

Culturally Competent Extension Educators¹

Lisa A. Guion, Kay Brown, and David C. Diehl^{2A}

This paper is the second in a series of articles on planning programs to effectively reach diverse audiences. The Planning Culturally Relevant Programs series is available at <http://www.ifas.ufl.edu/diversity/>. 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>.

Overview

While there are many definitions of cultural competence, one of the most widely used was put forth by Cross and his colleagues in 1989 as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or amongst professionals and enables that system, those agencies, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (p. iv). According to Cross (p. v), the characteristics of culturally competent institutions are that they:

1. value diversity
2. have the capacity for self-assessment
3. are conscious of the dynamics present when cultures interact
4. have institutionalized cultural knowledge
5. have developed adaptations to diversity

The cornerstone of cultural competence is a better understanding of individuals within the cultural groups that we currently serve and/or desire to serve.

Knowledge of the history, culture, traditions, customs, language or dialect, values, religious or spiritual beliefs, art, music, learning styles, and practices of individuals is vital to educators when laying the foundation for programs that encourage true connections (Dresser, 1996; and McPhatter, 1997).

This knowledge helps educators better understand members of a particular community and how those members interpret their world (Okun, Fried, & Okun, 1999). Respecting and learning about

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 2. Lisa A. Guion, former faculty member, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; Kay Brown, Extension Agent IV, Escambia County; David C. Diehl, Assistant Professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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culture promotes a focus on the positive characteristics and strengths of a community and the individuals that reside within it (Okun, Fried, & Okun, 1999). This positive focus leads to an appreciation of cultural differences. Corey & Corey (2003) assert that first educators/helpers must be aware of their own assumptions, biases, and values to become increasingly aware of the cultural values, biases, and assumptions of culturally different learners in nonjudgmental ways; this knowledge informs strategies that are sensitive to the needs of individuals and groups.

Culturally competent programs are effective and powerful because they are "customer driven." They are designed to understand and respond to the specific needs of a cultural community (Guion, Chattaraj, and Sullivan, 2003). Learning and respecting the particular needs of a cultural group in order to better serve them is far more effective than simply doing what has always worked with other, more mainstream, populations (McPhatter, 1997). Cultural competence entails improving relationships with various ethnic communities and designing programs that are directly related to their needs, lives, and individual goals (Murphy & Nesby, 2002).

Communication: One of the Key Competencies

Intercultural competency skills include an awareness of one's own cultural communication style and an awareness of other valid cultural communication styles that reflect different perceptions, assumptions, norms, beliefs, and values (Schauber & Castania, 2001). Other skills of intercultural competency include:

- the understanding of historical power differences;
- present-day behaviors that result from the history of a group's survival;
- ability to empathize cross-culturally;
- accepting multiple perspectives;
- observing mindfully while reserving judgments; and

- adapting one's communication style to others (Schauber & Castania, 2001).

Conclusion

If programs are to effectively serve an increasingly diverse population, it is crucial that educators become more culturally aware, responsive, and competent (Guion, Chattaraj, and Sullivan, 2003). Culturally competent educators consider factors such as language, customs, ethnicity, family structure, and community/tribal dynamics when designing their programs (Lynch & Hanson, 1997). There are a variety of resources to help educators become more culturally competent (see next section). However, the best way to become culturally competent is to interact with the culturally diverse learners, their families, and their communities. While this approach requires a large time commitment, the rewards of having culturally relevant and responsive programs far outweigh the costs.

Selected Resources for Educators

The following Web sites provide a wealth of information in regard to diversity education:

The **Child Welfare Information Gateway Cultural Competence** site is a collection of materials for people working with child welfare and related issues, including cultural competence.
<http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/cultural/>

The **eXtension Diversity Center** is an online resource dedicated to issues of diversity specifically for Cooperative Extension.
http://www.extension.org/pages/Diversity_Center

The **Health Resources and Services Administration Cultural Competency Site** provides resources and links on cultural competency issues, especially those related to health.
<http://www.hrsa.gov/culturalcompetence/>

The **National Center for Cultural Competence** provides a variety of resources for individuals seeking to improve their culturally competent service delivery. <http://nccc.georgetown.edu/index.html>

The **National Multicultural Institute** focuses on providing training resources for building inclusive and diverse organizations. <http://www.nmci.org/>

The **Strengthening Programs to Reach Diverse Audiences Curriculum** is a University of Florida resource designed to build the capacity of faculty to work with diverse audiences.
<http://fycs-diversity.ifas.ufl.edu>

The **Critical Multicultural Pavilion** provides resources for teachers on issues related to diversity.
<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/>

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