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# Inclusion and Trust in Community-Engaged Scholarship: A Case Study of a County Visioning Project

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**Abstract.** In recent decades, local governments have sought to increase community engagement in collaborative governance processes, such as community visioning and strategic planning, to develop policies that are inclusive and supportive of those who live in the community. A key component of the community visioning process is the inclusion of diverse community members and stakeholders which can enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of the process in addition to providing an opportunity for civic engagement. We review how trust was an essential component required for developing strong community engagement in a community visioning project in Tillamook County, Oregon.

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## INTRODUCTION

The shifting demographics of communities have led to a greater diversity of interests, values, and opinions among community members, many of whom wish to have a say in how their communities are run. Both individuals and specific interest groups can quickly become adversarial when they feel they are excluded, which often leads to community polarization, stalemates, and relationship breakdown (Ayres, 2012). Community visioning is a strategy that allows local governments and community development organizations to engage in an inclusive and collaborative problem-solving process with their residents. Within this process, local leaders and residents come together to develop a shared vision for the community's future as well as an actionable path towards achieving it (Shiple & Michela, 2006). Community members assist governments and other local organizations by identifying problems within the community and suggesting solutions. This participatory process supports the development of policies that address community concerns and helps to guide the community in a resident-led direction.

Extension professionals have long played a role in community visioning processes. One of the first documented community visioning programs, *Take Charge*, was published in 1990 by Jane Ayres, an Extension specialist at Purdue University. Today, nearly two thirds of community visioning programs in the United States occur within a university

setting, most commonly through Extension (Walzer & Sudhipongpracha, 2012). The use of community visioning by Extension professionals should be of no surprise: its objective aligns well with Extension's core goals of building economically viable communities, renewing civic engagement, and enhancing community decision-making and governance (Beaulieu & Cordes, 2014). When university faculty and Extension professionals are involved, community visioning becomes a form of community-engaged scholarship in which community members and universities work together to generate new knowledge and solve real-world problems. This collaboration is mutually beneficial, as local governments and leadership groups can receive assistance with research, data analysis, and facilitation while universities uphold their commitment to public service, build stronger relationships with local communities, and participate in unique research opportunities.

Successful visioning efforts are inclusive and involve participation from all segments of the population (Ansell et al., 2020; Ayres, 2012). Underrepresentation of some groups can lead to a vision that lacks critical perspectives and does not represent the desires of all community members. Comprehensive community engagement is not easy, and many visioning efforts struggle to generate a level of enthusiasm for the visioning process that inspires meaningful community participation (Ding, 2005). Communities with greater social and cultural capital engage in more successful visioning

processes due to decreased polarization, increased trust and network connections, and a greater ability to collaborate (Allen et al., 2012; Ding, 2005; Emery & Flora, 2012). Experts find trust to be an especially important factor in influencing participation, as it impacts community members' perceptions of risks and benefits and thus their willingness to participate (Ansell, 2020; Emery & Flora, 2012; Walzer & Hamm, 2012).

Here, we review a community visioning process that occurred in Tillamook County, Oregon from June 2020 to June 2021. This project was a collaboration between Oregon State University's Policy Analysis Lab, Oregon State University Extension professionals, and the Tillamook County community; it highlights the importance of Extension professionals in community visioning and community-engaged scholarship partnerships.

### CASE STUDY: TILLAMOOK COUNTY, OREGON

Tillamook County is a rural county located in northwest Oregon and is home to approximately 27,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In the last two decades, changes in demographics, as well as shifting economic and social conditions, have led to several growing concerns: a clashing of cultures between newcomers and long-time residents, environmental impacts from both tourism and traditional natural resource-based industries, a lack of adequate infrastructure, land use disputes, a shortage of affordable housing and living wage jobs, and high rates of poverty and homelessness (Adventist Health Tillamook County, 2019).

During the spring of 2020, the Tillamook County Futures Council, an advisory council to the Tillamook County Board of Commissioners, embarked on a project to update the county's vision and address the community's concerns. The council hoped to build upon the original vision created in 1998 using new methodologies to create a vision for 2030. The council recognized the strengths of collaborating with the state's land-grant university and Extension and chose to partner with Oregon State University Extension professionals in the county as well as Oregon State University's Policy Analysis Lab (OPAL). The Extension faculty member was a member of the Futures Council and acted as a liaison between OPAL and the Futures Council. OPAL's campus-based faculty and graduate students designed the community engagement process and collected the data required to develop a new, inclusive strategic vision that is reflective of the diversity of Tillamook County communities. Data collection occurred from June 2020 through June 2021 and is one part of a larger visioning process that is occurring in Tillamook County which will culminate in the development of a strategic plan.

To gain an understanding of Tillamook County's current condition as well as the community's concerns and hopes for the future, Extension faculty and OPAL faculty and graduate students, which we are collectively referring

to as Oregon State University, conducted interviews with dozens of community leaders, including each of the Futures Council members, and then implemented a random sample survey of the population by mail, followed by an open-access survey to the rest of the community via internet. Both surveys were available in English and Spanish. Oregon State University sought to obtain the perceptions and opinions of the county's youth through focus groups. Presentations were given to groups of Latino community members to provide information about the project and to encourage individuals to participate in the survey process. Additionally, Oregon State University interviewed local Latino community leaders and asked them to encourage those they knew to participate.

Organizers calculated that a survey sample size of 600 was the target required to provide statistical confidence and generalizability in our random sample. Prior surveys conducted in Tillamook County had received upwards of 40% response rates, so we believed that we could obtain at least a 30% response rate. We mailed surveys to 2,000 randomly selected addresses. These addresses were plotted on a GIS map to check that they were representative of the Tillamook County population, and it appeared that addresses from all the main population centers were included in this sample. Of the 2,000 surveys mailed, approximately 200 were undeliverable. We obtained responses from 365 households (response rate = 20%) in the survey of random households, and 1,062 responses were collected in the open-access survey. While our random sample did not alone provide us with enough responses to make confident generalizations about the Tillamook County's population, our general access survey does, and we believe that together, the results from these two surveys paint a sufficient picture of the community's opinions for the purpose of this community visioning process.

The visioning process occurred during increased uncertainty and conflict driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, growing social unrest, economic instability, and a divisive U.S. presidential election. The context of the visioning process posed numerous challenges and made community engagement difficult. Stay-at-home orders were in place for much of this period, and all the project's collaborative efforts took place over video conferencing platforms. The use of participatory visioning methods was severely limited, and we relied exclusively on data that could be collected virtually. While visioning processes are often lengthy, the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic required us to spend one full year conducting community interviews, developing and implementing surveys, and analyzing data alongside our community partners. Additionally, many community members were experiencing challenges, such as loss of income, educating their children at home, the death of loved ones, and fear for their own health, all of which may have left them with less mental bandwidth to think about the future. Lastly, stark ideological divides arose in 2020 as disagreement

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grew over the pandemic and how it should be handled. These divides were furthered by the polarized rhetoric promoted by politicians leading into the 2020 presidential election and the eruption of nationwide riots and protests that drew attention to issues related to racial justice and personal liberties.

## ANALYSIS

Following the completion of community data collection and analysis (the first step in a longer visioning process), a team made up of an Oregon State University graduate student, faculty member, and Extension professional, who had each participated in this collection, sought to understand how inclusive it was. We analyzed the level of inclusion and engagement using two methods. First, we analyzed the degree of collaboration that existed between Oregon State University and the Futures Council. We then analyzed the level of engagement and inclusion of the community by comparing the survey demographics to U.S. Census Bureau population estimates.

## DEGREE OF COLLABORATION

The Degree of Collaboration Abacus provides a visual overview of how the most active community collaborators on this project—Oregon State University and the Futures Council—divided the voice and responsibility in the community visioning process (Doberneck & Dann, 2019). The framework borrows the structure of a traditional abacus used for counting and consists of two sides (one representing the community and the other a university partner), rungs that each represent a step in the research process, and beads used to represent levels of voice or authority (Doberneck & Dann, 2019). The location of the beads on each rung indicates whether the community or university has more decision-making responsibility at that step.

Oregon State University researchers had the majority of the voice and responsibility in the development of methodology, the collection and analysis of data, and the creation of public reports and products (Figure 1). This imbalance was not due to design, but Oregon State University researchers seemed to fall into this role due to their advanced

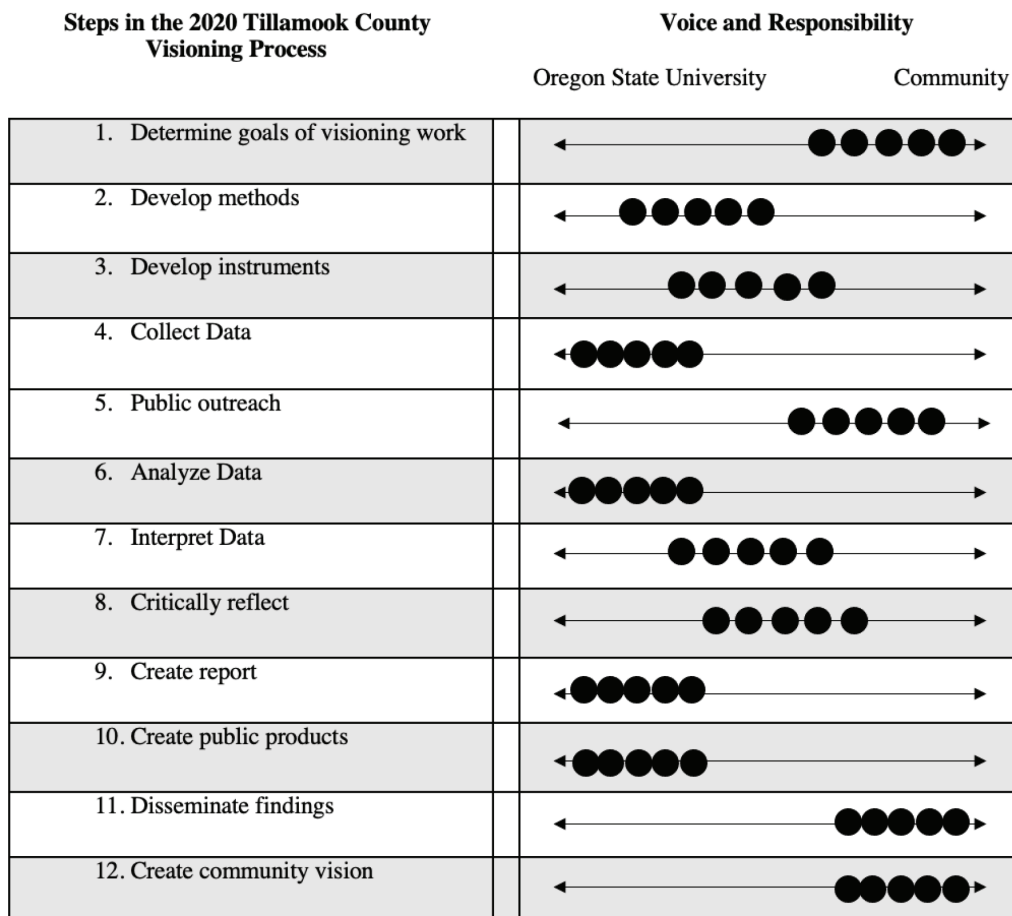


Figure 1. Degree of collaboration abacus for the 2020 Tillamook County community visioning project.

understanding of and training in social science research and methodology. Much of the responsibility for public outreach and communication fell to the Futures Council, as will the anticipated subsequent crafting of the final community vision. The steps conducted more collaboratively between the two groups included the development of instruments, interpretation of data, and reflection on the process. These steps required both an understanding of and relationship with the community, as well as technical and methodological expertise. Neither Oregon State University nor the Futures Council had enough knowledge to carry out these steps of the project on their own and instead relied upon each other for support. Thus, a division of responsibilities emerged: Oregon State University lead the technical and scientific portion of the project, and the community lead the work related to communication and the engagement of those not already involved. Areas in which both sets of skills were needed, such as development of the instruments, interpretation of the data and critical reflection, tended to yield the most balanced collaboration. Although Oregon State University and the Futures Council each took the lead on some tasks, creating power asymmetries within individual steps of the process, the level of voice and responsibility in the process as a whole was equitable and indicates that both groups collaborated strongly and inclusively.

#### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSION

The goal of inclusion is to ensure that a process has representation from all relevant stakeholders, ensuring that any decisions made are reflective of the needs and concerns of those affected. Oregon State University and the Futures Council sought to provide ample opportunity for all county residents to participate in the visioning process. Oregon State University students and faculty assessed the success of our attempts at broader community inclusion by comparing demographic data collected through the 2020 visioning survey to the most recent estimates available for Tillamook County from the Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey (ACS). Our comparison of the distribution of household and personal characteristics in the ACS data versus the sample data provided us an informal, yet convincing, assessment of the ways our samples did and did not reflect the known larger population. The categories included in our survey did not align directly with the ACS, so reporting the margin of error is not possible for all categories and thus was not included in our analysis. Additionally, we did not assess the statistical significance of these differences since we could not claim that the sample was truly random; rather, we looked for self-evident deviations where the sample clearly failed or succeeded to resemble ACS data.

The data collected via the random sample survey was not demographically representative of several key demographic variables. The respondents of this survey

skewed older, wealthier, and better-educated than the ACS estimates for Tillamook County (Table 1). In addition, the data underrepresented individuals identifying as Hispanic. However, the data was representative with regards to gender. The comparison to ACS data indicates that the Futures Council struggled to reach and engage some community members—primarily younger, Hispanic, and lower income individuals as well as those with less than a college degree—through random selection and mailed surveys.

The open-access survey was available to whomever saw the online survey link, and it provided an opportunity to participate for those who were not selected through random sampling, lacked a permanent mailing address, or experienced other barriers to participation in the mailed survey. We acknowledge that this survey also had its own barrier: it required access to broadband, a challenge for some lower-income, rural residents that was exacerbated by closures of local libraries and other WIFI access points during the pandemic. The expectation was that the data collected could be used to augment the random sample data as needed. The data collected via this survey also differed from ACS estimates, but in different ways than the random survey (Table 1). The sample collected from the open-access survey also lacked representation from individuals younger than 35, but overrepresented individuals in the middle age range. While those over 65 were still overrepresented, it was to a lesser degree than in the random sample. The open-access sample did include more women, more individuals with advanced education, and more high-income earners than both the random sample and the ACS estimate. Individuals identifying as Hispanic were underrepresented in this sample, though to a lesser degree than in the random sample.

In sum, we believe that we succeeded in engaging and sufficiently including both men and women, people of white, Black, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander and Native American heritage, as well as individuals from older, wealthier, more educated, backgrounds in at least one of our surveys for the purpose of this visioning project. However, we failed to achieve a sufficient level of inclusion from younger, Latino, lower-income, and less-educated people to confidently interpret their opinions.

Respondents had the opportunity to choose multiple categories, thus it is possible for the total percentage to add up to more than 100.

Our survey and the U.S. Census Bureau measured household income using different income brackets, and the categories for lower and middle income are slightly different. For the U.S. Census Bureau data the categories are defined as "lower" under \$34,999, "middle" \$35,000-\$99,000, higher \$100,000 and above. For the Tillamook County visioning survey data, the categories are defined as "lower" under \$39,999, "middle" \$40,000-\$99,000, and "higher" \$100,000 and above.

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**Table 1.** Comparison of the Demographics of the Tillamook County Visioning Surveys to the Census Bureau’s 2019 American Community Survey Estimates for Tillamook County

	ACS Estimates (2019)	2020 Tillamook County Visioning Project Random Sample	2020 Tillamook County Visioning Project Open-Access Sample
<i>Age</i>			
19–24	7.6%	0.3%	1.3%
25–34	13.5%	1.4%	7.2%
35–44	12.7%	10.9%	17.4%
45–54	14.5%	10.6%	18.3%
55–64	20.9%	23.7%	20.8%
65+	30.7%	52.4%	35.0%
<i>Gender<sup>1</sup></i>			
Man	49.8%	49.2%	35.9%
Woman	50.2%	50.8%	64.1%
<i>Race<sup>1,2</sup></i>			
White	96.3%	93.6%	95.4%
Black or African American	1.1%	0.5%	1.5%
American Indian and Alaska Native	2.5%	0.9%	4.1%
Asian	1.8%	0.8%	2.0%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.7%	3.9%	1.4%
Hispanic or Latino	10.3%	2.3%	5.1%
<i>Education</i>			
Less than college	42.2%	33.0%	27.7%
College degree	51.9%	37.1%	43.6%
Graduate degree	8.2%	29.4%	28.7%
<i>Household Income<sup>3</sup></i>			
Lower	33.0%	25.9%	18.1%
Middle	49.9%	51.4%	47.5%
Upper	9.1%	22.8%	34.3%

*Note.* The categories “prefer to self-describe” and “prefer not to disclose” were omitted from this analysis to allow for easier comparison to the Census Bureau’s 2019 American Community Survey estimates.

## DISCUSSION

### THE ROLE OF TRUST IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSION

Trust is often considered “the grease that allows the gears of collaboration to turn,” as it is a critical factor influencing the inclusiveness, and ultimately the success, of cooperative efforts like community visioning (Ansell et al., 2020, p.3). A community member who does not trust the process or those involved may feel more vulnerable to perceived risks and may

be less inclined to participate fully (if at all). Trust encourages greater commitment to the process and greater acceptance of its outcomes (Thomson & Perry, 2010).

We hypothesize that the dissolution of social capital caused by the increasing polarization of Tillamook County’s residents led to increased distrust of the government or Oregon State University, and, therefore, led to less participation in the community surveys (Banda & Kirkland, 2018; Rapp, 2016). Tillamook County was not immune to the trends observed in the rest of the country, and many believe that its residents were

more polarized in 2020 and 2021 than ever before (Jaquiss et al., 2020). We observed strong polarization in written survey responses where some community members included openly hostile messages and critiques of the process. Futures Council members hypothesized that some individuals may have disagreed with our choices to provide the survey in both English and Spanish and to allow respondents to self-identify their gender. Perhaps due to this disagreement and a belief that the survey was untrustworthy, some residents, possibly those with less education and lower incomes, chose not to participate. Those with lower incomes and less education already faced greater barriers to participate in the survey, as they were more likely to experience economic and mental stress due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, and this lack of sufficient trust likely further disincentivized participation.

The comparison of the survey demographics to the Census Bureau's estimates indicates that Latino community members were substantially underrepresented in both the random and open-access samples despite targeted outreach and the opportunity to take the survey in either Spanish or English. Extension assisted with the targeted outreach for the open access survey to encourage participation by Latino community members enrolled in Extension programs. Of the 2,000 mailed surveys, none were returned in Spanish and only one online survey was filled out in Spanish. Increasing levels of racism and fear related to immigration status in the United States has led to distrust of government and institutions among Latinos (Rocha et al., 2015). This distrust can impact the willingness of Latinos to participate in research, as they perceive the risk of doing so to be greater than the benefits they may receive from participation. Due to the global pandemic, we were unable to engage in many of the best practices for increasing Latino participation in survey research such as in-person outreach, rapport building, fear reduction, and personalization of benefits (Sha et al., 2017). Such activities would have built trust in the project and those working on it and may have increased Latino response rates.

The lack of demographic representativeness of the random sample caused distrust of the data among some Futures Council members, leading them to question if the data accurately expressed the sentiments of the Tillamook County population. As such, some were wary of using the data to inform a community vision that would inform policy. This distrust in the data may have been exacerbated by the division of labor that existed between Oregon State University and the Futures Council, as such divisions can create power imbalances in which one partner has greater control of certain aspects of a project due to specialized knowledge (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Provan & Milward, 2001). While we did not discuss this issue with the entire Futures Council, conversations between Oregon State University affiliates and Futures Council leadership identified the fact that Oregon State University alone analyzed the survey results as the core

reason for their distrust in the data. Many Futures Council members lacked an understanding of standard research methods and statistical analysis, so it was unclear to them how the results were being generated.

Power asymmetry in collaborative efforts is quite common, as it is difficult to share power perfectly and its effects depend on the existing level of trust (Ran & Qi, 2018). A lack of trust may cause difficulties in managing power asymmetries, while too much blind trust can lead to disappointment and therefore further decrease trust (Ran & Qi, 2019). At the start of the collaboration, Oregon State University sought to build trust with the Futures Council by attending meetings and conducting one-on-one interviews to understand members' goals for the process. Oregon State University's efforts were fruitful, and the Futures Council entrusted Oregon State University with the community engagement and data collection stages of the project. However, the Future's Council may have trusted Oregon State University too blindly, and when the demographic data collected did not meet their expectations, it led to decreased trust in the collaboration.

Upholding data that is not perceived as accurate may pose risks to Futures Council members as they are faced with the task of promoting and supporting the outcomes of the visioning process. Oregon State University rebuilt trust in the data by applying statistical weighting that brought the survey sample closer to the true population and talking with Futures Council members about research methods and statistical sampling. The Oregon State University Extension faculty member played an important role in the process of rebuilding trust among the other Futures Council members. Her academic training allowed her to critically evaluate OPAL's research methods and data analysis techniques, thus allowing her to build her own trust in the data. She then conveyed this trust to the Futures Council members who understood her expertise and trusted her unbiased perspective, perhaps more than that of the OPAL "outsiders." This collaboration between campus and Extension professionals allowed the project to continue moving forward and provided an example of how Extension can serve as a bridge between universities and communities.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXTENSION PRACTITIONERS

Although this analysis may be unique to the Tillamook County community visioning initiative, we are convinced that our experience can guide other community visioning practitioners as they attempt to develop visions for the futures of their own communities. This analysis may inspire practitioners to consider the level of inclusion that their project requires, the trust required to facilitate that inclusion, and the ways in which the context of the collaboration

might enhance or decrease inclusion. As we discovered, the cultural and societal context is important, and uncertain times may lead to lower-than-expected participation in community visioning projects. In this case study, contextual circumstances led to an increase in polarization and distrust among the community that was difficult to overcome via the virtual methods that we were required to use. Engaging community members who may be hesitant or uninterested in participating may require community visioning practitioners to think outside of the box to develop outreach tactics that sufficiently excite these individuals. Due to their extensive experience working with local communities, Extension professionals may be better able to develop these outreach strategies than university faculty. Furthermore, in rural communities like Tillamook County, Extension professionals are likely more familiar to and recognizable by community members than campus faculty, which may further aid trust-building and participation in community visioning processes.

Building strong and trusting relationships requires a deep understanding of a community and the cultural competency to incentivize community members to participate in a way that resonates with them. Such relationships do not occur instantly or easily and require substantial investments of time and other resources. By the nature of their work, Extension professionals build strong and trusting relationships in the communities they serve. Our experience during this project suggests that Extension county-based professionals are essential partners in community visioning projects. In addition to contributing critical research skills and community knowledge and insight, Extension professionals can act as liaisons who enhance the ability for campus-based faculty to build rapport quickly with community members. This greater rapport leads to greater trust and successful project outcomes, making Extension professionals a critical component of any collaboration between land-grant universities and their communities.

We follow this case study with three recommendations for university faculty and Extension professionals who wish to collaborate with local communities on a community visioning project. These recommendations are:

1. Partner with Extension professionals in community-engaged research to enhance trust and participation in community-engaged processes.
2. Use the Degree of Collaboration Abacus at the beginning of the project as a tool to discuss and plan the level of collaboration with community members and throughout the process at several intervals to continuously assess collaboration.
3. Involve community members in as many steps of the data analysis and report development as possible, providing education to enhance understanding and trust of research methods and analysis.

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