Increasing Collaboration Between Extension and Community-Based Nonprofits: The Quick Chats Workshop

Abstract

Collaborations between Extension and nonprofit organizations have the potential to increase programmatic outcomes and generate revenue. One challenge in establishing such collaborations is identifying potential collaborators. We organized a structured networking workshop to foster such relationships. Of 28 participants, 24 completed the postworkshop evaluation. On average, these participants reported meeting 12 new people and expected to follow up with five potential collaborators. Two key areas of expected collaboration were programming and public relations/communications. In this article, we describe the process of conducting the structured networking workshop, present the results of the follow-up evaluation, and offer recommendations for replication.

Keywords: collaboration, nonprofit organizations, community organizations

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Introduction

Cooperative Extension and nonprofit organizations often offer programs in youth development, health and nutrition, financial literacy, or gardening to the same audiences without much coordination. Yet enhanced collaboration between Cooperative Extension and nonprofit organizations has the capacity to help both partners increase program impacts and decrease costs (Coffey, Canales, Moore, Gullickson, & Kaczmarski, 2014; Parrott & Engelen-Eigles, 1992; Pritchett, Fulton, & Hine, 2012). Limited research exists that documents how Cooperative Extension collaborates with nonprofits (see, for example, Jones, Pracht, Simonne, Renfrow, & Hunter, 2018).

The first challenge in developing collaborations is identifying potential collaborators. This Ideas at Work article describes a process that was pilot tested in one Cooperative Extension district in Florida. Cooperative Extension faculty and leaders of nonprofits in the region were invited to a semistructured session called Quick Chats. The purpose of the event was to provide potential collaborators a safe place to introduce themselves and their professional interests and to exchange contact information—all within a few minutes. Participants reported in postworkshop evaluations that the pilot session was a good use of their time and allowed them to develop collaboration leads. In this article, we describe the workshop itself, present the

results of the postevent evaluation (approved via the institutional review board protocol at the University of Florida), and suggest recommendations for replication and future use.

The Quick Chats Workshop

We held the Quick Chats workshop at a neutral third-party venue. Our team included an Extension district director (Eric Simonne), a faculty member specializing in nonprofit leadership and management (Jennifer A. Jones), and a program director at the Community Foundation of North Central Florida (Lesley Banis). Community foundations are 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, and they often play an important convener role for nonprofits in communities. The community foundation included in our project, for example, hosts a nonprofit "center for excellence" that organizes regular workshops on various management topics. Our workshop was offered and marketed to the foundation's nonprofit members as part of the foundation's regular workshop offerings. We invited both Cooperative Extension county faculty members and leaders of nonprofit organizations from the region. The workshop was modeled after the Collaborating with Strangers CoLab process designed for networking (see Collaborating with Strangers, n.d.). The goal was to have participants meet and very quickly identify what, if any, opportunities might exist for collaboration.

As part of the online registration, invitees provided typical information—name, organization name, contact information—but each registrant also identified something he or she could teach (i.e., registrant's area[s] of expertise), something he or she wanted to learn (i.e., potential area[s] of improvement for registrant or registrant's organization), and ideas for partnerships. This registration information was used for developing a contact list that was distributed via email after the workshop. The data also were used for creating an 8½-by-11-in. introduction card for each participant that was displayed around the participant's neck during the event (see appendix).

The workshop, scheduled for 2 hr on a workday morning, opened with a brief introduction to the role of Cooperative Extension and instructions for the networking process. These instructions were followed by approximately 60 min of semistructured "quick chats" of 3 min. Quick chats were timed, a bell was rung after each 3-min session, and participants identified new partners randomly. Refreshments were available. During the structured networking portion, participants were given 3 min to meet someone they did not know. They were instructed to quickly read the introduction card displayed around the neck of the other person and then to discuss any potential areas of common interest they observed. Extension agents were not allowed to network with each other but instead were instructed to talk with nonprofit representatives. After about 60 min, instructions were given for participants to stop the structured networking, enjoy refreshments, and network freely.

Evaluation Results

Of the 28 attendees, 24 completed a brief anonymous evaluation (response rate of 86%). Respondents included 14 nonprofit professionals, seven Extension professionals, and three "others" (including nonprofit board members). Only 29% of participants reported prior collaborations between Extension and nonprofits, and most of those participants were Extension professionals (71%; five out of the seven participants who reported such collaborations). On average, participants reported meeting 12 new people and stated that they expected to follow up with five participants. Participants were asked to estimate how many potential collaborators they met who could benefit specific areas of their organizations. On average, participants

identified three potential collaborations that could expand programming (70 such potential collaborations total for the group), three potential collaborations that could improve public relations and communications (64 such potential collaborations total), two potential collaborations that could expand program marketing (41 such potential collaborations total), one potential collaboration that could expand fundraising (31 such potential collaborations total), and one potential collaboration that could expand program evaluation (21 such potential collaborations total).

Recommendations and Conclusions

On the basis of our pilot test and evaluation results, we identified four ways our Co-Lab–inspired Quick Chats model could be further modified to facilitate connections between Extension and nonprofit leaders. First, the attendees who identified the fewest potential collaborators were those whose work was concentrated outside the county in which the workshop was held. Therefore, we recommend including information about geographic focus in the registration process. Second, participants did not identify many potential collaborations related to program evaluation. Given that program evaluation is a strength of Cooperative Extension (and a possible revenue-generating activity), we recommend alerting participants during the workshop introduction that program evaluation is an area of potential collaboration. Third, the detailed information sheet displayed by each participant helped participants quickly identify potential collaborators (see Collaborating with Strangers, n.d.). Hence, all participants, including walk-ins, should display this information, and organizers should have blank copies on hand for those who register the day of the event. Fourth, our study was not longitudinal. We recommend that any replication of this activity include an evaluation of whether the event leads to long-term collaborations.

In conclusion, the Quick Chats pilot event proved a useful venue for connecting Cooperative Extension agents with nonprofit organization leaders and identifying potential collaborations with nonprofit organizations. The event was low cost, and all costs were covered by the community foundation as part of its regular nonprofit training workshop series. In short, this was a low-risk, high-reward method for establishing potential collaborations that could potentially increase programmatic outcomes and generate revenue for Extension. This process may be used by and adapted for other Cooperative Extension systems and nonprofits to create new opportunities for collaboration.

References

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Appendix

Introduction Card Format

Name:	
Organization:	
Something to Teach:	**Something to Learn:**
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My Preliminary Ideas for Partnership:	
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