How Facilitating Dialogues on Race is Fostering Systemic Change in Cooperative Extension

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Introduction

Coming Together for Racial Understanding (Coming Together) is a community-based, dialogue-to-change process initiated by Cooperative Extension (Extension) and developed in partnership with the dialogue-to-action organization, Everyday Democracy. The goal is to facilitate new ways of working together across racial differences to foster understanding, and to build trust to take collective action to address racism. This effort is built on four key principles:

1. Extension is well-positioned to help organize and facilitate these challenging conversations. For more than 100 years, Extension has built trust and social capital, essential assets for community-based work, across US communities. Scholars who study rural America, and democratic practices in rural America in particular, have long highlighted Extension's potential to serve as a trusted intermediary (Welborn et al 2016; Warner 1999; Diebel 2008).
2. Extension must practice what it seeks for communities.
3. Extension must do its own work around race before it can effectively engage communities in *Coming Together* dialogues.
4. Dialogues are vital to understanding, and understanding is vital to trust-building and working for meaningful change.

Summary Focus and Findings

One of the unexpected outcomes of the *Coming Together* initiative has been the many ways in which it has contributed to institutional change within Cooperative Extension. While *Coming Together* was designed to help Extension be more responsive to community needs for dialogue around race and racism, early outcomes have shown that as Extension prepares to do this work in communities, these efforts are forcing self-examination leading to shifts towards becoming more supportive and inclusive institutions. As a result of *Coming Together*, Extension systems are increasing partnerships between 1862, 1890, and 1994 institutions; changing hiring practices; making diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work more visible across Extension programming; and building capacity to engage more deeply in this work.

Coming Together started in 2016 in response to a growing concern at the community level about conflicts and violence explicitly linked to racism. The initiative by design combined two strengths of the Extension system: first, its capacity to support community development and deliberative dialogue, and the second, its connections at the community level. Initially, core teams of three individuals representing the various types of Land-Grant Universities (LGU)

Four Levels of Oppression and Change

Personal	Interpersonal
Values, Beliefs, Feelings	Actions, Behaviors, Language

Institutional	Cultural
Rules, Policies, Procedures, Practices	Beauty, Truth, Right, Normal, Narrative

within a state would attend a "train-the-trainer" workshop, then work to build capacity within their home states. This includes members from the 1862 (historically white institutions), 1890 (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) and 1994 (Tribal Colleges) LGUs. The intention was that these state teams could train a larger cohort of their state Extension colleagues on the dialogue process, and then each state team could use these skills to facilitate dialogues within communities to inspire community action. Through the *Coming Together* dialogue-to-change process, learning and acting on that learning to create change is supported at the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural levels (Pizaña 2017).
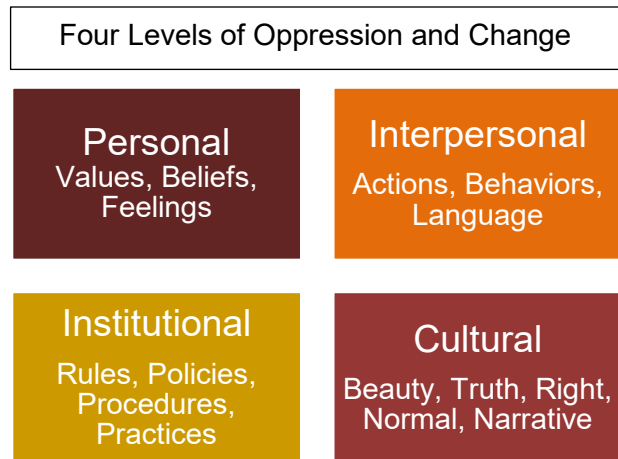
While *Coming Together* was designed to help Extension be more responsive to community needs for dialogues about race and their need to take action to address community challenges, this initiative has contributed to change within the Extension system. The initial focus on Extension doing its own work around race before engaging communities has systematically centered self-examination and efforts to become more supportive and inclusive institutions. This has resulted in changes within Extension at the institutional and cultural levels. The specific changes vary by state and institution, based on the unique organizational structure of each Extension system; however, clear themes have emerged.

Many institutions have prioritized Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts in recent years; however, the literature suggests that not all efforts have had the desired outcomes *(Barnett 2020; Patton et al. 2019)*. Indeed, critics of institutional change efforts note that steps such as issuing racial equity statements or instituting mandatory training may be meaningless unless they are coupled with strategies and policy changes to transform institutional cultures, hiring practices, and power structures *(Gasman et al. 2015; Ash 2020, Bethea 2020, Formanek 2021)*. Worse, they may end up harming the very populations they were intended to benefit *(Potapchuck 2021)*. In contrast, the *Coming Together* program appears to foster deeper levels of organizational learning and trust building. While more research is needed, this may result partially from (1) the way the program is structured to

require buy-in from top administrators even as it empowers local leadership and peer-to-peer learning and (2) the inherent features of the dialogue-to-change methodology *(Piercy et al. 2005.; Brown et al. 2019; Everyday Democracy, ND)*. As a result of *Coming Together*, state Extension systems are 1) reviewing and updating policies and practices and 2) building capacity and making DEI work more visible across Extension programming.

Methods For Understanding Initial Impacts

In 2021, Ripple Effect Mapping (REM, see Emery et al. 2015) was conducted through a group process including state team members to further understand the impact *Coming Together* has had on Extension systems. This approach was used to gauge perceptions of the impact the initiative was having. Separately, multiple surveys of state team members measured their perceptions of Extension's capacity to engage in dialogues on race, the kinds of institutional support state training teams needed, and whether the teams felt supported in this work.

Reflections on Policies and Practices

The REM process highlighted a key outcome related to policies and practices: increased awareness, efforts to make small changes, such as calling out microaggressions, and more honest discussion about how both current policy and related practices disadvantage people of color. A key focus related to employee recruitment and retention. In some states, this has led to examination of inequities that exist when staff of color are disproportionately funded by soft money (grants) compared to hard dollars. In other states, more urgent attention was given to efforts at improving retention of staff of color. In several states, changes have been made to hiring systems, from recruitment, to training and composition of search committees, to rethinking requirements for positions.

In an example from Texas, Prairie View A&M University Cooperative Extension (1890), and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension (1862) conducted a joint climate survey to evaluate current conditions related to DEI and gain initial baseline data on perceptions of policies and practices along with demographic data on staffing across both LGUs. The results of the survey helped inform prioritization of policy changes at both LGUs.

In another example from Michigan State University Extension, members of all search committees now take part in a required training that highlights the ways bias shows up in interview structures, as well as how individual biases impact perception of candidates and how to interrupt bias in those processes. Additionally, changes were made to the formation of search committees, and resources were created to help committees create interview questions that provide insight into candidates' DEI experiences. Significant efforts were made to include DEI focused language in job postings and to ions to, and to

emphasize that a DEI lens is expected to be an important part of everyone's work in Extension. These changes were initiated in part because the administrative leadership team participated in a *Coming Together* dialogue process.

Making DEI Work More Visible across Extension Programming

As a result of Coming Together efforts, to what extent have I seen the following in my institution or state:
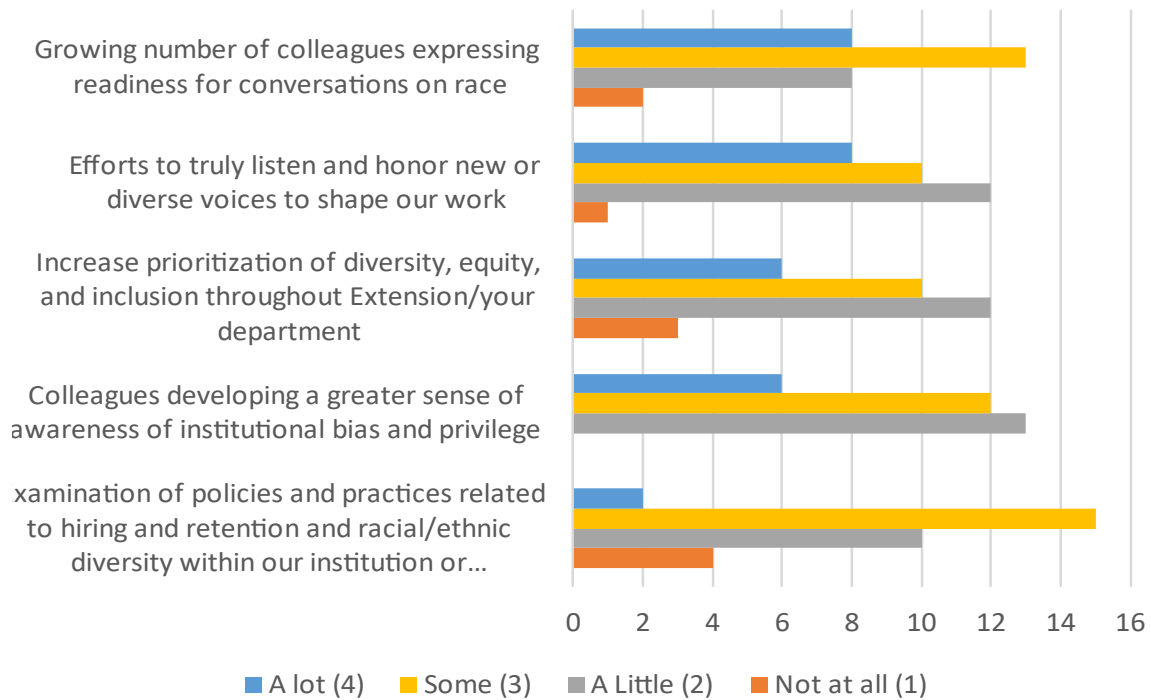

Figure 1: 2021 Survey of Coming Together state teams from 2018 and 2019 training cohorts (n=38)

Coming Together has inspired a shift in making DEI work more visible across Extension programming. This includes helping people see these issues through a new lens and language for examining justice, diversity, equity, and inclusiveness across all program areas, not only in specific DEI initiatives and programs. Participants in the REM also noted a related change in the framework of how programs and educational content is built within Extension, where programs are being intentionally designed to include DEI. This impact is also demonstrated in survey data that reflects a growing prioritization of DEI throughout Extension, as participants reported in Figure 2.

These changes exemplify a new norm that is emerging in Extension, where conversations about race are normalized, and regular, intentional conversations on race and racism are

prioritized (Walcott et al 2020). Participants in REM noted this foundational shift, as did responses to a survey of state training teams. DEI work across Extension is also more visible in increased efforts to truly listen to and honor new or diverse voices to shape Extension work.

REM participants reported that their Extension systems are beginning to prioritize DEI work as a core part of their mission and a core competency for Extension employees, rather than as an "add on" or something separate from regular job responsibilities.

In an example from Virginia, the position of *Extension Leader for Inclusion and Diversity* was created in 2020 as a joint position supported by both Virginia Tech (1862) and Virginia State University (1890). Previously DEI programming efforts with various groups had been disconnected because they were led by individual educators whose DEI work was in addition to their other responsibilities. Now the *Extension Leader for Diversity and Inclusion* is a dedicated position that provides overall leadership and coordination for DEI efforts, including *Coming Together* at both institutions. This position contributes to efforts to improve recruitment and retention of underrepresented staff, works to build the capacity of other staff to engage in DEI work, and provides leadership for Virginia's Diversity and Inclusion Fellows program. The Fellows program was expanded to include Virginia State after the establishment of the Extension Leader position.

In New Mexico, the Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity Co-Director positions were created to coordinate and manage DEI activities in the New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service. The positions, active at the college level including Extension, were established here as Extension was seen as a leader in the DEI space within the college. A *Coming Together* tasting session, a four-session mini-series, and the formation of a *Coming Together* state training team were among the catalysts for the formation of these positions, and for them being filled by two Extension faculty. Key outcomes since the creation of these positions are building of a network of people interested in DEI work that (1) helps staff support each other and their work and (2) begins to shift Extension culture to a place where conversations about diversity and inclusion are normalized.

These efforts serve to strengthen the capacity of Extension to facilitate dialogues in communities, and to authentically engage as partners WITH communities, which has led to new collaborative opportunities as new partners express willingness to engage with Extension because of this work. For example, in Minnesota, a new partnership was formed through *Coming Together*, including training facilitators from a local faith community who are now facilitating *Coming Together* dialogues.

Future Implications

Building Capacity - As a result of Coming Together, I have seen the following in my institution or state:
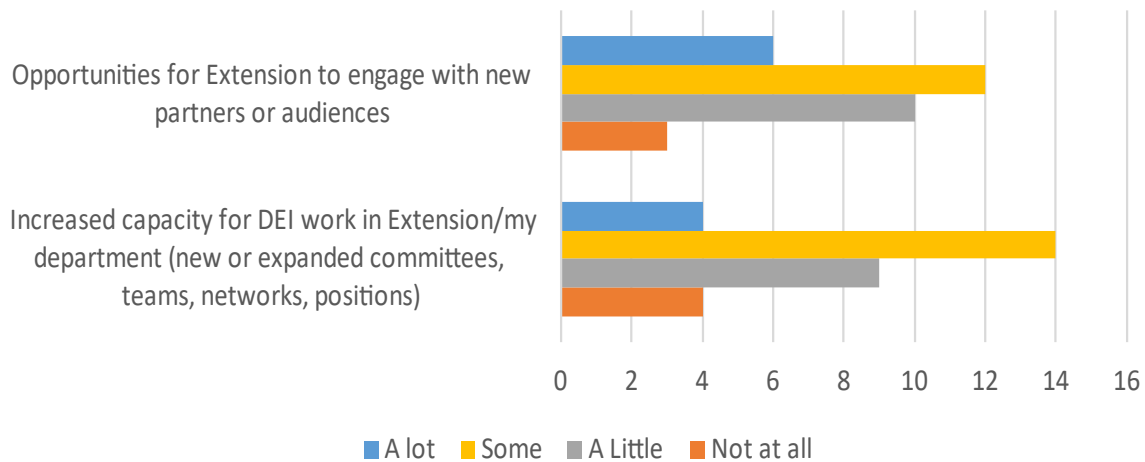

Figure 2: 2021 Survey of Coming Together state teams from 2018 and 2019 training cohorts (n=38)

While *Coming Together* has helped catalyze the beginnings of institutional and cultural shifts within Extension, increased commitment from Extension as an institution and from individuals at all levels of the organization will be required to sustain this change. Particularly related to making DEI work more visible across Extension programming, prior work has identified three things Extension can do to build on this early progress (Walcott et al 2020):

1. Give *Coming Together* fair weight on annual evaluations for those in Extension, leading the effort.
2. Provide time for Coming Together teams to lead efforts rather than merely making it an add-on to regular responsibilities.
3. Support professional growth. Leading dialogue programs like *Coming Together* requires a unique mix of facilitation skills and continued personal learning related to racial justice. Extension administration must be prepared to support their staff's learning in these areas.

Another area in need of attention is strengthening collaboration with Tribal Colleges (1994 Land Grant Institutions). New state teams have reflected stronger partnership with these institutions, but this continues to be an area of need for growth. Oklahoma, the only state with all three Land Grant types (1862 – Oklahoma State University, 1890 – Langston University, and 1994 – College of Muscogee Nation), has been a leading example of how

Coming Together strengthens the ties between these institutions and how racial equity work is strengthened by these connections. The state team, made up of facilitators from each institution, has collaborated to facilitate *Coming Together* dialogues for employees at all three universities and are continuing to strengthen their partnerships in this work as dialogue participants have taken the lead on planning additional events to further their learning following the conclusion of the dialogues.

These and other commitments are essential if the positive changes sparked by *Coming Together* and related DEI efforts are to build towards ongoing systemic change within Extension.

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