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One Size Does Not Fit All: Effective Community-Engaged Outreach Practices with Immigrant Communities

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One Size Does Not Fit All: Effective Community-Engaged Outreach Practices with Immigrant Communities

Abstract

Generic outreach approaches are commonly used to target as many individuals as possible in a cultural community to achieve a greater response rate. However, this one-size-fits-all tactic is rarely effective. Community-engaged outreach practices have been successful with immigrant communities in Minnesota's Twin Cities. When practitioners, clinicians, and scholars engage in these practices, they not only build trusting relationships with cultural communities over time but also achieve mutual benefit, reciprocity, and the leveraging of institutional resources.

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Community-engaged outreach practices in research, clinical practice, and evaluation prioritize reciprocity, mutual benefit, two-way sharing of knowledge, and the leveraging of institutional resources to address community-defined challenges and needs (Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2013). Such practices involve a more complete response to the priorities of community members than other outreach practices do. Hassel (2005) notes that engaging across cultures is not new to Extension, having been referenced as early as 1949 by Bates. Many previous contributors to this journal argue that Extension must continue to expand its ability to serve individuals from culturally diverse groups and be open to new perspectives in collaboration (Hobbs, 2004; Newman & Yang, 2007). The reality is that Extension is often asked to serve individuals from many communities at one time. For example, in providing programs meant to serve new immigrant communities, well-intentioned professionals may use a one-size-fits-all approach in hope of addressing the multiple cultural and linguistic needs of all individuals while accomplishing the goals and desired outcomes of a program or an organization. This approach, however, can do more harm than good, even with the most well-executed planning.

We advocate that rather than use a blanket approach with communities, Extension professionals use community engagement and relationship-building approaches implemented over relatively longer periods of time. Many in Extension already recognize that relational approaches are needed with all cultural groups. For example, Martenson, Newman, and Zak (2011) described the work of an Extension American Indian Task Force—a culturally specific listening and relationship-building process with tribal communities in Minnesota—that had enormous success. Much of this success was due to methods and inquiry techniques, such as listening sessions,

used to build trust over time with individuals from Indian reservations and tribal colleges. Listening sessions can be used with all cultural and linguistic groups; the crucial element is building partnerships in thoughtful ways whereby mutual benefit is achieved. At the center of this work is partnership and reciprocity—innovation that is not a precursor to programming, research, and other activities but an essential part of the discovery process (Barajas, Smalkoski, Kaplan, & Yang, 2012). In this article, we identify traditional outreach approaches that remain ineffective and recommend alternative practical applications Extension professionals can use while engaging with immigrant communities. Although we draw on examples with Hmong and Somali communities, we encourage readers to reflect on how the approaches we describe can be used with many communities and in a variety of contexts.

Traditional Outreach Approaches

Generic outreach approaches are commonly used to target as many individuals as possible in a cultural community to achieve a greater response rate. However, strategies such as hanging fliers written in communities' native languages in ethnic markets, going door to door with brochures, or announcing opportunities at community gatherings often result in little response. Although the majority of adult Hmong and Somali immigrants have lived in the United States for 20 to 40 years, for many, formal schooling was interrupted or nonexistent due to war and relocation, and they remain illiterate in their native languages or have only multiple oral language proficiencies. Although many of these immigrants' children are fluent in English and have attended U.S. schools, their literacy in Hmong or Somali varies, and for this and other reasons, they should not be relied on to interpret for adults in their families. To well-intentioned outsiders, making connections with communities that are insular may seem like a hopeless endeavor. To community members, not only are the approaches ineffective, but the sentiment behind them may be perceived as disingenuous, leaving them feeling used in the process and wondering whose best interests the organizations have in mind.

Community Engagement Approaches: Our Recommendations

Rather than provide a how-to document or a general list of more effective ways to practice community engagement with immigrant groups, we highlight those practices that we have observed as effective and successful by way of either our own participation or firsthand accounts.

Building Relationships Over Time

In 2012, a Somali community mosque participated in an evaluation project in which data were collected from mosque members. Attempts to establish connections failed as worshippers were unwilling to interact with researchers seeking data without the approval of the imam (mosque leader). The lack of cooperation not only slowed the process but also created deep suspicion that could have derailed the evaluation initiative. The imam's approval of the project was crucial in getting worshippers to agree to participate in the process. In an individualistic society, such as that of the United States, outreach is often approached on an individual level with individuals or families. In a collectivist context, it is most effective to approach the community as one unit, through a community leader, such as an imam.

For several years, the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) at the University of Minnesota has hosted free, out-of-school-time (OST) tutoring sessions and college preparation sessions for Hmong school-aged students. Led by neighborhood organizers, this successful OST program has allowed CURA to build relationships with Hmong youth and families over time, learn about their greatest needs and assets, and involve them in

organizational efforts in their neighborhoods and schools. Although sessions have been well attended, Yia Yang, a former coordinator with the program, recalls that early on only a handful of students showed up. Yang stressed the importance of starting small to develop trust and comfort, thereby building to broader reach later. "We've never used fliers or brochures. It has always been word of mouth," explained Yang. It is essential that the community members view programming as beneficial to their children and families; otherwise, there is little incentive for them to allow their children to participate in a program at an institution with which they have no connection.

Establishing Appropriate Staffing, Providing Transportation, and Recognizing Tradition

In all outreach activities, there must be a point person whom individuals and families trust. Having a key point person such as Yang, *a member of the community*, is essential for demonstrating a commitment to building a long-term, sustainable relationship. In addition, CURA OST was largely successful in part because CURA staff provided transportation for youth who were geographically isolated and lacked transportation. Moreover, in the Somali community, exchange of information often occurs in cafés, at weddings, or at other social gatherings. Rather than invite members of the Somali community to attend events such as health or education fairs, it is preferable to have a member of the community informally connect with others at traditional gathering places.

Developing Multiple Networks: Attention to Clan, Religion, and Elders

In both Hmong and Somali communities, clans often shape the everyday living and cultural practices of their individual members. In these collectivist contexts, building trust with community leaders, such as Somali imams, elders, and other leaders, is essential to deepening relationships with communities. Zha Blong Xiong, an associate professor in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota, recommends targeted outreach with Hmong males, particularly fathers, who are seen as leaders and decision makers of families and clans in Hmong communities. According to Xiong, if Hmong fathers support an effort, oftentimes movement will follow. In addition, generational factors must be taken into consideration.

Moving Forward

A widely held belief is that outreach is a vehicle that "helps" or "serves" a community. As Beaulieu and Cordes (2014) argued, however, community engagement provides researchers and other Extension professionals with a stronger vision—one in which "knowledge is incorporated into the educational equation and . . . participatory research and other alternative methods of research and learning are emphasized. In this conceptualization, the scientific expert is someone who learns as much as anyone" ("Help Extension Re-Imagine," para. 2). Achieving this benefit requires that throughout the relationship-building process, Extension professionals continue to ask questions such as "Are we invested in collaboration with communities that have sustained mutual benefits as an outcome?" and "If so, what does relationship building such as this look like?" Getting to know a community takes time, requires building trust, is an imperfect process, and often involves prolonged engagement. However, this "investment" has immense benefits for all involved. The agenda must be cocreated by community members and Extension partners, placing the community at the center of a relationship from which mutual benefit and reciprocity are produced and are viewed as actual outcomes.

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