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Building Extension's Capacity Through Knowledge of Global Aging Issues

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Building Extension's Capacity Through Knowledge of Global Aging Issues

Abstract

A willingness to explore the global stage can improve and embellish Extension program development, implementation, and evaluation methods. Understanding various models of aging from around the world builds capacity and invites the cultivation of innovative responses in local communities. China is instructive to those interested in expanding their perspectives of older adult programming due to its large population, aging society, culture, and political reforms. Insight into Chinese efforts and the possible applicability of that response to Extension programming is shared through observations from the Seminar in Aging conducted by the American Society on Aging in Beijing in May 2007.

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Local Needs, Global Answers

Extension professionals are firmly grounded in local communities. We are proud of our ability to improve the lives of our neighbors. At times, we extend this definition of neighbor to include individuals living in our state, nearby states, or region. Sometimes we expand the definition to a national level. It can be more difficult to think of a neighbor as an individual living in another nation; this may seem too far from the Extension tradition and may be thought to occur at the expense of local needs. Incorporating a global perspective into daily Extension work is not, however, a zero-sum game. The advantages of thinking globally have been outlined by several Extension professionals (Gallagher, 2002; Lev, 2001; Ludwig, 2002; Sundermeier, 2006).

A willingness to explore the global stage can improve and embellish program development, implementation, and evaluation methods. Knowledge of other countries' successes and failures builds Extension's capacity to have a positive impact in local communities. Insight into global issues thus becomes an additional resource for Extension professionals. One common global concern is the aging of the population.

In 2002, those aged 65+ comprised 7% of the world's population. By 2050, that number is expected to rise to nearly 17% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). This trend points to serious social, political, and economic consequences around the world and is a signal that for many countries, current programs are inadequate and must be reformulated.

China's Importance on the Global Aging Stage

For those interested in the impact of global solutions related to aging communities, an exploration of China's alternate viewpoints and models is instructive. China has several features that demand immediate attention.

- More than 1.3 billion people live in China, positioning it as the world's most populous country (U.S. Department of State, 2007)
- 144 million of the total population, or 11%, are currently more than 60 years of age (Information Office for the State Council of the People's Republic of China [IOSCPRC], 2006)

- The country is home to approximately 20% of the world's 60+ population (China National Committee on Ageing, 1999)
- 400 million people age 60+ will live in China by 2050 (China National Committee on Ageing, 1999), and, to put this into perspective, the total population of the United States in 2000 was less than 300 million (McDevitt & Rowe, 2002)

Program Development and Implementation in China

Insight into aging in China is outlined here through a presentation of selected observations from the Seminar in Beijing conducted by the American Society on Aging in May 2007. This event was experiential in nature, and the 24 of us who participated were provided with entrée not normally granted to foreigners. An investigation of Chinese perspective through visits to aging centers in Beijing; interaction with medical professionals, academics, and government officials; and an exploration of the culture were integral components of the seminar.

China's rapid social and economic reforms, coupled with future population projections, provide openings to develop innovative aging programs on a scale never before attempted in world history. In particular, efforts in personal development, health care, and family caregiving have possible implications for programming in the United States.

Personal Development

Personal development for older adults is positioned within China as a crucial central tenet in terms of quality of life. Women retire at 55; men at 60. Thus, there is a critical need to develop non-employment interests for a stage of life that could last upward of 30 years.

Recreation, leisure, and sport are viewed as an important aspect of personal development. This value is evident in the approximately 47,000 recreation and activity centers for older adults.

For those interested in education, individuals can attend one of more than 26,500 senior universities. Varying across communities, senior universities consist of facilities and programming. A senior university in Beijing provides classes in a variety of areas, such as dance and computer instruction. The cost to attend is minimal (about \$8.00 per term).

Health Care

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is a comprehensive and holistic view of health and is composed of five foundational concepts: nutrition, lifestyle, emotion, exercise, and mental fitness. Prevention and wellness are viewed as critical aspects of the overall framework.

Physical activity is highly encouraged in China and is a habit for many people, young and old. Exercise can occur for its own sake, but the incorporation of physical activity into daily lives is a cultural norm.

Education about prevention is a primary focus in China for its potential impact upon quality of care and quality of life. As approximately 60% of all older Chinese live in rural areas (IOSCPRC), education about health-related topics is primarily disseminated through use of various media, including television and radio.

Family Caregiving

In 1996, a law concerning the rights of elderly people was adopted, with one article stating explicitly that the *main* provision of support to old people is the family (Legislative Affairs Commission of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 1996). The Chinese presenters commented frankly concerning the breakdown in thousands-year-old traditions of familial values related to reverence for older people. Through the use of words such as "abandonment," it became evident that social attitudes are quickly changing.

As part of a response to changing attitudes, the government is encouraging family support contracts: a legal document that outlines what children will provide for their parents. By 2005, approximately 13 million such contracts had been enacted (IOSCPRC, 2006).

What Extension Can Learn from China's Response

I pose the questions below as examples of initial thoughts concerning another country's responses to aging and the applicability of that response to Extension programming.

Personal Development

- Would framing non-employed years as an opportunity to pursue personal development as opposed to living a life of leisure change negative attitudes about growing older? How could Extension promote this?

- What is the future role of senior centers? Would an emphasis on competitive sports promote stronger participation levels in group sports or recreation activity? Could Extension initiate and help sustain such changes?
- How is the senior university concept similar to and different from elder hostels? Is a true senior university concept viable? Could Extension support this idea in local communities?

Health Care

- How does TCM compare to Western notions of health and wellness, particularly when it comes to exercise?
- What might be missing from current Extension health-oriented programs?
- What can Extension learn from the emphasis on education through media delivery instead of face-to-face programming?

Family Caregiving

- Is it possible to formalize family caregiving responsibilities?
- Would a program similar to parent/teen contracts about drinking and driving work within the arena of family caregiving?
- How could Extension play a part?

Consideration of China's responses and the possible applicability to the United States is worthy of reflection as we are also facing broad and comprehensive changes to our population. Thinking globally about this issue presents an opportunity to expand possible Extension programming possibilities for older adults through assessment of the relevance of global answers to local communities. By thinking of the Chinese as neighbors, Extension professionals can learn about diverse and unique solutions and incorporate the 'best of' into their own programs and services.

How Extension Professionals Can Go Global Without Leaving Their Office

Although Extension professionals may acknowledge the benefit of thinking globally, it can be easy to allow the active development of a global perspective to slide to the bottom of the pile. Here are some activities that can be helpful, and all of these can be completed without leaving the office!

- Visit the CSREES Web site, and click on International in the navigation pane (<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/>).
- Read what other Extension professionals have said about this topic in previous issues of JOE. Go to: <http://www.joe.org/search.html> and enter "globalization" as the search term. Experiment with "internationalization" or the name of the country that interests you.
- Learn about the country of your choice on the U.S. Department of State Web site: http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1765.html. The Consular Information Sheets present a short general overview of many different countries.
- Subscribe to an RSS feed, listserv, or news service that carries features from around the world (My favorite is *Current Awareness in Aging Research E-Clippings*, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Subscribe at: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/cdha/pubs/caar/subscribe.html>).

What Does Global Aging Mean to My Neighbors and Me?

The pressing problems that have and will come to the United States as the result of our aging population sweep across areas as diverse as agriculture, family relationships, finances, health, and nutrition. Taking an expanded view of the needs of an aging clientele and possible solutions is one way to serve in our local communities. Extension professionals clearly will have an important role in shaping the vision for this future old age society.

We can build capacity in the role of educator through understanding global efforts and increasing our knowledge of other countries' failures and successes as they attempt to address aging populations. Engagement in active reflection and assessment of diverse answers results in the development of new perspectives. Thinking beyond the state, region, and nation powerfully influences the creation of solutions and development of programs for our neighbors.

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