Preparing Extension Educators for a Global Community

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Extension programs across the world are being challenged to consider their impact, relevance, and effectiveness in a rapidly changing society. In a Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) paper “Exploring New Opportunities for Extension” (2002), two questions were proposed: “How quickly can the Cooperative Extension System respond to the dramatic changes in agriculture and how responsive can the system be to changes in community structure, evolving demographics, increased globalization, and broader public expectations?” (p. 1). Barriers exist as the Cooperative Extension Service attempts to answer these questions, including a decrease in human and financial resources (CSREES, 2002). In order to retain Extension’s comparative advantage, educators will need to be appropriately equipped to provide targeted programs for communities as they respond to these global changes.

This study is designed to assess the current involvement in and training needs for Purdue Cooperative Extension Educators relevant to their international programming needs.

The objectives of this study will be to assess the following questions:

1) What level of international experience, including travel, language, and programming experience, do Indiana Extension educators possess?
2) What training do Extension educators feel they require in order to develop internationally related programming and to work effectively with diverse clientele?
3) What are the preferred methods for in-service training for those topics identified by Extension Educators in objective #2?
4) What are Extension educators’ recommendations concerning future international Extension programming in Indiana?
5) What do Extension educators identify as the most significant barrier for integrating an international perspective into future Extension efforts?

The instrument used in this study is based upon two surveys developed by Ludwig and Barrick (1996) to define the internationalization of Extension and a survey developed by Ludwig (1999) to identify issues with the globalization of Extension professionals. Adaptations were made to incorporate training needs, preferences of training methods, gender, years in Extension, program area in Extension, ethnicity, travel experiences, and foreign language abilities. A pilot test of the instrument was conducted with a random selection of Extension staff members in July 2003. Following refinement of the instrument, all of the approximately 273 field-based Extension educators in Indiana were sent a link to the survey web site, where they could complete and submit the survey anonymously. This survey method was chosen because Extension educators were familiar with the computer survey program and all have access to computers, Internet, and email. The rate of return by October 1, 2003 is 60-70%.

It is anticipated that as data collection is completed, there will be significant usage of the data within the state for competency and staff development improvements. The instrument developed may also serve as a model for other state Extension systems who struggle to answer the question: “Where do we begin in internationalization of Extension?” The results of this survey will also be utilized in the development of a needs-based globalization curriculum for Extension educators.
The Extension educators serve an important leadership role as community and cultural changes occur. The National Subcommittee on Extension Diversity (2002) concludes that Extension professionals must develop an understanding of their own cultural approach when working with others, an appreciation of how culture affects various groups in learning and working experiences, and the needed skills that facilitate the design and delivery of programs which are consistent with the cultural norms and values of their audiences. This study will help the Extension service in Indiana prepare for and respond to an expanded global mission which starts at home with our changing communities.

References


