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Podcast Interview Transcript

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Welcome to Progress in Community Health Partnerships' latest episode of our Beyond the Manuscript podcast. In each volume of the Journal, the editors select one article for our Beyond the Manuscript post-study interview with the authors. Beyond the Manuscript provides the authors the opportunity to tell listeners what they would want to know about the project beyond what went into the final manuscript.

In this episode of Beyond the Manuscript, Editor-in-Chief Darius Tandon interviews Deborah John, author, and Liana Harden, Extension community health partner in "Community-Engaged Attribute Mapping: Exploring Resources and Readiness to Change the Rural Context for Obesity Prevention."

Darius Tandon:

Well, good afternoon. We are doing a Beyond the Manuscript, and I have a few questions for two of the authors of our manuscript. And after I ask the first question, I'll ask the authors to introduce themselves as they are responding to my question. So, my first question is that this is a project that included six western states in the US reaching about 600 rural stakeholders, and the land grant university extension is recognized for engaging constituents in health partnerships within the communities that they served. Could you speak a little bit more about the level of coordination, organizing, communication among the partner sites, and, also, what were the opportunities for partners to dialogue across communities and states and are there any lessons learned on that communication that you would like to share?

Deborah John:

My name is Deborah, and I was the project director for this project, and one of the important aspects is that extension state leadership and community teams were critical for coordinating across the land grant university system and the associated extensions. And they function quite differently from state to state. The cooperative extension system as a public system is supported by national, state, and local cooperative agreements. And this opportunity enabled us to engage with extension as a critical community health partner and that's a strength because of the national system, which is emerging now with a focus on population health. At the local level, I think Liana has some examples that might actually clarify how we engaged at the local level with extension as a community partner with community organizations.

Liana Harden:

Yeah. So, my name is Liana Harden. I was a faculty research assistant on the program with Deborah on the research. So, I helped her implement that research on the ground. It was a really fantastic experience. Specifically speaking to this question, I think what were really some things that really popped out to me about this effort of coordinating between not only our community partners within the organizations within the community and the other extension offices in other counties is that we were able to share successful strategies and ideas for engagement as we were moving through. So, it provided us this constant process

evaluation as a result and developing our work as we learned together. And watching the incredible work unfold together was really impactful and, so, we could really learn from each other and apply the things that we knew were working. And then we could avoid those things that were really challenging and didn't – weren't efficient or effective. So, I found it to be really rewarding working together and keeping that constant communication open.

Deborah John:

And could I actually prompt Liana –

Liana Harden:

Yeah.

Deborah John:

– a little bit to talk about – so, Liana and our place-based extension partners are actually located in and embedded in the communities that they serve through their cooperative extension local offices. And, as a place-based partner, in the role of the community-based health partner, extension is an interface between the communities that are served by extension and engaging those communities so that we have meaningful dialogue from the community to extension, from extension to the campus, from campus to extension, so that it's a – we kind of envision it as an infinity symbol – that continuous feedback loop that allows us to understand how to support – to provide the support that we need. So – and then across our sites, we enable that dialogue through various online venues and some face-to-face meetings. Liana, can you talk a little bit about how that worked for you in your communities?

Liana Harden:

Yeah. You put that so eloquently. That exactly was the experience. So, extension has this incredible opportunity of being connected across the state and across – in all different sectors, whether that's economy or academics or city agencies, et cetera. And so, that really places where we can really connect to all different kinds of partners and bring all different kinds of partners together. So, very practically what that looked like in the communities I was working in, is we were working with everybody from the lumber industry to the environmental organizations, the city agencies, and the policy – all the people working in policy in the city, and the people working in the academic institutions, the schools, and the school districts and the school boards. And so, we were really able to bring people together – to be the connector—of these pieces towards this like larger health research that we were working towards, and the work – the way that Deborah had formulated the work – it really provided this very clear goal that we all shared, based on the data. And then around that data informing that passion within the community, everybody really pulled together and moved forward. And extension was simply that piece that really brought everybody together, provided that data, and provided that motivation. So, it was – I have nothing but really wonderful things to say about it because I feel that it was really quite successful in that way and very unique in that way.

Deborah John:

Yeah. One additional thing that is when we initiated this project, we envisioned this work in response to the child obesity epidemic that is prevalent in our country. And since that time, cooperative extension as a system has put out a national call and a framework for health and wellness. It's interesting from our perspective to see this shift in extension that has been historically either an educational or an agricultural system, and that's helping our work and the work of others like us, we're really helping to inform a transformation within extension to be more community-engaged health-focused, and we were really happy to be part of that.

Darius Tandon:

Thanks. That was a great answer to the question, and I appreciate the detail that you provided. Moving in a little bit of a different direction, you talk in the manuscript about the HEAL MAPPS™ differing from traditional extension outreach by targeting community solutions and shifting the typical paradigm, as you say in the manuscript, from one that extends knowledge from the university to the community to one that conveys knowledge from the community to the university. I'm wondering: has the project impacted the way that extension programs operate across academic partner sites in other ways?

Deborah John:

Yes. Because we used a participatory action research approach, throughout the project, the academic and community teams engaged in collective, self-reflective inquiry within and across teams. And this process helped us to understand and improve on the practices in which we participated and the situations that we found ourselves in. So, if we think about the approach, it allows us to shift the research and practice paradigm from one on, to one with rural people in places, and those are the intended beneficiaries of the work. Because extension has historically functioned as an educational system and delivering information intended to change knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors to individuals in the community served by the land grant university, we are seeing a shift with extension as an engagement system, working in partnership with community residents and decision makers to discover and uncover equitable solutions to socially and environmentally determined barriers – solutions that are locally informed and socially just. That's a shift in how extension functions and we are at the very beginning of a twenty-first century role in population health for extension.

Darius Tandon:

So, last question I wanted to ask – you say that the project expanded to include two additional land grant university extensions and twelve new rural communities, which you felt would help sustain the work that you were conducting. So, knowing that this project took place some time ago, have other extensions and communities come on board and are you actively disseminating information from this project to encourage sustainability of the work and/or new partnerships for this work?

Deborah John:

Well, let's see. Since this work was completed and the tool itself has been recognized nationally as an innovation in extension and that recognition just recently was presented at a conference attended by extensions from all over the United States, the tool has also been adopted into the SNAP-Ed, which is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education component – obesity prevention toolkit for states, which is an online website to support tools and strategies to help with the obesity prevention efforts of the SNAP-Ed partnerships. Additionally, we – and through that mechanism, we receive inquiries daily as to how to go about adopting the tool. The tool currently requires a three-day in person facilitated place-based training, and to that end we are in the process of taking the entire HEAL MAPPS™ training and implementation – the tool – online through an interactive online application. So, in order to enable the adoption and implementation of the tool, which supports work that we feel is highly relevant to supporting communities, that is the mechanism that we are using to allow further expansion of the tool. We also created a more streamlined method for collecting the geographic data and that method allows communities to basically collect information and to use that information in real time, which will be very helpful. And then finally, we've begun the process of taking all of the information from all of the communities and embedding that in a story map, which will be essentially

a HEAL MAPPS™ information system that allows communities to not just utilize the tool ,but to actually see how other communities are using the information that communities generate using the tool to effect change that reaches people in communities where they live, learn, work, age. And we find that the technologies that are advancing quickly are actually enabling the adoption of the tool, which is the process to affect community change or to help communities affect change within their communities.

Darius Tandon:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. I do have one other question, and, in some ways, some of your previous answers may have started to address this. Clearly, every context community in which one does community-engaged research is going to be slightly different. There are clearly examples of partnerships that take place in urban areas – some in rural areas. Yours is a really lovely example of work that is done in more rural areas. And I’m wondering if you have any thoughts – reflections – as folks are reading this transcript and listening to the podcast, of other things that are important for research teams to think about if they are attempting to do high-quality, respectful, community-engaged work in more rural areas that perhaps you don’t see talked enough about in the literature.

Deborah John:

Liana, do you have any thoughts? I have some thoughts, but I’d love to give Liana an opportunity to think about how – because she worked directly in the community and engaged across an extended period of time with a variety of partners in a variety of different ways – what her sense is.

Darius Tandon:

I know we – I know she –

Deborah John:

Liana?

Darius Tandon:

I think she dropped off the call.

Deborah John:

Oh, no.

Darius Tandon:

I wasn’t sure if she was back.

Deborah John:

Oh, okay. Well, then, I’ll answer. *[Laughs]* So, first and foremost, – and I’ve thought about this a lot – the process of engaging – maybe she’s back, but I’ll speak to this – the process of engaging in community-based research is unfortunately – and I’m going to say this in a way that maybe I can explain – one that is often driven by the resources that are available to do the work, which means that we often approach community-engaged research and programming with a sense of we have this funding to do this work and now we’re going to engage communities in the work. From my perspective, communities should be engaged in the process of determining what the work is, but that’s not the way the funding cycle works, *[laughs]*. And, so, we see how important it is to engage with communities with ideas with the understanding that the ideas may not get funded and, at the same time, we want them to be – to have their voice represented in the proposal from the very beginning. So, what we’ve done is we’ve created, at least in Oregon, a group of community-based stakeholders in various levels of the kinds of work that we tend to do, who are available when an opportunity for funding emerges, to be part of that decision-making process. And that’s a really critical point from my perspective of participatory research is the idea that is proposed for funding needs to be informed by the very people who are going to participate in this process over an extended period of time or we’re not really honoring the participatory approach.

Liana Harden:

Hi, Deborah. I'm back on. It's Liana. Sorry, I lost you.

Yeah, I wanted to just back you up on that one very strongly – because that was my experience in the work is that, where traditionally in a lot of the work that we've done has been – the word often used is community buy-in, and it's about creating a program and then you get community buy-in. Well, this kind of participatory-based research and approach flips that. It says, "We are working from the community up in our programming and in our projects and in our work, instead of creating the project first and then trying to get the community in on the back end." It flips that completely, and, so, it creates a situation which is really – change really is driven by the community and not by a prescribed or outside effort. Hopefully that makes sense in relationship to what Deborah was saying.

Darius Tandon:

It does. I was asking a general question about any perceptions or thoughts that you have about how community-engaged research in rural settings might look different or operate different or any reflections you had about things that perhaps you don't see in the literature about those distinctions between doing work in rural context than perhaps more suburban or urban context. So, I don't know if you have any additional reflections on that.

Liana Harden:

Yeah. I think Deborah covered it. It's really about giving that voice to the communities that we're working in that is informing the work that we're doing. And it's a – it really flips kind of some of the traditional way that extension and universities in general have done that kind of community-based work.

Deborah John:

Another aspect of it in rural areas that has emerged as critical to how we engage with the communities is the ability of the community to self-define its boundaries, which is a bit unique. Often in rural places, the city boundaries which create a political boundary are different from the boundaries that the residents explain as their community and different from the school district's boundaries, which is the catchment area for the school district. And the unincorporated areas that exist outside of the city is where people might identify with belonging with one community, and yet live in closer proximity to a different community, and, in fact, one of Liana's communities was like that where a community that was located in Oregon, the closest proximity to major resources was actually in the state of Washington and none of those folks thought that they were members of the community on the other side of the bridge, *[laughs]* and yet that was where many of the resources were that enabled life in that community to be functional and viable for many of the community members. So, understanding how boundaries function was a really critical component of our envisioning the work and then enabling the work so that we could actually capture that understanding of how people and place – that interplay between people and place – and the diversity of people and the diversity of place as it exists for rural places is something that we intentionally and very thoughtfully included in our envisioning this process – the HEAL MAPPS™ process – and the engagement of the people who were going to inform the process, as well as utilize the process.

Liana Harden:

And can I just add that I think that that's – what Deborah is speaking to is exactly why the HEAL MAPPS™ in particular, thinking about those spatial barriers, why HEAL MAPPS™ is critical – was critical to that process because it really looks at those spatial barriers and space as an attribute of the community. And, specifically in rural communities, it allows

Deborah John:

the rural communities to – it allows us to really look at those rural communities in that way, which are clearly so different in terms of resources and space than more urban areas.

And to help them to understand in an applicable way how to work with the decision makers – the people who may establish some of the challenges, the barriers, to change. So, if you live in a city and you have to work with the city government or the local business community. If you live right outside of the city, you might be working with a very different group of decision-makers, and if you live in even a more remote area, a completely different set of decision-makers and what's most proximal to you is what is going to have the biggest effect on your daily life. And, so, when we think about siting schools, and decisions that are made to close one school and open – put all of the students in a different school, giving the community an understanding of how the politics of decision-making work relative to the needs of the community and who's – who the stakeholder – who the stakeholders might be and having all those folks at the table to listen to the stories and the challenges and the opportunities together is really what allows the community to drive changes that are serving the populations who may be experiencing the most resource deprivation in rural places.

Darius Tandon:

Well, I think we have come to our time. I thank you both for your thoughtful comments and your reflections on the work that you're doing that really have gone beyond what you featured in your manuscript. So, thank you both for taking the time to join us and best of luck in your future endeavors.

Deborah John:

Thank you.