THE UNITED STATES COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM: CONTRIBUTING TO A PARTNERSHIP SYSTEM

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Abstract

How does an institution navigate current societal pressures and historical social inequities to move toward a partnerism system? Partnersim is defined as a socio-economic system that values and rewards caring for one another, nature, and our collective future. This article provides a preliminary look at two examples in which the University of Minnesota Extension is moving toward a partnership system. An analysis of results from surveys of two units, one of staff from the Center of Family Development and one of staff and board members from the Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, revealed four factors that influence organizations toward either a domination system or a partnership system. A discussion of the four factors addresses the challenges and the benefits of moving toward a partnership system.

Keywords: extension; higher-education; partnership system; domination system; partnerism; systemic racism; equity; diversity

BACKGROUND

Riane Eisler defines a partnership system as a "framework for organizing every aspect of society around life-supporting values of mutual respect and mutual responsibility,

non-violence, equality, empowerment, and caring" (Eisler, 2019). She distinguishes this from a domination system that encompasses more authoritarian ways of organizing and governing, often led by males and driven by monetary wealth (Eisler, 2018). Social systems and organizations are on a continuum between the absolutes of domination and partnerism. Partnerism is defined as "a **socio-economic system that values and rewards caring for one another, nature, and our collective future**" (Eisler, 2020). In the context of today's concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic, systemic racism, and climate change, partnership systems help social and environmental mission-driven organizations achieve their goals of improving equity and sustainability. What is poorly understood is how organizations can navigate and propel the shift from a domination system to a partnership system. The goal of this article is to explore factors that contribute to this shift within the context of the United States Cooperative Extension System (CES), focusing on two units within the University of Minnesota Extension (hereafter called Extension) and how their work contributes to a partnership system while navigating within systems of domination.

Conceived in 1914, CES is part of the land-grant university system stemming from the Morrill Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1862. Created to provide practical agricultural skills to farmers, CES has evolved to offer research-based education in the broad areas of agriculture, natural resources, and youth, family, and community development. Today over 100 land-grant universities and colleges located across the United States (US) are engaged in extension, teaching and research (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d.).

As with many U.S. institutions more than 100 years old, development in CES came at a large human and environmental cost. Hightower (1973) argued that the CES benefited large-scale agricultural producers at the cost of other kinds of farmers and rural inhabitants. In more recent work, Lee and colleagues (2020) analyzed results of a database created from historical records, tracking the distribution of land resulting

from the Morrill Act of 1862. They concluded that 52 land-grant universities were established on nearly 11 million acres forcibly taken from Indigenous Nations.

The relevance of CES, originally conceived to 'extend' agricultural knowledge from land-grant schools to improve farming, is being challenged. In his article, "Extension Reconsidered," Scott Peters argues that the view of CES to 'extend' agricultural knowledge is too narrow, too simplistic, overly celebratory, and excludes important factors (Peters, 2014). Peters claims that the promise of CES must not be limited to economics and material ends but must include civic and cultural ends. He states that the success of CES should be measured not numerically, but in the "intangible and non-numerical, expressed in living demonstrations of leadership and growth, and in the many satisfactions that belong to democratic living: appreciation, respect for individuality and human dignity, affection, ideals and opportunities" (Peters, 2014, p. 4). Our premise aligns with Peters—much of CES's story has been excluded, and the "intangible" is invaluable in understanding CES's potential, as Peters discusses. It is important to reach deeper and address the historical and institutional consequences of a system of domination rather than partnership.

Traditional comparisons of democracy versus dictatorship or eastern versus western contain examples of domination; each of these political and economic systems have injustices, violence, and power-based hierarchies (Eisler, 2017). For example, within land-grant institutions and CESs, inequalities remain within faculty positions in the form of ingroups and outgroups, i.e., those who belong (fit) and those who do not. Power is maintained within these systems via the requirements for tenure or promotion, and externally through the perceived expertise of university professionals.

Unlike its early days, when CESs worked primarily with white communities, work has expanded to include historically underserved populations, recent and new immigrants, and Indigenous Nations. University presidents, positional leaders, individuals, programs, units, and teams are making deliberate efforts to be equitable and caring

while addressing injustices in communities and systemic racism within institutions. However, not enough are alert to injustice in society, especially to racism and the realities and long-term consequences of white supremacy, nor are they addressing CES's violent and unjust beginnings. This article highlights two units at Extension and shares how they are successfully navigating within systems of domination and working toward a partnership system (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Extension Programs in Partnerism within Eisler's Domination/Partnership Social Scale (Eisler, 2020)
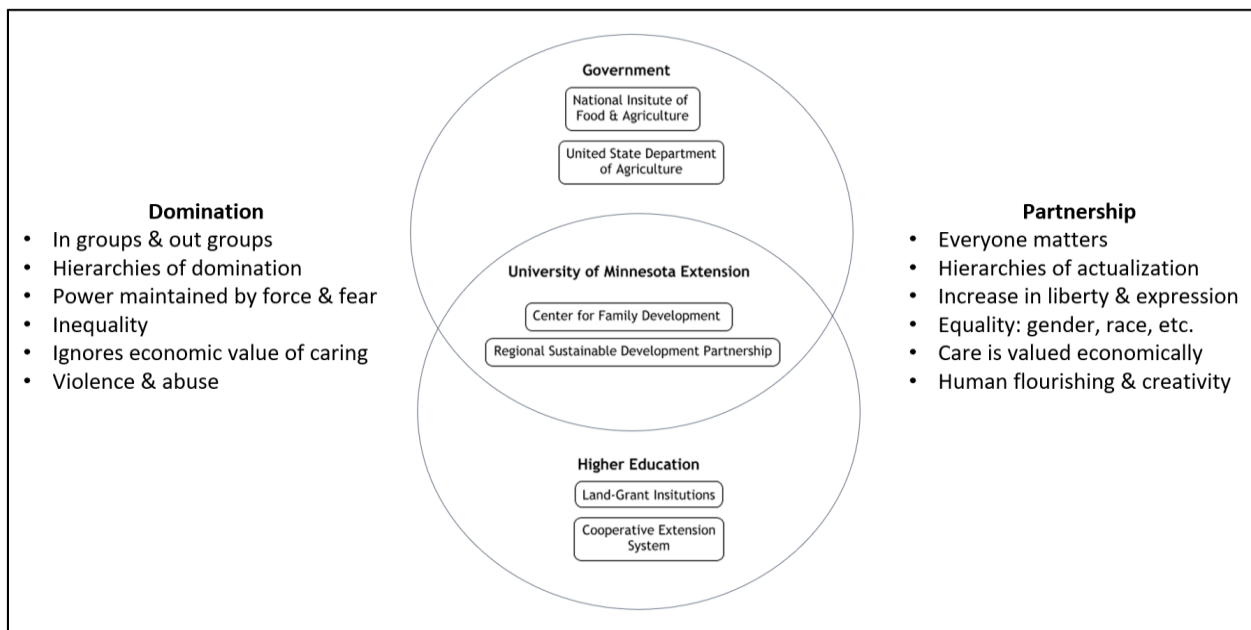
Note: The Regional Sustainable Development Partnership was formed by the Minnesota Legislature in 1997 and moved in 2011 to Extension.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM

The Morrill Act of 1862 established the land-grant university system in agriculture and mechanical arts, allowing the federal government to 'grant' each state 30,000 acres of public land for each of its congressional representatives. In addition to the Morrill Act

of 1862, two other key legislative acts passed by Congress and signed by President Lincoln laid the foundation for the need for a CES. The creation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Homestead Act 'gave away' land (160 acres per man) west of the Mississippi River to settlers, who were overwhelmingly white.

According to the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (2012), four more acts from 1887–1994 solidified the place of CES within the land-grant system:

- The Hatch Act of 1887 provided funding for states to create experiment stations to conduct agricultural research in connection with land-grant colleges and universities.
- The second Morrill Act, passed in 1890, provided more endowment funds for colleges and required some of the funding to be designated for colleges for black students. Today these colleges are commonly known as Historically Black Land-Grant Colleges.
- The Smith-Lever Act passed in 1914 provided funding specifically for CES to disseminate useful and usable information that improved rural life (for example, home economics and agricultural sciences).
- In 1994, 29 Native American colleges received land-grant status, with Congress authorizing a $23 million endowment. These are referred to today as the 1994 Tribal Land-Grant Colleges.

Extension departments at land-grant colleges and universities across the US are extensive in size, with approximately 2,000 campus-based faculty and over 8,000 extension professionals located in over 2,900 offices (Peters, 2014). The internal narrative for the past 100+ years of the land-grant schools and CES has been one of great accomplishments in agricultural research and education benefiting the people of the United States. However, the story continues to disregard the fact that land and resources were taken from Indigenous people to benefit white settlers in accumulating land and capital. The Morrill Act of 1890 also reinforced educational segregation of African Americans in the South. The creation of higher education had a cost, particularly to Native Americans and enslaved peoples (Nash, 2019). The common

narrative leaves out complex realities and actions during the time of settler colonization (Nash, 2019) and the consequences of inequities (access to land, education, equitable wages, voting rights, etc.) affecting generations of peoples. Moving toward a partnership system requires truthfulness about our history.

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

University of Minnesota Extension (Extension) is a major outreach arm of the University of Minnesota, a land-grant institution with a mission to serve the public through applied research and education. It plays a key role in the university's mission by bringing Minnesotans together to build a better future through science-based knowledge, expertise, and training. Extension provides critical services to the people of Minnesota by translating research into relevant, useful educational programs, bringing knowledge to bear on real-world issues in an effective, relevant, and timely manner. Programs are grounded in the discovery, advancement, and application of knowledge. The work helps strengthen individuals and families, businesses, and communities, with special emphasis on natural resources, agriculture, leadership, families, and youth. Extension works in tribal, suburban, urban, and rural communities, reaching over one million people annually (University of Minnesota Extension, 2020).

Center for Family Development

Through several major program areas, Extension's Center for Family Development (FD) works with families and those who serve them to promote greater health, resilience, and well-being. FD employs 119 staff members who partner with community and government agencies to help families make informed decisions about nutrition, finances, family relationships, substance use disorder and recovery, and general physical and mental well-being. University of Minnesota faculty members also support this work. These developments reflect a responsive evolution from the unit's beginnings in home economics.

Through its commitment to equity and to remaining relevant in the face of changing family needs, FD has made several recent shifts. FD created an American Indian team of educators who deliver culturally adapted programs that increase community capacity in addressing the opioid crisis. The community-led approach drives the educational methodologies, which include storytelling, how language can harm or heal, and programming for Two-Spirit people (American Indian Resource and Resiliency Team, 2020). Other examples include developing a method of participatory grant-making in health and nutrition, and providing online COVID-19-specific education for families. These and other examples show FD's commitment to aligning with a partnership system.

FD has revised position descriptions, recruitment strategies, and interview processes to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of its workforce. Today, forty percent of FD staff are people of color, and many live and work within the communities they serve. This is significant in a state whose population is 20% people of color (Data by Topic: Age, Race & Ethnicity, n.d.).

Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships

Unique to CES departments across the US, Extension's Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships (RSDP) was created in 1997 as a community-engaged collaboration across three collegiate units: the College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences, the College of Natural Resources, and University of Minnesota Extension Services. The original goal of RSDP was to bring together community and university knowledge and resources to drive sustainability in four focus areas: agriculture and food systems, clean energy, natural resources, and resilient communities (Daley-Laursen et al. 1998). In 2011, it became part of Extension as "a community-driven and sustainability-focused" part of the organization, with a mission to "advance the environmental, economic and social sustainability of Greater Minnesota through authentic community-University partnerships that co-create innovative solutions and fulfill the University's land-grant mission" (RSDP, 2019, 5, 7).

RSDP's values and organizational structures are relatively congruent with many of Eisler's facets of partnerism. Bedrock principles include cultivating "a richer and more vibrant partnership" between Minnesotans and the University, and uplifting "active community leadership, which calls on us to think first and foremost as citizens with a commitment to working through issues and exploring opportunities in an integrated and democratic manner" (RSDP, 2019, p. 5, 7). In the past five years, RSDP leaders have made efforts to address issues of equity by investing in increasing the racial and cultural diversity of board and committee members, including providing board members with honoraria to make participation more feasible.

STUDY AND FINDINGS

Purpose and Methods

This article represents the work of three researchers (the authors and another collaborator) to begin building a grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) that can inform how CES can manage organizational change toward partnerism. Our findings are summarized using an exploratory, first query of a purposeful sample (Patton, 2015) of faculty in FD and RSDP. Our intention was to understand how respondents perceived their programmatic work involving partnerism, as well as organizational and other factors they believe support or restrict these efforts. We focused on two specific Extension units because they are involved in intentional yet different efforts to strengthen partnerism.

We invited feedback from a spectrum of individuals, from positional leaders to field faculty and community members. For FD, we identified staff members who encompassed different work areas in family resiliency and health and nutrition programs, and respondents from a variety of position types and geographic locations (suburban, urban, and rural). Employees in these programs work primarily with traditionally underserved and underrepresented populations. RSDP programs are co-

created with the community, so we invited a mix of staff, board members, and volunteers from different regions to complete the survey.

Individuals from both units completed a short online survey - involving three open-ended questions:

1. How does your programmatic work involve partnerism?
2. What are any circumstances that push your programmatic work in the direction of partnerism? (These could include personal, team, organizational or other factors.)
3. What are any circumstances that push your programmatic work away from partnerism?

To provide a general focus for their responses, we provided a summary of Eisler's (2020) definition of partnerism in the introduction of the survey. We also included links to background information and resources for participants interested in learning more about partnerism. The online survey was open for five days.

All survey responses were aggregated verbatim into a spreadsheet for our analysis. We used a data jam approach to synchronously and practically explore and code over 100 discrete segments of text during online meeting sessions to inductively co-develop emergent themes (Patton, 2015) and draw on these to develop our initial theoretical propositions (University of Wisconsin Extension, n.d.). Well suited to COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions, a data jam involves a group of colleagues working together over a short period to analyze a data set, and results in increased reliability because researchers have collaborated in real time during a focused and intense period to code materials and develop an analytical manuscript (University of Wisconsin Extension, n.d.).

To strengthen the context validity (Creswell, 2003) of our analysis, we drew intentionally on our experiences inside and outside of the unit's samples. The authors have over 40 cumulative years of experience in CES across different disciplines and

units. Our collective expertise reflects program evaluation and design, family development, agriculture and natural resources, community-led development, international development, equity and diversity, mental health and wellness, and global Extension systems. We recorded our own conversations during our online meetings and revisited these to clarify our common interpretations of the data.

Results

We invited a total of 42 individuals from RSDP and FD to complete the survey, and 18 responses were submitted (a 43% response rate). We received 10 of 11 invited responses from FD individuals (a 90% response rate), and 8 of 31 invited responses from RSDP individuals (a 26% response rate). Reasons for lower RSDP response rate are unclear, but we believe it may be due to a shorter window of time to complete the survey.

Responses from FD and RSDP encompassed similarities and differences. However, we noted a fairly consistent but generalized description of how programmatic work involved partnerism. Responses from both groups reflect four thematic categories identified by the authors that influence work toward domination or partnerism:

● Societal pressures
● Structure of the University of Minnesota, Extension and the units
● Hiring practices
● Beliefs about and experiences with the work

The following is a detailed analysis of responses for each of the three survey questions.

Question 1. How does your programmatic work involve partnerism?
Respondents in both FD and RSDP described valuing community members, their voices, and their expertise as core goals of their programming. They described believing in letting communities define their work and the related programming to ensure that it is meeting the needs of the people; in the importance of empathy toward external

partners; and in honoring cultural differences and responding to what other cultures deem important (e.g. intergenerational living, gifting cultural baskets, food exchanges, and listening). Respondents recognized that many workplace communities value a collectivist approach to defining problems, generating solutions, and creating programs.

Responses demonstrated awareness of the importance of working across differences and toward greater equity, including supporting non-traditional roles for men. Others reported working with communities in poverty and those who have not benefited from capitalism. Many respondents described sharing an internal value for hiring a workforce from the community because of the shared language, history, and lived experiences it brings. Overall, responses reflected a strong commitment to working in and with Minnesota communities in ways that reflect inclusivity, diversity, equity, and justice.

Questions 2 and 3: What are factors that push the work toward or away from partnerism?

Table 1 summarizes the themes that emerged from the analysis of responses to Questions 2 and 3 of the survey concerning circumstances perceived to push programmatic work in the direction of or away from a partnership system. To preserve anonymity, responses were condensed into general themes and direct quotes were avoided. Considering both questions, four key factors were identified that influence programmatic work: external societal pressures, organizational structure, hiring practices, and personal beliefs and experiences. Three of the factors were described by respondents as encompassing characteristics that both propel and restrict partnerism. The external-most factor, societal pressures, was identified only as restricting progress toward partnerism.

Table 1

Summary of Results from Survey Questions 2 and 3, Categorized by Factors that Push toward Either System

Domination	Partnership
Societal Pressures	
• Exhaustion from the effects of institutional racism, economic disparities, and police brutality. • White supremacy and the characteristics that uphold racism push away from partnerism. • Current economic and political systems (philanthropy, capitalism, policies that prioritize property over people, wealth gaps) value individual over collective. • Communities have had long-standing negative relationships with critical support/education institutions. • A growing economic divide creates extreme hardship for people we serve.	Respondents did not identify this factor as propelling partnership.
Structure of the University of Minnesota, Extension, and the Units	
• The U of M has embedded systemic classism and racism. • Funding sources are from domination-based institutions and sometimes lack resources to honor community values. • It's tiring to do the work we are passionate about within institutions based in domination. • Extension gives too much credit to funding and time, which orient us toward a scarcity mindset - partnerism requires a growth or abundance mindset. • There are specific challenges in carrying out this work within this structure (justify meals for meetings, sell programs, too many meetings, workload is too heavy, pressure to reach so many people). • People are not paid a wage that supports them. • Rigid policies have little to no flexibility, empathy or caring for real-life challenges that community members experience.	• Extension's mission, vision and goals align with ideals of partnerism. • Extension's outcomes and impact are defined by community members and community scholars. • Grants require us to work with communities. • We partner with organizations that are trusted – this helps build trust with Extension. • We use metrics that value community health and well-being. • Recent organizational changes place greater value on community needs, building partnerships and providing new resources. • Staff members are paid to do this work and provided leeway. • We prioritize justice, equity, diversity and inclusion and have an internal group that provides a safe place for questions and learning related to this work.

• Budgets are cut as demand is increasing. • Geographic districts we cover have expanded, which makes relationships more difficult. • The funding source, not the needs of communities often drives the work. • Policies and administrative practices limit flexibility with financial resources. • Higher education focuses on a western view of science while diminishing other views of science – this ignores the economic value of caring. • Systems were not designed by or for non-white populations.	
Hiring Practices	
• The system is not designed for people of color and Indigenous peoples (only for front line work). • The system is designed to elevate whiteness. • We face challenges of trying to hire more men in female dominated areas.	• We are "of the place" because we hire from our audience - this means we are part of the communities we serve, which creates and/or reinforces trust. • We hire people who are committed to making a difference in their communities. • We hire people with personal values of care and authenticity. • Staff share lived experiences with those they serve, which creates understanding. • Increases in staff diversity provide new learning opportunities for other staff.
Beliefs about and Experiences with the Work	
• The work is exhausting – it requires persistence, patience, grit. • We recognize the work of sustainable development as inextricably linked with equity and justice. • Change is hard – there is resistance. • It takes work and time to build partnerships. • To be successful in a community oftentimes means distancing from the 'ivory tower' which can have negative consequences. • Egos, the need for scholarship and the interest in Extension as the main partner gets in the way and contributes to maintaining power and hierarchies. • Courage is needed and always being challenged. • There is an overall lack of trust toward academia due to a self-serving agenda.	• Staff want to make a difference in their communities where they live and work. • Having a statement on anti-racism helps staff learn the language, history, systems, and ways to push change. • We believe that answers lie within individuals and communities; a deficit approach is not helpful. • Extension fills a need not served in other places. • We value the importance of partnerism over logic models. • We believe one cannot engage in authentic partnership without a clear understanding of its actual history and its peoples' experiences. • We identify emergent issues based on community input. • We understand that our privilege (given our

• Some relationships focus on the individual/private good rather than the public/community good. • Gender dynamics diminish the ideas of some.	association with the University) comes with obligations and duties. • We continuously work to learn about equity and overcome historic injustices. • We use theory (e.g., design thinking) to facilitate community conversations about a project. • My work comes from my values, not my programming. • We know that our outcomes in RSDP will not be realized without collaborative, empathetic, relationship development. • We value "community" scholars. • We are skilled in working across geographic and political landscapes and treat others with respect. • The projects we work on provide a strong sense of shared purpose that transcends many differences.

Respondents identified that consequences of racism, white supremacy, and economic disparities are often a result of societal pressures and push the work away from partnerism.

Responses about the factor of the 'structure of the University of Minnesota, Extension, and the units' comprised a multitude of comments contributing to domination (source of funding, budget cuts, increased demand, time and pay rate, and systemic racism) but fewer elements promoting partnerism (mission, grant goals, and staff commitment to equity).

Hiring practices responses have greater results toward partnerism via a commitment to the work and the value of hiring employees from communities with shared language, culture, and knowledge.

Beliefs and experiences about the work overwhelmingly support a partnership system through a desire to make a difference, value community members as scholars with unique expertise, embrace a community-led approach, and address systemic racism.

Recommendations and Limitations

Themes that emerged from the four factors reflect an organizational tension between domination and partnership, situated within a large land-grant university system. The land-grant system has a history of domination hierarchies, and also is in relationship with communities struggling with issues stemming from dominance. The presence of historic and systemic racism, based on decisions over the past 100 years, coupled with current societal pressures, means that influences of the domination system on FD and RSDP are pervasive. With awareness of how the societal pressures affect staff (exhausting) and to honor relationships with communities, land-grant schools and CESs of today must change and uphold the ideology that a university is of the people, by the people, and for the people (Gavazzi, 2018). But, how do we transform a system from a hierarchy of domination to a hierarchy of actualization?

Respondents expressed frustration with the academic mindset of advanced college degrees being more valuable than baccalaureate degrees. The forces contributing to the hierarchy between tenured and non-tenured faculty, between faculty and extension professionals, and between faculty and staff across colleges and universities (Christensen-Mandel, 2019) hamper community scholarship and contribute to an inequitable system. To move the current system of higher education toward partnerism, land-grant institutions are encouraged to follow the ideals of the mission of Extension and to adopt an underlying belief in the value of community members' voices.

RSDP has created a board model in which community members and University faculty and staff work together to review and support community-driven sustainability projects. This model is unique to the University of Minnesota Extension. The board supports the work of community work groups comprising community scholars who

identify project ideas for the board to review and allocate funding. Community scholars and diverse community voices define projects, increasing trust between staff and board members. Because of this trust, RSDP has created learning opportunities in which staff and board members feel safe to work in a partnership-based system with confidence and conviction. The work is demonstrated in RSDP's core principles, specifically their focus on environmental health and community-based partnerships.

FD's changes in hiring practices to increase the percentage of the workforce and leadership from Indigenous or communities of color, have resulted in a move toward partnerism. Changing how and with whom FD works advances FD and Extension efforts in addressing institutional racism. A diverse workforce does far more than fill a quota or check a box; it communicates to constituents who and what work is important, and it changes the nature of that work. This changing workforce in FD has allowed Extension to develop relationships and engaged work with entirely new populations who in turn influence how and which programs are carried out.

The ability of employees to lean toward a partnership system, as evidenced in their beliefs and experiences, while navigating many of the restrictions inherent in the domination systems of higher education, is inspiring. What keeps employees motivated and acting with courage and grit? Survey results imply two explanations: a commitment to equity, and internal and external trust.

Both FD and RSDP demonstrated a commitment to equity by explicit or implicit dedication to this work, and by addressing issues of institutional racism through hiring practices and board diversity. Staff and board members experienced systemic racism first-hand, and instead of avoiding the conversation, they have created a safe and trusting space for support, to share stories and to learn.

One limitation of the study includes a differential window of time for survey response between the two units, resulting in a significant difference in response rate. A second

limitation is the number of people known to the authors who are currently doing partnership work; this knowledge guided who was invited to complete the survey.

Fostering workable relationships with staff and community members requires rebuilding or building trust to rectify the ivory tower perception of universities. Trust grows by hiring staff from within the communities being served, sharing values and knowledge (language, history, culture), and partnering with organizations trusted by community members. It is crucial to acknowledge the challenge of working with communities that do not trust the University, especially when moving toward partnerism in a domination-oriented environment. To mitigate the stigma associated with the University, staff sometimes concentrate on the differences between the University and Extension, perpetuating a need to dance between connecting with and distancing from their employer. While the skills of building trust and coping with uncertainty are admirable, respondents consistently labeled the efforts as exhausting.

Our history is rooted in domination and our educational institutions are fraught with systemic racism that negatively affects staff and program participants. Some units within the University of Minnesota and Extension are working toward a partnership system by engaging in long-term relationship-building with diverse and marginalized communities and community connectors. Staff members entering new partnerships work to earn community trust through respectful interactions and with an awareness and understanding of historical distrust of the institution. Extension staff are introducing new ways of operating through creative community engagement based on the input of community partners and volunteers. There is more to learn about the factors that support work toward a partnership system. We believe FD and RSDP offer valuable lessons learned for others in similar institutions.

AUTHORS' REFLECTIONS

The authors are aware that they wrote this article within the domination and partnership structures described here, and they experienced elements of both throughout the writing process. There is privilege associated with the opportunity to write for publication. For some, the risk of writing about domination structures is too great. There is also fear in writing about people's struggles against domination – fear of disapproval, arousing anger and even retaliation. This article was written with a keen awareness of these dynamics. Authors took careful steps to engage colleagues in decision-making and chose language that both accurately reflects people's experiences and supports organizational growth toward partnerism.

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