

Strategies for Accommodating Extension Clients Who Face Language, Vision, or Hearing Challenges

Abstract

Extension services nationwide seek to equalize access to university resources for all learners. In this article, we focus on accommodation as a tool of our trade. We discuss findings and implications from a study that documented approaches used by one state's Extension professionals to accommodate clients who face language, vision, or hearing challenges. We also explore constraints, criteria for effectiveness, appropriate goals, and roles and responsibilities relative to using various accommodations to provide full access for all who participate in Extension programming.

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Background

Language, vision, or hearing (LVH) challenges can impede learning in certain situations or environments. A disability is a physical or mental impairment that limits one or more things a person can do, making it difficult for that individual to learn, see, or hear ("Americans with Disabilities Act," 2009). An accommodation is a different way to do a task (Brady & McKee, 2005). It uses a learner's strengths to work around the learner's areas of need (National Institute for Literacy, 1999). An accommodation should not create a hardship but rather should help the learner meet his or her need. Sometimes accommodations may be the only way a learner can complete a task (Brady & McKee, 2005). It can be argued that accommodations are task oriented but lead to learning in the same way that technology is often task oriented but when used to teach a skill is learning oriented (Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center, 2001).

Accommodation Strategies and Implications

In the article "Accommodating Extension Clients Who Face Language, Vision, or Hearing Barriers" in this issue of the *Journal of Extension*, survey data and study outcomes are presented that document several strategies and resources used by Oregon State University (OSU) Extension professionals to accommodate Extension clients who

face LVH challenges. Both Extension and the clients themselves provided various accommodations to ensure learning (Angima, Etuk, & Maddy, 2016). Overall, translated materials and language translators were used most often for clients facing language challenges; large-font materials were used most often for clients with vision impairments; and American Sign Language interpreters and conversion of audio to text were used most often for clients with hearing impairments (Angima et al., 2016).

In providing any kind of accommodation either at workshops or in the field, several accommodation characteristics may be considered. It is important to know whether an accommodation is easily available, affordable, likely to be effective with the learner, proven to work, and, most important, evaluable relative to a national approval standard for its effectiveness (Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center, 2001). It is evident from the reference study (Angima et al., 2016), that Extension has not been able to train all Extension professionals on many of these characteristics.

Location and timing also play roles in Extension's ability to provide effective accommodations. Elements such as physical layouts of offices, specific equipment available for accommodations, and lighting and noise levels differ across Extension training venues. This circumstance makes it challenging to provide uniform accommodations across all programs. Furthermore, in Extension, most training sessions take place during evening or weekend hours, when other community resources for accommodation may not be readily available. This situation is more critical for participants who face LVH challenges but have not registered in advance of an event. Moreover, disruptions that result as part of last-minute accommodations may cause other participants to lose interest or not complete learning, especially with series-oriented programs.

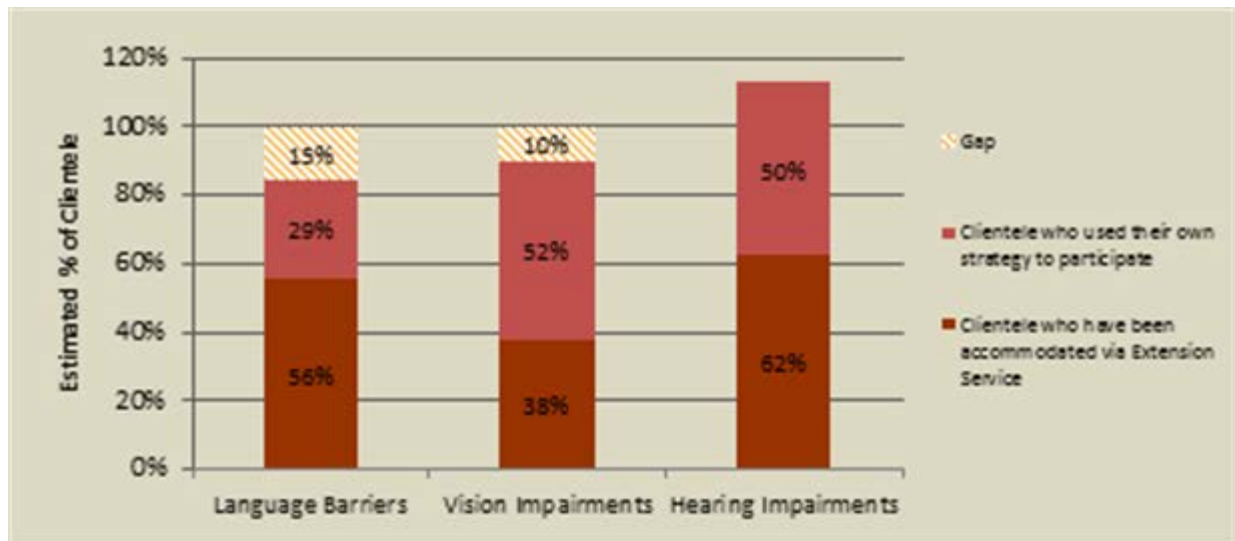
Gaps

Extension administrators nationwide expect all clients facing LVH challenges to be accommodated. The big question is this: What does 100% accommodation mean? Considering that both resources and faculty/staff time are limited, does it mean allowing some clients to provide their own accommodations if ultimately 100% of clients facing LVH challenges are able to participate?

To address these questions, we asked the Extension professionals participating in the OSU Extension study to indicate how frequently clients provided their own LVH assistance. The data (Figure 1) suggest that there is flexibility to shift the goal from "100% accommodation of clients using Extension resources" to "100% participation in Extension programming by clients facing LVH challenges," as exemplified by the data shown in Figure 1 for clients with hearing impairments. (The value of greater than 100% shown in Figure 1 is a function of the measurement and estimation method used [Angima, Etuk, & Maddy, 2016].) Subsequently, a gap or service need would exist when there are clients facing LVH challenges who are not able to either provide their own accommodation or receive Extension assistance to participate in programs.

Figure 1.

Existing Gaps Documented for Accommodating Extension Clients Who Face Language, Vision, and Hearing Challenges



Because Extension professionals are expected to provide 100% accommodation of clients facing LVH challenges, we sought to find out whether faculty and staff share and act on those expectations. To make this determination, we asked two questions about the percentages of clients Extension professionals *would like to be able to accommodate* and those they thought they *realistically could accommodate* with appropriate communication tools, given resource limitations and time constraints at local, regional, and state levels. Results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

Language, Vision, and Hearing Accommodation Rates as Expressed by Extension Professionals Under Two Scenarios: Expected Versus Realistic Levels of Accommodation

Barrier category	Accommodate under normal conditions (%)	Realistic rate of accommodation (%)
Language barriers	77	60
Vision impairments	72	51
Hearing impairments	73	56

These results can be interpreted as a gap between the expectations of Extension administration and Extension professionals, or as a gap between what is ideal and what is realistic or practical. Whatever the interpretation, it is important to note that adult learners do have a responsibility to ensure that they have a good learning experience. They need to be their own advocates, explain or suggest suitable accommodations that meet their needs, tell Extension personnel in advance about their disabilities, tell what accommodations have worked for them in the past, and ask for accommodations that are based on need and within their legal rights (Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center, 2001).

Conclusion

Without explicitly knowing Extension clients' needs in terms of LVH challenges, varying levels of gaps will

continue to exist in meeting the goal of accommodating 100% of those who would like to participate in Extension programs. It is incumbent on Extension administration and faculty to educate adult learners about the responsibility for communicating their needs rather than assuming that they know they must do so.

Extension professionals routinely conduct needs assessments to help them develop need- and demand-driven programs that meet community goals. Part of such needs assessments should be addressing accommodations for learners who face LVH challenges. Simple approaches may involve altering the way information is presented or adapting instruction in response to individual needs and strengths, especially when participants who face LVH challenges are involved. Such approaches may include using the following tactics:

- Highlight or color code important information in whatever form it is presented.
- Allow time for learners who face LVH challenges to think and assimilate content before proceeding.
- Maintain eye contact with learners to help ensure that learning is occurring.
- Record sessions, and let learners take them home to review.
- Provide individual feedback to learners who face LVH challenges about their progress in attaining the goals set forth for the program.

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