We (All) Need to Talk About Race: Building Extension's Capacity for Dialogue and Action

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We (All) Need to Talk About Race: Building Extension's Capacity for Dialogue and Action

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Abstract
For Extension to remain relevant to the mission of meeting the most critical community needs, we must examine the racial inequities that hold us back as institutions and lead efforts to engage diverse communities in learning about race through dialogue. Responses from participants in 26 states who joined a train-the-trainer initiative suggested that despite previous efforts, there is great need for increased education and capacity building to address racism and prioritize racial equity both within our institutions and in the communities we serve. For Extension professionals to effectively engage in this work, it is critical for administrators to show visible support.

Keywords: dialogue, diversity, equity, inclusion, racial understanding

Think back to your last training on diversity, inclusion, equity, race, or a related topic. Was it in person or online? Was it any good? Most importantly, did it result in action (for you personally or within your organization)? Most of us working in Extension attend these trainings, but alarmingly, participants from 26 states who joined a recent initiative saw a critical need for increased education and capacity building for understanding racism, prioritizing racial equity, and facilitating dialogues on race. These participants, along with our author group, were part of the Coming Together for Racial Understanding (CTRU) initiative.

In recent years, there has been increased discussion about the future of Extension (King, 2018; Raison, 2014), though this discussion is not new (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy [ECOP], 2002; King & Boehlje, 2000). In her 2019 commentary on critical components of Extension's
future, Dr. Amy Harder highlighted the need to enable Extension professionals to be "free to find the best ways to positively affect their communities" (Harder, 2019, Concluding Remarks section). Being prepared to address the most critical needs identified by community members requires willingness to engage in wicked problems. Regardless of program area, community building is the task of everyone in Extension (ECOP, 2002).

Throughout its history, Extension has helped communities address controversial issues by learning through dialogue (Shaffer, 2016). Now more than ever, Extension's capacity is needed to engage diverse populations in learning about race through dialogue (Raison & Gordon, 2012). Meeting this challenge will require examining the racial inequities that exist within and across the 1862, 1890, and 1994 systems and the audiences they serve (Angima & Stokes, 2019; Dorsey, 2001; Harris, 2008; Schor, 1986; Toldson, 2016). For Extension to achieve its mission and remain relevant to the communities we serve, we not only must lead efforts to engage communities in dialogues on race but also must examine the racial inequities that hold us back as institutions.

**Background**

Extension's focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has grown over the years. This shift has led to an increased focus on developing culturally relevant programming to reach audiences Extension has previously failed to engage (ECOP, 2002; Fox et al., 2017). Increased focus also has been placed on embracing diversity (Moncloa et al., 2019), becoming deliberately inclusive in our programming (McKee & Bruce, 2019), and building skills to work across difference (Deen et al., 2014; Pace & Pizaña, 2004).

In 2016, ECOP formed a rapid response team to consider Extension's role in supporting civil dialogue on race relations. This was a direct response to violence across racial lines taking place across the country. ECOP was essentially asking "What can and should Extension do to promote more dialogue in communities to address differences?"

The focus on dialogue in racial equity work is vital, both within Extension and in communities. If Extension, as a predominantly White-staffed and White-led system, engages in racial equity work using the traditional "expert" model, it runs the risk of continuing to operate from a lens of universalism, or the assumption that values held primarily by people who are White and by historically White institutions are universally shared (Guthman, 2011). Genuine dialogue across difference can help move us from universalism to pluralism when engaging issues of race, shifting Extension's worldview and programs to have equity at their core.

The ECOP rapid response team formed the CTRU initiative to engage Extension in the work of building awareness around issues of race, racism, and inequities through dialogue, drawing on Extension's long history of engagement to address wicked problems (Hustedde, 1996; Shaffer, 2017; Wright, 2012). To date, approximately 90 Extension professionals from 26 states have participated in two CTRU train-the-trainer programs held in 2018 and 2019. Insights from these programs are explored here. Having been involved in this initiative in various ways as organizers and participants, we are part of a team that volunteered to document the outcomes.

**Participant Perspectives on the CTRU Initiative**
Organizers of the CTRU train-the-trainer initiative expected that engaging communities in dialogues on race and racism would first require building the capacity of Extension professionals to engage in this work and that it would require the support of administrators. Accordingly, organizers requested that participants apply together as state teams with the endorsement of their Extension directors and that 1862, 1890, and 1994 institutions coordinate with one another in the formation of state teams. Nevertheless, during the 2018 CTRU train-the-trainer event, some participants raised questions about the capacities of their Extension systems or the level of support they would receive regarding efforts to engage communities in dialogues on race when they returned home. In 2019, we sent a survey to the 60 participants to gauge their perceptions of their home Extension systems' capacities to engage in dialogues on race, the kinds of institutional support they needed, and whether they felt supported.

Thirty-five participants completed the survey (58.3%). Responses came from across the country, though the majority came from the north central and southern regions. They represented county, district, state administrative, and state programmatic (specialist) positions throughout Extension. Each program area was represented (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program area</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4-H/youth development</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and natural resources</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and economic development</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and consumer sciences</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = 35.*

## Perceptions of Extension Efforts and Attitudes

Figure 1 describes participant perceptions of efforts and attitudes related to facilitating civil dialogue and addressing racism within their own Extension systems.

**Figure 1.**
Participant Perceptions of Extension Efforts and Attitudes
Responses to the questions in Figure 1 provided encouragement but also signaled clear opportunities for growth. By far the most positive responses were to questions regarding Extension’s concern about racism and racial inequity and support for dialogues related to race. These results speak to the growth in awareness of how important this work is to Extension and the communities we serve.

Regarding Extension’s ability to engage in this work, however, the data indicated opportunities for significant improvements. Participants were pessimistic about their Extension systems’ effectiveness in leading civil dialogues and in creating opportunities to learn about race and racism.

Qualitative responses elaborated these findings. Nearly half of the respondents identified training and support as their greatest challenges. Table 2 shows a selection of comments relating to these themes.

**Table 2.**
Participants' Needs for Ongoing Training and Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing training</td>
<td>“[We need a] peer-to-peer learning community [facilitated by efforts] such as monthly calls, [a] Facebook page, webinars.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Follow-up assistance [is needed] in adapting to specific university/state needs and time constraints.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“[I’m] dealing with my own internal dialogue about how to lead this work when I’m still doing a lot of the work myself.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased support</td>
<td>“I am the only one at my institution working on this. I feel isolated in this work.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Finding others in my geographical area who are interested in this work [is a challenge].”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The comments presented in Table 2 show that respondents saw a strong need for capacity building and professional networks of support within their institutions. It was also clear that leadership is critical to success. Figure 2 shows participant perceptions of Extension leadership and administrators' efforts and attitudes related to addressing racism and racial inequity.

**Figure 2.**

Participant Perceptions of Extension Leadership and Administrator Commitment

A significant majority, 80%, reported that their leaders considered addressing racism and racial inequity of either some or a lot of importance to achieving Extension's mission. But a much smaller percentage reported that their leadership was actively involved in addressing racial inequity within Extension.

This is an important difference. In qualitative responses, participants identified a lack of willingness and interest from other Extension staff as a significant challenge to engaging in dialogues on race at their institutions. For staff throughout the Extension system to view racial equity work as a priority, it is essential that they see leaders demonstrating a commitment through their own actions. One respondent noted, "Individual's [sic] perception[s] [are] that this work is not relevant to them because they do not belong to a marginalized group. This work is for everyone."

It is encouraging that many in leadership appear to consider addressing racism as critical to Extension's mission. However, to succeed in this effort, Extension must be willing to examine inequities that currently exist because of historical and existing systems of oppression. If Extension does not take steps to address the systemic inequities within its own institutions and programs, structures that harm both staff and communities will be perpetuated, and the ability of staff to effectively facilitate dialogues on race will be limited.

**Levels and Importance of Support**

Participants were also asked about the different types of support they receive for leading dialogue efforts and their importance. Selected responses are detailed in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.**

Importance and Level of Support for Leading Dialogues on Race
Note. "Other Extension employees" are those who had not yet participated in the Coming Together for Racial Understanding train-the-trainer programs.

In addition, 16 of 35 qualitative comments included mentions of "time" and "competing priorities" as challenges for the respondents as individuals. Nearly one third of the respondents also mentioned these as institutional challenges. Table 3 provides examples.

Table 3.
Selected Responses Relating to Time and Competing Priorities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Response(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual challenge</td>
<td>&quot;It is added on to all of my current responsibilities which are already overwhelming.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;[My greatest challenge is] carving out adequate time to prepare in addition to my existing, ongoing duties.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional challenge</td>
<td>&quot;[My institution's greatest challenge is] continuing to see this as an important issue at the core of everything we do as an organization committed to excellence.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implications
Participants reported the need for greater support for dialogue efforts and institutional capacity building. But what does that look like? On the basis of the survey responses, we identified several actions administrators could take to build institutional support. Figure 4 provides examples.

**Figure 4.**
Actions Administrators Could Take to Support Dialogues on Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Provide time for additional Extension employees to participate in Coming Together for Racial Understanding (CTRU) trainings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Provide adequate resources to support dialogue efforts (including funding for travel and materials).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Demonstrate institutional support even in the face of dissension or risk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Actively communicate support for this work as an overall priority in Extension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Participate in training activities and dialogues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Value CTRU trainings and facilitation of dialogues in promotion and tenure processes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Involvement in the CTRU initiative has encouraged participants to lead training events for their colleagues to engage in internal dialogues, address racial inequities, and build understanding across difference within their home Extension systems. This would in turn increase the capacity of additional Extension professionals to facilitate dialogues on race in workplaces and communities. Participants also have felt encouraged to partner with community-based organizations that have long been engaged in this work.

Insights gleaned from our survey provide clear and compelling arguments for the importance of dialogues on race to Extension and the potential to serve communities. Table 4 summarizes qualitative findings from our survey regarding potential benefits of such work and the costs of not engaging in it.

**Table 4.**
Potential Benefits of Dialogues on Race and Costs of Not Engaging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Potential benefits     | "We live in more loving, purposeful and authentic ways that align with our organizational missions. We hurt people less and affirm them more internally and in community settings."
|                        | "[The benefits would be] true movement and understanding of working through and across differences with a way that can enhance program opportunities, participants and staff professional development." |
|                        | "Extension exists to help strengthen communities and the lives of people in communities we work in. Communities that pursue racial equity will be stronger, better places to live." |
|                        | "[We would be] impacting our communities and helping them defend themselves against the prevailing winds of hate and intolerance." |
Respondents clearly stated that participation in this work made them more effective as Extension professionals and strengthened the support they were able to provide to communities. However, they were also clear that effectively engaging in this work would require coming together to build capacity through analyzing and changing our institutions.

But what if we do not do this work? Respondents stated that our institutions will continue to foster inequities and perpetuate the systems that have caused so much pain. Extension will have missed a critical opportunity to make a difference through dialogue-based learning and servant leadership within our communities and our land-grant universities.

**Conclusion**

Racial equity and dialogue work is not easy, is not always popular, and does not always result in the typical Extension metrics that so many are required to report. However, CTRU participants were unified in their assessment that this work is central to Extension's mission. The costs of "business as usual" and the need for changes are clear. However, for Extension professionals to facilitate the most effective dialogues on race for their institutions and communities, they will need institution-wide support from colleagues and, more importantly, administrators.

**Author Note**

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