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Exploring Land-grant Institution Partnerships to Better Serve Audiences

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Exploring Land-Grant Institution Partnerships to Better Serve Audiences

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Abstract. Programs within the Cooperative Extension Service often develop partnerships with other agencies and organizations to better meet their common goals. While there are many benefits of partnerships, they can be challenging when the partners are unequal or have dissimilar needs. Using a survey and interviews with faculty and administrators at two land-grant institutions we explore the similarities and differences that pull and push at their partnership. Recommendations to strengthen partnering opportunities at the institutional and program levels are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions establish partnerships to better meet their mission and fill gaps in their resources (Pritchett et al., 2012). By bringing unique resources to the team, successful partnerships help individual members learn from each other, build trust, and achieve common goals (Monroe et al., 2015). Partnerships have always been important to academic institutions. According to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU; 2018, p. 2), “Meeting the evolving challenges of today’s world demands that public colleges and universities creatively and effectively use their resources to serve the public good.”

Investing in beneficial partnerships is a logical strategy for meeting these challenges. An opportunity for a new partnership arose in 2018 when faculty from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) and the University of Florida (UF) began working together to create CIVIC (Community Voices, Informed Choices), a state program to build community capacity to address challenging problems. The two institutions sent eight faculty to the Extension Foundation’s Impact Collaborative to work together for 3 days. Recognizing the novelty of their effort, the team began exploring how Florida’s faculty and staff viewed and collaborated with their counterparts at the sister institution. Documenting existing and potential collaborations was also a significant factor in building the partnership’s foundation. The original team also documented their own activities as they collaborated on building the CIVIC program.

AN INTERINSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Higher-education partnerships connect universities with other universities or organizations “to achieve goals that would be difficult or impossible independently” (AASCU, 2018, p. 2), despite the lack of autonomy (Waddock, 1988). A partnership is a group of organizations that bring different resources and share similar characteristics to work together cooperatively to achieve common goals (Gray, 1985; Waddock, 1988). Hagenmeier (2015) noted that few partnerships in higher education involve equal partners. Indeed, historic differences and subsequent practices have created significant inequalities between 1862 and 1890 land-grant institutions.

UF’s and FAMU’s Extension programs vary greatly in size, organizational structure, and resources, due in part to disparities that can be attributed to a legacy of race-based differences in appropriations (Comer et al., 2006; Harris, 2008; Lee & Keys, 2013; Schor, 1986). The foundation of any meaningful partnership between an 1862 and an 1890 land-grant institution must not only acknowledge this reality but recognize how that reality is also seeded with differences rooted in organizational culture and history. UF provides an Extension presence in all Florida counties with a budget of \$118 million and around 700 faculty and staff, while FAMU resources of \$4.1 million and 45 faculty and staff are primarily directed toward establishing deep community ties to counties in the northern region.

This paper reports the results of a study exploring the nature of partnership between the institutions. Our findings led to a series of recommendations for administrators of both institutions, and we believe that our experiences will help other Extension faculty build new collaborations with partner institutions.

METHODS

A subset of UF and FAMU faculty who lead the CIVIC program developed interview and survey instruments for faculty, staff, and administrators from both institutions for a qualitative study. The administrative version varied slightly to account for diverse types of interactions. The questions focused on how UF and FAMU Extension personnel perceive the other institution and identified challenges and opportunities for interinstitutional collaboration.

The number of FAMU Extension faculty is considerably less than UF Extension faculty, so all FAMU faculty were asked to participate, while only a sample of UF Extension faculty was contacted. The criteria used to select the UF sample were based on geographical location, position title, and subject-matter expertise. The small sample size was a limitation of this study because it did not allow for generalization to all UF Extension faculty. Creating a sample from volunteers rather than random selection also limited generalizability.

In addition, the relative size of FAMU's Extension program compared to UF's may have influenced some respondents' views of the scope of possible interactions, especially the impact over multiple counties. To reduce the effect of this limitation, all reported themes were common to at least one-third of the responses for each question. This figure was determined by performing keyword searches for nouns and verbs used by respondents and then searching for synonyms of those words and analyzing the intent and scope of the response the words were contained within.

The responses were copied into a spreadsheet, which was then shared with the entire team. Each team member read all responses and then focused on responses to one question, identifying themes and indicative quotes that illustrated those themes (Bulmer, 1979; Patton, 1990; Strauss, 1987). Team members completed a textual narrative synthesis of themes based on a transformative philosophical worldview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Where discrepancies in opinion regarding the tone or intent of an open-ended response were found, team members discussed and found consensus for coding to theme categories.

Some of the resulting themes echoed the original survey questions, and some reflected commonalities across several questions. After agreeing to a set of themes, members reviewed, re-coded, and prepared narrative descriptions of these themes from the responses. Not all respondents answered all the interview/survey questions. Then, the

team determined the ideas that should be highlighted in the discussion and generated recommendations for our administrators that speak to the barriers to our partnership. The group iteratively wrote and edited all sections of the paper over an extended period of time.

RESULTS

Fifty-five responses were received from phone, email, and in-person interviews and surveys. Respondents included administrators ($n = 8$); state/regional specialists and program-specific faculty ($n = 20$); and county faculty and county Extension directors ($n = 27$). Five themes were derived from these data.

FAMILIARITY AND AWARENESS

Of the 43 respondents who answered the question about familiarity with the other institution, 21% said that they had none, and 66% professed a slight familiarity, leaving only 12% who indicated considerable familiarity. There was a basic understanding among those who were aware of the other's Extension program that both institutions have the "same mission and values" and that they are "counterparts." They understood that they are "partners" in Extension. There was agreement that FAMU has a smaller Extension program compared to that of UF, but at least one respondent was purposeful in saying, "Capacity is not capability." FAMU Extension was "aware of the broad mandate for all Extension programs." The gap in awareness suggested a considerable opportunity for learning about the other institution's goals and interests. Neither institution appeared to have a standard presumption to interact or work together, but there was perceived consensus that if the two did work together more often, "the exposure, knowledge, skills, and so on gained would inform and broaden" their understanding of each other's programs: "The more we interact with each other, the more we know each other."

CONSIDERING WAYS TO WORK TOGETHER

When asked to imagine ways in which they could personally work with colleagues in the other Extension program, 29 respondents supplied a variety of ideas. Ten answers were generic, referring to partnering, providing, or receiving assistance with training or developing common goals. Another 12 mentioned specific program areas or topics, their own subject areas in some cases, where they could see collaboration (e.g., urban horticulture, sea-level rise, 4-H and youth, community forums). Two responses referred specifically to finding common ground among program topics. Four responses specified that the benefit of working together would be to increase diversity and racial understanding. Most administrators' responses mirrored previously mentioned

Land-Grant Partnerships

comments: They saw some collaboration at the administrative level that was not reflected at the county or regional level; they would like to see more collaboration at all levels; and one suggested a survey to identify the strengths of each institution as a method of improving collaboration. One administrator, however, noted that working with another university would involve a “whole other set of administrative approval and hassles.” Others agreed that each institution has its own rules and regulations, which may make working together challenging. On the other hand, there were perceptions that institutional differences create opportunities for improved practice. A UF administrator believed that FAMU makes “more of a difference in [its] community” by having “boots on the ground and less bureaucracy.” The distance across the state and the desire to maintain an identifiable brand while allowing for independent programming also posed continuing challenges.

BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

Of the 27 responses to the question “How might such a partnership affect your work or change your community?” nine specifically noted increased diversity in programs and greater opportunity to reach traditionally underserved audiences. Four specifically mentioned increased resources. Shared expertise, perspective, ideas, and knowledge were also perceived as opportunities for collaborations with both institutions. Several respondents pointed out that more attempts have been made to coordinate and engage in recent years.

BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION

Respondents reached consensus on two significant barriers to collaboration: the geography of Florida and faculty specialization, which is a function of institutional size and faculty assignments. Interestingly, most statements regarding barriers were countered with clear expressions of hope that they could be overcome through technology and planning. Although face-to-face meetings were perceived as most useful, faculty admitted that busy schedules and travel time could be addressed with technology. Administrators as well as faculty agreed that more work could be done to build collaboration. The issue of finding parallel faculty with narrowly defined expertise was more challenging, however, and could prevent some specialists from embarking on joint programs.

RACIAL CONSIDERATIONS

There were striking differences in how respondents answered the question “Are there racial, and so on, considerations to working together?” In general, participants either denied that there were any racial elements of working together or absolutely agreed that there were. Many of those who believed that race was not an aspect of their work specifically

mentioned individual and professional relationships. For instance, one respondent noted, “There are whites and Hispanics in the group, but we all seem to work together.” On the other hand, some who believed that race was an aspect of working together mentioned an institutional aspect rather than a personal one. At least three comments referenced implicit-bias training needs for faculty, and four others referred to the differences in culture, funding, and traditional audiences associated with each institution. (It is important to note that these responses were collected prior to the summer of 2020.)

DISCUSSION

CIVIC team members and survey respondents shared hope of increasing the quality and reach of the programs to help people solve problems and improve their lives and communities (Conglose, 2000). Knowledge of the history of segregation, inequality, and unequal funding ensured that the authors came to this work without inappropriate assumptions of equality (Hagenmeier, 2015). Indeed, the opportunities and challenges surrounding race warranted further scrutiny at the time of our analysis of these responses. Revelations of health, housing, and other inequities at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and exposure of the devastating continued impact of race on law enforcement in 2020 gave urgency to this concern.

Although differences in perception about race were not completely correlated to institution, more of those who detected issues with race were from FAMU, and more of those who responded that their work was not affected by race were from UF. This difference highlighted a crucial question in potential Florida Extension partnership: How can individuals at two institutions work together when some believe that a dominant factor in their lives is either ignored or underappreciated by others?

One respondent said, “Honest consideration of the impact race has on the work of Extension is not possible without considering the real-world consequences of the political climate. In the current political climate, we see more Confederate flags on display than at any time since the sixties. Public display of traditional symbols of racism has increased dramatically in the last four years [since the 2016 presidential election]. These increases exacerbate the challenges of the communities FAMU serves. These increases compound the problems of institutional, programmatic, and personal racism.”

There was awareness on both sides of the potential for UF to reach more diverse audiences through partnership, while FAMU respondents identified a potential to expand their reach in number and in geography. Overall, respondents expressed a need to better understand how UF and FAMU

worked so they could “fit in the puzzle” together to work better. Many were simply unaware of the other institution’s scope of work. If this basic knowledge is not present, then impactful discussions of collaboration cannot move forward. At least one respondent encapsulated this need for better understanding of what each university “brings to the table and how we can work together.” And another suggested, “Combining websites, communications, and so on would benefit all. [I feel] that this lack of partnership is actually disrespectful. We could do a better job of communicating our efforts and working together.”

When respondents were asked to suggest ways to remove barriers to collaboration, the suggestions were wide-reaching. A common thread of these suggestions, whether explicitly stated or alluded to, was the time commitment needed to build trust and relationships. Nearly half of respondents suggested holding joint meetings or trainings, and many mentioned the benefits of cultural competence or diversity. Alternately, two respondents believed that the language of the Morrill Act itself created divisiveness between the two organizations rather than encouraging partnerships. Another suggested that administration could supply incentives. CIVIC is a good example of the benefit of timely funding: It is supported by both institutions and was developed through a joint training opportunity, which enabled team members to collaborate on institutional planning.

The desire to work together does not mean that it can be easily achieved, however. Historical and contemporary differences in target audience and power create challenges. For example, the disparity in size that was readily acknowledged by Extension faculty at both institutions means that the contribution of human and fiscal resources will be unequal. This inequality does not mean, however, that the value of each university’s contribution would be inequitable. Successful interinstitutional partnerships would require increased substantive understanding of the nature of available resources and the value of the nonmonetary contributions and sharing benefits of the joint endeavor. “Such an understanding would . . . provide a framework which acknowledges that diversity can serve as the foundation for equitable governance structures for partnerships” (Hagenmeier, 2015, p. 10). The mixed responses to questions around the influence of race together with a general misalignment in faculty understanding and definition of collaboration signified a need and an opportunity to increase interinstitutional understanding of the contemporary operation of race at the programmatic level and interracial understanding at the individual level between Extension faculty throughout the Florida Cooperative Extension Service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For faculty to successfully work together, Extension program administrators could orchestrate opportunities to increase faculty familiarity with colleagues from their sister institution. This goal could be helped through purposeful attention to and removal of barriers. We introduce these recommendations through a series of questions and suggestions.

IS THERE A SHARED VISION FOR COLLABORATION?

Faculty would find it helpful to have guidance about state priorities for collaboration and, just as important, about areas in which individual university identities should be retained and protected. For example, how would branding and publicity create shared attribution for collaborative efforts? Furthermore, the logistics of partnering could be made easier for all. Could announcements for webinars and informative events go to all Extension faculty? Could all faculty share software programs to enhance communication and reporting? Could faculty attend in-service trainings at either institution? Would faculty be encouraged to co-develop training programs? Could grants to one institution pay staff salary at the other?

CAN ADMINISTRATORS HELP FACULTY BECOME MORE FAMILIAR WITH EACH OTHER?

Joint sessions for new agent training; an annual jointly planned conference; a collective roadmap and vision for meeting the needs of the state; a common reporting tool, directory, newsletter, and LISTSERV; and professional associations could go far to facilitate increased interaction. Furthermore, faculty should be similarly incentivized and rewarded for their activity in professional associations, conference presentations, and other forms of engagement at each institution.

ARE FUNDS AND GUIDANCE AVAILABLE FOR THOSE FACULTY WHO WISH TO WORK TOGETHER?

The process of building relationships, understanding constraints, and appreciating expertise can take years. Just as collaborators decide authorship on papers, team members need to work out how they will be accountable to each other, how they will claim credit, and how they will jointly lead programs. Cultural competence and humility training may be useful. The very fact that race was a factor always considered by some and never considered by others underscores that we cannot assume that race would not somehow affect the success of these partnerships.

No matter the intensity and involvement of future collaborative partnerships between our uniquely similar organizations, the successful cooperation of the CIVIC team with our respective communities, colleagues, and clientele supplies an example to which others can aspire. Even our

work on this paper has helped strengthen the relationships among the CIVIC team members and may already serve as an example for others.

CONCLUSION

Partnerships are vital to achieving important goals. Successful partnerships are built over time as individuals and organizations deepen their relationships with each other. In gathering these data and working with CIVIC, the team recognized ways in which FAMU and UF already worked together. For example, some publicity materials spoke to both institutions (Buck, 2020), and faculty obtained funding for some joint projects. The two institutions are different and have created specialized expertise that could be shared to better meet individual and collective goals. The experience of creating the CIVIC program adds a new chapter to a significant history and suggests the benefits of understanding and acknowledging what works well and what does not work to develop strategies to work better.

In the current era of racial understanding, there is a new and urgent need for everyone to understand how systemic and deep racial differences affect every aspect of life in the United States and to commit to creating change. Is that likely to happen by taking an online training on cultural competence? We suggest that it is more likely to occur when people work together across racial lines to solve a common problem—when they commit to building a partnership and work together on an issue that is difficult for either to address alone. Where states have 1890 and 1862 land-grant institutions, a partnership at the state level could model ways that county faculty could work together to ask questions, build capacity, and deliver programs. Our divided history could be turned into an advantage. The Cooperative Extension Service is perfectly positioned to begin small experiments to explore new ways of living together, respecting each other, and building a future. We have no wish to go back to the way things were or return to “normal.” We reject the idea that our pre-COVID world was ideal or proper. The intersection of COVID and racial understanding has given us a chance to create a new world.

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