

Culturally Competent Extension Educators



Have you ever wondered if you are culturally competent? What does cultural competence imply? The cornerstone of cultural competence is a better understanding of individuals within cultural groups that we serve or desire to serve. The components of cultural competence include an understanding of the history, culture, traditions, customs, language or dialect, values, religious or spiritual beliefs, art, music, learning styles, and the practices of individuals in community settings. Why would this type of knowledge about our customers benefit an Extension educator?

Exercise: Create a list reasons for why developing cultural competency may be of benefit to Extension educators.



Cultural knowledge [diversity understandings] helps Extension educators better understand members of particular cultural groups and how they view the world in which they live. Respecting and learning about different cultures promotes a focus on the positive characteristics and the strengths of a community and the individuals who reside in it. When we have a better understanding of the persons who engage in Extension programs we are lead to an appreciation of cultural differences.

Consider the following:

Primary: characteristics of one's diversity which cannot be changed – age, ethnicity, gender, physical abilities, or qualities of race, place of birth, etc.

Secondary: dimensions of diversity which can be changed – educational background, geographic location, income, marital status, parental status, religious beliefs, work experiences, etc.



As we become aware of our own assumptions, biases and values, as well as take into consideration the cultural values of others from a non-judgmental perspective, we begin to develop culturally appropriate, relevant and sensitive strategies for working with our Extension clientele.

Exercise: Can you identify biases, assumptions or cultural values which characterize community perceptions of various ethnicities within your community?

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Culturally competent Extension programs are effective and powerful when they are “customer driven”. Program activities and discussions which are designed to understand and respond to the specific needs of a cultural community are desirable. Developing techniques for working with these special groups and demonstrating respect for the needs of their culture is far more effective than delivering programs as we have in the past. Cultural competence entails improving relationships with various ethnic communities and designing programs that are directly related to their needs, lives and individual goals.



Communication is a key competency in developing intercultural skills. As we become more aware of our own style of communication and other cultural communication styles, we develop intercultural competence which allows us to understand different perspectives, assumptions, norms, beliefs and values.

Exercise: What are some other skills of intercultural competence?

To interact well with people from other cultures it helps to (1) speak a bit of their language, (2) know how closely to stand (and other non-verbal behavior), (3) know about your own cultural style, and (4) know how your style meshes with those of others. [*Cultural Intelligence*: Brooks Peterson]



If Extension programs are to effectively serve an increasingly diverse population, it is crucial that Extension educators become more culturally aware, responsive, and competent. Culturally competent educators consider factors such as language, customs, ethnicity, family structure, and community/tribal dynamics when designing their programs. The best way, perhaps, 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.

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