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Increasing Collaboration Between Extension and University Faculty: The Value of a Dedicated Faculty Liaison

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This paper describes the development of a faculty liaison position created to increase collaboration between Extension and other university units and provides original research assessing the programmatic outcome. An assessment of initial collaborations was done, and a survey was given to university faculty to assess their impressions of Extension at the start of the position and after four years. The position provided a significant increase in collaborative projects and reported collaboration, and reported perceptions of Extension improved, while the ability to define the terms Extension and land-grant did not change. Suggestions for improving upon such a position are made.

Keywords: Extension, engagement, liaison, university, collaboration

The world has changed dramatically since the Smith-Lever Act helped create the Cooperative Extension System (National Institute of Food and Agriculture [NIFA], n.d.). Initially conceived to facilitate the provision of knowledge to the agricultural community by providing research-based information and using local demonstrations and onsite visits, Extension met the societal needs of the time period (Hains et al., 2021). However, as our society has shifted, so have expectations for Extension. Shifts include advances in technology, and with the advent of the Internet, there is easier access to information. There have also been corresponding shifts in the expectation that Extension services provide more than basic information to clientele, as discussed by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999). Other shifts include methods of outreach, topic areas covered, and audiences served (Hains et al., 2021). Additionally, declining financial support from national, state, and local sources has led to Extension needing to rethink how it can best and most effectively contribute to society while also remaining financially viable (Elliott-Engel et al., 2020). Increasing calls to justify investment and funding have led to a need to engage in better program evaluation to demonstrate Extension impact rather than simply providing education (Chazdon & Paine, 2014; Elliott-Engel et al., 2020; Franz, 2015). Overall, changes to funding structures, new pressures for evaluation to justify funding, and new ways of obtaining information (especially through the Internet) have led Extension to rethink its mission and strategies.

Simultaneously, universities have been under increasing pressure to serve the larger community rather than simply educate students or engage in research (Bruns & Franz, 2015; Franz, 2015). Calls for universities to show greater engagement with the community have been longstanding (e.g., Boyer, 1990, 1996) and have continued in more recent times (Franz, 2015; Moser & Ream, 2015). An Elective Community Engagement Carnegie Classification was developed in 2005 and serves to operationalize and demonstrate a university's engagement with the community (New England Higher Education, n.d.). There is a greater focus on universities helping to solve complex societal problems that require multi-disciplinary efforts, such as global warming, water quality and quantity, poverty, and reducing health disparities (Hains et al., 2021; Harder, 2019). Community engagement allows universities to demonstrate their relevance and importance to the larger society, and collaborative efforts are needed to meet community needs.

Extension is well-situated to help universities in their growing quest to reach out beyond the campus and better serve the community. In fact, community education and outreach have been the core mission of Extension since its inception (NIFA, n.d.). Given that communities have needs for expertise beyond Extension-oriented departments (Collins & Gaolach, 2018), and as universities strive to increase their outreach and relevance to the community (DePrince & DiEnno, 2019; Elliott-Engel et al., 2020; Harder, 2019), it will be important to increase the linkages between the entire university and the community (Sandmann & Weerts, 2008). Extension can potentially serve as a collaborator with other university entities to increase university-community engagement.

Society has changed significantly since the inception of Extension, and while Extension services have made some changes, additional changes might be beneficial. However, systemic structures set up at land-grant universities can be challenging to change and might serve as barriers to needed changes. These systemic structures might include locations of personnel or units, fiscal accountability structures, research pressures, rewards for individual achievement, and even supervisory systems (Moser & Ream, 2015).

At some land-grant universities, university work with the community predominantly consists of work done by Extension, while the rest of the university focuses on the missions of research and teaching (Gould & Ham, 2002). This configuration worked well at the inception of Extension and the land-grant system; however, the role of Extension has changed over time. There are greater expectations for Extension to meet more complex needs, which require collaboration, and to demonstrate changes to outcomes, rather than just providing education. Locating Extension services separately from other university entities or units can make necessary collaborative work challenging. County-based offices or regional programs can provide further distance between university academic and research units and Extension faculty and personnel, providing challenges to communication and collaboration. At some universities, Extension is better integrated into the university, embedded in two or more colleges, a model which has many

advantages such as greater understanding and recognition of Extension as well as greater ease of collaboration between Extension and other university units.

While a model of housing Extension in more than one college could provide a greater likelihood of collaborative work between Extension and other academic units, changing to this model is not feasible for many universities. Financial constraints, tenure-related challenges, and preferences to keep things as they are among various audiences can make efforts to change systems difficult (Leahey & Barringer, 2020). However, at land-grant universities in which Extension is housed separately from other units, it is more challenging for collaboration to occur (Gould & Ham, 2002). Further, a lack of understanding regarding Extension reduces its perceived value at the university, which further reduces opportunities for collaborative community engagement (Bull et al., 2004).

It will be important for Extension to work collaboratively with other university units to increase expertise to address societal and community needs. At land-grant universities where Extension has been less integrated into the university community, finding solutions to increase communication and collaboration will be important. One potential way to do this is to develop strategies to bridge Extension services to other academic units, such as creating a position for a liaison to facilitate collaborative work. The goals of this paper are (a) to describe a liaison position developed at a land-grant university in which Extension is housed in a single college as a way to better connect Extension with other university units in order to increase collaborative efforts and (b) to evaluate the effectiveness of this position.

Position Development

At a land-grant university in which Extension is housed in a single college, a decision was made by the Dean of Extension to develop a position that would serve as a liaison to the rest of the university to increase collaborative efforts. A tenured faculty member with a significant Extension appointment (65% FTE) agreed to serve in this role and work with the dean to develop the position. The faculty member was tasked with developing the liaison position to increase Extension's collaborative efforts and, in turn, better serve the needs of the community. Additional responsibilities included working with community Extension partners to find areas of needed expertise within the university community. The faculty member was given a dedicated 15% of appointment time (taken from the Extension appointment) to work on these tasks for four years and was allotted staff support in the amount of 10 hours per week of a staff member who was part of the dean's administrative team. A small stipend was provided to supplement the faculty member's salary during this time period in recognition of the additional duties. Supervision of this position was provided by the dean in the form of monthly meetings, which were initially one hour in length but reduced to 30 minutes in length once the position was more established. Additionally, the faculty member attended the dean's administrative team meetings and briefed the team regularly on efforts. The activities conducted were as follows:

- Created an advisory board to guide position efforts and obtain university input;
- Developed a formal method for tracking Extension collaborations, which involved using an Excel spreadsheet that provided information on college and units involved in collaborations, faculty members in those units and in Extension, a description of the project(s) or collaborative activity, and the length of the collaboration;
- Developed a survey of university collaboration and perceptions of Extension which was implemented at inception and after four years (see information in the Methods section);
- Provided presentations regarding Extension to multiple departments;
- Engaged in meetings with individual faculty members to encourage collaboration with Extension;
- Presented on Extension to the university's faculty senate;
- Provided information regarding Extension at the university's new faculty orientation;
- Met with community stakeholders at district-wide events to determine community needs and to seek university expertise for collaborative efforts;
- Developed a list of commonly requested university service opportunities to share with Extension offices and community partners;
- Provided individual assistance to faculty and county stakeholders who requested information regarding appropriate collaborators at the university; and
- Provided presentations and updates to Extension administration and faculty.

Methods

Collaboration Assessment

Before the development of this position, the university's Extension service had limited tracking of collaborations across the university (i.e., a single sheet of paper with projects listed and limited information about who was involved). At the start of the appointment, an assessment of current collaborations was conducted. The assessment was done by sending out email messages to all Extension faculty members asking them to provide information regarding any activities or projects in which they were working with other university units. Collaboration was defined as an activity or project that involved Extension faculty working with another university unit on a project that supported Extension activities; the work ranged from small collaborations, such as a single educational presentation, to large collaborations, such as multi-year grants. The goal of the assessment was to determine the current collaboration activities and create a formal tracking method. Additionally, this assessment provided a baseline level of university collaboration before the start of the position.

Faculty Survey

A faculty survey was created to assess a baseline report of faculty collaboration, knowledge of, beliefs about, and interaction with Extension. The survey was created by the faculty liaison in conjunction with the Dean of Extension based on desired information. Questions assessed demographic information (type of faculty appointment, the home unit of the faculty member, and whether the respondent had an administrative appointment), whether the participant had ever had an Extension appointment (at this or another university), whether the participant had ever collaborated with Extension, whether the participant had ever attended an Extension program, how valuable Extension was perceived to be, how many opportunities the participant felt there would be to collaborate with Extension, and how difficult they believed collaboration with Extension might be. Additionally, participants were asked open-ended questions regarding their understanding of the terms *Extension* and *land-grant*. While most questions were easily assessed on a nominal or ordinal scale, qualitative responses were assessed by two trained raters using a 3-point ordinal scale (0 = *no understanding*, 1 = *some understanding*, 2 = *full understanding*), reflecting the quality of the definitions provided. Those who did not respond were not included in the analysis (participants were directed to respond *I don't know* if they did not know the answer, so a blank response was treated as missing data). The two raters examined the responses separately and provided their initial ratings. The initial inter-rater agreement was 85%, but after the two raters met to discuss the items, they came to a consensus such that there was 100% agreement. In both administrations (before the appointment began and after four years), the survey was distributed to faculty members across the university via the Dean of Extension, who provided links and information to dean colleagues; university deans distributed the survey to their faculty members via college and unit lists. Surveys were anonymous, and individual-level data were confidential. Participants did not receive compensation for their participation. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Results

Collaboration Assessment

Upon the development of the position, a formal tracking system for collaborations was developed, and Extension faculty were then prompted via email to update information regarding their collaborations bi-annually. Initial tracking suggested 28 established collaborations between Extension and other university units. After four years, 99 collaborations were reported in the tracking system, indicating a greater than 200% increase in the number of collaborations within the four-year period.

Faculty Survey

Number of Participants

There was an increase in survey participation between the first and second administrations of the survey, and the number of units represented in survey responses also increased. During the first survey administration, 285 participants agreed to participate in the study, and 228 completed at least one question (80%). The number of colleges or other units represented in this survey was 14 of 18 (78%). The second administration yielded 385 participants who started the survey (representing a 35% increase in participation from the first administration), and 322 completed at least one question (84%). The number of colleges or other units represented in the second administration was 16 of 18 (89%). Not all participants completed all questions, so the number of respondents varied for each question. While the university does not track or report the number of faculty members employed at any given time (as it is constantly changing), it is estimated that there were approximately 5,000 faculty members at the university during these time periods (University of Florida, n.d.), meaning that the number of study participants represents only around 6% of the faculty population in the first administration and 8% of the faculty population in the second administration. This participation level is not unusual for online surveys (e.g., Aitken et al., 2008), particularly those that do not provide incentives; however, this response rate should be considered a limitation of the study results. Based on both the number of participants who agreed to participate and the number of units represented, it appears that the level of participation was greater for the second administration. This higher level of participation suggests a greater willingness to engage in an Extension related activity voluntarily and may indicate that university faculty had a greater interest in and awareness of Extension after the four-year period.

Collaboration with Extension

There was a significant increase in reports of collaboration between the first and second administration of the survey, $\chi^2(1, N = 405) = 10.512, p = < .001$. When asked whether they have ever had a collaborative work relationship with Extension, 31.5% reported having collaborated during the first administration. This number rose to 47.6% for the second administration, representing an increase of over 51% (see Table 1). There were also small, positive changes in perceived difficulty in collaborating with Extension, which were not statistically significant ($p > .05$). In the first administration, 31.9% felt that collaborating with Extension would be somewhat or extremely difficult, and 29.2% reported that it would be somewhat or very easy. However, in the second administration, only 20.7% reported that they believed it would be somewhat or extremely difficult to collaborate with Extension, and 41.7% reported that it would be somewhat or very easy to collaborate (see Table 1).

Table 1. Responses to Faculty Survey, First and Second Administration

Question	Response Options	First Administration	Second Administration
Have you ever participated in a Cooperative Extension program in the community (e.g., 4-H, Master Gardener programs, etc.)?	Yes	24.7%	41.2%
	No	74.7%	57.2%
	Unsure	0.7%	1.5%
		<i>N</i> = 146	<i>N</i> = 260
Have you ever worked collaboratively with Cooperative Extension in a professional capacity (i.e., in your work at UF or at another institution, have you done a joint project or research with Cooperative Extension)?	Yes	31.5% (<i>n</i> = 46)	47.6% (<i>n</i> = 128)
	No	66.4% (<i>n</i> = 97)	49.8% (<i>n</i> = 134)
	Unsure	2.0% (<i>n</i> = 3)	2.6% (<i>n</i> = 7)
		<i>N</i> = 146	<i>N</i> = 269
Based on the description, what is your perception of the value of Cooperative Extension?	Extremely valuable-1	60.3% (<i>n</i> = 88)	69.5% (<i>n</i> = 182)
	Moderately valuable-2	28.1% (<i>n</i> = 41)	17.2% (<i>n</i> = 45)
	Somewhat valuable-3	9.6% (<i>n</i> = 14)	11.4% (<i>n</i> = 30)
	A little valuable-4	1.4% (<i>n</i> = 2)	1.1% (<i>n</i> = 3)
	Not at all valuable-5	0.7% (<i>n</i> = 1)	0.7% (<i>n</i> = 2)
	<i>N</i> = 146	<i>N</i> = 262	
	<i>M</i> = 1.54	<i>M</i> = 1.47	
	<i>SD</i> = 0.78	<i>SD</i> = 0.80	
Based on the description, how much opportunity might there be for Cooperative Extension to collaborate with you?	A lot-1	31.7% (<i>n</i> = 46)	38.7% (<i>n</i> = 101)
	A moderate amount-2	24.1% (<i>n</i> = 35)	20.3% (<i>n</i> = 53)
	Some-3	23.4% (<i>n</i> = 34)	22.6% (<i>n</i> = 59)
	Maybe a few-4	15.2% (<i>n</i> = 22)	10.7% (<i>n</i> = 28)
	None-5	5.5% (<i>n</i> = 8)	7.7% (<i>n</i> = 20)
	<i>N</i> = 145	<i>N</i> = 261	
	<i>M</i> = 2.39	<i>M</i> = 2.28	
	<i>SD</i> = 1.23	<i>SD</i> = 1.29	
How difficult do you think it would be for you to collaborate with Cooperative Extension?	Extremely difficult-1	3.5% (<i>n</i> = 5)	2.7% (<i>n</i> = 7)
	Somewhat difficult-2	28.5% (<i>n</i> = 41)	18.0% (<i>n</i> = 47)
	Neither difficult nor easy-3	38.9% (<i>n</i> = 56)	37.5% (<i>n</i> = 98)
	Somewhat easy-4	19.4% (<i>n</i> = 28)	20.7% (<i>n</i> = 54)
	Extremely easy-5	9.7% (<i>n</i> = 14)	21.1% (<i>n</i> = 55)
	<i>N</i> = 144	<i>N</i> = 261	
	<i>M</i> = 3.03	<i>M</i> = 3.39	
	<i>SD</i> = 1.00	<i>SD</i> = 1.09	

Visibility and Perceived Value of Extension

There was also an increase in the visibility and perceived value of Extension (see Table 1). First, there was an increase in reported participation in community Extension educational programs, which was statistically significant, $X^2(1, N = 410) = 11.859, p < .001$. During the first administration, only 24.66% reported having participated in an Extension program in the community, while in the second administration, 41.26% reported having participated in an

Extension program in the community. There was also a small, positive shift in the perceived value of Extension which was not statistically significant ($p > .05$). However, the percentage of participants who believed that Extension was extremely valuable increased in the second administration. In the second administration, 69.47% of participants indicated that they believed Extension was extremely valuable, compared with only 60.27% in the first administration.

Definitions of Extension and Land-grant

Two areas that did not show a positive change between the first and second administrations of the surveys were the participants' abilities to define the terms Extension and land-grant accurately. Between the first and second administrations, the percentage of participants who could accurately define Extension remained virtually the same, whereas the percentage who could accurately define land-grant declined slightly. Notably, the first administration of the survey occurred about a year after a university-wide, full-year celebration of the 100th anniversary of Extension and the land-grant system, so this result could reflect educational efforts that were provided during that timeframe. Further, the liaison position did not provide educational programs focused on definitions of Extension or land-grant during the four-year time period; however, it might be beneficial to include such educational efforts in the future.

Conclusions

Since Extension was established, the world has changed significantly, and Extension has needed to change to better serve current community needs. While collaboration with other university units is desirable for Extension (as well as for the other units and the community at large), there are many systems in place that can make collaboration less likely to happen. There are different ways in which Extension is organized across the land-grant system, and the spectrum ranges from universities having an integrated approach (serving as a part of many colleges) to those in which Extension serves as a separate unit, with some universities falling in between with Extension housed in two or more units but not most units. While full integration could help increase collaboration, systemic structures may prevent full or even partial integration from occurring. These systemic structures might include locations of personnel or units, fiscal accountability structures, research pressures, rewards for individual achievement, and even supervisory systems (Moser & Ream, 2015). This study describes a position created to help increase collaboration with Extension at a university where Extension resides in a single college. The position increased collaborative work with university partners. Evidence has been provided for the position's success and limitations.

Results suggest that collaboration between Extension and other university units increased after the position was developed. Reported collaborative activities increased by over 200% during this period, and the increase in collaboration was further evidenced by an increase in reports of collaboration on a university-wide survey. Further, there was a reported increase in the visibility of Extension and its perceived value. Overall, the position appears to have led to gains in

collaborative efforts and increased visibility and perceived value of Extension. Notably, the ability to define the terms Extension and land-grant did not improve over time; however, education regarding these terms was not a specific goal of the position. Future work may focus on developing university-wide educational modules regarding the function of Extension and land-grant universities for faculty, staff, and students and developing awareness campaigns targeting internal university audiences.

Extension is often referred to as “the best-kept secret.” However, a lack of knowledge of Extension, both within and outside the university setting, jeopardizes its perceived value and reduces opportunities to impact the community positively. Engaging in collaborative projects within the university and serving a role in connecting community partners to university resources can increase Extension’s value. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of Extension’s success in the coming years.

The goals of this paper were to describe the development of a position aimed at facilitating collaboration between Extension and other university entities and to provide an assessment of position value. Overall, engaging an Extension faculty member part-time to serve as a liaison led to greater collaboration between Extension and the rest of the university. However, there are limits to what can be done with a single, partial appointment. It might be beneficial to increase the percentage of time allotted to such a position to 50% or higher to allow sufficient time to engage in needed work. Alternatively, it might be possible for much of the position’s efforts to be taken on by a professional staff member rather than a faculty member. Certainly, additional staff members and staff support time, including dedicated communications assistance and support for educational materials development, would be beneficial. Notably, this work was accomplished with limited input of resources due to budgetary constraints; however, a university with greater resources may consider a higher level of investment in this role. This model could work well for other land-grant universities in which Extension functions as an entity separate from other units and can serve as a way to increase collaboration. Changes to the funding source, supervision, and personnel types utilized may need to be altered to match specific university and Extension resources and needs. While this position may not be necessary for some land-grant universities, this model may provide a cost-effective opportunity for isolated Extension services to enhance collaboration with other units while at the same time better serving community needs.

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