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Extension Collaboration Between Departments: It's Not A Myth

Abstract

This article highlights cross-department collaboration within extension; specifically, between the Agriculture and Natural Resources department and the Home & Community department (Family and Consumer Sciences) at Utah State University. Using very successful collaborative programming examples this piece demonstrates how interdisciplinary partnership and connection can broaden perspectives, improve program relevance, and strengthen community impact. Extension practitioners are urged to routinely ask, “Who else can help?”.

Keywords: Collaboration, Departments, Community, Programming

Introduction

Collaborative work in the field of extension has long been encouraged by administrators, state legislators, and stakeholders. The collaborations of Extension professionals across multiple state agencies, local providers, campus-based specialists, and other stakeholders have resulted in meaningful advancements. The dynamic and coordinated effort of Extension professionals and their partners provides an effective method to address complex challenges. (U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.) This

article serves to highlight a particular collaborative format that crosses departmental lines within extension, namely, agricultural extension professionals and extension professionals within the Family and Consumer Sciences departments (titled “Home and Community” department at Utah State University, or USU). Frequently, collaboration is often viewed as forming partnerships within a specific department, perhaps across university lines or within the general realm of a particular subject area or, an on-campus specialist. However, when addressing an issue, it is useful and revealing to pose the question: are there any other departments that could address this same question from a different angle? This is the case that is addressed and highlighted within this article.

Discussion

Recently, USU Extension published an article within the Journal of NACAA titled “Elk Depredation in Utah: Mental Fatigue and Economic Uncertainty” (Gilliam, E. et al., 2025). This work between the two departments highlighted elk depredation in Utah and the agricultural impacts that it had on haystacks. However, because of the collaboration that happened between departments within USU Extension, namely the Agriculture and Natural Resources faculty member and the Home and Community faculty member in Sevier County, Utah, the article was able to be expanded upon and include a section addressing a possible connection between winter elk depredation and the winter blues. This had the effect of making the article and information more rounded, to say the least, while simultaneously addressing multiple issues in a more complete way. The Agriculture and Natural Resources faculty member did not possess the background knowledge or education to address a topic such as the winter blues. However, the Home and Community faculty member - equipped with an understanding of mental health challenges among agricultural workers, and the winter blues - was able to see the possible implications of wintertime stress due to elk depredation and help the Agriculture and Natural Resources faculty member connect the dots. Substantiating a connection between winter depredation and the winter blues that may be experienced by agricultural producers (Gilliam, A., Gilliam, E 2024). This is one example of a partnership between departments within extension resulting in an effective article. This

article not only provided deeper information into a singular topic but also expanded upon each extension professional's knowledge of how their program interacts with another program across departmental lines within extension.

Expanding upon cooperative work that led to the publication of the article within the NACAA journal, USU Extension once again collaborated between the agriculture and natural resource department and the Home and Community department to pull off a county-wide program geared towards Sevier County residents and the needs assessment that was conducted in 2021 by USU Extension. The program was titled "Sevier County Adventures" (Gilliam, A. et al., 2026). This program had four separate activities that addressed four separate topics highlighted within the needs assessment of the county, namely mental health, family time, suicide, and drug addiction. Both departments were able to collaborate and lean on each other in pulling off a Home and Community-centered event within the county, resulting in a program that, during the course of four activities within a rural Utah area, included over 405 participants and utilized 27 stakeholder partnerships, highlighting once again the effectiveness of cross-departmental collaboration within extension. At a minimum, utilizing each other's connections, talents, and abilities, can allow extension programming to become an even more impactful tool at and beyond the county level. An example is included in Figure 1 to aid the thought process of cross-departmental collaboration and serves as a strong reminder to always ask the question: who else can help?

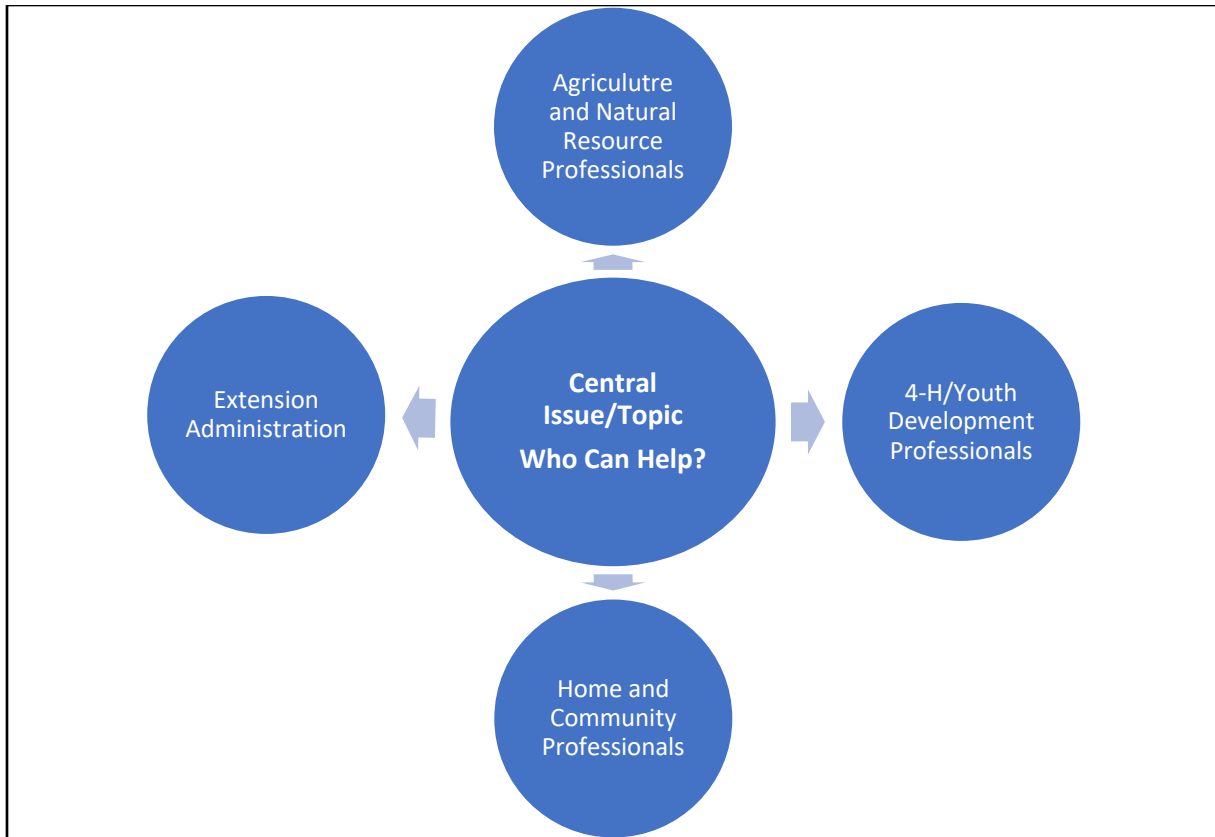


Figure 1. Cross-Departmental Collaboration Check

Conclusion

Very similar to collaborating on a large grant application or program, extension professionals can unite across departments. Utilizing this method may not always apply to every subject area within extension; however, there is value in applying the practice when trying to generate new ideas or approaches to address issues yet to be effectively resolved at any level. New ideas, new approaches, and new thoughts are often encouraged within the academic realm; however, putting these things into practice sometimes requires a reminder, and it is the goal of this article to do that.

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