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Creating Inclusive Extension Programs

Abstract

To develop more inclusive programs, Extension professionals should attend to self-awareness, communication, and program structure. We suggest engaging in reflection and examining word choices and program decisions to make programs more welcoming to all members of the communities we serve. Extension professionals should incorporate these practices in their work to meet the needs of increasingly diverse communities.

Keywords: [inclusive](#), [reflection](#), [self-awareness](#), [diversity](#)

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When we remove participation barriers in Extension programs, we enable access to new learning, foster consensus in our communities, and develop positive environments for all learners (Rayner, 2009). To respect and value all potential participants in our communities, we must prioritize developing inclusive educational spaces. It is easy to articulate inclusion as a value. However, it is challenging to implement inclusive practices. An organized approach to developing more inclusive Extension programs can be achieved through attending to self-awareness, communication, and program structure. Educators must communicate that they value everyone's presence through all their program choices because participants cannot separate identity-forming cues in the noncurricular components of a program from intended curriculum (hooks, 1994; Wortham, 2006).

Historically, Cooperative Extension and land-grant universities have fallen short regarding their intent to provide education and research findings to all populations (Fields & Nathaniel, 2015). In missing segments of the population that should be participating in Extension programs, we perpetuate legacies and systems of injustice (McCrary, 1994). Thus, it is imperative on Extension professionals to identify and change practices and structures that limit outreach in order to meet the needs of our entire population (Fields & Nathaniel, 2015).

An Organized Approach to Implementing Inclusive Practices

On the basis of our experience with the topic of inclusivity in Extension programming, we identify herein three practices that will assist Extension professionals in reaching the goal of meeting the needs of all potential participants.

Attending to Self-Awareness

Extension professionals must engage in reflection to uncover their biases and reveal how those biases interfere with intentions to be inclusive. We suggest the use of journaling to answer prompts such as, "Who are my participants? Who is missing? Why?" and "What do I assume about my participants? Nonparticipants?" These questions can help identify assumptions about participants and implicit and explicit messages participants are receiving from Extension professionals and their programming. Uncovering, confronting, and addressing biases ensures that communication is in line with inclusive intentions by making people aware of the biases they communicate unintentionally.

Communicating Inclusive Intentions

Reflective practice helps Extension professionals become more comfortable thinking and talking about their intentions for inclusion. It is essential that Extension professionals have open lines of communication directed at meeting the needs of all people (Schauber & Castania, 2001). Communicating expectations and available supports before programming begins alleviates participants' concerns and conveys that obstacles for participation have been considered.

Asking people to share the names and pronouns they use celebrates each unique individual. Although doing this can feel awkward, Extension professionals can open the door for participants to share such information by including in their first email about a program a statement such as this: "I invite those who go by a name not listed on your registration to email me and let me know. For example, I'm listed as Emerald, but I go by Emmy." Sharing pronouns also invites participants to do the same. Continuing the "Emmy" example, sharing one's pronouns can be accomplished through adding content such as this: "and my pronouns are she/her/hers." Moreover, Extension professionals should include their pronouns in their email signatures to further communicate openness to participants' sharing theirs.

Extension professionals can use language in other ways to communicate openness as well. The use of nongendered pronouns such as "they," "them," and "theirs" reinforces inclusive intentions, as does the use of gender-inclusive language in greetings, such as "Dear 4-H'ers/Master Gardeners" versus "Dear Boys and Girls/Ladies and Gentlemen." Further, the use of "family" instead of "mom and dad" and "partner" instead of "girlfriend/boyfriend" or "husband/wife" communicates a more inclusive mind-set.

Like certain language, dress codes can unintentionally communicate a less inclusive environment. Extension professionals should eliminate descriptors such as "church clothes" or "Sunday best" when slacks or a skirt and a collared shirt are required. Moreover, there is no need to separate dress codes into those for men/males and those for women/females. Instead, listing acceptable clothing items and allowing people to choose for themselves is an appropriate approach. Additionally, it is important to consider whether a dress code is necessary and, if it is, how to assist those for whom applicable types of clothing are cost prohibitive. For example, a 4-H program may provide county polo shirts or keep a closet of appropriate donated clothes.

Extension professionals hold their programs in accessible places, and they should communicate this accessibility to potential participants. Providing information about public transportation and the availability of accessible parking spaces, amplification systems, interpreters, and large-print or braille materials can put people at ease about accessibility.

Considering Structural Aspects of Programs

Often overlooked structural components of programs that can exclude certain groups or individuals include program schedules and locations.

Extension professionals should look beyond traditional calendars when scheduling programming. They should take action to become aware of various cultural events, including non-Christian-faith traditions or holidays, and examine how the worship practices of marginalized faith communities might coincide with program sessions.

Schools, libraries, parks, and town halls often are safe, accessible places that can be easier to reach for people who struggle to get to a county Extension office. Further, holding summer youth programs at elementary schools may provide participants and families access to free lunch programs. Extension professionals should bring their programming to the people rather than the people to their programming by having programs in a variety of locations throughout their counties.

Discussion/Implications

Participants in our workshops rooted in this work have reported success in integration of reflective practice, communication of inclusive intentions, and alterations to program structure. For example, one Extension professional reported intentionally changing language from "you guys" to "you all." Additionally, to meet people where they are, she added classes at housing centers for limited-resource individuals and collaborated with faith centers to build community gardens. The classes filled, and the community gardens are ongoing, multiyear successes. She also reported that now 90% of her programming is with people who differ from her racially and economically. Another participant reported that thinking through being more inclusive led to her being more mindful and aware of and feeling better able to address gaps in her programming. Further, she indicated having carried these practices through to her role as a county director and attributed new community partnerships to the more inclusive environment she has created.

To serve the people in their communities and meet the needs of the whole Extension audience, Extension professionals must engage in intentionally inclusive programming through self-awareness, communication of inclusive intentions, and alterations to program structure. Creating an environment of inclusion within our programs removes barriers for potential participants so that we can fulfill the land-grant mission.

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