

Collaborations that Work

Analysis of Successful Extension Efforts between 1890 and 1862 Land-Grant Institutions

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Introduction

Over the late spring and summer months of 2023, the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) worked with 1890 and 1862 Cooperative Extension Service leaders across the Southern Region to gain insights from collaborations that work among the South's 1862 and 1890 Land-Grant Universities (LGU). Using a mixed methods approach, insights were gained from Extension leaders as well as from project leaders that had successfully collaborated across institutions on an Extension effort. The following information outlines the methods and key findings gained from that process.

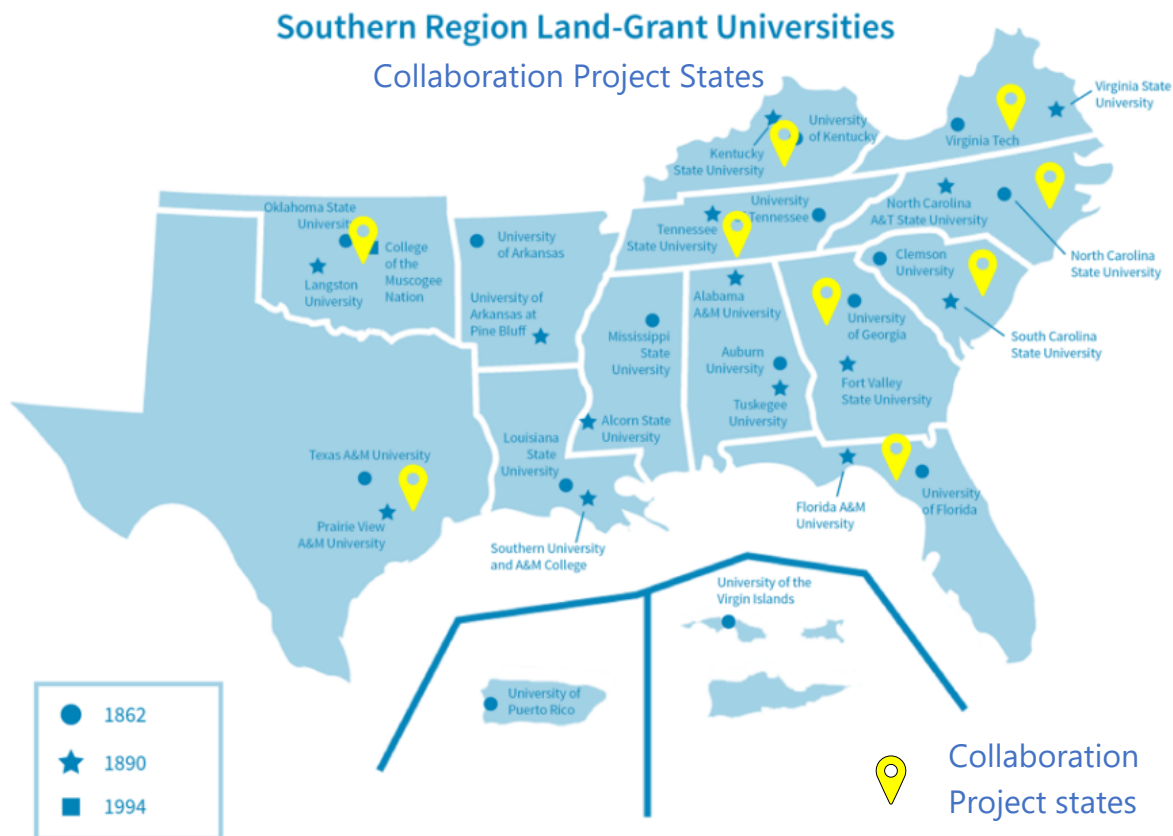
Background and Process

The SRDC explored how successful collaborations take place across the 1890 Land-Grant Universities, which are historically black serving, and the South's 1862 Land-Grant Universities (predominately white serving). Within the SRDC's 13 state footprint, each state is home to one 1862 Land-Grant University (LGU) and at least one 1890 LGU (Alabama has two). In fact, all but five of the nineteen 1890 LGUs are positioned in the South, making this a rich environment for exploring where collaborations across institutions work well.

To help guide efforts, a team of Cooperative Extension Service (CES) leaders from the 1890 Association of Extension Administrators (AEA) and the 1862 Association of Southern Region Extension Directors (ASRED) worked with SRDC to investigate successful collaborations between the two LGU types. This team designed a two-pronged approach to learning more about collaborative successes. First, a survey of the 1862 and 1890 CES leaders explored how they were working across the 1862/1890 lines to foster collaboration within their states. Next, we asked the 1862/1890 leaders to identify efforts they believed had been successful 1862/1890 collaborations, and to provide contact information for the project leads at each institution. Twenty-four projects were nominated spanning 10 of the South's 13 states. Of those, both the 1862 and 1890 leaders were available for interviews on 20 projects in nine states. With interviewers having significant career histories within the 1862 and 1890 systems, we

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conducted one-on-one interviews with these project leaders, exploring successful outcomes, challenges, factors contributing to success, and lessons learned. While the successful projects varied widely in purpose, responses highlighted some important keys to success.



Survey of Extension Leaders

The 18 survey responses were comprised of 10 AEA respondents and eight ASRED respondents. Respondents were presented with a set of features that may support cross-institution collaborations and were asked to identify the ones that were present within their respective state. As the chart below indicates, the feature most often identified was administrators from across the institutions meeting on a regular basis, identified by 76% of respondents. More than half of the respondents also indicated the two institutions:

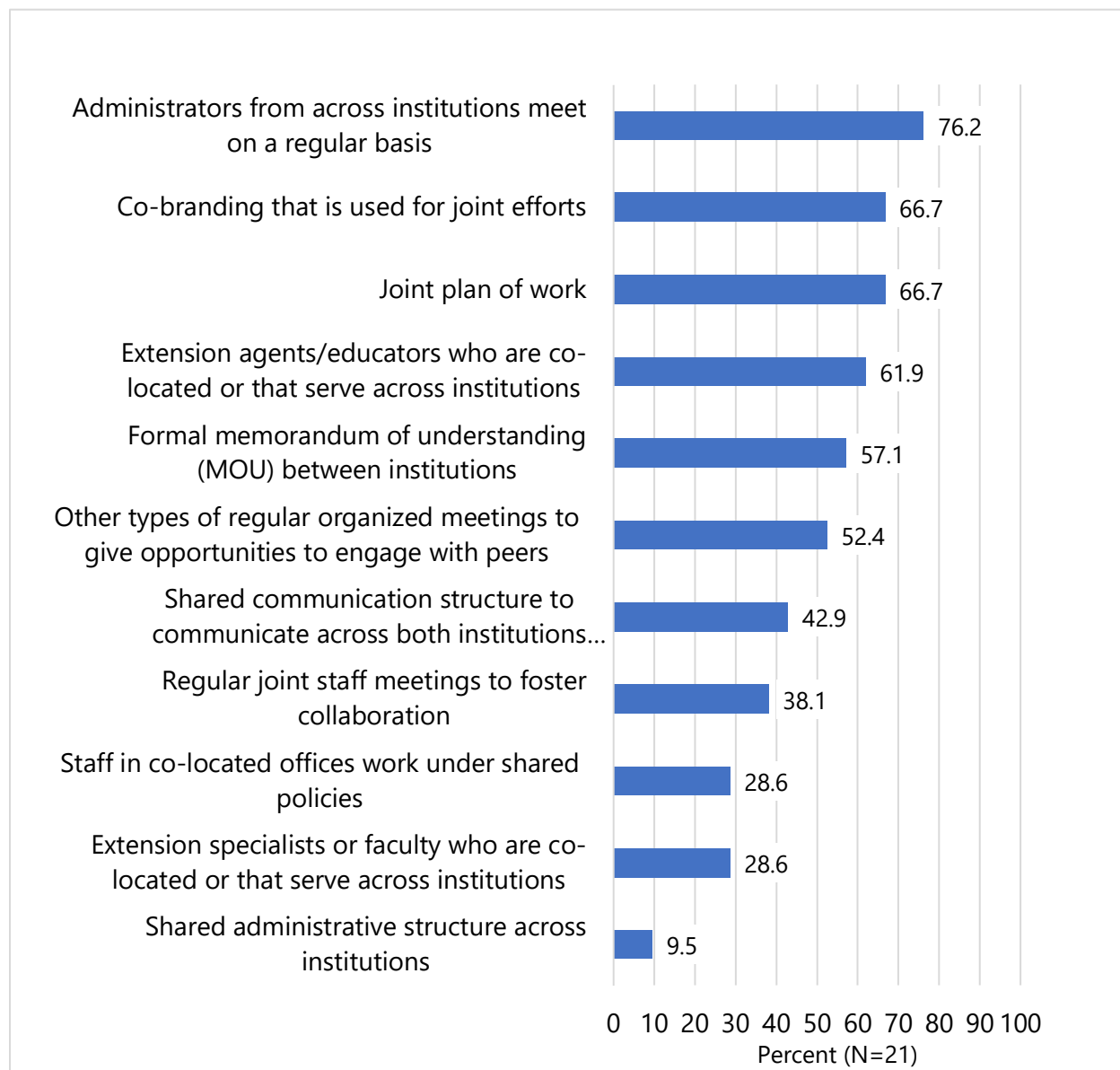
- Co-branded joint efforts (67%)
- Had a joint Plan of Work (67%)
- Had Extension agents/educators that were either co-located in an office or that served across institutions (62%)
- Developed a formal memorandum of understanding between the institutions (57%)

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- Provided other types of regular organized meetings to give opportunities for staff to engage with peers across institutions (52%)

While having some cross institutional connections, it was less likely that the two institutions had a common communication system, shared policies, or had a shared administrative structure that spanned the two systems.

Thinking about the relationship your institution has with other Land-Grant Institutions in your state, which of the following currently exist?



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Further unpacking these responses, six of the 15 who stated they had regular administrative meetings said those were conducted monthly, with other frequencies being less common such as quarterly (n=3), semi-annually (n=3), weekly (n=2), and annually (n=1). Similarly, those who held regular joint staff meetings (n=7) most often stated those were conducted monthly (n=5). Other types of organized meetings shared were county staff meetings where staff are co-located, more frequent meetings with new staff (weekly), State Extension Advisory Council meetings, and joint association meetings.

Survey participants were asked to respond to three open-ended questions. The first of these was, "What other things have helped to foster collaboration across institutions within your state?" To that prompt, respondents shared these reflections:

- Leadership team across institutions (administrators/specialists), meeting regularly, setting the environment for collaboration
- Desire to collaborate in order to better serve the state
- Good working relationships developed over time
- Personal, consistent, and open communication
- Keeping each other informed on opportunities
- Choosing leadership of joint efforts based on institutional strengths/specialties
- Clearly defining roles, sharing resources and responsibilities
- Having a memorandum of understanding for joint county operations
- Joint state advisory council that advocates for both institutions
- Cross institutional participation in state professional associations, professional development, and committees
- *Coming Together for Racial Understanding* initiative

The second open-ended question, "What challenges have Land-Grant Institutions had to overcome in your state to be able to collaborate?", garnered these responses:

- Navigating differences in institutions (i.e. operations, policies, number of staff, funding)
- Overcoming misunderstandings/misperceptions/history
- Practicing professional, respectful, open two-way communication
- Establishing shared expectations and commitment
- Keeping goal in mind – serving the needs of the state
- Ensuring co-branding; ensuring proper credit
- Avoiding duplication
- Maintaining state funding
- Ensuring equal participation
- Fostering (or working around) individual willingness to collaborate
- Leadership transitions
- Lacking adequate follow-through

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- Needing a system memorandum of understanding

Finally, administrative respondents were asked, “What are the 2 or 3 major things that could help to strengthen collaborations between 1890 and 1862 Land-Grant Institutions in your state in the future?” Their responses are summarized below:

- Regular, open communication among leadership
- Genuine desire by leadership to support collaboration
- Clear understanding of what collaboration means and how to communicate together across institutions
- Dedicated resources to support collaborative efforts (funding and human capacity/staff)
- Clear understanding about the capacity, strengths, and audiences for each institution’s efforts
- Parity in funding and staff
- Respect/equitable treatment of all staff and stakeholders/clients
- Joint plan of work based on each institution’s capacity/strength
- Joint conferences to showcase impacts
- Joint high-impact program that crosses different stakeholder groups
- Formalized memorandum of understanding to guide collaboration

“Think about how the universities can work together to solve the problems people have. Be intentional about doing the work people need.”

--Interview Respondent

Looking across the responses to these three questions, several common themes surface from the participants’ perceptions. First, leadership’s commitment and support for collaboration must be clearly communicated and modeled for those working under their lead to feel confident. Second, clearly articulating the value, capacity, strengths, and population reach of each institution will support joint efforts. Ensuring that resources, both financial and human capacity, are equitably shared is vital to full participation. Gaining a clear understanding among all partners on the goals and expectations of the joint venture from the beginning can also support the effort.

Interviews with Successful Collaboration Leaders

Collaborative Characteristics: As noted earlier, one-on-one interviews were conducted with the 1890 and 1862 leads for 20 projects that were identified as successful collaborations by their Extension leadership. The projects spanned the breadth of Extension programming with examples coming from Agriculture & Natural Resources, Family & Consumer Science, 4-H & Youth Development, and Community Development, as well as some that crossed program areas. Interviewees were also diverse in their positions within the respective institutions. For instance, in some states, the 1890 and

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1862 Extension leaders shared their perspectives on how to work collaboratively across the entire system. Other interview participants were working at the state level, providing leadership for a statewide initiative, while others were working on a single project jointly or within a single county. By span of the projects, 59% were statewide efforts, 25% were regional/multi-county, and 15% were single county efforts. Though these points of view within the system varied, the responses to what fostered successful collaboration were quite well aligned.

Purpose of Collaboration: The first point of discussion in the interviews was the purpose behind the collaboration. Almost half (45%) pointed to a desire to expand impact as a driver of the collaborative effort. Other reasons included reaching a broader audience (mentioned by 26%), growing staff capacity (24%), increasing complementary efforts or reducing duplication (16%), expanding cross-institutional understanding (8%), and maximizing strengths and capacities of each institution (5%). (Note: interviewees often provided more than one response to each question, so percentages will exceed 100% throughout the discussion.) It is noteworthy that, while each of these would be valuable reasons to collaborate, the two most often noted were outwardly focused on serving the public. Yet, internal benefits were also important considerations.

Collaboration Initiation: When asked how the collaboration got started, nearly half (45%) pointed to an existing positive relationship. One person defined this as respecting each other's work and enjoying working together. Some of these relationships were built through cross-institutional conferences/events and some through regularly scheduled leadership meetings. Recognizing a common community need was mentioned as the catalyst by 26% of the respondents. Reflective of the project aims, these initial needs were sometimes specific to a group of stakeholders (for instance, goat farmers) and sometimes broad, such as responses to natural disasters and societal trauma (i.e. death of George Floyd and COVID). Desiring to expand reach and impact again surfaced as important with 16% mentioning this as a driver. Opportunities to join regional or national initiatives (such as *Coming Together for Racial Understanding*) and responding to a specific programmatic opportunity (such as Children, Youth, and Families at Risk, CYFAR) also encouraged participants to reach across institutional borders. In addition to these, some noted the collaboration's potential of improving internal capacity through joint staff training, making more efficient use of resources, and aligning existing programs as objectives.

"If people want to collaborate better, they need to get to know each other. The bottom line is relationships."

--Interview Respondent

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Next, interviewees were asked who initiated the collaboration. Just over half (n=17) stated the 1862 institution reached out to the 1890 counterpart. Nearly half (n=14) stated the effort was jointly initiated, meaning the two lead partners came up with the idea of collaborating. This again demonstrated the importance of having opportunities to build relationships outside of the normal day-to-day workload. Of the six initiated by 1890s, their positions within the system were all identified (which was not necessarily the case for 1862 initiators). Of those six, two were initiated by specialists, two by Extension administrators, one by a county agent, and one by the 1890's Advisory Committee. This demonstrates the ability of someone from any position within a system to be able to foster successful collaboration.

Identification of Partners: Following the conversation about who initiated the collaboration, the question of how cross-institutional partners were identified was raised. As might be expected, over half (53%) of the respondents stated that the partners were identified by who had the skills needed and the interest in participating. This reflects previous responses about building joint capacity together. As one person noted, one partner had a strength in one area and another in a different area, but "together we decided we could provide a series of strong programs for [our target audience]." Again, reflecting previous observations, having an existing relationship helped 26% of these teams identify the participating members. In other cases, Extension leadership or State Program Leaders tapped partners from each institution. Also noted as ways of identifying partners were regular team meetings, seeing each other's program materials, and having joint advisory committees.

Resource Allocation: Once discussion of how partners were identified was completed, exploring how decisions were made as to how resources would be allocated was important. As the thread of existing relationships was beginning to emerge in these conversations, it was not too surprising to observe that most of these successful teams determined how resources would be allocated by thinking through the needs together. In fact, nearly three out of four (74%) stated this was their process for distributing resources. Also, 24% of the respondents discussed how each university pitched in to support the joint effort. In other cases, administrators or policies (grant funding and university) sometimes were the points of decision. Additionally, 24% of the respondents stated consideration was given to what was equitable in the process.

Outcomes: Looking at outcomes, the interviewees most often pointed to being able to reach wider audiences and deepening outcomes by working together, as noted by 53% of the respondents. This success fostered even more success as interviewees reported expanded collaboration on subsequent efforts (53%), increased trusting relationships (24%), increased funding because of the joint efforts (24%), better trained staff (24%), new or improved partnerships with external entities (24%), and better communication

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(18%). Also mentioned were enhanced appreciation for the strengths and challenges of each institution (11%), better management of programs (11%), and systems or practices in place to support future efforts (3%), all of which reflect the capacity building opportunity that strong collaboratives can provide.

Supportive Factors: With these encouraging outcomes in mind, gaining a better understanding of the factors that supported success was valuable. When asked what helped foster success, several important elements emerged. Those mentioned most frequently were:

- Open, honest communication among partners (39%)
- Keeping the purpose of serving the public as the central focus (37%)
- Recognizing the potential mutual benefit (32%)
- Having a previous trusting and respectful relationship (32%)
- Administrative support and modeling of collaboration (32%)
- Having regular joint meetings from the start (18%)
- Open minded staff/ willingness to consider differing perspectives (18%)
- Recognizing the strengths of each institution (16%)

Challenges: Recognizing that even the best of collaborations are not without trials, respondents were asked to describe challenges they had to overcome to be successful. These were all focused inwardly, related to how the different partners interacted together and navigated the shared project efforts. Over a third of the respondents (39%) mentioned navigating different institutional structures, policies, and service areas as a challenge to their joint effort. Also finding staff that had the time, diversity, and experience to shoulder the work was frequently noted (36%), with some discussion of challenges of staff turnover on the project level all the way up to administrative levels. Nearly a third of respondents also mentioned challenges in understanding the strengths and limits of each institution and dividing the workload accordingly (34%), as well as the need to build trust and overcome biases and misunderstandings from the past (32%). Other commonly stated challenges included navigating geographical and scheduling logistics (16%), gaining shared agreement on expectations early with the associated buy-in (13%), and finding ways of communicating effectively (13%). A few also noted that overcoming the mindset of competition and territorialism was a challenge.

Lessons Learned: Given the relative success of these collaboratives, respondents were asked to reflect on lessons learned through their experience. Almost half centered on one of three themes:

- Set shared goals, expectations, and accountability from beginning to end (47%)
- Engage in ongoing open, respectful, frequent communication (45%)
- Understand and match capacity and strengths to the workload; leverage, not compete (45%)

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Also, a third of the respondents reiterated the importance of keeping the purpose of serving people better as the center of focus. Focusing on the relationship building with trust and respect as core components also echoes responses from previous sections. Also, from multiple perspectives, respondents understood that having their Extension leaders' encouragement, support, and modeling was important to the success of their efforts.

"A strong and working collaboration takes an investment of time on behalf of the leadership of both institutions."
--Interview Respondent

Advice: Rounding out the interview process, some of the respondents reflected on advice they would give to others considering collaborative work. Not surprisingly, respondents echoed many of the common themes that have threaded throughout this discussion. Those most often noted were:

- Start by building a trusting relationship (62%)
- Ensure leadership supports the efforts; update them regularly (54%)
- Engage in open, honest, frequent communication (46%)
- Be intentional; stay the course; don't give up (46%)
- Recognize you will be better together in your goal of serving the public (38%)
- Invest in understanding the different institutions' mission, audience, capacity, and strengths (38%)
- Gain agreement on expectations and tasks, then follow through (23%)

Conclusions and Recommendations

We often hear about the need for more collaboration across institutional boundaries, and even more so the reasons why such efforts often flounder and even fail. This project took a different approach by asking questions about collaborations that their participants identified as having worked. The summary findings from this project presented above may be used to inform the development, renewal, and expansion of a wide range of collaborative efforts between people working through 1862 and 1890 land-grant institutions. Furthermore, they may be applicable to furthering collaborations between these institutions and 1994 tribal colleges.

As one way to use these insights to inform practical recommendations, the findings were shared with the SRDC's Technical and Operational Advisory Committee and Board of Directors, followed by discussion of the themes and opportunities for advancement in expanding and strengthening the capacities for collaboration. Based on that in-depth dialogue among representatives from 1862 and 1890 institutions as well as non-land-grant partners, the following action themes were identified. According to participants, we should collectively work to:

- Educate on these issues to enhance capacity
- Build and maintain trust

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- Communicate around the institutional histories and existing efforts to collaborate
- Expand relationships across and within institutions
- Pursue collaboration with intentionality, model through administrative leadership
- Respect what each person and institution bring to the table
- Address diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges together
- Understand each institution's needs, limits, capacity funding, staff needs, etcetera
- Engage with funders to deal with disconnects, including challenges with step ladder applications and cost reimbursement funding

In addition to this general discussion of what could be done to advance collaborations that work, the group also identified recommendations specifically for SRDC involvement. These included the following:

- Disseminate findings from this study to Extension (and research) personnel, with examples and lessons learned through professional associations, including the Joint Council of Extension Professionals (JCEP) and the Southern Region Program Leaders Network (PLN)
- Pursue 1862/1890 collaborations on SRDC plan of work topics with mutual interest, such as health, nutrition security, and climate
- Educate on principles of grant writing centered on collaboration, such as looking at equitable funding, addressing challenges in funding policies, and ensuring collaboration from start to finish
- Assist with regional "matchmaking" between individuals and their institutions interested in collaboration
- Engage with the 1890 Foundation and the 1890 Centers of Excellence to build bridges for collaboration
- Establish a taskforce to continue this work

Drilling down to what people can do in their own states to build more successful collaborations, several recommendations were highlighted. States are called to:

- Be intentional – dedicate the time and resources needed to build cross-institutional relationships
- Explore common interests and get the right people at the table
- Grow the mindset that collaboration does not equal competition
- Ensure that cross-institutional partnerships start together at the beginning (not a last minute "add-on" invitation)
- Organize joint meetings on a regular basis
- Formalizing relationships through memorandum of understandings or other guidance to help bridge the efforts
- Engage top leaders through middle managers to ensure all are supportive
- Identify metrics of collaboration

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- Incentivize with performance metrics suitable for staff and faculty evaluations (specific to 1862/1890)

As noted above, these efforts will require intentionality, time, and resources. Partners, from top leaders to middle managers, need to be brought together from the beginning to grow a collaborative mindset, establish incentives and metrics of success, and formalize relationships. The Southern Rural Development Center stands ready to assist its regional land-grant partners in this important work.

“Invite partners to the table at the beginning and work together to the end.”

--Interview
Respondent

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