

Cooperative Extension Response to a Diversity Education Resource: Implications for Extension Programming

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Abstract

A variety of efforts are under way to help build the capacity of Cooperative Extension to effectively serve culturally diverse communities. In Pennsylvania, one such effort was the development of *Diverse Issues*, a quarterly newsletter. The purpose of this study was to determine the usefulness of the newsletter as a diversity educational resource. The subjects were 200 extension professionals on the newsletter mailing list. Participants completed a 15-item questionnaire. Based on the findings of the study, extension professionals consider *Diverse Issues* a major diversity educational resource. They also agree that the content, topics, frequency of publication, and format are appropriate.

Background

The cultural landscape of American society has been changing dramatically in the last twenty-five years and will continue to change. By midcentury it is predicted that no racial/ethnic group in the United States will be in the majority. The African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian American populations in this country are increasing at rates faster than the Caucasian population (*Population Reference Bureau 2001*).

The changes in the diversity of our society extend beyond race and culture. The elderly will continue to constitute a larger segment of our population: people eighty-five years and older are the fastest-growing age group in the nation (*Brock 2001*). Single-parent families, blended families, and other alternative family structures are becoming commonplace; about 50 percent of all children born in the United States will spend at least part of their childhood with only one parent (*Lamb 1999*). Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people are choosing to be open in their communities and workplaces. People with physical and mental disabilities are more actively seeking to be contributing members of society. The fastest-growing religion in this country is Islam (*Arnett 1998*). And an increasing number of people are speaking languages other than English in public settings.

Our social institutions, including the Cooperative Extension System, will need to change in order to effectively serve the diversity

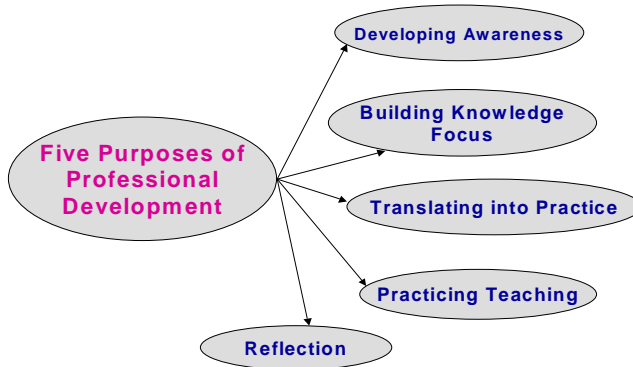
of communities and families across this nation. The mission of Cooperative Extension is to provide university-based educational services to communities, organizations, and families. In recognition of the demographic changes in the population, the Cooperative Extension System has placed an emphasis on diversity at both the organizational and the individual employee levels. In the words of the Strategic Planning Task Force on Diversity (1991): AIt's mission is to achieve and sustain pluralism as an integral part of every aspect of Extension: mission, and vision; work force; programs; audiences; and relationships with other people, groups, and organizations.@

The challenge for the extension professional includes developing knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors that will allow Extension to work effectively across differences. The challenge at the organizational level is to develop and implement systems, policies, practices, and procedures that allow the organization to work effectively in a culturally diverse nation. AHistorically, responsiveness to changeCto the needs of people where they live and workCis a strength of the Cooperative Extension System. As the population and work force continue to change, diversity and pluralism become the bottom line for the system. Increased productivity, relevance, and effectiveness; enhanced creativity and innovationCall are additional benefits of this organizational investment and commitment to diversity.@ (Strategic Planning Task Force on Diversity 1991)

Several studies have identified professional development as a driving force to expose educators to the most current concepts, thinking, and research in the field (van Broekhuizen and Dougherty 1999; Elmore 1995). Loucks-Horsely et al. (1998) have identified five stages reflecting the purposes of professional development: (1) developing awareness, (2) building knowledge focus, (3) translating into practice, (4) practicing teaching, and (5) reflection (Figure 1).

Each of these stages is critical in evaluating an educational resource used by extension professionals. For example, the awareness stage provides factual information on a new or existing topic. The knowledge focus stage provides opportunities for in-depth understanding of content. The translating into practice stage engages professionals to draw awareness and knowledge to plan and deliver programs. Finally, the practice and reflection stages provide opportunities for thinking about ways to improve programs.

FIGURE 1



Source: Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love and Stiles (1998)

The Present Study

In states across the country, a variety of efforts, large and small, are under way to help build the capacity of Cooperative Extension to more effectively serve our culturally diverse communities. In Pennsylvania, one such effort was the development of *Diverse Issues*, a quarterly newsletter distributed to extension professionals across the state. The goal of the newsletter is to increase an awareness of, appreciation for, and valuing of diversity.

Additionally, the newsletter aims to serve as a resource for practical learning activities and materials that Extension agents can use in promoting diversity and incorporating diversity experiences in their educational programming. Ultimately, the newsletter serves as one strategy to increase the knowledge base and comfort level of extension educators relative to diverse audiences and populations. Each issue includes five “regular topics”:

- **DIVERSITY IN PEOPLE.** Topics in this area have included: the Amish, Arabs, biracial people, alternative family structures, gays, the obese, characteristics of rural, urban, and suburban communities, and child-rearing practices of diverse populations. This section is intended to increase the knowledge base of extension educators relative to diverse audiences and populations.

- **DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE.** The focus is on issues related to working with people who are different from oneself. Topics in this area have included: multilingualism in the workplace, recruiting a diverse workforce, male-female conversational styles, terms and phrases to avoid in the workplace, and distinguishing affirmative action from managing diversity.
- **DIVERSITY ACTIVITY.** This topic features an activity that professionals can use with youth and/or adult groups to help increase awareness of diversity. Activities have focused on gender, various religions, languages around the world, differences and similarities among people, identifying positive qualities in others, and recognizing diverse perspectives on various topics.
- **DIVERSITY RESOURCE.** Resources have included descriptions and sources for educational materials specifically prepared for diverse audiences, clip art depicting diverse populations, and diversity-related Web sites.
- **DIVERSITY AROUND THE STATE.** Extension professionals in the counties have an opportunity to showcase their diversity activities and efforts. This section both promotes and recognizes the work of extension professionals, as well as sharing ideas that others can use.

The newsletter is available both in hard copy and on the Internet. Issues may be downloaded and printed from <http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/pi/pimenu.html>. Ten editions of *Diverse Issues* were published between September 1998 and October 2000. In an effort to evaluate the usefulness and determine the future direction of this newsletter as an educational resource, feedback was requested from the readers.

“The purpose of this study was to determine the usefulness of the Diverse Issues newsletter as an educational resource for extension professionals . . . across the state of Pennsylvania.”

Purpose and Objectives: The purpose of this study was to determine the usefulness of the *Diverse Issues* newsletter as an educational resource for extension professionals who work with families, organizations, and communities across the state of Pennsylvania. More specifically, the following research objectives guided the study:

- To assess the appropriateness of the content and format of *Diverse Issues* for its readers in terms of: (a) the knowledge and awareness of various dimensions of diversity; (b) interest and appropriateness of the format and topics included; and (c) frequency of publication.
 - To assess the ways in which *Diverse Issues* has been used by extension professionals.
 - To ascertain whether the number of diversity programs has increased at the county level.
 - To establish the need for improvement in the usefulness of *Diverse Issues*.
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Methodology: The subjects for this study were the extension professionals who are mailed a hard copy of *Diverse Issues*.

The current mailing list of two hundred was used to

determine the population. Of the population, the majority (180) held extension agent and County Extension Director positions, ten were extension administrators at the regional or state level, six were state specialists or faculty, two were university staff members, and two were Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Advisors.

The instrument used in this study was a fifteen-item questionnaire designed by the researchers based on the objectives of the study. The questionnaire contained a combination of short answer, multiple choice, open-ended, and Likert scale items. The questionnaire was validated for content and face validity by a panel of experts in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education. A post hoc reliability analysis conducted on Likert-types questions indicated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86 and 0.75).

A cover letter, questionnaire, and postage-paid envelope were mailed to the two hundred subjects. Subjects were requested to return completed questionnaires within two weeks. After two weeks an e-mail reminder message was sent to the mailing list. A total of 112 completed questionnaires were returned, resulting in a response rate of 56 percent.

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to determine frequencies, means, percentages, and standard deviations. Open-ended questions were analyzed for similarities across item responses.

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Results

A majority of respondents were female (74%). Seventy-three percent had been employed with Extension for more than five years. Ten percent had been extension professionals four or five years; and 17 percent had one to three years tenure with Cooperative Extension.

Objective 1—Awareness, interest, appropriateness and frequency of publication: Respondents generally considered the content of *Diverse Issues* to be appropriate. The newsletter increased readers’ awareness of various dimensions of diversity; the topics were appropriate and of interest to readers; and readers generally agreed that the newsletter helped them address issues relative to diversity in their programs (Table 1).

Table 1. Mean Score Ratings of Appropriateness of Newsletter Content

Item	Mean*	SD
Does the newsletter increase your level of awareness related to various dimensions?	4.07	0.71
To what extent are the topics of interest to you?	3.99	0.79
To what extent are the topics appropriate?	4.27	0.80
To what extent has <i>Diverse Issues</i> helped to address issues relative to diversity in your programs?	3.62	0.81
*Mean computed on a scale from 1 “not at all” to 5 “A lot”		

While “Diversity in People” was valued most highly, all sections of the newsletter were valued to a fairly high extent. “Diversity around the State” received the lowest mean score (Table 2).

Almost all respondents were satisfied with the current format of *Diverse Issues*. Sixty percent rated the format “very good” and 36 percent rated it good. Four percent rated the format either “fair” or “poor.” Similarly, almost all respondents rated the frequency of publication as “just right” (91%). Two percent felt *Diverse Issues* is not published frequently enough, while 7 felt it is published too frequently. There was less agreement on the preferred medium for

the newsletter. The majority (54%) preferred both Internet and hard copy availability. A little over one third (36%), however, preferred to have hard copy only, and 10 percent preferred to access the newsletter on the Internet only.

Table 2. Mean Score Value of Major Newsletter Sections

Item	Mean*	SD
Diversity in People	4.30	0.71
Diversity Activity	4.14	0.89
Diversity in the Workplace	4.00	0.80
Diversity Resource	3.95	0.81
Diversity Around the State	3.75	0.81
*Mean computed on a scale from 1 = Low to 5 = High		

Objective 2—Use of Diverse Issues by extension professionals:

The second objective was to assess the ways in which *Diverse Issues* has been used by extension professionals. This question received 136 responses. The most frequent response was that *Diverse Issues* was used as a source for personal growth and development (33%). Other uses of the newsletter were: inclusion of articles in county newsletters and other media (18%); use of the activities with 4-H clubs, groups, and other extension meetings (16%); staff development for extension professionals and volunteers (15%); use in various extension programming efforts in the community (11%); and use as a reference and resource (9%).

In addition to sharing the newsletter with extension staff and 4-H youth and leaders, respondents indicated that the newsletter is shared with extension advisory boards and committees, Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Advisors, human service agencies and organizations, various community coalitions, schools, and church groups.

Objective 3—Increase in number of diversity programs: The third objective of this study was to determine whether the number of diversity programs has increased at the county level. The majority (57%) of respondents indicated that the number of county programs

related to diversity issues had increased over the past four to five years. For 43 percent of the respondents, however, the level of diversity programming had remained the same. Some of the specific topics mentioned for diversity programming at the county level included: cultural understanding and tolerance; accepting differences; diversity of race, values, and socioeconomic status; diversity in foods; raising children from different cultures; relating to others with physical challenges; holiday celebrations from diverse cultures and countries; acceptance of gays in the workplace; how we are all alike; similarities among various cultural customs; and requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Participants were asked a series of questions designed to reflect the impact of *Diverse Issues* on extension professionals and their programming. Responses suggest that with *Diverse Issues* extension professionals are more likely to use diversity information in their programming; have a greater level of comfort dealing with diversity issues; and have an increased level of knowledge, awareness, and understanding of diversity issues. A much smaller percentage, however, reported having increased requests to do diversity programming (Table 3).

Objective 4: Improvement of *Diverse Issues* newsletter: As its fourth objective this study sought input for improvement of the newsletter. When asked, “What suggestions would you offer to improve the usefulness of *Diverse Issues*?” the most frequent response was “none” or “keep it the same.” Several comments suggested

Table 3. Rating of Indicators of impact of *Diverse Issues* Newsletter

Indicator of Impact	Increased	Stayed the Same	Decreased
Use of diversity information in extension programming	81%	19%	—
Comfort in dealing with diversity issues	73%	27%	—
Knowledge of diversity	91%	9%	—
Awareness and understanding of diversity issues	85%	13%	2%
Requests to do diversity programming	27%	73%	—

continuing or increasing the number of activities used for teaching diversity awareness in the newsletter. Additional suggestions were offered by individual respondents. These included the following:

- “suggestions for contacting or best ways to approach various diverse audiences”
- “include a section on diversity and training volunteers or community”
- “more practical”
- “practical tips for increasing awareness of diversity”
- “keep it shortC4 pages max”

Finally, respondents were offered an opportunity to share any other comments they would like to make about *Diverse Issues*. Of the thirty-four comments that were made, thirty were of a definite positive nature. Typical comments included:

- “Keep up the good work, we need more of this type of programming effort.”
- “I appreciate the effort and thoughtfulness that goes into this publication. I especially enjoy the activities. I like to include a variety of educational activities in my programming efforts.”
- “Very needed in order for extension to program with diverse audiences.”
- “This is an excellent tool for helping people learn about diversity and to be more comfortable about it. I feel they are a valuable asset to making staff and clients more aware of the cultural differences in our community.”

Two comments offered specific suggestions:

- “Consider including a column that will allow individuals to share personal views on how they have been enriched; or their county programs, through the information in your newsletter or from your diversity training programs.”
- “Add upcoming holidays and how they are celebrated; ask ‘experts’ to write about religious practices or about how different religions view particular issues.”

Two comments expressed concerns:

- “I still object to people who force the issue of their own diversity on me instead of attempting to incorporate their diversity for the good of all.”
- “My county has less than 1% minority. It’s hard to reach out.”

Conclusions and Implications

The study sought to determine the usefulness and impact of a diversity-focused newsletter as an educational resource for extension professionals. Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn:

- Extension professionals consider *Diverse Issues* a valued diversity educational resource. They also agree that the content, topics, and frequency of publication, and format are appropriate.
- Extension professionals have shared *Diverse Issues* with other groups in their communities. A majority of professionals indicated that the number of programs they conduct relative to diversity has increased. The availability of a ready-made resource may have been instrumental in increasing the likelihood that extension professionals would incorporate diversity education into programming with community organizations and clientele.
- *Diverse Issues* newsletter has increased the knowledge, awareness, and understanding of diversity-related issues. Extension professionals indicate a greater comfort level in dealing with diversity issues.
- While respondents generally rated the newsletter as valuable and suggest that the topic of diversity is important, the level of diversity programming remained the same over the past four to five years for many agents. Perhaps issues related to diversity compete with other priorities or perhaps, as one respondent commented, “My county has less than 1% minority. It’s hard to reach out.” Even in racially homogeneous communities, however, there may be diversity in socioeconomic status, physical and mental abilities, sexual orientation, occupation, family structure, or religion, to name a few.

The following recommendations are offered based on the findings of the study:

- The positive feedback from the users of *Diverse Issues* newsletter indicates a need for up-to-date information on diversity-related issues. Recent Census data and projections for the future reinforce the significance of this outcome. Therefore, it is recommended that this newsletter be shared with other states and articles from other state extension organizations be solicited to enrich the content of the newsletter.
- Further research is needed to identify barriers to diversity issues programming. Identification of barriers would help in designing new ways to offer diversity-related extension programs.

- The Internet version of the *Diverse Issues* newsletter should be linked to other state extension organization Web sites.
- The findings of this study should be shared with extension administration and extension staff development to enable them to make informed decisions relative to diversity programs.
- Finally, feedback from *Diverse Issues* readers should be sought periodically for continuous improvement.

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