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Successful Collaborations Between Extension and Nonprofits: Factors Contributing to Effective Alliances

Abstract

There are many potential advantages to collaborations between Extension and nonprofit organizations; however, it is unclear what factors contribute to a successful collaboration. We used an exploratory cross-comparative case study design to analyze four cases of highly successful Extension/nonprofit collaborations in one area in Florida. Using both deductive and inductive analysis processes, we identified several factors that contributed to the success of these partnerships: alignment of goals, longevity, informal adaptable partnering, relevant Extension agent background, delegation of tasks, marketability and fun, and relationship building. Exploration of these factors can inform future studies and has immediate, practical implications for Extension agents.

Keywords: [Extension](#), [nonprofit](#), [partnerships](#), [collaboration](#), [cross-sectoral collaboration](#)

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Introduction

Extension shapes communities by sharing knowledge and resources (Bowling & Brahm, 2002) in areas such as human services, nutrition and health education, agriculture, and the environment. Nonprofit organizations also share knowledge and resources in many of these same areas. Thus, there is great potential for collaboration between Extension and local nonprofit organizations. Examples of community and academic collaboration are increasingly prevalent in the fields of medicine, environmental health, and education, among others (Korfmacher, Pettibone, Gray, & Newman, 2016; McWilliam, Desai, & Greig, 1997; Valli, Stefanski, & Jacobson, 2016). These collaborations can increase positive dialogue between an academic institution and a community, foster webs of inclusion, reinforce learning, and enhance community capacity building (Bowling & Brahm, 2002). However, there is a lack of best practice research explicitly aimed at Extension/nonprofit collaborations.

In this article, we identify and analyze four cases of successful partnerships. We then examine factors that have contributed to the success of these partnerships and make suggestions for further research. Although our sample is limited to one Extension district, the findings will be of interest to Extension professionals

Literature Review

First we review the literature broadly regarding cross-sectoral collaborations, which are alliances between entities from separate sectors, such as government, nonprofit, and business. Then we focus specifically on the limited research available on Extension/nonprofit collaborations. Although we use the words *collaboration* and *partnership* interchangeably, the focus of the research reported here was on informal collaborative efforts.

Cross-Sectoral Collaboration in General

Brinkerhoff (2002) defined ideal partnership as "a dynamic relationship among diverse actors, based on mutually agreed objectives, pursued through a shared understanding of the most rational division of labor based on the respective comparative advantages of each partner" (p. 22). He surveyed government/nonprofit partnership literature and developed two categories for common collaboration dimensions: mutuality and organization identity. Within the mutuality dimension, each partner is committed to joint objectives that support both partners' missions. Mutuality partnerships tend to last longer and perform more efficiently because of the generally equal and codependent bond between participants. The second dimension, organization identity, refers to the distinctiveness of each partnering organization. For instance, government organizations can offer legal and institutional services while nonprofits offer flexibility and social mobilization. Recognizing and capitalizing on each partner's distinguishing traits can increase the effectiveness of a cross-sectoral collaboration and aid an organization in choosing which type of outside organization to partner with (private, nonprofit, government, etc.).

Complex social problems or national crises are too big for one sector, or even two sectors working independently, to comprehensively address (Kapucu, 2006). In the case of large national problems, such as disaster relief, and so called wicked issues (Weber & Khademian, 2008), such as hunger, poverty, education, and environmental protection, cross-sectoral collaborations allow for the bridging of critical gaps in service delivery.

The level of formality of a collaboration can make a difference in how it is perceived by government agencies and scholars. Gazley (2008) found that informal cross-sectoral collaborations receive less study than those based on contract. However, she pointed out that many collaborations benefit from flexible cooperation. On the basis of this insight, Gazley suggested informal mutual partnerships as an alternative to cross-sectoral subcontracting.

In a 2010 report on collaboration, Gazley identified five factors of highly successful partnership: (a) Closely aligned goals contribute significantly to successful cross-sectoral partnerships; (b) successful partnerships can benefit from increasing age and scope; (c) the policy in which collaboration exists can influence the success of a partnership; (d) public managers with nonprofit and volunteer backgrounds are more likely to report satisfaction with partnership results; and (e) although formal agreements increase the perception of success, they do not significantly affect the outcomes of collaboration.

Extension/Nonprofit Collaboration

Extension professionals often find themselves caught between a desire to provide free or affordable services to disadvantaged populations and budget restrictions that demand fee-based programming that pays its own way (Pritchett, Fulton, & Hine, 2012). By partnering with nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations, Extension agents can enhance their efforts through unique funding resources beyond their federal stipends.

There are two examples of research addressing mutually beneficial collaborations between Extension and nonprofits. Paynter (2013) suggested that the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program could benefit from increased nonprofit partnership, and Umali-Deiningner (1997) suggested that collaborations between Extension and private operations in Latin America had improved the promotion of farming practices. In both cases, the suggestion is that collaborations allow for sharing of the cost burden of the Extension delivery to spread knowledge and address community needs.

Beyond cost savings, Extension/nonprofit partnerships also can assist Extension agents in community capacity building. The knowledge held by nonprofit workers can serve Extension efforts through the implementation of steering committees or community consultants. Banach, Zunz, and LaPointe (2006) conducted a case study of rural New England communities with high percentages of at-risk families. Of the three sites studied, the site with the more experienced, engaged, and diverse steering committee was the most effective and was even able to gain financial sustainability within 2 years of the program's inception. Guion (1998) presented similar findings regarding the results of a community partnership, Ranchers Feeding Kids, that included a range of diverse organizations and school districts in southeast Oregon and western Idaho.

Given the potential benefits of and lack of research about Extension/nonprofit collaborations, we undertook a study to address the following research questions: (a) What are examples of successful Extension/nonprofit collaborations? (b) How do the factors of success in these examples compare to those identified in previous research? (c) What additional factors contribute to the success of these collaborations?

Methodology

Research Design

We used an exploratory cross-comparative case study design to identify the factors that contribute to successful collaborations between Extension agents and nonprofit organizations. The case study design is particularly useful for exploratory research because it allows researchers to study complex occurrences within their natural settings (Baxter & Jack, 2008). For our research, we studied four Extension/nonprofit collaborations that agents themselves identified as highly successful. The study was approved by our university's institutional review board.

Data Collection and Sampling

Data for the study were collected during a larger project (Jones, Pracht, Simonne, Renfrow, & Hunter, 2018). A survey of 64 University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences county faculty members was administered in April and May 2016 for the purpose of investigating Extension/nonprofit partnerships in one Extension administrative district in Florida. Forty-one complete and usable responses were received, resulting in a response rate of 64%. The survey included open- and closed-ended questions regarding existing

Extension/nonprofit partnerships. The survey was distributed online and took 15–20 min to complete.

For the aspect of the project we report on here, follow-up interviews were conducted with four of the 41 survey respondents who were chosen because their work with nonprofits was considered highly successful. The designation "highly successful" in this context meant that the collaborators had worked together to produce some sort of product, such as a workshop, an event, or a garden. By contrast, collaborations that were not deemed "highly successful" included those in which each partner helped recruit participants for the other—that is, collaborations in which partners supported one another rather than worked toward common goals. The agents involved in the four highly successful collaborations varied with regard to area of expertise, years of experience, and length of time living or working in the pertinent county (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Demographics of Extension Agents in Sample

Demographic variable	Case 1: Financial Fitness	Case 2: Trashy Fashion Show	Case 3: Community Garden	Case 4: Community Park and Gardens
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female
Area of expertise	Family and consumer science	Sustainability, youth development	Horticulture, volunteer development	Horticulture, volunteer development
Educational background	PhD, home economics	PhD, natural resources	MS, horticulture	MS, horticulture
Years of experience in Extension ^a	28	3	35	9
Years lived in county ^a	15	28	0 ^b	9
Years worked in county ^a	15	28	34	9

^aNumber of years of experience in Extension, number of years living in a county, and number of years working in a county could be factors in the relationship building necessary for collaborations. ^bAgent's residence was a neighboring county, where agent had lived for 34 years.

Data Analysis

We thematically analyzed (Patton, 2002) responses to the open-ended interview questions according to variables identified in the literature review as contributing to highly successful public/private partnerships (Gazley, 2010). Specifically, we analyzed the data to identify (a) how closely aligned the goals of the partners in each collaboration were, (b) the age and scope of each collaboration, (c) whether the policy of each collaboration was informal or formally contracted, and (d) whether the Extension agents had nonprofit and volunteer backgrounds. Next we reviewed the data again and, through inductive coding, identified emergent factors that appeared to have influenced the success of the collaborations but were not captured in the literature review.

Results

Here we present brief summaries of the four cases we analyzed, describing the type of collaboration and the impact it had on the community. We then provide the results of our deductive and inductive analyses.

Case Study Summaries

Case 1: Financial Fitness

Participant A is an Extension agent in north central Florida. For approximately 5 years, she collaborated with a nonprofit to offer a financial fitness program. The nonprofit provided a location, child care for participants' children, and a free meal for participants. Participant A provided financial management education. Specifically, she conducted a series of trainings on procedures for making corrections to credit reports and a plan for systematically paying down debt. The agent also offered individual appointments with participants. The trainings were held in a central neighborhood on a bus route, making the program accessible to attendees. Through participation in the program, many participants reduced their debt and some saved enough for a down payment on a house.

Case 2: Trashy Fashion Show

Participant B is a 4-H Extension agent in north central Florida. At the time of the interview, she had been collaborating with a local nonprofit service club for 2 years to organize an annual Trashy Fashion Show. The event promotes sustainability by encouraging local youths to repurpose trash items into clothing that is modeled at the fashion show. The partnership also includes an "Art from Trash" series that involves the service club volunteers in helping local youths create art from repurposed waste items. Service club members also regularly volunteer at the annual 4-H fundraiser, and the relationship has led to a newly created service-learning project that involves training youths to assist in regional diabetes screenings. The collaboration helps both partners generate community relationships and teach valuable life skills to local youths.

Case 3: Community Garden

Participant C, an Extension agent, and Participant D, a program assistant, along with local master gardeners, have collaborated with a nonprofit social service agency in northeast Florida to expand the agency's community garden. The garden provides several tons of fresh organic produce each year for the nonprofit's 18,000 low-income clients. The nonprofit provides the facilities and fundraising expertise, and the Extension personnel and volunteers provide gardening expertise. The partners have expanded the garden from 2,112 ft² to 6,500 ft² and trained and supported new gardeners joining the effort. The organizations have similar goals, with a focus on encouraging nutrition awareness and improving access to fresh foods in urban areas in need of such access. The partnership had begun through grassroots networking 4 to 5 years prior to the study interview.

Case 4: Community Park and Gardens

Participant E is an Extension agent in north central Florida. She has collaborated with master gardeners, local county parks and recreation personnel, and local service clubs to build a community park and gardens from

an abandoned 77-ac estate. The project was instigated by community leaders and a master gardener volunteer who imagined and advocated for the potential of the estate. Supporting their vision, the Extension agent and additional master gardeners formed a landscape committee that planned the restoration. This team partnered with members of plant- and horticulture-focused nonprofits to offer invasive plant removal and landscaping workshops to the public. Significantly, \$250,000 in donations was received from 2012 to 2017 for park and gardens projects. Through the collaboration, two part-time jobs were created, revenue at nearby businesses increased, and the team received a state-level award.

Deductive Analysis Results

With regard to our analysis related to success factors identified in the literature, we provide an overview of our results in Table 2, followed by a detailed explanation of our exploration of each factor. For the most part, the factors Gazley (2010) identified as important for successful collaborations were also present in the highly successful collaborations we reviewed in our case study.

Table 2.
Case Study Deductive Analysis Results

Factor	Case 1: Financial Fitness	Case 2: Trashy Fashion Show	Case 3: Community Garden	Case 4: Community Park and Gardens
How closely aligned were the goals of the collaborators?	Highly aligned	Highly aligned	Highly aligned	Highly aligned
What was the age of the collaboration?	5 years	4 years	4–5 years	5+ years
Was the collaboration informal or formal?	Informal	Informal	Informal	Informal
Did the Extension agent(s) have nonprofit and volunteer backgrounds?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Alignment of Goals

The partners in all cases in our sample had goals that aligned in some direct or indirect manner. These matching goals supported collaboration, even if the specifics of the partners' missions differed slightly. In some cases, there was more alignment between target audiences than missions. For instance, in the Trashy Fashion Show case, although the primary charitable campaign of the service club is eyesight preservation, the club's foundation has focused on increasing youth involvement in recent years. The obvious focus on youth development makes the 4-H program a natural partner for the service club even though the Trashy Fashion Show's ecological mission differs slightly from the service club's focus on eyesight. Thus, intersecting target populations is a particularly relevant shared goal in cross-sectoral collaboration that may complement other commonalities or supersede differences.

Age of Collaboration

Every collaboration in the sample was at least 4 years old and was ongoing with potential for growth. The Financial Fitness collaboration had become a self-sustained program, outlasting the involvement of the

founding Extension agent (who had retired). Scope and potential for growth seemed as important as longevity for program success. Several of the collaborations had started with small annual events, as in the Trashy Fashion Show, and grown to be involved with various activities throughout the year. In every case, the collaborators did not limit their scope to a specific time frame or restricted goal. Rather, each collaboration was a flexible partnership from the beginning that could expand and sustain itself along with the growth of the program.

Formality of Collaboration

Although much of the research on cross-sectoral collaboration focuses on formal partnerships, the collaborations we studied were at least initially established informally (i.e., without a contract). The Extension agents did not report any complications caused by lack of contracts. In fact, it is likely that the informal nature of the collaborations allowed for flexibility that facilitated their success.

Extension Agent Volunteer Experience

All four Extension agents who were interviewed had prior experience volunteering. In some cases, the Extension agent had experience in 4-H and master gardeners, both volunteer-driven programs. These programs may offer agents insights on volunteer management, which may serve a function similar to actual volunteer experience.

Emergent Factors Identified Through Inductive Analysis

Three additional success factors emerged during our inductive analysis of the data.

Task Delegation

The first additional factor we identified was a pattern in how the collaborators delegated tasks. In all four examples, the partners relied primarily on the nonprofit's skills for fund-raising and the Extension agent's skills for program delivery and, in some cases, project management. By organizing tasks according to each collaborator's recognized strengths, the four groups were able to create effective and thriving programs.

Marketability and Fun

Creative marketing approaches meaningfully differentiate programs and attract positive public attention (Andrews & Smith, 1996). Collaborators who were creative and developed opportunities for public engagement were able to rapidly expand their programs with the support of an involved community. For example, the Trashy Fashion Show has an element of creativity that elicits positive press, subject matter for photos and videos shared on social media, and arts and crafts that encourage intergenerational engagement. In another example, master gardeners involved in the Community Park and Gardens case created a game for training volunteers how not to trim crape myrtles, which was called "crape murder" and involved a fine for improper pruning.

Relationship Building

Many of the aforementioned factors encouraged relationship building that in turn enhanced other elements of the program. For example, the Financial Fitness collaborators pointed to the processes and systems they designed for their program as factors contributing to the collaboration's success. Repeated meetings fostered relationships between the Extension agent and both her clients and the organizational collaborators. Most of the cases also began with grassroots organizing at a local social level. As noted, the Community Park and Gardens was started through grassroots networking.

Conclusion

Cross-sectoral collaboration allows Extension agents and nonprofit professionals the opportunity to expand their impacts. The factors of success discussed in this article help us understand how to achieve a successful collaboration between Extension and nonprofits. The factors identified through our literature review that contributed most significantly to the success of the collaborations in our sample are closely aligned goals, long-term age and scope, and informal adaptable partnering. Additional factors that supported successful collaborations included smart delegation, marketability and fun, and relationship building.

Our study is limited by the sample size and the selection of cases on the basis of agents' self-reported data. It is also limited in that all of the participants were female. We recommend that future studies address what differences, if any, exist in collaborations initiated by male versus female Extension agents. Additionally, participants had between 9 and 34 years of residency in their communities or, in one case, in a neighboring community. The years of residency and/or years of experience working in the area may indicate existing relationships and, thus, be factors predicting success of community-based collaborations. We recommend that future researchers continue to measure and test this variable. We also recommend that future studies address such collaborations from the perspective of the participating nonprofits.

The cases presented here provide evidence that successful long-term cross-sectoral collaborations can be born through the fostering of a small number of factors. Extension agents can use these examples as guides for identifying and developing nonprofit collaborations. Such collaborations can help Extension professionals conquer long-term goals that they might have difficulty achieving through self-contained efforts.

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