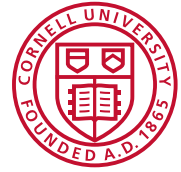


Cornell Cooperative Extension

Cornell Garden-Based Learning



Peer Learning Networks Support the Extension Mission

Learning networks are all around us. Since the dawn of human civilization, they have been at the center of every organization and industry as formal or informal knowledge-based social structures.

What is a peer learning network?

Dr. David Boud (2001) argues that peer learning networks can best be described as a form of interdependent or mutual learning that involves the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and experience between members of a community. Given that such networks are dynamic and complex, applying a one size fits all model is virtually impossible. This is both the beauty and calamity of adopting an informal learning model; it covers a wide range of different activities and interests, each of which can be combined with others in various ways to meet a common goal or need in a community (Falchikov 2005).

Cornell Cooperative Extension Master Volunteer Networks

The efficacy and success of the Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) correlates with its ability to support all features of its mission statement, which is:

CCE puts knowledge to work in pursuit of economic vitality, ecological sustainability and social well-being.

Our Extension master volunteer programs serve as interfaces in the exchange of information between viable research practices and local knowledge. The application of research and community collaboration is rooted in peer learning networks that aim to serve as a platform for healthy social, economic, and ecological environments. The Extension Master Gardener Volunteer program is an example of a peer learning network that started in the early 1970's.



Image credit: © Cornell University Communications

Land-grant universities through the national [Cooperative Extension System](#) are committed to providing research-based solutions. Within this system, stakeholders in peer learning networks play a critical role in identifying and communicating problems in their community that demand attention and scientific expertise. Community members as stakeholders is a powerful communication and educational strategy within the peer learning network framework. Community members avenue of insight to local values and needs hold the capacity for communities and institutions to share and process knowledge that is embedded with both local experience and research-based practices to cultivate the pursuit of viable practices. Further, peer learning network members can build the relationships and skills to fill the essential role of interpreting the language of scientific research, making it relatable and attuned to the concrete situation and needs of their community (Freire 1972).

Building Strong and Vibrant New York Communities

Diversity and Inclusion are a part of Cornell University's heritage. We are a recognized employer and educator valuing AA/EEO, Protected Veterans, and Individuals with Disabilities.

Studies show that individuals who participate in peer education display significant improvements in leadership, gain interpersonal communication skills, increase peer-education relevant knowledge, develop higher levels of self-esteem, and create better personal health behaviors when measured on assessments before and after their peer education experience (Wyatt and Oswalt 2011). The findings of such studies suggest that when someone within an individual's social group disseminates information, it tends to be more effective than information that is provided from an outside source or unknown third party (Carrico and Riemer 2011). The peer education strategy provides a platform for ambassadors for land grant universities and community members working together to effectively address current challenges around environmental stewardship in land use, food security, waste management, climate change, and threats to biodiversity by expand their existing knowledge and skills to:



Image credit: Cornell Garden-Based Learning

- Cultivate trust and relationships
- Understand the structures in which thought and language are framed in a community
- Combine technical or research-based knowledge with local, place-based knowledge
- Inspire community mobilization that leads to shared decision making, and exchanging of ideas for effective solutions and self-governance

Additionally, peer learning networks in Cooperative Extension can foster these universal growth needs and foundations of self-worth at the individual level (Brokenleg et al. 1990):

Generosity: Extension Volunteers reinforces gestures of thoughtfulness in their community and ask peers to take responsibility for each other. Critical reflection, as a part of a service learning experience, can be an important pursuit that leads to compassion, a broader scope, and life-long interest in the community engagement.

Power: There are many decisions to make in our daily lives and people will turn to peers to gather perspectives and guidance. In the area of gardening, it is important for Extension Master Gardener Volunteers to reflect on how to share decision-making to ensure a strong sense of commitment. How can community members of any age be included in planning, be encouraged to share their input, and be given real responsibility? There are many obstacles in gardening and we shouldn't deprive others the challenge of overcoming a barrier. The exchange of ideas can serve as a platform for creative and effective solutions! And the power ought to ultimately shift to empowerment and self-governance of community members.

Mastery: It is easy to create a long list of all the ways in which someone can gain skills by interacting with the world. Hands-on activities, experiential learning, group investigation, and discovery are the backbone of a life experience. Extension Volunteers can maximize mastery success by understanding and applying principles of adult learning and effective facilitation.

Belonging: In planning for our education programs we need to build in time and activities that allow for the fun and enjoyment from which close relationships develop, as well as opportunities for friends to join in, chances to make a difference in the community, and avenues through which every member of a community can voice an opinion.

Trust, Significant Learning, Impactful Action

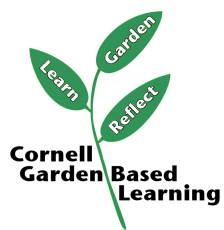
A community in action exists when its members interact in a meaningful way that deepens their understanding of each other and their needs that lead to significant learning. Peer learning networks provide a platform for collective meaning making, mentorship, encouragement, and an understanding of the perspectives and unique qualities of an increasingly diverse membership (Deborah and Wright 2003).

A community peer will establish trust when they show a genuine desire to invest in the needs and goals of their community while respecting the values and beliefs of others. Staying flexible and open towards various viewpoints will allow trust to take root. Taking the time to know one's peers and learning what is important to them is always partnered with showing respect and dignity towards their peers (Community Tool Box 2018).

Cornell Cooperative Extension can support these already existing systems of informal learning to fulfill its mission. Adopting such a structure is quite the cultural paradigm shift, however, years of extensive research around adult education and peer learning has proven its efficacy and reliable commitment towards sustainable, healthy communities.

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