

An Overview of Diversity¹

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This paper is the first in a series of articles on planning programs to effectively reach diverse audiences. The Planning Culturally Relevant Programs series is available at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_series_planning_culturally_relevant_programs. A Web-based staff development curriculum, Strengthening Programs to Reach Diverse Audiences, is also available at <http://fycs.ifas.ufl.edu/diversity/diversity%20website/home.htm>.

Defining Diversity

There are probably as many definitions of diversity as there are diverse characteristics of people. One definition states that: "Diversity is a mosaic of people who bring a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, styles, perspectives, values and beliefs as assets to the groups and organizations with which they interact" (Guion, 1999, p.1).

There are two essential words in this definition of diversity: *assets* and *interact*. There will always be commonalities and differences among people, but the key is to interact well with the groups you serve. By interacting with individuals you gain a better sense of

their specific needs, which needs can be addressed through Extension programming, and how to deliver programs in ways that will be well received by the individuals. Also, you gain insight into their strengths, assets, and skills, thus enabling you to use those as part of the solution to the issue at hand.

To truly accept diversity, you must learn to respect and value it. If you are willing to respect it, you must have the commitment to gain the knowledge, skills, and personal awareness necessary to work in the most effective ways with a variety of clients. An Extension professional who can learn to integrate diversity factors into program design, greatly increases the chances of establishing a program that effectively serves all of its participants.

Different Types of Diversity

In defining diversity, we must also examine the different dimensions of diversity. There are two broad dimensions of diversity: primary and secondary. *Primary dimensions* of diversity reflect characteristics that are relevant and cannot be changed, including age, ethnicity, gender, physical abilities or qualities, race, place of birth, and so on. *Secondary dimensions*, on the other hand, are those

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that can change, such as educational background, geographic location, income, marital status, parental status, religious beliefs, and work experiences.

Changing Demographics

The U.S. confirms that minority groups are increasing at a rapid rate. Our country is more ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse than ever before in its history.

Some national statistics provide evidence of America's changing demographics:

- The Hispanic/Latino population is now about 15% of the U.S. population and is projected to triple by 2050.
- In 2008, 14% of Americans identified themselves as African American.
- Asian Americans now represent about 5% of the U.S. population and are also growing rapidly.
- According to Census 2000, about 18% of Americans over age five spoke a foreign language in addition to English.
- Diversity is even more evident among children (ages 0–17), with 22% being Hispanic/Latino and 15% being African American in this age group.

Foreign-born immigration is approaching levels not realized since 1900–1910. Based on reports from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 11% of the total population in the U.S. is foreign born. In 2000, nearly 7 million people identified themselves with more than one race. This means that people are beginning to recognize their multiethnicity.

Florida statistics, from *Florida Quick Facts* and the U.S. Census Bureau, also demonstrate the rapid demographic shifts occurring in this state:

- Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin comprised about 21% of Florida's population.
- About 16% of Florida's population identified themselves as African American.

- Asian persons in general account for 2.3% of the population of Florida.
- About 23% of persons over five in Florida speak a foreign language in addition to English.
- Foreign-born individuals represent about 19% of Florida's population.
- About 17% of Florida's population is age 65 or over, one of the highest rates in the nation.

Diversity Within Diversity

When thinking about diversity, you must also consider the significant diversity that exists *within* various ethnic groups in our society today. The main ethnic groups in the U.S. include African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, and Native Americans. While there are common cultural threads within a certain ethnic group, there are also very distinct values, norms, and practices within the group. Consider these facts:

- African American/Black is a term that encompasses recent African immigrants as well as the descendants of contiguous Africa, both in the mainland U.S. and from the U.S. Caribbean territories.
- The term Asian American refers to Americans who trace their origins to any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asian, or Indian subcontinents. It includes people with ancestral ties to numerous countries, including India, China, the Philippines, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Pakistan, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Indonesia.
- There are at least 14 distinct groups that make up the Hispanic/Latino American population and whose members trace their lineage to one of three continents: North America (Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean), Europe (Spain), and South America.
- There are close to five hundred federally recognized Native American tribes.

Other factors that can also contribute to diversity within an ethnic group are education,

socioeconomics, level of ethnic identification, family background, and upbringing. The EDIS fact sheet, *Ethnic Marketing: A Strategy for Marketing Programs to Diverse Audiences (FCS9223)*, provides more information on the issue of diversity within diversity.

Reasons to Reach Diverse Audiences

Given Florida's diverse population, it is becoming increasingly important for Extension to reach diverse audiences with its programs and services.

There are four main reasons for Extension to intensify its outreach to diverse audiences:

1. As a publicly funded organization, Extension's mission is to serve all Florida citizens;
2. Having diverse participants enriches the Extension class setting with new ideas and thoughts;
3. Changing demographics may eventually mean change in political power structures, perhaps beginning at the local levels. Thus, it is important for Extension to have political advocates; and
4. Diverse ethnic groups are experiencing increased financial viability, which has implications for financial support of Extension.

Barriers to Reaching Diverse Audiences

Two of the main barriers to reaching diverse audiences is the fear of the unknown and the fear of differences between the educator and the audience. It can be difficult to initiate contact and begin to build relationships with individuals who you have not worked with in the past or know very little about. Also, it can be intimidating to meet individuals from a culture that seems drastically different from your own.

Thoughts about the unknown are based on perceptions. Perceptions are influenced by experiences, beliefs, values, and environment.

"Preconceptions and stereotypes function as negative lenses through which people perceive others who look, think or behave differently" (Hogan-Garcia, 2003, p. 52). Such stereotypes can be a major barrier to working with diverse audiences.

Understanding and communicating with a diverse group is a behavior that is a learned skill or habit. Habit is defined as a point where desire, knowledge, and skill meet. Thus, desire, knowledge, and skill are essential to the removal of the bias that can cloud judgment. You have shown a basic desire to reach diverse audiences in meaningful ways by reading this fact sheet. The next step is to increase knowledge and skills—a way to gain cultural competence.

There are three broad, overarching strategies for reaching out to diverse audiences. They are:

1. **Be an active learner.** While training is important, just attending a seminar or reading a lesson will not provide you with all the knowledge you need. Active learning involves lifestyle changes. It involves actively seeking opportunities to engage in dialogue with diverse individuals and communities.
2. **Use critical thinking.** Learn to avoid errors of perception, judgment, and premature reactions. A statement about a group of people based on negative observations of a few members is stereotyping and prejudicial. Insist on accurate information. Validate that information is true for the specific individuals who you are working with.
3. **Look at the humanity in everyone.** Some goals are universal. It does not matter what socioeconomic class you are in or to what ethnic group you belong. Most people want health, safety, education, economic security, and the best for their children. These commonalities help us to recognize the humanity in everyone.

Corey & Corey state it best when they assert:

It is necessary that you have a range of experiences upon which to draw to understand the human condition. Universal human themes link

people in spite of their differences. What is crucial is your openness to learn from the lessons that life has presented to you, your respect for contrasting perspectives, your interest in understanding the diverse world views of the clients you will meet, of the challenging of your attitudes and views" (2003, p. 83).

Conclusion

Based on the changing demographics and the evolving nature of Extension programming, there is a clear need for Extension programs to become even more diverse in terms of participants, volunteers, and staff. Given that target audiences are rapidly changing, Extension programming must also change in order to be more responsive to the needs of all potential Extension clientele.

While it is easy to value commonalities in people, it is far more difficult to honor, appreciate, and respect differences. In embracing diversity, we must become aware of and celebrate the differences that are based on cultural values, norms, practices, and other factors.

Learning comes from interacting with diverse audiences with whom you want to work. Through interaction you find commonalities to embrace. You also find uniqueness that must be respected and incorporated into program design and implementation in order to have the greatest chance of success in serving that audience.

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