Exploring the Challenges for Extension Educators Working in Urban Communities

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Abstract
This article provides Extension educators with a practical template of ideas and concepts to remember when working with urban audiences and communities. As communities begin to change, due to expansion and shifts in populations, so should the focus of Extension programming. In order to facilitate this process, there needs to be a greater source of information to help Extension educators achieve success in what could be unfamiliar territory. By providing practical techniques, the educator is aware of potential pitfalls and has information that will help ease the working relationship between all individuals, hopefully leading to a successful program.

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Urban Programming Focus in Extension

The traditional basis of Extension programming was founded on delivering programs to rural communities and families. For many educators, the ease and adaptability of programming in these communities was based on their familiarity with the community, longstanding relationships with families, and an understanding of the norms and values that existed in the community. As communities begin to change, due to expansion and shifts in populations, so does Extension programming (Borich, 2001; Schafer, Huegel, & Mazotti, 1992). This shift requires a major change in the way Extension educators approach and program in various communities. One type of community that has become increasingly important is the inner city. Yet many Extension educators have little or no experience working in such communities.

The inner city is a mixture of cultures, attitudes, norms, and beliefs, which have all become intertwined, creating a distinctive culture. A myriad of individuals with different backgrounds and beginnings exists in locations marked with cultural, economic, and political strife and harmony. The US Census Bureau reported in 2000 that over 80% of the population lived in metropolitan areas and that this would continue to be an upwards trend in the next 10 years. Increasingly, Extension educators will need to enter and work in these types of communities.

It is important for the Extension educator to understand the perspectives of urban communities and the historical, political, economical, and social nuances that have helped shaped them. If an individual is seeking to program and work with individuals to improve the quality of life, a basic understanding of how people live and operate is very important to the success of the program and the acceptance of the program deliverer.

Key Points to Entering and Working in Inner City Communities

During the course of a 3-year service learning project, select Penn State University researchers

and Extension programmers have worked in several inner city communities within Philadelphia. While each community has its own nuances, several guiding points have been used to enter and work successfully within each of the communities.

Establishing Initial Rapport

- Do not expect to enter an inner city community and have programs start immediately.

- It can take time to build meaningful relationships before you can begin to talk about the logistics of the program. Plan plenty of time for listening and learning about the needs of the community.

- The rapport and foundation that one builds is fundamental to starting and sustaining Extension programs. If trusting relationships are not fully developed, there can be negative results on the quality of the program and the reputation of the Extension educator.

Realize There Are Differences Among Ethnic Groups

- Not all ethnic minorities are the same, nor do they all share the same types of experiences or values because they live in the same community.

- Find an advocate from each ethnic group you may potentially work with in order to ensure equal representation and voice.

Communication

- Understand that the vernacular used within the inner city does not reflect the intelligence of community members.

- Some of your most influential and informative individuals in the inner city may not have a formal education but posses a knowledge of the people and culture that surpasses that of many individuals.

- Incorporate appropriate local vernacular within the context of the program. The use of local terms may be received more positively and understood by the participants.

- Avoid moving too quickly to a first-name basis with community members. Address adults with an appropriate title, such as Mr., Mrs., or Miss. Addressing people by their first name too quickly can be interpreted as a sign of disrespect.

- When at all possible, hold meetings in the local community rather than at the Extension office or other locations outside of the community. Some community members may lack transportation to travel to other locations. Others may feel uncomfortable outside of the familiar city setting.

- Be cognizant of appropriate dress for special meeting locations. For example, women wearing slacks are not permitted to enter some churches. When in doubt, ask.

Building Community Ownership

- Include community input early on--at the planning and development stages of programming efforts. Strike a balance between community priorities and Extension mission.

- Provide leadership training that encourages community members to assume leadership roles. Set a goal to develop and strengthen the leadership capacity of members of the community.

- Make adjustments to educational materials that were not designed specifically for low-income, urban audiences. Inner city audiences may have difficulty relating in meaningful ways to examples in teaching materials that were designed for middle class, rural, or suburban audiences. Ask members of the community to review materials and offer suggestions for examples to which inner city audiences are more likely to relate.

Avoid the Missionary Mentality

- If you are new to urban communities, realize that you will be viewed as an outsider. Many times individuals who enter urban communities come in with a "helper" or "missionary" mentality that can be seen as condescending and obtrusive.

Working with individuals in the inner city can make for an exciting and challenging experience. Embrace the reciprocal learning that will take place, the new partnerships that will form, and the invited insight into the lives of others.

Most important, when working with people in the inner city, be open-minded, flexible, and "go with the flow."

References

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