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Hearing Their Needs: Voices of Underrepresented Populations

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Hearing Their Needs: Voices of Underrepresented Populations

Abstract

The Plan of Work process provides an opportunity for Extension to review its educational objectives and consider the changing needs of its potential audiences. In Pennsylvania, a special effort was made to gain input concerning programs to be conducted in 2005-2009 from ethnic minority and low-income populations. This article shares the concerns and needs expressed during focus group interviews, summarizing issues related to youth, family, community, and nutrition and health. Results have important implications for the development of relevant programming with diverse audiences.

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As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, Extension organizations have raised diversity to a new level of importance on the organizational agenda. Strategic plans clearly spell out goals and strategies to recruit and retain a more diverse workforce, build capacity to manage diversity, and reach diverse populations with relevant educational programming. Some states have established strategic plans specifically to address their changing audiences and workforce.

Every 4 years, Extension reviews its educational objectives. This allows Extension to consider the changing needs of its potential audiences, and develop a new plan of work (POW) that is relevant and addresses the needs of the clientele. The POW process is an extremely important task, because it provides the direction needed to achieve its primary purpose - to bring the university to the people. It is crucial that *all* stakeholders are given the opportunity to provide input into the planning process. As Grogan (1991) purported, "The future success of Extension will be determined not only by the relevance of its educational programs, but by the extent to which low-income and minority group citizens participate in and consider them valuable."

In Pennsylvania, stakeholder input is formally gathered via on-line surveys and focus group interviews of current program participants. The on-line survey method was instituted to provide Pennsylvania residents a cost-efficient opportunity to offer input; however, Internet access is limited in many low-income communities. Unfortunately, citizens who do not have easy access to the Internet or have not participated in Extension programming are not likely to have the opportunity to have their insight, needs, and wants reflected in the POW. As stated by Schaubert and Castania (2001),

It's time that Cooperative Extension reflect on its start; a time when agents went out and visited with prospective audiences to promote its relevance and learn how Extension could align itself with the values and needs of the people. Now, more than ever, extension educators need to establish open lines of communication with prospective audiences and become attuned to how they can meet the needs of all people, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or other dimensions of diversity.

Purpose and Methodology

In an attempt to give voice to a diversity of underrepresented audiences, a special effort was made to gain input from ethnic minority and low-income populations on the major programs to be included in the 2005-2009 Pennsylvania Plan of Work.

Five Pennsylvania communities were selected for inclusion in this exploratory study. Each was purposively selected because of the high concentration of racial and ethnic minorities and/or low-income populations. A focus group interview was held by the researcher in a public space in each community. Participants were invited to join the focus group by the local Extension 4-H/youth development or family consumer science educator. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary. Each participant that completed the interview received a credit card redeemable for \$10.00 in groceries at a specified store in their community.

Due to the complexities of obtaining informed consent from the parents of minors, participation was limited to people who were 18 years of age or older. Additionally, all were either members of a low-income and/or minority group or a community service professional who served low-income and minority clientele. A total of 52 community members participated. Seventy-nine percent (n = 41) were community members, and 21% (n = 11) were community service professionals. The researcher who conducted the interviews was a member of an ethnic/racial minority group.

Table 1 provides a brief description of the focus group participants. These participants groups included participants with varying levels of familiarity with Extension.

Table 1.
Focus Group Characteristics

Focus Group	Type of Participant	Race/Ethnicity					General Description
		White	African American	Hispanic	Asian	Total	
1	Member of community	2	6				Parents of 4H'ers living in low-income housing development
	Professional		1			9	
2	Member of community		8				Low-income housing development
	Professional		1			9	
3	Member of community	3	3	2	1		GED class
	Professional	1	1			11	
4	Member of community		9				Community members at-large
	Professional	1	4			14	
5	Member of community			7			Low-income housing development
	Professional	1		1		9	
Total		8	33	10	1	52	Members of Community = 41
							Professionals = 11

Focus group questions mirrored a subset of questions that were included in the Web-based needs assessment available to all Pennsylvanians. The semi-structured interview questions were based on key issues identified by county Extension educators and faculty in a series of meetings held over an 18-month period of time. Questions used in the focus groups centered on the following general categories: youth, family, community, nutrition, family health, and long-term health needs of middle-aged and older adults.

In each category, participants were asked to think about the next 5 years. Then, participants were asked to discuss what concerned them most, what challenges they expected to face, what type of educational programs Extension might provide to address the issues, and what concerns they had about today's policies that impact the local community, youth, families, health, nutrition, and care

of the elderly.

Focus group interviews were at least 1.5; hours in length. Group size varied from 9 to 14 participants. All participants were encouraged to respond to the interview questions. Each interview was audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription. The data were analyzed using QSR NVivo 2.0, a software package for qualitative data analysis. Using content-analysis procedures, the findings were separated into content-related categories, then grouped by theme: youth, family, community, and nutrition and health. Last, the data were checked for inter-rater reliability. Agreement between the two raters approached 90%.

Findings

This article brings the concerns of the underrepresented voices in our sample into the limelight. It is imperative that Extension include the needs and suggestions of its entire clientele base when developing the POW and designing programs. The following summarizes the needs and suggestions of the focus group participants into content-related categories--youth, family, community, nutrition, family health, and care for the elderly.

Youth

Participants identified several positive youth-engaging organizations/opportunities in their communities. Among them were 4-H programs, Girl Scouts, homework clubs, the library, church youth groups, a community center, and YMCA programs.

When participants reflected on the challenges youth may face and the types of programs needed to address these challenges, a number of issues surfaced. In several communities, participants cited the lack of affordable recreational opportunities for children. In many of these communities the public pools were not operating, and membership costs for the YMCA were prohibitive. Where opportunities existed outside of the neighborhood, there was a lack of transportation for youth to attend.

Youth in low-income families are limited in their opportunities to explore beyond their immediate communities due to financial and transportation constraints. Participants in each of the focus groups expressed the need for exposure to activities, events, and sites that would challenge youth to broaden their horizons. Suggestions included field trips to museums, attending theatrical performances, and traveling to historical and educational points of interest.

Additionally, youth need to be provided the opportunity to explore the academic and career possibilities that exist beyond their immediate experiences. Activities suggested for urban youth included pruning trees and growing produce to sell. Youth are interested in dance, ballet, theatre art, modeling, talent shows, creative arts, cheerleading, and drill teams.

The lack of exposure to sporting activities was of much concern. At the root of the problem participants cited the disorganization of community-sponsored sporting leagues and declining financial sponsorship from local businesses. In particular, participants noted that sporting opportunities for female youth are especially scarce.

In some neighborhoods, safety was a primary concern. The lack of safe places to go outside of the home confined many youth to indoor activities, primarily watching television. Participants expressed a need for a safe place to congregate and engage in learning activities. One participant argued that programs need to be located "in the middle of where the greatest, most crying needs are, where the biggest disconnect exists."

A number of issues related to personal development and social skills were discussed (Figure 1). Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that youth in their communities need educational opportunities that promote their development as strong, self-respecting citizens.

Figure 1.
Personal Development Needs of Youth

- Assist youth in refining their conflict resolution skills^a
- Character education
- Learn to be tolerant of differences in others
- Learn how to behave in a respectful manner, without giving up their individuality
- How to communicate positively on topics and areas of disagreement
- Develop challenging, non-competitive programs (e.g., ropes courses)
- Develop positive self-esteem and self-respect

^a One community service professional encourages youth to challenge others not with their fists but with

their minds. He does this by teaching them the skill of playing chess. It was suggested that a 4-H chess curriculum be developed to promote self-discipline.

Others were particularly concerned with promoting active civic engagement in youth. Learning what it means to be a good neighbor, opportunities to volunteer, and learning how to vote were specifically mentioned.

Participants also felt that career and college preparation programs would be beneficial. Suggested objectives for such a program were exposing youth to a wide variety of jobs in the workplace, assisting youth in defining their goals and aspirations for the future, and preparing them for post-secondary education. A college prep program could provide basic information on the collegiate experience, how to select a school, the application and management process of financial aid, and preparation for college visits. Youth also need opportunities and transportation to visit colleges.

It's paramount that we create a support network for youth and help them to realize that attending college is a realistic goal. While many of the questions that youth have about college should be provided within the school system, guidance counselors are typically severely overloaded and are unable to reach all of the youth who would benefit from their services.

Attention is needed in the social and psychological domains of youth development. A serious concern was expressed regarding the limited programming at the high school level that addresses use of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco. While these issues may be introduced at the middle school level, they seem to receive less attention in the upper grades. A few participants supported the implementation of drug prevention programs with elementary school-age children.

There are limited opportunities for adolescents to talk about issues of serious importance to them. Participants identified the following as topics they would be interested in learning more about:

- Pregnancy prevention,
- Sexually transmitted diseases,
- Eating disorders,
- Prenatal care for teen parents, and
- Parenting classes for first time parents.

Although many of these topics may reach beyond the scope of Extension, it is important to acknowledge the genuine needs of these populations. Collaborations with local parenting and/or counseling agencies would be a viable and realistic means of fulfilling these needs.

Finally, a number of policies affect youth in a negative manner. The lack of available transportation makes it difficult for many youth to participate in activities that exist outside of their neighborhoods. Employment opportunities for youth are limited. In some communities, night school is only available to youth with behavior problems. Participants supported this program, yet they expressed a need for alternative education options to specifically serve teen parents who are trying to balance the demands of parenthood and schooling. Unconsciously, we tend to bias the negative impact of teen pregnancy solely on females, often times failing to recognize that the situation has negative impacts for teenage males as well. Court-ordered employment and child support can severely reduce the opportunities for teen fathers to pursue a college education.

Family

Participants repeatedly cited the lack of educational and recreational opportunities designed for whole families as problematic. Community programs tend to focus on either adults or youth; however, few provide opportunities for mothers, fathers, and children to interact together.

The need for parent education programs was frequently voiced. One respondent declared, "We have parents who have never been parented. They have no parenting skills of their own. Yet, we are expecting them to pass this along to their kids." Participants identified needs for parent education in the following areas.

- Selecting appropriate breakfast foods for children,
- Learning how to "connect" with their teenage children,
- Assisting parents in overcoming/coping with the fear and/or ambivalence that they sometimes experience with their teenagers, and
- Developing skills to cope and deal with young adolescent's quest for autonomy and individuation.

Parenting skills are needed not only for parents, but also for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. One community expressed a particular need for programs on how to care for "crack babies" because these children display more challenging behavioral patterns and have special needs.

Parents need assistance to develop skills to successfully negotiate the school system. For many, the communication and relationship between parents and schools is poor. Some parents feel that schools are not making an attempt to include them in their child's education. They feel

uncomfortable dealing with school officials. "The administration doesn't want to hear from parents. They want your taxes but they don't want your voice." Parents want more information about the opportunities available so they can help their sons and daughters select the classes and programs that may better their futures.

Participants requested a comprehensive money management program that focused on basic budgeting skills, checking account management, and information on the services commonly offered by banks. Another suggested that information on scams be included. Other areas of need for families included programs that address self-esteem issues for adults, time management skills for single working parents, and anger management. Additionally, citizen education and English as a Second Language programs are needed for migrant adults.

The high cost of childcare for working parents, the lack of affordable housing for low-income families with children, and the lack of employment were mentioned as public policy issues that affect families.

Community

A common concern throughout the study was the lacking of a sense of community among minorities and non-minorities alike. Participants suggested that more community-building activities be sponsored to bring citizens together. Another issue expressed was the need for skills to interact with township and borough officials. Residents want to have a voice in developing the policies related to their community, although many feel they lack the skills and/or knowledge to do so. Additionally, with the changing demographics in some communities, some respondents voiced a need for diversity education to "help people get used to being around and accepting the differences of different kinds of people, cultures, and habits."

Issues relating to the elderly were another area of concern. On one hand, a growing number of elderly are raising their grandchildren (Lugaila, 1998) and are in desperate need of both financial and emotional support. "Grandparents lack the patience and skills to parent today's youth. Some are even angry about the situation. Grandparents raising grandchildren need help." On the other hand, families who must consider placement of elderly relatives in nursing homes need information. What should family members look for in a nursing home? What questions should they ask? How can one ensure that a relative is being properly cared for? Participants expressed fear of maltreatment in nursing homes.

Nutrition and Health

When asked to reflect on issues and concerns related to nutrition and health, a number of areas were discussed. Families would benefit from nutrition education that promotes healthy cooking and eating practices. Learning to determine proper portion sizes, creative ways to use leftovers, and alternatives that provide the family with healthy meals with limited preparation time were specifically mentioned.

Weight control and exercise were high on the list of needs. Affordable group exercise programs for adults, particularly females, are not readily available to many residents of low-income communities. In addition to exercise and weight control, programs that help adults set goals to improve their welfare and self-esteem were desired.

Other health concerns included diabetes, the lack of affordable health insurance, and knowledge about preventive health measures. One participant creatively suggested the development of early protection information sheets to serve as an age-based guideline for medical check-ups. Furthermore, there is a lack of information about medical services that are available to members of the community. Better information about available public services is needed.

Figure 2 identifies the general areas of concern that were repeated in at least four of the five focus group interviews.

Figure 2.
General Areas of Concern

- Issues related to the long-term health and care of the elderly
- Stressed family life
- Limited opportunities for teens to discuss perceived issues of importance (e.g., drugs, sex, pregnancy)
- Lack of positive and challenging activities for youth
- Limited parenting skills
- Opportunities for personal development for youth and adults

Discussion and Recommendations

Current Extension programs are attempting to address some of the needs expressed by focus group participants. Examples include: conflict resolution skills, citizenship education, and tobacco prevention for youth; and healthy eating habits, money management skills, and participation in policies impacting the community for families and adults. While these are areas in which Extension has been successful, it is important to note that even these programs will need to be adjusted in terms of content and teaching delivery to be accepted by, and meaningful to, some low-income and diverse audiences.

There are other areas of need that are not being adequately addressed by current Extension programming or by other community organizations. These may be viewed as special opportunities for Extension to fill unmet needs. Extension can offer programs that encourage the whole family to interact and learn together, provide support groups for parents and parenting grandparents, and create opportunities for group exercise with built-in lessons on self-esteem and healthy dietary practices.

There are clearly opportunities to develop and conduct programs that meet the many unmet needs of youth and older teens. Extension could develop programming that provides opportunities for teenagers to discuss and learn about critical topics that affect the social circumstances of their everyday lives. While traditional 4-H programs provide numerous opportunities for youth to participate in activities at the county, state, and even national level, youth who are not involved in these traditional programs do not have this chance to travel. Exposure to communities beyond their neighborhoods could inspire new perspectives, hopes, and goals for their futures.

Undoubtedly, Extension cannot single-handedly provide all programs for all people. Particularly in times of shrinking resources, it has neither the staff nor the finances to do so. However, through collaboration with other community-based organizations in low-income and diverse communities, Extension can help to meet a greater number of needs. For example, if Extension cannot conduct weekly grandparent support groups, they may be able to develop the curricula and train volunteers or other agency staff to do so. Pooling resources with other agencies might enable the development of community programs that neither organization could do by itself.

It is important to note that many of the concerns and needs such as issues related to parent involvement, parenting skills, limited activities for youth, and long-term care for the elderly, that arose during the present study were also identified by the Community Needs Capacity Assessment conducted by Extension professionals in another Midwestern state (Nieto, Schaffner, & Henderson, 1997). These needs may very well continue to exist in the future unless education professionals within organizations such as Extension take the time to hear the voices of the underrepresented and develop relevant programming and collaborations to fill the unmet needs. In Pennsylvania, for example, the results of this study were posted online <<http://pow.cas.psu.edu/pdfs/NontradResponses.pdf>> to guide the planning of POW committees.

Although the needs revealed through this exploratory qualitative study are specific to the focus group participants and their communities, these results provide the basis for further research with low-income and underrepresented populations using more rigorous methodologies.

Extension has many opportunities to develop and conduct relevant educational programs with diverse audiences. To increase effectiveness, however, we need to find out what the needs are from *all* the people we intend to serve and then present the materials in a manner that will invite members of diverse audiences to relate to, and engage in, the learning.

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