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Improving Disability Awareness Among Extension Agents

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Improving Disability Awareness Among Extension Agents

Abstract

Increasing prevalence rates and legislative mandates imply that educators, parents, and Extension agents will need better tools and resources to meet the needs of special populations. The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service addresses this issue by using e-learning tools. Extension agents can take advantage of these courses to gain critical special populations-related knowledge as well as garner professional development credit.

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Introduction

The prevalence of rates of disabilities nationally and in Texas is steadily increasing. Further, community educators such as Extension agents must be cognizant of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that was passed in 1990. ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination solely on the basis of disability access to employment, public services, and accommodations. The mission of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service therefore is to ensure that all its educational programs are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, or national origin; however, in a focus group study conducted by Peterson, Grenwelge, Benz, Zhang, Resch, Mireles, and Mahadevan (2012), Extension agents reported the need for professional development and training in the area of disabilities. AgriLife's mission in conjunction with increased prevalence in disability rates, ADA requirements, and Extension agents' needs necessitates that AgriLife uses an innovative approach to its programming and professional development opportunities for agents. This article describes the major elements of this approach.

Prevalence Rates

According to the American Community Survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau, there were 30.6 million people with some type of disability living in the United States in 2011. This represented a prevalence rate of 11.9 percent. Table 1 reflects the specific data in terms of age and prevalence rates.

Table 1.
Disability Populations

in the U.S. by Age
and Prevalence Rates

Age	Rate
0-5 years	0.8%
5-17 years	5.2%
18-64 years	10.2%
65+ years	36.6%

In Texas, 25.1 million individuals lived with a disability in the community, a prevalence rate of 11.5 percent (Table 2).

Table 2.

Disability Populations
in Texas by Age and
Prevalence Rates

Age	Rate
0-5 years	0.9%
5-17 years	5.1%
18-64 years	10.1%
65+ years	40.4%

Program Design and Implementation

In Texas the Texas Education Agency (TEA) attempts to increase disability awareness among stakeholders by allocating funds toward specific programs. The Family Development and Resource Management Unit of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service was awarded these funds and is currently working with TEA to deliver professional development programming and educational resources to educators in Texas concerned with serving individuals with disabilities. The result of this collaborative effort was the establishment of the Career and Technical Special Populations Training and Resource Education Center (CTSP). The overall objective of this center is to create and disseminate educational products to raise disability awareness among Extension agents and parents. In addition, the products are used to provide professional development opportunities to Extension educators.

The CTSP Center provides resources that can be used by a variety of audiences, including Extension agents; educators such as CTE teachers, special education teachers, general education teachers; service agents such as local education agency consultants; university faculty; and parents/guardians and adults with special needs seeking to live independently. The center employs online methods to reach its audiences because technological advances have expanded the range of educational

possibilities and contributed to an increased interest in distance education. Other advantages to Web-based education are its potential to encourage collaborative, self-directed/active learning, and it provides for an array of resources and creates an individualized learning environment (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Jonassen, Howland, Moore, & Marra, 2003). An emphasis on growing educational requirements for professional licensing has also popularized online learning (Miller & King, 2003).

Educational Products

Two courses are available for Extension agents in Texas. Developed by Family Life and Special Populations Extension specialists, they are supplemented by videos and additional resources.

- **Disabilities A to Z (2 hours)** : This introductory course acquaints educators with common disability terms and available national, regional, and parent-related Texas-based resources. Included in the course is also an extensive glossary of special education-related terms and acronyms. Upon completion of the course, educators are able to define disabilities, locate resources specific to their communities, learn about legal obligations they have toward individuals who have disabilities, and apply what they have learned through a review.
- **People First Language (1 hour)** : This course addresses the importance of using people-first language when referring to individuals with disabilities or special needs. People-first language is an objective way of acknowledging, communicating, and reporting on disabilities. It eliminates generalizations and stereotypes by focusing on the person rather than the disability. Educators receive an overview of people-first language and pointers on what language can be appropriately used. The course is supplemented by videos and review exercises.

Educational Impact

Enrollees obtain three professional development credit hours upon completion of the two online modules. Since its launch in 2009, 1,196 participants have completed the 2-hour Disabilities A to Z course, obtaining 2392 Continuing Professional Education (CPE) credits. A paired-sample t-test examining the difference between the participants' pre- and post-scores on the course indicated an average of 58% knowledge gain. A paired sample t-test tells us that the difference in the scores from pre- to post-test is due to the educational intervention and not chance. Correspondingly, 953 participants have completed the 1-hour People First course. Knowledge gain averaged 60% from pre- to post-test.

Implications for Extension Agents

County agents in Texas can take advantage of the resources that CTSP has in place and use specific components of the center to provide accessible programming to their clients. Following are a few suggestions.

- Extension agents can access the resources provided by the CTSP Center to learn about various special needs, available area resources, applicable laws, and strategies for helping parents.

By accessing the online courses, agents can become familiar with special education.

- The resources demarcated for parents are useful for those agents seeking to help clients who either suspect or have recently learned that their child has a disability.
- Agents can also educate local clients by encouraging them to take AgriLife Extension's online modules in venues such as disability resource fairs.
- By using the various resources, agents can also act as a liaison between local and state agencies, higher educational institutions, industry, community organizations, parents, and educators, and can further initiate collaborative partnerships that are critical to the success of all education programs.

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