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A Snapshot of the Change Agent States for Diversity Project

Abstract

The Change Agent States For Diversity is a consortium of seven states dedicated to supporting greater cultural diversity in land-grant universities. The overall goal of the project is to build the capacity of land-grant universities to function inclusively and effectively in a multicultural world. The purpose of the study described here was to evaluate the progress of the project. This article reports selected findings from key administrator interviews and offers implications for increasing the movement of Extension toward a more inclusive system.

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The mission of the Cooperative Extension System's Emphasis on Diversity and the strategic plan is to achieve and sustain pluralism as an integral part of every aspect of Extension: mission and vision; work force; programs; audiences; and relationships with other people, groups, and organizations. ~ Strategic Planning Task Force on Diversity, 1991, p. 8

Introduction

In response to the growing diversity of our nation (2000 Census Bureau), the Change Agent States for Diversity (CASD) project was initiated by Cooperative Extension (Change Agent, 2003). CASD is a consortium of seven states dedicated to supporting greater cultural diversity in land-grant universities by bringing the needed technical skills and training to each of the member states. CASD project states include: Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Pennsylvania. In Missouri and North Carolina, both the 1862 and the 1890 institutions participate in the project. Through this collaborative approach, the consortium will develop successful models and strategies that can be applied throughout the system to bring about organizational change.

The overall goal of the project is to build the capacity of land-grant universities to function inclusively and effectively in a multicultural world. Additionally, the project aims to set standards and implement a vision for supporting healthy, thriving, culturally diverse communities through Extension, research and academic programs.

The objectives of the project are:

1. Establish a national mechanism to support ongoing, sustainable change in the Extension System and its research and academic partners in the Land-Grant system.
2. Develop effective state leadership for addressing diversity issues.
3. Improve the diversity profile at county and state levels.
4. Foster a system that values differences.
5. Manage and enhance diversity skill development.
6. Establish strategic diversity management.

Although this article focuses on the Change Agent States for Diversity Project, issues related to diversity affect the Cooperative Extension System in all 50 states. Hence the issues raised and the findings shared in this study may have implications for all states, including those that are not currently a part of CASD.

These issues and findings are critically important to the Cooperative Extension system as the demographics of America are changing and continue to change. For example, the Census Bureau reports that people of color in this country are increasing at rates faster than the Caucasian population. People with physical and mental disabilities are more actively seeking to be contributing members of society. The fastest growing religion in this country is Islam (Arnett, 1998). And an increasing number of people are speaking languages other than English in public settings. Understanding these changes and the findings of this study will be of value in developing a plan to build and strengthen the mission of Cooperative Extension in serving the changing American population.

We need to take proactive measures rather than reactive ones because we are certain the changes will happen and we need to be prepared. This study provides a justification for Extension in all states to be prepared strategically. An important goal of this project is to share the learning gained within the entire system. As states work to build and strengthen their capacity to function effectively in increasingly multicultural settings, these findings may help strengthen programs addressing diversity within each state.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study described here was to evaluate the progress of the Change Agent States for Diversity Project. This evaluation assesses states' movement in three organizational change initiatives: Organizational Profile, Valuing Differences Education, and Managing Diversity Skill Development.

This article focuses on the Managing Diversity Skill Development initiative. The following are selected key research questions that guided this part of the study.

1. What is the business incentive for managing diversity in Extension?
2. What are the key diversity-related issues in the organization? How do administrators model support for diversity in their organizations?
3. What strategies do administrators identify as supporting the employment, development, retention, and promotion of diverse groups in the organization? What barriers do administrators identify?
4. How useful is diversity training in preparing Extension professionals to serve diverse populations more effectively and to work in a more diverse workforce?
5. In what types of diversity-focused training have administrators participated?
6. To what extent do administrators have the appropriate skills to manage organizational change on diversity within Extension?

Methodology

Twelve interview questions were developed by the researcher in consultation with members of the CASD consortium and two professors of Agricultural Sciences, both of whom have expertise in the area of research design and implementation. Open-ended questions were designed to reflect the objectives of the study. In addition, three of the open-ended questions included a related Likert-type scale item.

A telephone interview was held with each of the executive directors of the Cooperative Extension organizations in the Change Agent States for Diversity Project, seven from 1862 and two from 1890 organizations.

Each director was contacted to schedule a telephone interview with the researcher. Once the date had been set, a copy of the interview questions was emailed to the director for review prior to the interview. Interviews were between 45 and 75 minutes in duration. Each interview was tape recorded for accuracy of transcription. Data were analyzed using NVivo, a software package for qualitative data (NVivo, 2002).

Findings

The Business Incentive for Managing Diversity

Directors were asked to share their opinions of the business incentive for managing diversity in their organization. Responses fell into four major themes. One of the business incentives was that differences in backgrounds bring a richness in innovative thinking, views, and opinions, and a

richer knowledge base from which the organization can draw upon. It creates an enhanced educational and academic environment.

Another business incentive was that diversity relates to the working atmosphere. It helps those from diverse backgrounds feel comfortable that their values are being included. A diverse working environment increases the tendency of diverse employees to stay with the organization and be productive for a long time.

A third theme focused on the relationship of the organization with the community it serves. Managing helps to insure that Extension educational programs are sensitive to, and attend to the needs of, diverse communities and industries. One director specifically states, "We need to diversify our employment force so we have people who understand diversity and can help shape educational products for our customers."

The fourth incentive suggested that managing diversity results in better, more inclusive decisions.

Key Diversity-Related Issues in the Organization

When asked to identify the key diversity-related issues in their organization, the single issue mentioned most frequently was the need to diversify the staff. Directors specifically mentioned the lack of diversity in candidate pools, recruiting and retaining a diverse staff, and the need to increase diversity of the faculty and student body as key issues. Another issue mentioned by several directors was reaching out to, relating to, and serving specific audiences. Hispanics and Native American audiences were seen as a growing challenge. Three directors mentioned gender, specifically stating "conflicts regarding gender" and "gender equity."

A variety of additional concerns were considered diversity-related issues. Some related to the Extension constituency: ensuring diversity in councils and advisory groups and the feeling that "some of the constituent groups or audiences are old fashioned." Other issues related to people within the organization. One was a concern that individuals should be able to feel that their differences are respected and valued in the organization. Another issue related to classism and the perceived difference in power among groups in the organization. An additional worry was that not all people feel that the organization and even the outlying community is a comfortable environment.

Modeling Support for Diversity

Directors were asked to describe how they model support for diversity efforts in their organization. One of the most frequently mentioned responses was that they "talk about it." The directors talk about the importance of diversity with their employees, at conferences, during new staff orientation, in newsletters, and at regional meetings. "I believe it's important to speak publicly about these issues. It's important to say these things are important."

Another way of modeling that support is with their presence, being visible among diverse populations and at programs that serve diverse audiences:

I spoke at the [diversity] conference. I was on 2 or 3 panels. I make it a point to be there, not simply because people expected me to be there, but I wanted it to be known within our organization and among our partners. . . . I wanted our partners to know that I support the conference.

Hiring a diverse staff was mentioned by several directors as an important way to model support for diversity. "Hiring a diverse faculty and staff is the bottom line." Positive recognition for individuals and programs that serve diverse audiences was also mentioned. "Recognize publicly those who are doing extraordinary work in diversity." "The programs that I say are the star programs. If they are never ones that address diverse audiences, people will know that I don't value diversity."

Other methods included:

- Using outreach development funds to support programs that would not have been funded otherwise,
- "Running decisions by" certain groups in diverse communities,
- Supporting conferences and programs that reflect commitment to diverse audiences,
- Showcasing partnerships with diverse audiences,
- Providing the appropriate vision and making sure organizational plans reflect that vision, and
- Inclusion of diversity in the annual appraisal system.

Strategies That Support Employment, Development, Retention, and Promotion of Diverse Groups

Employment

A variety of considerations go into the hiring process to support the employment of diverse groups. First, care is taken in developing the position announcement. It is written to apply to as broad a based educational background as possible "so that people don't look at it and feel they are ruled out." Additionally, it is written in a manner that does not exclude one gender. Further, statements about diversity are included within the announcements.

Next, special attention is given to how the announcements are advertised. Advertisements are placed in a "broad array of outlets that reflect diversity," in a "cross spectrum of communities, geographical locations, and cities," and in ethnic newspapers. One director specifically mentioned using the affirmative action officer to help identify places to advertise announcements so they reach diverse audiences. Two directors use the current staff to generate potential applicants. One director explained, "We try to foster among our diverse employees ♦ if you know others of your ethnic background, we encourage you to ask them to apply." The other director provides support to send current employees to other sites, job fairs, and institutions where they have access to recruitment of and exposure to diverse colleagues.

Finally, several directors make sure that the search committee itself is diverse. One director specifically mentioned a fairly significant orientation program for the search committee that focuses on the kinds of things that are and are not appropriate during the job interview.

Retention

Creating an open, safe, welcoming, and trusting work environment is an important strategy for increasing retention. Additionally, recognizing, showing confidence in, and helping people feel valuable in the organization help maintain good retention. If people are not happy, one director makes a point to find out the reasons why and is willing to make adjustments. Another provides added resources to help the employee conduct programming with groups that have not been previously served.

Professional Development and Promotion

Only one director offered strategies for development of diverse groups in the workplace. In this organization, the staff appraisal system is used to keep all employees well informed about ways to grow, to develop their skills, and how the organization can help them become a stronger professional. Additionally, the university president gives all employees one thousand dollars a year for professional development. Employees can choose to use this funding to support diversity-related professional development experiences. No specific strategies were offered for promotion of diverse groups in the workplace.

Barriers Inhibiting Employment, Development, Retention, and Promotion of Diverse Groups

The largest barriers inhibiting the employment, development, retention, and promotion of diverse groups in the workplace appear to relate to salary competition, organizational resistance to change, and perceived level of discomfort for minorities within the community. Several directors expressed an inability to financially compete with other employers for candidates of color.

Additionally, some directors are dealing with employees who "want to keep doing things the way they have always done them." For some, the conservative nature of the organization makes it difficult to even broach certain topics such as sexual orientation. Furthermore, the attitudes of members on advisory groups present challenges to change:

Obviously, it is related to our councils, and the councils are citizen groups. They reflect all the strengths of the community, but they are not perfect. We don't control them. We don't select, evaluate, or appoint them. I'd call it a challenge to the extent that we are able have councils that have the same enthusiasm about our diversity goals as we do.

The perceived feeling of isolation, both within the organization and within the community was viewed as a definite barrier to hiring and retaining people of color. The following comment reflects this view. "The organization is extremely white . . .so entering our organization might not be very appealing to some people who are diverse."

Other barriers included:

- A social stigma attached to agriculture ("They still think it is cows, plows and sows"),
- A lack of successful models for working with diverse populations that can be applied in different parts of the state, and
- The tendency of the young generation to change careers frequently.

Usefulness of Diversity Training in Preparing Extension Professionals to Serve Diverse Populations

Directors were asked to comment on how useful diversity training has been in preparing Extension

professionals to serve diverse populations more effectively. The rating scale was "extremely useful," "very useful," "somewhat useful," "not very useful," and "not at all useful." The most frequent response (4) was "very useful." Additionally, one director felt training has been "extremely useful," another rated training between "somewhat" and "very useful," and two rated training as "somewhat useful." Finally, one director stated the belief that training has the *potential* to be "very useful."

Even the director who rated training as "extremely useful" admits:

That's not to say that there is not a lot of work to do. It doesn't mean the work is over. But if I think back to the mid to late 1980's and where we have come as an organization, it has been remarkable.

Diversity training in the organizations has covered a variety of topics within an array of approaches. "Now diversity training is much more than just EEO guidelines that we first started with. So I think [with] diversity training, we've come a long way." Training topics specifically mentioned by directors included:

- Race,
- Gender equity,
- Sexual orientation,
- Religious differences,
- Moral values,
- Discrimination,
- Sexual harassment,
- Different cultures, and
- Different points of view.

Staff workshops and professional development offerings, a college-wide Extension forum that focused on issues of diversity, lessons on the Web that address working with diverse audiences, support for employees to attend diversity conferences, and mentoring were methods used to provide diversity training. Additionally, one organization described an experiential/emersion approach to diversity education, patterned after the National Extension Leadership Development program (NELD). In another organization, a gender issues study was conducted that led to a gender issues workshop for all academic deans and department heads in the college.

Usefulness of Diversity Training in Preparing Extension Professionals to Work in a More Diverse Workforce

Directors were asked to comment on how useful diversity training has been in preparing Extension professionals to work in a more diverse workforce. The rating scale was "extremely useful," "very useful," "somewhat useful," "not very useful," and "not at all useful." The most frequent response (6) was "very useful." Two directors rated the impact of training as "somewhat useful" and one director simply stated that it "*will be* very useful."

The need to change is more strongly felt by employees with greater tenure in the organization:

But for those who have been with us a long time it has changed an amazing amount. The language you can use, the kinds of stories you can tell, the pictures you can have on your walls, these are very different from the way they were in previous years. They are doing a very good job with that.

Some directors felt that diversity training is increasing awareness and understanding of just what the needs are. Further, it is helping people broaden their definitions of diversity. There is recognition, however, that people are at different developmental stages regarding diversity and that although significant progress has been made, there are critical issues that continue to need work. "CASD is coming on with a new line of diversity and new issues. The old model has served it's time. It's time to pull the old model off the line, discontinue it and put the new one on."

Managing Organizational Change on Diversity--Skills of Administrative Teams

The administrative team was defined to include: Director of Extension, Extension Administrator (1890 organizations), Assistant and Associate Directors, Regional Directors, and County Directors. Directors were asked to rate their administrative teams on the following scale: "to a great extent," "to some extent," and "not at all." Most directors felt that they and the administrative teams in their states have the appropriate skills to manage organizational change on diversity within Cooperative Extension "to some extent."

However, several directors rated themselves and their teams higher. "We are on the plus side of 'To some extent.' Through this initiative I hope we will sooner than later get there." One director distinguished between having the appropriate skills and actually making change. "In terms of having the appropriate skills, I would say that is 'to a great extent.' As far as having organizational change actually happen, I'd say 'to some extent.' That's kind of like steering a glacier."

One director expressed strong feelings in his response to this question:

To a great extent, although there is variability among these groups. The reason I think that is because people understand it's a core value, it's a performance expectation. Some may say they do not believe that, but they know it's a core value and an expectation. People have been given opportunities to explore their own values and develop competencies. No one would say that diversity is not a strong core value and expectation.

Diversity-Focused Skill Development and Training for Administrators

When directors were asked to indicate whether or not various administrators had participated in training that focuses on specific diversity-related content, the following was evident. Extension administrators, across the board, were more likely to have received training in the areas of:

- Managing the implementation of legal compliance,
- Conducting and overseeing bias-free hiring and human resources processes, and
- Positioning the organization to build community partnerships and stakeholders.

Extension administrators, across the board, were least likely to have received training in the areas of: creating inclusive environments; managing the organizational change process; and implementing practices to affirm people's culture in the workplace.

Implications

The directors in these nine organizations have embraced a commitment to move their organizations forward in the transformation of the land-grant system to one that functions effectively in a multicultural world. All are taking courageous strides and making bold decisions toward achieving this goal.

Leadership from the top is key in the organizational change process. The directors are clear about the business incentives for managing diversity, and they are stepping up to the plate. Directors use a variety of positive methods to model support for diversity within their organizations. Several examples suggest that they are indeed "walking the talk."

An emphasis has been placed on managing diversity skill development for all employee levels within these organizations. While directors admit there is plenty of room for continued learning, they believed that diversity training has been very useful in preparing Extension professionals to serve diverse populations more effectively and in preparing Extension professionals to work in a more diverse workforce.

Organizational change does not come quickly. And change in managing diversity is no exception. This report represents data collected at the beginning of a 5-year project. During the next 5 years, member states in the Change Agent States For Diversity will continue movement toward achieving the goals of the project. During that time, these and other states will have many challenges. While many positive steps have been taken, the following are among important challenges that Extension must yet address.

- Directors continue, for a variety of reasons, to struggle in diversifying the workforce. Extension must find ways to successfully compete for diverse employment candidates within a highly competitive market.
- Extension is challenged to raise the level of enthusiasm for diversity among its advisory councils, Extension boards, and other constituent groups to equal the increased level of enthusiasm for diversity among extension administrators and staff.
- Extension is challenged to provide all administration with training in the areas of creating inclusive environments, managing organizational change, and implementing practices to affirm people's culture in the workplace.

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