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Transformative Partnerships: Expanding Extension's Capacity to Support Texans with Developmental Disabilities

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Cover Page Footnote

We thank the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities, its members and staff, for support of this effort.

Transformative Partnerships: Expanding Extension's Capacity to Support Texans with Developmental Disabilities

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Abstract. New partnerships to reach new audiences are key to Extension's future (Harder, 2019). But partnership is enhanced through shared decision-making, co-creation of content, and leveraging non-overlapping expertise and experience (Bertsch et al., 2020; Israilov & Cho, 2017; Ostrom, 1996). Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service partnering with the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities provides a novel approach to using statewide presence to the benefit of a partner seeking to expand its footprint (Alford, 2014; Ostrom, 1996) and is, itself, an outcome (Voorberg et al., 2015). Additionally, Texans with disabilities benefit through greater access to the education and resources the partnership produces.

INTRODUCTION

While the Cooperative Extension System nationally has engaged in serving clientele with developmental disabilities, most efforts have been program-specific and heavily youth-focused rather than more broadly applicable to Extension's work (Taylor-Winney et al., 2019). Brill (2011), Angima et al. (2016), and Keywood and Brill (2020) discuss strategies for more inclusive, accessible Extension education; Peterson et al. (2012) explores the Extension professionals' experience with inclusive programming and their trainings needs. However, the literature does not provide examples of capacity building at the local level to ensure Extension personnel and programming are reaching individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

More than 3.2 million community-dwelling Texans have a disability (U.S. Census, 2019). With an estimated 52% of individuals with disability living in just 10 of Texas' 254 counties (Texas Workforce Investment Council, 2019), experiences with support, access to information, and resources vary depending on where an individual resides as well as the type of disability. The mission of the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities (TCDD) is to create change so that all people with disabilities are fully included in their communities and exercise control over their own lives. TCDD advances this mission by funding innovative grant projects across the state, training to empower Texans to advocate for the change they wish to see, sharing resources, and organizing educational programs (Administration for Community Living [ACL], 2021; TCDD, n.d.-a). TCDD is governed in accordance with the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act and reports to a 27-member Council consisting of individuals with developmental disabilities and family members, appointed by the Texas Governor and representatives from state agencies that provide services and support. TCDD is part of a national network of developmental disability councils that exist in every state and territory in the United States (ACL, 2021).

COMMUNITY OUTREACH COORDINATOR PROJECT

In 2019, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service (AgriLife Extension) entered an innovative, multi-year, collaborative partnership with TCDD to provide education, training, and resources for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, family supports, partners, and providers, including Extension professionals. Through the presence of regional Community Outreach Coordinators (Coordinators) housed at AgriLife Extension facil-

ities, TCDD gains the visibility, benefit, and reputation of being active and engaged throughout Texas, not just in its population centers (Figure 1). In addition to physical support, TCDD benefits from the Cooperative Extension know-how in approaches to outreach and education (Franz & Townson, 2008).

AgriLife Extension benefits through the recognition of its value as a presence and thought leader in local communities, willing to engage in collaborative public scholarship with a public sector partner (Franz, 2003, 2011; Harder, 2019; Kalambokidis, 2004) on behalf of a constituency craving information and supports. The project also seeks to achieve some of the professional development recommendations identified by Peterson et al. (2012) and Keyword and Brill (2020) including, but not limited to, inclusive programming, expansion of disability resources, and increased disability awareness.

INNOVATIVE EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES

The Community Outreach Coordinator Project brings a unique focus to Extension education through disability-related topic areas and broadening existing efforts related to diverse, inclusive, and equitable audiences and programming. Franz and Townson (2008) describe the content spectrum as information sharing and the process spectrum as educational program delivery (see Table 1). During the first phase of the partnership, AgriLife Extension and TCDD focused on low content activities through *service* and *facilitation* approaches. Service activities included connecting with regional networks, community coalitions, and committees and increasing stakeholder engagement of disability-focused and non-disability-focused organizations; facilitation activities included the launch of community listening sessions across the state to gather information on regional disability-related issues and to inform future activities.

As the partnership continues to evolve, AgriLife Extension and TCDD are focusing on high content activities through content transmission and transformative education approaches. Content transmission activities include dissemination of disability-related resources and education through bimonthly newsletters, localized resource guides, and ongoing webinar series; transformative learning activities include opportunities that allow/will allow disability experts to provide single-event training opportunities for county Extension agents, childcare providers, and other service professionals. Education delivered within this approach is focused on applicable, practical training that clientele can adopt in their everyday practice.

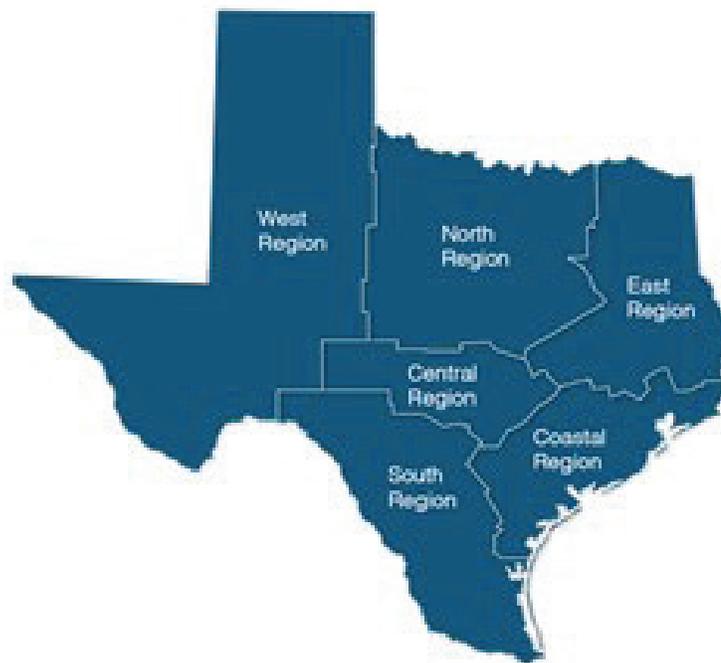


Figure 1. Community Outreach Coordinator regions. Reprinted from *Connect with Your Regional Coordinator* (TCDD, n.d.-b). Copyright 2021 by TCDD.

Expanding Extension’s Capacity to Support Texans with Developmental Disabilities

Table 1. Community Outreach Coordinator Project Transformative Partnership Model

		CONTENT	
		Low	High
PROCESS	High	<p><i>Facilitation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional listening sessions • Surveys related to barriers to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • community engagement • impact of COVID-19 pandemic on community programming 	<p><i>Transformative Education</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational series/trainings related to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • employing persons with disabilities • emergency management • worksheet for inclusive Extension programming • inclusive childcare
	Low	<p><i>Service</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committees • Community coalitions • Stakeholder engagement • Developing/growing new/existing community partnerships 	<p><i>Content Transmission</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletters • Community resource guides • Educational presentations related to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • aging with disability • special education • healthcare transitions

Note. This table is adapted from the Extension Educational Approaches Model (Franz & Townson, 2008).

CO-CREATION AS A MEANS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

Transformative education is defined as changing pre-existing knowledge through newly acquired learning material, critical discourse, and self-reflection to better assimilate to an everchanging environment (Mezirow, 1991). Neither AgriLife Extension nor the Cooperative Extension System as a whole can achieve the high process, high content educational approach of transformative education in an area like developmental disability without “challeng[ing] the traditional expert model and the dominant mind-set of many Extension professionals” (Bertsch et al., 2020) and engaging in co-creation of educational products with public and private sector partners. Franz (2003) describes a positive linear relationship between increased Extension partnerships with community networks and increased adaptations of programmatic changes. This sentiment is echoed in the literature supporting public sector co-creation (Alford, 2014; Israilov & Cho, 2017; Ostrom, 1996; Voorberg et al., 2015). Through co-creation, AgriLife Extension is still an expert in a successful outreach, education, and community capacity building model that has worked for more than a century, and community partners are hungry for access to that expertise and experience to better serve their constituencies.

CONCLUSION

The partnership between Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities has evolved to a mutually beneficial level where both parties continue to engage in co-creation of educational products, build community capacity, and prove a replicable model for other states and with other disciplines. Partnership with agencies and organizations with whom Extension does not compete for the same audience, dollar, or expertise provides an opportunity to revitalize its relevance in communities and with clientele.

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