

Extended Dialogue: Extending Service

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SPEAKERS

Andra Johnson, Ricky Telg, Phillip Stokes

R Ricky Telg 00:04

This is Science by the Slice, a podcast from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Center for Public Issues Education. In this podcast, experts discuss the science of issues affecting our daily lives reveal the motivations behind the decisions people make, and ultimately provide insight to solutions for our lives.

P Phillip Stokes 00:31

Welcome to Science by the Slice. I'm Phillip Stokes, and this is part two in our Extended Dialogue series. Dr. Andra Johnson grew up on a farm in rural Louisiana. His family raised cattle and grew cotton, corn and wheat. Those early experiences growing up working in agriculture motivated him to pursue a career that would enhance the livelihoods of families like his who produce the food and raw materials we all rely on. At an early age, Dr. Johnson recognized that access to knowledge and resources was not equitable among all farmers. He saw that even though his family worked incredibly hard to produce commodities, that hard work was by no means the only factor limiting success on the farm.

A Andra Johnson 01:25

I think over time, particularly as it relates to diversity, equity, inclusion, access, justice, all of those different things is really creating this level playing field. How do we create that level playing field?

P Phillip Stokes 01:42

In the second episode in our Extended Dialogue series, I spend time with Dr. Johnson in meaningful conversation about diversity, and the ways he thinks extension can support farmers and all citizens to be productive throughout their lives. Dr. Johnson believes that in order to be

inclusive, and for the public to be receptive of extension, developing trust is critical. People need to view Extension as a part of their own community, and that it is made up of people that they can identify with.

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Andra Johnson 02:14

We want to create an environment where you see yourself, which means that internally, we want people to feel that they are important that they are important, the work that they do is important, it's valuable for the state of Florida and even beyond that work is valuable. We appreciate that work. And we want people externally, our stakeholders to see themselves. So that when there is that level of trust that they can, that they can have in what we do.

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Phillip Stokes 02:47

Dr. Johnson recently became the dean of UF IFAS Extension, and the director of the Florida Cooperative Extension Service. In today's episode, I speak with Dr. Johnson about his experiences working and studying at land grant universities, some of the changes that have taken place throughout his life, and how he sees Cooperative Extension meeting the needs of all the community members they serve. Well, Dr. Andra Johnson, it's so great to have you on the pie sinners podcast science by the slice, and we're talking about the topic of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice. I know a lot of times, that's abbreviated as JEDI. So I might, I might call that JEDI from time to time, just so we don't have to say it out every single time. But before we get into our topic, and a little bit more about Extension, if you could just introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your position here at the University of Florida. I know you started November 1st right of 2021. Is that correct? That is correct. Okay, yeah. So just tell us a little bit about yourself.

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Andra Johnson 03:55

So I am originally from rural town in Louisiana, grew up on a farm and went and did my undergraduate work in Louisiana and in urban forestry, consequently, and then went on to do my graduate work in Pennsylvania. After completing my graduate work, went to served as a professor for a number of years teaching and also conducting research and then moved to Mississippi where I serve in an administrative capacity over the research unit there and then moved back to Louisiana were served, again over over research in the agriculture and food sciences. And then after which moved to Penn State, moved to Pennsylvania rather, and served as the associate director of Extension there before coming here to University of Florida. So it's been roughly two months now. So it's been a great learning experience thus far really getting around the state and learning from to our stakeholders, as well as our faculty in learning to the amazing work that's been done in those capacity. So it certainly has been exciting thus far.

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Phillip Stokes 05:12

Well, great. Yeah. And we're really excited to have you here. And of course, I'm excited to talk with you today. And then get to know you, as well as as you move on into your position. And I know there's so much good stuff ahead. So you know, you were just talking a little bit about

your experience. And correct me if I'm wrong, it seems like every stop from the time you were in undergrad to now you've been at a land grant institution, is that correct?

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Andra Johnson 05:38

That is correct. That's correct. So I've been fortunate has been fortunate to spend literally my entire career at a land grant institution, smaller institutions, land grant institution our 1890 institutions. I started my career there. And Louisiana and Mississippi before, as I said, moving to Pennsylvania, which is a 1862, institution, land grant institution. So it is really been a wonderful ride, and I am a real product of the land grant system.

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Phillip Stokes 06:09

Yeah, and I'm sure you've probably seen, like you said, You've been at a variety of institutions, you've probably seen things change. So I guess kind of one of my first questions for today is, I guess, how have you seen the rolls of land grant institutions change over time? And you can kind of answer that, in reference to diversity, equity, inclusion and justice, but also just generally, as well, like what have you seen in some of the changes in these institutions and the goals and their roles in society over time.

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Andra Johnson 06:42

So when you really look at the land grant and land grant mission, you can certainly see how those roles have changed, we've been really impacted by this continuous change, if you will, we're seeing change in demographics, we are seeing change as it relates to our environment. And so all of that change is really creating what I feel is greater opportunities for us to as a land grant system to better serve, particularly as we think about diversity, equity inclusion, as well as justice as we kind of think about it in that frame, there's an opportunity for extension and opportunity for the land grant to really become a part of that, to really help guide that and, and we have certain strengths that I think others do not have. And because of those strengths, I think we're in perfect position to kind of lead some of those efforts to be really a part of that to be a catalyst, in some cases, really facilitating conversation and bridging the gap. So I think Extension is in is in a wonderful position to really kind of take the lead, if you will, as it relates to, to some of the some of those things, those things that we've been challenged with for a number of years.

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Phillip Stokes 08:02

I guess maybe my next question going off of that is how do you see extension continuing to meet the needs of communities, because communities are changing, and, you know, even production, agriculture is changing, and the urban and ag continuum is changing? So how do you see Extension kind of continuing to meet those needs, just over time?

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Andra Johnson 08:26

You know, I think I think Extension has a wonderful model. And that model is really being

YOU KNOW, I THINK I THINK EXTENSION HAS A WONDERFUL MODEL. AND THAT MODEL IS REALLY BEING embedded in our communities, really developing relationships, within those communities, really understanding the needs of those within those various communities. And I think as we continue to do that, we will continue to pull back some of the layers, if you will, to, to really meet those needs it, it's a great opportunity for us to, to co create, with our with our communities, and really bring to bear if you will, the power of connections, the power of the connection to others the power of connection, in terms of our own network, the network of extension, that that expands not only on the various universities, such as University of Florida, we have such a huge connection there. But also we have this huge connection across the country, where we have other units extension units that are also doing work. So we have this huge network that we aren't we, as we are thinking about creating what communities and in our various counties and stakeholders, we're really bringing to bear all of that information, all of that networking, power, all of that brain power. We bring in all of that to solve specific problems. And I think so, extension is so uniquely positioned because of all of our connections because of the resources that we have to really, to really assist in moving forward.

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Phillip Stokes 09:59

Yeah, that's wonderful, and you know, I can say personally being a part of IFAS. Yeah, I mean, that's one of my favorite things that I get to do and feel like we're part of a larger community, state and even national kind of solving some of these challenging issues or just working together, connecting. Yeah, I think that's that's just a fantastic point. Getting back to kind of some of those diversity, equity, inclusion and justice issues. What does that mean to you, personally, over time? And how does that relate to your position here at the University of Florida?

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Andra Johnson 10:36

As I think about my experiences, and all of the experiences, experiences that happen, that I've gone through and walk through, one of the things that really drew me to Extension was growing up and seeing my family, my father and uncles, are really working tremendously hard to produce a crop year in after a year and in many cases, not really having access to resources, not having access to information. And because of that, they could never really fully be, what they were capable of being are producing what they're capable of producing, because they simply just did not have access did not have access to some of the programs, and so on and so forth. So it was it was this limitation. And so one of the things that even at a young age, I always knew that somehow, I was going to work to deal with that to come up with a solution for that so that others would not have the same issue. This is where Extension plays a unique role, again, really being in position to ensure that that all have access. So in a broad scheme of things, that that that also means that how do we create greater diversity in the workforce within us IFAS? How do we create a greater diverse workforce and not just a diverse workforce, but a workforce that is inclusive, a workforce that moves beyond simple parity, a workforce that is so diverse, is diverse, and to the degree where we have different experiences and different ideas and different solutions that we all bring to the table. And we are all enhanced by those those differences that will further enable us to be impactful in our communities. And so this is, this is in essence, what excites me and and we have a tremendous opportunity here in Florida, we've done a really good job, I think there's also an opportunity for us to even give, do even

more as it relates to creating and this inclusive, diverse environment, if you will, both internally as well as externally in terms of the stakeholders and our stakeholders in in our efforts in terms of meeting them.

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Phillip Stokes 13:02

Yeah, one of the things I think about as you're talking and in our discussion in general, how everyone just has a different lens and a different frame of reference. And it's at times, it's it's hard to step out of that. Right, you know, and so, you know, I like what you said that when we have these different perspectives and experiences we're enhancing, right, where it's enhancing what ifas can do and what extension can do. And it kind of creates a bigger impact. So yeah, I think that's just it's one of those things I think we got to recognize, but I think you just kind of hit on that great. How can an institution, such as UF IFAS do more for the kind of those JEDI topics in Ag and Natural Resources? Right, so agriculture, natural resources, you know, as you mentioned, with your personal story, historically, maybe has not there has not been the same amount of access, historically. And so what can be done moving forward to promote some of that justice and inclusivity?

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Andra Johnson 14:07

I think there are a number of things that that can be done. I think one of the challenges that that many institutions, particularly as it relates to extension have is creating that level of trust. And oftentimes that level of trust within various communities that that is not there, primarily because there's been a lack of consistency. Which means that and often, there have been cases where we're in communities, and we do maybe a project here and a project there, but it's not consistent. And because it's not consistent there, you never really build that level of trust. One of the things that I'm really very careful about is being this cookie cutter program, if you will, where we go into various communities and we Almost force feed them, what we want them to have, this is what we have. So we'll give you this. But that's not really meeting them where they are. They're not, that's not addressing the issues and the challenges that they have is simply doing an activity for the sake of activity. But yet not meeting people where they are, is important for us to as an extension unit to really meet people where they are to meet them to have those conversations to build those relationships. In that building relationships require time, it requires us being a part of that community, it requires us really engaging and having discussions and open dialogue, where we're creating space for people to be who they are recreating space for them to, to grow in this process. And also for us to grow in this process. So I think that's very, is critical, critical for Extension, to really be a part to be a part of the relationship building. I think that's critical as we as we move forward.

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Phillip Stokes 16:06

In Essence Extension, right is a service right to the community. And and I guess the word I, I'm thinking about his, his dignity, right? Like, we want to treat everyone with dignity, we want to listen, we want to, you know, as a university, and as extension faculty and staff, yeah, to really meet those needs. So what are some of the current initiatives of IFAS Extension, to meet some

more of the community needs to be more inclusive, to be more diverse to really account for the diversity of the state of Florida? What are some of the current initiatives? And what are your future plans and your goals? You know, what would you like to see happen as well?

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Andra Johnson 16:47

So I think some of the current initiatives, and obviously with me being relatively new, it's catching on to some of the things that they're taking, that's taking place. But some of the current initiatives, there's the the CIVIC initiative, which is a relationship with FAMU where communities are, in essence are coming together around racial understanding, I think those are important initiatives where, where it creates an opportunity for dialogue and conversation. There are a number of others in our various districts, in terms of efforts that are taking place as we move and continue to move forward. Some things that that crossed my mind and some things that I am, will really be kind of stressing as we continue to move forward is things such as creating greater space, more space, really having more communities of practice and affinity groups, where we're bringing together those who have a passion around certain issues, and those who have similar identities, bringing them together for a to bring them into a certain space that they are comfortable in comfortable in, in communicating and having dialogue and conversations. Cafe Latino is it's one of those other initiatives that I that I think is quite valuable. And we want to we want to uplift, elevate those, if you will, by really kind of encouraging, but also where there's opportunities to provide resources so that they can do certain things, I think is important as well. So looking into that, as also an opportunity to my previous organization or institution, one of the things that I led was called the Beyond Civil Rights Initiative. And this initiative really was the idea of going beyond simple parity in terms of internally in terms of our workforce, but also externally in terms of those who, who we're serving. And that means having greater conversation, that means being more reflective of the state of Florida, in terms of our personnel and our staff. And also in terms of who how we're serving who we're serving our, the goal is to be to serve all Floridians in whatever capacity that is, we all learn differently, which means that there's opportunities for not only face to face engagement, but virtual engagement, online engagement. So there's opportunities for us to continue to expand our region, in our audience. So I think we have a we have a unique opportunity. And I think COVID kind of pushed us into that place where now we have a unique opportunity to meet audiences that typically did not participate. For whatever reason they did not participate. So now we have an opportunity to really expand our audience into those spaces to create opportunities for them for the younger people to create even more opportunities for them in terms of what we're doing in the space of STEM and and how do we take it advantage of artificial intelligence in order to benefit some of our younger people to get them excited. And to think beyond what's typical as relates to agriculture, and start thinking of agriculture as as something even broader, where you can almost use any kind of skill set you have any kind of interest that you have, can fall in line with what we do in, in Extension. So I think there's, we have tremendous opportunity now to really, really expand our reach and, and meet a different audience and cater to to others as well.

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Phillip Stokes 20:38

Yeah, that's, that's fantastic insight. And yeah, I'd like that thinking beyond thinking outside the box, all those things. Is there anything else you'd like to add? I know, we just scratched the surface. It was really great talking to you. But I want to I want to open up it to see if there's

anything else that you'd like to share today on the podcast.

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Andra Johnson 21:02

So certainly, I think, as Extension continues to move and to think about the future and think about, how do we modernize Extension, our goal here and in an Extension is really to be customer focused, and customer centric, which means that we want to prioritize a experience, we want to prioritize the, our engagement with our stakeholders, that is, we want to ensure that we are meeting them where they are. One of the things that that that I've mentioned in other occasions is that we would like to be the go to, we want to be the first the first entity that is called when you think about the needs that you have, you know, there's obviously information everywhere at the click of your finger. But we want to be the go to, we want to have programs readily available at the drop of a dime 24/7 that when you need information, we're there. We have the information available, we have the people that are available, we have the call centers that are available. So we were really beginning to think about how do we push the envelope? And how do we be in position so that we are that, that that first entity and we want to create an environment where you see yourself?

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Phillip Stokes 22:21

Yeah, what I'm hearing from you is yeah, IFAS Extension can be the go to for a lot of for a lot of issues, community issues, you know, social issues. And of course, you know, those natural resources and ag ag issues as well. But, ya know, I, me personally, when people ask me, you know, hey, you know, for instance, I had a family member say, hey, you know, we have bees forming a hive in our house, who would you, you know, recommend I call it said, call your county extension agent, you know, like that kind of thing. Because, you know, if that person doesn't know exactly what to do, they'll at least know, you know, how to refer you to the the expertise on on that issue, whatever that issue is.

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Andra Johnson 23:03

And that's how we want all to think that's, that's what we're shooting for. I mean, that's our goal, we won't want that to be the first, the first thought that comes across your mind is call your county agent, call your county extension person and they can they can help you in solving your issue.

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Phillip Stokes 23:31

I want to thank Dr. Andra Johnson for being a guest on Science by the Slice. We have two more episodes to come in our Extended Dialogue series. Be sure to subscribe to Science by the Slice on your preferred podcast app, so you'll be notified as soon as they are released. If you have questions about the podcast or you'd like to share any feedback, you can email us at piecenter@ifas.ufl.edu. That is piecenter all one word at ifas.ufl.edu I want to thank everyone involved with Science by the Slice. Michaela Kandzer, Rachel Rabon, Valentina Castano, Sidney Honeycutt, Ricky Telg, Ashley McLeod-Morin, and Alena Poulin. I'm Phillip Stokes. Thanks for listening to Science by the Slice.

