



Community Engagement for Cooperative Extension: Strategies to improve representation in community engagement efforts

Series Publication 4 of 7

Rachel Leih, Lauren McCullough, Vanessa Farrell, Michele Walsh

Introduction

A key to meaningful program efforts is community engagement. Community engagement must engage community members most directly impacted by University of Arizona Cooperative Extension (Extension) programs and allow participants to guide their needs and interests. To gather community input and feedback, it is not enough to simply pick a date, reserve a space, and expect a representative group of people from the community to come to an event. Even when people from the community attend engagement events, significant thought should be given to how information is presented and how feedback is gathered to encourage broad and authentic participation. Consideration should also be given to how these experiences are mutually beneficial for Extension and the community members participating.

Consider common barriers to participation in community engagement

There are often barriers to participation that need to be considered when trying to engage community members. Some common barriers include:

Barrier	Description
Awareness	First and foremost, people need to know that engagement opportunities exist and that they, personally, are welcome to participate in providing their feedback and recommendations. Outreach and recruitment strategies should consider the demographics of the community. The best way to recruit high school students for a focus group will look very different from how new parents are informed about an infant nutrition program or how community members are recruited to provide input about a new community park.
Timing	Often engagement events are scheduled at the convenience of those facilitating the event or with the assumption that others work a traditional 9 to 5 schedule. There is also a tendency to consistently schedule events on the same day of the week or time of day. When considering potential new dates and times for events, feedback from the people who are already in the room is often asked, rather than reaching out to people who didn't attend the event. This continued engagement of the same people over and over again can limit hearing from other voices in the community.
Childcare	Depending on the type of engagement activity, it may be difficult for someone with children to participate due to an inability to secure or pay for childcare. This can create both a logistical and financial barrier to participation for parents and caregivers.
Location and transportation	Unreliable access to transportation can limit the ability of community members to attend formal engagement events. For urban areas, this may mean relying on public transportation, which can take a significant amount of time, depending on how far they have to travel. For rural areas, public transportation may not exist. Distances to attend community events and the associated fuel costs may be a barrier.

Power dynamics	It is important to consider the potential power dynamics that may create barriers for participation. Low resource communities, historically, have been excluded from decision-making processes and may not feel welcome. Individuals may have had negative experiences with previous community engagement efforts, including feeling that information was simply ‘extracted’ from their community. Meaningful engagement experiences involve opportunities where community members are authentically included in problem-solving processes and provided with opportunities to take on leadership roles.
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Ensure that engagement opportunities are accessible and welcoming to community members

In addition to getting people in the community to come together, creating an atmosphere that encourages everyone to participate is essential. Some things to address include:

Consideration	Description
Location	Rather than asking community members to come to an event that you host, consider where people already congregate within the community, including both physical and digital spaces. Work with community leaders and try novel approaches of communication. One strategy for gathering information that engages people where they already spend time is a quick, informal “pop-up” engagement. ¹ Pop-up engagements are a useful way to build awareness of the work Extension does in the community and to gather quick feedback from community members who may not ordinarily seek out opportunities to attend more formal community events. See Article 5 in this series for strategies to gather quick feedback from community members during a pop-up engagement.
Language Use	Consider the languages community members speak, both in public and at home, when planning and executing engagement opportunities. In addition to creating outreach materials that are provided in multiple languages, consider having an interpreter at events or offering events completely in Spanish or other languages to better promote participants’ ability and comfort in providing feedback.
Literacy Level	Consider the education and literacy levels of the audience and avoid engagement strategies that require extensive reading or writing when this may limit participation. Though surveys may be the most common way organizations seek community input, there are other ways of gathering feedback, such as through focus groups, digital storytelling, and video reporting, that emphasize the importance and value of storytelling while also reducing barriers to participation based on literacy levels (See Article 5 in this series).
Accessibility	Ensure that materials and physical spaces are accessible to people of all abilities. Universal Design is “the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability, or disability.” ^{2,3} In addition to selecting spaces that people can access who may be in a wheelchair or have limited mobility, consider how digital and physical documents may or may not be accessible. ⁴ This includes ensuring videos have captions, that digital documents are able to be read by screen reading technology, and, when possible, providing materials ahead of time. This may also include having a sign language interpreter available at public community engagement events.

Power Dynamics	Reflect on the power dynamics that currently exist in engaging with community members and the ways those power dynamics influence who attends and actively participates. What knowledge and expertise is conveyed as valuable? ⁶ Consider the language used to describe group members, such as ‘newbies’ or ‘elders’, and how that influences whose perspectives are valued. Pay attention to the practices and rituals that exist in meetings, such as how decisions are made and who is rewarded for their work. In addition to what is written on paper about how groups operate, there are power structures that are below the surface that influence small group culture that are worth identifying and reflecting upon. This reflection will help promote trust and positive engagement with community members.
Youth Engagement	When developing new programs, consider that young people are important beneficiaries of Extension’s work and can have unique perspectives about the problems and opportunities that exist. ⁵ Engaging community members at young ages can also help promote a culture of community engagement. Extension professionals have the opportunity to partner with colleagues in 4-H to engage youth and to jointly promote positive youth development and leadership, which can greatly contribute to community health.

Develop community engagement opportunities that are mutually beneficial

In addition to providing valuable input and guidance about the direction of Extension programs, community engagement strategies should also be beneficial to the people they engage, and these benefits should be articulated early in the community engagement planning process. This requires planning and sufficient funding, so it is important to include community engagement efforts in your budget planning process. Some ways to ensure your engagement efforts are mutually beneficial include:

Strategy	Description
Share Results with the Community	At the most basic level, determine how to share results and decisions with the community, illustrating how their input informed the direction of programs. People who offer their time and insight understandably want to know they were heard and that their participation was valued, even if ultimately the exact things they asked for can’t be provided.
Build Capacity as Community Advocates	When thinking about engaging community members more long-term, whether through a digital storytelling project, as members of an advisory board or task force, or in some other long-term strategy, think about how community members are building their capacity as community advocates and how they can be compensated for their time. It is important to offer opportunities for leadership or advancement as benefits to participation. For example, volunteers from the community could be trained to act as ambassadors, hosting pop-up events that raise awareness about programs and services and gathering feedback from other community members about their needs and interests. By training these community members on how to host events and gather feedback, they have the opportunity to develop professional skills, skills that they can include on their resume. Over time, a member of the ambassadors could be invited to be the lead trainer or coordinator and offered a stipend for their time.

Compensate Community Members for Their Time	Given that many community members have financial barriers to participation, it's important to compensate people for their time when possible. This can include providing childcare or reimbursing participants for childcare costs, providing bus passes or coordinating transportation, or providing stipends, when that is allowable in your budget. Having food at community events is always a nice gesture, though not always an allowable cost. If food is not an allowed expense, investigate whether a partner, grocer, or business might be able to cover the cost of food.
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Continuation of the Community Engagement Series

This is the fourth article of a seven part-series on community engagement, a collaboration between the [University of Arizona's School of Nutritional Sciences & Wellness - Cooperative Extension, SNAP-Ed](#) (UA SNAP-Ed) and the [Community Research, Evaluation, and Development \(CRED\) team](#) from the Norton School of Human Ecology. The publications reflect the concepts of seven [interactive, online learning modules about community engagement](#) that were developed by the UA SNAP-Ed and the CRED team. The next publication in this series will focus on the inform and consult levels of the Spectrum of Public Participation.

The full Community Engagement in Cooperative Extension article series includes:

1. What is Community Engagement?
2. Using Interactive Maps to Understand Communities
3. Who is and is not Participating in Community Engagement?
4. Strategies to Improve Representation
5. Spectrum of Public Participation: Inform and Consult
6. Spectrum of Public Participation: Involve
7. Spectrum of Public Participation: Collaborate and Community Directs

All articles in the series are available at the following link:

[Community Engagement in Cooperative Extension Series](#)

Citations

1. 880 Cities. Pop-up engagements. <https://www.880cities.org/pop-up-engagements>. n.d. Accessed October 29, 2021.
2. Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. What is universal design. <http://universaldesign.ie/What-is-Universal-Design/>. n.d. Accessed October 29, 2021.
3. CAST. Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2. <http://udlguidelines.cast.org/>. Published 2018. Accessed October 29, 2021.
4. The University of Arizona Disability Resource Center. Universal design for learning strategies. <https://drc.arizona.edu/instructors/universal-design-strategies>. n.d. Accessed October 29, 2021.

5. Local Government Commission. Participatory tools for better community planning. https://www.lgc.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Participation_Tools_for_Better_Community_Planning.pdf#page=14. Published 2013. Accessed October 29, 2021.
6. Cultural indicators and power. <https://glenn.osu.edu/research/food-policy/food-policy%20attributes/Cultural%20Indicators%20and%20Power.pdf>. n.d. Accessed October 29, 2021.

Resources

[Adolescent & Young Adult Health National Resource Center - Youth Engagement in Adolescent and Young Adult Health Care](#)

[CDC Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry - Challenges in Improving Community Engagement in Research](#)

[The Change Foundation - Should Money Come into It? A Tool for Deciding Whether to Pay Patient-Engagement Participants](#)

[The Community Tool Box - Enhancing Cultural Competence](#)

[University of Arizona Disability Resource Center - Universal Design for Learning](#)

[University of California CalFresh Nutrition Education Program - Moving From Serving Youth to Engaging Youth](#)



AUTHORS

Rachel Leih, MPH, M.Ed

Research Professional II, Community Research, Evaluation and Development Team

Lauren McCullough, MPH

Outreach Program Manager, School of Nutritional Sciences & Wellness

Vanessa A. Farrell, PhD, RDN

Associate in Extension, School of Nutritional Sciences and Wellness

Michele Walsh, PhD

Associate Director, Family, Consumer and Health Sciences

CONTACT

Rachel Leih

rleih@arizona.edu

This information has been reviewed by
University faculty.

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Other titles from this series can be found at:

extension.arizona.edu/pubs/community-engagement-cooperative-extension-series

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