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Productive Partnerships for Food: Principles and Strategies

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PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE

Productive Partnerships for Food: Principles and Strategies

Abstract

This article guides Extension educators in facilitating university-community partnerships in their locality. Principles and strategies for building effective and productive university-community partnerships around food that integrate research, education, and action are discussed, drawing from three examples. Partnerships are based on the principles of building off of community assets, diverse stakeholder involvement, guidance by community interests, and integration of research with practice. The partnership strategies encourage partners to develop common goals, clarify roles and responsibilities, develop protocols, commit the necessary resources, and create a flexible and trusting atmosphere. The need to balance multiple interests in a partnership is discussed.

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Introduction

Productive and effective partnerships, particularly between university faculty and community leaders, are well recognized as an important element in achieving the mission of Cooperative Extension and the Land Grant University (Ewert, 2001; McClintock, 1998). Partnerships are one of the core elements in the Kellogg Commission's *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution* (1999). According to Peters (2001), the concept of collaborating with families and community leaders was part of the original mission and vision of Cooperative Extension. At the same time, the need for linking research and intervention has also been recognized (Gillespie, 1998).

This article offers principles and strategies for engaging in productive partnerships for food system

education, research, and action. The principles described are a product of the experience of the authors in building collaborative food system partnerships using a research-based partnership framework (Gillespie, Craig, & Gillespie, 2001). This framework offers an alternative from an "outside expert" approach to an inclusive one in which each member of the team is recognized as knowledgeable and significant, i.e., "everyone is an expert." The research focused on government and not-for-profit partnerships, but many of the same principles would apply for industry or small entrepreneurial partners. (See Lansing & Kolasa, 1996, for a discussion.)

Examples are offered from three communities in New York (Rochester, Tompkins County, and Onondaga County), which draw on experiences and research around the country. Partnerships in New York were based on the mission of the Cornell University Family and Community Food Decision-making Program (<http://www.cce.cornell.edu/programs/FoodSystems/index.htm>) to build "family and community capacity for thoughtful food decisions through community research and education."

Principles

The following principles (Gillespie et al., 2001) have guided the partnerships and research:

- Research, education, and action are integrated into University-Community partnerships to yield the greatest benefit.
- The community, through representatives of stakeholder groups, participates in the research and leads education and action programs.
- Emerging research findings influence education and action programs as evolving program strategies and evaluations inform research studies.
- The primary focus is on programs to build family and community capacity that result in sustained change.
- Community-based partners guide education and action with academic partners providing input and support.
- Reflective Human Action (Stratton & Mitstifer, 2001) makes the framework self-renewing, through ongoing analysis, reflection, and evaluation.

Reflections

When beginning a partnership, partners should ask themselves the following questions, which can focus the group on the most viable work and establish realistic goals and expectations.

- What is it that we can do together that we couldn't do alone?
- What is already happening on which we can build?
- What community networks exist with which we work?
- What do we expect of
 - one another?
 - the partnership?
 - ourselves within the partnership?

Strategies

To implement this framework and principles, the following strategies have emerged from the work accomplished together (<http://www.cce.cornell.edu/programs/FoodSystems/JOEtable.pdf>):

1. Agree on Common Goals and Indicators.
2. Clarify roles and responsibilities.
3. Develop protocols.
4. Commit necessary resources.
5. Create a flexible trusting atmosphere.
6. Continually assess.

Guidelines for each strategy are described below, drawing from the three examples of university-community partnerships.

Agree on Common Goals and Indicators

- Ensure goals are compatible with those of team members and their organizations.
- Set and maintain project timelines.
- Clearly define indicators of progress towards goals.
- Establish measures for indicators and goals.

Establishing mutual goals for a partnership is the starting point. Asking, "What is it we can do together that we couldn't do as well separately?" is a useful way to assess the advantages of

partnering. Resource costs, particularly time, in developing and maintaining partnerships should be discussed to clearly identify the relative advantage of collaboration.

The most effective partnerships around food bring diverse individuals together, creating a need to balance multiple interests. Goals must be consonant with the goals of the organizations represented in the partnership.

As the group establishes initial goals, concurrently, members should step back and ask who else should be involved, as discussed in the sixth strategy, continually assess roles and responsibilities. Asking, "What is already happening in the community?" and "What other networks already exist?" identifies additional stakeholders in the partnership, resulting in a continual reassessment of roles and responsibilities.

The Rochester Community project began with the dominant approach of developing goals for a grant proposal received by the university working cooperatively with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Monroe County. Once the project was funded, however, this approach was departed from, and community members were invited to join in identifying specific Family and Community Food Decision-making objectives and research questions.

This was accomplished by meeting with two community groups. One was an "on-call" consultants group that met once to discuss "What are the research questions that would help you in your work?" The second group, a community advisory committee, made a more extensive commitment to meet periodically to assist in guiding the research, interpreting findings, and suggesting community applications.

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

- Do this for yourself, your organization, other partners, and community.
- Decide what you can realistically accomplish with available resources.
- Shift from dependence on outside "experts."
- Acknowledge the methodological nature of community work while being attuned to immediate needs of some members.
- Clarify professional and personal relationships.

Experience from each community example showed the importance of creating realistic expectations for yourself and your organization, and of communicating these expectations clearly to all interested partners. At the same time, the partners need to have realistic expectations about what the partnership can accomplish, the roles each can play, and the responsibilities each can realistically take on given competing priorities. Being realistic and open about these commitments will help create the necessary atmosphere of trust.

In Tompkins County, resources were successfully brought together from the Family and Community Food Decision-making partnership (university and county Extension) and a graduate community nutrition course focusing on developing skills for doing a food and nutrition assessment within a social context. The university team members soon realized the importance of continually assessing and communicating expectations.

For instance, some low-income community members believed the workshops they participated in would lead to immediate university-initiated actions and changes within their community. The university team members had to communicate that the workshops were opportunities for community members to make connections and initiate their own changes, and that the role of the university was to lend support to these actions.

Develop Protocols for Working Relationships

- Build on individual strengths.
- Share and balance power, practicing flexibility to create trust.
- Develop a protocol for managing disagreements.
- Form consensus on new partners.

Individuals come to a partnership with complementary strengths and experiences. For example, every group needs dreamers, developers, and doers (for 3-dimensional vision) (<http://www.cce.cornell.edu/programs/FoodSystems/3DView.htm>). Although some may be stronger in one area than another, all need to appreciate the value of each to build strength and balance in the team.

In order to complement and not compete with each other's strengths, the team needs to be able to balance power with trust and to be flexible in working relationships. Team members should back each other up, challenge each other when useful, and shift roles and responsibilities as needed to maintain momentum toward the common goals. This research has found that protocols, agreed upon early on, can help the group in this process of working together and managing disagreements. It was found that even with the best intent, disagreements are likely to occur. The critical issue is whether the group has a process for handling them to the benefit of the group as well as individual members.

In one community, adding new partners became an issue that could have unraveled the partnership when the lead community writer for a grant proposal announced new members were being brought in without consultation from other partners. Although well intentioned, as the partners probably strengthened the proposal, other members felt the relationship had been damaged by this unilateral move. In addition to taking time to re-establish trusting relationships as described below, there was also the issue of dividing the already small amount of the proposed budget among even more partners.

Commit the Necessary Resources

- Utilize existing resources when possible.
- Deliver what you have promised.
- Make use of intellectual, social and financial capital.

The resources committed to any partnership will depend on the nature of the partnership and the resources available to each of the partners. Community work not only takes a great deal of time, but the needs of the partnership will change over time. The resources devoted to this process must, therefore, be consistent and malleable.

As the work plan progresses, commitments will also need to be made to fund the action plan and/or to develop proposals for outside funding. Both kinds of funding sources have been sought in the three community partnerships described here. When possible, utilizing existing community resources is the most efficient and best support sustainability of activities.

It is equally important that partners contribute the resources promised to the partnership. Most partners have severe limitations on their resources, and it disadvantages the team if commitments aren't met. Therefore, these commitments must be made with care to support a trusting atmosphere, as discussed in the next section.

In Onondaga County, an Extension educator learned the importance of evaluating and adequately communicating the availability of resources during a project to develop, in partnership with diverse community stakeholders, a cookbook for low-income individuals. As the extent of the project was realized, Extension found itself over-committed in terms of time and unable to commit the financial resources that would make the project a success.

The project was eventually successful, but only after a re-evaluation of the resources available from the various partners and a restructuring of working relationships. In retrospect, the Extension educator felt she would have developed a project timeline to understand more fully what would be required of her and then would have considered whether the project was consonant enough with her agency's goals to be worth the commitment of resources.

Create Flexible, Trusting Relationships

- Be trustworthy--Keep your commitments.
- Commit to the common good.
- Create a common language.
- Share credit.
- Seek out "trusted" sources for new situations/collaborators.

One of the reasons that the development of partnerships in the community takes time is because of the high level of trust and respect that must be created among many partners. This is particularly true for those committing a significant amount of resources to the project in the form of time or money, or for those partners who have been in the community long enough, their social capital. Building these kinds of partnerships will always take a great deal of time, energy, and commitment, and this must be planned for from the beginning when initiating partnerships.

For a partnership to work, all members must commit to the common good and balance that commitment successfully with their professional and agency goals when they are not congruent or complementary. It's easy to over commit or to commit before confirming agency support when the partnership begins to come together and people are excited. Delivering what you promise is a key element of building a trusting atmosphere. So, "under-sell and over-deliver on your promises." This is another reason why it is very important to verbally articulate expectations of one another, the partnership, and yourself as a member.

Common shared language is also a necessary communication requirement. For example, at an Expanded Food and Nutrition Education program in-service training where the multi-disciplinary approach of the Family and Community Food Decision-making program was under discussion, Extension agents made a plea for defining concepts such as "food system" and "community." Gillespie and Gillespie (2000) responded with their perspectives on these and other concepts such as food security and family food decision-making.

The Tompkins County example illustrated that developing relationships with the recipients of program services presented unique challenges because they were often not prepared for the group processes that professionals and academics tend to employ. For example, some community members appeared to relate best to students for a variety of reasons. The following recruitment

tips were helpful in identifying program recipients (their term) who were interested in participating in the planning group and subsequent workshops focusing on food access:

- Utilize previous connections.
- Incorporate stakeholders in the recruitment process.
- Spend time with the target community and know their language.
- Talk extensively with prospective participants and maintain contact.
- Recognize that you are dealing with personal issues, so recruit with some discretion.
- Be consistent with information.
- Assume a 30%-50% attendance rate.

The community workshops were particularly important in establishing trust. One of the major outcomes was the sharing of experiences among recipients and the focused opportunity for recipients to voice their concerns to an interested and caring audience. These workshops established relationships between the facilitators and the recipients of services, which proved indispensable in the formulation of common goals and the implementation of joint activities. In the third workshop, when recipients were brought together with service providers, they felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

Continually Re-Assess

Partnerships need to be evaluated on an ongoing basis, particularly as circumstances central to the partnership change.

- Adjust member roles and responsibilities.
- Monitor changes in the community.
- Evaluate movement toward goals.

In assessing current roles and responsibilities, team members should ask, "Who else needs to be involved?" As new circumstances arise, new partners should be sought, paying attention to the need to follow an agreed upon protocol. Additionally, when new partners are added or existing partners leave, the dynamics of the partnership may change, raising the question of "How can the whole team adjust?"

The group must also decide how they are going to work through issues of power within the partnership. Power issues can prevent the group from meeting their objectives and can ultimately lead to the disintegration of the partnership. It is important that everyone recognize the expertise that all partners bring to the process and negotiate ways to ensure that this expertise is recognized by everyone in the group. One strategy is to practice "power with" rather than "power over"(Barr, 2000). This is particularly true when working with partners who may have less formal education and experience with formal partnerships.

It is important to share credit with all contributing members of the partnership, necessitating the questions "Who is active and contributing?" and "When should everyone take credit for team successes?"

As the team progresses toward its agreed upon goals, it is important to celebrate milestones along the way, not just the "big events," but keep in mind that process is as important as actions for building capacity.

Applications--A Balancing Act

Finding the balance for your community issue or vision is key. This is a negotiated process with partners agreeing on a balance that can work for the team, as well as individual responsibilities and goals. Among areas we found necessary to balance were:

- Process and product,
- Problem solving and Asset building approaches,
- Community-initiated and University-initiated actions, and
- Individual and group credit (Gillespie et al., 2001).

Process and product was first discussed in the Rochester collaborative when community partners, based on previous experiences within the community, were concerned about having products to show for their work, like creating a community garden or developing an incubator kitchen for low-income entrepreneurs. At the same time, they recognized the need to build community and family capacity to achieve their long-term goal of improving the community food system by transferring wealth to low-income neighborhoods.

In Tompkins County, this issue arose at several stages during the development and capacity-building process, but came into sharp focus when some food recipients became impatient with the process and asked "When are we going to quit talking and start doing something?" Finding the right balance to build capacity and yet see concrete outcomes requires patience and understanding among partners while trying to continually balance long-term and short-term goals.

Community development literature has begun to encourage building on assets and moving away

from a problem-solving approach (Gillespie et al, 2001). This research found that a balance is needed. When there are real problems facing families or communities that serve to block improvements, they must be dealt with either before or while community members understand and build on their family and community assets.

Most university-community Extension programming is initiated by university-based faculty and staff. Although it's increasingly based on needs assessment and research findings, the issue of who decides priorities for allocating limited programming resources is core to a genuine partnership.

An approach that arguably has the advantage in terms of relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability, is one in which the community also has significant input into program priorities and forming relevant research questions. This balance of input and decision-making power will vary, but each community project will benefit when all partners have significant input. This requires a shift in leadership styles (as discussed by Gillespie et al., 2001) , but it was found that it profoundly affects program directions, ownership by community members, program effectiveness, and enhances research validity and relevance.

"Who gets credit?" is often a core issue within the university-Extension system. Because the reward system for academics is still, in spite of much rhetoric about change, largely based on individual accomplishments, and for county Extension associations and their community partners on single agency accomplishments, the issue of who gets credit is difficult. The approach presented here is that often each partner can and should take credit for contributing to group accomplishments.

The ability to fairly share credit, however, is a primary test of the health of a partnership and the ability of team members to give up something in terms of individual credit for the good of the partnership. Given the current promotion and retention evaluation structures, it is, however, critical to achieve a balance with individual credit as well recognizing that needs vary depending upon one's position in the university-Extension hierarchy.

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