

Cooperative Extension Builds Community Capacity Through Inclusive Engagement

Martha C. Monroe, Alicia Betancourt,
Sandra K. Thompson, and Dreamal Worthen

Abstract

The Cooperative Extension System, a component of every land-grant university, is well positioned to take a leadership role in community engagement in every state. In Florida, a new program called Community Voices, Informed Choices (CIVIC) builds capacity among county and state faculty from the state's two land-grant universities to engage community members in the process of resolving contentious issues through democratic governance. CIVIC strengthens partnerships with historically underserved communities, offers programs and activities to promote deliberative discussion, and facilitates interest in moving toward solutions. Case studies from three communities illustrate the CIVIC process and demonstrate how Extension faculty help communities help themselves.

Communities across our nation wrestle with a variety of challenging issues, such as declining economies, health disparities, energy shortages, racial inequities, and failing schools. While consultants, staff, and experts can address some of these concerns, others are best addressed by engaging the affected public at a grassroots level to help decide how to frame the problem or prioritize options (Patton & Blaine, 2001). Not everyone feels welcome to engage in community governance, however, and not all communities make it easy to do so (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). The Cooperative Extension System (CES), with representation in every county of every state and a home base in state land-grant universities (LGUs), has demonstrated success providing research-based information to the public. For 160 years, CES has been a community partner, trusted by both residents and municipal governments to offer strategies to address important problems and issues.

The 21st century brings several challenges to the strong tradition of Extension programs, as Reed and Swanson outline (this issue). Extension programs that primarily offer information to their clientele are realizing that easier access to information—through Google, for instance—may limit Extension's perceived usefulness. Without the skill of media literacy, people are more likely to believe whatever they find (McGrew et al., 2017, 2019). In addition, many of those who could benefit from the information Extension offers are not seeking it; Extension needs to cultivate relationships with a greater diversity of people (McDowell, 2004). Finally, given the national political climate and ensuing polarization of

information as well as the traditional decision-making system of unsatisfactory public hearings that do not allow for civil discussions, new platforms for addressing issues at a community level are needed. Extension leadership, therefore, should build on Extension's existing strengths while addressing these challenges. Extension programs should include local knowledge, offer research-based best practices, build skills, and demonstrate how community input can improve inclusive governance (Bull et al., 2004; Patton & Blaine, 2001). According to Harkavy and Hodges (2012), the university should exist as part of the community, and solving universal problems should be a high institutional priority.

For Extension faculty to provide visionary leadership and engage community members, however, they will need to step outside the traditional outreach model characterized by expert presentations. Extension personnel must learn to listen to the community and build their own capacity and confidence to address issues. Only then will they be able to build the community's capacity to be effective in an equitable collaboration processes (Community Research Collaborative, 2021). Community capacity can be thought of as the collective knowledge, skills, and resources that community members possess and use to identify and achieve shared goals (Chaskin, 1999). Building community capacity requires time and must be guided by a purposeful, strategic educational process designed to achieve this goal.

Extension faculty across Florida have developed the Community Voices, Informed Choices (CIVIC) program, modeled on the Kettering Foundation's

National Issues Forums (Kemmis, 2022) to build community capacity to solve problems. The CIVIC statewide leadership team provides training programs, discussion guides, facilitation, evaluation templates, and analysis to help county agents and specialists work with communities to address local concerns. This paper describes CIVIC at the state level as an integral program of both LGUs in Florida. Three case studies illustrate how CIVIC programs work with communities to build partnerships, offer inclusive programs, and support community action. Our experiences demonstrate how university engagement can benefit local communities as well as provide educational and research opportunities for students, thus supporting all three land-grant missions.

Literature

Cooperative Extension's historic role in solving community problems has long worked well for issues that can be addressed on an individual level, such as literacy, personal health, and farm practices. However, Cooperative Extension has expanded its mission to wrestle with challenges that communities must address together, such as economic development, land-use planning, and governance. The more controversial these issues are, the more challenging they become for elected officials. People may disagree on the facts or distrust the science that underlies the facts. On some issues, opposing factions cannot even come together to discuss options, and division deepens over time. The different values, such as trust in government, concern about the environment, and preference for a free market system, underpinning public perceptions begin to explain the fundamental difficulties in addressing such contentious issues (Kahan et al., 2011).

At the same time, people want to participate in meaningful efforts to improve their communities (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2009). By increasing or improving their partnerships with communities, Cooperative Extension faculty can help build community capacity and can help people obtain information, weigh costs and benefits, and discuss options. For some difficult issues, community deliberative discussions may be a crucial step forward to support a better understanding of why different solutions appeal to different people (Mathews, 2014). In cases that call for expertise beyond Extension, Extension can tap cross-university faculty to provide information and clarity on the issue at hand.

Community engagement works when it is an ongoing, cumulative process that enables relationships and trust to build and strengthen over time (Community Places, 2014). Engagement processes can take place individually or collectively, but their overall aim is to meet community-identified needs. It is essential at the outset of community engagement processes to develop and agree upon a clear purpose for the partnership. Early agreement on a shared vision can assist in identifying objectives, the depth and scope of the work ahead, and desired outcomes. Community-engaged processes are part of the continuum from consultation, in which families and community members are simply informed or asked for their consent, to partnership, in which community members are fully engaged in decision-making and solution development (Stuart, 2017).

The Development of CIVIC

Extension faculty and staff from both the University of Florida (UF) and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) came together to form CIVIC. This multidisciplinary and diverse team has grown over time to include expertise in community development, natural resources, and youth development. For the first time in Florida, the team has developed a common infrastructure for CIVIC to become a lasting and sustainable activity at both institutions.

Despite the novelty of our process (specifically, a joint UF/FAMU Extension program), our purpose is well established, though perhaps not common. Many organizations and even Extension programs have developed strategies to engage communities in deliberative democracy (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Peters et al., 2018) to identify appropriate and actionable solutions (Chess et al., 1998). Extension efforts in at least six states have championed such public engagement programs. In Kentucky, for example, the University of Kentucky's Superfund Research Center organized a forum for community members to discuss regional health care concerns (Brewer et al., 2020). The forum enabled residents to submit questions to a panel of experts, express their concerns, and suggest strategies for resolution. In an extension of its land-grant mission, Kansas State University encourages faculty across the institution to enhance democratic engagement through the university's Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy (Shaffer & Procter, 2021). Kansas State's Extension program has also adopted this form of engagement.

Sixteen focus groups helped Extension specialists understand community concerns around climate change (Kahl & Campbell, 2019), and an analysis of the pre- and post-surveys suggested that participants increased their knowledge of the issue and their confidence that people could respond effectively to the challenge. In each of these cases, individual faculty worked with select communities or on a specific issue. CIVIC's approach, in contrast, endeavors to institutionalize a process of community engagement for any Extension faculty to use as they work with communities on any issue that may be both important to and contentious among community members.

The team modeled CIVIC on the Kettering Foundation's strategies of deliberation, which include a framed issue that reflects various value positions and a facilitated discussion of tradeoffs associated with solutions (Mathews, 2014; Stern, 2005). To this core, CIVIC adds: (a) working with local community issues rather than national concerns, (b) emphasizing the inclusion of historically underserved voices by building partnerships with key stakeholders, and (c) moving the community toward action that can help bring about resolution. Florida Extension's close relationships with county governments enable CIVIC to help municipalities collect input from the public and generate opportunities for the public to learn about county programs. CIVIC's community engagement framework realizes Extension's potential: It facilitates collaboration to build strong and vibrant communities by building capacity through improved governance at the institutional level (Struyk, 2002).

Extension faculty are a good fit for this work, as they live and work in communities across the state and are skilled in program development. They have the content expertise needed to convey information about local issues, can readily access research findings, and can leverage their community connections to build partnerships. They can also scaffold and organize workshops, field trips, surveys, panel presentations, and discussions as needed to move the community toward logical, agreeable resolutions. They might be less comfortable, however, facilitating discussions and addressing local conflicts. CIVIC training programs help Extension faculty build skills to navigate these challenges.

CIVIC has prioritized engaging underserved groups in community governance because

sustainable engagement and capacity building cannot be driven by a homogeneous group: Real community engagement must include all the voices in a community. It is with that knowledge that the CIVIC team endeavored to "get its own house in order" before moving into communities. We achieved this internal diversity by establishing a partnership between UF, a large institution serving approximately 55,000 students, 59% of whom are White, and FAMU, which enrolls nearly 11,000 students, 84% of whom are African American. This partnership allows the CIVIC team to model and build diversity, equity, and justice dimensions into the program. FAMU's expertise in reaching historically underserved communities complements UF's ability to provide programs in every county.

The CIVIC team has worked to bring additional faculty members into the program with a series of in-service training programs that teach agents to conduct CIVIC activities on various issues of concern in their communities. Developing the training curriculum while conducting events allowed the core team to articulate its vision, reflect on the degree to which the vision was realistic, and adapt training programs to meet changing opportunities.

Institutionalizing CIVIC at our universities has also included broadening faculty involvement. CIVIC serves as a "revolving door" for communities to access the talents and research each university system offers, and our multidisciplinary approaches to community engagement enable CIVIC to usher other faculty and organizations through the same door to collaborate with communities. At FAMU, for example, community development work has engaged architecture faculty in supporting the development of an African American community in Apalachicola, Florida, and conservation professionals in work with heirs' property challenges. Another CIVIC project on water quality has evolved to explore fish toxicity with UF Sea Grant and research faculty.

Students support CIVIC as well. Graduate students have collected data on community concerns, developed resource materials, and created online collective evaluation tools. An undergraduate student created a short video to trigger community discussion. University engagement with communities may be rooted in Extension, but it can easily incorporate research questions and student projects across the university.

How We Build Community Capacity:

CIVIC’s Activities

CIVIC’s efforts to increase community engagement, community decision-making, and community action follow an iterative path that allows Extension professionals to support short-, medium-, and long-term goals for each involved community. CIVIC’s key processes revolve around three activities: (a) building partnerships, (b) providing opportunities to gain perspectives about an issue through inclusive town hall meetings and deliberative forums, and (c) supporting community actions with next steps. Each objective has a

complementary Extension effort and evaluation technique (see Table 1). Together, these strategies illustrate the progression from public engagement to action that builds community capacity.

Outcomes

CIVIC’s key processes are described below. Each is highlighted with a case study.

Building Partnerships

CIVIC activities seek to engage people in all corners of the community. Partnerships with community organizations can help the CIVIC team

Table 1. Framework for CIVIC Activities

Time frame	Objective	Agent effort	Evaluation
Short term	Build partnerships around an issue in the community with Extension by holding meetings, collecting concerns, organizing, recruiting, and marketing (particularly to new voices and new people).	Agent works to understand multiple perspectives on the issue while seeking partner organizations and agencies to address it.	Efforts are evaluated according to the number of new partnerships or groups formed to address a community issue, the number of new participants engaging in the issue, and the knowledge gained in leadership skills.
Medium term	Offer inclusive programs such as town hall meetings and deliberative forums. Particular attention is paid to working with partners that represent underserved communities, overcoming barriers to engagement, and addressing their needs.	Agent leads town hall meetings, organizes deliberative forums, and provides data, resources, and best practices to support the community planning process while working to bring underserved voices to the events.	Efforts are evaluated according to numbers of participants, numbers of programs, responses to pre-/post-surveys that indicate gains in awareness and perspectives, and plans to move toward action.
Long term	Support community action through facilitating meetings, identifying guest speakers, finding information, collecting data, and so on to meet community needs.	Agent works to increase capacity and engagement by serving the interested group members, representing them to government agencies, and helping to voice community needs. The agent may also draft plans, policies, and procedures and conduct surveys.	Efforts are evaluated by the community’s assessments and choices to accept (or not) plans/policies to address an issue and by the level of community investment in this process.

frame the issue at hand with relevant examples and details, and community organizations are often instrumental in advertising and cohosting events. We have noticed that issues do not affect all community members in the same way, nor are all community members equally aware of the issues that might affect them. By describing the same issue in diverse ways we can attract different audiences, which helps reach our goal of hosting inclusive and diverse events. Some people, for instance, may be more willing to attend informative presentations before they are interested in deliberating. Expectations for the

CIVIC-community partnership must be ironed out in advance so that individuals are not disappointed with the outcome.

In addition, partnerships with municipalities are relatively easy for Extension to facilitate, and county or city agencies sometimes ask agents to help them by engaging community members in rating options, discussing visions, or offering feedback. Participants can feel that their engagement matters when the partnership provides a route for their voices to be heard—that is, when they are asked for their opinions and know they will be reported to decision makers.

County Transportation Improvements Require Community, Expert, and Agency Engagement

Our first case study illustrates the power of partnership and the unique role that Extension can play in linking the community to municipal leadership and expert assistance.

Monroe County is the southernmost county in the state of Florida. As of the 2020 census, its population was more than 83,000. Its county seat is Key West, at the tip of the Florida Keys. The only road that connects the island chain is U.S. Highway 1, locally known as the Overseas Highway.

The Overseas Highway is one of the world's best scenic highways, but it is also congested and dangerous. Heavy traffic, speeding cars, and a lack of turn lanes all contribute to accidents, but the main contributor is the explosion of residents, workers, delivery trucks, and tourists on a two-lane road that has changed little since the 1950s. Although the Keys have less than 100,000 full-time residents, they also have more than five million annual tourists, and an estimated 69,000 workers commute from the mainland on this one road. Most weeks and months reach 95–100% tourism capacity. There is no alternate route to avoid accidents or daily congestion; backups extend for miles and can take hours to clear.

As resident and visitor complaints about transportation issues mounted, county and city leaders began searching for solutions. UF/IFAS Extension faculty suggested that the local Extension Service could support this search by organizing and facilitating community forums to hear about the issue's effects on a variety of stakeholders.

Extension worked with small business owners, regional transportation coordinators, Florida Department of Transportation representatives, public works directors, municipal staff, elected officials, tourist development administrators, and residents to determine the size and scope of the forums. To address residents' concerns, UF/IFAS Extension faculty also collaborated through interviews with homeowner, Chamber of Commerce, and Rotary groups to develop relevant issue guidance, including information about chokepoints along the highways and workable solutions.

Although traffic specialists were clearly in the room, the format of the forums gave all participants the opportunity to be heard. Working, living, and traveling in the community were the only requirements for residents to fully participate. During the discussion, participants expressed and agreed upon community values. Many attendees were ordinary people affected by an ever-increasing community issue, and their shared underlying values connected them to each other. Individuals demonstrated a commitment to continuing engagement, which builds community capacity while supporting municipal staff and experts to make community decisions on the issue.

The community forums led to an expression of shared community values and diverse perspectives on solutions, but further steps were needed to make concrete changes. The primary outcome of the forums was the creation of a formal Monroe County Transportation Committee.

This group proceeded to review solutions that the forum had identified and agreed to move forward with at least three recommendations to their respective municipalities. To further demonstrate the value of the community forum process, as of July 2022, the committee has made an additional 11 recommendations and developed a transportation master plan of 183 total projects. Some of the recommendations are quite complex and reflect both geographic and participant diversity on the committee.

Educational Activities

Our commitment to community engagement means not only that community leaders and members participate in our programs but also that they explore local solutions at the community level. Town hall meetings and deliberative discussions are designed to encourage people to gain information about an issue, listen to different perspectives, and identify potential steps they could take in small groups of interested individuals. Extension faculty can then support these activities or pass them off to other community organizations to champion. In our experience, moving toward community action begins before the deliberation activity occurs and can be enhanced with partnerships and strategic marketing.

Venue considerations and logistical components of each educational activity—such as offering childcare, translating the discussion into other languages, locating the event on a bus route, and offering free parking—can attract community participation. Understanding the barriers to participation in advance helps agents prioritize strategies to increase access.

Deliberation is fundamental to the CIVIC process: We seek to engage communities in discussions that explore different perspectives on

the problem at hand. To create a platform for open discussion rather than debate or acrimony, we frame the conversation around potential solutions that reflect different value priorities and include information about local choices, tradeoffs, and costs (Haidt, 2012; Mathews, 2014; Stern, 2005). As part of CES, CIVIC frames issues with research-based information drawn from experts across our university campuses and partner agencies and organizations. It is essential to introduce participants to the notion that deliberation—if the group finds common ground—can result in opportunities that can actually be pursued.

During CIVIC activities, Extension faculty typically use ground rules to establish an atmosphere for discussion, move the conversation forward, draw out quiet participants, and seek nuggets of interest in the next steps. If questions arise that should be answered by an expert, they are noted and addressed later rather than disrupting the local knowledge offered by participants. When the discussion is about perceptions and opinions, no one is wrong. Faculty's facilitation role is essential to the success of deliberation and community engagement.

Additional Strategies for Engagement: Family and Community Preservation in Historic African American Communities

In our second case study, we look at innovative ideas for community engagement. Town hall meetings and deliberative discussions form the core of many CIVIC programs, but these are not the only strategies that engage community members in exploring local issues.

The City of Apalachicola, Florida, is typically recognized for one of two reasons: It is both a source of seafood—oysters, fresh shrimp, and blue crab—and the symbol of “Old Florida” heritage tourism. While these are the two more publicized story lines, additional realities exist. The city also exemplifies the challenges faced by many small towns when young people move away for job opportunities. In response to this societal issue, FAMU program leaders used the CIVIC process to address family and community concerns through transdisciplinary approaches. Working *with* communities and families rather than *on* them is essential to sustainable community growth and family sustainability.

This project would not have evolved without close collaboration between Extension faculty and various other units in FAMU, such as architecture, history, and planning. Our team included a planner, a documentary filmmaker, community organizers, and graduate students in architecture and history. Apalachicola residents also worked with the team on issues of community preservation through a study of “The Hill,” the town's African American community.

We employed five transdisciplinary community engagement methods to support the Hill community: community mapping, scenario modeling games, public meetings, web-based engagement, and collaborative community art. Community mapping is used to illustrate how community members view their neighborhood and to generate topics for facilitated discussions. In our case, it included photography, sketching, asset mapping, and strength/weakness/opportunity/threat mapping.

Scenario modeling games allowed community members to develop a model for a part of the community that needed improvement. This strategy generated interest in this community area

and generated instant feedback from participants. This method can build a sense of community ownership by engaging residents who might not otherwise get involved.

As demonstrated by the early work at the Hill, public meetings, forums, workshops, and festivals provided opportunities for engagement with larger numbers of community residents. Small breakout sessions in these larger meetings increased participation, focused on certain aspects of the community development process, attracted attention to projects, and established participant networks.

The fourth method was especially valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Web-based engagement was utilized in lieu of public meetings to enable residents to choose where, when, and for how long they wanted to engage. This method also created space for debate and the exchange of ideas through online discussions, websites/blogs, online surveys, and social networking.

The final strategy, collaborative community art, was effectively used at the beginning of our community engagement process to establish trust, generate ideas, and propose a future vision for the Hill community. Activities included photography, photovoice, creative writing, poetry/songs, and artwork. Essential to this process is the place-based nature of the resulting art and the engagement of designers with the local community to amplify the community's unique character and expression. Collaborative community art reflects the diversity of the Hill's physical, social, and economic development.

Traditional community planning and design have often left out the voices of families and marginalized groups. The work in Apalachicola has been carried out over years, beginning with interviews with many of the community's senior residents to learn their stories and to hear their visions for their community. In addition, high school students accompanied university graduate students to photograph the community. This expanded the traditional visioning process, which has not always produced equitable and sustainable communities and community partnerships.

Work with members of the Hill neighborhood continues. Extension will continue to support the Hill community as this partnership evolves from engagement to decision and action. The capstone project to this point has been an African American Pop-Up Museum that showcased interviews conducted over a 2-year period as well as community members' historic photographs showing family and community life (church, educational, and economic) in the 1800s and 1900s. Extension's partnership with the Hill will continue to serve as a transdisciplinary mechanism for revitalizing the community.

Moving Toward Action

Although people in a community may wish to work toward solving problems, they may not perceive that there are opportunities to do so (Kaplan and Kaplan, 2009; Mathews, 2014). CIVIC activities provide supportive platforms for small groups of people to meet, share perspectives, ask questions, learn, and plan to do more together. Individuals are given the opportunity to continue to meet or create next steps in designing solutions they believe will aid their community.

Moving toward community action is a function of the partners, the issue, and the opportunities. If partners request a CIVIC activity, they are likely to use the input. If they were involved in designing the CIVIC activity, they are more

likely to continue to work toward solutions with Extension faculty. During and immediately after the activities, facilitators can make community action more likely by noting suggestions, returning to check with participants, providing additional information to resolve outstanding questions, and using their knowledge of community resources to provide support and offer suggestions.

Agents are educators, and the goal of CIVIC programs is to build community capacity. This work continues by supporting the emerging leadership from the group, providing research questions that help fill data gaps, offering information about how people can engage with local government, and connecting participants to relevant staff and organizations.

Family Heirs' Property, From Engagement to Law

Our third case study illustrates how CIVIC activities can inform community members and link them with existing efforts that enable them to move toward successful action.

To bring community-based action to the issue of persistent African American poverty as it relates to ownership of family heirs' property (FHP) in Florida, FAMU married community

capacity building with theoretical tenets of information/education marginalization. This blending of theories facilitated unimaginable “on the ground” condition change, including new law codification to address the real-world problem of FHP as well as an appropriate response to FHP owners’ (participant researchers’) lived experiences.

FHP is real property that has been passed down informally from generation to generation, in most cases without a will or with an improperly written will. The result is cotenancy, where owners (multiple generations of the same family) of a parcel cannot individually authenticate their piece of the parcel separate from other family members, effectively making them co-owners of the property. FHP is disproportionately owned by African Americans and is most responsible for persistent poverty (Bailey et al., 2019; Wimberley & Morris, 2003). Most low- to middle-income families with real property holdings often do not have the resources (human, financial, and legal capital) to organize multiple heirs under an effective ownership structure (Flocks et al., 2018; Heirs Property Retention Coalition, n.d.).

The issue is not merely an inconvenience. FHP is easily stolen and lost due to forced partition sales (Craig-Taylor, 2000), unpaid taxes, liens, family conflict, and barriers to title clearing (Dyer & Crayton, 2008; Dyer et al., 2009) and is one cause of African American land loss (Love, 2017). Consequently, owners are also challenged with limited interconnected assets that could spur entrepreneurship and investment. The disproportionate ownership and impact of FHP on communities of color is geographically consistent with the slave labor-based plantation economy in southern states (Bailey et al., 2019; Thompson, 2017).

As a result of the above conditions, FHP owners and other stakeholders in Florida sought educational and technical assistance to identify a just and affordable title clearing process and to prevent forced partition sales. In response, FAMU’s Cooperative Extension Program launched the Family Heirs’ Property Resolution and Transformation Program (Haslam et al., 2011; Lowney, 2003), which operated through the lens of critical race theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hartlep, 2009). Specifically, CRT was the driver in giving voice (Riphagen, 2008) to FHP’s origins, impact, persistence, and solutions for people of color, particularly those in the geographic service area of FAMU’s Cooperative Extension Program.

Community Outreach/Engagement

FAMU’s FHP program began by providing education and technical assistance through workshops and family group sessions. These meetings helped participants, but they did not create momentum toward changing conditions in Florida to benefit the most heirs. A plan was developed to engage FHP stakeholders in North Florida through an FHP town hall meeting utilizing CIVIC’s framework. The meeting had three goals: (a) to provide foundational information about FHP and its impact, (b) to facilitate group discussion leading to an agreed-upon action, and (c) to perpetuate FHP discussions around living room tables; in church, civic, and other organizational meetings; and with city and county government and other stakeholders.

Community Decision-Making Through Deliberative Dialogue

At the town hall meeting, a panel of FHP past and present owners, lawyers, a conservation representative, and local county government representatives presented FHP foundational topics. The main categories of discussion were definitions; characteristics; economic vulnerabilities; remedies; roles of property appraiser, county growth management, engineer, surveyor and legal experts; and the Uniform Partition of Heirs Property Act (UPHPA; Uniform Law Commission, 2014). Flowing from the panel discussion, a large-group discussion and several small-group deliberative dialogue discussions occurred involving FHP owners and professionals from various stakeholder disciplines. The prevailing view was that heirs’ property was a complex issue requiring resolution on multiple fronts. However, as the meeting neared a conclusion, a cross section of participants determined that UPHPA adoption in Florida should be the next step. Participants were eager to experience the protections of UPHPA—that is, the law would give many heirs’ property owners in both rural and urban parts of Florida enhanced property rights, which would in turn put them in a better position to fend off speculators, developers, and others who have abused partition law for decades to force the sale of many family-owned properties for fire-sale prices.

Support Community Action Post Town Hall

New stakeholders with significant human capital and organizational influence joined the Florida UPHPA Adoption Committee. The result was a cohort of legislative champions, the cooperation of the Florida Bar, and FHP owner expert testimony, which ultimately led to the passage of Florida Senate and House bills. The final bill was signed into law on June 20, 2020, by Florida governor Ron DeSantis, just 14 months to the day of the April 20, 2019, town hall meeting. The outcome for heirs' property owners navigating the title clearing process was summed up by a Jefferson County, Florida, FHP owner seeking consultation about uncooperative family members: "We are glad that law passed. It saved us" (M. Brooks, personal communication, February 9, 2022).

Lessons Learned

This reflection on the establishment and institutionalization of CIVIC and its role in building community engagement has afforded us an opportunity to recognize several key aspects of the program, including limitations of our process and additional research needs.

1. CIVIC has helped promote growth in both LGUs. Both FAMU and UF have increased their ability to reach their audiences, and faculty have gained skills and experiences by working together, particularly in the challenging arena of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Acknowledging the differences between the two universities and identifying ways to overcome barriers has led to new possibilities for programs and growth. By modeling this work at the state level, state specialists can more easily offer support to county faculty, who then become more likely to embark on challenging issues and new partnerships in their communities.
2. Individual faculty involved in CIVIC projects have gained skills and support that have translated to other projects, both within their Extension roles and with other university colleagues. Growing our skills in engaging different parties, removing self-interest, and building collaboration with both community members and cross-university colleagues has enhanced our ability to build capacity with a variety of communities. We expect and support participants at all CIVIC levels to gain and expand knowledge and skills that they will transport to other community projects, such as the North Star Legacy Communities program.
3. Community members are more likely to be engaged in an issue and act if they have an opportunity to discuss locally specific details and explore what a change could mean to them. While the National Issues Forums guides provide a helpful framework for

discussion, they require the addition of local details and some modification to build local interest in local engagement.

4. Our organizational structure—a small leadership team representing different facets of the partnership and a larger statewide team that meets monthly—has created efficiency and breadth as we develop materials, seek resources, and conduct training programs that blend our respective institutional expertise.
5. One limitation of the CIVIC process is that the program is designed to address such a variety of issues that our team does not always have the requisite expertise. Attracting faculty who do may be a challenge. A second challenge is that community solutions are not always identifiable. If participants are expecting to hear solutions, managing their expectations can be challenging. Successful community engagement requires that leadership emerge from the deliberation process to move the community into action, but this may not be communicated well enough at the onset of CIVIC activities.
6. We are learning that future research could improve our strategies and help us work more effectively with communities. Better understanding the issue framing process, for example, could help us generate more insightful deliberative discussions and facilitate movement toward areas of agreement. Better indicators of community engagement could improve our evaluations, reports to partners, and progress in community resource development.

Conclusions

Cooperative Extension faculty are trusted community members. They form an important bridge between the university and municipal governments and can use their unique position to facilitate community engagement. While this might

be a new role for some agents, building capacity and empowering people to solve problems hearkens back to Asbury Francis Lever's original vision of the agriculture agent who should not be limited to helping farmers grow bigger crops. Rather, "He is to assume leadership in every movement, whatever it may be, the aim of which is better farming, better living, more happiness, more education and better citizenship" (from Lever's remarks to the U.S. Congress on the Agricultural Extension Act in 1913, which became known as the Smith-Lever Act that established CES; Hills, 1920).

The work of building a new statewide partnership between two institutions has involved a number of specific tasks—such as developing a strategic plan and logic model, organizing training workshops, and conducting a survey of faculty and staff—that have enabled the team to build relationships that are strengthening the CIVIC program. We are learning through this process that working relationships can help overcome cultural and racial differences. All CIVIC team members have been involved in difficult conversations as we recognized and endeavored to overcome our own unintended biases while seeking to support community participants.

Leadership and engagement of audiences that represent the diversity of involved communities is a fundamental value of the CIVIC program. Engaging community members through deliberation creates the possibility for new leadership to surface. Extension's position as an educational entity enables us to play a role in community transformation, which is by nature a deliberative process of capacity building. Extension agents have the knowledge to lead and facilitate community transformation, including substantive knowledge of the local issues at hand; knowledge of how their community functions through individuals, organizations, and networks; and knowledge of action strategies. The CIVIC process creates opportunities for citizens to become involved and engaged in local issues in a meaningful way. This program increases community capacity both by increasing Extension's ability to serve the community and through direct community engagement.

CIVIC programming includes community resource development (CRD) principles of empowerment, human rights, inclusion, social justice, self-determination, and collective action (Kenny, 2016). Complex issues lack straightforward solutions, and determining appropriate actions in response may require a much longer process. Finally, deliberative issue forums can support communities

in identifying solutions, therefore increasing community capacity. Internal capacity building for Extension professionals in CRD principles gives them the training and tools they need to facilitate community forums, assess program efficacy, and develop meaningful partnerships, all of which contribute to successful outcomes.

References

- Bailey, C., Zabawa, R., Dyer, J., Barlow, B., & Baharanyi, B. (2019). *Heirs' property and persistent poverty among African Americans in the Southeastern United States*. In C. J. Gaither, A. Carpenter, T. Lloyd McCurdy, & S. Toering (Eds.), *Heirs' property and land fractionation: Fostering stable ownership to prevent land loss and abandonment* (pp. 9–19). U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, Southern Research Station. https://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/gtr/gtr-srs244/gtr_srs244_002.pdf
- Brewer, D., Travis, E., Koempel, A., Ormsbee, L., & Pennell, K. (2020). Community forum identifies opportunities to engage with Eastern Kentucky community leaders about chronic disease and environmental pollution. *Applied Environmental Education and Communication*, 19(2), 187–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533015X.2019.1597660>
- Bull, N.H., Cote, L.S., Warner, P.D., & McKinnie, M.R. (2004). Is Extension relevant for the 21st century? *Journal of Extension*, 42(6), Article 6COM2. <https://archives.joe.org/joe/2004december/comm2.php>
- Chaskin, R.J. (1999). *Defining community capacity: A framework and implications from a comprehensive community initiative*. Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. https://www.lisc.org/media/filer_public/27/0f/270f0aa3-a66d-4f57-ad8c-f733584dca64/08102018_resource_defining_community_capacity.pdf
- Chess, C., Dietz, T., & Shannon, M. (1998). Who should deliberate when? *Human Ecology Review*, 5(1), 45–48.
- Community Places. (2014). *Community planning toolkit: Community engagement*. <https://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/sites/default/files/Engagement.pdf>
- Community Research Collaborative. (2021). *In it together: Community-based research guidelines for communities and higher education*. University of Utah. <https://d2vxd53ymoe6ju.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2021/05/12143439/CRC-Guidelines-May-12-2021.pdf>

- Craig-Taylor, P. (2000). Through a colored looking glass: A view of judicial partition, family land loss, and rule setting. *Washington University Law Review*, 78(3), 737–788. https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawreview/vol78/iss3/2
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York University Press.
- Dyer, J.F., Bailey, C., & Tran, N.V. (2009). Ownership characteristics of heir property in a Black Belt County: A quantitative approach. *Southern Rural Sociology*, 24(2), 192–217. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jrss/vol24/iss2/10>
- Dyer, J.F., & Crayton, E. (2008, March). *Heir property in Alabama* (Publication No. HE-852). Alabama Cooperative Extension System.
- Flocks, J., Lynch, S.P., II, & Szabo, A.M. (2018). The disproportionate impact of heirs property in Florida's low-income communities of color. *Florida Bar Journal*, 92(8), 57. <https://www.floridabar.org/the-florida-bar-journal/the-disproportionate-impact-of-heirs-property-in-floridas-low-income-communities-of-color/>
- Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. Vintage Books.
- Harkavy, I., & Hodges, R.A. (2012). *Democratic devolution: How America's colleges and universities can strengthen their communities* [Policy memo]. Progressive Policy Institute. http://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/10.2012_Harkavy-Hodges_Democratic-Devolution.pdf
- Hartlep, N.D. (2009). *Critical race theory: An examination of its past, present, and future implications* (ED506735). ERIC. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED506735.pdf>
- Haslam, S.A., Reicher, S.D., & Platow, M.J. (2011). *The new psychology of leadership: Identity, influence, and power*. Psychology Press
- Heirs Property Retention Coalition. (n.d.). *HPRC projects*. <http://hprc.southerncoalition.org/?q=node/3>
- Hills, J.L. (Ed). (1920). *Proceedings of the 33rd annual convention of the Association of American Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations, November 12–14, 1919 in Chicago, IL*. Free Press Printing Company.
- Kahan, D.M., Jenkins-Smith, H., & Braman, D. (2011). Cultural cognition of scientific consensus. *Journal of Risk Research*, 14(2), 147–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2010.511246>
- Kahl, D., & Campbell, A. (2019). Engaging citizens to address community climate change issues. In P. Lachapelle & D. Albrecht (Eds.), *Addressing climate change at the community level in the United States* (pp. 259–274). Routledge.
- Kaplan, S., & Kaplan, R. (2009). Creating a larger role for environmental psychology: The Reasonable Person Model as an integrative framework. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 29(3), 329–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2008.10.005>
- Kemmis, D. (2022). Collaborative democracy. *Kettering Review*, 37(1), 23–29. https://www.kettering.org/sites/default/files/periodical-article/review_winter_22_kemmis.pdf
- Kenny, S. (2016). Changing community development roles: The challenges of a globalizing world. In R. Meade, M. Shaw, & S. Banks (Eds.), *Politics, power and community development* (pp. 47–64). Policy Press.
- Love, D. (2017, June 30). 15 million acres to 1 million: How Black people lost their land. *Atlanta Black Star*. <https://atlantablackstar.com/2017/06/30/from-15-million-acres-to-1-million-how-black-people-lose-their-land/>
- Lowney, C. (2003). *Heroic leadership: Best practices from a 450-year old company that changed the world*. Loyola Press.
- Mathews, D. (2014). *The ecology of democracy*. Kettering Foundation Press.
- McDowell, G. (2004). Is Extension an idea whose time has come—and gone? *Journal of Extension*, 42(6), Article 6COM1. <https://archives.joe.org/joe/2004december/comm1.php>
- McGrew, S., Ortega, T., Breakstone, J., & Wineburg, S. (2017). The challenge that's bigger than fake news: Civic reasoning in a social media environment. *American Educator*, 41(3), 4–10. https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2017/mcgrew_ortega_breakstone_wineburg
- McGrew, S., Smith, M., Breakstone, J., Ortega, T., & Wineburg, S. (2019). Improving university students' web savvy: An intervention study. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(3), 485–500. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12279>
- Nabatchi, T., & Leighninger, M. (2015). *Public participation for 21st century democracy*. Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, D.B., & Blaine, T.W. (2001). Public issues education: Exploring Extension's role. *Journal of Extension*, 39(4), Article 4FEA2. <https://archives.joe.org/joe/2001august/a2.php>

Peters, S.J., Alter, T.R., & Shaffer, T.J. (2018). *Jumping into civic life: Stories of public work from Extension professionals*. Kettering Foundation Press.

Riphagen, L. (2008). Marginalization of African-Americans in the social sphere of US society. *The Interdisciplinary Journal of International Studies*, 5, 96–121. <https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.ijis.v5i0.174>

Shaffer, T.J., & Procter, D.E. (2021). Learning to become a civic professional: Using deliberation in community engagement. In D.W.M. Barker & A. Lovit (Eds.), *Higher education exchange 2021: Institutions and the public: A troubled relationship* (pp. 64–74). Kettering Foundation. https://www.kettering.org/sites/default/files/periodical-article/hex-21_shaffer-procter_0.pdf

Stern, P.C. (2005). Deliberative methods for understanding environmental systems. *BioScience*, 55(11), 976–982. [https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568\(2005\)055\[0976:DMFUES\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2005)055[0976:DMFUES]2.0.CO;2)

Struyk, R. (2002). Transnational think tank networks: Purpose, membership and cohesion. *Global Networks*, 2(1), 83-90.

Stuart, G. (2017, February 14). What is the spectrum of public participation? *Sustaining Community*. <https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2017/02/14/spectrum-of-public-participation/>

Thompson, S. (2017). *The contextual meaning given to the heirs property title clearing process* (Publication No. 10624788) [Doctoral dissertation, Creighton University]. ProQuest Dissertations.

Uniform Law Commission. (2014). *The partition of heirs property act*. <https://www.uniformlaws.org/viewdocument/final-act-97?CommunityKey=50724584-e808-4255-bc5d-8ea4e588371d&tab=librarydocuments>

Wimberley, R.C., & Morris, L.V. (2003). U.S. poverty in space and time: Its persistence in the South. *Sociation Today*, 1(2). <http://www.ncsociology.org/sociationtoday/v2/wimmor.htm>

About the Authors

Martha Monroe is a professor of environmental education at the University of Florida. Alicia Betancourt is the Monroe County Extension director with the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension. Sandra Thompson is the community and resource development Extension specialist at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. Dreamal Worthen is the family, youth and community Extension specialist–program leader at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University.