

RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, AND PARTICIPATION OF UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS ON PENNSYLVANIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION ADVISORY BOARDS AND COMMITTEES

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Abstract

With the changing demographics of American society, the Cooperative Extension System must re-examine its educational responsibility to local communities. In order for extension programming to truly reflect the needs of increasingly diverse communities, extension boards and program committees must include and involve people from diverse audiences. Between 1993 and 1996, Pennsylvania State University conducted an extensive civil rights assessment of Cooperative Extension programs in its 67 counties. Utilizing the data collected during the civil rights assessment, this study examined the responses of extension professionals relative to recruitment, retention, and participation of underrepresented groups on extension advisory boards and committees. A number of problems, as well as strategies for successful recruitment and involvement of underrepresented groups, were revealed. Several recommendations based on study results were offered.

The emphasis on diversity and pluralism continues to grow in recognition of the demographic, economic, and social changes taking place in the United States today. According to current trends, by the year 2000, one-third of all Americans will belong to racial and ethnic minority groups (Nichols, 1993). At the same time, 67% of women are entering the workforce and many are getting involved in community development programs outside the home (Chesney, 1992). A growing percentage of our population is classified as low income (Grogan, 1991). In addition, the U. S. communities are homes for more than 43 million people with disabilities (A Disability Awareness, 1990).

Today, the existing diverse groups in America have varying values, customs, needs, and challenges that may differ from those of the traditional audiences served by Cooperative Extension. The Cooperative Extension System (CES) finds itself having to re-examine its educational responsibility to the local communities being served, due to the

growing number, of potential non-traditional clientele. Indeed, in recent years, CES has placed greater emphasis on becoming a multicultural organization (Ludwig & Cano, 1993). According to Ludwig and Cano, a multicultural organization is genuinely committed to diverse representation in its membership, is sensitive to maintaining an open, supportive, and responsive environment; works toward and purposefully includes elements of diverse cultures in its on-going operations; and responds to issues confronting it.

Traditionally, the membership of CES advisory boards and committees has had limited representation from groups including racial/ethnic minorities, low income families, persons with disabilities, females on agriculture committees, and males on family living committees. There is need for the CES to make a concerted effort to recruit members from underrepresented groups onto local committees. The involvement of underrepresented groups in CES, however, may require special efforts (Nichols, 1993).

Extension advisory boards and program committees link the extension staff with the community. They assist in planning and facilitating effective educational programs that address local needs. In order for extension programming to truly reflect the needs of increasingly diverse communities, extension boards and program committees must include and involve people from diverse audiences in the identification, selection, design, and evaluation of extension programs.

In the state of Pennsylvania, between the years of 1993 and 1996, the College of Agricultural Sciences Office of Human Resources at the Pennsylvania State University conducted an extensive Civil Rights Assessment of the extension programs in each of its 67 counties. The purpose of the assessment was to review the extent to which underrepresented individuals or groups have been afforded the opportunity to participate in advising, planning, and/or participating in various aspects of extension educational programs. This article will detail the problems encountered and successful strategies employed by extension professionals when attempting to involve underrepresented groups on extension advisory boards and committees.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine the responses of extension professionals relative to recruitment, retention, and participation of underrepresented groups on extension advisory boards and committees. The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent do extension advisory boards and program committees reflect underrepresented populations in the community?
2. What problems do extension professionals experience when attempting to recruit and retain members of underrepresented

populations on advisory boards and committees?

3. In the perception of extension professionals, what problems hinder active participation of minority members on extension advisory boards and committees?
4. What practices and strategies do extension professionals identify as successful when recruiting members from underrepresented groups?

Procedures

The population for the study included a census of extension professionals in the 67 counties in the state of Pennsylvania. The assessment was conducted in two phases. In phase-one, county extension personnel completed a questionnaire designed to gather quantitative baseline data regarding the participation of underrepresented groups in extension educational programs either as program beneficiaries, volunteers, or as members of advisory committees. Phase-two consisted of an on-site visit by a review team for the purpose of gathering qualitative findings through discussions with staff, key board members, volunteers, and members of the minority community.

Review teams were composed of Pennsylvania State University faculty, administrators, and extension professionals. A review team met after each on-site visit to discuss its findings and recommendations with county extension staff. County staffs were required to develop an action plan for improvement. Final written reports, which were submitted to the Dean and Director of Cooperative Extension, were data sources for this study.

Data Analysis

To determine if extension advisory boards and committees were representative of the racial/ethnic

makeup of the community, the percentage of minorities on each board or committee was compared to the percentage of racial/ethnic minorities in the county, as reported by the 1990 Census Bureau. If the percentage of racial/ethnic minorities on boards was less than the percentage of racial/ethnic minorities in the community, the board or committee was considered unrepresentative of the minority population.

Additionally, the membership of each advisory group was examined to determine if both males and females were represented. Gender representation was determined differently than minority representation. Advisory groups that included at least one male and female were classified by the researchers as reflecting gender representation. The survey included open-ended questions that requested respondents to list the problems and successes they encountered, and any suggestions in

the recruiting and retention of members from underrepresented groups. Open-ended answers were analyzed for similarities across responses.

Results

Minority and Gender Representation

The extent to which advisory boards and program committees reflect underrepresented populations in the community varied from county to county. Racial and gender representation on boards and committees are reported in Tables 1 and 2. According to the 1990 U. S. Census, minority populations in Pennsylvania range from 0.6% to 47.9% of the population in the 67 counties. While all 67 counties had an extension board and a 4-H/youth advisory committee, not every county had a family living or agricultural-related committee.

Table 1. Percentage Of Boards And Committees Which Are And Are Not Reflective Of County Minority Population

Board/Committee	Reflective		Not Reflective		Total # of Bds/Com	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Extension boards	33	49.3	34	50.7	67	100
Family Living	31	50.0	31	50.0	62	100
4-H/Youth	21	31.3	46	68.7	67	100
Aericultural-related	4	17.9	55	82.1	59	100

Table 2. Percentage of Extension Boards And Committees With And Without Gender Representation

Board/Committee	Have Gender Representation		Have No Gender Representation		Total # of Boards/ Committees	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Extension Boards	67	100.0	0	0.0	67	100
4-H/Youth	65	97.0	2	3.0	67	100
Family Living	18	29.0	44	70.9	62	100
Agricultural-related	49	83.1	10	16.9	59	100

Slightly less than 50% (49.3%) of Pennsylvania counties had extension boards that reflected their minority populations. Similarly, half (50%) of family living committees included minorities proportional to the percentage of minorities in their counties. Thirty-one percent (31.3%) of 4-H/youth and nearly 18 percent (17.9%) of agricultural-related committees were reflective of the minority population in the county.

All 67 extension boards and 97% of 4-H advisory committees included both male and female membership. However, 70.9% of family living committees had only female members. In contrast, most (83.1%) of agricultural-related committees had both male and female representation (Table 2).

Recruitment, Retention, And Participation Of Underrepresented Groups

Slightly over twelve percent (12.1%) of the responses indicated that the agent had no problems related to retention of members from underrepresented groups. The majority of responses, however, listed a variety of problems associated with maintaining committee members. The most frequent response (13.1%) was "members don't attend meetings." Poor attendance was matched equally with time constraints and time conflicts (13.1%).

Extension professionals were asked to list the problems they encountered in the process of recruiting members for extension boards and advisory committees. The major perceptions of extension professionals are summarized in Table 3. Slightly over twenty-one percent (21.2%) of responses (from 18 counties) indicated no problems recruiting members from underrepresented groups. Nearly 19% (18.8%) of responses, however, suggested that members from underrepresented groups are simply not interested or willing to serve. Furthermore, 17.6% of comments suggested that overcommitment to other agencies, organizations, and groups, as well as other types of time

constraints, were problems faced when attempting to recruit new members. Nearly one in ten responses (9.4%) stated that the limited pool of minority residents, some of which were scattered and widely dispersed across the county, made it difficult to identify and recruit these individuals. A smaller percentage of responses (8.2%) mentioned that the time and location of meetings were sometimes a barrier. A similar percentage of responses (8.2%) suggested that the lack of familiarity with Cooperative Extension and its programs contributed to difficulties in recruitment. Nearly 5% of responses listed transportation problems. Other responses mentioned by more than one agent include: language barriers (especially for the Latino population); and inability to identify minority leaders in the community.

The major problems associated with the retention of members from underrepresented groups are summarized in Table 4.

An additional 10.1% of responses suggested that minorities do not relate well to Cooperative Extension or are not comfortable on extension boards and committees. Comments such as the following were listed. "For all minorities, the traditional 4-H focus doesn't keep their interest." "Members resign because they feel that programs like 4-H do not address [their] agencies program priorities;" "Buying into Cooperative Extension;" "Did not feel like she had anything to contribute;" and "Feeling of not fitting in." Additionally, family problems and commitments (10.1%); lack of transportation (8.1%); high mobility among the population, often related to changes in employment (6.1%); and conflicts and changes in work responsibilities (4%) were all problems related to retention.

Other responses mentioned by more than one agent included: small children requiring childcare; location of the building; and language barriers. One comment specifically stated that board rules that restrict membership to one year of service impede retention of minority members.

Table 3. Problems Recruiting Members From Under represented Groups on Boards and Committees

Response	N	%
No problems with recruitment	18	21.2
Not interested, unwilling to serve, no response to contacts	16	18.8
Over committed/Time constraints	15	17.6
No/small minority community to recruit from	8	9.4
Unfamiliar with Extension/Extension program not relevant	7	8.2
Meeting time or location a barrier	7	8.2
Transportation problems	4	4.7
Other problems	10	11.8
Total Responses	85	100.0

Note: Extension Agents could provide more than one response to this question.

Table 4. Problems in Retaining Members from Under represented Groups On Boards and Committees

Response	N	%
Time constraints/Time conflicts/Over commitment	13	13.1
Poor attendance at meetings	13	13.1
No problems retaining members	12	12.1
Low comfort level/Relationship with Extension	10	10.1
Family problems/Family commitments	10	10.1
Transportation problems	8	8.1
Loss of interest and commitment	7	7.1
Transient population	6	6.1
Conflicts with work	4	4.0
Other problems	16	16.2
Total Responses	99	100.0

Note: Extension Agents could provide more than one response to this question.

In the perception of extension professionals, members from Under represented groups faced special problems when participating on extension boards and advisory committees. The major perceptions of 'extension professionals are summarized in Table 5.

Not only are time constraints a problem in attracting and retaining members from Under represented groups on committees, but they are also a problem in achieving active participation by such members. More than one in four (26.8%) responses indicated time constraints, schedule conflicts, and Over commitment to other organizations as limiting

factors for active participation. Several comments specifically referred to **conflicts** between work schedules and extension activities.

Another major interference with active participation is poor attendance at meetings (17%). As one agent stated, "After missing many meetings, they lose interest in the committee. This makes it difficult for them to become active again." Transportation was considered a problem in 13.4% of responses. For some members (7.3% of comments), a feeling of discomfort was cited as a contributing factor to board and committee

participation. Responses providing specific examples of discomfort included:

“New minorities do not feel comfortable with leadership roles as yet.”

“Minorities feel they have difficulties relating to other 4-H groups and programs.

“The Black females felt uncomfortable being the only member of that minority on the board.”

“Males were uncomfortable in the Family Living Advisory Committee.”

Nearly 9% (8.5%) of responses suggested that a lack of familiarity and inability to relate with extension programs affected active participation of members from Under represented groups. Language barriers (Spanish) and personal/family problems also limited participation (3.7% of comments, respectively).

Strategies For Success

Some strategies for recruitment and retention proved more successful than others. The major strategies for success in attaining board and

committee members from Under represented groups are summarized in Table 6.

The most successful strategy for attaining members from Under represented groups is personal contact. “Personal contacts by a person who knew them,” “Getting to know a diverse group of people and making personal contacts,” and “We had someone who knew the candidates contact them about serving on 4-H PDC [Program Development Council],” are examples of responses listed. Some form of personal contact was mentioned in more than one-quarter (26.9%) of all responses.

In many instances, agents were able to capitalize on those personal interests of members from Under represented groups that matched the goals of extension programs. This was evident in 21.8% of responses. Examples of special interests included low-income families, minority families, and those seeking opportunity for public exposure. Approaching persons who had previous involvement and familiarity with extension programs proved successful in attracting members to boards and committees (19.2% of responses). Previous **youth** involvement in 4-H and family involvement with the Expanded Family Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) were mentioned specifically.

Table 5. Problems Achieving Active Participation of Under represented Groups on Extension Boards and Committees

Response	N	%
Time constraints/Schedule conflicts	22	26.8
Poor attendance at meetings	14	17.0
Transportation	11	13.4
Unfamiliar with Extension/Do not relate to Extension	7	8.5
Uncomfortable on committee/Feeling of being a token member	6	7.3
Language barrier	3	3.7
Personal/family problems	3	3.7
Other	16	19.5
Total Responses	82	100.0

Note: Extension Agents could provide more than one response to this question.

Table 6. Strategies For Successful Attainment of Board and Committee Members From Under represented Groups

Response	N	%
Personal contacts/Personal contacts by someone known	21	26.9
Own interest of Under represented group members	17	21.8
Previous involvement and familiarity with Extension programs	15	19.2
Persistence/Special efforts made by Extension staff and volunteers	11	14.1
Networking with other agencies/organizations/community leaders	6	7.7
Other	8	10.3
Total Responses	78	100.0

Note: Extension Agents could provide more than one response to this question.

The use of both persistence and special efforts (14.1%) were helpful. In one county, advisory board members were asked to suggest names of potential targeted members at every meeting. Rescheduling of meeting times, implementing projects that specifically benefit the handicapped, holding a day camp specifically to suit the clientele, and providing transportation and dinner were four examples of special efforts made by extension personnel and volunteers.

Almost 8% (7.7%) of responses described networking efforts with other agencies, organizations, and community leaders. "I asked the right people, e.g., leaders in the community who understand our efforts and mission." Others took advantage of previous collaboration on educational programs with other agencies and organizations.

Discussion

The percentage of extension boards and committees that were representative of the minority population ranged from a low of 17.9% for agricultural-related committees to a high of 50% for family living committees. The percentage of extension boards and committees that included both male and female members ranged from a low of 28.6% for family living committees to 100% for county extension boards. It should be noted, however, that county extension boards are comprised of representative members from other

extension advisory committees in the county. Therefore, some women were members of their county extension board as representatives of the family living committee. Overall, according to Pennsylvania State College of Agricultural Sciences Office of Human Resources records, these percentages suggest movement in a positive direction. There remains, however, room for improvement.

When responses to questions regarding recruitment, retention, and active participation of members from Under represented groups are compared, several concerns tend to repeat themselves. Some of these include: time constraints and Over commitment to other organizations and groups, poor attendance at meetings, lack of familiarity or relationship with extension programs, and lack of transportation and inconvenient location of meetings.

In a 1994 study conducted by researchers at Cornell University, extension staff suggested that "Extensions programs reflect its old audiences rather than society's current problems and priorities" (electronic transmission). The study further suggested that until extension more directly addresses issues of urban poverty, economic development, job creation, and social disorganization, extension is unlikely to recruit and retain strong minorities (Ewert & Rice, 1994). In addition, the most visible, most active individuals

are often sought after by numerous groups. They may easily become Over committed. There is a need to expand the pool from which potential members **from** Under represented groups are drawn.

Study responses suggested that many members of extension boards and committees have been involved in extension programming prior to serving on planning and advisory boards and committees. Direct involvement may increase the interest, comfort level, and willingness to serve and participate. Active involvement of Under represented groups in extension programs and activities may be a prerequisite to attaining genuine interest and active participation of such groups on boards and committees.

Members **from** Under represented groups must feel their participation is genuinely welcome and valued. Recruitment should be directed toward individuals who can truly make a contribution to the committee. Although representation of a particular group is a legitimate consideration in recruiting new members, committees should avoid recruiting a new member **solely** because of their membership in an Under represented group.

To involve minorities, special efforts must be made to recruit them. If members are recruited who do not have transportation and their input is valued, then special arrangements must be provided for transportation. Consideration should be given to meeting locations that are convenient for all members. "Most people would be hesitant to attend a meeting, program, or activity that is held at a church, country club, or other location that might not receive them on some other days, for some other occasion," (McCray, 1994).

Recruitment of members from Under represented groups is not an easy task. Nor can it be accomplished in a short period of time. As extension agents in this study stated, it takes a lot of time and effort.

Recommendations

To effectively meet the educational needs of all populations, the boards and advisory committees of extension programs must reflect the needs and interests of the entire community. Concerted efforts should be directed toward making extension boards and advisory committees reflective of all segments of the population in every county. Toward that goal, the following are recommendations based on the present study.

1. Use personal contact in recruitment efforts.
2. Collaborate, network, and co-sponsor educational programs with other agencies, organizations, and groups that serve Under represented groups.
3. Aim to recruit more than one member from the same Under represented group on a board or committee. Asking only **one** person to represent the spectrum of diversity may increase a feeling of tokenism.
4. Assess the educational needs and interests of Under represented populations in the community and develop and implement relevant educational programs that address these needs and interests.
5. Make a concerted effort to determine the reasons why members from Under represented groups do not attend meetings on a consistent basis. Address those specific reasons in a proactive manner.
6. Consider EFNEP clientele as potential committee members who represent the interests of low-income and other Under represented groups.
7. Rename the Home Economics Advisory Committee to become the Family Living

Advisory Committee and tap social service agencies for potential male members.

8. Translate written materials into Spanish, as needed and appropriate.
9. Consider transportation requirements of all members when meeting locations are determined. Rotate meetings throughout the county. Encourage and structure a system for car-pooling.
10. Strengthen the relationship with Under represented communities by volunteering to serve on boards and committees of organizations that address the concerns of Under represented groups. Attend community organization meetings, health fairs, exhibits, and other events in Under represented communities.
11. Establish reasonable term limits for board committee members to increase opportunities for new members to join and to avoid the impression of an exclusive club.

In addition, the following recommendations are offered for **further** study.

1. Review alternative media sources such as newspapers and newsletters targeted to special segments of the community. These may be good sources for identifying assertive members who- will become valuable contributors to extension programming.
2. Develop a relationship with members of Under represented communities. Demonstrate your respect and interest in these communities by participating in or co-sponsoring festivals and celebrations to build awareness for extension programs. Approach churches, small business owners, and barber and beauty shop owners.

3. Include pictures of Under represented group members in public relations and marketing tools and materials.
4. Assign current committee/board members to serve as mentors to new members, helping them to make a smooth transition onto the committee or board.
5. Expand the pool of potential recruits beyond the most visible, most popular members of Under represented communities.

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