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Engaging Minority and Culturally Diverse Audiences

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Engaging Minority and Culturally Diverse Audiences

Abstract

Extension's mission is to educate and disseminate research to all people, but minority and culturally diverse audiences are often difficult to engage. The article offers seven ideas to help Extension professionals engage these audiences. Learn to understand their culture. Interact with innovators and key leaders in the community, and understand the hierarchy. Identify and solve local issues. Be patient and persistent, and develop early success stories. Adapt the program to their culture, keep the message simple, and repeat the message. Look for win-win situations and financial incentives to encourage participation. Evaluate, revise, and repeat the program.

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Recent articles on diversity have dealt with changing the Extension organization towards cultural diversity (Schauber, 2001a; Schauber, 2001b) or evaluating diversity educational resources (Ingram, 2002). Schauber and Castania (2001) discuss the beginning of Extension and rebirthing the Extension process. Extension began by listening and learning from its audience, communicating with them, developing trust and mutual respect, slowly introducing new ideas, and getting them to adopt new practices. Extension professionals can use these same steps to engage minority and culturally diverse audiences.

Why Engage a Minority or Culturally Diverse Audience?

Cooperative Extension has a non-discriminatory policy that states: "All educational programs are available to clientele on a non-discriminatory basis without regard to race, color, creed, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, gender, age, disability." The United States Census (2000) reports that African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos represent 28.9% of the United States population. This represents a large segment of our population, and it is Cooperative Extension's responsibility to disseminate information to benefit all people.

The Federal government has grant or "soft money" available to work with minorities and underserved audiences. Federal grant proposals that address issues for underserved audiences receive priority funding. Including engagement and outreach grant activities for minorities and underserved audiences can be the difference between a grant being accepted or rejected.

Working with new audiences and new cultures can be enjoyable. It's like taking a trip to a foreign country without leaving home. Everyone benefits from sharing new ideas and new ways of thinking. The author has worked with the Amish, an underserved audience, for the past 5 years on water quality education. The Amish are a religious group who wish to separate themselves from the "sinful world." They have a strict religious code that includes restrictions on many modern conveniences (electricity, telephones, automobiles, etc.). This greatly affects their culture and how they interact with non-Amish people. The lessons learned from engaging the Amish may be applicable to other audiences. The following is a list of seven practical steps to engaging minority and culturally diverse audiences for the first time.

Seven Practical Steps

Understand Your Audience

Extension professionals need to understand the history and culture of a new audience. Go to conferences, read books, or take a college course. Spend some time visiting and socializing by meeting one-on-one or in small groups. Pay attention to their concerns. Develop trust and respect, and become a friend. Personal relationships foster participation in educational programs.

Interact with Innovators and Key Leaders

Understand the hierarchy within a new audience. Interact with innovators and respected key leaders who are in good standing in the community. Extension professionals need to talk to key innovators about any outreach and engagement Extension proposes to conduct. Use these people to validate Extension's integrity and goodwill. Innovators can help reduce any initial suspicions about an educational program. Let the innovators sell the benefits of the educational program to the key leaders. If they can see the benefit of the program, then it should be successful. If they have doubts, revise it. Let your audience be a part of the educational process.

Identify Issues, and Find Solutions

To effectively engage in outreach in any new community, it is important to identify local problems. If a group is not currently working with Extension, don't expect them to ask for help. Talk with innovators and key leaders, and get them involved. Ask innovators and key leaders to serve on local advisory committees. Many of Extension's preconceived ideas may be found to be false, so be flexible in your thinking and approach to educational programming. Help new audiences understand what types of educational services Extension has to offer because these groups are often not familiar with Extension.

Get Early Success Stories

Start out slowly, and grow the program. Be patient and persistent. Start with some early success stories. If Extension professionals are knowledgeable and helpful, participation will increase. Help new audiences with all their problems, even if it is not related to the issue that Extension wants to address. By helping with all problems, the participation in other Extension issue based programs may be higher.

Keep It Simple, and Repeat the Message

Culturally diverse audience may lack exposure to higher education, so keep presentations simple. Many cultures may rely on tradition, folklore, or home-remedies that have been passed down for generations, and they may not trust new methods or science. New information may take time to be accepted. Extension professionals will often have to simplify and adapt the program to the new culture. For example, in my work with Amish audiences (who have only an eighth grade education and no electricity) black boards and easels at a meeting work better than PowerPoint presentations.

Take time to educate children and young adults. Young people are inquisitive and may change quicker than adults. Starting a 4-H program in a new community may help educate the children and adults on best management practices and new research. Some problems may take a decade or more before positive change may be seen. Children quickly grow up to be adults, so keep repeating the message. The children are the keys to change, so educate them.

Look for Economic Incentives

Look for win-win situations. In Ohio, the concept of rotational grazing was introduced to the Amish. This practice allowed the grass to recover, doubled pasture yields, and decreased soil erosion. Ninety-four percent of Amish farmers adopted this practice within 2 years in one Amish community (Hoorman, 2002). Rotational grazing was used to exclude livestock from streams with over 10,000 feet of fencing installed. These dairy farms saved \$7,500 per farm on average in reduced feed cost. There was an economical benefit to the Amish community so these best management practices were quickly adopted, with many benefits to the environment. Look for similar win-win situations with new audiences.

Evaluate, Change, Do it Again

There are always new people coming into a community and new audiences to address. Just because a program has been conducted once, do not assume everyone participated. Evaluate the program, change it, and do it again.

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