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COVID-19 in Indigenous Communities: The Lived Experiences of Extension Educators

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Abstract

Cooperative Extension is present in nearly 100% of counties in the United States, but can only be found in a small percentage of Indigenous communities. Much of this inequitable access to educational and agricultural resources can be attributed to the lasting cultural, social, economic, and political effects of settler colonialism in the Land Grant System and the U.S. in general. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these inequities, as well as lack of access to traditional foodways, healthcare, and other basic services. Extension educators already working in Indigenous communities were uniquely situated to respond to the crisis and assist the communities they serve in meeting the new challenges. This study explores the lived experiences of some of these educators through qualitative interviews and advocates for their continued and expanded support. For the Land Grant System to live up to its professed mission of access and inclusion, it must provide equitable access to Extension services in Indigenous communities, and the COVID-19 pandemic proved how vital Extension programs are to their development and survival.

Keywords: Indigenous communities; COVID-19; settler colonialism; Cooperative Extension

Introduction

Cooperative Extension services have been a staple in the development of rural America for decades, but access to Extension services and resources in Indigenous communities is inequitable. While Extension offices are found in nearly 100% of US counties, they can only be found in a tiny percentage, less than 10%, of Indigenous communities in the United States (Brewer et al., 2016; NCAI, 2010). Indigenous communities are particularly in need of Extension services because of the significant issues they face in regards to health (Hoover, 2017), food access (Hoover, 2020), poverty (Maure, 2017), and other effects of settler colonialism, land dispossession, and the associated disruption to Indigenous agricultural systems.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous and other marginalized communities were disproportionately affected because of the existing systemic inequities they were already experiencing. Providing these communities with equitable access to Extension services is important for the Land Grant Mission, but has been systemically overlooked due to the cultural, social, and economic histories at play. Extension educators in those communities are able to respond to their communities' needs during a crisis, and are therefore integral to the communities' development and recovery. This paper explores the lived experiences of Extension Educators serving Indigenous communities during the COVID-19 crisis, how they are integral to the communities' responses, and the barriers that they face.

COVID-19 in Indigenous Communities

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit Indigenous communities particularly hard, as it has with many marginalized communities (Bowleg, 2020). For example,

the Navajo Nation (Diné, in the Native language), the largest tribe in the United States, had the highest infection rate in the country, surpassing New York, at 2,680 cases per 100,000 people. Currently, under the strong leadership of their President Jonathan Nez, they have flattened their curve. Still, although Native Americans are only 9% of New Mexico's population (where the Nation is located), they account for 57% of its COVID-19 deaths in the state (Parshley, 2020). New data from smaller tribes looks to be even worse; the infection rate in the Pueblo of Zia is currently 3,319 per 100,000, which is 10 times the rate of New Mexico in general. These numbers are probably not accurate, however because of lags in reporting, so the actual infection rate may be much higher.

These tribes are facing this pandemic with long-standing issues forced upon them by colonization and land dispossession, that make the spread of disease easier including poverty, a lack of running water in homes making frequent hand-washing difficult, and a lack of reliable electricity. Further, structural and economic issues such as overcrowded housing, hospitals being fewer and farther apart, and a lack of internet access make fighting the pandemic even harder (Lakhani, 2020). Native Americans have higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and heart and lung disease, all of which are risk factors for severe COVID-19 illness. In an NPR article, Dr. Laura Hammitt, the director of Infectious Disease Programs at the Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health, was quoted as saying, "Native American communities are often invisible in terms of their health inequities... IHS (Indian Health Service) is chronically underfunded" (Morales, 2020).

Despite the alarmingly high infection rates, Indigenous communities were often the first to respond to the crisis and did so

vigorously. In an article from *The Guardian*, Desi Rodriguez-Lonebear, a demographer from the University of Arizona and a member of the Northern Cheyenne tribe, attributed this early response to Indigenous peoples' history of responding to pandemics, brought along with White colonists, that wreaked havoc on communities, "More than any other population in the country, the shared experience of surviving a pandemic is in our blood, it's not historic, it's current for American Indians, it's our reality. We took it seriously because we had to" (Lakhani, 2020). In response, tribes across the country have done things like set up roadblocks and field hospitals, even before stay-at-home orders were implemented in the rest of the country. The Navajo Nation, for example, has tested 13% of people in the reservation, compared to 4% in the US (Lakhani, 2020). Even so, the high infection rate persists because of the systemic and health inequities and lack of access to resources that Indigenous peoples still experience.

All of this has served to highlight the systemic inequities that already existed, from access to healthy food and healthcare to the internet and information. When disaster strikes, it is going to hit hardest in places that were already marginalized and disadvantaged, now and into the unknowable future. Issues of equity and access are exacerbated in Indigenous communities because of the historical and systemic oppression that they have suffered, and this crisis highlighted that in a new and disturbing way.

Purpose & Objectives

These data and findings emerged out of a larger project, whose goal was to better understand if and how Extension is collaborating with Indigenous communities, what makes Extension educators that collaborate with Indigenous communities

successful, common barriers to successful collaborations, and what practical tools are missing for successful collaborations to exist at a systemic level. During the data collection phase of this larger project (January 2020-June 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic began, inevitably affecting the perspectives and experiences shared by participants. This current paper aims to share those perspectives, highlight the work being done by Extension educators in Indigenous communities to assist them during this crisis, and to explore the barriers that educators face. By investigating the vital work that these educators are doing in Indigenous communities, particularly in response to this global crisis and given the disproportionate health, economic, and political inequities experienced by Indigenous communities, this study provides a further argument for greater attention and funding from Extension for these services in Indigenous communities.

Conceptual Framework

Much of these inequities and the lack of resources to address them can be attributed to the lasting effects of settler colonialism. Settler Colonialism is a distinct type of colonialism that seeks to remove and replace Indigenous populations with the invasive colonizer society in order to develop a distinct identity and sovereignty in perpetuity. Through social and material relations, colonizers claim ownership and political rights over Indigenous peoples (Stein, 2017), eliminating the challenges posed to their sovereignty by Indigenous claims to land through genocide and forced removal. This domination of place and people's bodies and minds is for the production of privilege and maintained by military, political, and economic power, as well as other systemic structures of cultural control, such as education (Greenwood, 2009).

Dunbar-Ortiz (2015, p. 2) states that the history of the United States cannot be understood without this particular view of colonialism, “The history of the United States is a history of settler colonialism- the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft.” Race is evoked to justify structures of inequality, differential treatment, and subordinate status. These categories are subject to variation over historical time and space and are reflective of specific social structures, cultural meanings and practices, and of broader power relations. Further, this mentality doesn’t just hold during the colonization of a place, but continues to permeate the social, cultural, economic, and political relations between the colonizers and Indigenous peoples, since these power relations must be maintained in order to continue systems of oppression and the accumulation of privilege.

In today’s romantic idealizing of the Land Grant system, principles of democracy, equity, and inclusion are often included. Less talked about is the LGIs’ origin in colonialism and Indigenous land dispossession. Once lands for LGIs were obtained through forced removal, broken treaties, and genocide, the natural resources were used to accumulate wealth for the colonizers and the Land Grant system. LGIs are still linked to their colonial and capitalist past, requiring the continual accumulation of wealth, and are a key site in the reproduction of White citizenship and property rights. It is this accumulation of wealth, knowledge, and the reproduction of White citizenship at the institutes of higher education that allowed and continues to allow for the systematic oppression of Indigenous peoples (Stein, 2017).

Methods

I investigated the Western Region of Extension through a qualitative interview study. The Western region of Extension encompasses 13 states (Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming), American Samoa, Guam, Micronesia, and the Northern Mariana Islands. I interviewed educators from 1862 Land Grant Institutions (LGIs) in the region that collaborate with Indigenous communities to better understand their lived experiences. In this work, the methods of research (the techniques for collecting data) are prevalent in colonized, Western research, but the methodology (the theory for analysis, prioritization of ideas and voices in the research process, and the criteria used to evaluate the findings) strived to be decolonizing, with an emphasis on counternarratives, the co-construction of knowledge with participants through their lived experiences (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), and the liberatory effects of the research for Indigenous peoples.

For the interviews, sampling was a mixture of convenience and purposive (Bazeley, 2020). During recruitment, I was certain to prioritize interviewing a diverse group of participants that held a variety of professional positions, and were both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and spread over the large geographic region. I conducted 20 interviews in total, but not all participants are included in the present study; only the participants that commented on COVID-19 are represented here. Interview participants’ universities, reservations, and specific job titles have been removed from their quotes to protect their identities, and each was given or chose a pseudonym.

Interviews were completed over the phone or Zoom due to travel restrictions during the pandemic, and were audio recorded and transcribed for later analysis. While I did create a semi-structured interview protocol, in keeping with the idea that storytelling is important in decolonized knowledge creation (Brayboy, 2005; Delgado, 1988; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), the direction of the interview was allowed to evolve as the participants' experiences and perspectives directed them, so as to best capture their stories. The interviews were more like a discussion, with an emphasis on the mutual co-construction of ideas and researcher reflexivity (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

To analyze the interviews, I used thematic analysis (Bazeley, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, I familiarized myself with the data by checking the transcriptions, reading and re-reading the data, noting initial ideas in research memos, and building open codes. Then, I search for patterns within my codes, to sort them into categories. These were then used to create themes by identifying analytical clusters. The analysis progressed from initially organizing data to show patterns in a descriptive way, towards interpretation of those patterns and their significance, broader meanings, and implications (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by evaluating the data as a whole, comparing to data from the survey and my research memos, and by engaging members of the community.

Further and to more thoroughly understand the stories of some of the participants, I used a semi-narrative analytical approach to better understand how participants conceptualize their collaborations with Indigenous communities. In this work, I kept participants' stories, "intact by theorizing from the case" (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). This allowed me to better understand how the

participants made and applied meaning to their work, to prioritize the inclusion of counternarratives (Brayboy, 2005; Delgado, 1988; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and include participants' ideas and feedback. I gave the participants opportunities to provide feedback on whatever components of the process they wanted to, including reviewing transcripts, providing feedback on findings, and collaborating on conclusions from the data, and many took this opportunity to further engage with the work.

Findings

One of the many themes that emerged from the interviews was the difficult and sometimes dire situations that members of Indigenous communities live in. When COVID-19 began to sweep the country, the nation saw how marginalized communities were often hit hardest, due to inequitable access to resources and the systemic effects of racism, colonialism, and discrimination. The Extension educators in this study took advantage of their positionality, the trust that they have gained in their communities, and the knowledge that they have of their needs to help them face this pandemic. This speaks to the importance of Extension in Indigenous communities, as without the educators' expertise, these communities would have had fewer resources to meet the new demands of the crisis and less powerful voices to speak on their behalf.

Already in Crisis: Extension Programs in Indigenous Communities

Participants in this study described the issues and barriers that they and the Indigenous communities that they serve face daily. Some of the folks I talked to live or work in communities that can only be accessed by 4-wheel drive, by horse, or by plane, where there is no county or borough government to provide services, and where

Indigenous communities “pop up” to access traditional food sources by hunting, fishing, and subsisting. Some participants work in communities that don’t have running water and still heat their homes with indoor, wood-fire stoves, sometimes creating unsafe air quality conditions. Some suffer from issues with wild dogs making their communities unsafe. Social issues such as suicide, sexual assault, poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, and substance abuse were common. Illiteracy and language barriers were other issues that educators faced; it wasn’t uncommon for people to only speak the Native language or to not be able to read or write in English well due to a lack of formal education. Access to technology and the internet often make work difficult and access to information scarce. Racism was also a serious issue for both the members of the Indigenous communities and the (usually White) Extension employees working with them.

Health disparities in Indigenous communities was a common theme across states as well, including issues with illnesses, healthy living environments, and access to healthy food. Respiratory illnesses, like respiratory syncytial virus, tuberculosis, asthma, carbon monoxide exposure, and lung cancer were major concerns. Lack of access to healthy food and the health effects of that were also common issues that participants help their communities deal with. Many states are educating Indigenous communities about how to preserve food in healthy ways, grow traditional crops that will provide healthier alternatives to processed food, and safe cleaning practices for food preparation. Still, traditional foodways continue to be disrupted with restrictions on hunting and fishing, lack of resources like clean water, and equipment required to harvest or preserve food safely.

All of the issues discussed above had an associated Extension program being

facilitated to try to combat them. For example, Frank, a Specialist in indoor air quality, discussed the need for educational programs because, “a lot of the houses are very closed up, intentionally for savings, because of the expense of energy out in the rural areas. It’s like living in a Ziploc sack.” Danielle, a Specialist in health and wellness, has a current project that partners with the Center for American Indian Health Equity to provide institutional support for faculty to address health equity in Indigenous communities. Carrie and Jane, who both identify as Native, discussed how, “When you look at all the health outcomes and health disparities, Native [Group], they’re the worst in comparison to all the other groups,” and “Natives had the highest diabetes rate,” respectively. Carrie, a Federally Recognized Tribes Extension Program (FRTEP) Agent located on a reservation, has discussed incorporating traditional Indigenous meals into her local school’s menu because of the known health and cultural benefits associated with that and Jane, an expert in nutrition, encourages those in her community to seek out safe and healthy exercise opportunities to fight childhood obesity. Randall and Diane, Extension educators from the same state, work with their local reservation’s Director of Education to facilitate opportunities for students to learn creative writing skills in an effort to address the alarmingly high suicide rate among Native children.

The wide variety of programs that are being facilitated in Indigenous communities speaks to the importance of serving these communities and of Extension’s role in their health and development. In this study alone, participants were facilitating programs to address everything from gardening to livestock management, literacy to robotics, indoor air quality to food preservation, obesity and opioid misuse to the

maintenance of traditional foodways and their connection to culture and health. Most of these educational programs were developed in collaboration with the communities themselves and addressed needs that they found to be important. When COVID-19 reached these communities, these same educators were able to respond in new and innovative ways that still prioritized their communities' needs while meeting the pandemic's new demands. Had they not been there, these needs might have gone unaddressed.

Extension's Importance in Indigenous Communities in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Stories from the Field

Clay's interview was done on March, 18th, 2020; this was right when universities, colleges, businesses, and other public places were beginning to be shut down, but not far enough into the progression of the pandemic for any of us to really know what we could expect. Clay is an Extension educator in rural Alaska, and has a high percentage of Native Alaskan members of his community. After my formal interview with Clay was over, we continued to chat about the state of the world and the issues we were both facing with COVID-19. Beginning with what our respective universities were doing to contain the pandemic, Clay explained his fears about what this would do to his community:

We sent all our dorm kids home. You know, they had to vacate. Yeah... I don't know. I'm really troubled. I mean, we closed the schools down. People don't have childcare, and we shut down 4H 'cause that's through the university. So, we don't have after-school activities... It really feels like we're dismantling all of these social services and community things that we put in place because we have unsupervised children and we have

all these terrible problems. So, the cost of having unsupervised children, the cost of having under-supervised children, the cost of not having any positive outlets for anyone... You know who gets sick a lot, is poor people. People who can't work, you know?

I mean, we got housing problems. All this stuff, what is this gonna do to the rate of adverse childhood events, child abuse, domestic violence, of all these problems that we built all these structures to help try to mitigate? What about AA? What about people that need to go to meetings and can't because they've all been shut down? Is the risk of them getting coronavirus worse than the risk of them missing two months of meetings and being socially isolated? I dunno, man. I can't speak for Colorado or Los Angeles, but for my own community, I just really worry about people. Like, not having child care? How's that going to affect a single mom living in poverty not to be able to go to work?

Clay's discussion here highlights the severity of the issues that his community faces- poverty, violence, housing, and substance abuse- and his fears about how the pandemic will exacerbate them, by taking away the social, educational, and health programs put in place to address them. He even makes a comparison to other parts of the country, and expresses how his community is at a higher risk. When weighed against the risk of contracting the coronavirus, Clay isn't sure what is worse.

At the time of his interview, James, an Agriculture and Natural Resource Agent and who identified as Native, was in the early stages of a significant and impactful program to help his farmers and the

residents of Guam face supply chain disruption due to the pandemic:

Before this COVID virus, I was gearing up to work out an MOU with EPA to take over the Pesticide Safety Education Program. And then when this happened, there was a new focus now, and it was the production of agriculture here on Guam. So, I went from talking about pesticide safety education to, how in the heck am I gonna keep my farmers employed?

Now, the program that we're looking at doing is reinvigorating the farm production here on Guam, because we're an island and we're isolated. 90% of the produce that we buy in our stores are from off-island. Only 10% of it is grown here on Guam. The shippers are not gonna stop shipping, but we're worried about the farmers in the States. If they get sick, if the workers get sick, if the truckers get sick, if the workers in the meat plants get sick, everything's gonna collapse.

When the COVID virus hit, they lost everything, you know. And just like in the States, there are farms that are producing to accommodate the retail stores. There's a lot of farmers that depend on schools and the restaurants for their livelihood. In Guam's case, I'd say it's 70-80% of the farmers that don't deal with retail stores, deal with restaurants and the tourist industry, and they've lost their livelihood. The farmers of Guam said, "Hey, I've lost everything, we have no market, you need to help me." So, we changed. Hopefully in the next few days, we get a consensus from the Governor of Guam to help fund the buying of local produce, and we can infuse that back into the local economy. So, I

have no idea how in one month, I went from pest management to ag marketing. I don't know. I don't know.

James, whose job it is to serve farmers in the field, was able to pivot from his typical responsibilities, including pesticide safety education and advising farmers about Native and Western crop production, towards meeting the new needs of the pandemic. He was able to listen to his community's needs and to respond quickly to both save their livelihoods and make sure that the people of Guam had access to food. The fact that he was already present in the community, knew their concerns and goals, and had pre-existing relationships with the farmers there made him able to respond to the crisis quickly and in ways that will significantly impact his community. Also, the power of his voice and positionality allowed him to bring the community's concerns all the way to the Governor in order to bring about action.

Margaret, someone who is also in a position to make an impact on the state-level, talked about how she and others in her state are collaborating together to support their Indigenous communities during the pandemic:

I am setting up a statewide conversation between all of the people who serve as liaisons (to tribal communities) for each of the universities in the state because one individual talked to me last week and said, "We need somebody to convene us and we need to have a conversation about COVID, its impact on tribal communities, and how are we going to work with our students who are living in rural communities and don't have access to internet." So as a matter of fact, just before I was talking to you, I was pulling that meeting together.

Margaret has spent a significant amount of time building relationships with members of both the Indigenous communities in her state and members of the academic community, so she was uniquely able to bring these people, their knowledge, and their resources together to address the pandemic. This state-wide conversation that Margaret was able to coordinate among the people that serve Indigenous communities in her state is an important example of the invaluable work that Extension educators can do to help the most vulnerable communities, including Indigenous communities, to respond to a crisis.

Randall has also been put in a position that will allow him to impact the COVID-19 crisis on the state level for Indigenous communities in his state. In addition to his position in Extension, Randall has long been a member of his state's Commission of Indian Affairs because of his significant relationships with members of the reservation he serves. Through this membership, he has been able to make an impact on his community in positive ways for many years and has formed many important relationships that have helped him in his Extension role as well. Their Commission has recently formed a COVID-19 committee, consisting of 5 subcommittees, to address issues related to the pandemic. Randall is co-leading the Education Subcommittee and plans to continue this work past his retirement in the summer of 2020. This will allow Randall to continue making an impact on his community, especially in light of the needs from the pandemic. Randall was able to take advantage of his relationship with Extension, the committees he serves, and members of the Indigenous community to take significant action when he was most needed.

The experiences of these educators were captured during the early days of this crisis, so the outcomes of their responses are still to be seen. However, their preexisting relationships with community members, their knowledge and expertise about their goals and values, and their resulting ability to respond quickly to the crisis were vital. In addition, many of the educators were also able to leverage their social and political standing, as well as their financial and educational resources, to assist their communities as well.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The interviews with participants in this study highlight the important role that Extension is playing in marginalized communities and, without Extension, vital services might not be getting to them. The COVID-19 pandemic has overlaid the pressure of a global crisis on the effects of the systemic marginalization that they face and Extension provided people to help these communities address it. While this present study emerged out of a larger one and was not designed to specifically investigate Extension's response to COVID-19 in Indigenous communities, it does highlight the importance of Extension to these communities and some of the ways that educators were able to rise to the challenges that COVID-19 presented. The educators' strengths were that they were present in these communities, understood their goals and needs, and had the resources and power to address them. This is ultimately the strength of the Extension model itself.

If Extension and the larger Land Grant System in the United States is going to live up to their commitments to access and equity, serving Indigenous communities will need to be a priority, especially in light of the history of land dispossession in the Land Grant System's creation. Extension in Indigenous communities has been

underfunded, underrepresented, and lacked support at a systemic level (Brewer et al., 2016). In order to address these issues, there will need to be a systemic prioritization for the programs that serve Indigenous communities in the form of resources, personal and professional support for educators, and even cultural change. There may be many ways to achieve this, and it will look differently at each LGI and in each Indigenous community, but some suggestions are increased funding for programs and personnel within Indigenous communities that center their goals and values; professional development opportunities for educators regarding topics such as allyship, culturally relevant pedagogical practices, and working across sovereignty; and valuing this work on employee evaluations alongside research and other scholarship. This work will not be easy, requiring a shift in culture, a broader understanding and appreciation of non-Western epistemologies and worldviews, and a willingness to tackle difficult cultural, political, and economic challenges.

Additionally, 1862 LGIs could strengthen collaborations with other groups serving Indigenous communities including those from within our own Land Grant System, namely the 1994 Tribal Colleges and Universities. In addition to traditional Extension educators that might be serving Indigenous communities, FRTEP, housed at 1862 LGIs, places Extension educators in Indigenous communities, and most 1994 LGIs have Extension personnel on their campuses as well. All of these educators together might provide a system of support and collaboration by taking advantage of the strengths and compensating for weaknesses of each other's positionality, funding opportunities, and relationships within communities to best serve them as a cohesive Land Grant System.

Further, as we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, marginalized communities, including Indigenous communities, will be more severely affected during times of crisis due to systemic inequities. As we face other global crises such as climate change, Extension must play a role in the United States and around the world to address them. Extension will need to work with communities that have non-Western epistemologies and foodways to do this, making it vitally important to understand how to best serve them. More research should be done regarding Extension's work with Indigenous and other marginalized communities, the components to successful collaborations, and the common barriers that educators will face.

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