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Program Update: Multi-State Extension Conference Addresses Food Diversity from Farm to Table

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Abstract: In 2005 and 2006, The Ohio State University Extension, University of Kentucky, Kentucky State University, and Purdue University Cooperative Extension Services developed and coordinated two conferences addressing food diversity from farm to table. The overall goal of the conferences was to foster a tri-state network of multi-disciplinary approaches to meet the needs of diverse audiences related to food. Self-reported email evaluation surveys suggested that conference goals and objectives were achieved. Future diversity trainings should continue to be multidisciplinary and should seek to attract others working in non-extension roles.

Situation

Compared to states in other regions, several Midwestern states, including Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky, have experienced slower overall population growth while simultaneously experiencing an aging and declining native majority and a growing minority of immigrants. Between 1990 and 1997, these midwestern states grew an average of 4.7 % compared to 7.6% for the nation (Rainey, 1998). Much of the region's growth can be attributed to domestic and international immigration. In Kentucky, the 2000 census revealed a growth of 73% for Asians and 173% for Latinos in the 1990s (Price, Scobee, & Sawyer, 2004).

Demographic changes of the United States and the Midwest have shaped consumer patterns and markets for agriculture. The U.S. ethnic food market is estimated to generate 75 billion dollars in annual sales; equivalent to 1 out of every 7 dollars spent on groceries (Geisler, 2007). Ethnic changes will not transform the landscape of agriculture, but will increasingly create niche markets for entrepreneurial farmers (Ballenger & Blaylock, 2003).

Extension and other professionals working with various food systems must be responsive to changing demographics and the associated implications to agriculture, health, communities, families, and youth. Family and Consumer Science educators are challenged to tailor nutrition and consumer education to a variety of ethnic audiences. Agriculture and Community Development educators can help farmers and businesses respond to expanding market opportunities. Working with diverse youth groups and adult volunteers poses different opportunities for professionals working in 4-H youth development.

Because Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio share similar demographic trends, cooperative approaches could be efficient ways to address food diversity issues and provide professional development opportunities. Therefore, the Extension services of Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio came together in 2005 and 2006 to address the issue of Food Diversity through a tri-state diversity conference. This article describes the collaborative process and the impact of the conferences.

Planning and Partnerships Leads Conference Coordination

The first annual Tri-State Diversity Conference was held in 2004 and sought to provide training on diversity for Extension professionals in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky. The first conference developed a professional relationship among the three states and a commitment to learn and work together. The second and third conferences were held in 2005 and 2006, and used "food diversity" as a theme. Food diversity was identified as an opportunity for professional development in the region and also was multi-disciplinary in nature. The overall goal of the conferences was to foster a tri-state network to meet the needs of diverse audiences through food related issues.

The Tri-State Diversity Planning Committee met on a regular basis in 2005 and 2006. The planning committee consisted of Extension professionals from University of Kentucky (UK), Kentucky State University (KSU), Purdue University (PU), The Ohio State University (OSU) as well as USDA- Natural Resources and Conservation (NRCS). The purpose of the committee was to select a theme, develop a program, secure resources, find a location, and conduct marketing and advertising.

Tri-State Diversity Conference Activities

In 2005 and 2006 experts convened in Cincinnati and Covington to discuss issues related to production, marketing, and consumption of ethnic and cultural foods. The conferences attracted 169 registrants in 2005

and 189 registrants in 2006 (many attended both). Conference participants represented a diversity of interests: Education, Dietetics, Community Services, Extension, Agriculture, and Public Health. Around three-fourths of participants worked for Extension. Participants could select from a variety of presentations and tours addressing food diversity. Some topics of concurrent sessions included: Goat Meat Production and Marketing, Religious Practices and Food, Niche Marketing, Biotechnology, Fish Consumption and Health, Food in Different Cultures, International Bread, and Food and Latino Culture. Participants also had the opportunity to sample ethnic and cultural foods throughout the conferences.

Impact of Conferences

Retrospective self-report surveys were administered via email to evaluate whether we achieved our objectives following the conferences. For both years, response rates were 53%. Participants self-reported that they were more aware of diverse food practices, had more interest in collaborating with other disciplines, were more confident to address food diversity, and were more aware of work outside of their disciplines (Table 1). Finally, participants were more aware of the association between diverse food practices and health.

Table 1.
Survey Responses

Question and Percentage Responding "Agree" and "Strongly Agree"	Before Conference 2005 (2006*)	After Conference 2005 (2006*)
On a scale of 1 to 5 how aware are you of the work outside your program area/ profession that addresses the food needs of diverse audiences?	15% (22%)	70% (69%)
On a scale of 1 to 5 how much interest do you have to collaborate with other disciplines/ program areas to address diverse food needs?	33% (29%)	72% (69%)
On a scale of 1 to 5 how confident are you that you can address the needs of diverse audiences as they relate to food?	27% (19%)	66% (68%)
On a scale of 1 to 5 how aware are you of diverse food practices?	37% (31%)	86% (87%)
On a scale of 1 to 5 how aware are you of the association between diverse food practices and health?	36% (24%)	74% (72%)
* 2006 responses include both first time registrants and repeat registrants		

We were not able to distinguish 2006 results between first-time and repeat registrants in order to assess impact differences. However, the 2006 survey asked participants to list activities that resulted from the 2005 conference (if they had attended). Thirteen listed activities such as providing ideas to farmers markets, making programs more culturally relevant, and encouraging 4-H clubs to consider ethnic food-related

projects. The low response to this question coupled with the low 2006 pre-conference scores (Table 1), suggests that respondents in 2006 may have been more likely to be first-time registrants.

Discussion

The Tri-State Diversity conference demonstrates that states can successfully cooperate at a regional level to deliver quality programs. Pooling resources to address a common issue such as food diversity is essential in times of declining Extension budgets. Cooperative efforts also present another opportunity for professionals to share program ideas, network, and form multi-disciplinary and multi-state collaborations.

The food diversity theme is multidisciplinary in nature and therefore attracts professionals working at different levels of the "field to table" spectrum. Given that the conferences attracted professionals in non-Extension roles, there was an opportunity for Extension professionals to build new allies and partnerships.

Multidisciplinary approaches to food diversity will ultimately have greater impact. For example, an agriculture Extension educator speaking to producers about ethnic food markets would most likely have greater success if he or she had some understanding of ethnic consumer issues. With its four focus areas, Extension has a strong capacity to offer multidisciplinary educational programs related to food issues. Therefore, in an increasingly competitive environment for resources and services, food diversity offers a unique niche for Extension program and professional development.

Overall, feedback regarding the conferences was extremely positive. Many were impressed by the wide variety of sessions offered and the high quality of speakers and tours. Participants also liked the opportunity to network with different professionals on food diversity issues. Our evaluation also indicated that the conferences were largely successful in achieving their objectives. Ultimately however, the true impact should be gauged at the community level and activities that follow. The network that developed as a result of the conferences has the potential to document and communicate best practices, case studies, and research findings through electronic newsletters, Web pages, Internet blogs, or possibly eXtension.

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