Evaluating the Organizational Advancement of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Extension Education

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Abstract

In response to global trends and calls for greater inclusivity, the field of extension education has made significant strides towards embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles. This study explores the progress of DEI initiatives in the Cooperative Extension System (CES), which has aligned with industry groups, non-profit organizations, academia, and scientific societies worldwide. Through a multifaceted approach, CES has pursued strategies such as intercultural competence (ICC) training for professionals, diversity action plans, and culturally responsive teaching techniques. This study assessed the advancement of DEI in extension education using a survey of DEI specialists across extension organizations in the U.S. Two assessment frameworks guided the study: the Diversity and Inclusion Self-Assessment and the Meyer's DEI Spectrum tool. The results revealed significant variation in the implementation of specific DEI progress indicators, highlighting areas of advancement and opportunities for improvement. Notably, extension organizations demonstrated strong progress in the dimensions of "Data" and "Infrastructure," indicating a commitment to collecting comprehensive demographic data and establishing supportive structures. However, challenges persist, including insufficient administrative support and incomplete organizational commitment. While many organizations have launched initial DEI efforts, sustained progress is essential to ensure the authenticity and effectiveness of these initiatives. The study underscores the importance of continuous assessment and accountability to drive meaningful DEI change within extension organizations. By addressing challenges and building on successes, extension organizations can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape that mirrors global aspirations for social justice and diversity.

Keywords

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Abstract

In response to global trends and calls for greater inclusivity, the field of extension education has made significant strides towards embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles. This study explores the progress of DEI initiatives in the Cooperative Extension System (CES), which has aligned with industry groups, non-profit organizations, academia, and scientific societies worldwide. Through a multifaceted approach, CES has pursued strategies such as intercultural competence (ICC) training for professionals, diversity action plans, and culturally responsive teaching techniques. This study assessed the advancement of DEI in extension education using a survey of DEI specialists across extension organizations in the U.S. Two assessment frameworks guided the study: the Diversity and Inclusion Self- Assessment and the Meyer's DEI Spectrum tool. The results revealed significant variation in the implementation of specific DEI progress indicators, highlighting areas of advancement and opportunities for improvement. Notably, extension organizations demonstrated strong progress in the dimensions of "Data" and "Infrastructure," indicating a commitment to collecting comprehensive demographic data and establishing supportive structures. However, challenges persist, including insufficient administrative support and incomplete organizational commitment. While many organizations have launched initial DEI efforts, sustained progress is essential to ensure the authenticity and effectiveness of these initiatives. The study underscores the importance of continuous assessment and accountability to drive meaningful DEI change within extension organizations. By addressing challenges and building on successes, extension organizations can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape that mirrors global aspirations for social justice and diversity.

Keywords: Organizational assessment, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Evaluation

Introduction

In alignment with the prevailing sentiments of prominent industry groups, non-profit entities, esteemed academic institutions, and respected scientific societies worldwide, the realm of extension education has taken significant strides in recent years toward championing the cause of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI; Deen et al., 2014; Diaz et al., 2023; Moncloa et al., 2019). This collective shift in focus underscores the increasing recognition of DEI's critical role in shaping the landscape of education and professional practice. Indeed, the landscape of extension education has seen a proliferation of DEI initiatives that mirror the broader global movement toward social justice and equal opportunity (Diaz et al, 2023a; Diaz et al, 2023b). With a notable emphasis on intercultural competence (ICC) training for extension professionals, these initiatives have sought to foster a more inclusive and equitable environment within Extension institutions (Diaz et al., 2023a). Simultaneously, the propagation of diversity action plans and the embrace of culturally responsive teaching strategies have become hallmarks of Extension's commitment to DEI. This reflects a conscious endeavor to bridge existing gaps in the pursuit of fairness and inclusiveness, both internally and in its vital role as a conduit for educational outreach and service to diverse clientele (LaVergne, 2015; Moncloa, 2019). Each of these strategies has been advanced to address a perceived gap or limitation in extension education efforts to achieve a satisfactory degree of equity and inclusivity both internally and externally (i.e., via educational outreach and service to clientele).

Internally, the extension organizations have long been aware of critiques regarding the composition of their workforce, and, since the late 1980s, have attempted to increase the diversity of personnel through targeted recommendations generated by multicultural hiring committees and strategic diversity planning commissions (Diaz et al., 2023a; Iverson, 2008). Gaps in engagement with traditionally under-served clientele, including historically marginalized communities of color and people (particularly youth) with disabilities or non-conforming gender and/or sexual identities, while persistent, have similarly been the subject of increased attention from extension professionals (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Janeiro et al., 2015; Mouton & Bruce, 2013; Peterson et al., 2012). Amongst a suite of DEI-informed strategies to provide more equitable and inclusive outreach and service to culturally diverse audiences, ICC-driven training frameworks have been advanced to enable improved communication with culturally diverse audiences, generate more culturally responsive educational materials for these audiences, and to facilitate the achievement of DEI goals across Extension broadly (Deen et al., 2014; ECOP Rapid Response Team, 2017; Kraus et al., 2022; Moncloa et al., 2019).

Despite the promotion of these and related initiatives, as well as the proliferation of DEI-focused discourse (in the form of internal reports, institutionally sponsored webinars, commentary articles, and published studies exploring organizational implementation barriers and capacity-building needs), there is currently little data on tangible progress towards recently promoted DEI goals across extension organizations (Chazdon et al., 2020; Moncloa et al., 2019; Walcott et al., 2020). Beyond the necessity of documenting progress towards sponsored DEI initiatives to evaluate the fidelity and impact of extension education efforts, there may be added urgency to evaluate and communicate DEI progress as a means to navigate and potentially mitigate documented increases of frustration, pushback, and even hostility towards DEI concepts among extension professionals and the general public (Elliott-Engel et al., 2021; Estepp et al., 2021; Iyer, 2022; Walcott et al., 2020). Mirroring trends across other institutional settings, the expanded global attention on DEI initiatives specifically – as well as related concepts addressing structural racism, cultural representation, and social justice generally – has engendered a degree of resistance to DEI

promotion that may be counteracted by improved transparency about progress made and what implications advancements towards key DEI progress indicators may have for improving all facets of extension education (Iyer, 2022). In this study, we leveraged feedback from a sample of DEI specialists employed at extension institutions across the United States (U.S.) to evaluate advancement towards key DEI benchmarks, progress indicators, and outcomes.

Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the advancement of DEI work in extension education by leveraging feedback of DEI professional employees at extension organizations across the U.S. Five objectives guided our approach in this study:

1. Identify and evaluate relevant key DEI progress indicators related to policy and employment procedure(s).
2. Identify and evaluate relevant key DEI progress indicators related to strategic planning and accountability protocols.
3. Identify and evaluate relevant key DEI progress indicators related to DEI committee development and general DEI support.
4. Identify and evaluate relevant key DEI progress indicators related to outreach programming.
5. Determine the degree of progress attained toward each of the 12 DEI Spectrum dimensions.
6.

Methods

Our study followed a correlational design, and survey data were gathered from a population of extension professionals who identified as DEI contacts at their respective institutions. A sampling frame was developed by the U.S. Extension Council on Organization and Policy DEI Program Action Team that included a list of 70 extension education contacts matching the population ($N = 70$). We distributed the Qualtrics survey to all individuals in the sampling frame, and with a 53% response rate, the final sample consisted of 37 respondents ($n = 37$). All individuals in the sample identified as the DEI contact for their extension organization before completing the survey. Data were gathered in January and February of 2023.

Instrumentation

Two frameworks guided the design and execution of this study. The first - the Diversity and Inclusion Self-Assessment, was initially created by the National Alliance of Mental Health (NAMI), and later modified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE; NACE, 2022). The tool is primarily designed to gauge the status of, and progress toward, three areas: (a) commitment to diversity and inclusion, (b) institutional practices for hiring and commitment, and (c) staff structure and outcomes (NACE, 2022). Assessment users are encouraged to indicate progress within each category via example progress benchmarks/milestones.

The Meyer's DEI Spectrum tool also informed this study's objectives and data collection protocols (Meyer Memorial Trust, 2018). The tool provides a systematic approach to evaluating an institution's DEI progress across 12 unique dimensions: (1) DEI Vision, (2) Commitment, (3) Leadership, (4) Policies, (5) Infrastructure, (6) Training, (7) Diversity, (8) Data, (9) Community, (10) Decisions, (11) Accountability, and (12) Inclusion. Each dimension addresses an element of organizational practice that contributes to the full integration and operationalization of DEI. Organizational leadership is encouraged to appraise each of the 12 dimensions in relation to

where they believe their organization is in their journey towards achieving success toward that component (Meyer Memorial Trust, 2018).

Although the Meyer's DEI Spectrum tool's metrics range from "not yet started" to "exemplary/ leading" for each dimension, the highest level of progress may not be completely attainable for certain dimensions within short, intermediate, or long-term periods of time (Arif et al., 2023; Meyer Memorial Trust, 2018). This recognition acknowledges the unique culture, setting, and operational constraints of a given organization or institutional network (Arif et al., 2023). Notwithstanding the achievement of "exemplary" progress, it is critical for institutions to understand where they currently stand with their DEI advancement efforts. As such, institutions can utilize this tool to develop targeted priorities, objectives, and strategies to monitor progress towards the achievement of overarching DEI goals.

For the first section of the questionnaire, we adapted the aforementioned NACE assessment tool to be better tailored to the extension education context. Specifically, several items were reworded for clarity and applicability, while other items were omitted during the validation process. In addition, we altered the instructions, response format, and anchors to improve face validity. Despite these modifications, the NACE tool's suite of metric items related to commitment to DEI, institutional practices for hiring, and the structure and impact of assembled DEI committees provided valuable framing guidance for this study.

For the second section of the questionnaire, we adapted Meyer's DEI Spectrum tool (Meyer Memorial Trust, 2018). The tool measures an institution's progress towards 12 dimensions of DEI along a five-point continuum. Meyer's DEI Spectrum tool underscores the complexity of DEI and avoids any absolute dichotomy between the absence and presence of certain policies. This feature is attuned to the nuanced nature of DEI work, emphasizing these efforts as part of a fluid journey rather than a series of static, linear benchmarks (Arif et al., 2023). The tool also provides succinct characterizations of each progress stage across each of the 12 DEI dimensions, allowing users the opportunity to better situate their organization's progress along the spectrum (Meyer Memorial Trust, 2018). With minor modifications to the spectrum scale point anchors to improve applicability to the extension education context (see the Methods section below for more detail), Meyer's DEI Spectrum tool (see Appendix) became a useful device for eliciting and framing feedback concerning DEI progress in extension.

A panel of experts from the ECOP DEI Program Action Team reviewed the questionnaire for content validity and face validity. The panel reviewed each item for its appropriateness to the Extension organizational context, examined question format and response options to improve survey flow, and assessed the instructions and questions for face validity. Between October to December 2022, the panel reviewed the questionnaire in multiple rounds, which resulted in continuous incremental updates and improvements. One major recommendation from the panel was to communicate to respondents that results would not be analyzed by *[State]* to avoid any form of attribution based on one's institution progress along the spectrum or status on each indicator.

In Section 1, respondents were presented with a series of 5-point Likert-type items. They were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on their organization's status of 18 DEI metrics adapted from the NACE instrument. For example, respondents were presented with the following item: *Our Extension organization has the full support of all employees on DEI policies and procedures*. Another item was, *Our Extension organization has an official definition and shared understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion*. In future studies, we encourage researchers to adapt the questions; all items are shown in the results section and can

be used by others to develop benchmarks in their DEI assessments. While Section 1 overlaps with Section 2 in some cases, we sought to understand specific indicators of DEI progress before moving to broader organizational status on the spectrum.

For Section 2, we measured all 12 dimensions of Meyer's DEI Spectrum tool but made minor adjustments to the response anchors for improved face validity. For each dimension, respondents were asked to select one of five options (based on the continuum) that best reflects the position of their Extension organization on DEI. For example, respondents were asked to select one of the following options for *DEI vision*: My extension organization...(a) Does not see DEI as relevant to its work, (b) Recognizes the importance of DEI to its work and is contemplating next steps, (c) Recognizes the importance of DEI to its work and is in the process of developing a shared DEI vision, (d) Has developed a shared DEI vision and is working to align the organization's programs and operations with this vision, and (e) Has integrated DEI in organizational and vision statements which are actively being used to guide the organization's programs and operations. Note, respondents were not shown the continuum labels (e.g., Not yet started) and were only asked to select one descriptive option that aligns with their organizational position. Response anchors were aligned to the continuum post-data collection and can be found on the Meyer's Memorial Trust website (Meyer's Memorial Trust, n.d.).

Data Analysis

We used descriptive frequencies and non-parametric statistics to analyze the data. We present the frequency distribution for all items. Then we used the *Mean Rank* (MR) from the Friedman test to rank each item from most to least agreement (i.e., implementation) across all institutions represented in the sample. The Friedman test is a non-parametric alternative to the repeated measures ANOVA. It is used to determine statistically significant within-subject effects for ordinal variables based on within-subject ranks. These ranks are derived from the average ordering across all items instead of the mean score for each item (see Pereira et al., 2015). Hence, we only used the Mean Ranks (MR) without the Chi-Square test statistic as a distribution-free approach to order items from lowest to highest. This procedure was also used to rank the 12 components on the DEI Spectrum tool from Exemplary/Leading to Not yet started on the continuum.

Results

DEI progress indicators were ranked from highest to lowest agreement (or most to least implemented) in extension education using the Mean Ranks (MR) from the Friedman's test. For the five items with the highest MR, most respondents *agreed* and/or *strongly agreed* that their organization included DEI goals in their strategic plan (MR = 12.38), implemented specific outreach programs to diverse clientele groups (MR = 12.04), had an official definition and shared understanding of DEI (MR = 11.81), conducted at least one DEI training annually for all employees (MR = 11.38), and had a DEI committee responsible for ensuring service to diverse communities (MR = 11.09). For the items least implemented, most extension organizations *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that they used metrics related to DEI in their annual evaluation of staff (MR = 6.61), had the full support of all employees on DEI policies and procedures (MR = 5.77), and had a diverse workforce that reflects the demographics of their state (MR = 4.01). Table 1 shows the list of 18 specific DEI progress indicators.

Table 1

DEI Progress Indicators Ranked from Most to Least Implemented in Extension ($n = 37$).

*R	MR	Our Extension organization...	Frequency (%)				
			SD	*D*	*N*	*A*	*SA*
1	12.38	...included DEI goals in our strategic plan	3	8	8	41	41
2	12.04	...implemented specific outreach programs to diverse clientele groups	3	14	8	35	41
3	11.81	...have an official definition and shared understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)	3	11	5	51	30
4	11.38	...conduct at least one DEI training annually for all employees	11	22	3	11	54
5	11.09	...have a DEI committee responsible for ensuring we are reaching out to diverse communities	11	14	11	30	35
6	10.96	...makes DEI a core value that is tied to our strategic vision	5	8	14	46	27
7	10.84	...adapted or created Extension programs to serve diverse audiences	3	16	11	46	24
8	10.51	...spent time and resources to learn about underserved communities in our state	5	14	16	41	24
9	10.15	...have an official DEI policy	8	24	3	35	30
10	9.77	...established DEI policies that outlines the expected behavior of all employees	11	16	11	32	30
11	9.46	...created a DEI committee that reports directly to the highest level of leadership in our LGU	16	16	8	32	27
12	9.09	...recruited individuals from diverse backgrounds whose knowledge and values promote DEI in Extension	5	27	11	41	16
13	8.85	...funded programs to promote DEI across all Extension units or departments	5	32	14	27	22
14	8.77	...have procedures in place for recruiting more diverse staff	11	24	5	38	22
15	7.5	...have created a DEI plan with clear goals and benchmarks	11	24	14	41	11
16	6.61	...use metrics related to DEI in annual evaluation of staff	30	27	3	22	19
17	5.77	...have the full support of all employees on DEI policies and procedures	19	32	16	30	3
18	4.01	...have a diverse workforce that reflects the demographics of our state	32	41	11	16	0

Note. SD = *Strongly Disagree*; D = *Disagree*; N = *Neither agree nor disagree*; A = *Agree*; SA = *Strongly Agree*. *R = Items ranked based on the Mean Ranks (MR) of Friedman's test.

For the Meyer's DEI spectrum, results indicate extension organizations have made the most progress on "Data" (MR = 9.40) and "Infrastructure" (MR = 8.25) with the majority of responses aligning to "Well on the way" on the continuum. Following the continuum aligned to response anchors, results indicate most organizations "Collects and disaggregates comprehensive demographic data in its programmatic and operational work but may not know what to do with

the information" [Data], and "Has internal committees, affinity groups or other formal structures focused on integrating DEI issues into the organization's work" [Infrastructure]. While ranked lower due to the frequency of responses in "Not yet started" and "Ready to start," many organizations also were categorized as "Well on the way" for "Policies" (MR = 6.47) and "Decisions" (MR = 5.83). In contrast, many organizations were positioned in the "Launched" category of the continuum for Training (MR = 6.64), Inclusion (MR = 6.54), Community (MR = 6.51), Commitment (MR = 6.36), Leadership (MR = 5.64), Vision (MR = 5.63), Diversity (MR = 5.50), and Accountability (MR = 5.22). Overall, results show many extension organizations have launched their DEI efforts. Table 2 shows the dimensions of Meyer's DEI spectrum ranked by its position on the continuum using the MR.

Table 2

Dimensions of Meyer's DEI Spectrum Ranked by Progress on the Continuum (n = 37).

R	MR	Dimension	Frequency (%)				
			N	R	L	W	E
1	**9.40**	**Data**: "The organization routinely collects and analyzes disaggregated data for all programmatic and operational work and uses the information in planning and decision-making."	0	0	35	41	24
2	**8.25**	**Infrastructure**: "The organization has committed resources and structures (e.g., an equity committee) to support the DEI transformation."	0	8	32	54	5
3	**6.64**	**Training**: "An organization fosters ongoing DEI learning and growth for its staff, management and board."	0	11	62	19	8
4	**6.54**	**Inclusion**: "The organization values and reflects the voice, contributions and interests of its diverse staff and constituencies and has created systems, policies and practices to maintain this organizational culture."	3	16	41	41	0
5	**6.51**	**Community**: "Mutually beneficial, accountable and equitable partnerships exist with diverse organizations and leaders from communities experiencing disparities."	5	16	38	35	5
6	**6.47**	**Policies**: "The organization has DEI policies and an organizational plan with clear goals, objectives and indicators of progress and success."	14	14	24	41	8
7	**6.36**	**Commitment**: "An organization has institutionalized its commitment to DEI."	5	14	41	41	0
8	**5.83**	**Decisions**: "An organization's decisions are systematically guided by equity considerations."	11	16	35	38	0
9	**5.64**	**Leadership**: "Organizational leaders recognize the importance of DEI and prioritize, resource and lead the effort."	0	24	54	19	3
10	**5.63**	**Vision**: "The organization can envision a DEI future and uses this vision to guide its DEI work."	5	30	35	19	11

11	**5.50**	**Diversity**: "The organization has policies and strategies for strengthening and maintaining diversity; staff and board are representative of the community they serve; effective retention strategies are implemented."	8	22	35	35	0
12	**5.22**	**Accountability**: "An organization has developed mechanisms to create and maintain accountability to its constituents."	8	33	36	17	6

Note. N = *Not yet started*; R = *Ready to start*; L = *Launched*; W = *Well on the way*, E = *Exemplary/Leading*. See Meyer's Memorial Trust (n.d.) for a description of the response anchors.

Discussion

Our study sought to evaluate progress towards DEI across extension organizations. Findings demonstrate notable variation in progress towards identified DEI indicators, both within and between indicator categories, as well as a relatively clear indication of where extension organizations are currently situated with respect to the 12 Meyer's DEI Spectrum tool dimensions. Table 1's results indicate a high degree of agreement that the most implemented actions across extension organizations were:

- the inclusion of DEI goals in strategic planning,
- the implementation of specific outreach programs to diverse clientele groups,
- having a shared definition and understanding of DEI,
- conducting an annual DEI training for all employees,
- establishing a DEI committee to ensure service to a diverse clientele, and
- making DEI a core value that is tied to a strategic vision.

Interestingly, four of those six progress indicators are categorized as "policy and employee procedure(s)," suggesting an institutional prioritization of actions that are achievable through the development, formalization, and communication of new DEI policies and protocols. This is intuitive, as creating and formalizing policy procedures, crafting official definitions for emergent terminology, and aligning new DEI goals with existing strategic planning priorities are foundational to the implementation of most any subsequent DEI actions.

Recent research also confirms the importance of policy and employee procedure among DEI specialists in Extension. In their assessment of DEI experts' perceptions of the most critical barriers to and strategies for successful DEI implementation in extension, Diaz et al. (2023) found that establishing "clear expectations with professional development opportunities, hiring procedures, programs, and reporting systems" (p. 6) was unanimously considered an extremely effective or very effective strategy to overcome recognized DEI implementation barriers. Additionally, Diaz et al. (2023) found approximately90% of DEI experts believed that developing "hiring committees with individuals [who] understand and prioritize organizational diversity (p. 6)" was also critical to mitigating barriers to establishing DEI initiatives. Walcott et al. (2020) further supported the notion that extension organizations often support the creation and formalization of new DEI policies and procedures, particularly as they relate to employment standards and professional development efforts, such as workplace training dedicated to addressing racism and racial inequities. In their survey of extension professionals representing educators and administrators, the authors found that respondents were generally dissatisfied,

however, only sporadically did administrative support extend beyond symbolic endorsements and declarations of intent (Walcott et al., 2020). This recognition of the need for greater support and engagement from administrators and colleagues alike mirrors another standout progress indicator finding from our survey: respondents broadly indicated the extension organization they represented did not have the "full support of all employees on DEI policies and procedures."

Table 2's results reveal extension organizational progress across various dimensions of Meyer's DEI Spectrum. Notably, extension organizations in the U.S. have shown the most progress in the "Data" and "Infrastructure" dimensions, with most respondents indicating they are "Well on the way" along each respective continuum. In the *Data* dimension, participants additionally reported actively collecting and analyzing comprehensive demographic data for their programmatic and operational work but also demonstrated they may not yet fully understand how to use this information effectively. While there may be constraints to the full operationalizability of current monitoring and data collection efforts, this finding may suggest these institutions are signaling a commitment to the type of continual, recurring monitoring efforts that may begin to distinguish impactful DEI work from DEI engagement that does not address the tenets of organizational DEI,(Kraus et al., 2022). In the *Infrastructure* dimension, where indicated progress was likewise very strong – the sample of represented extension organizations have broadly committed resources and established structures, such as equity committees, to support their DEI transformation efforts. Prior research on successful DEI implementation across institutional contexts (including Extension) has stressed how critically important DEI infrastructure elements such as diverse hiring or inclusive policy committees can be in shifting an engrained institutional culture (Diaz et al., 2023; Kraus et al., 2022).

While some dimensions received high ratings of progress, others, including *Diversity* and *Accountability*, were ranked lower due to a larger number of responses falling in the categories of *Not yet started* and/or *Ready to start*. However, even within these lower-rated dimensions, many respondents categorized their organization as being *Well on the way* to achieving the respective dimension targets. For example, in both the *Commitment* and *Decisions* dimensions - which are rated 7th and 8th respectively on the dimensions progress list - there were many *Well on the way* responses, indicating that extension organizations appear to be making significant strides toward institutionalizing their commitments and integrating equity considerations into their decision-making processes. The variability in indicated progress within and between dimensions reaffirms how fluid the process of authentic DEI attainment can be and may also reflect unique organizational conditions between Extension institutions, as institutions may have distinct capacities, resources, and priorities (Diaz et al., 2023).

Finally, many respondents positioned their organizations as being within the "Launched" category for dimensions like *Training, Inclusion, Community, Commitment, Leadership, Vision, Diversity*, and *Accountability*. This indicates that numerous extension organizations have demonstrated preliminary commitments to core tenants of DEI work. While promising, serious threats to quality DEI implementation are prevalent, not least of which is the possibility of internal resistance from those tasked with enacting and carrying out organizational policies (Iyer, 2022; Kraus et al., 2022). To ensure these *Launched* actions ultimately represent longstanding and authentic commitments to DEI advancement, rather than improper, incomplete, or easy-to-adopt quick-fix approaches, we encourage DEI specialists at extension organizations (and any associated practitioners) to integrate the regular use of assessment tools such as the NACE instrument or the Meyer's DEI Spectrum tool to continually monitor and hold accountable their DEI advancement efforts.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the multifaceted journey of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) within extension organizations, highlighting significant strides as well as areas requiring further attention and development. The insights derived from the NACE instrument benchmarks and Meyer's DEI Spectrum dimensions provide a nuanced understanding of the current state of DEI in these organizations. To continue the progression towards a more inclusive and equitable environment, several recommendations and implications for practice and future research are proposed.

In practice, extension organizations should focus on strengthening administrative support and engagement from all employees. The creation and formalization of DEI policies and protocols have been identified as foundational for successful DEI implementation. However, these policies must be not merely symbolic but are actively and consistently integrated into the daily operations and culture of the organization. Furthermore, extension organizations must address the identified gap in gaining the full support of all employees on DEI policies and procedures. This can be achieved through comprehensive training, open dialogues, and creating spaces where employees can express concerns and provide feedback on DEI initiatives.

Another key area of focus should be the strategic incorporation of DEI goals into the broader organizational strategy. This requires a commitment from leadership at all levels to prioritize DEI not only as a core value but as a critical component of the organization's mission and vision. Additionally, the findings suggest a need for ongoing efforts to understand and effectively utilize comprehensive demographic data collected in the DEI process. Organizations should strive to move beyond the collection of data to its meaningful application in decision-making and program development.

For future research, there is a need for more longitudinal studies to track the progress and impact of DEI initiatives over time. Such studies could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of different strategies and help in identifying best practices for DEI implementation in extension organizations. Moreover, research exploring the internal and external barriers to DEI, including resistance to DEI initiatives, would be beneficial. Understanding these barriers can inform the development of more targeted and effective strategies to overcome them.

In conclusion, while the journey toward a fully inclusive and equitable organization is ongoing, the findings from this study provide a roadmap for future efforts. By building upon the successes identified and addressing the challenges highlighted, extension organizations can play a pivotal role in fostering authentic DEI change, both within their organizations and in the communities they serve. As this field continues to evolve, it is imperative that extension organizations remain adaptive, responsive, and committed to the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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