Experiential Learning for Extension Professionals: A Cross-Cultural Immersion Program

Jenna B. Daniel
University of Georgia, jbrown10@uga.edu

Dennis Duncan
University of Georgia, dwd@uga.edu

Maria Navarro
University of Georgia, mnavarro@uga.edu

Nick Fuhrman
University of Georgia, fuhrman@uga.edu

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Abstract

As the U.S. population becomes more diverse, Extension is called upon to modify its programming to meet the needs of its changing constituency. Georgia Extension created a professional development curriculum to assist Extension professionals in crafting effective programming for the rapidly growing Latino population. The study reported here explores qualitatively how Extension professionals in Georgia experienced their Cross-Cultural Immersion Program (CCIP). Through an interview-based study, three themes emerged from the data. Extension participants experienced: (1) diverse familial relations in Latino populations, (2) obstacles during programming, and (3) greater personal over professional gains through the CCIP.

Jenna B. Daniel
Extension Program
Coordinator
jbrown10@uga.edu

Dennis Duncan
Professor
Department of
Agricultural
Leadership, Education,
and Communication
dwd@uga.edu

Maria Navarro
Associate Professor
Department of
Agricultural
Leadership, Education,
and Communication
mnavarro@uga.edu

Nick Fuhrman
Associate Professor
Department of
Agricultural
Leadership, Education,
and Communication
fuhrman@uga.edu

The University of
Georgia
Athens, Georgia

Introduction

A land-grant institution's goals are three-fold: performing research, educating students, and contributing to the community through public service. Created from the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, the Cooperative Extension System functions as the primary organizational effort to serve the constituents of the each state by disseminating knowledge gained from its land-grant university. This pivotal piece of the land-grant university lies in "taking the university to the people" (Rasmussen, 1989), an effort that provides practical knowledge to individuals throughout a state regardless of level of participation in the university system or cultural background.

What was a primarily agrarian society is now a "heterogeneous, urban society" (National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, 2002, p. 2). These changes are in direct relation to the United States becoming a nation of numerous cultures and ethnicities (Bull, Cote, Warner, & McKinnie, 2004; National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, 2002; Peterson, Betts, & Richmond, 2002). Today, Extension professionals encounter an increasingly diverse

population in the communities they serve.

Since 1980, the Latino population has more than tripled, from 14.8 million to 50.5 million (Bergard & Klein, 2010) and is the largest and fastest growing group within the United States (Peralta & Larkin, 2011). Today, Latinos account for one-sixth of the U.S. residents (Immigration Policy Center, April 2012).

As Extension's clientele becomes more diverse, so too must its programming and services. Extension is "established and budgeted on the premise that the agency serves people…to be effective, the agency staff must be sufficiently skilled and trained to give dimension and structure to the people's needs so that they can be defined, articulated, and acted upon" (Veri & Vonder Haar, 1970, p. 1). This notion resonates in the recently published report by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (2010), which identified organizational challenges relevant to the future state of Extension. Two of the challenges included: (1) increasing flexibility in identifying and serving clientele with diverse needs and (2) developing the skills of Extension professionals to meet the needs of diverse clientele (Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, 2010). The findings speak specifically to the necessity for continuing education of Extension professionals to serve an increasingly diverse clientele.

In an attempt to identify, employ, and evaluate practices that best serve the growing Latino population in their communities, Extension personnel turn to literature addressing "promising practices" for agencies and their staff to provide services for a diverse population. One practice identified is cross-cultural immersion programs. Cross-cultural immersion programs offer individuals the opportunity to visit a foreign country for an identified period to experience and gain knowledge about a different culture, language, and group of people (Ludwig, 1999). Cross-cultural immersion trips enhance the participants' ability to gain a better understanding of the population being served, and skills are cultivated that are necessary in identifying and addressing the needs of the intended population (Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004).

Research shows that individuals who participate in a cross-cultural immersion program experience self-development and openness to other cultures (Wilson, 1982) plus develop the competence of thinking more broadly and fostering habits of continual growth (Cushner, 2004). By understanding people's livelihoods, Extension educators are better equipped to plan and develop culturally targeted needs assessments and programs (Ludwig, 2002). Marsden (2000) claimed that "submersion into another culture provides a perspective that, in some ways, is difficult to transfer" (para. 5). By gaining a better understanding about the country that clientele lived in before coming to the United States, service providers such as Extension professionals are able to offer tailored and needs-based assistance for immigrant populations (Harder, Lamm, & Vergott III, 2010).

A key tenet in the practice of cross-cultural immersion is that of transformation and the shift of a current perspective. Parallel to this, transformative learning theory and perspective learning theory are best suited as the theoretical frameworks for the study reported here. Transformative learning theory explains the "learning dynamics that are involved when we dig down to the roots of our assumptions and reconceptions and, as a result, change the way we construe the meaning of experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 196). When an individual has an experience that is not in line with

"expectations framed within cultural assumptions and presuppositions" (Taylor, 1994, p. 158), the experience can be either rejected or accepted. It is the acceptance of a new experience and the subsequent revision of an individual's meaning perspective that is explained through the theory of perspective transformation. Mezirow (1991) describes a perspective transformation as:

> The process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings (p. 167).

For a perspective transformation to occur, an individual must complete each of the 10 stages of the process, beginning with a disorienting dilemma and concluding with a transformed perspective and the reintegration into life based on this newly redefined perspective. Relative to the cross-cultural immersion program, a disorienting dilemma can occur when individuals work to understand a different culture whose customs may be different from their own (Mezirow, 1991). From an Extension standpoint, agents often work with cultures whose customs are different than their own. However, little research exists that documents the impact of cross-cultural immersion programming targeted at these Extension professionals.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study reported here was to understand the value of a cross-cultural immersion program for Georgia Extension professionals by exploring the knowledge, benefits, and experiences gained by participants. The study attempted to answer the following research question:

1. What skills and competencies do Cooperative Extension professionals gain as a direct result of their involvement with this cross-cultural immersion program?

Methodology

Given the influx in the Latino population, Georgia Extension established a Cross-Cultural Immersion Program (CCIP) in 2002 as professional development for agents and staff. The objectives of the program were to: (1) provide participants with a knowledge of social, cultural, and environmental issues of Latin America, (2) compare and contrast cultural values between Latin America and the United States and to interpret these values relative to the Latino and non-Latino communities in Georgia, (3) learn about globalization and its impact on Latin America, and (4) be exposed to basic Spanish language instruction to improve Extension professionals' language skills (Ames & Atiles, 2008).

This program, funded by the USDA-CSREES International Science and Education Competitive Grants Program (Ames & Atiles, 2008), provided the opportunity to travel to a Latin American country for 2 weeks. A typical CCIP trip included visits in the host country to a university, agricultural sites, social service agencies, public health clinics, and schools. These site visits provided participants a broad set of cultural experiences within the country they visited. Snaza, Talbert, Ayres, Balschweid, and Tharp

(2009) describe a similar trip taken by Extension professionals from Purdue University where "the study-tour was designed for participants to see the realities of the daily lives of the people" (para. 4).

To understand how the cross-cultural immersion participants experienced their trip, during the spring of 2009, volunteers were purposively selected from a list of alumni (past participants) of the CCIP. More specifically, a snowball sampling technique was used. Following each interview, participants were asked to suggest appropriate and willing individuals who might participate in the interview. Response was voluntary, and participants were asked to take part in an interview that lasted 45 minutes. Interviews took place either in person or via the phone. Seven immersion program participants and Extension administrators agreed to participate and were interviewed. Seven questions were asked of the participants (Table 1).

Table 1.

Interview Questions

Interview Question	
1	Prior to your trip, did you feel there was a need for increased cross-cultural programming in your area/county and discipline/program?
2	How did you prepare for your trip, and did you have any specific goals that you wanted to achieve through this trip?
3	What aspects of your cross-cultural studies experience (trip) proved to be beneficial to you/your job? Do you have any suggestions for improvement/enhancement of cross-cultural studies programs/trips?
4	What barriers do you encounter with the Latino Community (or other communities) as an Extension/education professional? Have these barriers changed or do they look different to you as a result of your participation in the cross-cultural studies program/trip?
5	Do you find that your programs have become inclusive of different cultures as a result of your participation in the cross-cultural studies program/trip? Have there been any changes in your professional practice/programming directly or indirectly triggered by your participation in the cross-cultural studies program? Can you give some examples?
6	How can others learn from your experience and your programs? Are there any practices/ideas/strategies you would like to share with other education/extension professionals to enhance their cross-cultural programming?
7	In a moment of drastic budget cuts, it is difficult to continue or include many people in cross-cultural studies programs and trips? If you had to suggest alternatives, what would you suggest?

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed to form pertinent and meaningful questions for the quantitative section of the research study (not presented here). Reoccurring themes were coded into categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that were later used to create constructs on a questionnaire distributed to all past program participants. Support for themes was established by a theme's frequency of occurrence in the raw data. Themes that are presented first in the findings occurred more often in the raw data. Themes were named based on the researchers' summary of the raw data. Credibility was established by engaging in member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and the researchers shared raw data with informed readers to ensure the alignment of the themes presented with the data (Cho & Trent, 2006). All data analyzed and reported in this article relates only to the interview-based portion of the study.

Findings

Participants ranged from administrative professionals to county professionals (Table 2). Given a small sample, all participants were given pseudonyms so that they were not identifiable in print (Nespor, 2000). Of the seven participants, three were non-Hispanic white males (43%), with non-Hispanic white females closely following (n=2; 29%). The remaining two participants included one Hispanic female and one Hispanic male. The clientele these participants served ranged from rural to urban populations.

Table 2.

Participant Demographics

Participant	Demographics
Mary	Hispanic, Woman, Middle-Aged, County Family and Consumer Sciences Faculty, Urban/Suburban Clientele
Tom	Non-Hispanic White, Male, Middle-Aged, State 4-H Faculty, Rural to Urban Clientele
Addison	Non-Hispanic White, Female, Middle-Aged, County Agriculture & Natural Resource Faculty, Rural to Suburban Clientele
Matthew	Hispanic, Male, Middle-Age, State Extension Administration, Rural to Urban Clientele
Adam	Non-Hispanic White, Male, Middle-Aged, County 4-H Faculty, Rural to Suburban Clientele
Whitney	Non-Hispanic White, Female, Middle-Aged, State Family and Consumer Sciences Faculty, Rural to Urban Clientele
Jack	Non-Hispanic White, Male, Middle-Aged, State Extension Administration, Rural to Urban Clientele

In the data collected from the seven participants, two overarching themes emerged from the coded responses: benefits of an immersion experience and persistent challenges (Table 3). These two

themes encompass two additional subthemes. For benefits of an immersion experience, subthemes of cultural appreciation and first-hand experience emerged as dominant. For the second theme, persistent challenges, the two subthemes that surfaced were participant recruitment and programmatic difficulties.

Table 3.
Themes and Subthemes

	Themes & Subthemes
Theme 1	Benefits of an immersion experience
Subtheme A	Cultural appreciation
Subtheme B	First-hand experience
Theme 2	Persistent challenges
Subtheme A	Participant recruitment
Subtheme B	Programmatic difficulties

Benefits of an Immersion Experience

The most common and recurring theme addressed the benefits and gains participants received as a direct result of the immersion experience. These benefits ranged from professional to personal gain. Responses highlighted a newfound or enhanced appreciation of a culture, individuals different from their own background, and the first-hand experiences they encountered while participating in the CCIP. From this overarching theme, two subthemes were discovered: cultural appreciation and first-hand experience.

Cultural Appreciation

Cultural appreciation was a large subtheme that occurred in the data. Participants highlighted their ability to have a better understanding of what it felt like to look and be different from everyone else and to live in a country where their native language was not widely spoken. Specifically, participants mentioned a new opportunity to relate and share experiences with the Latino population following their trip. Because most participants had not previously traveled outside of the United States, they found this experience to be both professionally and personally rewarding. Their experiences in a cross-cultural immersion program in a foreign country drastically changed their world view (Table 4).

Additionally, individuals spoke about their ability to be more inclusive in programming by creating new programs or altering existing programs. After CCIP, participants felt more confident in their ability to offer programming to their community's Latino population.

Table 4.
Benefits of an Immersion Experience: Cultural Appreciation

Participant	Response
Jack	The biggest changes have been faculty initiating programming because they have a better understanding of the culture and a higher comfort level to offer programs.
Whitney	We also ask them to begin to think about what does their county look like, who is in their county, and just because you don't have the population in the county doesn't mean that you can't go (on the trip) because very often what you learn by being the outsides, in another culture, you can come back and apply it in your own county, even if that culture group is not there.
Adam	Because even the information that was presented to me about Mexico before I went, and what was shared, I looked at it through a view of my world. I tried to take my world that I lived in and tried to shape that into where I thought I was going, but it was vastly, totally different.
Whitney	I think that the international experience for our agents helps them begin to break down the walls that divide us and when I hear them moving from saying "those people" to saying "you know the people in my community, we" when they go to beginning to see themselves as part of the community, I think that's when you made the big change, and when the community begins to start to identify Extension as the place to go.
Mary	I think that I have always been available to be inclusive of other groups. Now I am more aware of what their needs are. Yesterday when I was teaching a nutrition class to a group of Hispanic people I was able to explain to them that the Extension system cares enough about their need and participation in their program that they would send agents and professionals to another country to better understand their community. I can also relate to them and given examples of my trip to Mexico and I can bring my experience there to my job here.

First-Hand Experience

The second subtheme that emerged from the data was first-hand experience. This subtheme explored the ways in which traveling outside the U.S. and experiencing a new culture created a unique learning experience. Many participants discussed their ability to understand numerous facets of the culture, including nutrition, family structures, and transportation.

A specific portion of the trip that participants highlighted in their interviews was the homestay. During the trip, all individuals stayed with a local family, and many participants found this

invaluable. By living with a family, they were able to experience another culture on a more intimate level than ever before.

Additionally, participants highlighted their recent increase in empathy after experiencing immersion in a new culture and place first-hand. By understanding what it felt like to be an outsider, look different from the majority of the population, and not be able to speak the native language, participants gained an understanding of what some individuals from the Latino population experience while in the United States (Table 5).

Table 5.

Benefits of an Immersion Experience: First-Hand Experience

Participant	Response
Mary	By being immersed in the culture I could learn about their ways of living, nutritional habits, leisure time, and means of transportation. As a new agent going into the experience, it was very rewarding to establish connections within the Extension family. Whenever we see each other there is a bond because of the trip and the culture that we experienced together.
Matthew	Immersion programs are irreplaceable. Have faculty live with other families is the one thing that makes this program different. Faculty could learn Spanish here in the United States, but living with the family breaks down a lot of barriers for the faculty. It is a more real life experience.
Whitney	My philosophy and everything that I have seen says that if you have the opportunity to be alien, out of your comfort zone, that when you are working with people who are in that situation, you have a certain empathy, you have a better understanding.
Adam	I enjoyed it (the trip), I had a good time, but you learn in a way where it's not like you are lectured constantly. It follows Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning. You are there, hands on learning, and I just think that trip is beneficial in the fact that it's very hard to sit in a classroom and be lecture and have somebody present slides and information.

Persistent Challenges

By far, the most recurring theme was that of challenges, barriers, and struggles CCIP participants encounter when programming for and working with the Latino population. These barriers encompass programmatic issues, recruitment and retention, trust, and language. Participants strongly voiced the issues that arise when trying to work with this specific population. From this theme, two subthemes arose: participant recruitment and programmatic difficulties.

Participant Recruitment

Barriers concerning participation of the Latino population in community programming were consistently voiced by most participants. Many Extension professionals articulated the difficulty and lack of success they experienced trying to offer programming for Latinos.

Most participants recounted their unsuccessful experiences in providing programming for this population. Concerns of county offices housed in government buildings, inability to gain interest among Extension peers, and issues of language and trust frequently surfaced during the data analysis.

However, one participant did describe a small success he experienced after his participation in CCIP. It was revealed that participation from the Latino population in the community was increasing through an after-school program (Table 6).

Table 6.

Persistent Challenges: Participation

Participant	Response
Addison	I have been trying to offer continued education credits for training seminars for agents and employers that work with Hispanic cultures, but no one has shown any interest.
Whitney	After their experience they are more open to looking at their community and saying…alright, we identify who is here, we begin to look at, who is the underserved population?
Adam	We've had some Hispanic youth that have actually participated in the after school programs since then, and the parents come in.
Jack	Through what I have observed I think that the biggest barrier is a trust factor. Building their trust in us is always a hard and difficult process. Language has also presented itself as a barrier. An increase in Spanish speaking faculty and staff will help decrease this barrier. By speaking their language, we are able to understand better our role and what we can do for them.
Adam	Language has been a barrier and their family structure is a lot different than ours.
Matthew	Language. Barriers change a whole lot. But usually when agents return from the trip they are better able to convince their office to find someone who is bilingual to work with the office in implementing programs.
Addison	I have tried to implement safety training workshops in our community but couldn't get anyone to come. I think the main

| | reason that they refuse to come is that they aren't very trusting of me because they have never met me and I am not involved in the Latino community. My office is also housed in a government annex building. |

Programmatic Difficulties

Upon returning to the United States, many individuals were excited about their travel and had gained a wealth of information, but they found that they did not have the resources or tools available to translate this knowledge into action. Most of the participants noted that no changes had been implemented in their current programming since they had returned from their CCIP trip. They also noted that their offices did not have the funding to have materials translated into Spanish, did not employ individuals that spoke Spanish, and did not have the money or connections to advertise new programming to the Latino community.

Participants noted that many of the Latino individuals they encounter are very family oriented. When these individuals move to the United States and are not familiar with programs such as 4-H, they can be distrusting of them and can be hesitant to send their children to activities and camps for days at a time with non-family members. This concept of trusting individuals other than family became apparent to many participants as a direct result of their cross-cultural immersion experience (Table 7).

Table 7.

Persistent Challenges: Programmatic Difficulties

Participant	Response
Whitney	You don't necessarily have to have a lot of funding, you just need to figure out a way to connect with the audience, to find people who are already serving this audience, and one of the things I really want them to do when they come back is to identify someone in their community that could be a cultural guide.
Adam	And one mom…she doesn't feel real comfortable (with the idea of leaving her children afterschool for 4-H) and she's gotten into talking with me about what is 4-H… but they (Latino populations) think a lot different because they are very protective and very family centered… So now it's actually improved where we have had some of our students (Latino) come and are enjoying participating and its kinda like um, I view it as, it's one or two… You know if they are happy and they are enjoying it, and their parents are enjoying it, they're gonna spread it to other people in the community and the comfort level starts being built up…'well hey my child can go to 4-H, that's a big event, that's a big program, its teaching them a lot, they're learning a lot, so I want

	them to go participate'. So that that comfort level starts getting built. Maybe one or two now, but I think eventually it will spread to more.
Tom	It's not as common in Latin American countries to send your kid off with people. It's more family-based socializing, so I think that that's a barrier, but I've seen that throughout 4-H, not in dramatic numbers, but based on when one county agent builds a personal relationship with someone who happens to be Hispanic, then that's the kind of person. It takes those personal relationships that will then get these kids to camp or get them to these activities where their parents are willing to send them.
Whitney	4-H looks very militaristic if you think about it. We have clubs, and the parents aren't involved in clubs that much except on the periphery...they (Latinos) think what are you teaching my child? You want me to let my child go away with you for a whole week? First of all (Latino) families don't do that, they all go together.
Addison	I think that my biggest struggle is that I need help marketing these programs. I think that our county is very inclusive of all culture. We try and offer safety classes that would be presented in all Spanish, but still no one will show up. We advertise in Hispanic papers and send people out into the community to spread the word. I don't understand why they won't come.
Mary	There is definitely more need for culturally appropriate materials for the community and we also need more materials to be translated into Spanish.
Whitney	You're more...tend to be more willing to at ways to adapt your programming to make it a more comfortable program for them, you start looking at different ways of teaching, different learning styles...

The majority of participants found their experience to be a positive one concerning their cross-cultural immersion trip. Participants found their ability to feel empathy increased, their aptitude to relate to other cultures was growing, and their first-hand experiences to be invaluable.

On the other hand, most participants voiced their frustration with the barriers and challenges they faced upon their return to their communities. Issues of funding, language, trust, and participation all threatened to render their attempts at programming ineffective. These challenges resonated among the participants frequently.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Data from the research reported here illuminates three ideas that should be considered for future

research. These areas will have vast implications for the ability of Extension to remain relevant and to increase its ability to reach an ever expanding number of constituents.

The notion that participants had the ability to reflect upon their experience and transform that experience into action signifies their capacity for transformative learning. "Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7). If agents are willing to challenge the historical knowledge in Extension, engage in both critical reflection of their current assumptions and dialogue of the current climate, then they will be better able to understand the importance and be effective in creating culturally relevant programming for the Latino population in Georgia. Mezirow (2000) describes the importance of challenging current knowledge and understanding how it came to be the norm by saying:

> As language and culturally specific social practices are implicated in learning, understanding will be enabled and constrained by the historical knowledge-power networks in which it is embedded. The assumptions of these historical networks and their supporting ideologies need to be brought into awareness and critical reflection by the learner to make possible a greater degree of autonomous learning. (p.7)

This solidifies the CCIP's ability to bring about significant and impactful changes in both the professional and personal lives of the program's participants.

A large disparity in emotions and ability seemed to develop from the time the participants traveled out of the country to when they returned to their respective communities. This gap occurred from barriers Extension professionals encountered when recruiting participants and creating effective programming for the Latino population. These thoughts were voiced by an overwhelming majority of participants.

Though participants had a broad array of thoughts and feelings about their cross-cultural immersion trip, the general consensus of the data is that the program is a positive force for education and change among Extension, but a need for a stronger post-trip support system is evident (Ference, 2006). The data suggests that when the program participants experienced barriers and challenges with reaching their intended population, they found no support or help from Extension in supporting their efforts. Funding, language, and translation of materials were all recurring issues participants encountered. Cross-cultural immersion participants should communicate both their interest in, and the necessity of, reaching this population to the administration and leadership of Georgia Cooperative Extension. This support from all levels of Extension could help determine the success of their professional endeavors across Georgia.

The idea of participation and recruitment was also largely voiced regarding a participant's inability to create effective programming for this intended population. In an attempt to create culturally relevant programming for the Latino population in Georgia, "Educators need to have some knowledge of their learners and the experiences they bring to the classroom . . . they should have an understanding of the diversity among the foreign-born population [which has] implications for teaching and learning"

(Alfred, 2009, p. 138). This recognition of culture-based and culturally relevant program planning has considerable significance for any adult educators who work with nontraditional populations (Guy, 1999a, 1999b). By providing and creating culturally relevant programming for the Latino population in Georgia, Extension professionals are creating educational opportunities that are germane for an increasing population in the United States.

Findings from the interviews suggest that although "the new millennium will offer many challenges to Extension, recognition of the global community we inhabit and share with partners around the world will become an increasing priority" (Ludwig, 1999, para. 20). Georgia Extension personnel have made vast strides with their cross-cultural immersion program to help Extension professionals become better able to tailor programming efforts to meet the needs of the Latino population.

The aforementioned practices leave Extension professionals with a unique experience that is unforgettable and allows individuals to immerse themselves in a new perspective and way of life. The researchers believe the following recommendations should be implemented in order to further improve the CCIP for Georgia Extension and potentially other states.

1. Conduct a quantitative study with prior CCIP participants as a supplement to the qualitative study reported here.

2. Implement a Community of Practice that would aid Extension professionals in sharing trainings, programming, best practices, and experiences with one another on a repeated basis.

3. Conduct research on how to implement programming for Latino populations post-trip. When meaningful ways to engage and interact with the Latino community are discovered, they should be shared with other Extension professionals through a Community of Practice.

4. Georgia Extension leadership should work to support the community efforts to increase Latino participation in their programming. Administration can create a culture of inclusion by recognizing Extension professionals who currently work with these audiences and ask for insight from these individuals on helping their colleagues better reach this demographic.

As the United States becomes a progressively more diverse nation, the need for a broader knowledge base of cultures and populations is imperative for the Cooperative Extension System (Herndon, Behnke, Navarro, Daniel, & Storm, 2013). With initiatives like Georgia's CCIP, non-traditional groups are provided better access to more tailored and culturally sensitive programming. This programming will be vital in Extension's quest to become more diverse and better able to target and address local needs.

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