# Episode 5: Just Keep Swimming

*[Intro Music]*

**[Intro]**

**Julie:**

Hello. This is Stop, Collaborate and Listen!  We are Julie

**Eve:**

and Eve.

**Julie:**

This show is all about relationships, but just not in the way you might think. We're talking about partnerships for those of us who are connecting public audiences with science and science with public audiences. Today we're talking about maintaining healthy partnerships over time.

**Eve:**

Dear Stop, collaborate and listen,

 I'm the lead of a project team made up of science center practitioners and university-based researchers. When we formed our team, there were a lot of discussions about expectations, roles, responsibilities, and, team dynamics. Since then, we've really taken a deep dove into our work and have moved on from these discussions. Is it enough to have these conversations initially when forming a team, or is there more that I should be doing to ensure a healthy team dynamic?

I'm concerned that the team dynamic could fall apart and that all the work in the beginning would just be for not.

Signed,

Just keep swimming.

**Julie:**

Yeah. This is a really complex and pretty common dilemma and there really isn't one right answer for how to keep things going. What types of practices you need to have in place? It all really depends on the context. So we're going to get into that and some different approaches for keeping partnerships going.

**[Discussion with Guest]**

**Eve:**

And to help us tackle this issue today. We're talking with Nathan Meyer, who's worked for almost 20 years with extension at the University of Minnesota. As part of our broader impacts design project or BID, Nate was partnering with the Minnesota Zoo. Nate, we're thrilled to have you with us today. Thank you so much for being here.

**Nate:**

Yes, it's great to be here. I look forward to the conversation.

**Eve:**

So before we even dive into these healthy relationships, I actually want to just talk about extension. This is sort of your this has been your realm for a long time. And in some ways, it's kind of the OG broader impact. Right. Can you tell us a little bit more? What is extension and how does this fit into what we're talking about here today?

**Nate:**

Yeah, across the United States, there are typically a variety of different land grant universities. There are 1862 land grants and then 1890 historically black land grants, and 1994 tribal land grants. And each of these institutions, in one way or another, has in common a dedicated part of their mission focused on outreach, taking university research and resources out to the public to help solve problems.

So at the University of Minnesota, the way that is manifest is through a variety of programs in different centers and disciplines. We have agricultural and natural resources programs, community vitality programs, youth-focused programs, and programs that focus on family resilience and resources.

Extension programs take a whole variety of different formats and forms. Many of you may be familiar with the 4H program across the country.

That's a youth-focused program that involves youth in learning and leadership in a variety of different ways and across disciplines to follow their own interests and passions, but also to become young changemakers and be a part of solving wicked problems.

**Eve:**

It's clear in what you've said that extension work is rooted in the work of partnership. So I'm curious thinking now about the broader impacts community. What can we learn? And specifically, what can our listener just keep swimming? What do you think they can learn about from extension, about partnerships and how to keep them strong over time?

**Nate:**

There are a number of things that come to mind. You know, first and foremost. All of the extension educators who I work with in Minnesota and really all of us actually have engagement as a primary performance criteria for our work. And by that, we mean that every year a part of what we pay attention to in our jobs is cultivating those productive, working connections with the range of people from, you know, our program participants and the communities in which they live and work up through professionals and other organizational stakeholders, or the university faculty who again are entwined in tackling the problems that we're trying to solve.

But the other thing I think that is really important and maybe illustrative of the nature of extension is I think that it helps broader impacts design relationships to focus on creating or co-creating more durable program channels. That's really important to making the most of these broader impacts relationships work over the long term. Is finding durable channels and creating more institutional relationships to allow them to continue in the midst of inevitable staffing changes and the movement of our own careers.

**Julie:**

And Nate we had a lot of the inevitable staffing changes, right, and certainly spurred on by COVID and what a crisis that was for museums and zoos and science centers because of their lack of visitation during that time, it really changed the staffing structure for a lot of our partners.

I wanted to kind of take a turn back into the broader impacts design partnership, and I'm hearing something in your discussion about durability. Like 4H is a durable set of programs. It's not even just one program, it's a whole suite of programs. And that way it can sustain somebody leaving who has the relationship that makes a partnership work because someone else is coming in and they don't have to design a program. They just have to rebuild relationship and connection. And I'm wondering about it. As there's this turnover in partnerships, how often do partners need to kind of reconnect not just for the sole purpose of reflecting on where is this partnership, what kind of practices are working for us? And maybe even assess changing practice or changing direction moving forward?

**Nate:**

My hunch is that it depends is the answer.

**Julie:**

That's the unsatisfying answer for so many of our questions. Context is everything.

**Nate:**

Early on, I think it's important to check in a lot. When we started working between the zoo and the university in our broader impacts design partnership, we were on the phone - believe it or not, Zoom wasn't as much of a thing back then, so it was legitimately the phone we were on, you know, talking every couple of weeks and checking in about what we were doing, how we were progressing, what we needed to do next. And honestly, we got to the point in, in our relationship of hosting what I think was a really useful meeting where we brought an important group of staff from the zoo and staff from the university together.

And our goal was to try to expand the relationship beyond just a handful of us, to try to begin to institutionalize it. I can say in retrospect, one of those meetings wasn't enough, right? Because good ideas started to spark. There were a few follow-up calls, often one-on-one, and then when COVID hit and we really retreated to our corners and ended up in our homes, the energy just sort of petered out.

So, you know, I draw from that a belief that had we been able to continue that on an annual basis or something for a few years, or just inviting our colleagues from across the organizational divide to other kinds of meetings that would have been helpful.

As relationships mature though, then I find that we meet less frequently, right? We have something durable often it's operating at a more institutional level. We understand what each other are doing and

what we can provide. It's almost more maintenance and in times of change that those meetings become important again. So I know the person you've worked with for many, many years is leaving. We want to introduce you to the new person or our organization is going through a transformation. We want to introduce you to our new organizational structure, a new program.

There's a new opportunity. I think those kinds of things can happen so early on. Building the relational capital, meeting more frequently to understand each other and work on moving it up into a programmatic and institutional relationship feels important. And then once you get there tending over time to be mindful of meeting about changes, about new opportunities, about issues that might come up are important.

**Julie:**

I love that. And it seems like it's not just about sort of tending to it over time, but also about transparency, making sure that if something's happening in your organization that you acknowledge that even if you don't know how it might impact your partner, just kind of keeping them in the loop so they can see things coming, changes coming.

**Eve:**

You know, it also makes me think of some of the tools that members of this team developed as a part of the project, and they're available at the project website that are specifically focused on sort of doing that self-inventory of the two partnering organizations and then comparing notes. These are intended to be something that both help you check in with your own organization, your own priorities and goals, and then make sure that you're explicitly sharing those with your partner.

And we have those framed on our website as something to visit, only the beginning of a partnership. But actually what I'm hearing you say, and I think this is spot on, is that actually that's something probably we should revisit in times of change. And as a part of maintenance, as a new staff member comes in, you have to kind of go back to some of those initial assumptions.

The premise for the partnership check-in, does it still feel right? Does it still make sense with the new staffing, with the new priorities of the group? So I love thinking of that not just as something for the get-go, but actually as a part of maintenance.

**Nate:**

I agree. I still today think of understanding a university faculty member's legacy as a really important part of the conversation. I want to understand where they're really going so that I can find that connection and likewise getting out into the community and understanding their missions and how their missions connect are really important. But the broader impacts menu that we learned about through the project and we created was really instrumental for me in thinking about what are my durable connection points for faculty members, what I did, which was it was great again, I still use it.

I actually created the menu and then I created a budget for every menu. So it forced us to think through what is this really cost in terms of time, staff, and money? And we did that and it all rippled up so we could look at an inventory from the most intensive co-creative kind of relationship to, you know, it costs you almost nothing to throw a blurb that you write into our newsletter.

But we had a whole spectrum and we could think through that. And again, that kind of menu I think is really important and also instrumental in helping in the dialog with faculty and community partners to understand what is missing. You know, is there something that is a whole in our current menu? It's something that you really feel like you need to achieve your legacy or to achieve your mission that we're missing that can help us understand how to create it.

**Julie:**

Now, that's great to hear that the tools are useful beyond the broader impacts design partnership, but just for sort of self assessment and reflection in general, I want to ask you a little bit about institutionalization. We've talked a lot about durability in this discussion, but also in this project. And it really was one of the goals is understanding what kinds of partnership practices do we need to put in place, including developing and using tools to generate durability?

Is that goal of durability and institutionalization sometimes too centered in our process? And what I mean by that is do we sometimes skip over the really important parts of developing a relationship to privilege? The goal of institutionalization or durability?

**Nate:**

I think the answer is probably yes.

**Julie:**

So it's something we observe in reflections with the bid teams, with their partners. There was a little bit of going back later and saying, I wish we put more time into the relationship ahead of time, or because

COVID did create so much turnover, the institutionalization goals were sort of challenged by context of the moment and the time. And that doesn't mean that the partnerships aren't successful necessarily.

Right. And so I, I think I'm interested in this idea of institutionalization overshadowing the other positive outcomes of partnerships.

**Nate:**

What I'm hearing you saying is that we can sometimes rush to institutionalize something that does not result in genuine partnerships. I would say genuine partnerships are instrumental to good broader impacts design. And so I think you're right, we did not in our project achieve some of the kind of institutionalized things that I heard about in our broader impacts design cohort and I see them happening more frequently actually around the U.S. like the, you know, the broader impacts design bootcamps at a university or something where, you know, there's a design every year you bring in your five museums and you set them down with new faculty and you do sort of a mixer, potentially an institution can get ahead of itself in doing that without really taking the time to put in place genuine partnerships. There is some point where we talked about, you know, that progression of moving the relationship upward to the institution. And I do think there's something about that buy in about it being more than two individuals that really contributes to a durable relationship.

But at the same token, it's important to always have those two individuals. I think that it's probably important to prioritize always having those rich, engaged human connections. But when those can be channeled through durable programs or sort of institutional relationships, that can be really important.

**Julie:**

I'm hearing you talk about what I think amounts to trust, right? So building trust. And I think sometimes when we're talking about partnerships, we get to abstract and think about trust between organizations. But it's important to remember and kind of, you know, ground in reality that trust is an experience of individuals and it's the stories they share about their experiences of being in relationship with others in their organization that build that kind of organizational level trust.

And I think it's really important what you're saying is giving people a lot of opportunity to build that sort of trust. I heard you say something about the quiet channels between organizations being really important to maintain, and that can sound kind of cryptic or even nefarious. But I agree it's really important to have that informality built in to your conversations to say, I'm calling you on the phone or maybe nowadays on Zoom to say I care about how what my organization does, I care about the decisions that my program makes and how they affect you, I think is a really important piece of advice.

So yeah, I just wanted to highlight that you have said that Nate because it really when we focus on institutionalization, we're thinking about organizations as these abstract entities, but they are organizations made up of individual people with relationships.

**Eve:**

So much of what we're saying today is highlighting the importance of allowing time, allowing time the most valuable and scarce of resources for so many of us to continue to nurture these relationships, to not only develop and establish trust, but also to make sure it's still there. That takes ongoing cultivation. Do you have any tips for how we can all set aside that time?

How we can all I hate to say this but justify setting aside the time that's really necessary to continue to nurture these relationships.

**Nate:**

You know, I think it's difficult, right. Even even in an organization that I work for, where we make engagement a part of our annual performance expectation, it's still always difficult. I think this can happen in a range of ways and at different levels. You know, one is to split up your relationship building effort into some steps. Usually when we get together for that trust building, that relating, it's with a purpose.

And so, you know, there's an agenda, there's a reason for the meeting. And I think if we collect some of those milestones along the way, that can add up to something that may not look big at the start and may sort of not have a clear direction. But when you look in hindsight and you can see that journey, it adds up the more you can capture that intentionality, whether it's in a Google document or if you use like a customer relationship database, you know, just capturing those notes about why you're meeting, for what reason what you're trying to build can help capture that journey along the way.

You know, I would invite invite people into ongoing staff meetings and we have a few important staff meetings through the year. I would invite people in if you have a conference event. So I think these are all ways that we can build that relational capital in the midst of our existing things that again help you get jump started.

And then maybe eventually you reach a point where you can co-develop that kind of opportunity together. Right? When we start to talk about those broader impacts, design, you know, boot camps, if it's done right and there's already strong relational capital there, then that annual gathering or that periodic gathering of those people to come in and, you know, build those new relationships, I think reinforces that trust and that familiarity that you've built up.

**Julie:**

I love how you talked about building these activities into things that are already valued by your organization. So it's sort of a cohort operation, but it also means you don't have to justify relationship building in and of itself. It's part of the bigger picture. It's integrated into something that doesn't need a lot of justification because it's known to be a value over time.

I also heard something about partners. You know, there might be these dyad partners and in the BID project we talk a lot about University and Science Center in partnership with two individual brokers. But I also heard you talk about that as an opening, a gateway to other partnerships, right? Other relationships and that sort of that bringing together of two different networks that expands both members of that partnerships - relationships of social capital in the region. If we're talking geographically. I like that and think that's an important point.

I want to ask you kind of a counter question. It's a negatively framed question, and I don't mean this in such, but I really want our listeners to have the option to kind of self-assess after this, and we'll point them in the show notes to some of the tools that BID has available.

But in your experience, Nate, how do you know when the partnership's not healthy? What are those kind of indicators that let you know something's really wrong here? And then in those instances, what's your first response?

**Nate:**

So, you know, individually, if the person I'm trying to build a relationship with seems guarded, if they don't show up to meetings, they don't seem engaged. I mean, you know, there are all kinds of one on one interactive things that can signal that maybe your working to build a relationship with someone who isn't the right connection or, you know, the time isn't right.

Timing has a lot to do with this. Again, we talked in discovered in our partnerships that there are points in a university faculty members career trajectory when they're really eager and open to developing those new broader impacts, design relationships. Some faculty have that locked down and you just may become an added at the wrong time. And likewise, you know, I've worked in botanical conservatories and nature centers and we have an annual cycle of events and things that we need to do that if you caught me at the wrong time, I didn't have the bandwidth, right?

So I think there's there's individual indicators. We talked about building trust, but I think there's also as we develop these relationships a familiarity with the institutional organizational ecosystem or system that surround the people you're working with because that has an influence too, right? What are your performance expectations? What is valued in that organization? How is your ability to manage and co-create with partners valued?

What is the annual financial cycle can have a big difference. When I work with federal partners on federal projects, it's a completely different financial cycle than when we work with state partners and state projects. Universities have something called indirect. It's funding that is formulaically included in a grant proposal in order to cover our broader operations. But that can be a big surprise to non-governmental or NGO partners, nonprofit partners in the community.

So there's all sorts of familiarity that comes into play that, again, in some cases may signal that, you know, you just may get to a point where a partnership isn't going to work out. I think there can be overall, you know, social and political and economic things going on that, again, can influence partnerships. Many of us had these kinds of influences when we move through the COVID pandemic, when we couldn't get together, there were restrictions on how we normally do business, restrictions on financial flows, all kinds of things that impacted our ability to partner productively.

It should not be expected. It certainly wasn't the case in our broader impacts design partnership that all of the relationships work out on the same timeline or even at all.

**Julie:**

So it sounds like to pay attention to the health of partnerships, you really need to be tuned in to the subtleties of communication and timing. And those are two things that I heard you say is people being guarded or not showing up to meetings, but also not sort of taking the time to understand the context of institutions and the different timelines that different types of programs and projects are working on.

**Eve:**

So Nate, there is so much that we've covered here today. I've heard you talk about this need to really check in even if the tempo of check-ins changes, there is a need for sort of continuous check-ins as maintenance at times of change. I really like the point that we discussed about not losing sight of the relationships when we get focused on institutionalization, I think that striking that balance is really critical. And then finally, you know, we talked a lot about trust and transparency, and I really am going to think a lot about this idea of building in ways to cultivate trust and transparency into the activities that you already have underway. I want to ask if you want to leave our listener, Just Keep Swimming with sort of one final piece of advice on how to check in on the health of relationships from a broader impacts perspective. What would that be?

**Nate:**

Yes, Just Keep Swimming, I think the one piece of advice that I would offer that for me that encapsulates everything we've talked about today is to intentionally and continually invite that transparent trust building relationship. I think the institutional and durable channels that we're working in are really important, but it's too easy to rush toward that transaction before we cultivate the trust and the connection.

And again, when I reflect on what I learned in the broader impacts design process, it is the rich value of understanding the legacy that a faculty member wants to leave, or frankly, the partner who we're working with at a museum, a nature center, a community organization. We all want to leave a legacy. And to really understand that and to understand the mission of where we're headed and to be able to keep that between us is so important.

**Julie:**

Nate, when you're talking about broader impacts legacy, I think researchers are so used to talking about what their research is, but sometimes they forget to tell interested listeners why they do their research. And I think that's kind of what you're talking about with legacy is if partners with research related, broader impacts all keep in mind the why of this and the role of the broader perhaps activity in getting researchers towards their why.

So you know they might be studying some geochemical process but the reason isn't just to know about geochemical process. It might be to help come up with solutions for wicked problems like climate change. So I just wanted to hear your reflections a little bit on what you meant by legacy.

**Nate:**

Yeah, you captured it spot on. It's really understanding. I think the why of what we're all doing. I think that that is true for our research colleagues, but also true of most of the community organizations and informal education organizations we work with. There's always a why I was reviewing an article today for a paper that I'm writing, and a part of the paper talked about the fundamental importance of creating narratives of hope to drive transformative change and resilience.

And I have a hunch that that's true of these kinds of durable,  productive partnerships too, that the more we can really find a shared narrative of hope, hope in what we're doing, hope in what we want to accomplish, that's going to drive a relationship. It's going to give us beacons that we aim for, even if it's not in the form of a specific legacy that we want to leave, but but hope for a change we want to see. I think that can really drive a good partnership.

**Julie:**

Wow, that's really powerful. Thinking about shared narrative of hope, we talk a lot in the broader impacts community about broader impacts, identities and sort of connecting the broader impacts work that you do to the things that you value and all the sort of multiple dimensions of your identity, not just your professional identity and shared narratives of hope, really kind of centers that and gives that some gravity. I really like it. Thank you.

**Eve:**

That's great. Well, Nate, thank you so, so much for joining us today. This has been a fabulous conversation. We really appreciate it.

**Nate:**

Thanks all for having me. And for all the work you've done, it's a brilliant project, a wonderful tool kit, and I appreciate all the things that have sparked from it.

**Eve:**

Thanks so much.

*[Outro Music]*

**[End Credits]**

**Eve:**

Thanks for listening to Stop, Collaborate and Listen with your hosts. Eve Klein from the Institute for Learning Innovation and

**Julie:**

Julie Risien from the Oregon State University's STEM Research Center.

**Eve:**

There are so many partners who supported this work. For a full list, please see our podcast description. Specifically, we want to thank Liz Neely from Liminal and Julia Furlan for their guidance and consultation.

**Julie:**