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A Process for Learning About and Creating Programs for Culturally Diverse Audiences

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Abstract

This article provides a process for responding to the charge by Extension to be more effective in reaching culturally diverse audiences. A process for learning about these audiences includes using academic resources; learning from culturally specific media; attending cultural events; visiting locations frequented by members of the target population; and enlisting help from a cultural guide. Using this process will result in knowing how to create programming by answering such questions as: how members of the target population learn, who participates in learning, and where learning takes place. Educational programming created using this process is more likely to be effective in attracting and providing benefit to the target audience because it takes into account the cultural perspective of the audience served.

Introduction

Extension educators need to develop educational programs for an increasingly diverse society. In order for these programs to be effective, educators must know how to learn about culturally diverse audiences so that they can effectively reach them. This paper describes a step-by-step process for accomplishing this task.

For the past decade, it has been argued that Extension programs must be responsive to the critical issues facing culturally diverse audiences. The critical issues that arise within such culturally diverse communities vary by population group and geographic location. Individuals and families from diverse cultural groups struggle with issues such as marriage and family relationships, managing finances, securing housing, and providing healthy meals for family members. With that said, many of the publications and training provided by Extension are about "being sensitive to multicultural issues" or "creating a diverse climate." Little is said about how to actually create culturally appropriate programs that address the critical issues of culturally diverse audiences.

Guidance for enhancing diversity comes from two Extension documents. The first document, Pathway to Diversity (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1992), is a strategic plan that serves as a guide for the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) to become a more diverse and multicultural organization. This plan indicates that Extension needs to be more effective in reaching audiences that reflect diversity in today's society and that members of culturally diverse groups should be participants in all aspects of the Cooperative Extension Service.

The strategic goals from Pathway to Diversity (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1992) particularly relevant to the objectives of this paper are as follows:

1. CES will expand the diversity of current and potential audiences and programs to reflect the population groups of the nation, states, and territories in selecting and developing programs.
2. The CES will include members of diverse groups as full and influential participants in all aspects of CES, especially in decision-making and in establishing policies that shape the organization and its programs.

The second document that provides guidance for developing programs for culturally diverse

audiences is *The Extension System: A Vision for the 21st Century* (National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges 2002). The authors of this report present a vision for Extension to address contemporary issues of the people it serves. The authors describe an attitude of knowing that we have as much to learn from our community partners as they have to learn from Extension's resources and information. To be effective in responding to this charge, Extension educators need to learn from and develop partnerships with members of culturally diverse audiences and provide educational programs in ways that reflect their cultures.

The process described below has been refined for establishing partnerships with community groups with different cultural experiences. Together, we developed programs that addressed relevant issues in their community. One of these professional experiences included directing the Community University Partnership in Education and Service (CUPES), a Kellogg-funded university/community partnership at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. The partnership was between the Academic Health Center at the University of Minnesota and the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis, one of the poorest and most culturally diverse communities in Minnesota. The partnership was governed by a board of directors of health science faculty including physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and dentists from the University and community residents from the Phillips Neighborhood that included Native American, Latino, Asian American, and African-American individuals.

The second professional experience in which this learning occurred was the coordination of HIV/AIDS education with the Minneapolis Red Cross for high-risk populations. Again, educational programs were developed in partnership with culturally diverse community groups. During these professional experiences, individuals from diverse cultures very patiently taught us about their culture and how to implement educational programs with community groups and community organizations.

Strategies for learning about the community

The authors of *Pathway to Diversity* (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1992) present a vision and mission for change to achieve audience and program diversity. *Pathway to Diversity* provides guidance for integrating diversity into the work of Extension education. The first step is learning about the cultural group in which a program is to be implemented.

How does one learn about a specific cultural group? Schauber and Castania (2001) remind us of Extension's beginnings, when time was spent with prospective audiences to learn what people valued. Extension educators built relationships and earned the trust of people in the community. This is exactly where Extension educators need to be today, developing relationships and partnerships with people in the community, even though the community might be culturally more diverse and more complex than it was in the early days of Extension.

Strategies for learning about a specific cultural group include using academic resources; listening to media and reading newspapers; attending cultural events; visiting locations regularly frequented by members of the targeted group; and identifying a cultural guide. All of these strategies, described below, can be used to better understand a culture. They can be used in any order, and the pace at which they are used can vary. These strategies offer an Extension educator the opportunity to become immersed in cultural information.

The strategies also complement each other. For example, visiting an ethnic marketplace may raise unanswered questions. "Why does the Latino market sell tongue?" "What is the historical significance of this food?" The answers to these questions might be found in scholarly literature. They can also be answered by a cultural guide.

As one considers information about a cultural group, attention should be paid to such things as how families function, how learning takes place, how events are celebrated in the culture, why they are celebrated in the way they are, and what struggles members of a particular community face every day. This information is helpful in planning educational programs.

Most importantly though, this process must begin with the attitude that members of the targeted cultural group have much to teach us about who they are and what programs will be most effective. This attitude, as described in *The Extension System: A Vision for the 21st Century* (2002), will help Extension educators learn from their community partners. The authors state that we need to share leadership with those who have the most relevant information and who operate at a level close to the issues. Extension educators may have the content knowledge but need to

learn from individuals representing the targeted cultural group about how to effectively provide programs.

As one begins this learning process, it is helpful to be aware of possible community partners with whom programs can be developed. It is also important to know that learning takes time, and that it will continue for the duration of a relationship with a community.

Use academic resources to learn about the target group. Academic resources include journal articles, books, other scholarly works, and academicians themselves. Identify academicians who represent the targeted cultural group or who may be from the dominant culture but have spent considerable time working with the targeted group. If there is limited access to college or university libraries, use on-line resources. Because there are so many sources of information available on-line, readers must be cautious about the source and credibility of the information. Some information may be backed by an individual's opinion rather than backed by a scholarly source.

Listen to media and read newspapers that are sources of information for members of the target population. Tune in to television and radio stations that are important to members of the targeted cultural group. Identify these television or radio stations by asking members of the target population what they listen to. Many larger cities have African-American radio stations that are managed by and are broadcast for the African-American community. These stations may promote events in the community of interest to African-Americans, provide forums addressing health issues that disproportionately affect African-Americans, and play music from the African culture. Cable television may also have similar programs provided by and developed for a specific cultural group.

Other sources of cultural information are newspapers published by and for specific cultural groups. These newspapers can often be found in grocery stores or other public places frequented by members of a specific cultural group. Sometimes these newspapers are sold for a nominal fee, but often they are free. These newspapers usually provide news items and information about events as well as articles about issues important to the target population. For example, a Latino newspaper might highlight the upcoming Cinco de Mayo celebration and might list the celebration events and provide an explanation of the importance of the celebration in the Latino culture.

Attend cultural events sponsored by the target community. Examples of cultural events that one might attend include pow wows or Juneteenth Day celebrations. These events usually have very special meaning to members of a specific cultural group. Consequently, it would be helpful to learn about the event or celebration before attending. Attend such events in a respectful way and observe in order to learn. For example, it might be inappropriate to participate in a dance at a pow wow unless invited. Participation in activities without understanding what they mean to the members of the community could be seen as disrespectful. Making judgments about a practice or comparing a practice to practices in the dominant culture could also be disrespectful. Being a quiet presence that does not distract from an event is also respectful. By being respectful, one can learn a great deal about family life, customs, and heritage that can be useful in planning and implementing educational programs.

Visit locations regularly frequented by members of the target population. Ethnic market places, grocery stores, clothing stores, and art galleries that serve culturally diverse population groups are places to learn about a target audience. Such places often provide items that are not available in mainstream stores. In ethnic grocery stores one can learn what foods are commonly eaten by members of a specific cultural group. The foods people eat are usually part of one's cultural history. Many traditional foods are important because they were available in the region where ancestors lived or they have religious significance.

Markets or clothing stores might also provide information about family life, spiritual practices, and cultural history. Ceremonial clothing might be available that can be helpful in understanding cultural events or ceremonies. Artwork may also provide visual narratives of cultural heritage.

Visiting locations regularly frequented by members of the target population can also provide information about family life. Visiting a grocery store frequented by Latino families can reveal that Latino families typically buy groceries and shop as an entire family with the children, father, and mother all present. In the Latino culture, knowing that family members often do things together is important when planning and implementing educational programs.

Identify a cultural guide. A "cultural guide" is someone representing the targeted cultural group who can teach about and clarify understanding of a culture, and provide direction to additional resources. A formal or informal relationship can be developed with one or more cultural guides. For example, an individual may have an occasional informal relationship with a person who answers questions. An individual might also have a more formal arrangement with a person that includes regular meetings. That person would also provide information and answer questions.

In some cases, depending on the time involved and the relationship, the cultural guide should be compensated for his or her time and knowledge. This compensation should be appropriate within the person's culture. In some cultures, money is not considered an appropriate gift to show appreciation; rather giving an item of value within that culture may be more appropriate.

Some individuals from some cultural groups are very willing to teach others about their culture and others are not. There are no clear-cut guidelines for how to find cultural guides, but they are likely to emerge as the other strategies are pursued. Again, an attitude of respect for the culture and the cultural guide's way of teaching are important. Let the cultural guide teach in the way he or she chooses to teach, which may be the way that teaching is done in that culture. In some cultures teaching is done through story-telling, in which case questions are not answered directly. If the Extension educator has a desire to learn and gain an appreciation for the richness of a specific culture, a member of the group will most likely emerge as a teacher.

Creating educational programming

Most Extension educators are part of the dominant European-American, middle-class culture and probably are very comfortable with educational programs that involve sitting at desks or at a table in an educational setting with an educator who provides information. There is an expectation of some degree of interaction between student and teacher, and a book or manual might be used as a guide. PowerPoint slides might be used, coffee breaks may be included, and a certificate or other evidence of completion is often provided at the end of the session.

Learning about a specific cultural group through the strategies described above may teach us that the educational model preferred by members of the dominant culture might be very inappropriate for a culturally diverse audience. Below are some initial questions Extension educators might ask to help guide the planning of educational programs for culturally diverse audiences.

- How do members of this audience learn?
- Who participates in learning?
- Where does learning take place?

In planning and implementing an educational program, it is important to develop a partnership with a community group or community organization that is representative of the targeted audience. For example, it would be useful to plan and implement a nutrition education program for Asian Americans with a social service organization that serves Asian Americans. In addition to the knowledge gained through the strategies described, the social service organization will have knowledge and experience about effectively serving that population.

How do members of a targeted cultural group learn? Many cultural groups learn from elders in their community. In some cultural groups, teaching is done by men or women, depending upon the topic. Some cultural groups learn through story-telling, others learn through music. It would be important to include teaching methods that are culturally appropriate.

Many cultural groups routinely share food as part of any event or learning experience. If this is the case for the targeted audience, culturally appropriate food should be provided.

Who participates in learning? As Extension educators consider educational programs for diverse cultural groups, they should consider who participates in learning about the culture. In some cultures married couples attend events together. In other cultures, the entire family attends most events. Inviting only one member of the family may result in no one attending.

It may also be important to know who in the family is likely to be the decision-maker. For some content areas, such as family finances, it would be essential that the family decision-maker be invited to participate in the educational program if behavioral change is to take place. In some cultures the family decision-maker is the husband, and in other cases, the decision-maker is an

elder.

In addition, when planning family life education, one might want to think about who is defined as "family" in the targeted cultural group. Sometimes aunts, uncles, godparents, or friends are considered "family" and may be appropriate to include in family life education.

Where does learning take place? Although Extension educators sometimes assume that schools or government buildings are places where individuals would want to come to learn, that is not always true for members of some cultural groups. Sometimes understanding a culture's history will present clues to appropriate places for educational programs. For some cultural groups, government buildings are not comfortable places to learn because their relationships with government agencies have not always been positive. Instead, a church setting or community building may be more likely to result in better attendance.

Conclusion

Extension educators continue to struggle to develop educational programs that attract and are beneficial to a wide array of cultural groups. The strategies described in this paper allow one to think about educational programs from the perspective of the audience, rather than from the more traditional educational models that Extension typically uses. Using this process can result in educational programs that are more effectively serving the target audience.

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