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## The Value of Jointly Held Conferences: Benefits and Considerations for Planners and Participants

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## **The Value of Jointly Held Conferences: Benefits and Considerations for Planners and Participants**

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*University faculty and staff regularly participate in academic conferences as part of their professional responsibilities, yet the literature on their value is scarce, especially when examining conferences held jointly by two associations. Research is needed to help association leaders, planning committees, and attendees make informed decisions about conference organization and participation. This paper highlights the benefits and challenges of a jointly held academic conference for participants, association leaders, and organizational liaisons. In June of 2016, two Cooperative Extension associations, the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP) and the Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals (ANREP), jointly held a conference in Burlington, VT. The authors used surveys administered to conference participants, planning committee members, and liaisons at the United States Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) to collect data immediately following the conference and six months later. Using the Community Capitals Framework (CCF) to organize evaluation results, the authors discuss the benefits and challenges of planning, sponsoring, and attending the conference from the perspectives of these different groups. The authors focus on three community capitals: human capital, social capital, and cultural capital. Based on the findings, they offer recommendations for future evaluation of jointly held academic conferences.*

*Keywords:* academic conferences, community capitals framework, conference planning, conference evaluation, Extension, jointly held conferences

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## Introduction

Although “professional conferencing is a multibillion-dollar global industry” (Wiessner, Hatcher, Chapman, & Storberg-Walker, 2008, p. 367), the literature on the benefits of conferences is scarce (Chase & Kuehn, 2010), and even less has been written about jointly held conferences. Jointly held conferences are defined here as meetings of two distinct organizations that have expended equal effort and expense in planning and implementing the event (Street, 1991). In the 1980s and 1990s, there were some references to jointly held conferences (Caldwell, 1984; Enns & Jahn, 1996), but most only provide information about the proceedings. These references provide little specific information about planning and implementation procedures, or a description of benefits to participants.

Understanding why individuals choose to attend academic and professional conferences is important in assessing the impacts of jointly held professional conferences. Price (1993) theorized that there are four reasons for attending academic and professional meetings: education, networking, leadership, and professional savvy. The first three reasons include “sharing and receiving information, stimulating creative thinking, and rekindling or establishing contacts” (Wiessner et al., 2008, p. 367). The fourth, professional savvy, is related to learning about and becoming a member of the profession (Price, 1993). According to Price, education was the most important motivation for attendees, and leadership was the least important. Price also concluded that career stage was the best predictor of motivation for attendance. In the early career stage, attendees want to develop skills and a specialty. At conferences, they are looking for support and opportunities to demonstrate creativity in order to receive recognition. Mid-career attendees are more interested in integrating knowledge, updating information, and gaining new skills in areas such as training and coaching. They are also seeking recognition and esteem (Price, 1993).

The challenge of planning and implementing a jointly held conference is to produce results that benefit both organizations as well as their members. Steffen, Abu-Mulaweh, and Devine (2007) acknowledged that “hosting a joint conference between two distinct sections raises logistical and idiosyncratic differences,” and that “for a successful conference, suitable for all attendees, each of these differences needs to be overcome or accommodated” (p. 30). In a time of shrinking budgets and an emphasis on outcomes, employers want to be assured that long-term benefits result from attending conferences. Schuttloffel (2010) said that jointly held conferences often occur because it sounds like a good thing to do, rather than because they result in long-term results. She warned that the benefits of conferences often end when the conference concludes. Long-term impacts should be assessed to understand the lasting contributions of the jointly held conference on participants’ professional lives.

### **Case Study: Jointly Held Conference of Two Extension Service Associations**

This study drew data from the evaluation of the Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals (ANREP) and National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP) joint conference, “Building a Path to Resiliency: Uniting Natural Resources and Community Development,” held in Burlington, VT, from June 26 to June 29, 2016. This conference served as a case study to assess the benefits of a jointly held conference as they relate to the mission of the Cooperative Extension System, which is to “advance agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being, and communities” (Agriculture Extension Act of 1914). A jointly held conference between two Extension organizations focusing on natural resources and community development moves the Extension mission towards its explicit goal of improving the well-being of individuals and their communities.

#### **Conference Organizational Components**

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Cooperative Extension System (CES) organizes around four program areas: agriculture and natural resources, 4-H and youth development, family and consumer sciences, and community development. Two of these areas were represented at the jointly held conference described in this paper: natural resources and community development. The two associations that held this conference were

- *The Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals:* ANREP is a national association for CES professionals working in environmental education, fisheries, forestry, wood sciences, range, recreation, waste management, water, wildlife, energy, and related disciplines. The association’s objectives include (a) facilitating information sharing; (b) promoting educational and training efforts among governmental agencies, private natural resources groups, related industries, and other natural resource professionals; (c) developing, sponsoring, and promoting educational and training programs and activities that advance the practice of natural resource management; and (d) strengthening communication with Extension administration at county, state, and federal levels. ANREP, founded in 1996, has about 400 members.
- *The National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals:* NACDEP, founded in 2003, is dedicated to improving the visibility, coordination, professional status, and resource base of community and economic development Extension programs and professionals. Its purpose is to bring together community and economic development Extension professionals to (a) facilitate information sharing; (b) promote cooperation between states, regions, governmental agencies, private community development groups, related organizations, and professionals; (c) advance sound community development practices; (d) provide support and promote activities and programs at the national level; (e) advance the professional status of Extension community and economic development professionals; (f) strengthen

communication with Extension administrative entities; (g) expanded applied social science research; and (h) promote community and economic development within the land-grant system. NACDEP has approximately 260 members.

### **Conference Design and Content**

The conference was planned and implemented by two committees: the Steering Committee and the Planning Committee. The Steering Committee comprised representatives from both associations, including presidents, presidents-elect, past-presidents, treasurers, host state delegates, and association management staff. The Planning Committee comprised volunteers from the host state, as well as from both associations. The conference contained the following components: an opening reception, concurrent sessions, regional meetings, general sessions, poster sessions, business meetings, award ceremonies, mobile workshops at community and economic development sites near Burlington, VT, and pre- and post-conference workshops.

### **Framework for Discussing the Benefits of Jointly Held Conferences**

The authors employ the Community Capitals Framework (CCF) to structure the discussion of jointly held conference benefits and use it as a conceptual framework to organize evaluation results. The CCF includes seven types of social capital: built, financial, political, natural, cultural, social, and human (Flora & Flora, 2013). An examination of evaluation results using the CCF can help to focus future conference planning, leverage political and financial capital, and identify strengths and opportunities of each organization separately and together. This framework provides a lens to examine the resources and relationships within a community and their contribution to healthy ecosystems, vital economies, and social well-being. An in-depth theoretical discussion, along with the advantages and disadvantages of applying CCF to the community development context, can be found in, for example, Baron, Field, and Schuller (2000); Pigg, Gasteyer, Martin, Keating, and Apaliya (2013); and Theodori, Luloff, Brennan, and Bridger (2016).

The authors began with an assumption that a jointly held conference is an investment into several capitals that strengthen individual professionals and their organizations. They choose the CCF because it is well suited to examine groups linked by common professional or academic interests (Emery, Fey, & Flora, 2006). Used as an organizing strategy, the CCF supports several measures of the benefits of jointly held conferences, particularly collaboration among academics. These include, for example, sharing resources, dividing labor, alleviating academic isolation, maintaining motivation for scholarship, and creating energy through interpersonal relationships (Hord, 1986). An additional measurable benefit is collaborative knowledge construction. For example, in 2005, researchers from North Carolina State University collaborated with the Academy of Human Resource Development International Research Conference to pilot a process where knowledge construction and learning became focal points of the conference (Wiessner et al., 2008).

For this paper, the authors focus on three capitals: (a) *human capitals* which include the skills and abilities of people to access resources and knowledge and to lead others; (b) *social capitals* which are the connections among people and organizations; and (c) *cultural capitals* which relate to the way people know and act within their organizations or conferences. Since the CCF was not used in the construction of the questionnaire, not all of the capitals were given equal weight among the questions that were asked. For example, *financial capitals*, which are the available financial resources that can be invested in the organizations or conferences (modified from Emery et al., 2006), were identified by National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) liaisons but were not included as benefits in the participant evaluation tools. As the authors analyzed the qualitative information gathered from planners and NIFA liaisons, they realized the value of this framework in interpreting the results, and if the questionnaire were used again, it would include questions related to *financial capitals*.

### **Purpose and Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the benefits and challenges of a jointly held academic conference for participants, association leaders, and organizational liaisons.

Specific study objectives included (a) assess satisfaction and usefulness, (b) describe change in knowledge and awareness of conference-related topics and issues, (c) examine behavioral change in terms of professional activities, (d) assess factors that influenced decisions to attend, and (e) document observations of planners and liaisons related to program implementation and usefulness to related organizations. Several questions guided the analysis:

- 1) What are the benefits, if any, of jointly held professional conferences?
- 2) Are there drawbacks, and if so, what are they?
- 3) Given limited time and funding, do associated organizations support jointly held professional conferences as a way of encouraging pollination of ideas and communication across organizations?

### **Methodology**

#### **Data Collection Procedures**

The evaluation design included an online post-conference survey sent immediately following the close of the conference and an online post-conference survey sent six months after the end of the conference. In addition to the surveys sent to all conference participants, an interview-type questionnaire with open-ended questions was sent by email to key individuals from both associations who were involved in planning the conference and to association liaisons at the USDA NIFA.

A census sample was used for the post-conference and follow-up surveys. All 443 conference participants were asked to complete those online surveys. As much as possible, recommended procedures for internet surveys were followed (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014; Monroe & Adams, 2012). To maximize response rates, Dillman et al. (2014) recommended personalized, repeated contact. At the conference, participants were asked to look for an email with a link to the evaluation survey. The first email was sent shortly after the conference concluded.

Evaluators were unable to personalize contact because the internet survey program used, Survey Builder, did not have that capability. They did, however, contact participants three times over a four-week period. The second and third emails were sent in subsequent weeks, with the subject line and the day of the week and time of day varying with each email. The purpose of this procedure was to get the attention of participants who check their email on different days at different times. All emails included a link to the online survey and contact information in case there were questions or problems with the survey. The same protocol was followed for the six-month follow-up survey. No identifying information other than standard demographics was collected or used in the analysis.

The survey of planners and liaisons also took place six months after the conference and addressed the benefits and challenges of the conference to their respective organizations through several open-ended questions. This survey was implemented using one university's Qualtrics system. Planners and liaisons were sent two reminders.

### **Evaluation Tools**

The authors of this article were members of the conference evaluation team that designed the surveys used in this study. Although many of the questions on the participant post-conference and follow-up surveys were those traditionally used on post-conference questionnaires, several were specifically designed to capture collaborative aspects and other issues related to jointly held conferences that the authors discovered in their review of the literature. Again, CCF designations were not made in the survey design process and were used only in analyzing the qualitative results. The surveys were not validated before use, but as will be explained later in this paper, question groupings indicated internal consistency based on the responses in this study.

On both participant surveys (immediately after the conference and six months later), questions were designed to capture satisfaction with the conference itself on a 4-point Likert-type scale (*not satisfied to very satisfied*). Questions addressed whether components of the program were useful, how important certain factors were in influencing attendance at the conference, satisfaction with the registration process and the accommodations, and how respondents rated the conference overall. The five items in this scale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.704, indicating internal consistency, which means that the questions taken together measure conference satisfaction. Participants were also asked about the benefits and barriers to attending a jointly held conference. The first set of questions asked how attending the 2016 ANREP/NACDEP

joint conference benefited them. The response statements were (a) increased my understanding of issues relevant to my work; (b) increased my contacts for future collaborations; (c) gave me a new understanding of the mission/function of an Extension association other than my own; (d) increased my awareness of programs related to my work; (e) provided ideas on how to access resources related to my work; (f) met my professional development needs; and (g) will help me do a better job of meeting the needs of my students, audiences, or clients. Respondents indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement on a four-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*). This scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .89, indicating internal consistency.

Another question asked how likely participants were to carry out a variety of actions in the next 12 months based on what they learned at this conference. Actions offered were (a) develop or restructure programs, products, or services for my students, audiences, or clients; (b) develop or revamp the evaluation strategy for my program, service, or product; (c) begin to plan a collaborative project with someone I connected with at the conference; (d) develop a grant proposal with other conference attendees; (e) join an association committee or workgroup; (f) run for an office or position within one of the associations; and (g) plan to attend the academic meeting of another Extension association. The response choices were 3 = *very likely*, 2 = *maybe*, 1 = *unlikely*, and 0 = *does not apply*. *Does not apply* responses were dropped from the analysis. This scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .675, indicating slightly less internal consistency, meaning that some people may favor certain factors over others.

Respondents were asked about factors that influenced their decision to register for the conference, with options of (a) conference location; (b) conference cost; (c) conference theme; (d) opportunity to give a presentation, poster, or workshop; (e) opportunity to network and have fellowship with Extension association peers; and (f) opportunity to learn from members of another Extension association. Response choices were 1 = *not important*, 2 = *slightly important*, 3 = *important*, and 4 = *very important*. This scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .572, again showing less internal consistency. Respondents were also asked to write what they thought was the most important benefit of having a jointly held Extension association conference.

On the six-month follow-up survey, participants were asked whether information, resources, and contacts from the ANREP/NACDEP conference helped them accomplish any of the items listed on the initial survey except "attended the professional meeting of another Extension association." This item was eliminated because not enough time had elapsed for this to have occurred. The response categories on the post-survey were 1 = *no and do not intend to do so*; 2 = *no, but intend to*; 3 = *partially accomplished*; and 4 = *accomplished*. Open-ended questions included (a) Did attending the conference contribute to your productivity in other ways? Please explain; (b) Please describe at least one specific accomplishment that you can attribute to your attendance at the joint 2016 ANREP/NACDEP conference; and (c) Please provide any additional comments or suggestions that you would like to share with the leaders of either association or with the planners of future conferences.

Open-ended questions on the conference planners' survey included (a) If you were involved in the initial decision to conduct a joint conference with ANREP and NACDEP, what were the things mentioned in support of a joint conference? (b) What were the things mentioned in opposition to a joint conference? (c) What were some of the challenges you and others faced in planning this joint conference? (d) What were the differences in planning this conference and planning other conferences in which you have been involved? (e) What advice would you give to others planning joint conferences like this one? (f) In what ways do you think participants benefited from the joint conference? Are there any other groups you would like to plan a joint conference with in the future? (g) If so, what are they and why, and (h) If not, why not?

### Survey Responses

Of the 443 conference attendees, there were 253 responses to the first survey, a 57% return rate. There were 64 responses to the follow-up survey, a 14.5% return rate (based on the total number of attendees). Tables 1–3 provide participant demographics. The demographic percentages from the initial and follow-up surveys remained fairly consistent. A slightly higher percentage of participants belonged to NACDEP than ANREP, but representation was closely divided between the two organizations. Less than 7% of respondents did not belong to either organization. The largest group of participants were between the ages of 50 and 69; however, participants ages 35 to 40 were well represented. The majority worked for a university Extension service, which was expected since ANREP and NACDEP are Extension professional associations developed for specific subject-matter areas.

**Table 1. Association Membership of Attendees and Respondents**

Membership	Conference Attendees	% Attendees	# Initial Survey	% Initial Survey	# Follow-up Survey	% Follow-up Survey
ANREP only	174	39.4	107	42.3	25	39.0
NACDEP only	211	47.7	119	47.0	32	50.0
Both assoc.	13	2.9	10	4.0	3	4.7
Neither assoc.	44	10.0	17	6.7	4	6.3
Total	442	100.0	253	100.0	64	100.0

**Table 2. Age of Respondents**

Age	# Initial Survey	% Initial Survey	# Follow-up Survey	% Follow-up Survey
Under 35	37	14.6	9	13.2
35–49	91	36.0	26	38.2
50–69	118	46.6	32	47.1
Total responding	246	97.2	67	98.5
No response	7	2.8	1	1.5
Total	253	100.0	68	100.0

**Table 3. Work Affiliation of Respondents**

<b>Work Affiliation</b>	<b># Initial Survey</b>	<b>% Initial Survey</b>	<b># Follow-up Survey</b>	<b>% Follow-up Survey</b>
University Extension	225	88.9	65	95.6
University Non-Extension	10	4.0	1	1.5
County agency	5	2.0	0	0
Federal agency	2	.8	1	1.5
Nonprofit agency	1	.4	0	0
Private organization	1	.4	0	0
Student	3	1.2	0	0
Total responding	247	97.7	67	98.6
No response	6	2.3	1	1.4
Total	253	100.0	68	100.0

### **Data Analysis**

Survey data were exported from the online survey software to Excel and imported into an SPSS database for analysis. Descriptive analyses were performed and are described in the results section. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis, which associates participant responses from the two professional association groups to predefined themes based on the community capitals in the CCF (Ezzy, 2002). Sometimes the responses included more than one thought or answer, and if that was the case, they were divided into multiple responses. This allowed researchers to pull apart answers into smaller statements and reassemble them in new ways (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Strauss & Corbin 1990). To ensure clear understanding and uniform interpretation, each row of an Excel spreadsheet contained a response, and each column contained a capital and a definition of the capital. To guard against personal biases that might influence findings, all four researchers independently coded all 156 comments with one or more community capitals that they thought described the comment best. After each researcher did their independent assessment, one point was assigned to the capital every time it was chosen, and the total points were summed.

### **Evaluation Results**

#### **Factors That Influenced Participants' Decisions to Attend the Jointly Held Conference**

Four factors stood out as influencing attendees' decision to attend and are listed in order of importance: (a) opportunity to network and have fellowship with Extension association peers; (b) opportunity to give a presentation, poster, or workshop; (c) opportunity to learn from members of another Extension association; and (d) location. Opportunity to network and have fellowship with Extension association peers ranked the highest for all participants, ANREP participants, and NACDEP participants (Table 4).

**Table 4. Factors that Influenced Participants' Decision to Attend**

Decision Factors	<i>M</i> – all participants	<i>M</i> – ANREP	<i>M</i> – NACDEP
Opportunity to network and have fellowship with Extension association peers	3.5640	3.5535	3.5811
Opportunity to give a presentation, poster, or workshop	3.0850	3.0318	3.1081
Opportunity to learn from members of another Extension association	2.9197	2.8038	3.0946
Location	2.8452	2.7750	2.9467
Conference cost	2.7183	2.7438	2.7067
Conference theme ( <i>building resiliency</i> )	2.2008	2.2063	2.1667

Response scale: 1 = *not important*; 2 = *slightly important*; 3 = *important*; 4 = *very important*.

### Immediate Benefits to Participants Attending the Jointly Held Conference

On the initial survey, respondents rated the benefits that a person gained or might gain in the future from a jointly held conference. Although the means were all over 3.00 on a 4-point scale, the top three benefits for all respondents together – as well as for respondents divided by association group – were (a) increased contacts for future collaborations, (b) increased awareness of programs related to one's work, and (c) increased understanding of issues relevant to one's work. The means for NACDEP were consistently higher than for ANREP and also for all participants taken together (Table 5).

**Table 5. Immediate Benefits of Attending the Conference**

Benefit	Capital	<i>M</i> – all participants	<i>M</i> – ANREP	<i>M</i> – NACDEP
Increased my contacts for future collaborations	Social	3.5000	3.4310	3.5878
Increased my awareness of programs related to my work	Human	3.4677	3.4310	3.5077
Increased my understanding of issues relevant to my work	Human	3.4080	3.3898	3.4427
Provided ideas on how to access resources related to my work	Human	3.3198	3.3448	3.3256
Will help me do a better job of meeting the needs of my students, audiences, or clients	Human	3.2903	3.2759	3.3130
Met my professional development needs	Human	3.2686	3.2719	3.2992
Gave me a new understanding of the mission/function of an Extension association other than my own	Cultural	3.0504	3.0090	3.1040

Response scale: 1 = *not important*; 2 = *slightly important*; 3 = *important*; 4 = *very important*.

The content analysis of the qualitative data illustrates the same three benefits: increased awareness of programs related to one's work (*human capital*), increased contacts for future collaborations (*social capital*), and becoming a part of a larger team (*cultural capital*).

Participants most frequently cited *human capital* and *social capital*, with *cultural capital* third (Table 6). *Natural* and *financial* capitals were also noted but will not be included in the discussion portion of this paper because the number of comments in these categories was so small.

**Table 6. Comments Related to the Benefits of Attending the Conference**

<b>Community Capital</b>	<b>Total Number of Points</b>	<b>Examples of Comments</b>
Human – skills and abilities to access resources	336	I heard several presentations that I intend to follow up on to learn more. The topics will help me build skills and (hopefully) lead to better work.  Saw examples of online courses being run by other ANREP members. Learned interesting new information on a wide array of topics.
Social – connections between people	282	This conference (ANREP) always helps me to "recharge my batteries" with kindred spirits interested in Extension scholarship. An added benefit was meeting with NACDEP. Met people from my university I hadn't met before!
Cultural – how people act within the community	129	I am a new employee of Extension, so I was able to learn more about the greater team I have become a part of.
Natural –assets in the community	21	The mobile workshop allowed me to see agritourism in another part of the US. Very interesting and very educational. Would like to use my newly made contacts to bring a group of producers for a visit.
Financial –assets invested in the community	15	An opportunity to collaborate on a regional Hatch grant

### Long-Term Benefits for Participants

Long-term benefits of conference attendance are evidenced by participants' conference-related actions after returning home. To examine long-term benefits, responses on the initial and follow-up surveys were compared. In the initial survey, respondents were asked to respond to a series of prompts about their intent to use what they had learned or experienced at the conference. As seen in Table 7, participants most often selected *maybe* or *very likely* for the options "begin plans for a collaborative project with someone I connected with at the conference" (79.5%) and

“develop or restructure programs, products, or services” (84.0%). The majority selected *unlikely* for “run for an office or position within one of the associations” (76.4%) and “plan to attend the professional meeting of another Extension association” (59.6%). Participants were also able to choose “does not apply,” and these responses were eliminated when calculating the total percentages listed in Table 7.

**Table 7. Intention to Take Action after the Conference**

Intentions	Capital	#/% Unlikely	#/% Maybe	#/% Very Likely	#/% Total
Develop or restructure programs, products, or services for my students, audiences, or clients	Human	37/16.1	108/47.0	85/37.0	230/100.0
Begin plans for a collaborative project with someone I connected with at the conference	Social	48/20.5	99/42.3	87/37.2	234/100.0
Develop or revamp the evaluation strategy for my program, service, or product	Human	65/28.5	120/52.6	43/18.9	228/100.0
Join an association committee or workgroup	Cultural	128/55.4	63/27.3	40/17.3	231/100.0
Plan to attend the professional meeting of another Extension association	Cultural	140/59.6	64/27.2	31/13.2	235/100.0
Develop a grant proposal with other conference attendees	Social	119/51.6	90/39.0	22/9.5	231/100.0
Run for an office or position within one of the associations	Cultural	172/76.4	44/19.6	9/4.0	225/100.0

On the six-month follow-up survey, participants were asked if they had accomplished any of the actions listed on the post-conference survey. As seen in Table 8, the most frequently cited fully accomplished action within the first six months was to *join an association committee or workgroup* (25.8%), however, if you combine partially accomplished with accomplished actions, *developing or restructuring programs, products, or services* is at the top of the list of accomplishments. This is consistent with the list of intended actions in Table 7. It is also noteworthy, that the combined percentage of *partially accomplished* and *accomplished* responses for attendees who said that they *began plans for a collaborative project with someone I connected with at the conference* (47.0%) put it second on the list of actions, which coincides with the high combined *maybe* and *very likely* ranking for that action in Table 7. It is also an indication that collaborative activity may be an important benefit of jointly held conferences. Although developing or revamping an evaluation strategy came in third in Table 7, it ended up last in Table 8. The reason for this discrepancy may be the short period of time between the post-conference survey and the follow-up survey.

**Table 8. Actions Reported on the Six-Month Follow-Up Survey in Order of Highest Number/Percentage of Participants that Either Partially or Fully Accomplished the Action**

Accomplishments	Capitals	#/% No, do not intend	#/% No, but do intend	#/% Partially accomp- lished	#/% Accomp- lished	#/% Total
Developed or restructured programs, products, or services for my students, audiences, or clients	Human	15/22.4	13/19.4	28/41.8	11/16.4	67/100.0
Began plans for a collaborative project with someone I connected with at the conference	Social	20/29.4	16/23.5	19/27.9	13/19.1	68/100.0
Developed or revamped the evaluation strategy for my program, service, or product	Human	27/42.2	14/21.9	21/32.8	2/3.1	64/100.0
Joined an association committee or workgroup	Cultural	39/59.1	7/10.6	3/4.5	17/25.8	66/100.0
Ran for an office or position within one of the associations	Cultural	59/89.4	2/3.0	0/0.0	5/7.6	66/100.0
Developed a grant proposal with other conference attendees	Social	48/73.8	14/21.5	1/1.5	2/3.1	65/100.0

### Benefits of Jointly Held Conferences from the Perspective of Planners

Ten conference planners were surveyed, and six responded to the online survey (60%). The content of the answers was analyzed by looking for themes based on the capitals in the CCF. When asked about justifications for planning a jointly held conference (anticipated benefits), the planners' responses fell within three rationales: sharing resources (*human capital*), bridging the cultural or academic divide (*cultural capital*), and building professional relationships (*social capital*). When asked what benefits they thought participants gained (perceived benefits), their answers fell within the same categories (Table 9).

**Table 9. Benefits Anticipated and Perceived by Conference Planners**

Benefits	Capital	Examples of Comments	
		Anticipated Benefits	Perceived Benefits
Sharing knowledge and educational resources	Human	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A unique learning opportunity different from what we do in our 'regular' biennial conferences.</li> <li>• An opportunity for learning from one another.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They got to see some things they would not otherwise get to see.</li> <li>• Many benefited from the opportunity to attend sessions a little out of their discipline and gain new perspectives.</li> </ul>
Building professional relationships	Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities to get to know colleagues in other disciplines.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities to meet Extension professionals in other disciplines.</li> <li>• The interactions between participants from different associations helped create new connections.</li> <li>• Some, I think, made new connections that they normally would not have.</li> </ul>
Alleviating academic isolation	Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Way to build connections and future opportunities with NACDEP.</li> <li>• Synergy and win/win for members of each organization.</li> <li>• A means to build relationships between the two organizations.</li> <li>• A unique opportunity to our members -- different from typical conferences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chance to stretch their thinking by participating in a presentation in other subject matter areas.</li> <li>• Got to see "how the other folks" do things.</li> <li>• Got to hear presentations from outside their usual focus area.</li> <li>• For people specialized in either discipline, it was a good crossover opportunity.</li> <li>• Got to be with a sister association that works in a similar area. Natural resources and community development have strong ties.</li> </ul>
Saving the cost of attending more than one conference	Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Savings in travel costs for dual members or people who might like to go to two events.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For attendees working in both community development and natural resources, they did not have to choose which conference to attend.</li> </ul>

Additional information provided by planners dealt with some of the logistical and social aspects of a jointly held conference. In response to questions about the planning and implementation process, they told evaluators that putting together this joint conference took substantially more effort and time from association officers and committee members. In addition, they said they had to make more effort to communicate with each other and with participants and negotiate with committee members and administrators to make conference-related decisions that would ensure the relevance of the conference to both associations.

Planners said that coordinating between two associations with different cultures and traditions presented unique challenges that might not occur in a single-organization conference. They said that cultural differences could be mitigated by coming to an agreement on specific parts of the conference (e.g., whether the awards ceremonies should be held separately or together), agreeing on the financial arrangements between the two associations early in the process, and jointly working with a conference organizer. They said that many aspects of the process went smoothly because of similarities between their respective associations and conferences. Each association did, however, have some unique traditions (one held an evening karaoke event, whereas the other held a 5k run), so those details needed to be addressed. In the end, those two activities were roughly equally attended by members of both associations; however, neither association adopted the other's special event for their own subsequent conference.

### **Benefits of Jointly Held Conferences from the Perspective of NIFA Liaisons**

Finally, two national program leaders from NIFA, who serve as liaisons to NACDEP and ANREP, and who attended the conference were asked (a) Are NIFA leaders supportive of jointly held conferences? If so, what are they doing to promote this practice? (b) Do you think jointly held conferences foster cooperation among Extension associations and organizations? (3) Do you think jointly held conferences foster integrated, multi-state projects? If so, how? If not, why not? Table 10 summarizes their responses based on the three CCF capitals. The NIFA liaisons saw the potential benefit of a jointly held conference in allowing for networking and learning outside of one's main discipline; however, they also acknowledged time and resource constraints that may prevent adoption and long-term commitment of NIFA from promoting these types of jointly held conferences.

**Table 10. Interview Responses of NIFA National Liaisons to ANREP and NACDEP**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Capital</b>	<b>Responses from NIFA Liaisons</b>
What are NIFA leaders doing to promote jointly held conferences?	Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share with listservs</li> <li>• Maintain other communication channels – internal and external</li> <li>• Send NIFA National Program Leaders (to conferences)</li> <li>• Have NIFA National Program Leaders participate in the planning process of future conferences</li> </ul>
Do you think jointly held conferences foster cooperation among Extension associations and organizations?	Human	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. They provide the opportunity to share interdisciplinary knowledge</li> </ul>
	Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. They encourage networking beyond one's primary discipline or function</li> </ul>
	Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes. The joint ANREP/NACDEP conference is leading to a discussion among other groups to see if there is interest in a joint conference.</li> <li>• Yes. If opportunities were encouraged, then the likelihood of greater cooperation across Extension and its professional organizations would be enhanced.</li> </ul>

Question	Capital	Responses from NIFA Liaisons
	Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maybe not. The potential could be somewhat limited by not having opportunities, time, or resources to explore cross-function efforts.</li> </ul>
Do you think jointly held conferences foster integrated, multistate projects?	Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, but there needs to be a champion who is willing to lead the effort and engage the respective groups.</li> <li>• If folks see it as a one-off, they are less likely to commit to a longer-term approach.</li> </ul>
	Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The possibility exists, but the potential cannot be realized without dedicated resources and activities that encourage uptake and adoption.</li> </ul>

### Discussion

Learning new information and skills is an important benefit of jointly held conferences. As mentioned earlier in this article, Price (1993) theorized that there were four reasons for attending academic and professional meetings. The first was education or *human capital*. Price (1993) said that education was the most important motivation for attendees. Similarly, Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) demonstrated, using social cognitive theory, that conferences are important to the social learning process because they offer formal and informal methods of socializing and experiential learning. Indeed, conference attendees can learn as much from informal conversations during conference coffee breaks, and other social activities, as from the concurrent sessions (Senese, 2010). Along these lines, Hord (1996) said one way to assess the benefits of jointly held conferences is to measure the extent to which resources are shared.

In the study presented here, the largest number of participant comments about the benefits of this conference referred to gaining skills and abilities needed to access resources and knowledge. Participants also rated highly the *human capital* items listed in the benefits section of the conference survey – awareness of programs, understanding issues related to work, and ideas on how to access resources. The largest percentage of participants thought that they would develop or restructure programs based on what they had learned at the conference (*human capital*), and this proved to be the action that the largest percentage of the participants partially or fully accomplished. Although the mean score for the item, “The conference experience gave me an opportunity to learn from members of another Extension association,” was slightly lower than for other items on the list of conference benefits, it still fell within the *agreed* response in the scale.

Networking and collaboration with new groups is another important benefit (Cherrstrom, 2012). The second reason for attending academic and professional meetings, according to Price, is networking. Hord (1996) suggests that conference planners might document the extent to which they are able to divide the labor involved in planning and implementing the conference, assess participants’ feelings of academic isolation, and measure changes in their motivation to do joint scholarship. These *social capitals* have the potential to become long-term, lasting impacts of

jointly held conferences (Schuttloffel, 2010). In this study, participants rated “increased my contacts for future collaborations,” a *social capital*, the highest on a list of benefits. More than three-fourths of the participants said they might or were very likely to begin plans for a collaborative project with someone they connected with at the conference, and 47% said that they had either begun or accomplished that objective. In addition, comments about *social capital* were the second-highest category among all capitals mentioned in response to the open-ended questions. Conference planners also targeted *social capital* in their answers. They saw a definite win/win scenario, synergy, and opportunity for connections as they planned and implemented the jointly held conference. They also said that they had to make more effort to communicate with each other during the planning process and had to negotiate conference-related decisions to ensure the relevance of the conference to both associations. Although the researchers did not ask participants if their collaborative project was with a member of another association, there is a chance that some cross-association projects were created.

Both conference planners and NIFA partners emphasized the *social capital* benefits of jointly held conferences, specifically the interaction and networking between association members and the exchange of information, skills, resources, and potential projects. Unlike the 2005 Academy of Human Resource Development International Research Conference (Wiessner et al., 2008), opportunities for collaborative knowledge construction were not a planned part of the Extension conference. Whether or not new knowledge construction will come out of the collaborations begun by conference participants is unknown and could be the subject of follow-up evaluation. Subsequent conferences planners might want to intentionally include opportunities for new knowledge construction.

All three groups indicated that *cultural capital* – the way people know and act within their organizations or conference – was a benefit of the conference. This corresponds to the fourth item on Price’s list – professional savvy. In this study, the difference between those who said they intended to join an association committee or workgroup and those who, on the follow-up survey, said that they actually did join, was noteworthy. On the initial survey, 17.3% of attendees indicated that they were very likely to join a committee or workgroup following the conference, yet 25.8% of respondents said that they accomplished it at the time of the six-month follow-up survey. The *unlikely/no* group on the post-conference survey and the follow-up survey were within five percentage points of each other, so it appears that many *maybe* respondents took the leap and joined groups or committees of their association. If this is the case, it could indicate a longer-term *social capital* impact.

Conference planners, knowing that cultural and financial issues might arise, took a risk when they decided to combine association conferences. They recognized that each organization had different needs and that these needs had to be recognized and accommodated (Steffen et al., 2007). After it was over, they indicated that *human capital* was one of the positive impacts of the collaboration, noting that many participants benefited from the opportunity to attend sessions

“a little out of their discipline and gain new perspectives.” Similarly, liaisons representing NIFA, those individuals who are often responsible for encouraging collaborative work and implementing and funding conferences, thought that *human capital* was a benefit of jointly held conferences. They noted that these conferences might provide the opportunity to share interdisciplinary knowledge.

Conference planners expressed hope that the joint ANREP/NACDEP conference will lead to a discussion among other groups to see if there is interest in holding jointly held conferences. The NIFA liaisons agreed that the success of the joint ANREP/NACDEP conference would stimulate discussion among other NIFA administrators about improving the culture of Extension, by finding opportunities for multiple Extension-related disciplines to meet together in a conference setting on a more regular basis. The caution, however, is that this will require a “champion” or “champions” who will dedicate themselves to moving this idea forward. Although NIFA partners see the human, social, and cultural capital benefits of jointly held conferences, they expressed concern about the increased need for resources and additional responsibilities involved in staging these types of conferences.

To our knowledge, the social capitals framework has not entered into discussions about conference benefits. Along with the results presented here, the framework helps others interested in conference planning, including creating stated goals, objectives, and structure. The social capitals framework is a way of understanding how conference participants interact (Flora & Flora, 2013). By considering human capital, *social capital*, *cultural capital*, and *financial capital*, the framework provides a convenient way of framing conference benefits and, therefore, designing conference activities to achieve optimal value for participants’ time and registration fees, as well as external supporters such as NIFA. Further, the framework can provide structured support both before and after the conference to enable participants to benefit even more, a necessary result, as noted by several authors (e.g., Borg, 2015; Schuttloffel, 2010; Wiessner et al., 2008).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations within the design of this study should be acknowledged. First, the return rate of the post-survey was 57.2% percent, so the opinions of 43% of the attendees at the conference are unknown. Only 14.4% of the 442 conference participants returned the six-month follow-up survey (or 25.2% of those who completed the post-survey). The authors do not know for sure that these missing respondents would answer similar to the actual respondents, even though they are also members of one of the two professional associations that sponsored the conference. NACDEP members represented a higher percentage of the respondents, even though ANREP’s overall membership is higher. Another important limitation of the study is that the CCF was not used in planning any of the evaluation tools but was used only in analysis of the data. This was a particular problem because participants who answered quantitative questions were not given the

opportunity to select answers that represented all seven capitals. The other four capitals were not adequately explored in this study but might be the focus of future research. For example, financial capitals were not addressed in the post-conference survey or follow-up survey but did appear in the interview question responses from planners and NIFA liaisons. It is important to emphasize that the findings may not be generalizable to other jointly held conferences but can be used as suggestions of benefits and challenges that might be present in other similar conferences.

### Conclusion

This research teaches us that jointly held conferences, such as the NACDEP/ANREP conference that was held in June 2016 in Burlington, VT, have strengths as well as challenges that planners, partners, and participants need to consider. The strengths have been described in terms of the organizational capitals that build collaboration among academics through shared resources, collaborative knowledge construction, alleviation of academic isolation, and creation of energy through interpersonal relationships in the academic community (Hord, 1986). This exploratory study has shown that a jointly held conference is an investment into at least three CCF capitals – *human*, *social*, and *cultural*. Members of each association gained new knowledge and skills (*human capital*), they began to form networks (*social capital*), and some attendees decided to join committees and groups related to their association and planned to attend a conference sponsored by another organization (*cultural capital*). Many participants at the conference applauded the efforts made by planners to create the jointly held conference and understood its value to their professional development experience. Planners from both associations closed the conference feeling that it was a success, and the post-conference and follow-up evaluations supported those perceptions.

More evaluation studies are needed on the subject of jointly held conferences. The authors recommend that as other associations consider planning and offering jointly held conferences, they compare data on the benefits and challenges of jointly held conferences with data from single organization conferences. Other evaluation methods might be considered, such as Ripple Effects Mapping (REM), which maps the flow of outcomes from multiple stakeholders. The CCF is just one framework that could be used to design evaluation tools and discuss benefits and challenges. Frameworks from other disciplines, such as community development, leadership studies, group dynamics, and the like, may aid in this discussion. Studies such as the one reported here are important because planners, sponsors, and participants with tightening budgets need to decide how to spend limited professional development funds. They need to decide whether they or the organization they represent benefit most from joint or separate events. Future planners cannot assume that a jointly held conference will be especially attractive to all members. They need to convince them about the benefits and challenges with empirical evidence.

As mentioned in the introduction, Schuttloffel (2010) found that jointly held conferences often occur because it sounds like a good thing to do, rather than because they have long-term positive results. She warned that the benefits of such conferences often end when the conference concludes. This sentiment was echoed by a NIFA liaison who believed that jointly held conferences needed a champion who will ensure that resources are available for “uptake and adoption.” That partner commented, “If folks see it (a jointly held conference) as a one-off, they are less likely to commit to a longer-term approach.” It makes sense to assess the impacts and challenges of jointly held conferences to better understand how they contribute to professional development in ways that single organization conferences might not. The challenge of planning and implementing a jointly held conference is to produce results that benefit both of the associations involved and their members (Steffen et al., 2007).

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