

Spanning Boundaries and Transforming Roles: Broadening Extension's Reach With OSU Open Campus and Juntos

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Abstract

For over 100 years, Cooperative Extension has served communities through local Extension agents with expertise in such topics as agriculture, youth development, and family and community health. In 2008, the Oregon State University Extension Service launched a pilot (Open Campus and Juntos) to broaden Extension's reach by placing agents with "boundary spanning" expertise inside communities to address disparities in educational and economic opportunities. Open Campus and Juntos span three university-community boundaries: cultural dissonance between higher education and communities, particularly for Latinx families; the disconnect among community colleges and universities in supporting transfer students; and the silos among traditional Extension content areas to build programs addressing community needs. Impacts include 7,200 students and family members served through Juntos, increased high school graduation rates for Juntos students, additional transfer support for 1,500 community college students, and the creation of multiple centers providing broadband access in one of Oregon's most rural counties.

Keywords: boundary spanners, Latinx, rural, Cooperative Extension, college access



Cooperative Extension (Extension) has over 100 years of history in partnership with land-grant universities in the United States, working in a third space that is not strictly academic nor professional (Whitchurch, 2008). Early Extension programs were primarily offered in rural communities and focused on farming and animal production, but additional programs quickly developed to address broader community needs, including 4-H youth clubs, home economics, health and nutrition, natural resources, and community development (Gould et al., 2014; Peters, 2002). In Oregon, Extension programming has been intentional about staying relevant to our core partners, while also innovating in order to address community needs that may fall outside the traditional Extension content areas or audiences.

During the 2008 Association of Oregon Counties annual meeting, a novel plan was proposed to extend additional Oregon State University (OSU) resources into the communities most impacted by the global financial crisis of 2008 to help with economic development, educational training, and workforce development. In response, OSU Extension launched a pilot program, Oregon Open Campus, placing "boundary spanners" inside rural communities and rural community colleges. Since then, Oregon Open Campus has developed into two distinct programs, currently named Open Campus and Juntos, that collaborate with local partners to provide community-based activities that include college and career

pathway programs, youth development for rural and Latinx families, and support for economic development projects. The vision of both Open Campus and Juntos is centered on Extension agents as experts in “boundary spanning,” meaning professionals who live in the middle, between the university and local needs in communities (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Open Campus and Juntos teams come with a distinct set of skills in convening, partnership-building, and an intentional focus on designing culturally relevant approaches to serving communities. As higher education boundary spanners, Open Campus and Juntos coordinators are embedded in communities to identify and mitigate systemic boundaries between our communities and higher education specifically around (a) college and career access, (b) degree completion support, and (c) community engagement. This article provides a reflective exploration of how Open Campus and Juntos expanded the conventional role of an Extension agent, the program offerings and target audiences stemming from

this initiative, and plans to keep growing the program in a sustainable and meaningful way.

The Need for Open Campus and Juntos

Oregon students encounter a number of barriers and boundaries on the path to higher education, beginning with high school completion. Oregon’s high school graduation rates are among the lowest in the country, with lower completion rates for students of color, rural students, and students of low socioeconomic status (Table 1). These high school completion disparities for marginalized students are persistent, historical, and well-documented in the U.S. educational system (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). Degree completion is associated with increased economic well-being; those without a high school degree have higher rates of unemployment and earn less money than individuals with degrees (NCES, 2021; USDA Economic Research Service, 2019).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the State of Oregon

Category	Year	Statistic
Demographics		
Rural population ^a	2020	20%
Latinx population ^b	2021	14%
Latinx population in K-12 schools ^c	2022	25%
Education		
5-year high school graduation rate ^d	2021	85%
Rural high school graduation rate ^b	2021	82%
Urban high school graduation rate ^b	2021	86%
Latinx high school graduation rate ^b	2021	82%
Economically disadvantaged high school graduation rate ^d	2021	80%
4-year college degree or greater ^b	2021	35%
Rural 4-year college degree or greater ^b	2021	25%
Urban 4-year college degree or greater ^b	2021	39%

Note. ^a U.S. Census Bureau, 2022. ^b Ford Family Foundation & OSU Extension Service, 2023. ^c Oregon Department of Education, 2022b. ^d Oregon Department of Education, 2022a.

Beyond high school, postsecondary options also present historic and systemic challenges for students. Colleges and universities in the United States were created to serve White Christian men (Thelin & Gasman, 2003) and have ties to the displacement of Native peoples from their land and the labor of enslaved people (Lee & Ahtone, 2020; Wilder, 2013; Yosso et al., 2009). This history may not be as overt in 2024, yet Bonilla-Silva (2010) argued that a “new racism” is just as present in more subtle ways. Systemic boundaries in predominantly White institutions, such as Oregon State University, present cultural barriers for students of color, including relatively few faculty of color, persistent microaggressions, a lack of institutional cultural awareness, and “institutional, implicit and blatant acts of racism from students and professors alike” (Banks & Dohy, 2019, p. 119).

The location of colleges and universities can also serve as a physical boundary. Oregon is a geographically large state, with nearly half of the population located within the Portland metropolitan area (Portland State University Population Research Center, 2023), whereas 10 eastern counties have population densities of less than six people per square mile (Oregon Office of Rural Health, 2023). Ruiz and Perna (2017) noted that students’ proximity to a college or university positively affects college choice, number of college applications submitted, and likelihood of college enrollment.

Higher postsecondary educational attainment is also associated with higher earnings in both rural and urban areas (USDA Economic Research Service, 2019). The Oregon Longitudinal Data Collaborative (2022) reported on one cohort of students with 2019 median wages of \$23,419 per year for non-high school-completers and \$44,455 per year for students with graduate degrees, even with the latter group having fewer years in the workforce. Appreciating the positive economic impact of higher education while recognizing the disproportionate barriers for students of color and low-income and rural students led Open Campus and Juntos to center postsecondary access in our work.

Boundary Spanning Highlights and Impacts

In response to these barriers and boundaries affecting students and communities

across the state, OSU Extension expanded the content-specific role of an “Extension agent” to create flexible faculty positions in communities. These Open Campus and Juntos coordinators focus on spanning boundaries between campus, community, and education institutional type to collaboratively solve community and individual challenges. Subject matter expertise, traditionally framed within a content area (youth development, agriculture, etc.), is an essential competency for an Extension agent (Berven et al., 2020; Donaldson & Vaughan, 2022; Lakai et al., 2012, 2014), with the subject matter typically learned as part of the professional’s college degree (Berven et al., 2020). In contrast, Open Campus and Juntos coordinators do not share a common academic background, but rather are subject matter experts in boundary spanning, including community convening and relationship building. Open Campus and Juntos span three university–community boundaries:

- the cultural dissonance between higher education institutions and communities, where college-access programming and community relationships should fully honor the identity and cultural wealth of students and their families (Yosso, 2005),
- the disconnect among community colleges and universities to support transfer students in the context of Oregon’s systems of higher education, and
- the silos among traditional Extension content areas and OSU programmatic specialties to build programs addressing community needs.

Open Campus and Juntos provide a number of programs across the state that support our strategic goals while spanning these boundaries. Initiatives that exemplify boundary spanning with proven impact on Oregon’s education and economic landscape include the OSU Juntos program, community college partnerships, and rural community engagement and broadband access.

Juntos, meaning “together” in Spanish, is a college and postsecondary access program delivered in Spanish and designed for Latinx students and their families. The name reflects the program’s core values of

engaging the entire family and education partners. The program addresses the cultural dissonance among higher education, K-12 school systems, and Latinx communities. Juntos was introduced in Oregon in 2012 when OSU Extension and community partners were seeking to raise high school graduation rates and improve disparities in educational outcomes for Latinx students (López-Cevallos et al., 2020), who make up a growing share of Oregon's K-12 enrollment (Table 1). Particularly in rural areas of Oregon, schools and school districts may not have sufficient culturally or linguistically appropriate materials for the growing Latinx population, resulting in lower parent engagement with schools and lower sense of belonging for both students and parents on the postsecondary pathway (OSU Extension Service, 2022).

Community-based Open Campus and Juntos coordinators deliver the Juntos curriculum, engage with local Juntos program facilitators, provide student mentoring, organize community events, and cultivate a wide variety of local partner relationships. These activities utilize coordinators' expertise to create high-impact solutions for students who are vulnerable to boundaries within the educational system and between communities and institutions. Through the work of these coordinators, Juntos has served over 7,200 participants in Oregon, is active in 40 communities, and works in partnership with school districts, community colleges, and local partners. Juntos students have a 92% high school graduation rate, which exceeds the 2021–2022 five-year cohort completion rate of 84% for all students and 81% for Latinx students (Oregon Department of Education, 2022a). Participants also maintain over 90% postsecondary access following high school, which includes enrollment in community colleges, universities, trade schools, and apprenticeships.

Open Campus and Juntos coordinators also work closely with community college students throughout the transfer pathway. Oregon community colleges provide educational opportunities that are often more geographically and financially accessible to students (Hodara et al., 2019). In Oregon, only 25% of community college students report that they are not able to meet their college costs, compared to 47% of public university students (Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2023).

Many students begin at a community college to reduce financial costs of college attendance (Ma & Baum, 2016). However, community college students who want to transfer to a university must navigate additional and complex systems of higher education (Meza & Blume, 2020). Eighty percent of students who begin at a community college desire to transfer; however, only 10–15% will ever complete a bachelor's degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2018). Barriers to transfer student success include loss of credits during transfer (Jenkins & Fink, 2015), lack of information or personalized support (Fay et al., 2022; Jenkins & Fink, 2015), and a low sense of belonging at 4-year institutions (Shaw et al., 2019). Furthermore, college completion and transfer rates are the lowest for historically marginalized students, particularly students of color, rural students, and students of low socioeconomic status (Meza & Blume, 2020; Shapiro et al., 2017). In an effort to work collaboratively on solutions, Open Campus and Juntos created a boundary-spanning transfer support system with coordinators that are coemployed between OSU and a community college. Based in communities, these coordinators provide local transfer advising support and direct connections to OSU and other transfer resources. Since 2009, Open Campus and Juntos have served 1,500 transfer students in half of Oregon's community colleges (OSU Extension Service, 2022).

Finally, Open Campus and Juntos navigate across boundaries of the traditional Extension content areas and the specialized programmatic domains of OSU to design and implement programs. For example, a program was developed in response to a community need for internet access. Inequitable access to broadband in rural communities is linked to disparities in many programmatic domains, including technology, health care, education, and economic well-being (Early & Hernandez, 2021). Grant County is among the most rural counties in Oregon, with a population of 7,174 people located over a large geographic area, and higher unemployment rates and much lower job growth rates than the state average (Ford Family Foundation & OSU Extension Service, 2023). With the goals of providing access to more educational, health care, and job opportunities, the Open Campus coordinator led efforts to create CyberMills, which are physical locations providing critical broadband in a county where only 17% of people

have access (Ford Family Foundation & OSU Extension Service, 2023). The Open Campus coordinator convened partners around this critical economic issue, normally not addressed through Extension programming, and secured over \$1,000,000 in grant funding, resulting in two CyberMill locations with over 700 registered users and an average of 30 daily entries. Users credit CyberMill with providing access to resources (e.g., online learning, telehealth, remote work) that would not otherwise be available.

Conclusion

Reflecting on lessons learned, Open Campus and Juntos offer proof-of-concept that expanding the definition of an Extension agent can successfully engage new communities with innovative programming. Open Campus and Juntos programs have achieved measurable impacts in empowering Latinx students and families around postsecondary education along the entire K-12 pathway, expanding support for community college transfer students, and increasing the strength of relationships across the boundaries previously identified. This work has resulted in sustained collaboration with partners including K-12 systems, community colleges, other higher education institutions, and a wide variety of community organizations, governmental entities, and foundations across the state.

In response to the success of Open Campus and Juntos, these programs were elevated in late 2023 to be part of a new standalone unit within OSU Extension, allowing for the addition of new programs, funding mechanisms, and flexibility to streamline processes to support additional community members and students. In addition to adding a director of OSU Juntos and a director of OSU Open Campus, a third director of OSU Native American and Tribal programs was hired in 2024 to support the growing Extension initiatives with Native American/Alaska Native and Tribal communities. These three directors will continue building culturally relevant and community-based

teams, while also providing collective leadership for college and career access, student success, and community engagement.

Open Campus and Juntos also continue to refine data collection and long-term evaluation methods to better measure student, family, and community outcomes and impacts. Steps taken to further these goals include the adoption of a customer relationship management system for collecting student data, developing a set of metrics for all high school seniors in our program, and determining longer term student outcomes in a variety of ways (e.g., personal outreach, National Student Clearinghouse data, OSU and community college student data systems).

Along with growth comes the need for sustainable funding. Open Campus and Juntos have diversified funding over the last 10+ years, including university funding, shared positions with community partners, and grants. Future goals include a permanent financial investment from the state legislature for Open Campus and Juntos growth and a presence in all 36 counties in Oregon.

The OSU Open Campus and Juntos programs have shown how Extension can broaden the traditional role of Extension agents by creating “boundary spanning coordinators.” These coordinators still dive into the risky but innovative third space (Whitchurch, 2012), but with an expanded definition of a subject matter expert. This expansion is more than semantics; it is a profound philosophical shift that places relationship building, cocreation, culturally relevant practices, reciprocity, and community engagement at the heart of Extension. As evidenced throughout this article, boundary spanners have effectively connected diverse communities, community colleges, and universities, ushering in a new era of collaboration and mutual benefit. As Oregon continues its journey toward greater equity and prosperity, the Open Campus and Juntos programs stand as a testament to the power of fostering meaningful connections among education, communities, and opportunity.



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