



A Path Forward: A Review of Grassroots Engagement and Social Justice Through Cooperative Extension

Emily Phaup

Whitman College, USA

Recommended Citation

Phaup, E. (2022). A path forward: A review of grassroots engagement and social justice through cooperative extension [Review of the book *Grassroots engagement and social justice through cooperative extension*, ed. by N. Imani & T. Shaffer]. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 10(1). Article 13. <https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.66277>

A Path Forward: A Review of Grassroots Engagement and Social Justice Through Cooperative Extension

Grassroots Engagement and Social Justice through Cooperative Extension, Edited by Nia Imani Fields and Timothy J. Shaffer. Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI, USA. 2022. ISBN-13: 978-1611864274. (Paperback). 174 pp.

Reviewed by Emily Phaup

In this influential book, Nia Imani Fields and Timothy J. Shaffer introduce readers to the barriers Cooperative Extension has faced in achieving its aspirational mission. While acknowledging this uncomfortable history, they do not dwell here. Rather, they lay out a promising path forward through deep engagement to address systemic inequities in communities. Using countless inspirational examples, they demonstrate a new approach to Extension programming rooted in social justice. This includes practical guidance for partnership development and program planning to address society's most timely challenges and meet the pressing needs of communities. Extension professionals who are ready to think differently about the organization's role and responsibility in our evolving world will find transformational potential in this much needed book.

Keywords: *cooperative Extension, social justice, community engagement, land grant, diversity*

Un Camino Adelante: Una Revisión de Implicación de Base y Justicia Social por Medio de la Extensión Cooperativa

Implicación de Base y Justicia Social por Medio de la Extensión Cooperativa, editado por Imani Fields y Timothy J. Shaffer. Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI, USA. 2022. ISBN-13: 978-1611864274 (Libro en rústica). 174 páginas.

Reseñado por Emily Phaup

En este libro influyente, Nia Imani Fields y Timothy J. Shaffer introducen a sus lectores los obstáculos enfrentados por la Extensión Cooperativa en lograr su misión con aspiraciones. Mientras reconocen esta historia incómoda, ellos no se quedan por aquí. Más bien, establecen un camino adelante y prometedor por medio de un compromiso profundo para dirigirse las desigualdades sistémicas por las comunidades. Usando innumerables ejemplos, demuestran un enfoque nuevo a la programación de Extensión que está muy arraigada en la justicia social. Esto incluye una dirección práctica para el desarrollo de la sociedad y planificación de programas para dirigirse los desafíos actuales de la sociedad y satisfacer las necesidades de las comunidades. Profesionales de Extensión quienes están preparados a pensar de manera diferente sobre el papel y la responsabilidad de la organización en nuestro mundo siempre cambiante encontrarán gran potencial en este libro tan necesario.

Palabras clave: *extensión cooperativa, justicia social, participación comunitaria, concesión de la tierra*

Cooperative Extension occupies one of the most opportune positions from which to address our communities' endemic challenges. With this privilege, however, comes great responsibility. Fields and Shaffer have provided a text addressing this responsibility that should be required reading for all current and aspiring Extension professionals.

Grassroots Engagement and Social Justice Through Cooperative Extension candidly outlines the fraught history of injustice in the organization's past while illustrating an ambitious path forward. The purpose of the book is to offer an alternative to the traditional Extension model by drawing on the principles and practices of higher education community engagement. This new approach positions Extension professionals deeply engaged in their communities with accountability for culturally relevant community education that is rooted in democracy and social justice.

The authors approach their argument from complimentary positionalities that can uniquely highlight the congruence of Cooperative Extension and the higher education community engagement field, which often appear disconnected in the literature (Fear & Sandmann, 2016; Stoeker, 2014). Nia Imani Fields is a recognized leader in Cooperative Extension with extensive experience in 4-H Youth Development and access, equity, and belonging. Timothy Shaffer holds notable leadership roles in civic engagement, civil discourse, and deliberative democracy in higher education. Together they demonstrate the mutual benefit and power of these fields when working in tandem.

The book is organized in two sections. Following the authors' introduction, Part 1 offers a philosophical and pedagogical foundation for engaging diverse audiences in Cooperative Extension. This includes the uncomfortable history of segregation and injustice at its roots. The section moves on to provide relevant case studies and practical tips for designing and delivering culturally responsive Extension programming.

Section 2 focuses on aspirational examples of grassroots engagement in practice. Authors highlight justice-centered work across many Extension program areas. Topics addressed include environmental justice, food justice, financial equity, and building social capital through youth programs. The book concludes with the authors calling for a reckoning within the Extension organization. They argue that we must acknowledge the problematic history and one's positionality in order to create something new so that the work is as meaningful and impactful as possible in the next century.

Contributions to the Field

One of the most significant strengths of this book is the way it motivates the reader to grapple with the question of Cooperative Extension's role and responsibility in today's world. The book's organization leads the reader to see the possibilities in adapting programs to evolve with our changing society. I agree with the authors that Extension professionals should move toward centering the needs of our most vulnerable communities, despite the challenges associated with organizational change. Examples offered by Fields and Shaffer illustrate the potential to move from a historical approach to a more needs-based and equity-centered strategy.

I commend the authors for their direct and honest discussion of where Extension started and opportunities for evolution. They demonstrate that it was established for the dominant culture, specifically to support white rural farmers who did not have access to education. As our society has evolved over the last century, so too has its needs. As the authors explain, continuing with the historical approach to Extension programming will further perpetuate systemic oppression within our communities. While many Extension professionals may be apprehensive to break from tradition and may not feel equipped to tackle current events and issues, the authors offer clear direction for the champions willing to lead the charge.

Transitioning programs to align with societal needs, according to the authors, begins with understanding the demographics in each community. This should be coupled with critical self-reflection and recognizing one's positionality in relation to their clientele. Authors then provide inspiration in many examples of justice-oriented Extension programs already in place.

Communities today are faced with monumental challenges that Cooperative Extension is well positioned to address. These include climate change, environmental racism, and food access and health

disparities among marginalized communities. Community engaged scholars have been addressing these topics for many years and could be a resource and partner for Extension professionals.

Each chapter seamlessly integrates contributions from the higher education community engagement field. This begins in the introduction with the concept of vigorous reciprocity (Smith, 1949). The authors explore the expert/learner dichotomy, limitations of a top-down approach, shared leadership and co-creation, and challenge us to rethink our definition of expertise. This integration demonstrates an alternative approach to Extension work, drawing on the principles of community engagement in higher education.

Grassroots Engagement and Social Justice Through Cooperative Extension makes several substantial contributions to higher education community engagement. Most importantly, in my view, is the weaving together of the individual power of two dynamic fields to demonstrate the transformative potential of their connection. From their campuses, community engaged practitioners work tirelessly to address pressing challenges in some of the most vulnerable communities in our country. However, gaining access and building trusting relationships with those communities can be a challenging first step. Extension professionals are often already trusted community members in the places they live and work. Nevertheless, many do not yet have the tools to pivot into the social justice programming that is most needed. This book demonstrates that together, Extension professionals and community engagement practitioners can share knowledge and resources to magnify their individual impact.

I hope the authors will continue to build on this work with future publications. The book leaves me with two lingering questions. First, in considering the damage that may have been done in Cooperative Extension's previous work with communities, are there steps that should be taken to repair relationships before pursuing or renewing partnerships? Second, how might Extension professionals compensate key community partners for contributing their valuable labor and expertise to the organization? Insights in these two areas may help to avoid causing additional harm and creating power imbalances.

Implications

This influential book was released on the heels of a historic moment in time. The compounding national crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, the MeToo movement, and threats to democracy, among others, have highlighted the value and significance of higher education community engagement. With unique access to the communities facing some of the most challenging circumstances, Cooperative Extension may be best positioned to take up this work.

Through countless exemplars, Fields and Shaffer highlight the incredible power of Extension professionals in shaping their communities. Importantly, this power to influence comes with consequential responsibility. They must take extreme care to ensure equitable representation and access in programming to avoid unknowingly perpetuating the systemic oppression that has scarred our institutions' histories. By following the authors' guidance, Cooperative Extension has the potential to lead a transformative response to our country's most pressing and evolving challenges.

Pivoting to focus on social justice, as the authors describe, could inspire a new generation of Extension professionals. Many young people entering the higher education workforce today are looking for opportunities to make a difference in the world with values that align with the organizational direction for which Fields and Shaffer advocate (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020; Post et al., 2016). Extension leaders should authentically make space for this new approach so the next generation can see themselves in the work. This could serve as an effective recruitment strategy to improve representation and reinvigorate the organization.

While this book offers compelling inspiration for Extension professionals, they may need an additional level of training to adapt their work in the ways described. Extension leaders should provide professional development around critical reflection, equity and inclusion, engaged pedagogies, and building community partnerships, for instance. One place to start may be facilitating learning communities using this text as a guide. Localized groups of Extension professionals could work collaboratively to explore ways to apply the concepts and strategies provided to their own communities with consideration for the unique sociocultural contexts in each.

Conclusion

To summarize, Fields and Shaffer provide an enlightening and inspiring resource for Extension professionals and community engagement practitioners to see the powerful potential of connecting their work. While they explore organizational challenges rarely discussed on this scale, each chapter includes accessible resources, examples, and guidance for taking steps forward. Their vision comes together through revitalizing theoretical and conceptual frameworks, pedagogical practices, evaluation techniques, personal and professional development, and program examples from multiple Extension program areas.

In the end, the authors challenge readers to wrestle with the role and responsibility of Cooperative Extension. They make a strong argument for adapting programming to meet the new needs and circumstances of our changing population. Reframing our thinking to embrace principles and strategies found in the higher education community engagement field could bring about promising opportunities for Extension to be a leader addressing our country's most pressing challenges. This encouraging book paints a picture of what the future of Cooperative Extension could be, a future for which we should all be striving.

References

- Cann, C., & DeMeulenaere, E. (2020). *The activist academic: Engaged scholarship for resistance, hope and social change*. Myers Education Press.
- Fear, F. A., & Sandmann, L. R. (2016). The “new” scholarship: Implications for engagement and extension. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 20(1), 101-112.
<https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/1260>
- Post, M. A., Ward, E., Longo, N., & Saltmarsh, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Publicly engaged scholars: Next generation engagement and the future of higher education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Smith, R.G. (1949). *The people's colleges: A history of the New York state extension service in Cornell University and the state, 1876-1948*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Stoecker, R. (2014). Extension and higher education service learning: Toward a community development service-learning model. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 18(1), 15-42.
<https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/1091>

About the Author

Emily Phaup, Ph.D., leads the Northwest 5 Consortium from Whitman College.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Emily Phaup at phaupe@whitman.edu.