

## PERCEPTIONS, RESPONSES, AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DIVERSITY HELD BY EXTENSION ADMINISTRATORS

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to determine the knowledge of diversity and response towards diversity by The Ohio State University Extension administrators. Results indicated that the Extension organization had reached the level at which people were actively acknowledging diversity as an issue. The most critical diversity issues facing Extension were confusion about how to communicate and serve clientele from other backgrounds, understanding how to use the different strengths of individuals, lack of clear vision of what a multicultural organization could achieve, and recruitment programs that failed to attract diverse applicants. The administrators scored an average of 65% on a research or fact based multiple-choice test which measured knowledge about diversity. The Extension administrators were neither pessimistic or optimistic regarding the organization's progress toward providing equal opportunity to all employees.*

A review of literature revealed that the Cooperative Extension System must place an increased emphasis on becoming a multicultural organization (United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), 1990; Task Force on Diversity, 1990; Deville, 1991; Strategic Planning Council; Skinner, 1991). "A multicultural organization is one which is genuinely committed to diverse representation in its membership, is sensitive to maintaining an open, supportive and responsive environment, is working toward and purposefully including elements of diverse cultures in its on-going operations, and...is authentic in its response to issues confronting it" (Barr & Strong, 1987, p. 85).

A key to establishing a multicultural organization appears to be administrators who are competent in the area of diversity (Deville, 1991). Barr and Strong (1987) indicated that any successful effort to achieve diversity would not be initiated from a human resources department. To establish a multicultural organization requires personnel and attitude changes from the top down (Tiedt & Tiedt, 1990). Programs which involve the less powerful professional in an organization

permits the organization to embrace multiculturalism by claiming it wants to eliminate oppressive barriers and include under-represented groups without making changes in top management practices (Simons, 1989).

As an organization, Extension must look at itself by raising the questions: Are we valuing diversity? Are middle and upper level management culturally sensitive and able to manage a culturally diverse work force? Do we understand the impact of culture on communication and performance? A values audit of Ohio extension personnel (Safrit, Conklin, & Jones, 1991) indicated that diversity was not highly valued by members of Ohio's Extension organization. Based on the findings of Safrit, Conklin, and Jones (1991), and the review of literature (Deville, 1991; Simons, 1989; Brazzel, 1991; Barr & Strong, 1987), a need to determine the current knowledge and response by extension administrators towards diversity issues was warranted.

### Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine the knowledge of diversity and response towards diversity by Extension administrators. To guide the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What was the level of response to diversity that the Extension organization had reached?
2. What were critical diversity issues affecting the Extension organization?
3. What was the diversity knowledge level of extension administrators?

## **Methodology**

### Population

The population for the descriptive study was all Extension administrators at The Ohio State University. The population included a census of all members of the: Administrative Cabinet (N = 12); Organizational Support Team (N = 8); County Chairs (N = 87); and District Specialists with support team responsibility (N = 20).

### Instrumentation

A four part questionnaire was developed to collect the data. Questions on the questionnaire were adapted from survey instruments developed by Simons (1992). Part I (Organizational Response Level) of the questionnaire consisted of eleven indicators which described different levels an organization could reach in responding to diversity (Simons, 1992). A ladder-like grid was developed and respondents marked the level which most appropriately described the level the organization had reached in response to diversity.

Part II (Critical Issues) of the questionnaire identified 22 critical issues (Simons, 1992) within the extension organization related to diversity. Respondents were asked to rank each issue using a

Likert type scale where 1 = Non-existent; 2 = Insignificant; 3 = Noteworthy; 4 = Important; and 5 = Urgent.

Part III (Diversity Awareness Assessment) consisted of 23 multiple choice questions which measured the factual knowledge level of respondents on diversity issues against research finding (Simons, 1992). Part IV (Culture Audit) of the questionnaire gathered demographic information.

Validity was established utilizing a panel of experts on research design, diversity in organizations, and knowledge of diversity from The Ohio State University and Extension Service - United States Department of Agriculture (ES-USDA). Reliability for the Diversity Awareness Assessment (Part III) was established using the test-retest procedure ( $r = .78$ ). The instrument had an overall reliability (Cronbach's alpha) coefficient of .62.

### Data Collection

The questionnaires were administered during two administrative meetings. The Administrative Cabinet and Organizational Support Team were present at one meeting. County Chairs and District Specialists were present at the second meeting. The overall response rate was 85 percent. Response data by administrative strata was as follows: Administrative Cabinet, 100 percent; Administrative Support Team, 100 percent; County Chairs, 86 percent; and, District Specialists, 55 percent.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed utilizing the SPSS computer program. Descriptive statistics were used.

## Results

### Organizational Response Level

Table 1 reports that 16 percent of the administrators indicated that the extension service has reached the level at which people actively acknowledging diversity as an issue. Sixteen percent indicated changes had to be made to deal with diversity at 15 percent indicated that the organization had created an open forum for discussion. However, 13 percent indicated that the extension service had reached the level where the issue of diversity was being discussed privately and in informal groups, and 4 percent indicated that there was denial, anger, frustration, and conflict in dealing with diversity within the organization. One respondent (1%) indicated the Extension

organization had reached the level where there was an overall plan to deal with diversity. None of the respondents indicated the Extension organization had reached the level where there was an evaluation process set up to check the progress being made toward diversity.

### Critical Issues

Administrators were asked to rate 22 issues related to diversity on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = non-existent; 2 = insignificant; 3 = noteworthy; 4 = important; and, 5 = urgent) based on their assessment of how critical the issue was to the organization. Ratings ranged from a mean score of 3.45 to 2.25 (Table 2). The issues which received the greatest mean scores were: confusion about how to communicate and serve clientele from other

Table 1. Organization Response to Diversity in the Work Place (n = 108)

Level of Response	f	Valid %
There is little or no awareness of diversity as an issue.	6	7.2
There is denial, anger, frustration, and conflict.	3	3.6
People are actively acknowledging that diversity is an issue.	13	15.7
The issues are being discussed privately and in informal groups.	11	13.3
We have created an open forum for discussion.	12	14.5
We have decided that changes have to be made.	13	15.7
There is a corporate vision about the role of diversity in the organization.	10	12.0
Policies are being set in line with the vision.	5	6.0
Disconnected efforts are taking place.	9	10.8
There is an overall plan and concentrated effort to deal with the issues.	1	1.2
There is an evaluation process set up to check our progress.	0	0.0
Missing data	25	0.0
Total	108	100.0

Table 2. Rank Order of Critical Issues - Level of Importance (n = 108)

Item	f	$\mu$	$\sigma$
Confusion about how to communicate with and serve clientele from other backgrounds.	107	3.45	.90

Understanding of how to use the different strengths of individuals.	106	3.39	.90
Lack of clear vision of what a multicultural organization could be or could achieve.	106	3.37	.94
Recruitment program fails to attract diverse applicants.	107	3.35	1.06
Different senses of time and urgency about dealing with diversity.	107	3.24	.82
Lack of role models or mentors.	107	3.22	1.01
Communication problems.	107	3.20	.98
Lack of training or resources to deal with diversity.	107	3.14	.91
Administrators lack skills to work with individuals from diverse backgrounds.	105	3.13	.97
Inequities in pay scale, promotion, or job definition.	104	3.00	1.24
Public media does not reflect diversity.	106	2.94	.98
Double standards.	106	2.93	1.17
Poor feedback on performance.	105	2.92	1.09
"We" versus "they" distinctions.	107	2.88	1.08
People feeling "put down."	107	2.84	1.08
Inadequate or non-existent child care.	104	2.81	1.12
Offensive slurs, jokes, stereotyped remarks.	107	2.79	.86
Insensitive or non-inclusive language (sexist, racist, etc.).	107	2.74	.94
Dead end jobs.	106	2.70	1.05
Violations of work rules, policies, procedures.	104	2.42	1.08
Sexual harassment.	104	2.35	.99
Sabotage or harassment of certain groups or individuals.	106	2.25	1.14

Scale: 1 = Non-existent; 2 = Insignificant; 3 = Noteworthy; 4 = Important; 5 = Urgent.

backgrounds (3.45); understanding how to use the different strengths of individuals (3.39); lack of clear vision of what a multicultural organization could achieve (3.37); and, recruitment program fails to attract diverse applicants (3.35). Ten items received a rating of 3 or greater, indicating "noteworthy" of concern.

From the critical issues list of 22 items, the administrators were asked to identify three critical issues which were most important. The results indicated that the top three issues as perceived by the extension administration were: communication with clientele (10.2%); recruitment program fails to attract diverse candidates (8.9%); understanding

how to use individual strengths (8.6%); and, lack of a clear vision (8.6%) (Table 3).

#### Diversity Awareness Assessment

The diversity knowledge level of the administrators was measured utilizing a 23 item multiple-choice test in which one correct response to each item was research or fact based. The results yielded a mean score of 15.04 which equated to a 65 percent correct response rate (Table 4). The range of scores was from zero (0) correct to 21

Table 3. Most Critical Issues as Identified by Respondents (n = 108)

Item	f	%
Confusion about how to communicate with and serve clientele from		

other backgrounds.	32	10.2
Recruitment program fails to attract diverse applicants.	28	8.9
Understanding of how to use the different strengths of individuals.	27	8.6
Lack of clear vision of what a multicultural organization could be or could achieve.	27	8.6

Note. Each respondent could identify up to 3 items (unranked) from the 22 items listed in Table 2 or add others.

correct. Over 59 percent of the administrators had scores below the 70th percentile.

### Culture Audit

When asked to indicate their level of optimism or pessimism regarding the organization's progress in providing equal opportunity to all employees, responses varied. Responses ranged from very pessimistic (2%), to very optimistic (10%) (Table 5). Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the administrators were optimistic about the organization providing equal opportunity. In addition, 20 percent indicated they were pessimistic about the organization providing equal opportunity. The mean score of 3.47 was closest to the rating item of 3.0 which indicated neither optimism or pessimism (Table 5).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The data indicated that the Extension administrators perceived that the Extension organization had not yet reached its goal of becoming a multicultural organization. The administrators stated that the organization was at a stage where change needed to occur. The lack of an overall plan or concentrated effort to deal with diversity issues was identified. The goal of diversity in any organization cannot be met until policies which are in line with the vision are established and imbued by the organization

Table 4. Number and Percent Correct on Diversity Awareness Assessment (n = 108)

Number Correct <sup>a</sup>	f	%	cp <sup>b</sup>
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0	1	.9	.9
6	1	.9	1.9
8	2	1.9	3.7
9	4	3.7	7.4
10	6	5.6	13.0
11	7	6.5	19.4
12	6	5.6	25.0
13	4	3.7	28.7
14	7	6.5	35.2
15	12	11.1	46.3
16	14	13.0	59.3
17	17	15.7	75.0
18	9	8.3	83.3
19	9	8.3	91.7
20	7	6.5	98.1
21	2	1.9	100.0
Total	108	100.0	100.0

<sup>a</sup>Maximum number correct possible = 23; <sup>b</sup>cp = cumulative percent;  $\mu = 15.04$ ;  $\sigma = 3.67$

(Wurzel, 1988). It is recommended that the Extension organization create an action force whose primary responsibility would be to develop the needed vision and policies through an action

Table 5. Level of Optimism/Pessimism Regarding Organization's Progress in Providing Equal Opportunity (n = 108)

Level	f	%	cp*
1. Very Pessimistic	2	1.9	1.9
2. Somewhat Pessimistic	19	17.6	19.4
3. Neither	24	22.2	41.7
4. Somewhat Optimistic	52	48.1	89.8
5. Very Optimistic	11	10.2	100.0

Total	108	100.0	100.0
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\*cp = cumulative percent;  $\mu = 3.47$ ;  $\sigma = .96$

plan which includes evaluation and accountability guidelines.

The action force could begin by clarifying the organization's vision of diversity. An audit of the Extension "corporate culture" should be conducted to assist the organization in determining what the present culture looks like. By studying some of the current "culture" (promotion, mentoring and sponsorship, performance appraisal, staff development, employment practices), insights into the corporate culture could be gained.

The results indicated there was confusion about how to communicate with and serve clientele from other backgrounds. Administrators also indicated a need to learn more about using the different strengths of individuals. In achieving diversity, training programs for all the staff will be needed. It is recommended that administrators participate in staff development programs which are aimed at managing diversity, communicating across cultures, and incorporating diversity into the work place. Experiential training programs to help all levels of administrators understand and recognize how biases may effect an individual's ability to manage a diverse work force are advisable. Administrators in a multicultural organization must escape the mind set that all workers are similar and put aside the assumption that they are managing people who are like them or aspire to be like them (Thomas, 1990).

Extension administrators need to become more knowledgeable regarding diversity issues and aware of the difference between dominant and minority cultures. Key questions Extension administrators members must ask include: "How am I adapting myself to the diverse backgrounds of the people which whom I work? As an administrator, how do I evaluate the people I interview? Do I treat each individual as if diversity

made no difference? Do I value and assess each person as a unique individual? One of the critical issues identified was recruitment program which failed to attract diverse applicants. An audit of the recruitment program should be conducted to identify strengths and areas for change. In addition, it is recommended that the Extension organization secure the services and advice of a professional recruitment firm specializing in the recruitment of diverse applicants.

It is important that Extension move beyond affirmative action and the assumption that if we fill the pipeline with qualified minorities and women, we can solve our upward mobility problems. Once recruited, they will perform in accordance with our promotion criteria and move naturally up our regular development ladder (Thomas, 1990).

Further research needs to be conducted in other states with Extension administrators to determine if the results of the current study are unique to one state. In addition, data should be collected from other Extension personnel to determine if their knowledge about diversity and response to diversity issues is the same as the administrators. Finally, the use of focus group interviews is suggested to add qualitative information to the current descriptive survey research.

## Epilogue

What has occurred since the diversity study was conducted in 1992? With the passage of almost three years, it appears timely to add a brief epilogue to the research reported.

Focus group interviews were conducted with randomly selected participants of the original study. The interviews supported the general findings of the descriptive research. Focus group participants indicated both administration and local clientele

expectations contributed to unwritten rules or "traditions" of the organization. All those interviewed agreed that for diversity to become a part of the organizational culture, everyone must make a commitment to diversity. It was noted that "diversity leadership must start at the top."

Results and initial conclusions drawn by Cano and Ludwig were reported to the Extension Administrative Cabinet and used as a starting point for discussion and action by that group. OSU Extension administrators perceived Extension had not yet reached its goal of becoming a multicultural organization and action was required.

Inservices for all personnel were initiated as a part of Extension state conferences and district in-service educational programs. Focus was on the development of sensitivity to other cultures and improvement of communication skills. The Extension Affirmative Action Committee was reconfigured and recharged as a Diversity Committee to provide leadership for diversity efforts. Another task force revised and re-energized the organization's mentoring program.

In the Fall of 1994, the Administrative Cabinet scheduled a two-day retreat to further their own knowledge of diversity issues and to participate in experiential learning activities. Facilitators from the National Extension Diversity Center guided the learning process.

The Diversity Committee is in the process of developing a diversity plan. The diversity plan has gone through multiple refinement stages, has been approved, and will be presented to all staff in the Fall of 1995 at District workshops. The plan outlines four goals for the organization and an action plan to accomplish each goal. Goals related to: a commitment to pluralism; development of an environment which supports diversity and pluralism; work force diversity; and, audience and program diversity.

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