



“WORKING WITH NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS – COOPERATIVE EXTENSION’S OPPORTUNITY TO EXPAND ITS REACH”

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Introduction

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) that share similar goals and missions to Cooperative Extension are ubiquitous in Arizona. Some of these groups have a long history of collaborating with Cooperative Extension faculty and staff. For example, Cooperative Extension in Arizona has historically worked with watershed groups, natural resource conservation entities, as well as family and health organizations. According to Arizona State University’s Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation, there are over 20,000 NPOs registered in Arizona with \$27 billion in revenue. A large majority of these (over 15,500) are 501(c)3 charitable organizations (ASU, 2014).

With an increase in awareness and activity around sustainable agriculture and local food systems, numerous new regional and local NPOs have come about with education and outreach goals that are in line with Cooperative Extension. This paper will address the reasons how working with these NPOs increases Cooperative Extension’s capacity to reach a greater share of clientele, including the mutual benefits that may be experienced by both entities. Next, the paper will propose a few ‘ground rules’ for Cooperative Extension personnel interested in working with NPOs and what to look for in a mutually beneficial collaborative partnership.

Increasing Cooperative Extension’s Capacity

In these days of fiscal restraint, county Extension agents are learning to do things more efficiently with less funding. This is even more critical in western states like Arizona where there are only 15 geographically large, but relatively sparsely populated counties, compared to other states that may have up to 254 counties, e.g. Texas. Arizona ranks second highest in the nation for average county size at 7,573 square miles, compared to the national average county size of 998 square miles (Wikipedia, 2014). As an example of scale, the four

counties that make up the southeastern corner of Arizona are as large as the entire region of New England. Yet, there is only one community resources development agent and three agricultural agents for this region of the state. Despite its size, southeastern Arizona has a thriving cadre of local food systems and sustainable agriculture interests, including a handful of nonprofit organizations that share education and outreach goals with Cooperative Extension.

Cooperative Extension agents have the opportunity to increase their ability to reach more clientele working with NPOs than they would by simply relying upon their own networks. These partnerships with NPOs can ultimately result in a greater dissemination of Cooperative Extension’s research-based information and programs. With the advent of social networking, Cooperative Extension’s reach can be expanded even farther through the utilization of NPO reach into various online groups and communities of practice.

Conversely, Cooperative Extension has the opportunity to increase the capacity of an NPO itself. An article in the Journal of Extension entitled “Generating Self-Organizing Capacity: Leadership Practices and Training Needs in Non-Profits” notes: “Community relationships outside the group bring in new information and resources that build the capacity of the organization to innovate” (Allen & Morton, 2006).

Newly forming NPOs are in a good position to take advantage of the administrative leadership and training opportunities that may be offered by Cooperative Extension agents. As board members or advisors to an NPO, agents can share their professional experiences in community engagement, education, communications, board development, facilitation and strategic planning, reporting, by-laws, grant writing, and interviewing.

For many NPOs, advocating for a particular cause is an underpinning of their mission. While it may not be appropriate for Cooperative Extension agents to participate with NPOs in advocacy that involves political or lobbying

activities, Cooperative Extension can bring critical research-based information to bear on certain issues and therefore bring credibility and balance to NPO efforts. Likewise, NPOs can bring to light research needs that Cooperative Extension agents can facilitate through specialists and other university resources.

For example, one particular NPO in southern Arizona that promotes and educates rural and urban communities about sustainable agriculture and the importance of local food systems has a keen interest in promoting mesquite pods as a viable and sustainable food source for humans and livestock. Mesquite pods have been harvested and used by Native Americans for thousands of years, and more recently by enterprising rural and urban residents. University of Arizona Cooperative Extension is assisting this NPO with understanding and researching best harvesting and storage practices so as to avoid contamination by aflatoxin, a highly toxic by-product of the fungi *Aspergillus flavus* and other bacteria. The partnership between the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension and this NPO lends credibility to the NPOs outreach and education efforts while expanding the clientele that Cooperative Extension's research-based information can directly benefit. Moreover, Cooperative Extension's participation with this NPO in its mission of promoting local food systems and sustainable agriculture helps shed light on ideas that may be perceived as 'fringe' or esoteric in more conventional agricultural circles. These 'fringe' ideas are becoming more mainstream as our society is, today, becoming more interested in alternative ways to grow food in increasingly urban environments, in times of food insecurity. Therefore, working with these groups is a benefit to Cooperative Extension because they can continue to be seen as a leader in agricultural knowledge, no matter the size.

Lastly, NPOs and Cooperative Extension partnerships are in a better position to take advantage of grant opportunities geared toward small organizations. For example, NPOs sometimes lack grant-writing skills and experience; yet depend on grant funding in addition to membership dues and donations for their financial viability. Cooperative Extension agents can assist with grant proposal narratives as well as sign on as collaborators to boost the NPO's standing with the granting foundation or agency. Moreover, they can also assist NPOs with meeting the outputs or deliverables of grant awards and, even more importantly, assist the NPOs from the beginning of the project to ensure they have a system in place to document and report back to the funding agency on their project's activities, outcomes, and impacts.

How does an agent decide that a partnership could be viable?

Since there are many NPOs, the first tasks should be to determine which ones are working toward similar mission areas that could be compatible with a research-based university and, more specifically, educational programs that Cooperative Extension may already promote based on community needs assessments.

What are the steps that an agent should go through to efficiently create a partnership?

1) Network

Typically connections with people and organizations are established by networking. In some cases, co-workers are helpful in brainstorming possibilities. In others, it requires some investigative work by talking with clients, similar government agencies in the community, and attending meetings of local organizations and local governments working on similar issues. While some organizations may be obvious connections because they are well-known and very active, others may be working on projects outside mainstream media and the culture of Cooperative Extension. Exploring the social media outlets, presenting topics to the local community, joining local groups, and attending events offered by the well-known groups where other organizations are present to seek support, are all good places to start getting connected.

2) Contribute

Once people and organizations begin to realize what you have to offer and see that you are willing to contribute, NPOs will likely make offers and present opportunities to become more involved. Like most endeavors, respect is earned through giving of your time and expertise. How to contribute to a particular NPO is a case-by-case decision. Often it will start with volunteering to help research, fundraise, advertise, etc. As a new contributor with fresh eyes on the organization, there may be obvious ways to improve the way things are accomplished. Don't be too hasty and try to change things from the beginning, so as not to upset the chemistry of the organization. It is better to ease in new ideas once a good rapport is established and you have a better sense of the needs and direction of the NPO.

3) Set Mileposts

Planning ahead for specific mileposts toward success will help keep things on track.

- a) Begin by reading any by-laws or other organizational documents to learn the origin, basis, and rules of the organization to make sure there are no issues that could be conflicts and should be discussed.
- b) In your initial discussions and time spent getting to know each other it should become clear if advocacy efforts of an NPO are compatible with a university's mission and goals. It is possible to work with an NPO that has an advocacy component as long as there is a clear understanding that government employees may not be able to take part in certain aspects of the advocacy. This should be clear between you and the NPO and you and your university before you begin.
- c) As a collaborator in one of the areas needed to make your partnership a success, it will become apparent

to you and the NPO if there is a good fit between the two organizations and between you and the people in charge of the NPO. Checking in with your collaborators after each effort to make sure things are on track is better than letting it ride until trouble starts.

4) Be Proactive

Another potential conflict of interest is becoming financially involved with an NPO. It is important to find out what rules your university has in place that might affect your role with the NPO. Working as an organization's treasurer or any other position with signing authority over how funds are distributed is a potential conflict of interest for a government employee. To be sure, it is best to understand the expectations of both organizations before accepting any role.

5) Evaluate

One thing that is important to both NPOs and universities these days is measuring the impact of the organizations on the people they serve. This can be economic impact or public value and often both are important to measure. For example, Cooperative Extension can provide and/or conduct assessments and surveys that measure an organization's members' changes in practice or increase in knowledge as a result of the NPO's efforts. This is often a way that agents can contribute since Cooperative Extension has years of practice measuring outcomes, impacts and conducting evaluations. Cooperative Extension has developed many resources to help programs and organizations determine their impact on people and communities.

Research shows that organizations like Cooperative Extension succeed when teams carry out complex work. Cooperative Extension needs to build successful teams and develop effective team leaders to better address the problems and issues facing people and communities today. "Heroes must join together to enhance Extension's effectiveness and sustainability through self-directed work teams" (Franz 2004).

Conclusion

The future success of Cooperative Extension and NPOs will be based on their ability to collaborate and share resources. There is no way to turn back the clock to the days when government funded all that we do, and the rugged individualist was the ideal role model. The more we can find like-minded organizations to work with that create a synergy in our communities, the more successful we will become. This is also the way we remain relevant to the clients we serve. If

we stop exploring and collaborating and try to do the same things we have always done, the flickering candle we now recognize as the analogy for public sector organizations will be snuffed out and replaced by a poor substitute for Cooperative Extension and NPOs.

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