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Toward Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Outreach and Engagement in Extension Education: Expert Consensus on Barriers and Strategies

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Abstract. Barriers to the successful implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) education and outreach initiatives are being documented across higher education institutions as DEI policies and protocols are gaining attention. Despite growing attention to promote DEI in higher education institutions, there remains a need to examine barriers preventing DEI efforts in a systematic way, particularly in Extension education contexts to formulate strategies to promote DEI. We present an expert, consensus-based framework to identify the most salient barriers to successful DEI implementation in Extension. We also discuss opportunities for Extension practitioners to overcome salient barriers with tailored mitigation strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across Extension and Land-Grant University institutions is an evolving institutional response to a tumultuous history of discriminatory policies and practices. Historically, Extension policies have led to issues concerning inequitable outreach. These issues include chronic under-engagement with—and service to—marginalized and underserved communities, disproportionately low representation of educators of color in professional positions, and a lack of targeted and inclusive outreach towards individuals with disabilities and individuals with non-conforming gender or sexual identities (Elliot-Engel et al., 2021; Harris, 2008; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Ostrom, 2020; Whitehall et al., 2021).

The implementation of DEI initiatives is increasingly critical as the US population continues to diversify. Some notable initiatives already adopted by Extension include intercultural competence (ICC) trainings for Extension educators and outreach professionals, diversity hiring committees, the development of culturally responsive teaching curricula, and the incorporation of DEI metrics in program evaluation (Iverson, 2008; LaVergne, 2015; Radford & Noe-Bustamante, 2019). Despite the increased adoption of DEI-oriented engagement strategies, there is still a need to better understand the barriers that impede

successful DEI implementation and impact within Extension (LaVerge, 2013; Muñoz et al., 2017; Peterson et al., 2012). With this in mind, our study sought to leverage the expertise of DEI experts in Extension in order to identify key barriers to DEI advancement and strategies for mitigating these barriers, including a single-strategy approach that has the potential to make the most significant positive impact on DEI engagement. Our findings provide recommendations to inform Extension's current DEI policies and practices and to guide future research on this topic.

DEI CHANGES IN EXTENSION: GRADUAL IMPROVEMENTS AND PREVAILING GAPS

Notwithstanding the persistence of diverse and inclusive engagement gaps, awareness of the importance of DEI in today's Extension work has increased to an unprecedented level (Bain et al., 2021; Deen et al., 2014; Janeiro et al., 2016; Moncloa et al., 2019). Several emergent policies and initiatives operationalize this increased awareness: though responses vary across states and institutions, Extension administrators have seen an increase in DEI implementation strategies such as the development and promotion of diversity action plans, diversity hiring committees, culturally responsive teaching curricula, strategic working groups and diverse outreach coalitions, DEI metrics used in program evaluation, and professional development trainings to improve the ICC of

Extension educators and outreach professionals (Diaz et al., 2021; Iverson, 2008; Moncloa et al., 2019).

Diversity action plans constitute one of the longest-standing efforts to elevate diversity as an educational and institutional priority across Extension, with earliest implementation dating back to the late 1980s (Iverson, 2008). Early strategic diversity planning initiatives were the result of 1990s commissions and committees created to build Extension's capacity to function more inclusively in an increasingly diverse world (Ingram, 2005; Iverson, 2008). Commissions during this period were integral in the development and publication of critical reports that evaluated Extension's engagement with multicultural faculty, staff, and clientele, as well as policy recommendations for administrators to improve outreach services for these under-represented and under-served audiences (Iverson, 2008). Critiques and associated recommendations have frequently revolved around the representation of people of color in key positions, the accessibility of technical support and resources for educators interested in practicing inclusivity, and the codification of protocols to process and address employee grievances (Iverson, 2008).

Despite the many beneficial outcomes from these initiatives over the years, analyses of the aggregated impacts of implemented diversity action plans have found persistent shortcomings (Ingram, 2005; Iverson, 2008). Diversity action plans and policies have historically been shaped by the dominant discourses and narratives reflecting both the constituent members of the strategic committees that produced them and the era in which they were produced (Ingram, 2005; Iverson, 2008). As such, past assumptions and biases on what constitutes diversity, equity, inclusivity, privilege, or power may have created major incongruencies between stated problems (e.g., racism) and proposed solutions (e.g., workplace sensitivity trainings), which may have inhibited Extension's ability to address the root cause of these problems (Cano & Ludwig, 1995; Iverson, 2008).

The adoption of ICC trainings into standard professional development programs has become another rapidly-growing strategy to promote DEI across Extension (Deen et al., 2014; Nieto & Bode, 2020). ICC comprises a set of skills to facilitate effective communication across cultures and is defined as "the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world," (Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009, p. 7). Originally conceptualized within higher education institutions, ICC frameworks have been increasingly adopted within corporate, public, and non-profit sectors, as well as in Extension's non-formal education context (Atiles, 2019; Deardorff, 2006; Deen et al., 2014; Diaz et al., 2021).

Existing standardized instruments guide Extension's incorporation of ICC into professional development curricula

and program evaluation criteria. For example, Extension makes use of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a widely-used commercial instrument designed to assess respondents' "orientation towards cultural differences and their readiness for intercultural training" (Atiles, 2019; Deen et al., 2014; Fantini, 2009, p. 471). The IDI is a central element of two prominent ICC frameworks developed for Extension's unique informal style of education: *Coming Together for Racial Understanding*—developed by the Cooperative Extension Service Rapid Response Team—and *Navigating Difference*—developed by Washington State University (ECOP Rapid Response Team, 2017; Deen et al., 2014). These training regimens aim to ensure that Extension professionals can confidently and effectively communicate in culturally diverse settings and assimilate intercultural competencies into their program planning, program implementation, and program evaluation (Deen et al., 2014; Moncloa et al., 2019). Evidence suggests that the incorporation of these ICC-oriented training frameworks has been successful in improving the ICC of Extension educators, staff, and other personnel. However, there is a growing need to develop more contextually-grounded ICC frameworks tailored to the unique needs of Extension professionals, such as those that promote the development of the competencies most relevant to Extension professionals over time (Deen et al., 2014; Diaz et al., 2021).

DEI initiatives are becoming more prominent and widespread, but the literature demonstrates that there are still barriers to fully implementing DEI in a way that maximizes impact on a local, state, and national scale (Logan, 2021; Collins & Mueller, 2016). Notwithstanding researchers' previous attempts to identify these barriers, researchers have not made an effort—before the present study—to leverage practitioner expertise to systematically identify barriers and strategies that are relevant across various local Extension and outreach contexts. With this study, we aimed to prioritize common barriers for improved DEI policy and programmatic foci and lay a foundation for collaborative opportunities to advance DEI promotion and implementation strategies that are effective and directly transferable across Extension contexts.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to determine the most pervasive barriers and the most effective strategies to achieving DEI in Extension. Objectives were to determine:

1. Barriers to DEI in Extension,
2. Strategies for overcoming these barriers, and
3. Single-strategy approaches with the potential to "move the needle" on DEI in Extension.

METHODS

We utilized a three-round Delphi approach in this study. Commonly employed in the social sciences, a Delphi approach typically emphasizes “...structured anonymous communication between individuals who hold expertise on a certain topic with a goal of arriving at a consensus in the areas of policy, practice, or organizational decision making” (Birdsall, 2004; Brady, 2015, p. 1). In Extension contexts, researchers have used the technique to achieve a range of objectives, including developing a standardizable state-wide curriculum for a Master Gardener program, determining the suite of competencies required for entry-level Extension professionals to perform effectively, and identifying salient workplace issues that could hinder the acquisition and retention of talented Extension educators (Callahan et al., 2011; Harder et al., 2010; Kroth & Peutz, 2011). The Delphi approach is also applicable within Extension to set programmatic priorities, determine program strengths and weaknesses, or plan and prepare for budgetary modifications (Warner, 2021). To achieve the objectives outlined in this study, we determined that the utilization of a research-based group consensus technique was most appropriate to identify and prioritize the most salient barriers and mitigation strategies associated with achieving DEI in Extension. Given the complexity and uniqueness of Extension situations and settings in the United States, we concluded that the structure of the Delphi approach—which facilitates equal, anonymous input from a diverse group of experts like the DEI experts in Extension—was best suited to generate the quality and scope of findings presented.

DELPHI PANEL

The panel assembled for this study included a purposive sample of 11 experts across the United States who we solicited for engagement based on their expertise and contributions to DEI in the Extension education context. The panel included experts who contributed to the establishment and delivery of ICC curricula such as Navigating Differences, Coming Together for Racial Understanding, and the IDI. We selected the panelists from an existing national panel established in 2020 to reach a consensus on essential intercultural competencies most appropriate for Extension educators. A multi-phase process coupling secondary research with recommendations from relevant national and international associations—i.e., Association of International Agricultural and Extension Educators, Joint Council of Extension Professionals, National Association of Extension Program and Staff Development Professionals, and the American Evaluation Association—informed the creation of the original ICC panel. This process led to a total of 35 expert panelists in converging areas of Extension education and DEI. Once the original panelists completed their initial ICC

work from 2020, they came together to discuss next steps. Through that discussion, the experts recommended that an additional Delphi study be conducted to explore the barriers to DEI in Extension. Through these discussions, the national panel selected a subgroup of 11 panelists to participate in this Delphi study based on their expertise in ICC, DEI, and Extension education. The panel included educators and administrators with significant cumulative experience in addressing issues at the nexus of DEI and Extension education.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

While there are several variations of Delphi studies, most follow three structured rounds: they begin with open-ended or semi-open-ended questions that become increasingly more structured in subsequent iterations “...in order to verify previous consensus, test propositions, and finalize decision-making models” (Birdsall, 2004; Brady, 2015, p. 3). Our study adhered to this standard format. In the first round, we provided three prompts to the panelists and asked them to identify (a) the barriers they perceived to be most salient and pervasive to achieving DEI in Extension, (b) the most effective strategies to overcoming barriers to DEI, and (c) a single strategy that has the most potential, by itself, to move the needle forward for DEI in Extension. In the first round, we achieved a 100% response rate ($n = 11$). The responses from the first round resulted in the identification of 26 barriers, 25 strategies to overcome barriers, and 11 single-strategy approaches.

We utilized the second round to refine the list based on the panel’s level of agreement (i.e., consensus) on the extent of the barrier and the effectiveness of each identified strategy. For barriers, we asked participants to rate the extent of the barrier using a 4-point Likert scale where 1 = *Not a barrier*, 2 = *Somewhat a barrier*, 3 = *Moderate barrier*, and 4 = *Major barrier*. We utilized the *a priori* definition of consensus, where major barriers were identified as those for which 2/3 of the panel selected “Major barrier.” For the strategies, we asked participants to rate the effectiveness of each strategy using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = *Not effective at all*, 2 = *Somewhat effective*, 3 = *Effective*, 4 = *Very effective*, and 5 = *Extremely effective*. For this scale, we utilized the *a priori* definition of consensus when 2/3 of the panel selected “Very effective” or “Extremely effective.” There was also an open-ended question at the end of each list that asked panelists to input additional barriers or strategies for consideration. We achieved a response rate of 100% for this second round ($n = 11$). In this round, we removed 16 barriers, six strategies for barriers, and one single-strategy approach because they did not adhere to the definition of consensus specified above. Additionally, two items were added to the lists based on the open-ended prompts for strategies, including: (a) develop hiring committees with individuals that understand and

prioritize organizational diversity, and (b) DEI units situated and structured within Extension work.

For the third and final round, we asked panelists to repeat the exercise in round two. This gave them the opportunity to reconsider their responses based on the new, synthesized list. The scales and definitions of consensus remained the same as round two. We achieved a response rate of 100% for the final round ($n = 11$). Respondents agreed upon a final list of two barriers, 18 strategies for barriers, and nine single-strategy approaches.

FINDINGS

OBJECTIVE 1: DETERMINE THE AGREED-UPON BARRIERS TO DEI IN EXTENSION

Table 1 shows the percentage of panelists who identified each barrier as a *major barrier* to DEI in Extension. Only two barriers achieved the study's definition of consensus, with an additional five barriers falling just under the *a priori* threshold. While we recommend attention be paid to the two items that achieved consensus to better understand the underlying issues impeding DEI in Extension, some may find the additional five barriers relevant to discussion regarding DEI in their respective contexts.

OBJECTIVE 2: DETERMINE THE AGREED-UPON STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO DEI IN EXTENSION

Table 2 shows the percentage of panelists who rated each strategy for overcoming the aforementioned barriers as *Very effective* or *Extremely effective*. Of the 19 strategies that made it to the final round of the study, all achieved the *a priori* definition of consensus. There was a strong level of agreement across most strategies, with four strategies achieving 100% agreement and 12 strategies achieving above 90% agreement.

OBJECTIVE 3: DETERMINE A LIST OF SINGLE-STRATEGY APPROACHES THAT HAS HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO "MOVE THE NEEDLE" ON DEI IN EXTENSION.

Finally, Table 3 indicates panelists' ratings for the effectiveness of items of a single-strategy approach for moving the needle forward in DEI within Extension. Only one item that was included in the last round of the study was eliminated for not meeting the *priori* consensus threshold. Of the nine single strategies that met the consensus threshold, there was strong agreement across seven items (>70%), and two items with 100% agreement: "Involvement and support of upper administration across the organization" and "Purposely hiring people with expertise to focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion and culturally relevant programming."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Results from the Delphi study show a consensus between panelists across all three areas of study: barriers, strategies, and essential single-strategy approaches to DEI. Only two of the nine barriers to DEI reached the final consensus threshold in the third round; these results suggest that panelists view these barriers as most critical to DEI engagement. Panelists' consensus that "all policies and procedures are designed to serve one traditional group of people" relates to Extension's tumultuous past engagement (or lack thereof) with different client segments and the inequitable development of the Land Grant University and Cooperative Extension systems (Harris, 2008; Ostrom, 2020; Whitehall et al., 2021). Likewise, consensus on "a lack of diversity among Extension professionals" reflects long-recognized issues with narrowly-focused hiring practices in Extension (Fox et al., 2017; Janiero et al., 2015). While these barriers may be known to educators interested in advancing DEI in Extension, we believe the strategies and single-strategy solutions identified through the study offer novel and tangible pathways for improving DEI engagement and implementation.

Our findings indicate there is a high level of agreement between experts on both strategies and single-strategy approaches to improving DEI implementation within Extension. The overarching theme of the strategies is the need to systematically institutionalize and integrate DEI into all components of Extension administration and practice. Panelists identified a pathway for change that requires administrative buy-in and support at all levels of the organization. An example of institutionalizing DEI in Extension can be found in colleges of agriculture and natural resources that have established offices for DEI. However, a limitation exists when Extension organizations depend on campus-wide equity or DEI offices. These campus-wide units, which often focus on faculty and students, may not understand the nuances and unique needs of Extension field professionals, stakeholders, and clientele. This reliance on non-Extension units can serve as a significant barrier to DEI and is important to consider when evaluating the results of this study.

Michigan State University (MSU) provides a model for other Extension organizations as it connects a campus DEI unit with Extension. The MSU College of Agriculture and Natural Resources created an Office of DEI that works closely with MSU Extension. While the office has administrators who can influence policy discussion across the college, they also employ an Extension state specialist who is focused solely on the needs of the state's Extension professionals. The office collaborated with administration on efforts to integrate DEI into all components of the organizational strategic plan and outlined action items that extend across all mission areas of the university (MSU, n.d.). This approach primarily models

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Table 1. Barriers to DEI in Extension and Associated Round 3 Ratings from Delphi Panelists

Barrier	% of panelists who identified it as a major barrier
All policies and procedures are designed to serve one traditional group of people	72.73*
Lack of diversity among Extension professionals	72.73*
Extension workers are not evaluated on DEI work	63.64
Lack of accountability to address diversity, equity, and inclusion aggressions.	63.64
Lack of sustained funding to support diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives	63.64
Limited knowledge of the needs of diverse populations	63.64
Unrealistic expectations placed on diversity officer roles to address diversity, equity, and inclusion.	63.64

* denotes consensus achieved among panelists.

Table 2. Strategies to Address Barriers to DEI in Extension with Associated Delphi Panelists' Ratings from Round 3

Strategy for barriers	% of panelists who identified it as an extremely or very effective strategy
Establish clear expectations with professional development opportunities, hiring procedures, programs, and reporting systems.	100
Ongoing, and systematic DEI professional development that begins with onboarding	100
Provide budget allocations to facilitate DEI initiatives	100
Regular engagement among Extension administration/leadership in DEI and Social Justice professional development	100
Clear standards to apply to thoughts and behavior that will create equitable and inclusive action	90.91
Develop hiring committees with individuals that understand and prioritize organizational diversity	90.91
Hire DEI-focused leaders in Extension administration	90.91
Incorporate DEI in Extension strategic plans	90.91
Incorporate DEI in the Extension program planning process	90.91
Revise existing policies to facilitate DEI in Extension	90.91
Hire staff who have responsibilities across the organization for development and implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and their sustainability	90.91
Understanding of current barriers toward implementing and sustaining diversity, equity, and inclusion work	90.91
Including diversity, equity, and inclusion in promotion evaluations	81.82
Revise the hiring process to attract diverse candidates in Extension	81.82
Visible support and prioritization of DEI from Extension leadership	81.82
Address the historical and systematic issues around DEI in Land Grant Universities	72.73
DEI units are developed and structured within Extension work	72.73
Include diversity, equity, and inclusion training as a mandatory part of Extension professional development	72.72

Table 3. Single-Strategy Approaches to Advance DEI in Extension with Associated Delphi Panelists' Ratings from Round 3

Single-Strategy Approach	% of panelists who identified it as an extremely or very effective single strategy
Involvement and support of upper administration across the organization	100
Purposely hiring people with expertise to focus on DEI and culturally relevant programming	100
Develop and/or adapt programs that include and facilitate DEI practices	90.9
Integrate DEI into plans of work, reports of accomplishments and performance reviews.	90.9
Creating a full-time position that is part of the organization's Leadership team to focus on and provide input/insight on DEI in efforts and initiatives	81.82
Develop a cohort of trained staff and faculty to provide peer support to others for DEI	81.82
Revise Extension strategic plans such that DEI becomes the lens for assessing the effectiveness of the Extension system	81.81
Administration directs resources to DEI Professional Development trainings	72.72
Engaging a DEI task force to develop and implement policies and procedures to move Extension forward in becoming more equitable and diverse.	72.72
Assigning DEI coaches/mentors to Extension professionals to assist with application of knowledge	63.63

an identified single-strategy consensus result from our study: involvement and support of upper administration across the organization.

The strategies agreed upon by our panelists demonstrate a need to enhance ICC across Extension through professional development trainings. These trainings should begin when new employees are onboarded but continue throughout an employee's career. Focusing on DEI in the hiring stage can attract diverse candidates, as the method considers ICC in hiring decisions. Such a strategy can be adopted across Extension, as it aligns with research that recommends the consideration and evaluation of ICC in the hiring stage to recruit and retain professionals who are capable of serving all audiences (Diaz et al., 2021). The major implication of this study is that we provide a list of barriers, strategies, and single-strategy approaches that Extension administrators and professionals can use to develop and implement a responsive, tailored, and effective DEI policy plan to facilitate and strengthen DEI in Extension.

Finally, while the findings of this study provide an entry point into the development and implementation of new and expanding DEI efforts, we recommend a continued emphasis on identifying and reaching consensus on additional constraints and possible solutions to successful DEI implementation across Extension contexts. Given the high degree of fluidity and variation in Extension systems and professional roles, an ongoing emphasis is key to staying on top of things and anticipating future obstacles. While we believe our findings provide a credible snapshot of DEI in Extension, future research may consider the application of

context-specific conceptual frameworks to provide a further nuanced assessment of DEI strategies for Extension. For example, Organizational Readiness for Change (ORC) is a framework used to assess whether an organization's members (and, by proxy, the organization itself) are adequately prepared to adapt to internal and external changes. This framework may be appropriate for future research on DEI in Extension (Lehman et al., 2002; Weiner, 2009). Although different groups operationalize ORC in distinct ways across different contexts, there are certain core ORC components—including *change commitment* (i.e., members' joint resolve to implement a change) and *change efficacy* (i.e., shared belief in members' collective capability to implement said change)—that are consistent (Weiner, 2009). In the context of this study, ORC—or some comparable theoretical paradigm—may offer a useful conceptual frame to assess Extension stakeholders' commitment to and capacity for change by identifying the factors (e.g., structural barriers) most likely to influence change readiness with respect to advancing DEI in Extension.

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