Cultural Relevance and Working with Inner City Youth Populations to Achieve Civic Engagement

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Abstract: This article helps Extension professionals consider the cultural relevant needs of inner city residents in hopes of achieving ongoing civic engagement and appropriate program activities in these communities. Having a deep understanding of how the various dimensions of marginalized community life among inner city populations affect participation in organized civic activities is necessary for Extension professionals who seek to increase civic engagement capacity among inner city populations. Bridging the unexplored geographical differences of urban vs. suburban Extension will help to achieve successful youth engagement work in America's inner city communities.

"Giving back to the community" is a phrase liberally used to express efforts at strengthening and sustaining civic life in minority communities (Charles, 2005). However, many youth in inner city communities do not feel especially empowered to "give back to the community." They may feel that solving the problems of the community was the job of the "grown-ups." Even though the youth have heard the phrase used and have used the phrase themselves, many of them have not yet been clearly shown what they are receiving from the community and thus are unsure about what they are to "give back" (Charles, 2005). Service learning activities educate students in civic skill-building that will enable them to engage with their community. Students are expected to learn critical thinking skills through their "real world" experiences. The activities are intended to foster leadership and social responsibility.

However, an apparent problem with "service learning" for inner city youth is the kinds of activities considered for youth participation. Often, these youth are hardly finding program activities that they perceive are relevant to their lives. Service learning must have cultural relevance as a way to build on the theories and practice of civic engagement. The following information is intended to assist individuals and groups who will work with inner city youth (Panshin, 1992; Webster & Ingram, 2007)

Recognizing an Inner City Youth's Reality

Possible Priority Mismatch

Teens face great pressure maneuvering in an urban environment while simultaneously juggling individual identity development and the social need to fit in with peers (Charles, 2005). Therefore, Extension educators and other youth development professionals should understand that some of these youth may not initially embrace the importance of extracurricular activities.

Perception of the "Environment"

Many inner city youths' understanding of "environment" may be different than that of the professionals in youth development organizations. Much of what some inner city youth consider their "environment" is connected to their close surroundings, not to the "natural world" itself (Charles, 2005). Contextualizing "environment" is beneficial for bringing authentic engagement to agricultural and eco-friendly youth activities.

Image Profiling

There is no clear-cut way to make a determination about a youth's background without having some extensive exposure to him or her. On the surface, they may wear the clothes typically associated with being "street" or "thuggish"â baggy pants, oversized t-shirts, baseball cap, etc., but often this is only a representation of fashion/style and not representative of one's behavior or character (Charles, 2005).

The Gatekeepers of Authentic Inner City Youth Engagement

Professionals in youth development organizations must actively work to seek out and maintain relationships with the various adult community members who are connected to the "at-risk" youth they seek to assist and not attempt to seek out long-term relationships with the youth only. In minority communities, it is important to be aware of the existence of cultural norms that adhere to generational hierarchy. Approaching community members respectfully, as the rightful gatekeepers to the youth of the community, is a sign of cultural sensitivity that will likely be rewarded by trust and access (Webster & Ingram, 2007).

Conclusion

Cultural competence findings regarding inner city youth populations demonstrate creativity and a recognized need to reach out to engage youth in non-traditional settings as well as within their communities while using youth development principles to more comprehensively address the contextual issues affecting youth decision-making (Farner, Rhoads, Cutz, & Farner, 2005; Skuza, 2004).

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