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HUMAN AWARENESS TRAINING FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORKERS

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Our society includes a variety of life styles, value systems, subcultural traits, attitudes, and behaviors. Many present-day social situations continue to perpetuate these differences. Therefore, with the expanded involvement of the Cooperative Extension Service in community development, it seems appropriate that community development personnel should receive what I call "human awareness training." I define human awareness training as that training which emphasizes the study of minority-group history and culture, the nature and characteristics of the disadvantaged, the contemporary social-psychological concerns, the analysis and understanding of prejudice and racism, and the serious examination of one's own attitude and behavior toward others unlike himself.

Accurate knowledge and understanding of disfranchised members of society are crucial if community development educators are to help community groups arrive at decisions and actions to improve community well-being. I wonder how many extension educators, and community development workers in particular, are trained to work with the low-income, the culturally disadvantaged, and local minorities. My suspicion is that most are not. Community development educators need a sufficient training background to empathize with such groups if they are to fulfill their mission effectively.

Working productively across ethnic and cultural lines requires, among other things, an understanding of the clientele's attitudes and perceptions as well as one's own attitudes and perceptions regarding the clientele. Frequently, the attitudes of the educator are subconscious. Unaware that he holds certain attitudes, he may behave in a manner which is detrimental to the clientele-educator relationship. Disadvantaged groups usually are able to detect quickly when the educator's attitude and behavior are not what they consider desirable. This factor may determine the success or failure of an educational endeavor.

Many developments and circumstances affect the attitudes of

individuals and groups. Extension workers are not immune. One of the pertinent attitudes is ethnocentrism. An individual with an ethnocentric attitude judges the worth of other cultures in terms of the standards of his own culture. Since other cultures are of course different, they are considered inferior. This attitude reflects an inability to appreciate the viewpoint of others who have a different morality, set of values, religion, language, or race. Human awareness training, if designed properly, can cause people to seriously examine and analyze some of their attitudes, and hopefully to modify them when necessary.

Community development educators not only must recognize, understand, and manage their own attitudes and behavior, but also must recognize and try to understand the attitudes and values of their clientele. This will allow development of the interaction required between clientele and educator to assess the educational needs of the clientele. An attitude usually expressed at the outset is suspicion of the educator's motives. This is particularly acute when the clientele and the educator are of different races. The educator should understand some of the causes of this kind of attitude and be prepared to deal effectively with them.

The community development educator will function better in this setting if human awareness training has been provided. As suggested in the recent Community Resource Development Report of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, training in social awareness is preferable to competency concentrated in the physical sciences.

HUMAN AWARENESS SEMINARS

Some two or three years ago, before Cooperative Extension with a community development component came to the Langston University campus, it was felt that employees of agencies concerned with human and community problems needed human awareness training. For this reason, in 1970 a project proposal was developed and funded by HUD through the Community Development Section of the Oklahoma State Department of Vocational and Technical Education. The university proposed that it hold two-day seminars annually for municipal and community-service employees in nine communities in the state. We are now in the third funding year.

The project is based on the belief that the demands which routines and job complexities usually place on municipal and community service employees can obscure the need for social and human sensitivity in the conduct of their daily tasks. Moreover,

it was felt that the perspectives of these persons would be improved if they had an opportunity, if for only a short time, to devote their attention and study to some specific human predicaments.

The seminars consist of the study of minority-group history and culture (Indian and black), selected contemporary sociological problems, and psychological aspects of individual and group behavior emphasizing the prejudice phenomenon. Obviously these matters cannot be treated completely in two days. Actually, we have four interrelated mini-courses which afford continuity.

Among the instructional methods employed during the seminars are large-group lectures, small interaction groups, multimedia materials, and simulation games. Every effort is made to involve each participant in the total program. We try to keep the activities and atmosphere as low-keyed and as non-threatening as possible. Many of the participants have never been a part of a similar learning experience. The instructional and training corps is comprised of three campus-based faculty members and two other off-campus professionals.

During the past two years the seminars have been attended by approximately 850 persons, of which 61 percent were white, 30 percent black, 7 percent Indian, and 2 percent Mexican American. These persons have ranged in professional backgrounds from VISTA volunteers to police chiefs and city managers.

It is impossible to assess the impact of such a short-term effort on the long-term attitudinal change of participants. However, we feel that the seminars have been meaningful based on the participants' evaluations and on the fact that some agencies have sought additional training from our seminar staff. Also, many participants have requested additional reading material and sources of information for their continued study.

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

There are many educational challenges and opportunities in community development. In my judgment, the educational need for human awareness and understanding is one. With many organizations and groups presently participating in some form of community development with minorities or the disadvantaged, it seems reasonable to conclude that people in these organizations could profit from such education.

The recent Community Resource Development Report of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy recommended

that consideration be given to the association of Cooperative Extension work with the educational efforts in community development undertaken by other agencies or organizations. Many of these organizations are seeking additional in-service education with a focus on human relations. In my opinion, Cooperative Extension could perform a useful service by providing assistance in human awareness education to such organizations.