

Planning Programs to Break Down Cultural Barriers¹

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This paper is the fifth in a series of articles on planning programs to effectively outreach to diverse audiences. This series will include specialized papers on enhancing cultural competence, recruiting diverse volunteers, planning culturally appropriate marketing strategies, and other topics that are integral to the design and implementation of culturally relevant Extension education programs.

Connecting Cross-Culturally

Learning about cultural differences in customs and beliefs is the beginning of a rewarding journey toward building trust, cross-cultural communication, and competence. When Extension professionals study cultural traditions, norms, practices, values, and learning styles, they are more prepared to effectively deliver services and connect with culturally different individuals on a deeper level. It is important to keep in mind that everyone is unique in his or her own way, so cultural norms should be viewed as guidelines, not as absolutes. This awareness will serve to enhance Extension's services and communications with audiences, rather than to stereotype individuals or communities.

Cultural Guides

Most often, the way to truly understand an individual, family, or community that differs dramatically from your own heritage is to hear directly from them in regards to their needs and concerns. However, sometimes that is not possible, so to gain a better understanding of a particular ethnic community the Extension professional should talk to an insider, or cultural guide/cultural broker.

Cultural guides are an excellent source for breaking through cultural barriers and connecting on a more intimate level with diverse ethnic communities. When Extension professionals reach out and make genuine efforts to increase their knowledge and awareness of others, they are often met with positive responses. A cultural guide may be willing to engage in a learning/teaching process when approached from a position of equality and shared meaning. Cultural guides are invaluable to Extension professionals in the following ways:

- planning the way lessons are taught in an effort to maximize learning style preferences;
- determining activities and learning experiences that would be most effective and meaningful for the specific cultural or ethnic group;

- designing marketing approaches to reach diverse audiences and ethnic communities; and
- obtaining volunteers from within the ethnic group to assist Extension professionals in providing the best service possible.

Selecting Cultural Guides

Extension programs will benefit most from seeking consultation with more than one cultural guide, as there may be numerous organizations, advocates, and individuals who represent the cultural and ethnic groups in the communities receiving services. Also, focusing solely on members of a particular ethnic group who hold formal offices or positions may not be the best strategy for connecting with diverse cultural communities. It is important to remember that formal leaders of a community may not necessarily be viewed positively, so contacting informal leaders is also very important. Informal leaders may often be the gatekeepers and opinion leaders in the community. Remember, each person can bring slightly different perspectives and viewpoints.

Getting Beyond Cultural Barriers

You may ask yourself, "How can I get beyond cultural barriers in order to develop real cross-cultural connections?"

Extension educators must first value and respect the community in order to be valued and respected themselves. If the agent is involved in the community, the community may in turn want to be involved in Extension services. The Extension professional must engage members of the community in all stages of Extension programming (e.g., members represented on advisory boards, etc.). This is a major step toward building a deeper relationship with the community.

Culturally sensitive language is another aspect of building relationships in diverse communities. Insensitive language will definitely interfere with developing quality cross-cultural connections. For example, use of the simple phrase "you people," when speaking to or about a cultural group could be construed as negative. The Extension professional must use language that values diversity and cross-cultural connections.

Extension agents must also be mindful of how other individuals prefer to be "named" and identified. Examples would be the preference of a community to be referred to as, Jamaican rather than African American, or Asian rather than Oriental. One must be sensitive of how others define themselves if feelings of trust, respect, and understanding are to develop between the Extension professional and the community. When in doubt, ask questions.

Planning Culturally Relevant Programs

Twelve essential strategies can serve as a valuable roadmap toward finding common ground:

1. Develop programs to address the "real-life, felt or expressed needs" of the community.
2. Offer programs in familiar surroundings: neighborhood churches, schools, etc.
3. Meet in a location serviced by public transportation systems if necessary.
4. Take childcare needs into account when planning Extension services if necessary.
5. Offer culturally appropriate door prizes or refreshments.
6. Take cultural holidays and community gatherings into consideration so that your programs do not conflict.
7. Dress appropriately and respectfully for the culture group you are serving.
8. Select visuals that reflect the cultural and ethnic identity of the community.
9. Use materials written at an appropriate level and in the appropriate language.
10. Use examples that are relevant and meaningful to the community.
11. Involve cultural guides and diverse volunteers in program design and implementation.
12. Identify and use the appropriate teaching style to address preferred learning styles.

Conclusion

In order to build trust with diverse audiences and make meaningful connections, an atmosphere of understanding, respect, and support for cultural diversity must be created. Knowledge of the history, culture, traditions, customs, language or dialect, values, religious or spiritual beliefs, art, music, learning styles, and practices of a cultural group is vital to Extension professionals when laying the foundation for true connections to occur. The desire to understand another culture and open the lines of communication builds respect and trust between diverse audiences and Extension professionals.

Suggested Reading

For more information on planning programs to break down cultural barriers please see:

Guion, L. A., Goddard, H. W., Broadwater, G., Chattaraj, S., & Sullivan-Lytle, S. (2003). *Strengthening programs to reach diverse audiences*. Gainesville, FL: Florida Cooperative Extension, University of Florida. Available at <http://fycs-diversity.ifas.ufl.edu>

Footnotes

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