Culturally Competent Extension Educators[1]

Lisa A. Guion and Kay Brown[2]

This paper is the third 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.

Overview

The cornerstone of cultural competence is a better understanding of individuals within the cultural groups that we currently serve and/or desire to serve. Knowledge of the history, culture, traditions, customs, language or dialect, values, religious or spiritual beliefs, art, music, learning styles, and practices of individuals is vital to educators when laying the foundation for programs that encourage true connections (Dresser, 1996; and McPhatter, 1997). This knowledge helps educators better understand members of a particular community and how they interpret their world (Okun, Fried, & Okun, 1999). Respecting and learning about culture promotes a focus on the positive characteristics and strengths of a community and the individuals that reside within it (Okun, Fried, & Okun, 1999). This leads to an appreciation of cultural differences. Corey & Corey (2003) assert that first educators/helpers must be aware of their own assumptions, biases, and values to become increasingly aware of the cultural values, biases, and assumptions of culturally different learners in nonjudgmental ways: "With this knowledge helpers will begin to develop culturally appropriate, relevant, and sensitive strategies for intervening with individuals and with groups" (Corey & Corey 2003).

Culturally competent programs are effective and powerful because they are "customer driven." They are designed to understand and respond to the specific needs of a cultural community (Guion, Chattaraj, and Sullivan, 2003). Learning and respecting the particular needs of a cultural group in order to better serve them is far more effective than simply doing what has always worked with other, more mainstream populations (McPhatter, 1997). Cultural competence entails improving relationships with various ethnic communities and designing programs that are directly related to their needs, lives, and individual goals (Murphy & Nesby, 2002).

Communication: One of the Key Competencies

Intercultural competency skills include an awareness of one's own cultural communication style and awareness of other valid cultural communication styles which

reflect different perceptions, assumptions, norms, beliefs, and values. (Schauber & Castania, 2001). Other skills of intercultural competency would include:

- the understanding of historical power differences;
- present-day behaviors that result from the history of a groups survival;
- ability to empathize cross-culturally;
- accepting multiple perspectives;
- observing mindfully while reserving judgments; and
- adapt ones communication style to others.

(Schauber & Castania, 2001)

Conclusion

If programs are to effectively serve an increasingly diverse population, it is crucial that educators become more culturally aware, responsive, and competent (Guion, Chattaraj, and Sullivan, 2003). Culturally competent educators consider factors such as language, customs, ethnicity, family structure, and community/tribal dynamics when designing their programs (Lynch & Hanson, 1997). There are resources to help educators become more culturally competent. These include diversity curriculum specifically related to program planning (Guion et al., 2003), as well as Web sites (e.g. National Extension Diversity Center) with links to staff development resources and training opportunities. However, the best way to become culturally competent is to interact with the culturally diverse learners, their families, and their communities. While this approach requires a large time commitment, the rewards of having culturally relevant and responsive programs far outweigh the cost.

Selected Resources for Educators

The following Web sites provide a wealth of information in regard to diversity education:

- Strengthening Programs to Reach Diverse Audiences: http://fycs-diversity.ifas.ufl.edu
- National Extension Diversity Center: http://www.ediversitycenter.net/
- Teachers Corner EdChange Multicultural Pavilion: http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/teachers.html

References

Corey, M. S., & Corey, G. (2003). *Becoming a helper*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Dresser, N. (1996). *Multicultural manners: New rules of etiquette for a changing society*. New York: Wiley.

Guion, L.A., Chattaraj, S.C.* and Lytle, S.S.* (2005). A conceptual framework for connecting across cultures. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 97(1), 76-82.

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.

Lynch, E., & Hanson, M. (1997). *Developing cross-cultural competence* (2nd ed.). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

McPhatter, A. (1997). *Cultural competence in child welfare: What is it? How do we achieve it? What happens without it?* Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America Press.

Murphy, E., & Nesby, T. (2002). *A map for inclusion: Building cultural competency*. Pullman, WA: Cooperative Extension, Washington State University.

Okun, B., Fried, J., & Okun, M. (1999). *Understanding diversity: A learning-as-practice primer*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Schauber, A. C., & Castania, K. (2001). Facing issues of diversity: Rebirthing the Extension service. *Journal of Extension, 39*(6). Retrieved June 17, 2003, from http://joe.org/joe/2001december/comm2.html

Footnotes

1. This document is FCS9219, one of a series of the Family Youth and Community Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date September 2005. Visit the EDIS Web Site at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu

2. Lisa A. Guion, Ed.D., associate professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, and Kay Brown, M.A., extension agent IV, Escambia County, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, Cantonment, FL 32534.

origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other extension publications, contact your county Cooperative Extension service.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A. & M. University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Larry Arrington, Dean.

Copyright Information