

Culturally Diverse Advisory Boards and Volunteers¹

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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://fyas.ifas.ufl.edu/diversity/diversity%20website/home.htm>.

Overview

Recognizing the community as important and inviting community members to participate in all stages of programming are first steps toward building deeper relationships as well as stronger advisory boards and volunteers. Advisory board members and volunteers should represent a variety of perspectives, bringing new ideas and views to Cooperative Extension. In Extension, advisory committees and volunteers play key roles in making our programs more effective and relevant.

Benefits of Culturally Diverse Volunteers and Advisory Boards

Culturally integrated advisory boards are one vehicle for increasing community involvement. Integrated advisory boards allow Extension educators to gain valuable information about what the community needs and expects. This makes Extension programs and services more relevant, connected, and meaningful (Nash, 1999).

Culturally diverse program volunteers are another valuable resource for educators. One role that culturally diverse volunteers and advisory committee members can serve is as a cultural guide (also called cultural brokers and cultural mediators in the literature). It is difficult, and may even be unrealistic, to expect an educator to know everything about all cultural groups in their county or area. Thus, cultural guides can highlight traditions, beliefs, practices, and other elements of a culture that may be unfamiliar to an educator (Lynch & Hanson, 1997). Similarly, they can help the educator break through cultural barriers to connect on a more intimate level with diverse ethnic communities.

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1. This document is FCS9220, one of a series of the Family Youth and Community Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date September 2005. Revised June 2010. Original written by Lisa A. Guion, former faculty member and Janet Harper Golden, former Extension agent; Revised by David C. Diehl. Visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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For example, a cultural guide can assist the educator in making inroads and linkages with opinion leaders, gatekeepers, and leaders in the community. A cultural guide may be willing to engage in a teaching and learning process when approached from a position of equality and shared meaning. When professionals reach out and make genuine efforts to increase knowledge and awareness of others, they are often met with positive responses.

However, there must be some level of caution in identifying a cultural guide because some individuals do not want to be viewed as "the voice" of their community (Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Careful consideration and dialogue with an individual can ensure that the person does not feel as though he or she is a victim of *tokenism*.

To gain varying perspectives and capitalize on shared culture, Extension professionals should seek consultation with more than one cultural guide. Focusing solely on members of a group who hold formal offices or positions may not be the best strategy. It is important to remember that formal leaders of a community are not necessarily viewed as representing the best interests of the community; identifying informal leaders is important (Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000).

Cultural guides may prove invaluable in helping educators:

1. Plan how lessons are taught—maximizing learning style preferences;
2. Select activities and learning experiences that will be most effective and meaningful;
3. Design marketing approaches; and
4. Obtain other volunteers from within the cultural group (Lynch & Hanson, 1997). The use of cultural guides will be covered in the EDIS fact sheet FCS9221, *Planning Programs to Break Down Cultural Barriers*.

Lessons from Experience

Some basic lessons about creating effective and diverse boards, working groups, and volunteer teams (Fletcher, 1999, pp. 24-25), include the following:

- **Agree on reasons for seeking diversity:** It is important that the organization and the board share a deep commitment to diversifying the membership of the board and the volunteer pool.
- **Staff the nominating committee with as much diversity as possible.** If a variety of people are involved in the nomination of board members and volunteers, a more diverse pool of participants will be developed.
- **Seek candidates who not only are members of the target group but are also committed to the organization's mission.** While diversity is a worthy goal, organizations will thrive when the board members and volunteers are passionate and knowledgeable about the work of Extension.
- **Define expectations for all board members and volunteers.** All current and future board members and volunteers should have a clear idea of what will be expected of them.
- **Establish a system for orienting new members and for continuous development of board members and volunteers.** Especially if your organization is undergoing change and pursuing more diverse participants, orientation and training will be critical tools to manage ongoing change.
- **Reach out beyond immediate circles to find potential candidates.** While it is easy to draw upon our known circle of colleagues, it can be valuable to expand our reach into new partnerships.
- **Understand the pitfalls of expecting persons of color to represent all the people of their cultural or ethnic background.** As mentioned earlier, some people will not be comfortable representing all of a particular group; be sensitive to this possibility.

- **Foster an atmosphere of openness, honesty, and tolerance for conflict.** For diverse groups to work together, it is necessary to build comfort and willingness to share different ideas.
- **Demand leadership from both board members, staff, and volunteers.** If a truly inclusive organization is to be created, all partners must be committed to the ideals of diversity.

Conclusion

Just as Extension program participants should reflect the demographic makeup of the county, our volunteers and advisory boards should be representative of all the citizens as well. Equally, if not more important, culturally diverse volunteers and advisory board members can assist educators in planning, designing, marketing, and implementing culturally relevant programs. They can also assist in increasing involvement and participation in programs.

Key Resources

Empowering and Motivating NDSU Extension Advisory Boards, Councils, and Committees: A

Hands-On, Practical Approach: This document provides practical advice on constructing effective boards in the Extension setting and includes information on diverse representation.

<http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/ext-emp/advisory/Advisory%20Council%20Guide.pdf>

Perspectives on Nonprofit Board Diversity:

This document provides an overview of a variety of issues related to diverse representation for boards of nonprofit organizations.

<http://www.transformativegovernance.org/Perspectives%20on%20Nonprofit%20Board%20Diversity.pdf>

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