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Toward Cross-Cultural Outreach: The Washington State Experience

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Toward Cross-Cultural Outreach: The Washington State Experience

Abstract

The changing face of America presents Extension workers with an unprecedented cross-cultural program delivery challenge. In order to meet that challenge, Extension faculty and staff must develop the awareness, sensitivities, and skills for effective outreach and engagement. Washington State University Extension has conducted intensive training workshops toward that end. Those highly interactive workshops are designed to help participants face social realities, share experiences, overcome anxieties, and build program strategies. Extension in Washington has become a richer environment.

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Introduction

Three major events of the early millennium prompted cross-cultural outreach education among Extension ranks in the Pacific Northwest and across the nation. The first was the rather dramatic revelation by the 2000 U.S. Census that the nation had become irreversibly multi-cultural. The second was the mandate by many universities of diversity training for faculty and staff, fueled in part by the very lucrative market for higher education among foreign students. And the third was the sobering realization, following September 11, 2001, of how poorly Americans really understood the many cultures of our world. This scenario posed a real challenge to Extension workers, whose daily job is to be educators and change agents for all the people of our land (Schauber & Castania, 2001).

Need

In Washington State, the character of certain regions had been visibly and culturally transformed in recent years as Hispanic, Asian, and Eastern European expressions became dominant in communities once seen as Anglo-American. Blacks, Native Americans, and early East Asians had consolidated social and political identities, while such groups as Koreans, Palestinians, and East Indians were becoming important members of the commercial milieu. Students from 99 countries studied at Washington State University, representing almost 20% of the graduate school and nearly 6% of the entire student body. And finally, the measures taken by Homeland Security in response to "9-11" had made cross-cultural sensitivity and understanding imperative among Extension employees (Dorsey, 2001).

Instructional Design

In view of this changing cultural landscape and the challenges facing Extension workers in the field, it became clear that comprehensive instruction in cross-cultural outreach for faculty and staff at Washington State University was required. The design chosen was a day-long, four-module interactive workshop with a cloistered catered luncheon. A sequence of events follows:

- Module 1: Cross-cultural Journey of Facilitator
- Module 2: Interactive Sharing of Cross-Cultural Experiences by Participants

- Catered Luncheon and Reflection
- Module 3: Interactive Sharing by Participants of Biases, Concerns, Fears, and Anxieties
- Module 4: Strategizing for Constructive Cross-Cultural Engagement
- Evaluation

The workshops addressed the cultural diversity and plurality of Washington's population and worked toward building bridges to a more effective and interactive society. The first module led the participants through the cross-cultural journey of an experienced facilitator sharing examples of real life challenges, obstacles, and survival skill building in a wide variety of cultures and circumstances at home and in various countries of the world (Ludwig, 2002). The second invited and encouraged workshop participants to share their own cross-cultural experiences, local or further afield, and how they overcame challenges in achieving effective and fulfilling relationships. The third embraced an open and frank discussion of active or latent fears, biases, prejudices, or concerns that present obstacles to integrated and productive personal or professional lives (Brosnahan & Lee, 2001). The final module explored a rather extensive set of principles, practices and concepts designed to build more effective integrative skills.

Action

During the 2000 and 2001 program years, 13 cross-cultural outreach workshops were conducted for Washington State University Extension workers. Subsequently, similar workshops were guest-conducted for family/consumer science and community development faculty in Portland and at Cornell, respectively. Some 205 Extension workers attended these several events.

Responses

Reported strengths of the workshop series as documented by participants elevated the sharing of colleagues' experiences and contributions as the most valuable aspect of the intervention. It was strongly felt that Extension workers tend to work alongside one another daily, sometimes for years, and never have the chance to learn or hear about the feelings or personal insights of even close associates. The encouragement of open discussion and exchange without fears or restrictions was seen as a real strength of the workshops. Cultural awareness and sensitivity reportedly is a delicate and sometimes very personal area. It was generally felt that the workshops provided a safe haven for dialogue and discussion.

The same was voiced with respect to the topic of biases and prejudices. Because the expression of such feelings tends to be politically very incorrect in today's university setting, workshop participants felt relieved to be able to externalize those feelings on safe turf, to deal with them in supportive company, and to move on to more constructive skill-building.

Changes in Professional/Personal Life

Workshop participants reported subsequent changes in professional life such as strengthened working relationships among colleagues unlike themselves, more inclusive approaches to program delivery techniques, heightened sensitivities to other cultures, and an awareness of expanded training needs and opportunities.

Those sensing later differences in personal lives related to the workshop experience cited the engagement of family members and friends in discussion of cross-cultural affairs, increased cross-cultural insights and sensitivities, greater self-awareness and understanding, personal outreach actions, and a quest for further education and self-development.

Summary and Conclusions

The demographic scenario facing Extension workers, whether in Washington State, the Pacific Northwest, or nationwide, is both dynamic and challenging. Changing ethnic and cultural expressions take place during mere segments of the careers of faculty members and staff personnel engaged with new clients and entire communities in transition. Language, values, dress, foods, sounds, music, habits, religious persuasion, festive expression, family organization, and a myriad other aspects of life are changing before the very eyes of Extension educators and change agents. It follows, then, that Extension workers must themselves welcome and participate in self-education and change in order to build the sensitivities and skills necessary for effective and productive outreach and engagement.

That is what Washington State University Extension has begun to accomplish. Traditional Anglo-American Extension workers have come a long way in a short time. Colleagues of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the ranks have lent significant support and provided valuable insights. Extension life in Washington State has become a real celebration of diversity and enrichment.

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