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Exploring Community Partnerships in Agricultural and Extension Education

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Exploring Community Partnerships in Agricultural and Extension Education

Abstract

The descriptive study reported here sought to discover how Extension and agricultural education programs develop and use community partnerships to enhance educational programming. The population was a census of all New Mexico Extension agents and agricultural education teachers. Agents partnered with 57 different agencies/organization and teachers with 44 different groups. Agents were more likely to share programming efforts and resources, and serve on advisory committees. Teachers were more likely to share resources and programming efforts. More strengths than limitations were identified by both groups as reasons to collaborate. Both groups strongly agreed that sharing time and expertise can benefit programs.

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Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Agricultural education and Cooperative Extension Service programs have relied on volunteers to serve as partners in delivering a variety of programs. However, additional partnerships are needed within industry and community organizations to provide diverse resources for programs. The types and nature of partnerships vary greatly across programs as teachers and agents use community resources in different ways.

Both agricultural education and Extension identify community involvement and engagement as an important competency for professional success. Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh, and Nieto (2002) identified working with legislators, community leaders, and funding sources as one of the top 10 topics for professional development activities of Ohio Extension agents. A similar study conducted in 2014 asked New Mexico Extension agents to identify which 52 value items were evident in their organizational policies and procedures. Of the items ranked, Networking/coalition building with other agencies and organizations was identified as the second highest of 52 items (B. Seevers, personal communication, 2014). Agricultural education has similar expectations for teachers. The National FFA Organization's (FFA) Local Program of Success (LPS) Guidebook identifies three strategies for successful agricultural education programs including marketing, professional growth and partnerships (National FFA Organization, 1998).

The conceptual framework for the study reported here is based on Epstein's six types of involvement for educational programs for effective school, family, and community partnerships (2011). The six types of involvement (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community) create a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships. This study looks specifically explored how the sixth component of the involvement model Collaborating with community, affected agents and agricultural education teachers. Partnerships have a variety of benefits and disadvantages to implementation. Laughlin and Schmidt (1995) identified several benefits to partnerships in Extension programs, such as new resources, grant funding, increased communication, additional networking, and increased visibility. Disadvantages such as increased competition and responsibility as well as loss of control, uniqueness, and identity were also reported. This suggests that frank discussions of intended outcomes and expectations are critical to make partnerships succeed. However, there is currently little research to understand how these partnerships are being addressed in agricultural and Extension education.

Purpose and Research Objectives

The study reported here sought to discover how Extension and agricultural education programs develop and use community partnerships to enhance their educational programming. To accomplish this purpose, a survey instrument was developed to determine how partnerships are currently being utilized. Additionally, the study sought to examine the how Extension and agricultural education programs within communities support one another. Specifically, the study focused on the following objectives:

1. To identify what organizations are currently being used as partners in Extension and agricultural education programs
2. To determine how specific organizations are being utilized in agricultural and Extension education programs
3. To determine the perceived strengths and limitations of program partnerships
4. To identify specific attitudes toward partnerships between agricultural education and Extension programs

5. To compare the use of partnerships between agricultural and Extension programs.

Methods and Procedures

The population for the descriptive research study was a census of all Extension agents (N = 150) in New Mexico and secondary and middle school agricultural education teachers (N = 96) during Spring 2014. A survey was sent to both organizational list-serves within the state. A pre-letter, invitation and five follow-up correspondences were sent to each list. An overall response rate of 25% for the agent instrument and 22% for the teacher instrument was achieved. Because of the low response rate, information from the study is not generalizable to the target populations. However, we believe that the data collected in the study is an important first step to allow us to see how some agents and teachers are using community partnerships.

The researcher developed survey instrument consisted of five sections. Part one included a checklist of 36 specific organizations and asked respondents to identify which organizations they are currently partnering with. Respondents were also able to add other organizations that were not included on the initial list. Section two asked respondents to identify the top four organizations that they partner with and then to identify the name of the agency and the length and nature of the partnership. Section three identified strengths and limitations of partnerships in an open-ended question format. Section four asked agents and teachers if they were currently working with each other. The last section of the instrument asked agents and teachers to address their attitude toward 15 statements regarding Extension and agricultural education partnerships. Demographic data were also collected. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for each item. Face and content validity of the instrument were assessed using a panel of experts.

Results/Findings

Demographic Profile

Agents (n = 70) represented 23 of 33 counties in New Mexico as well New Mexico State University and two of the three district offices. Agriculture education teachers (n = 41) were all employed at the middle or secondary level at public schools throughout New Mexico. Although the majority of respondents were agriculture teachers (43.2%) or 4-H and agriculture agents (27.1%), the remaining 29.7% were FCS agents or specialists. The number of years employed for both groups was similar. Extension staff ranged from less than 1 year to 34, with an average of 11.1 years, and teachers ranged from 1 to 30 years, with an average of 14.3 years. Subjects averaged 8.4 and 8.2 years, respectively, in their current positions. Subjects were also similar in age. Extension staff ranged from age 24-64, with the average age of 46.2. Teachers ranged in age from 25-66, with the average age of 39.6. Extension agents were evenly divided between male (50%) and female (50%) respondents, while teachers were 67% male and 33% female.

Objective 1: To identify what program are currently being used as partners in Extension and Agricultural Education Programs.

Using a checklist, Extension employees identified 57 different agencies and or organizations that they partnered with, while agriculture education teachers identified 44 different agencies. Table 1 identifies the groups most frequently partnered with by each group. Secondary agricultural education teachers identified a more diverse set of partners than Extension, to include programs related to agriculture education, professional associations, and local business and religious groups.

Table 1.

Agencies/Organizations Most Frequently Partnered With

Extension Agents/Faculty	Agricultural Education Teachers
1. Public Schools	1. 4-H
2. USDA	2. Fair Board
3. NMDA	3. Public Schools
4. Local Government Org.	4. NMAETA
5. Fair Board	5. Local Businesses
6. FFA	6. Churches & Religious Org
7. Farm Bureau	7. Farm Bureau
8. Local Businesses	8. Ag in the Classroom

Objective 2: To determine how specific programs are being utilized in Agricultural and Extension Education programs

Participants were asked to identify the nature of their partnerships with four of the organizations they most frequently associated with (Table 2). Extension faculty shared programming efforts to maximize resources, shared resources (other than money), and served on advisory committees with local agencies and groups. Less often they received financial support from other groups. Secondary agriculture teachers/FFA advisors shared resources (equipment, curriculum, facilities, etc.) and shared programming efforts. They were least likely to serve on advisory boards or special interest committees with community groups.

Table 2.

Primary Roles Assumed Within Partnerships

Role	Extension Agents/Faculty	Ag Education Teachers
Advisory committee	21.0%	11.7%
Financial Support	9.0%	16.1%
Shared Programming	29.5%	20.5%
Community Boards (Special	11.6%	10.6%

Interest)		
Shared resources (other than \$)	23.4%	30.1%
Other	5.5%	11.0%

Objective 3: To determine the perceived strengths and limitations of program partnerships

A lengthy list of perceived strengths of partnering/collaborating with others in the community was generated by both groups. Most frequently reported items were networking with others, ability to expand resources and reach larger audiences, shared interests and goals, diversity of clientele and ideas, increased community support, and higher public awareness of programs. The list of limitations was shorter, but shared the common themes of time, funding, scheduling, communication, and differing points of view or goals.

Objective 4: To identify specific attitudes toward partnerships between Agricultural Education and Extension Programs

The relationship between Extension faculty and secondary agricultural education teachers/FFA advisors in local communities is overall positive. One hundred percent of the agricultural education teachers indicated they collaborated with the Extension faculty in their community, while 58% of the Extension respondents reported partnering with agricultural education teachers. The primary reasons Extension agents did not collaborate with agricultural education teachers were: there are no agricultural education or FFA programs in the community and job responsibilities don't match (FCS agents). Other reasons cited include: competition, not being asked, it didn't come up, time, or the perception that the teacher is anti 4-H. Although 100% of the teachers indicated that they do work with their local 4-H program, two concerns raised were that the distance between the school and the Extension office is too great and that the partnership is not always strong due to constraints and limited Extension staff.

Using a 4-point Likert scale where 4 = Strongly Agree and 1 = Strongly Disagree, subjects responded to 15 items assessing attitude toward their partnership with each other. The attitude towards the value of partnerships was very positive (Table 3). Both teachers and agents strongly support that sharing time and expertise can expand resources and opportunities. Limitations such as distance, scheduling, time, and communications were not seen as barriers to collaboration. Agents and teachers were neutral in the belief that others are open to partnerships. Agriculture teachers were positive in their belief that friendships made partnering easier. Neither agents nor teachers felt that they had received in-service or other training on how to collaborate with other groups.

Table 3.

Attitude Toward Partnerships (4 = Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree)

	Extension Agent/Faculty	Ag Education Teacher

1. Sharing time/expertise expands resources and opportunities	3.65	3.57
2. 4-H/FFA are in competition with one another	2.05	1.95
3. I am supportive of collaborating with others	3.84	3.86
4. There are not enough resources to share	2.11	1.75
5. There is not enough time for collaboration	1.97	2.19
6. Distance/location are challenges to collaboration	2.49	2.24
7. I need to take care of my program first, then consider partnering	2.24	2.28
8. 4-H is valuable because it prepares youth for FFA	2.43	3.28
9. I receive community support for partnering w/others	3.06	3.25
10. The missions of 4-H and FFA support collaboration	3.05	3.33
11. I have received in-service and or training on how to collaborate with other groups	2.19	2.22
12. Other agriculture teachers/agents are open to partnering with me	2.76	3.15
13. I am friends with agriculture teachers/agents and that makes partnering easier	2.72	3.57
14. There is not adequate communication between myself and the county agriculture teachers/agents	1.86	2.33
15. Scheduling makes partnering difficult	2.59	2.79

Objective 5: To compare the use of partnerships between agricultural education and Extension programs

Extension agents and teachers did partner with each other. Table 4 identifies methods of collaboration identified from highest to lowest. Both groups identified judging at competitive events as the primary method of collaboration, followed by sharing resources or curriculum and being a speaker or expert in a specific content area. Extension agents were more likely to conduct joint educational programs or co-sponsor an event. Teachers were more likely to coach teams for both organizations and assist in the recruitment of members.

Table 4.

Partnership activities between Extension 4-H and agricultural education (FFA)

Partnership Activity	Extension (4-H)	Ag Ed (FFA)
1. Judge at Competitive Event	63.6%	87.1% (1)
2. Sharing Resources or curriculum	59.1%	61.9% (2)
3. Speaker or expert on content area	54.5%	52.4% (4)
4. Conduct joint educational program	54.5%	28.6% (7)
5. Co-sponsoring event (i.e, leadership activity or judging event)	45.5%	28.5% (8)
6. Consultation in problem situations	41.0%	38.1% (5)
7. Coach teams for both	36.4%	61.9% (3)
8. Chaperoning or driving youth to events	36.4%	28.6% (9)
9. Joint fundraising	18.2%	23.8% (10)
10. Recruitment	0.9%	38.1% (6)

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

Extension faculty and secondary agricultural education teachers in New Mexico are partnering with a variety of community, government, and professional organizations relative to their perspective programs. Extension faculty reported most frequently partnering with public schools. Nationally and in New Mexico, many Extension programs are involved in school enrichment or special interest programs. This is especially true in elementary and middle schools. Extension agents also indicate they partner with FFA programs in their community. Agriculture education teachers reported that they most frequently partner with the 4-H program in their community. This is an encouraging and exciting finding. Through positive example and sharing at professional meetings and in professional newsletters, New Mexico agricultural education teachers can serve as role models to teachers and administrators in other states where collaboration and support is more competitive and less cooperative.

Both Extension and agricultural education teachers reported that shared programming and shared resources other than money were the most common roles assumed when partnering with other agencies and groups. Extension agents are more likely to serve on advisory boards and committees than teachers. Most Extension programs have advisory committees that engage local leaders. More research could be conducted to determine if and how secondary agricultural education programs in New Mexico use advisory committees.

The strengths of collaboration far outweighed the number of limitations identified by both agents and teachers. However, despite the evidence of strong community collaboration, limitations need to be recognized, and strategies for overcoming those limitations should be developed, or the current levels of success could be diminished. Items such as increased time and resources are similar to many of the cons established by Laughlin and Schmidt (1995). Additionally, Laughlin and Schmidt found several of the same benefits to partnerships, including networking opportunities and increased communication.

The relationship between Extension faculty and secondary agricultural education teachers in local communities is positive. Barriers such as "not being asked" or "it didn't come up" can be easily overcome by awareness and reaching out to one another. Sharing of time and expertise was clearly linked to the ability to expand resources and opportunities. Respondents were in agreement that the missions of 4-H and FFA support collaboration. In an era of limited resources, sharing programming, time, facilities, and expertise are just a few ways to reach broader audiences and maximize resources. It is also modeling the approach of collaboration versus competition.

Maximizing possibilities for Extension faculty and agricultural education teachers to meet and discuss issues and opportunities in a non-competitive environment can support and strengthen collaboration. Teachers were more positive than agents in their belief that friendships made partnering easier. This is possibly explained by the fact that some of the Extension agents participating were FCS agents who had minimal interaction with agriculture teachers. Both groups indicated that they had not received in-service or other training on networking and collaboration. A review of pre-service curriculum for training teachers and Extension agents should be reviewed and modified if necessary. In addition, opportunities for in-service training at professional meetings should be made available.

Extension faculty and agricultural education teachers found many ways to collaborate and support one another's programs. This concept encourages maximizing resources by more effectively directing time and expertise and exposing youth to different styles. Overall, New Mexico Extension agents and secondary agricultural education teachers are positive about the importance of collaborating within their communities and with each other.

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