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## Fostering Civil Public Dialogue Through Collaboration: Opportunities for Extension

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## Fostering Civil Public Dialogue Through Collaboration: Opportunities for Extension

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**Abstract.** This article addresses the issue of incivility in public policy debates by pointing to citizen collaboratives as an alternative that promotes civil dialogue. Collaboration forums bring together those having diverse and often opposing interests to craft solutions to public policy issues intended to advance all parties' interests in an atmosphere of mutual trust, mutual learning, and respect. Extension has a role to play through engagement with collaboratives to build community capacity and advance community and ecological sustainability. Examples of Extension involvement and the potential success that collaboratives can achieve is presented.

### INTRODUCTION

The Joint Council of Extension Professionals (JCEP) chose the theme “Cultivating a Climate of Civil Dialogue” for the 2018 meeting of its annual Public Issues Leadership Development Conference. Carolyn Lukensmeyer of the National Institute for Civil Discourse pointed out in her keynote address, “Incivility and Political Dysfunction: How Did We Get Here and What Can We Do?”, that incivility was at record levels in the United States. Seventy-five percent of people surveyed in one poll said the level of incivility is a crisis, and that “democracy is a conversation” (Carolyn Lukensmeyer, personal communication, April 9, 2018).

Some scholars have pointed out the problem of advocacy as a dominant force in our society that divides people and oversimplifies what can be complex and indeterminate public policy issues, thereby reducing our ability to deal with them effectively (Chrislip & Larsen, 1994). Collaboration is a means of stakeholder engagement and consultation to achieve consensus on public policy issues that seeks to overcome conflict and polarization. Collaboration brings those on various sides of an issue together in a process of mutual learning intended to foster understanding and solutions that respect all participants' interests (Chrislip & Larsen, 1994; Monroe & Butler, 2016).

There are several criteria for the success of collaboration. A few of the most important include:

- a willingness to learn,
- recognition that all sides have something to gain,
- credibility and openness of the process and perception of procedural fairness,
- an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, and
- a willingness to invest a considerable amount of time (Chrislip & Larsen, 1994; Gray, et al., 2012; Monroe & Butler, 2016).

The collaborative framework has the potential to provide many benefits, such as:

- achievement of the social license that many public agencies are looking for,
- innovation through mutual and adaptive learning,
- the possibility of forestalling litigation and gridlock, and
- provision of a forum for civil dialogue that can build social capital and community capacity around many important issues (Chrislip & Larsen, 1994).

Collaboratives can play an important role in promoting civil dialogue with which Extension can be involved.

Collaboration as discussed here focuses on the coming together of citizens, interest groups, agencies, and local governments that have been in conflict in order to overcome gridlock and find a way forward for their mutual interests. However, there are many reasons and situations in which collaboratives can be formed, not all of them over conflict, and each collaborative will have its own unique suite of personalities and issues.

While much of the Extension literature on engagement with collaboratives focuses on facilitation, I want to highlight another role for Extension: that of becoming a collaborative member, working with other community leaders and organization representatives as an equal partner rather than facilitator, leader, or convener. This role focuses on peer-to-peer relationships with other collaborative members engaged in mutual learning and problem solving.

## **PEER TO PEER LEARNING AS AN OPTION FOR EXTENSION ENGAGEMENT WITH COLLABORATIVES**

I am a member of a forest collaborative in Idaho that was formed in 2008 to end gridlock over management of a local national forest. Multiple interests are represented, from recreation to forest industry and environmental groups. The scope of the collaborative is large, encompassing foci on forest management, ecological restoration, rural economies, wilderness, wildlife habitat restoration, and recreation, among others.

The collaborative works closely with the local national forest to provide input on projects and programmatic priorities. The collaborative has had many achievements, including acquisition of \$40 million in federal and matching funds through the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. In 2015 every member of the collaborative was a recipient of the Secretary of Agriculture's Abraham Lincoln Award for External Partnership.

Civil dialogue is one of the ground rules for participation as outlined in the collaborative's operating protocols. Another important factor, and a particularly salient one for Extension, is the concept of mutual learning (Cheng, et al., 2015; Cheng & Sturtevant, 2012; Hinkey, et al., 2005). Through discussion, sharing, and invited presenters, the diverse membership learns together and is exposed to the same information, producing a shared understanding of the issues.

Given my Extension appointment in natural resources, the collaborative effort is a perfect fit for my programming, which is directed toward sound stewardship of natural resources and the economic benefits that result from their utilization. My interest is in advancing both socio-economic and ecological values. Influence is achieved through participation and by providing perspectives and analysis within one's area of expertise. Extension faculty can have influence in resolving conflict and finding solutions as a peer among equals, not just as a teacher, leader, or facilitator. This constitutes what Cooley (1994) describes as a learning-centered vs. a teacher-centered paradigm for Extension involvement and influence.

## **OTHER OPTIONS FOR EXTENSION INVOLVEMENT WITH COLLABORATIVES**

There are multiple ways that Extension personnel can be involved in collaboratives. These include acting as facilitators, giving presentations to a collaborative in one's area of expertise, convening a collaborative that brings together diverse sides on a community issue, or attending collaborative meetings to gauge stakeholder needs to guide Extension programming (Ekins, 2018). For example, Cooley (1994) argues for greater recognition of Extension faculty's role as facilitators of learning vs. "teachers" when working with collaborative groups, and Rebori (2000) points out the importance of facilitators establishing ground rules for collaborative member interactions and establishing a consensus decision-making framework.

For case studies of facilitation, Corp & Darnell (2002) present an example of Extension facilitation of a conflict over herbicide spraying between wine-grape producers and growers of traditional crops, and Fiske (1991) presents an example of Extension facilitation of a controversy between farmers and other community members over pesticide spraying.

As the makeup of collaborative groups and their problem-solving focus are unique to a place and situation, an Extension professional's manner of engagement will depend on the unique context and their expertise. Therefore, there is no simple prescription for Extension engagement with collaboratives that would apply in all cases. By introducing the concept and providing a few examples, it is hoped that Extension faculty can become open to opportunities to engage with collaboratives in the interest of solving conflict through civil dialogue.

## CONCLUSION

Citizen collaboratives provide one model of how those who have diverse interests and have been in conflict can come together to solve community and complex public policy problems. Extension can play an important role in these endeavors by participating as a partner, advising, and providing expertise, facilitation, and research on the role of collaboratives at building community capacity and resolving conflict.

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