

Reaching Diverse Audiences¹

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This paper is the second 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

Florida's demographics are undergoing major changes and the need exists for programming efforts that reach all audiences across the state. It is becoming increasingly more important for Extension to reach diverse audiences with its programs and services. There are four main reasons for Extension to intensify its outreach to diverse audiences. They include:

1. As a publicly funded organization, Extension's mission is to serve all Florida citizens;
2. Having diverse participants enriches the Extension class setting (new ideas, thoughts, etc.);
3. Changing demographics may eventually mean change in political power structures, perhaps beginning at the local levels. Thus, it is important for Extension to have political advocates; and,
4. Diverse ethnic groups are experiencing increased financial viability, which has implications for financial support of Extension.

Barriers to Reaching Diverse Audiences

One of the main barriers to reaching diverse audiences is fear of the unknown and fear of differences. It can be difficult to initiate contact and begin to build relationships with individuals that you have not worked with in the past or know very little about. Also, it can be intimidating to meet individuals from a culture that seems drastically different from your own.

Thoughts about the unknown are based on perceptions. Perceptions are influenced by experiences, beliefs, values, and environment. "Preconceptions and stereotypes function as negative lenses through which people perceive others who look, think or behave differently" (Hogan-Garcia, 2003, p. 52). Preconceptions and stereotypes can be a major barrier to working with diverse audiences.

Understanding and communicating with a diverse group is a behavior that is a learned skill or habit. Habit is defined as a point where desire, knowledge and skill meet. Thus,

desire, knowledge and skill are essential to the removal of the bias that can cloud judgment. You have shown a basic desire to reach diverse audiences in meaningful ways by reading this fact sheet. The next step is to increase knowledge and skills—a way to gain cultural competence.

There are three broad, overarching strategies for beginning to reach out to diverse audiences. They are:

1. **Be an active learner.** While training is important, just attending a seminar or reading a lesson will not provide you with all the knowledge you need. Active learning involves lifestyle changes. It involves actively seeking opportunities to engage in dialog with diverse individuals. It involves getting involved in their community, etc.
2. **Use critical thinking.** Learn to avoid errors of perception, judgment, and premature reactions. A statement about a group of people based on negative observations of a few members is stereotyping and prejudice. Insist on accurate information. Validate that information is true for the specific individuals that you are working with or trying to work with.
3. **Look at the humanity in everyone.** Some goals are universal. It does not matter what socioeconomic class you are in or to what ethnic group you belong. Most people want health, safety, education, economic security, and the best for their children. These commonalities help us to recognize the humanity in everyone.

Corey & Corey state it best when they assert:

"It is necessary that you have a range of experiences upon which to draw to understand the human condition. Universal human themes link people in spite of their differences. What is crucial is your openness to learn from the lessons that life has presented to you, your respect for contrasting perspectives, your interest in understanding the diverse world views of the clients you will meet, of the challenging of your attitudes and views". (2003, p. 83)

Conclusion

It is easy to value commonalities in people. It is far more difficult to honor, appreciate, and respect differences.

In embracing diversity, we must become aware of and celebrate the differences that are based on cultural values, norms, practices, and other factors.

Learning comes from interacting with diverse audiences with whom you want to work. Through interaction you find commonalities to embrace. You also find uniqueness that must be respected and incorporated into program design and implementation in order to have the greatest chance of success in serving that audience. Subsequent fact sheets in this series further explore diversity as it relates to program planning issues including "Planning Programs to Break Down Cultural Barriers," "Culturally Diverse Advisory Boards and Volunteers," "Personal Marketing: A Strategy for Marketing Programs to

Diverse Audiences," "Ethnic Marketing: A Strategy for Marketing Programs to Diverse Audiences," and "Relationship Marketing: A Strategy for Marketing Programs to Diverse Audiences." These and other publications in this series will provide more information on reaching diverse audiences. Also, an on-line, web-based staff development curriculum, *Strengthening Programs To Reach Diverse Audiences*, is available at <http://fycs-diversity.ifas.ufl.edu/>.

References

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