

Nonprofit Partnerships in Extension Programming: A Pilot Study

Abstract

Strategic collaboration between Extension faculty and nonprofit organizations has the potential to reduce costs, generate revenue, and improve programmatic outcomes for all involved. Through a mixed-methods pilot study, we examined how and to what extent such collaboration exists. Data sources included the National Center for Charitable Statistics, the Foundation Center, and results from a survey administered to county Extension faculty in one administrative district in Florida. Findings indicate that although Extension faculty partner with nonprofits, further development of these partnerships could lead to increased revenue generation and programmatic outcomes. Our methods and findings may help inform future research and development of strategic partnerships elsewhere within Extension.

Keywords: [nonprofit organizations](#), [collaboration](#), [cost sharing](#), [Extension](#), [partnership](#)

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Introduction

Extension programs cover a wide array of academic areas, such as agriculture, economic development, youth development, financial literacy, nutrition education, and health education (e.g., University of Florida, 2013). Related activities are similar to the services offered by many of the more than 1.4 million nonprofit organizations in the United States (McKeever & Pettijohn, 2014). Despite the similarities of the missions of Extension and community-based nonprofit organizations, limited research has been conducted to identify how and to what extent Extension programs partner or may partner with such entities.

Strategic partnerships with nonprofit organizations could help Extension meet its local and national goals (e.g., Coffey, Canales, Moore, Gullickson, & Kaczmariski, 2014; Parrott & Engelen-Eigles, 1992; Pritchett, Fulton, & Hine, 2012). For example, partnering with nonprofit organizations may allow Extension to expand programming, increase participation in programming, increase volunteer engagement, earn income, and capitalize on opportunities for increased visibility and embeddedness within a community. Additionally, most scholars agree that so-called "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1984) will not be solved by one organization or institution alone. Instead, these problems require sustained and cross-sectoral collaboration. Strategic partnership with nonprofits, therefore, also can be an important component of Extension's plan to address complex social and

environmental issues.

Because little research has been done regarding collaborations between Extension and nonprofits, we conducted a pilot study to identify and analyze existing partnerships between Extension at land-grant universities and community-based nonprofit organizations. We focused on one Extension administrative district (17 counties) in northeast Florida.

Methodology

Our mixed-methods study involved a parallel convergent design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). We conducted Phase 1 (nonprofit data collection) and Phase 2 (Extension data collection) separately and concurrently and analyzed the data for each phase separately. Then, in Phase 3, we compared the data, a process that allowed us to produce recommendations for Extension.

The study region included the 17 counties of northeast Florida: Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Citrus, Clay, Columbia, Dixie, Duval, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Lafayette, Levy, Madison, Nassau, Suwannee, Taylor, and Union. We selected this region for our pilot study because it includes both urban and rural counties and was identified by the director of the district as having high potential for increased collaboration.

In Phase 1 (nonprofit data collection), we developed a comprehensive overview of the nonprofit sector using data from the National Center for Charitable Statistics and the Foundation Center. These data included the numbers and types of organizations in the 17 counties, financial figures for the organizations, and an estimate of the private grant dollars flowing into the area. This overview expanded on prior research conducted in Florida (Jessie Ball duPont Fund & Nonprofit Center of Northeast Florida, 2012; Jones et al., 2016; Nonprofit Center of North Central Florida, 2012; Salamon, Lessans-Geller, & Sokolowski, 2008).

In Phase 2 (Extension data collection), we conducted a survey in April and May 2016 of the 64 University of Florida (UF) Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) county faculty members serving in the region. A total of 41 usable, complete responses were received, yielding a response rate of 64%. Survey questions focused on how frequently faculty members partnered with nonprofit organizations, what types of partnerships were active at the time, and what perceptions faculty had regarding the importance of those partnerships as well as opportunities and barriers relating to successful nonprofit/Extension partnerships. In addition, participants were asked to identify three nonprofits with which they had closely collaborated and to elaborate on the nature of the relationships with those partners. The survey included a mix of open-ended and close-ended questions. We conducted thematic analysis (Patton, 2002) on the responses to the open-ended questions.

In Phase 3, we compared the data we collected during the first two phases of the research to identify how partnerships between Extension and nonprofit organizations could be developed, promoted, and supported.

Findings

Part I: The Nonprofit Sector in Northeast Florida

Numbers and Types of Nonprofit Organizations

There are 8,558 nonprofit organizations in northeast Florida, of which 6,838 (80%) are 501(c)(3) charities. 501(c)(3) charities, referred to in this article as nonprofits, are legally incorporated for charitable (including

religious and educational) purposes. Of these organizations, only 1,739 had annual revenues greater than \$50,000. Thus, the majority of nonprofits are grassroots, volunteer-run organizations. The organizations that had annual revenues greater than \$50,000 varied in size but included multimillion-dollar entities, such as universities and hospitals.

Organizations in the nonprofit sector are classified into 10 subsectors, according to the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities. The subsectors are arts, culture, and humanities; education; environment and animals; health; human services; international; mutual/membership benefit; public/societal benefit; religion; and unknown (for certain statistical purposes, we combined mutual/membership benefit and public/societal benefit; for more information about the categorizations, see <http://nccs.urban.org/classification/ntee.cfm>). The composition of the nonprofit sector in northeast Florida (i.e., numbers and types of organizations) is largely comparable to the nonprofit sectors in Florida and in the United States (Table 1). The most notable difference is that northeast Florida has more religious organizations than other regions of the country. Additionally, as compared to the United States overall, northeast Florida is home to a greater percentage of public/societal benefit organizations and lesser percentages of arts, culture, and humanities, education, and human services organizations.

Table 1.

501(c)(3) Nonprofit Organizations in the Northeast Florida Extension District, Florida, and the United States by Subsector

Subsector	Northeast Florida		Florida		United States	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Arts, culture, and humanities	414	6%	4,169	7%	96,488	9%
Education	910	13%	7,813	13%	152,951	15%
Environment and animals	287	4%	2,545	4%	50,649	5%
Health	460	7%	4,150	7%	74,346	7%
Human services	1,315	19%	12,684	20%	259,273	25%
International	94	1%	1,140	2%	18,255	2%
Mutual/membership and public/societal benefit	1,080	16%	10,494	17%	106,533	10%
Religion	2,277	33%	18,945	30%	263,320	26%
Unknown	1	0% ^a	222	0% ^a	3,225	0% ^a
Total	6,838	100%	62,162	100%	1,025,010	100%

Note. Source: National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2014. The 17 counties in northeast Florida are Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Citrus, Clay, Columbia, Dixie, Duval, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Lafayette, Levy, Madison, Nassau, Suwannee, Taylor, and Union.
^aPercentage < 0.5%.

The numbers and types of nonprofit organizations in the study region varied by county, and urban areas typically

had more nonprofit organizations, and more education and human services organizations in particular, than rural areas. The number of organizations per county ranged widely from a high of 3,649 to a low of 23. The nonprofit sector in rural areas typically had a greater percentage of religion-based nonprofits. For example, in each of the rural counties of Bradford and Lafayette, the religion subsector comprised more than 60% of the nonprofit sector.

Revenue and Expenses of Nonprofit Organizations

Table 2 shows revenue figures for each subsector of nonprofits in northeast Florida. Of the 6,838 nonprofit organizations in the region, only 1,739 have annual revenues greater than \$50,000. The 6,838 organizations generate approximately \$9.7 billion in annual revenues and have a median organizational revenue of \$131,661. Program service revenue is the largest source of income in the nonprofit sector both locally and nationally (McKeever & Pettijohn, 2014). In northeast Florida, 74% of revenue is program revenue, 21% is donations/contributions, and 5% is revenue from other sources. After removing hospitals and higher education institutions—two types of nonprofits with significant program revenue—50% of the sector's revenue is from programs, 43% is from donations/contributions, and 7% is from other sources. Revenue sources vary by type of organization, a fact that may influence how Extension faculty work with nonprofit organizations.

Table 2.
Total Revenue and Percentages of Types of Revenue for Each Subsector of Nonprofit Organizations in Northeast Florida

Subsector	Percentage of total number of nonprofits	Total revenue	Subsector revenue as percentage of nonprofit sector revenue	Percentage of subsector revenue from program revenue	Percentage of subsector revenue from donations revenue	Percentage of subsector revenue from other revenue
Arts, culture, and humanities	6%	\$105,052,390	1%	24%	71%	5%
Education	13%	\$774,838,353	8%	40%	45%	14%
Environment and animals	4%	\$72,785,521	1%	49%	44%	7%
Health	7%	\$6,957,085,329	71%	87%	8%	4%
Human services	19%	\$1,284,871,194	13%	53%	40%	7%
International	1%	\$9,748,760	0% ^a	16%	81%	3%
Mutual benefit and public/societal	16%	\$491,121,845	5%	3%	93%	4%

benefit						
Religion	33%	\$52,987,105	1%	33%	61%	6%
Total ^b	100%	\$9,748,490,497	100%	74%	21%	5%

Note. Source: National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2013.

^aPercentage < 0.5%. ^bUnknowns were reclassified as appropriate.

At the time of our analysis, nonprofit organizations in northeast Florida expended approximately \$9 billion annually, and median nonprofit expenses were \$127,006. Nonprofits' expenses varied by county, with nonprofits in urban counties far exceeding their rural peers. For example, nonprofits in the urban counties of Alachua and Duval had per capita expenditures of \$9,686 and \$6,608, respectively, whereas on the other end of the spectrum, the rural counties of Lafayette and Union had per capita expenditures of \$8 and \$43, respectively. These data have one major limitation. The expenditures represent organizations with headquarters (i.e., mailing addresses) in the respective county and do not tell us whether an organization headquartered in one county is also providing services in additional counties. In other words, a nonprofit based in Alachua County might be conducting programming in Lafayette County. In this case, the dollars would be attributed to Alachua County but the actual expenditures benefit Lafayette County. This sort of scenario is one of the greatest challenges in working with nonprofit data.

Local and National Foundation Funding to Nonprofits

In regard to local giving, more than 520 private foundations existed in northeast Florida at the time of our analysis. Of those, 434 were located in Duval County, the county with the largest population in the region. Many counties had one or no private foundations. The 520 foundations in the region had a total of more than \$2.3 billion in assets (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2013). Additionally, nonprofits were attracting more than \$58 million in external private funding to the region (Foundation Center, 2013). This funding was primarily focused on education (28%), human services (23%), and health (17%) (Foundation Center, 2013).

Overall, the results generated from Phase 1 of our study suggest that although nonprofits have important and varied roles in communities, great disparities exist between the types and financial capacities of nonprofit organizations in rural and urban areas.

Part II: Existing Collaborations Between Extension and Nonprofits

The primary programmatic responsibilities of the agents who responded to the survey we conducted during Phase 2 of the study were family and consumer sciences (32%), agriculture (17%), youth development (17%), horticulture (10%), and marine/sea grant (2%). The faculty had been in their positions for an average of 9.49 years, had lived in their counties for an average of 17.13 years, and had worked in their counties for an average of 12 years. Their responses contributed quantitative and qualitative data related to existing and potential collaboration with nonprofit organizations in the region.

Types of Collaborations Between UF/IFAS and Nonprofits

Of the 41 survey respondents, eight (20%) reported the names of three nonprofits with which they worked

closely, 19 (46%) named two, and nine (22%) named one. Only five respondents (12%) did not name any nonprofits with which they worked closely. Some respondents mistakenly included government agencies. The collaborations with nonprofits were primarily with human services organizations and public and societal benefit organizations (Table 3).

Table 3.

Primary Collaborations by Type of Nonprofit Organization

Nonprofit type	Percentage of reported collaborations
Human services	54%
Public/societal benefit	23%
Environment and animals	10%
Mutual/membership benefit	6%
Education	4%
Arts, culture, and humanities	1%
Health	1%
Religion	1%

Variations on Collaboration

Respondents reported various types of collaboration that may be broadly categorized in two ways: resources offered and resources received. In regard to resources offered, 73% of respondents provided direct services to nonprofits, 48% provided curriculum and related services, 35% provided train-the-trainer programs, and 15% provided consulting services. In regard to resources received, 35% reported receiving services and 15% reported receiving training from nonprofit organizations. Additionally, 19% of respondents engaged in cosponsorship of community-based events.

Collaborations are not merely a transactional exchange but must represent a common vision and a sustained commitment to interchanging ideas and resources. Therefore, the data presented here cannot represent the total value of the collaboration. They do, however, provide a starting place from which we can describe these relationships.

Perceived Importance of Nonprofits to UF/IFAS

Respondents perceived nonprofit collaborations to be important to Extension. On a scale of 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*), faculty rated collaboration with nonprofits in general as 4.18. When respondents rated relationships with specific nonprofits, the ratings were even higher. For example, for the first of three nonprofits identified, the average rating was 4.27. This result indicates that although the respondents viewed nonprofits in general as being important collaborators, they generally saw the relationship with one particular nonprofit as especially important.

Frequencies and Types of Interactions

Respondents expressed that they worked with nonprofit organizations on a regular basis. Specifically, 13% interacted with nonprofits daily, 38% weekly, 43% monthly, and 8% annually.

The UF/IFAS faculty reported working with a variety of stakeholders within the nonprofit sector. In order of greatest to least contact as indicated by use of a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*a great deal*), UF/IFAS worked with senior leaders (3.7), frontline staff (3.7), midlevel leaders (3.7), volunteers (3.3), and board members (3.0).

UF/IFAS Faculty Perceptions of Factors Related to Successful Partnerships

A thematic analysis of the responses to the open-ended survey items yielded seven key factors faculty perceived to be important to successful partnerships. The most important of those factors were (a) mutual interest (a theme in 47% of responses), (b) ability to leverage strengths and resources (a theme in 28% of responses), (c) communication (a theme in 25% of responses), and (d) relationship building and teamwork development (a theme in 22% of responses).

Only five obstacles to successful partnership were reported: (a) difficulty among Extension personnel in identifying nonprofits with which to partner, (b) Extension personnel's lacking adequate time to jointly pursue funding, (c) the misperception among Extension or nonprofit personnel that Extension does not need to fund raise, and (d) the perception that Extension and nonprofits are competing for the same grants and clients.

UF/IFAS Faculty Perceptions of Opportunities for Future Collaborations

In response to an open-ended question, 24 faculty conveyed their perceptions about opportunities related to future collaborations. These responses were analyzed thematically, and four core potential opportunities emerged. These opportunities were as follows: increase programmatic impact (58% of responses), develop broad-based community support (29% of responses), increase competitiveness for fund raising (13% of responses), and consolidate efforts (4% of responses).

Part III: Analysis of Phase 1 and Phase 2 Data and Resulting Recommendations

Room to Expand

The 41 faculty respondents identified 66 unduplicated nonprofits with which they worked. Only eight faculty identified three specific nonprofits with which they worked closely. The rest named two, one, or zero such nonprofits. However, in the study region, there are more than 6,800 nonprofits, many of which are working toward some of the same goals as Extension. These data suggest that there is potential for an increased number of partnerships and, perhaps, broader coalition building among multiple agencies with similar missions. Increased collaboration, if done strategically, has the potential to increase the programmatic effectiveness and fund-raising capacities of all parties.

Allocation of Time

As faculty pointed out in their responses to open-ended items, successful partnerships take time. It takes time to identify common goals, articulate strengths, consolidate efforts, and apply for grants. Additionally, this sort of work requires a high level of trust and mutual understanding. Benefits of these activities could be increased programmatic impact and fund-raising competitiveness; however, without the time to develop this work, the benefits go unrealized. If these relationships are to be a priority, both Extension and nonprofit leaders must allocate time and resources to the long-term work of collaboration building.

Need for Training

Based on survey data, we believe Extension faculty and staff would benefit from training on and information about the nonprofit sector and a deeper examination of nonprofit funding and leadership structures. For example, it is a common misperception that nonprofits are funded through charitable donations; however, revenue varies by type of nonprofit organization (see Table 2). An awareness of such nuances will enable Extension agents to develop more strategic and effective partnerships.

Shift in Perspective

It is noteworthy that in describing potential opportunities for collaboration, some respondents did so through the lens of what Extension had to offer. For example, one participant wrote, "We are an excellent resource. We have free resources that nonprofits can utilize in a wide variety of ways. We are experts in our fields and have current research based information to teach and provide." Another wrote, "[We] work closely with stakeholders and remind them we are educators, researchers, specialists and support personnel who are dedicated to making Florida a desirable place to live and work." These quotes represent what economists might describe as a supply-side mentality: Extension has expertise and services to provide, and the goal here is to provide them. Missing from this perspective are self-defined needs and desires of the communities and the nonprofits. How do the perspectives of all parties blend to create a mutually agreed on set of goals? This is the sort of question Extension administrators and faculty must ask if they are to address complex social, economic, and environmental problems, the sorts of problems that require deep and sustained collaboration.

Discussion

In this section, we describe the methodological and practical contributions of this article, the implications for revenue generation of collaborations, and the limitations of our study.

From a methodological perspective, we have described a process Extension programs across the country can replicate to identify current and future strategic partnerships. The key data source for Phase 1 was the National Center for Charitable Statistics; some of the center's data are available publically and other data are available via paid subscription. The key data source for Phase 2 was a survey of Extension agents in one region (survey available upon request). Overall, this two-phased process can be replicated to identify (a) gaps in service (particularly with regard to types of nonprofits in rural areas), (b) the extent to which agents are partnering with nonprofit organizations, and (c) examples of successful local collaborations. The primary purpose of this process is to create stronger collaborations between Extension and nonprofits; however, the data also can contribute to statements of need in grant proposals and Extension reporting mechanisms.

From a practical perspective, our findings suggest that it would be of strategic value for Extension administrators

to take the following actions to increase partnerships:

- Provide trainings to Extension faculty in coalition building, fund raising, identifying (and vetting) nonprofits, forming partnerships, and building relationships.
- Support the time needed to build collaborations with nonprofits, and allow for this effort to be acknowledged in annual accomplishment reports and plans of work.
- Provide incentives for faculty and staff to expand their roles within communities, going beyond educators to become facilitators and collaborators through promotion and revised job descriptions.

An important benefit of partnering with nonprofits is the potential for Extension to generate earned income. There are several forms of income generation to consider, two of which are key. First, Extension could provide fee-for-service consulting to nonprofit organizations. This expertise could focus on Extension's core strengths in program design, curriculum design, volunteer management, train-the-trainer programming, and evaluation. Second, Extension could partner with nonprofits to jointly pursue grants, community enhancement initiatives, and other funding opportunities. In these scenarios, Extension could serve in either the program delivery or the program evaluation role of the collaboration. In this way, Extension would leverage its strength in ways that maximize the work of both Extension and the partnering agency. Of course, other sorts of creative collaborations might also emerge.

One limitation of our study is that it provided only the perspective of Extension. We documented how Extension faculty perceived these partnerships with nonprofits and did not take into consideration how the nonprofit organizations might perceive the partnerships. Future studies should include a data collection process that reveals the perspectives of nonprofit leaders.

Conclusion

In this article, we presented findings from a pilot study of the public/private partnerships between one land-grant Extension district covering 17 counties in northeast Florida and the region's community-based nonprofit organizations. Despite our study's seemingly limited scope, the findings have the potential to help Extensionists identify opportunities for strategic partnerships that can increase the effectiveness of both the government-funded Extension programs and the work of the local nonprofits. We also anticipate that this article will inform future research in other Extension districts and other states.

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