



METRICS FROM THE FIELD

Blending insights from research with insights from practice

KEN METER

Learning together

Published online 19 June 2012

Citation: Meter, K. (2012). Learning together. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2012.023.016>

Copyright © 2012 by New Leaf Associates, Inc.

In this issue, Ken Meter looks at two contrasting models of knowledge-building. One extracts resources from communities. Another, often practiced by extension educators, builds capacity both at the university and in the community by convening people to learn together.

In a previous column (volume 2, issue 2), I showed how the food the economy extracts resources from communities (Meter, 2012). When this is true, the essential core of food system work is to build capacity at the grassroots — especially in those rural and inner-city areas that have been the most depleted, or most marginalized.

My basic rule is that more capacity should be built in the community that is intended to be “served” by a given project than in the partnering university or nonprofit. Furthermore, the work should leverage and add to existing assets in the

Ken Meter, president of Crossroads Resource Center, has taught economics at the University of Minnesota and the Harvard Kennedy School. He is one of the most experienced food system analysts in the U.S., having produced 83 regional and state food system assessments in 30 states, focused on geographic farm and food economies. A member of the Alliance for Building Capacity, he is also the author of *Hoosier Farmer? Emerging Food Systems in Indiana*.

community, rather than undermining them through change.

Even for those scholars who dedicate their careers to community-building, work at the grassroots is far more unkempt and unpredictable than working within the academic sphere. Moreover, the official rewards are typically sparse.

As one example, I recall a colleague who dedicated a distinguished career to improving productivity on family farms. His work was, and still is, deeply respected. Yet not long after he retired, he wrote that the industry he had supported through his research was not sustainable.

I remember this story from time to time as I ponder the illusion I used to carry that universities were places where virtually any idea could be discussed, documented, or challenged. For this scholar, it was not until he was safely outside the academic sphere that certain of his truths could be told.

In this light, it seems worth remembering the extension model that truly differentiated land-grant research and education. Alas, in the extractive economy, extension educators have become an endangered species in many states.

The core premise of extension research is that scholars and farmers can learn together, blending pragmatic experiences from the farm with theory taught in academic settings. The scholar plays a

convening role, engaging farmers in research projects that might be pursued for academic purposes but are located on farms. Farmers are invited to help frame the research, often lend their land for research plots, and help interpret the results. This model often results in solid research that enjoys more seamless implementation, since farmers know and care about the research, and understand how it applies to farms like theirs.

This turns out to be a remarkably effective process for coping with emerging issues, such as an unexpected outbreak of pests or disease that farmers might notice quickly, but could not analyze in depth without scholarly assistance. By the same token, scholars are co-learners, since most outbreaks are a surprise. Using theoretical knowledge to inform practical experience, this elevated practice in turn could create new theory that draws upon, and adds to, farmer wisdom, even while it improves the academic canon.

The best extension agents realize that their role is to serve as servant-leaders, a term Rich Pirog popularized during his tenure at the Leopold Center at Iowa State (Pirog & Bregendahl, 2012). Pirog nurtured regional food systems working groups that allowed citizens and academics to meet on relatively level playing fields. By removing the power imbalance between scholars and citizens, exceptionally searching work was produced. Strong connections were built among practitioners and academics. Sophisticated community practices resulted.

Similarly, in many states, counties make significant financial contributions to the operating costs of the extension program within their borders. Not only does this ensure a wide base of political support; it also makes the investments by the local community quite tangible.

This could be contrasted with a more extractive model, in which the university may espouse that it builds the capacity of the surrounding community, when in fact it interferes with processes that have been thriving quietly inside the community for decades. At times the institution claims ownership and dominion over ideas that were developed by community volunteers (consider corn), in order to ensure market success for the institution. A classic example is the university that builds a research center in or near a low-income area, hoping to attract donors, but does little to

actually engage residents other than as objects of research.

Under this extractive model, the view of the professionals often becomes so narrow that they assume that nearby residents are in need of training, primarily because what the college can offer is training. From the privileged view of the campus the surrounding neighborhoods appear “deficient.” The assets of the community itself typically go unrecognized.

Funders, often with the best of intentions, may reinforce these extractive relationships because people who can be portrayed as “in need” look far more appealing as objects of philanthropy than if they are viewed as people with phenomenal unrecognized assets who want to build greater capacity. I once delivered a report to a foundation working in a low-income setting that documented that residents had formed 170 nonprofit organizations with links to nearly as many outside institutions. This information was suppressed by staff because it did not conform to the foundation’s view that the neighborhood was helpless without its assistance.

For these reasons, people who want to study those who try to climb out of poverty get paid far better than those who are actually striving to climb. While both parties need money, only one is viewed as worthy of substantial resources.

The most honest of the experts — who typically work at the margins of the institutions themselves — know that the real wisdom is often held by those who dwell on the borders of a given system. Often these wise practitioners know the system under scrutiny far better than those who occupy the center. There, on the margins, you can often find these scholars and residents learning together. 

References

- Meter, K. (2012). How do we grow new farmers? Learning from another American pastime. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 2(2), 3–6.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2012.022.015>
- Pirog, R., & Bregendahl, C. (2012). *Creating change in the food system: The role of regional food networks in Iowa*. Lansing, Michigan: Center for Regional Food Systems at Michigan State University. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/ccfsreport>