



October 2011
Volume 49 Number 5
Article Number 5FEA4

[Return to Current Issue](#)

Building Community-University Partnerships by Listening, Learning, and Responding

Diana M. Martenson

Extension Educator and Professor
St. Paul, Minnesota
marte002@umn.edu

Dawn A. Newman

American Indian & Tribal Partnerships Liason
Cloquet, Minnesota
daneuman@umn.edu

Deborah M. Zak

Campus Regional Director
Crookston, Minnesota
dzak@umn.edu

University of Minnesota Extension

Abstract: University of Minnesota Extension is expanding work in Indian country by building community-university partnerships through a methodology of listening by gathering data in Indian country; learning by creating opportunities for professional development; and responding by building trusting relationships, resulting in more educators working in partnership with Indian communities. Extension educators who seek a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources with community partners are more likely to address the interests of the community in an appropriate and sustainable manner. Outcomes achieved are attributed to mutual respect for the strengths of each partner and the joint identification of opportunities, solutions, and success.

Introduction

Prior to 2006, University of Minnesota Extension had little systemwide effort in place to reach out to Minnesota's Indian country. While Extension has offered programs in health and nutrition, gardening, natural resources, and youth and family development since the mid-1950s, these efforts were isolated and rarely sustained, providing limited long-term results. In fact, despite federal law providing special funding sources through the Extension Indian Reservation Programs and the 1994 Tribal College Land Grant program, these programs reached less than 10% of reservation-based American Indians (Hiller, 2005). While individual Extension staff members did work within American Indian communities to grow trusting relationships and develop successful programs, this approach depended on an individual staff member's interest rather than on a sustainable, systemwide vision for working in Indian country.

In the fall of 2005, a team of eight Extension staff members met with the University of Wisconsin Extension Native American Task Force. The goal of this meeting was to learn about the work of Wisconsin's task force, which has been successful in strengthening community-university relationships resulting in successful program development. Members of the Wisconsin task force felt the successes were a direct result of this model. The Minnesota team shared what they learned from the Wisconsin exchange with their Extension dean and recommended the adoption of a similar model.

In 2006, Extension's Dean, Beverly Durgan, established the American Indian Task Force (AITF), charging 11 Extension professionals with the goal of invigorating Extension's work in American Indian communities. The AITF goals were aligned with the University of Minnesota Diversity Task Force goals to: (1) improve American Indian communities' access to and representation in the University; (2) provide staff development for Extension staff interested in working with American Indian populations; and (3) develop, in partnership with Indian communities, appropriate programs and products, using innovative approaches to achieve concrete goals. Dean Durgan and members of the AITF hoped that these goals would help Extension expand its work in Indian country through mutually beneficial community-university partnerships.

Here is an example of what can be accomplished. Extension and the White Earth Reservation began a collaborative effort in 1998 to address the school's concern with low math and science test scores. A summer school was created through a community-university partnership to provide a culturally appropriate, activity-centered curriculum for American Indian students. This partnership resulted in improved educational outcomes for American Indian students (Blinn, Zak, & Vogt, 2006). The work of this partnership has resulted in enhancement to the school's math and science curriculum; has engaged University faculty members from multiple departments; and has recently been awarded a grant to develop a national curriculum. This example provides inspiration for building long-term community-university relationships around mutual interests and resources that a partnership can provide.

Extension has embarked on new and important work to address earlier institutional inconsistencies in outreach in Indian country. The question remains: what more can be done? How can state Extension programs build upon existing federal programs to improve American Indian communities' access to a university? This article describes Extension's approach to expanding work in Indian country by building community-university partnerships through a methodology of listening by gathering data in Indian country; learning by creating opportunities for professional development; and responding by building trusting relationships, resulting in more educators working in partnership with Indian communities.

Listening: Gathering Data

The AITF members launched their work by listening to American Indian community members. They hoped to better understand the interests, areas of expertise, and resources within Indian country as seen through the eyes of residents and leaders in these communities. As Mary L. Walshok, associate vice chancellor of public programs and Extension dean at the University of California-San Diego, explained, "Campuses must see themselves as one center of expertise, rather than as the center of expertise, and they must learn to listen and exchange knowledge, not just reach out and transfer knowledge" (1999, p. 83). This quote exemplifies the way AITF members gathered data through both informal and formal discussions with tribal community members to listen and exchange knowledge.

The first priority was to visit Minnesota's 1994 Tribal Colleges that share the land-grant mission, which is a commitment to reaching underserved audiences and providing quality educational opportunities grounded in their culture. The AITF held planning meetings at each of the tribal colleges. They met with administrators and staff from White Earth, Leech Lake, and Fond du Lac tribal colleges to learn about each other's expertise and to understand each community's priorities. The AITF members spent 2 days, in some cases, moving

beyond the tribal college to tour health facilities, schools, and economic development enterprises. A long-term goal of the AITF was to include tribal representation on the task force. After the visits, tribal college representatives were invited to join. Three tribal members representing each of the 1994 Tribal Colleges became contributing members of the task force.

In addition to the informal discussions, AITF members conducted two types of formal listening sessions: a modified Appreciative Inquiry process and the Sondeo method. The Appreciative Inquiry process is widely used with American Indian communities as an interactive and collaborative dialogue process that uses storytelling to share information. Five tribal nations participated in the sessions; community members shared information about their nation's values and strengths and identified priority issues unique to them. For example, some communities identified the desire for programs as diverse as an afterschool youth program and a locally based healthy food supply, while others wanted to strategize ways to maximize forest by-products or implement a community wastewater management plan. These sessions created opportunities for dialogue between tribal communities and the university that have built partnerships and programming in some of these areas.

The Sondeo method was used by three AITF members to conduct a formal listening session in the Fond du Lac Nation. This internationally developed method requires the participation of diverse team members and provides for a rapid assessment of community-defined priorities. The goal for using this method was twofold. First, the Extension educator wanted to create an introductory experience to enrich his understanding of the community and their cultural perspectives on natural resource management. Second, the Sondeo method would offer a team-oriented approach to trigger conversations between community members and university professionals to help identify need-based programming for the Fond du Lac community (Wilsey & Beaulieu, 2010).

These listening sessions are essential to building long-term relationships that work. It is imperative that the needs of the communities come from their perspective before programming or further ideas are developed. A tribal college member reflected: "I wasn't certain what the University of Minnesota wanted or expected of us. However, during the course of the listening session it became evident this group was genuinely interested in understanding tribal communities and families." Spending time listening enhanced understanding and led to educational partnerships. The opportunity to tour community facilities was a bonus, as the AITF members met more community people with various interests, expertise, and priorities. The task force learned not to make assumptions because each nation's priorities are different and to focus on what can be accomplished with the resources available through the partnership.

Learning: Professional Development Opportunities for Extension Staff

Based on conversations, AITF members understood that Extension educators are interested in working with native community leaders but are reluctant to initiate a conversation out of fear of being culturally inappropriate. In an effort to enhance cultural literacy within Extension, the AITF conducted an informal survey of 166 Extension educators to learn about their staff development interests and preferred learning styles. Survey results indicated that these educators were interested in learning more about American Indian culture and how to make contacts and build relationships within American Indian communities. They also preferred learning through an immersion experience. In response to the survey results, AITF organized a 2-day staff immersion opportunity at Red Lake Nation for 50 administrators and faculty members from the university to learn about American Indian culture, specifically about the Red Lake Nation.

During the 5-hour-long bus trip, riders learned about Red Lake's cultural and political makeup from two Red

Lake community members. They explained Red Lake Nation is a closed reservation and how it differs from other northern Minnesota reservations. A closed reservation indicates it has the right to limit who can visit or live on the reservation; proper protocol was followed to make arrangements.

Upon arrival at the Red Lake Nation, participants shared lunch with Red Lake community members as the tribal chair welcomed the guests and spoke of his interest in building educational partnerships with the university. An AITF member expressed the university's gratitude for the opportunity to learn about the reservation and presented the tribal chair and tribal college president with gifts. After lunch, tribal members and university faculty participated in tours arranged by the trip organizers. Some participants took part in a natural resources tour, which included Red Lake Nation Foods, the fishery, and several forestry greenhouses. Others toured the Red Lake Comprehensive Health Services, an assisted living facility, and attended a presentation on a diabetes prevention program. Still others participated in an education-based tour of the Red Lake Nation College, the K-12 school, and the Boys & Girls Clubs. These experiences gave university representatives a chance to learn more about Red Lake's community enterprises, including areas that would benefit from additional educational resources.

Building on the experiences of the previous day's tours, Red Lake Nation tribal department chairs and community members met on the second day with the university-based participants to discuss opportunities for collaboration in the areas of natural resources, health care, and education. Community members and university faculty identified a strong interest in focusing on health disparities by developing local foods, community gardens, and farm-to-school programs. A small team was formed, composed of community and university representatives, to define areas of common interest and potential resources for a local foods initiative. Through the work of this team and the Red Lake Health Improvement Program, a 1-acre vegetable garden was planted to support the Anishinaabeg Maawanji'idiwag Farmers Market, which opened in August 2010 and continues to provide fresh vegetables to Red Lake community members each summer. The work of this partnership has also led to a demonstration grant, adding a salad bar to the school lunch program.

Professional development for Extension staff is a focus of the AITF's work. This was accomplished in a number of ways to better prepare Extension educators to work in partnership in Indian country and to build better understanding of the cultural differences. One specific opportunity for Extension professionals was at Extension's 2008 annual conference, where three American Indian task force members designed and presented the workshop, Exploring Tribal Government, Sovereignty, and Culture. The workshop was well received; leaders from the university's Crookston campus invited the team to present the workshop to their faculty and students. In addition, Extension developed a DVD and supplemental materials based on the workshop and distributed these materials to each county Extension office to help county commissioners throughout Minnesota improve their working relationships with tribal governments.

Responding: Building Trusting Relationships in Indian Country

While gathering data and providing staff development to improve the cultural knowledge of Extension professionals, the AITF committed itself to building trusting relationships in Indian country. To further its efforts of expanding Extension's work in Indian country and building community-university partnerships, the AITF assisted Extension in its efforts to increase the presence of American Indian professionals in Extension.

Due in part to the work of the AITF, Extension has hired six professionals, four of whom are American Indian, to focus their work in Indian country. Of the six, four work with youth development and natural resource programs. These positions, funded jointly in 2007 by Extension and a Federally Recognized Tribes Extension Program grant from the Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service and the

University of Minnesota Extension, were the outcome of a collaborative effort between the tribes and the University of Minnesota Extension.

In addition, Extension also filled a financial resource management position with an applicant from the Leech Lake Tribal College. This led to curriculum transformation through the weaving of intellectual ideas, capacity building, community practice, cultural input, and evaluation. Hiring the tribal member was mutually beneficial in that Extension provided the financial literacy program to an underserved population, and the tribal member presented the program in a culturally appropriate manner. Hiring educators from within the community is a plus. They have trusting relationships, know how to work with the tribal government, and are able to immediately step into the work.

The AITF recognized that new Extension positions in Indian country should focus on the needs and requirements of tribal communities. Therefore, community participation in the hiring process from beginning to end was imperative. Based on the information gathered in the listening sessions, tribal members' voices played a large part in determining the kind of expertise required for each position. In addition, tribal members helped develop the position descriptions, helped recruit qualified applicants, and served on search committees. Working in partnership with tribal members and/or tribal divisions is essential for successful recruitment, hiring, and community programming. Extension will continue to work as partners in the future.

To support the newly hired staff, Extension created an American Indian and tribal partnership liaison position. An Extension regional director, who is American Indian and co-chair of the AITF, was hired to fill the position. The liaison mentors and supports educators working in Indian country by helping them navigate community and university protocols, explore program ideas, secure funding sources, and make professional connections within the university. The leadership provided by the liaison has helped retain educators and invigorate Extension's work in American Indian communities.

The AITF has learned how important building relationships over time is to creating community-university partnerships. It is through these trusting partnerships we have addressed mutually beneficial interests, such as hiring educators to work in Indian communities to address community priorities. It is just as important for the newly hired educators to build relationships with each other as they are encouraged to work as a multidisciplinary educational team. The American Indian and tribal partnership liaison convenes regular meetings with the team of educators to develop team strategies by sharing experiences, ideas, and resources, which, in turn, build relationships. It takes time and intentionality to work as a cohesive multidisciplinary team.

Conclusion

The AITF is the driving force for Extension's efforts to build relationships with Indian communities through culturally specific programmatic work. Through responsible and responsive listening and learning, Extension is able to act in collaboration with several tribal communities to meet the specific needs of each community, and additional programs will continue to emerge. Extension's efforts to increase the presence of American Indian professionals within its ranks are helping create lasting inroads within American Indian communities. The AITF actively reports on programmatic updates and outcomes, which has helped keep this initiative on the forefront of meeting diversity goals within Extension and, more broadly, the university. The AITF work is helping transform how several Extension program teams collaborate with diverse communities.

Several factors have contributed to the success of the AITF's work. Because the dean of Extension appoints each member to the AITF, the group has organizational legitimacy within Extension. The dean's appointments come from a multidisciplinary, self-selected pool of individuals. A range of educators and administrators communicating across cultures, both ethnic and academic, creates the needed internal

attention in addressing community-identified interests. At the core of this work are members of sovereign Indian Nations and faculty members of the university engaging in a mutually beneficial participatory process.

Today, Extension has the beginnings of an infrastructure in place to support a team of educators and relevant programming that is culturally specific and built on community-university partnerships. As Blinn, Zak, and Vogt (2006) stated, successful partnering provides a unique set of resources that, when combined, make a comprehensive program that any single entity could not deliver. Therefore, while the AITF might be the catalyst for programming within Indian country, a fundamental understanding at the core of all of the AITF's programming is that it takes a team-based effort to achieve significant results.

Plans for the AITF's future include developing a system for evaluating community-university partnerships. In addition, the AITF will use a baseline data survey of Extension programs, administered in 2008, which Extension plans to revisit. The survey provides a map of Extension programmatic efforts in Indian communities. The change in data over 5 years will assist the AITF and Extension more broadly determine the direction of future work and provide evidence of Extension's growing influence in Indian country. Finally, the AITF team plans to act on the results of a consensus workshop, focusing on collaborative multidisciplinary efforts and enhanced staff development opportunities in the area of American Indian culture.

In conclusion, it takes time to make real change happen within an organization's construct of inclusion and diversity. Building trust with community partners is also time intensive—requiring curiosity, respect, and a belief that what is created together far exceeds what a single entity could deliver. Extension educators who seek a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources with community partners are more likely to address the interests of the community in an appropriate sustainable manner. Hiring educators from the community with existing relationships expedites the development of partnerships and subsequent programming. It is through the intentional work of Extension in partnership with communities that transformational change takes place. The resulting outcomes and impacts have significance for both the community and the university.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Charles Blinn, Trudy Fredericks, Jennifer Garbow, Juan Moreno, Mary Ringhand, Richard Senese, Gail Tischler, and David Wilsey for their helpful comments on previous drafts of this article.

References

- Blinn, C. R., Zak, D. M., & Vogt, M. (2006). Building and maintaining successful relationships between reservation and university programs: Summer school experiences on the White Earth Reservation. *Journal of Forestry*, 104(2). pp 84-88.
- Hiller, J. (2005). Is 10% good enough? Cooperative Extension work in Indian Country. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 43(6) Article 6FEA2. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2005december/a2.php>
- Walshok, M. L. (1999). Strategies for building the infrastructure that supports the engaged campus. In R. G. Bringle, R. Games, & E. A. Malloy (Eds.), *Colleges and universities as citizens* (pp. 83). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Wilsey, D., & Beaulieu, S. (2010). We listen to them: A method for interaction and assessing natural resource perspectives in tribal communities. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 48(5) Article 5FEA9. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2010october/a9.php>

Copyright © by *Extension Journal, Inc.* ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the Journal Editorial Office, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact JOE Technical Support.