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Partnerships Evolve Over Time

Abstract

Traditional partnerships of communities of place and interest evolve to support programs and provide resources. While all Extension is local, the dance with local partners varies greatly. Forming and reforming, these partnerships are vital to Extension's future. Providing the Extension program, building ownership, and "dancing to new music" characterized the University of Connecticut Extension's partnership in New London County. Elements affecting the success of this transition are examined as partners successfully resolved long-term concerns moving to new opportunities. Community partnerships across the country are based on factors identified as leading to successful outcomes in this case study.

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Introduction

Partnerships are central to engaging community resources in the development of educational programs. Extension has a successful history working with communities of place and interest to garner support. While relationships vary, common factors influence how partnerships evolve.

Relationships with volunteer organizations blend continuity and transition. They require constant attention to build consensus and maintain support for Extension programs and facilities.

Communities of place, defined as where people live, work, and play, are traditional locations of Extension programs. Communities of interest differ in that they emanate from shared interests of individuals and are not confined to location (ECOP, 2002, p.3).

All Extension Is Local

Community involvement is fundamental to identifying educational issues and building political support. Adapting Tip O'Neil's comment regarding politics, Henry Wadsworth (1996, p.3) declared that "all Extension is local." Local referred to the confluence of programs with community-based political support. Fred Harrington (1977, p. 126) described a shared financial support system where Extension obtained financial resources from federal, state, and local funds, and benefited from supporters who ensured that decision-makers continued support.

The Virginia State Leadership Councils' Task Force (1997) identified the need for Extension to develop strategies, with local partners, to market accomplishments to the community's public officials. George McDowell (2003, p. 6) proposed four functions for Extension staff: identify problems of individuals and communities, seek information to address those problems, design, conduct or facilitate ways to impart the knowledge resulting in scholarship, and garner support from beneficiaries.

How does Extension generate community support for a sufficient resource base to meet community needs? Support from communities of both place and interest play a significant role in acquiring resources.

Partners Dance

Partnerships have been compared to a dance with both a beginning and an end (Anderson, 1994). Anderson observed partnerships are based on common goals to which individuals contribute expertise and skills. Collaboration occurred when the dance partners sought mutually decided solutions based on pooling information, knocking heads, constructing alternatives, and forging an agreement (Gray, 1989).

Successful partners recognize that mutual benefits and new possibilities are unachievable alone (Rose, 1994). Loden (2004) identified partnerships as either traditional or strategic. Traditional partnerships focused on a specific goal until the goal was achieved. Strategic partnerships worked toward achieving a shared vision continuing if new goals were identified. The length of each dance and the number of dances are based upon each partner's interest in continuing.

Renewing a Partnership

Cooperative Extension in New London County, Connecticut has a rich history of varied dance partners. Beginning in 1915 with Connecticut's first county agent, the Farm and Home Bureau evolved into the local partner focusing on Extension staff supervision and programs. In the late 1950s, Connecticut dissolved county government, and the dance changed, creating new opportunities and partners.

New opportunities included the University of Connecticut (UConn) assuming the role of staff supervision. The creation of a county Extension council formed a new strategic partner responsible for the local funding role from a state allocation, through the university to the partner.

The New London County Agricultural Extension Council actively raised funds to build a new Extension center. Opening in 1963, the building housed Extension and USDA sister agency staff, yet another dance partner. Over 35 years, the Council owned and managed the building, providing programmatic support.

Despair, Then Renewal

Solutions from the past resulted in challenges and opportunities for the partnership. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) required changes in the facility structure. The Council's inability to finance ADA required building improvements prevented USDA from signing a new lease. In 1995, consolidation moved USDA offices to another location, resulting in a loss of income.

Facing financial challenges, the Council focused exclusively on building issues, neglecting program support. Transitioning from what had been, to what might be, frustrated volunteers. Yet future building and program possibilities were not apparent, placing the Extension-council partnership at risk.

Effective leadership and grassroots energy were needed to explore a renewed partnership. Managing the transition required focus on renovating a community icon, the Extension center building, while reorganizing the Extension council relationship. Partners needed to all dance to the same tune.

During the mid 1990s, new leadership in the UConn College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (where Extension is housed administratively) and at the county level renewed Extension's historic commitment to local

partners. The Council's board of directors discussed critical issues related to the building, the group's fiscal health, and programmatic needs.

Immediate focus addressed the building and impending fiscal demise of the Council, a separate 501(c)(3). Options to upgrade the building appeared limited, and despair was abundant among Council directors. Then in 1995, UCONN 2000 legislation was passed authorizing one billion dollars over 10 years to revitalize long neglected deferred maintenance issues of University facilities. The music for a new dance was written by this legislation.

A New Beginning Emerges

The New London County Center belonged to a non-profit council, but was located on land belonging to the State Board of Education. The Council could use the land as long as they sponsored Extension. Upon the council's demise, the land would revert to the state (Deed, 1962). The problem was a backlog of deferred maintenance issues with no funds to resolve. UCONN 2000 opened a door to transfer the building to the university for renovation. The partner group relinquished control of a facility they had built in exchange for the university conducting major renovations and maintaining a local presence. Consensus was achieved, on all levels, to proceed.

The partners' dance shifted, with one strategic partnership ending and new goals identified. University officials explored alternatives to renovation, including demolishing and replacing the current structure with a modular version.

Community concerns focused on a modular's durability and perceived image. A second option moved the center to an abandoned state hospital where a sex offender rehabilitation program was located. This situation raised concerns about the site's appropriateness for 4-H programs. A meeting between university officials and the council's building committee resolved building location issues.

The building committee's composition and approach to this meeting were crucial to success. Members consisted of original building committee members, adults (who as youth had raised funds for construction), current council, Farm Bureau, 4-H Foundation members, and Extension faculty and administration. With Extension administration playing an intermediary role, volunteers worked as equals with university officials in the Provost Office and Facilities to address concerns.

Outcomes

University officials agreed to support comprehensive renovation of the existing building with it continuing as an Extension center. The council agreed to transfer the building to the university, with the Board of Trustees formally accepting the transfer on November 10, 1998.

Renovation began in May 2002, when Extension employees moved to a temporary location for 13 months. During renovation, the council agenda shifted from building issues to program support as council members considered ways to provide programmatic financial support, a first in many years.

A May 2004 building rededication celebrated the emergence of a renewed partnership and the end of despair. A ribbon cutting celebrated volunteer efforts to renew the building and to honor shepherding of the building's care over time. The ongoing partnership with Extension volunteers was evident as a new milestone was reached.

Six years passed from inception to rededication. Council members worked with staff to consider options, monitor construction, and release responsibility and despair. Significant challenges were overcome through collaboration creating new goals for a long-standing partnership. The partners continued dancing, but to new music.

Key Elements to Success

Several factors contributed to the achievement of a successful partnership. A process of working through organizational transitions was always present. Factors included managing frustration, anger, uncertainty, and keeping the goal of an updated building in the forefront. Other elements included:

- Partners developed a common interest in identifying and working toward the goal (Rose 1994).
- Community leaders and grassroots volunteers were involved from the start.

- Progress was balanced with flexibility as alternatives were explored.
- Partners worked to understand different cultures, values, and perceptions.
- Leadership combined with commitment helped maintain forward momentum.

Partnerships built on these elements identified educational issues of communities of place and interest and obtained resources to address these issues. A unique aspect of Extension programs is collaborative partnerships that form and reform over time. While much has changed, the importance of vibrant traditional and strategic community partnerships continues.

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Discussion