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## Reframing the Conversation on Diversity

Alejandra Gudiño MS, MBA, Donna Mehrle MS, RD and Candance Gabel MS, RD, LD

*University of Missouri*

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### Abstract

As the United States in general, and Missouri in particular, grows more and more diverse not only in terms of race, languages and religions; but also in terms of age, sexual orientation and family structure; we are facing additional interaction with people of different cultural and social values. We need the opportunity to raise the levels for self-reflection to reframe the conversation on diversity to discuss, discover and understand who we are before we can understand the other.

The level of self-reflection in a conversation around cultural diversity will help us recognizing that our well-being and that of others are interdependent and intertwined. Our Intent with this workshop is to: increase awareness of the different dimensions of diversity; examine own cultural identity, own attitudes, perceptions and feelings about diversity; and become aware of skills and resources to manage crucial conversations.

The workshop will be based on the “Diversity Education Plan” that we implement for our Family Nutrition Education Program. This plan is not only for new faculty, it is intentionally designed to prepare Extension Professionals in the field to work effectively across the many dimensions of diversity by adapting personal communication, style and behavior to be an effective communicator and to feel comfortable engaging in initiatives or programs for diverse audiences.

*Keywords:* social values, cultural values, diversity conversation, diversity education

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## Introduction

As the United States and the state of Missouri grow more diverse, in terms of race, language, religion, age, sexual orientation and family structure, we face more interactions with people of different cultural and social values. It is no longer just business travelers or tourists who face the challenges of intercultural relations. An increasing number of people encounter “difference” or “foreignness” in work places and living environments with more frequency.

When people socialize with others, they bring a broad variety of culturally learned assumptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, biases and behaviors to the relationship. In essence all social interaction can be considered a multicultural event because each person is unique. Culture defines us and impacts decision-making both on an intentional and unintentional level. Not everything about who we are and how we show up in the world is obvious to us. We are frequently unaware of the effect our attitude and beliefs have on others.

We need the space and the opportunity to share our beliefs with others, before that, we need the space to discover and understand who we are. Tools such as self reflection, dialogue and mindfulness allows for transformation at the personal and at the organizational level (Terhune,2006). The basic essence of self awareness is both understanding who you are and the willingness to engage in an on-going practice to examine the thoughts, behaviors, and identities that define our individuality. Without an intentional practice of self reflection, we can be oblivious to how we impact those around us. Our best intentions don't always create the best impacts. For this and many other reasons we consider self-awareness a guiding principle of diversity (Rhonda, 2008). Reframing the conversation to emphasize open-minded self reflection, has helped us recognize that our well-being and that of others are interdependent and intertwined.

Recently we have formalized our diversity education training by developing and implementing a “Diversity Education Plan” (Gudiño, 2011). This plan contributes to the effort of the Family Nutrition Education Program (FNEP) at the University

of Missouri-Extension. The main objective of the plan is to train faculty and staff in the field, to work effectively across the many dimensions of diversity, by adapting personal communication, style and behavior. The end result is to instill effective communication and to feel comfortable teaching programs to diverse audiences.

The FNEP is a federally funded program designed to teach basic food and nutrition education to low income Missourians. The goal of the program is to promote lifelong health and improve the quality of life through the adoption of healthy habits. Nutritional program assistants work with clients individually, in groups, in their homes, in school and agencies throughout the state. Over 433,152 participants received education in FY11.

## Method

Our Diversity education program provides a structural method. It gives the participants an opportunity to learn more about themselves as they learn about cultures different from their own. To date, we have completed more than 80 hours of training across the state and the results are starting to speak for themselves. Our program, like many others, is facing changes and this diversity plan provides the space to learn about each other and ease the process.

The manual is meant to be used to explore issues related to diversity, change, inclusion and self-reflection. It offers a series of tools, methods and ideas that can be used in different training contexts with a variety of age groups. It is composed of four sections. The sequence of the sections are deliberate, however they can be used as stand-alone training activities: 1) Me, Trust & Identity; 2) Me and the Others, Confronting Differences; 3) Inclusion and Change; and 4) Future Actions, You and your Regions.

In developing the plan, we did not want to limit it to an exchange of information, but hoped to encourage behavior change with the participants. To achieve the ultimate goal of behavior change, it is important that training is delivered on a consistent basis and the training is not a single event but

integrated throughout all professional development opportunities. The manual, “Tools for Critical Self-Reflection and Dialogue about Diversity” was developed so that regional supervisors could integrate the plan into their monthly training. A workbook and correlating support materials were also developed and given to each paraprofessional. The manual reflects a framework anchored in the concept of intercultural competence, and connects academic theories with applicable practices.

As stated above, diversity training is a continual process. The plan was developed to ensure that diversity training was not a single occurrence, but rather woven into the professional development fabric of our organization. At this time, a series of 12 webinars on “Food and Culture” are being developed to provide information on the various cultural groups present in Missouri. These webinars are divided into heritage profiles that describe food and the eating practices of people from different cultural groups who have a major presence in the state. Each webinar will have a corresponding reference guide with cultural attributes. These webinars will become a part of paraprofessionals’ professional development portfolio. Once complete, these will also be offered to other states who may wish to utilize the online opportunities.

### **Evidence of Positive Change**

Our Family Nutrition Education Program reaches every community in the state of Missouri. We are working with many races and ethnicities that now call Missouri home: African Americans, Bosnians (mainly Muslims), Somalis, Burmese (mainly ethnic Karen and Chin), Iraqis, Vietnamese, Hispanics, Hmong, Chinese, Russians, Bhutanese, and Koreans. In addition to the different nationalities, the state of Missouri has many cultures divided by various sections of the state. The north consists of farmland with a Northern European influence. The Southeast Bootheel is similar to the Mississippi Delta. The Ozarks relate to people from the Appalachian Mountains. Missouri has three urban areas, St. Louis, Kansas City and Springfield. All three of

these cities have a very diverse population. There is evidence of positive change by the sheer numbers we enroll in our program and the success of those completing our program.

Prior to implementing the plan in FY11, the EFNEP program participants were 63% White, 19% African American, 1% Native American, 1% Asian, less than 1% Pacific Islander and 16% Other. Eighteen percent of participants reported being Hispanic. Since implementing the plan (FY10 & FY10), the percentage of African American participants has increased to 26% while White participation has dropped to 58% overall (FNP Annual Report 2010).

Although we do not have specific numbers from the collection tool used, it has been reported by the paraprofessionals that since FY11, they are reaching new Somali, Bosnian, and Hmong immigrants on a regular basis. These audiences had settled prior to FY11, but recruitment of these audiences is attributed to the training techniques of the plan and increased paraprofessional comfort in reaching out to new and diverse audiences.

### **Scope of Impact**

As Missouri continues to become more diverse, it is imperative that educators are prepared and comfortable in reaching out to those who live and work in the geographical area they serve. Without the cultural competence gained through this program, nutrition educators would not be able to educate homemakers and improve the lives of their families.

To date, more than 168 paraprofessionals have been trained, totaling over 80 hours across the state. As a result, paraprofessionals indicated that they are more comfortable in reaching new, more diverse audiences. They also indicated they feel that they have experienced personal growth and gained new understanding about working with diverse audiences. FNEP in Missouri, like many other states, are reaching out to new audiences. The plan provides the space to learn about each other and ease the transition for minorities.

Due to the impact seen with the FNEP paraprofessionals, University of Missouri-Extension has

incorporated the Plan into their statewide faculty orientation. All new Extension specialists, including Ag & Natural Resources, Business & Industry, Community Development, Human Environmental Sciences, and 4-H/Youth Development, received the same training as the nutrition educators. Therefore, creating an organization-wide diversity-training program, with the goal of creating a more inclusive and diverse workforce, as well as reaching new audiences.

The impact of the Plan was also recognized by the University of Missouri campus awarded the Family Nutrition Education Programs the Mizzou Inclusive Excellence Award. These awards are presented on behalf of the Chancellor's Diversity Initiative and recognizes faculty and programs that go above and beyond to create an inclusive environment.

### **Innovation**

Intercultural competence has emerged as a concept that makes reference to the interaction of individuals at different levels from an individual process of acquiring knowledge, to the notion that people can live together peacefully in one community and in constant interaction (Deardorf 2006). Competence demands that you know yourself, and where you come from, before you embark on understanding others. It is a challenging process, as it involves very deeply rooted ideas about how we structure our world and our lives. Therefore, we understand competences as a process that develops out of a foundation of awareness and it is an intentional act.

This model brings together three elements of learning and change that are usually utilized separately: 1) dialogue; 2) reflection; and 3) mindfulness. The combination of these three elements permits a synergy that amplifies the impact of any one of the three elements individually. We used the term "synergy" alluding to the fact that teams could produce more in concert, than the sum of their individual productiveness. This emphasis on dialogue, reflection and mindfulness provide work groups, and individuals, with a framework and discipline that can

assist them in utilizing their diversity.

Dialogue, reflection and mindfulness are called meta-competencies because they are of a higher order than many technical, procedural, and process skills. They serve to enhance and exploit lower-order skills such as listening. These skills significantly improved our awareness, our openness, and readiness, to hear what is really being said is expanded.

A formalized diversity education program showed a significant change in our paraprofessional training. Throughout the duration of our program, we have provided continuous diversity education that is related to civil rights and cultural differences. Yet, "The Tool for Critical Self-Reflection and Dialogue about Diversity" provides language, activities and an opportunity for continual learning as well as personal self-reflection.

### **Conclusion**

The Diversity Education Plan is designed to create an inclusive work environment and professional practices. These guidelines and tools are only useful if they can be incorporated into regular practices and ways of thinking about teaching and learning. This will take time and commitment from University administrators and employees. As a statement, "diversity" is often misrepresented or dismissed as a pointless, politically correct concept. Nonetheless, it is imperative that we recognized our own personal history, social, economic, cultural and political backgrounds and how they create the framework for our lives. It is also important to realize that we have the ability to modify this framework if we are aware of it. It is a crucial step to build a more inclusive community.

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