

The Need for Diversity and Inclusion in Extension Efforts

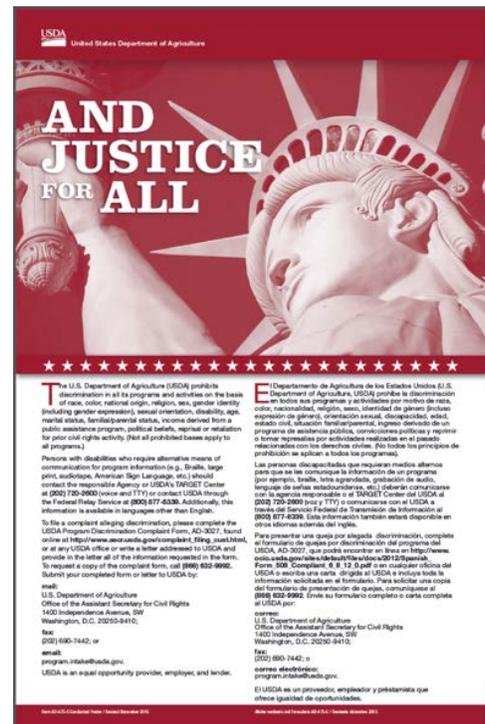


The role of an Extension professional requires consideration of the ever-changing cultural climate of communities across the state. As such, Extension agents need to be culturally competent and should incorporate the principles of diversity and inclusion in every aspect of the job, from program planning and evaluation to outreach and volunteer management.

Diversity and Inclusion: What Do They Mean?

Diversity encompasses a wide range of differences, although most people automatically think about it only in forms of race or sex. Diversity also refers to differences in ethnicity, religion, national origin, disability, age, genetic information, education, and life experiences (EEOC, n.d.). Inclusion, then, is the demonstration of respect for and appreciation of these differences. Extension agents need to have the awareness, understanding, and skills related to diversity and inclusion when developing educational programs and working within diverse communities (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011).

It is also important to understand legal policies and procedures that promote diversity and inclusion. One example is the use of an inclusion statement, also known as a notification statement. An inclusion statement explains that an organization welcomes all members of the community and will not discriminate or deny services based on an individual's or group's differences. At Mississippi State University, Extension falls under the Division of Agriculture, Forestry, and Veterinary Medicine (DAFVM), and the DAFVM inclusion statement is as follows:



Mississippi State University remains committed to creating, encouraging, and maintaining a campus community that reflects the rich citizen diversity of this state and nation. Specifically, we will provide an environment in which differences are welcomed, embraced, and valued (DAFVM Memorandum, 2016). We are an equal opportunity employer, and all qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability status, protected veteran status, or any other characteristic protected by law.

Another example is the "And Justice for All" poster that the government requires every Extension building to display, since Extension is funded in part by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The appropriate "And Justice for All" poster (version AD-475C) is to be

prominently displayed in all offices where there is a USDA presence. It should be where customers will be able to read it. All “And Justice for All” posters must be displayed in a specific size: 11 inches wide by 17 inches tall.

So How Do You Demonstrate Inclusion? *Be Mindful*

Be mindful of your thoughts, beliefs, and actions in addition to those of others. Reflect on how you operate, what drives you, and how the principles that shape you determine your interaction with people different from you. To gain a self-awareness about diversity and inclusion, consider two approaches: understand the perspective from which you see people and ask someone you trust to share their opinion of how you interact with people different from you.

The first step to developing a greater self-awareness is determining how you view others. Do you believe that people have qualities or traits that are set from birth, or do you believe that they can be developed over time? Believing that qualities are set can lead to stereotyping, where individuals are treated “as walking embodiments of a group’s stereotypes [that] leads them to behave in ways likely to bring out the negative behavior” that is expected of them (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006). For example, if you believe that all children are rude, and you let that stereotype guide your attitude when implementing an after-school program, it is more likely that the children who are well-behaved and participatory will be ignored or given less credit than they deserve, simply because you unconsciously focused on the actions of a few, poorly behaved children.

The second step to gaining a greater self-awareness is seeking the feedback of someone you trust and respect. To practice the concept of mindfulness, think about a particular audience or client group with whom you have not yet worked or you might have a difficult time engaging. How would you go about better understanding them and their needs, and how would that affect your Extension outreach efforts with them? If you’re uncertain how to handle a situation, seek the help of colleagues you trust and respect for guidance. In some cases, your peers may have encountered this situation before, and their input can prevent many headaches.

Be Strategic and Intentional

Most professionals are strategic and intentional about the work they do. As Extension professionals, you put many hours and considerable effort into creating programs for the community you serve. That same effort and energy should go into ensuring that your programs acknowledge and welcome diverse client groups.

A simple way to do this is through a thorough needs assessment and logic model approach. As you assess the needs of your stakeholders, consider opportunities to enhance diversity and be more inclusive of those stakeholders who may not be traditional or common. Give them an opportunity to identify ways that Extension can better serve them. Using that information, build it into your logic model for program planning.

A logic model is a tool you might already use, but not necessarily in regards to diversity and inclusion. Incorporating actions and tools that consider and enhance diversity and inclusion into an educational program logic model will result in a program with outcomes that include successfully working with all people.

Acknowledge and Communicate with Others

While becoming self-aware, being strategic, and being intentional all address diversity and inclusion, it must still be implicitly stated: all people need to be acknowledged. You may not agree with or understand certain people, but that does not mean those individuals are bad or difficult to work with.

Learn to communicate in a diverse environment by understanding the positives and negatives of verbal and nonverbal communication. Using inappropriate labels or terms (for example, calling a person Mexican when, in fact, that person is Latino but not from Mexico) should be avoided at all cost. Body language may also vary among cultures. A behavior as subtle as making eye contact can be perceived as a sign of respect in one culture but disrespect in another.

Additionally, try to approach interpersonal communication with a goal of understanding, rather than focusing on right, wrong, or proving a point. One way to do this is to practice active listening. Following are some suggestions on active listening:

- Restate what the other person said, in your own words, and ask them for confirmation that you understand them. *“What I heard you say was... Am I understanding you correctly?”*
- Observe and acknowledge the other person’s emotions when he or she talks. *“You appear to be frustrated. How can we work together to address this?”*
- Summarize the key parts of your conversation, and ask the other person for confirmation on understanding. *“Okay, so far we have discussed... and we agree on the following action items... Before we move on, is that your understanding, as well?”*

It’s Time to Walk the Walk

All of these tools regarding diversity and inclusion are only good if you use them. It is up to you to commit to using these tools, not only in your planning efforts, but in your implementation efforts as well. This follow-through will increase the probability that you will have success working with diverse populations in your programs. If communities are changing and becoming more diverse, and if the job as an Extension professional is to work in these communities, then it is essential to be committed to working with all people.

It is imperative that Extension agents nurture relationships that embrace the differences of people in the communities they serve. Self-reflection, strategic and intentional planning, and effective communication will make the work you do more effective and more inclusive.

References

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