Indian Country and County Extension: A Comparison of Programs in the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension System

Dr. Sabrina Tuttle
Assistant Extension Agent
University of Arizona, the San Carlos Apache Reservation
PO Box 850, San Carlos, AZ 85550
Tel. 928-475-2350, FAX 928-475-2359
Email: sabrinat@ag.arizona.edu

Abigail Dambeck
Melvina Adolf
Linda Masters
Matt Livingston
Terry Hunt Crowley
University of Arizona

Abstract

In the United States, extension service to states and counties manifests a century long tradition where clientele and communities comprehend the role of extension and support it culturally and economically. In contrast, extension on U.S. American Indian Reservations has often been erratic or even nonexistent. Although scientific research comparing Indian Country Extension and County Extension is scarce, anecdotal evidence suggests that there may be significant differences in how a program must be prepared and presented in order for it to be successful and accepted and by an American Indian audience. A qualitative study conducted on five Indian Reservations within the Arizona/New Mexico region looks at distinct cultural, historical, and geographic characteristics, including differences in tradition and culture, learning styles, health, and politics. Each of these characteristics and differences may influence the acceptance and success of traditional extension programming efforts on U.S. American Indian reservations.

Keywords: Indian country extension, county extension, cultural learning styles
Introduction

In the United States, extension service to states and counties manifests a century-long tradition where clientele and communities comprehend the role of extension and support it. Agents and clientele have formed a trusting and respectful long-term relationship. In contrast, extension on U.S. American Indian Reservations has often been erratic or even nonexistent (Hiller, 2005). Research comparing Indian Country extension and County extension is scarce, though anecdotally there seems to be significant differences. This qualitative inquiry in the Arizona/New Mexico region of the United States, revealed distinct cultural, historical, and geographic characteristics on U.S. Indian Reservations which may influence the acceptance and success of traditional extension programming efforts. Influences on Indian Country extension include: tradition and culture, health, recreation, politics, and family (Tuttle et. al 2008). Learning style is another cultural aspect affecting how U.S. Native peoples perceive extension programs on their reservations.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose and objectives of the research study was to determine if there are differences between County extension and Indian Country Extension within the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension system, and if so, delineate the differences and similarities between them.

Methods

This research project is a qualitative study following the principles of Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen (1993), using trustworthiness criteria. Trustworthiness criteria included triangulation of data, a reflective journal, thick description, and participant confidentiality. Triangulation of data consisted of site photos, interviews at different sites and with different types of employees, and examination of archival documents. The researchers visited seven sites on five reservations in six counties and conducted 28 interviews. Engagement began in October 2007 and ended in August 2008. Researchers obtained permission from the University of Arizona and the Navajo Nation Institutional Review Boards as well as the San Carlos Apache Tribe, the Hopi Tribe, the Hualapai Tribe, and the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) to conduct the research. Researchers maintained confidentiality by not naming, in research publications, the reservations or counties where employees worked, as this was a small, integrated group of participants within the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension system.

The 28 participants in the study included 15 females and 13 males in various extension positions within the University of Arizona and New Mexico State Cooperative Extension System. The researchers interviewed seven FRTEP (Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program) personnel, (6 agents and one staff) working on five Indian reservations. They also interviewed twelve county agents, three county staff, one university administrator, and four state specialists. One FRTEP agent was a past employee; one county agent, who has worked extensively on one of the reservations located in a tri-state area, was from New Mexico State University, and one FRTEP agent had a split appointment between the two universities. Years of experience ranged from one to thirty, with five having 1-5 years; nine having 6-10 years; four having 11-15 years; three having 21-25 years; and two having 30 years on the job. Program areas for each agent participant ranged widely, from Agriculture and Natural Resources (7), Family and Consumer Science (4), Community Development (1), and 4-H Youth Development (4), with 11 agents and staff having split appointments in two or more of these subject areas. Six specialists had teaching as well as extension appointments, and one also had a research
appointment. Specialists’ areas of expertise included Animal Science (2), Agricultural and Resource Economics (2), Veterinary Science (1), and Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering. One administrator also had a teaching appointment in Range Management.

Results and Conclusions

Researchers’ Journal

During the three researchers’ site visits, they traveled 3,000 miles and visited diverse climate and ecological zones, as well as experiencing the unique cultures of each reservation and variations in county and FRTEP extension offices and environments. The following paragraphs contain quotes and summations from their journals and present the researchers’ impressions of reservation life, culture and geography.

“Some people think that Arizona is devoid of vegetation and boring, but I have to say my initial impression of dormant brownish-yellow grasslands …. [is a better] description. Closer to the northeastern town, it was interesting to start seeing the rock formations rising from the flatter and sparsely scrubby countryside . . . The majority of the buildings in the northeastern town had to be on the historic side.

It was most challenging to find the [reservation] Cooperative Extension office. The sign was hand painted with an agricultural mural and white letters—not quite large enough to be easily read from the road. From the outside, the agent’s office seemed to be a very small house built in the 50s or 60s. It was tucked-in behind an aging trailer and a couple of older residences that housed other organizations. Once inside, the building appeared to be bigger than I expected . . . When we entered, my co-researcher was immediately greeted with warm hug. I was pleasantly surprised to receive a hug instead of a handshake myself. I have experienced very few introductions to Native people in which the Native person was open and friendly. This was an interesting exposure of the fact that I am still holding on to stereotypes about other cultures.

When the researchers went to lunch in the town’s chapter house (local governmental building), “we were two strangely dressed white ladies looking for food. The hallways and seating area were all packed with elderly individuals, some obviously couples, others groups of female friends or relatives . . . who seemed to be waiting their turn at the office. In any case, several of the people were surprisingly friendly and open . . . Some of the older ladies were very talkative. When they noticed my co-researcher was wearing cowboy boots, they asked us humorously, ‘What are you two cowgirls doing here?’ (Researcher 1, site description C, reflective journal). “These older women wore beautiful turquoise and silver necklaces and jeweled bracelets—we wondered if this manifested respect accorded to elderly women in this culture, which I found out later was true” (Researcher 2, site description C, personal communication). “The mutton we ate arrived wrapped in a golden brown frybread with green chiles alongside the meat. . . . This mutton was similar in taste to a very mild beef roast.

From the northeastern town, crossing the state border, we drove on to a scenic area—this was a drive that seemed to go on endlessly. The drive was broken up by the numerous small communities we passed through as we entered the different locales of the region. Once we arrived at the scenic area, I gleefully noted that we had entered into another state (I had officially visited three states in two days). Of course this excitement was increased by the towering buttes and surrounding mesas of the valley.
Along the drive to the town near the center of the reservation, the agrarian lifestyle and their informal economy were very apparent. We passed numerous grazing cattle and horses as well as the corrals and arenas associated with their management. . . . Another striking characteristic was the number of hitchhikers I saw along the course of these travels. Dogs were also particularly prevalent during this portion of the trip. . . . This town seemed more economically depressed than the northeastern town and less rural in that many of the buildings were government sponsored buildings. As we drove along the curving roads, we passed a cluster of mustard yellow institutional looking buildings next to a school playground. We noticed several similarly institutional looking apartment complexes; the majority of the privately owned homes were old single-wide trailers.

Later our trip through what I perceived to be the downtown . . . took us past a string of schools, churches and government offices that seemed to be the most modern part of town, apart from our hotel and restaurant. As we drove to the north . . . I was reminded that we were in a different ecological zone. The grass of the [previous] area was gone. Now there were short, scrubby junipers and piñon pines, along with various other hardy shrubs that can withstand the drier and colder temperatures of this northern area.

“My co-researcher and I were unable to make our initial trip to visit one reservation, so I combined the site visit with an Indian Country Extension (ICE) working group core meeting we had on the reservation, where I also interviewed the reservation’s extension agent for the research project. I had visited this reservation once before when we visited a vegetable garden built on terraces and irrigated by a spring at the top of the hill. At the crest of the hill, was an ancient town, a Tribal settlement that boasted historical tales of Native battles. There were many pottery shards on this hillside. Both of the times I have entered this reservation, I’ve been impressed by a sense of peace and stillness in the open plains where people still reside after several thousand years of habitation. Some of the traditional southwestern adobe housing is present on the mesas, though modern houses have replaced many of these.

The same flat, dry open grasslands at about 5000 feet elevation stretched toward the settlement. I felt the same peace and stillness, and a quiet that was only interrupted by a strong breeze that cooled the summer June air. The rest of the low and high desert of Arizona was baking in a dry heat at over 100 degrees at this time of year. Up [here] it was in the high seventies, almost spring like. I stayed at the Tribal cultural center, which is a rather bare bones hotel with only one phone, no cell service, and the only restaurant for miles. I ate a traditional beef stew that consisted of very plain hominy and a very spicy green chili. There is also a craft center and a meeting room where we met for our working group session.

This Tribe impresses me as a very traditional people in this remote corner of Arizona; those who have remained on the reservation seem less assimilated with the Anglo/Hispanic modernized culture than many of the other tribes in the state. The extension agent mentioned that their language is Ute-Aztec in origin, and it reminds me of some Native legends that this Tribe came up from the south originally and two other Tribes in our study came down from the north. The canyon is a lovely enclave, with cliffs hovering above on one side and a running creek in the canyon, alongside a small group of homes, one of which where the extension agent lives, a very cool and refreshing place.”(Researcher 2, Site E, reflective journal)
For more information on the climate, ecological zones, socioeconomics, and extension program characteristics on each of the five reservations covered by this research project, see Tuttle et al. (2008).

Data Review and Results

Responses from the various interviewees (FRTEP, county, and state personnel) reflected the unique characteristics of each group, therefore the researchers analyzed results by groups. Overall:

- FRTEP participants saw the largest differences between Indian Country Extension and traditional County Extension;
- County participants manifested a combination of opinions about differences and similarities
- State personnel generally viewed less difference between counties and reservations.

FRTEP personnel expressed disparity regarding educational objectives and curriculum design due to socioeconomic, cultural, and learning style differences. Socioeconomic factors included a lower average family income than the state average in Arizona; reservations are located in remote areas; and the school educational level may be somewhat lower than off reservation, particularly with the elderly, although elders possess a wealth of indigenous knowledge, some of which is being lost by the younger generations. Tribal members manifested distinct cultural differences from the Anglo/Hispanic cultures surrounding them; there were also significant differences among the various Tribes. Even Tribes with similar language heritage were distinct. These differences from the Anglo/Hispanic dominant cultures in the area included: deference of younger people to adults, agriculture being a part of religion and social life, and the presence of tribal traditional subject matter, which must be integrated in extension education. Learning style differences consisted of the frequently stated idea that Native people tend to be visual learners, as well as introverts who dislike being singled-out for attention in an instructional setting, preferring to work in small groups with hands-on material. One agent stated: “the culture is a bit different . . . . It’s a collective survival . . . . that’s the way people survived in this culture for so long and you did it as a group. Individualism was not really something people did. You’re part of the whole.” These cultural learning style tendencies, while typical of Native peoples in general, do not represent every individual in each Tribe.

Three county agents stated that there were no differences in educational objectives & curriculum needs, while others maintained that it varies due to culture and beliefs, the needs of each Tribe, the necessity to partner with tribal agencies, and that extension is “not always met with open arms—you have to sell a philosophy.” According to some county agents: youth and adult relationships differ in Tribal communities; cultural aspects should be woven into the curriculum, and tribal members tend not to contact the county extension office by phone, preferring to visit the FRTEP agent’s office, due to proximity and familiarity. State faculty pointed to cultural sensitivity, the failure of the (linear) LOGIC model for planning and implementation, as well as tribal politics, laws, and rules as affecting reservation extension programs, although subject matter and curriculum was comparable in the counties and on reservations.
FRTEP participants perceived hands-on, visual delivery methods as well as round-robin discussion and focus groups as effective delivery strategies; they also highlighted the culture and tradition of each tribe and the need for translation and/or simpler educational tools for elders. An agent noted: “Well, in Indian Country you have to do a lot of explaining and describing and hands-on, a lot of visual delivery. I’m pretty sure the County is aware of that, but that’s how a lot of programs are delivered. Also in languages: English and the Tribal language . . . the elders need translation. The need for being accepted. Knowing the person that’s presenting given the fact of your culture: your clan, where you’re from.” It’s also important to bring in Native people to teach classes on traditional Indian subjects, and using Tribal elders is also effective. Five county participants saw no differences in delivery strategies, yet others mentioned the need for visual and simple graphical images, show and tell, classroom to demonstration sequence, and language considerations for elders. State participants said that differences were based more on location and infrastructure (less on the reservations and remote rural areas) as well as reservation groups being smaller and less formal; one stated that tribal clientele do not know what to expect from extension. Another mentioned that tribal audiences are smaller, less formal groups; non-reservation clients don’t seek participation as much as reservations clientele do. However, the beef cattle industry is the same on and off the reservation, as it has the same marketing system, though instructors need to take into account time modification, or “Indian time”, where some participants arrive between 15 minutes to an hour late to workshops or meetings.

FRTEP agents cited short, quick surveys (Likert or Borich scale), individual oral feedback, and focus groups for effective evaluation. One agent stated that small evaluation cards were best, and that “people won’t come out and tell you now, but will tell you later, as long as one month later”, providing oral feedback for the activity. Other FRTEP personnel also corroborated the effectiveness of oral feedback on extension activities; negative feedback is normally phrased diplomatically and given at a later time. “Evaluation uses a different system, totally different, the reservation is like a big county—we need extra personnel for evaluation,” stated one agent on a large reservation with many communities.

Five county participants noted that evaluation was the same. One agent claimed: “Program implementation is the same, but evaluation comes back in a different manner or method. Extension is consistent across all (groups).” Others observed the effectiveness of face-to-face communication—“the most effective evaluation is if you sit down and talk to them face to face”; the use of quick and simple evaluations due to lower reading level and elders with less formal education, and that agents work toward small changes so as not to alter the slower, less stressful lifestyle. State personnel mostly left evaluation up to the local agents. The state administrator did mention that small increases in the 4-H youth program, such as adding one or two members in reservation programs, is a lot; “it looks different than in the county,” where larger gains are expected.

Although some county personnel made no distinction regarding volunteer programs, most FRTEP and county personnel stated the largest differences were associated with volunteerism. The lack of a volunteer tradition, excessive paperwork, criminal background checks, lower income, no transportation, and substantial community and familial responsibilities prevented reservation clientele from volunteering. Parental support is often lacking in youth programs; either the parents are too busy with other community and extended family activities, or they are lacking transportation, income, or sufficient motivation to support the labor intensive extension volunteer model. One county agent noted that volunteerism is difficult in all small, lower income communities, not just on the reservation, and with adult programs as well as with youth.
Paperwork and leader certification are difficult in the Native American community, and the criminal background check for volunteer leaders is intrusive and a problem with Tribal sovereignty laws. One agent stated that with “the volatile Tribal politics on the reservation and because of Tribal sovereignty rights, a lawsuit regarding state criminal background checks issued by the university might occur: yet the University is not concerned much about this issue.” Another agent stated: “We have a hard time getting volunteers. In the past, it was better. Background checks for volunteers, including Master Gardeners, make it difficult—the way of life, transport and (the high price) of gas as well as busyness make it hard.” Another mentioned having money for meeting snacks and transportation was a hardship for reservation residents; “people are also leery about giving information in general (to the government),” due to past governmental misuse of Tribal information. One agent added: “Racist attitudes off the reservation discourage parents, leaders, and youth from participating. For so many years the BIA provided services—the people are used to it.” Three other agents corroborated the problem with off reservation prejudice towards reservation youth, leaders and parents. Youth programs work better with paid staff, according to several agents. One instructional specialist spelled out a typical problem with the volunteer philosophy:

“People are too busy doing other things like sports and Tribal ceremonies. The traditional model of volunteerism doesn’t fit here. People will help out if a program is desired, but no one will step up to lead it. They just don’t want to be the ‘leader’.”

A county agent and an instructional specialist explained further:

“Native Americans step up and help if asked, but you have to make them feel good about it—they’re more willing to make their world better. County volunteers are busy professionals who don’t have time.”

“County folks are more willing to volunteer, due to better economic status. Native Americans need a support network—they don’t want to step out on their own—they all like to be pretty uniform. They don’t take criticism well, especially from amongst tribal members, but do criticize. We’ve lost a lot of volunteers because of needy or critical participants.”

“Reservation residents are not accustomed to volunteering for 4-H positions—they often want to know how much they will get paid. It is more their perception of who should be a volunteer and what should be paid for. Some are good and do a good job.”

“It’s difficult to get volunteers on the reservation—almost impossible. The Tribe usually pays for such positions. I can get help for tasks—whatever I’ ask they’ll jump in and do it, as will staff. But they will not manage the program.”

The state administrator summed up the root of the problem:

“The culture of volunteerism is absent at best or regarded negatively on the reservation. [The reservation residents ask themselves]: ‘Who is to volunteer? Why should I? Is an outsider asking me to work?’ Or, if it is an inside extension agent, clan or band, obligations for the “ask” cause suspicion. Volunteerism is an expectation in BIG Extension (all University Cooperative Extension on a national level).”
Several FRTEP/county participants recommended a new extension model not based on volunteers. This model includes collaborating with tribal agencies that provide paid staff, as well as working with schools and after school programs to capitalize on their organizational strengths. Two county agents commented:

“Maybe (using) some of those professional employees, if they can fit it in to some of their regular work duties, it might be advantageous. What would be nice is if you could get more of the tribal elders involved, some of the folks that still have a lot of things to pass along . . . . It would be nice if you could get some of those grandmothers involved.”

“University expectations and policies and procedures inhibit . . . some volunteer participation and volunteer programs. I don’t think there is the availability of volunteers. Due to economics and culture, it is difficult to fit extension volunteer model to Indian communities. New ways and partnering with tribal members and communities is needed.”

However, there are many institutional barriers to transforming the extension volunteer model. A county agent points out one:

“Some (university) peers do not accept alternative models, models other than the (4-H) club model; gatekeepers try to control the state program through peer review. We’ll have to see what the new 4-H director does—the last three before him have not been able to change it. Society has changed; the club program is not relevant now.”

A FRTEP agent echoes his sentiments:

“It’s difficult to explain to Tucson (University of Arizona) what I do: so far as evaluating me, they don’t have a clue! It takes a long time to get impacts on the reservation, often greater than ten years. Peers don’t understand the differences of working on the reservation, differences in time schedules and cultural and familiar factors.”

The administrator expands upon this theme:

“Tolerance levels for deviation from BIG Extension is something that challenges reservation agents. If you don’t plan with the LOGIC model, you’re wrong. There are plenty of different ways other than the LOGIC model that can be used. How did we do meaningful work before the LOGIC model? It’s the nature of our work; it’s what we do. Extension existed 90 years without the LOGIC model. We do 1965 extension on the reservations.”

**Educational Importance, Implications, and Application**

Institutional barriers include the desire of mainstream society to make Native American communities look the same as their communities. The assumption can be that Native American communities will react the same way as mainstream communities based on the rewards that would stimulate a mainstream community. That assumption can often be incorrect. Flora and Trumby Lamsam (2008) make this point in their paper stating:

[Many people believe that] “Native peoples must be informed, persuaded, and educated into wanting the lifestyle of mainstream Americans. By using this perspective, a Dine who chooses to tend sheep and live traditionally will always be counted as an impoverished person. In our work with indigenous scholars and communities in many parts of the world, we are continually reminded not to confuse standard of living for
quality of life. Among some Lakota, lack of family and friends is poverty, not lack of money. The real divide is one of worldview. The modernization project requires all peoples to continually want more and more things and encourages them to shed other values in order to get them. Yet around the world there are increasing actions by funders, scholars, and communities to reinforce a different world view."

Nonetheless, new partnerships in Indian Country are already in practice in many instances, and should be further sought, cultivated and maintained, in order to improve service to Tribal communities.

Significant differences in educational objectives, curricula, delivery methods, evaluation, and volunteerism exist between county and reservation extension programs. Extension personnel should design programs that dovetail with the cultural, socioeconomic, and educational needs of the reservation communities. One option may be creating an alternative extension model without volunteers. This includes partnering with tribal agencies and schools. More research with other Tribal reservations, in diverse parts of the U.S. and internationally, is needed. In addition, an alternative, possibly circular, logic model should be investigated for use on reservations to better meet the assessment, implementation and evaluation of extension programs.

References


