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Extension's Role in Urban Education: Why Aren't We Involved?

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Abstract: With education failing nationwide and economic restraints affecting both rural and urban educational institutions, Extension should be taking a more aggressive stance instead of operating in what has now become the way of Extension and "collecting numbers." Why isn't Extension more visible in the urban populations that reside in our own backyards? This article is a cry out for a clear understanding of where Extension is in today's world and how we must change to survive and flourish amidst changing cultures.

Introduction

The capital city of Louisiana, Baton Rouge, has been lucky to have two very distinguished land-grant universities less than 20 miles apart. Both Southern University and A&M College and Louisiana State University and A&M College have Cooperative Extension offices. Extensions' role in the past has been to serve rural and underserved populations, but does this give us an excuse to not assist those in our neighboring communities?

My question to Extension educators is "does it matter that the education systems right under our noses is failing, and a large number of the underserved in the capital city lacking resources?" Educational systems are failing across the state. Schools are constantly being taken over by charter and recovery school districts. What is lacking is more aggressive involvement of our state Extension offices. When will Extension begin to take pride in the education of those where they exist, reaching beyond addressing needs of only rural communities?

Our Neighbors Need Help

The traditional role of Extension is disappearing, and Extension must redefine itself to survive (West, Drake, & Londo, 2009). Unfortunately, Extension has become professionalized and has turned "inward," concerned only with its agenda (Diebel, n.d.). This agenda has been transformed to merely collecting numbers, not stories of who has been inspired, whose knowledge has been increased, or whose business has been enhanced. With such high demands and needs in education, it is imperative that Extension becomes more involved with education both rural and urban, bringing the expertise and cooperative approach to teaching that Extension has mastered.

Extension educators share similar desires to improve communities through educating, sharing knowledge, teaching skills, and helping others learn (McGrath, Conway, & Johnson, 2007). Why not share that expertise with urban education? Why not bring to urban schools the integrated teaching techniques of Extension to improve urban education? Sauer (1990) began to answer these questions when he wrote that "the very future of Extension as a meaningful educational institution

is interwoven with the effectiveness of its response to the challenge of youth at risk."

The Need for Extension Assistance

Extension has defined itself as a "change agent" in various aspects of the communities it serves, where Extension professionals are known as experts in educating others. Thus there should be a strategic way of incorporating urban education into curriculum development and program planning, particularly in communities neighboring Extension offices.

We are presently in a place where we must face the realization of the need for "change." Oftentimes individuals are set in their own ways of doing and thinking, not considering the change going on around them. Extension has to consider the change in culture; change in paradigm; change in needs of communities both urban and rural; and change in its own operation.

Implications for Urban Involvement

Extension officials acknowledged the need for urban involvement more than 20 years ago, yet still existing are the struggles of whether or not Extension should increase its presence in assisting urban populations. The role of Extension with youth is still primarily 4-H programs. Though it has been successful, 4-H may not suffice for what is needed in urban settings. Extension educators should be willing and allowed to assist other efforts to help failing schools, therefore decreasing the uneducated population of youth in urban areas.

With the increased popularity of education "reform," this is as good a time as ever to look at alternative education methods that are proven successful. Is it possible that Extension has been successful all these years because of their methods of teaching? Why can't these methods be used in traditional educational settings?

As self-proclaimed "experts" in disseminating educational resources to rural populations, Extension educators and researchers possess the innovative ideas and resources available to help public schools in urban settings. While extending knowledge and research is still needed for some issues, the problems communities face today require a different approach (Diebel, n.d.).

Resources may vary between urban and rural communities, but the challenge of motivating kids are common across community lines (Crockett, n.d.). Thus, I pose the challenge to Extension professionals nationwide to expand our reach and increase our clientele by becoming more involved in bringing resources and tools we have historically found successful to educating urban youth.

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