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Intercultural Competency Development Model for Extension Professionals: Expert Consensus Using the Delphi Technique

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Cover Page Footnote

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Intercultural Competency Development Model for Extension Professionals: Expert Consensus Using the Delphi Technique

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Abstract. To address concerns about the applicability of existing intercultural competence models to the Extension context, we aimed to develop a systematic intercultural competence framework tailored for Extension professionals through a collaborative and consensual process. A three-phased Delphi approach was utilized with a panel of 36 intercultural competence experts in Extension across academic disciplines to identify and finalize competencies thought to be necessary across career phases. The panel agreed upon 54 competencies in total with 13 competencies to develop in the first year, 37 competencies to develop in the first three years and four competencies in years two through seven.

INTRODUCTION

Nationwide, Cooperative Extension serves an increasingly diverse clientele. As a result, there is increased emphasis in Extension on developing interculturally competent educators to better understand and communicate with diverse individuals (Deen et al., 2014; Nieto & Bode, 2020). There is a growing emphasis on the concept of intercultural competence, and experts are applying it more and more to their professional contexts. The term *intercultural competence* refers to “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes,” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247–248; Lopez-Littleton & Blesset, 2015; McCalman et al., 2017). There is a growing adoption of intercultural competence frameworks in the corporate, public service, and non-profit sectors. This shift has prompted Extension to consider integrating similar frameworks into administrative protocols and professional development curricula to equip educators with competencies necessary to address the needs of their increasingly-diverse clientele. (Deen et al., 2014; Nieto & Bode, 2020). While there has been growth in the development and implementation of intercultural competence trainings for Extension personnel—primarily in the United States—, the competencies targeted within these existing broad curricula have been developed outside of Extension and may not always be best suited for Extension’s

non-formal education context (Benavides, 2017). The purpose of this study was to develop a career-progression-based intercultural competence development framework specifically for Extension professionals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CONCEPTUALIZING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Experts within the educational, administrative, business, health service, and social work sectors conceptualize intercultural competence differently (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). In their review of contemporary intercultural competence theoretical frameworks and models, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009, p. 9–33) identified five distinct intercultural competence model types:

- *Compositional Models*: An analytic scheme or typology which identifies hypothesized components of competence without specifying relationships between components.
- *Co-Orientalional Models*: Conceptualizes criterion of adept communication and shared meaning.
- *Developmental Models*: Specifies stages of competence progression or maturity, thereby prioritizing the dimension of time in intercultural interaction.

- *Adaptational Models*: Typically contains two dimensions; envision multiple interactants and emphasize interdependence of these interactants through “mutual adjustment” modeling.
- *Causal Process Models*: Reflects specified interrelationships among components. More easily formalized/adapted into testable instrumentation.

The Process Model of Intercultural Competence (a causal process model type) and the Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (a compositional model type) are two models developed to identify general competencies across sectors. Both models were developed using a Delphi approach, which leveraged the views of 23 intercultural competence experts worldwide (Deardorff, 2009). This grounded-theory approach synthesized panellists’ views to illustrate requisite motivational and attitudinal factors, cognitive factors (e.g., knowledge, comprehension), and internal and external desired outcomes. While these models reflect a degree of consensus on salient factors, any effort to adapt the models for the purposes of assessment should recognize that competence development is an ongoing process and certain factors will be more or less relevant at any given time across contexts (Deardorff, 2009). Researchers and practitioners operating in a given sector (e.g., health services) are recommended to take appropriate measures to ground the model in their own context to generate more contextually-appropriate indicators and measurable outcomes of cultural competence (Deardorff, 2009). Extension has adopted these recommendations, to varying degrees of success.

SNAPSHOT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN EXTENSION

Intercultural competence tests, tools, and instruments guide Cooperative Extension’s efforts to integrate intercultural competence concepts into professional development curricula and assessment protocols. Fantini (2009) identified 44 distinct instruments designed to assess different intercultural competence outcomes. One of these, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), is a validated 50-item commercial instrument (Fabregas Janeiro et al., 2015; Atilas, 2019). Developed by Hammer and Bennett (1998) based on Bennett’s earlier (1986) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, the IDI measures intercultural competence along a developmental continuum to gauge “... respondents’ orientation towards cultural differences and their readiness for intercultural training” (Fantini, 2009, p. 471).

While the IDI—along with other related commercial instruments—is widely used to inform the design and evaluation of intercultural competence training regimens, its complexity and proprietary status requires consultation, coaching, and implementation support from qualified

administrators (Moncloa et al., 2019). Additionally, the implementation of the IDI is subject to the same challenges and limitations of any single assessment tool: it may not always be relevant to the situation or context in which it is applied. Therefore, standardized tools like the IDI are not tailored to a specific set of goals, objectives, or program parameters. In addition, Deardorff (2009) indicated the IDI cannot supplement another strategy to conceptualize and assess intercultural competence, and as a result, it cannot be used as part of a multi-method assessment strategy. Similar issues may arise with the internal development of training or assessment tools which are exclusively informed by a single theoretical framework or conceptual model that was not tailored to the Extension context (Deardorff, 2009). For example, development of an intercultural competence training and assessment model built upon the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) framework would have limited effectiveness in an Extension context because the framework was developed specifically for formal educational settings (Gay, 2002).

States such as Kansas, North Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin have integrated intercultural competence training and assessment regimens and illustrate the benefits of a pluralistic approach to intercultural competence training and assessment (Atilas, 2019; Deen et al., 2014; Fabregas Janeiro et al., 2015; Wille et al., 2019). For example, Coming Together for Racial Understanding, a collaborative training program developed by a Rapid Response Team of Extension and non-Land Grant University professionals, has leveraged multiple frameworks of intercultural competence and responsiveness (e.g., facilitating civil dialogue, racial sensitivity) to develop its protocols (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy Rapid Response Team, 2017). Another example is the Navigating Differences training program. Developed by Extension research specialists at Washington State University, Navigating Differences advances an intercultural competence curriculum which integrates social justice and organizational development models, as well as cultural sensitivity constructs adapted from the public health field (Deen et al., 2014).

While these and other frameworks were developed from a comprehensive set of theoretical and conceptual influences, selected constructs may not have their roots in Extension’s non-formal education context, and therefore may not be best suited for convenient adoption by Extension professionals (Deen et al., 2014). Hence, there is a need to systematically explore and develop an intercultural competence framework tailored to the wider Extension education context to better position Extension professionals to meet the needs of an increasingly-diverse clientele.

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METHODS

We utilized a 3-phase Delphi approach for this study. Commonly employed in the social sciences, a Delphi approach typically emphasizes “structured anonymous communication between individuals who hold expertise on a certain topic with a goal of arriving at a consensus in the areas of policy, practice, or organizational decision making” (Birdsall, 2004; Brady, 2015, p. 1). The panel assembled for this study included a purposive sample of 35 experts across the United States who were solicited for engagement based upon their expertise and contributions to intercultural competence training and administration. Panellists included experts who contributed to the establishment and delivery of culturally competent curricula such as *Navigating Differences*, *Coming Together for Racial Understanding*, and the IDI.

We used an intentional multi-phased process to formalize the expert panel. First, the principal investigator conducted secondary research while soliciting recommendations from national and international associations to develop the initial list of potential panellists. The research team reviewed the initial list, provided their recommendations, and finalized the initial sampling frame based on the team’s agreement. The principal investigator then contacted each potential panellist to schedule a time to conduct an introductory call. The research team provided additional information (i.e., working with multicultural audience, studying Extension context, and study components) about the study to those who responded to emails from the principal investigator. The principal investigator also addressed study and/or participation questions before seeking confirmation for participation in the study. Those who agreed to participate also helped identify additional relevant experts (via snowball sampling) to include on the Delphi panel. All of these steps led to identifying an expert panel consisting of 35 professionals.

While various formats exist, most Delphi studies follow three structured rounds, beginning with open or semi-open questions which become increasingly structured in subsequent waves “in order to verify previous consensus, test prepositions, and finalize decision-making models” (Birdsall, 2004; Brady, 2015, p. 3). Our study adhered to this standard format. In the first phase, we asked the panel to identify the competencies they perceived to be important for the development of a culturally-competent Extension educator. These included competencies related to culturally responsive teaching and facilitating civil discourse. In the first phase, we achieved a 100% response rate ($n = 35$). The responses from the first phase resulted in the identification of over 200 competency items.

We utilized a 7-point Likert-type agreement scale in the second phase to refine the list based on the panellists’ consensus on the importance of each competency for working with multicultural audiences. We utilized the *a*

priori definition of consensus, where two-thirds of the panel must select “Strongly Agree” (7) or “Agree” (6). We achieved a response rate of 97% for this round ($n = 34$). Seventeen (17) competency items did not achieve the consensus threshold, and we eliminated them from the initial list (from phase one).

For the third and final phase, we asked panellists to identify the career phase in which each competency should be developed—and the importance of developing it during that career phase—on a 5-point Likert-type scale (“Not Important at all” to “Very Important”). The phases included: (a) in the first year, (b) between one to three years, (c) four to seven years, (d) eight to 10 years, and (e) 11+ years. We analysed the career phase components based on the panel’s consensus. We utilized the *a priori* definition of consensus to be two-thirds of the panel selecting “Very important.” The *a priori* definition differed from the previous round to ensure development of a meaningful yet feasible framework. We achieved a response rate of 94% for this round ($n = 33$). Respondents agreed upon a final list of 54 competencies. The intention of this last phase was to use the list of competencies to identify a career-progression-based intercultural competence model.

RESULTS

Through the Delphi technique, the panel agreed upon nine important personal attributes and attitudes, 15 areas of required knowledge, and 30 necessary skills (Tables 1–7). Six of the personal attributes and attitudes should be developed within the first year, while the remaining three should be developed within the first three years. Two of the required areas of knowledge should also be developed within the first year, while the remaining 13 should be developed within the first three years. There are six skills that need to develop within the first year, while another 20 should be developed within the first three years and four need to be developed during the first four to seven years on the job.

DISCUSSION

While intercultural competence models have proliferated over the last two decades, these frameworks may not always be best suited to Extension’s non-formal education context (Deen et al., 2014). With this possible shortcoming in mind, we sought to develop an intercultural competence framework tailored and highly applicable to Extension education’s unique situations and settings. The overarching purpose of our study was to provide a framework that is relevant to Extension in that it reflects the career progression of Extension professionals and positions in order to effectively meet the needs of diverse clientele. Using a semi-structured 3-phased Delphi approach, we facilitated panel consensus on 54 competencies indicating intercultural competency in Extension. We identified competencies that should be

Table 1. Personal Attributes and Attitudes with Over Two-Thirds Panel Consensus for Importance Within the First Year

Personal Attributes and Attitudes	Percentage of respondents who rated the trait/attitude as very important	Percentage of respondents who believe the trait/attitude needs to be developed in the first year of an Extension career
Open-minded	76	64
Respect	76	82
Humility	73	73
Empathy	70	79
Trustworthiness	67	67
Honesty	64	85

Table 2. Personal Attributes and Attitudes with Over Two-Thirds Panel Consensus for Importance Within the First Three Years of an Extension Career

Personal Attributes and Attitudes	Percentage of respondents who rated the trait/attitude as very important	Percentage of respondents who believe the trait/attitude needs to be developed in the first year of an Extension career
Willingness to challenge one's own attitudes, preexisting beliefs and cultural assumptions	70	85
Desire to be a lifelong learner around issues of diversity, equity and inclusion	70	70
Inclusivity	70	94

Table 3. Knowledge Area with over Two-Third Panel Consensus for Importance within the First Year of an Extension Career

Knowledge Area	Percentage of respondents who rated the area as very important	Percentage of respondents who believe the area should be developed in the first year of an Extension career
Understand the importance of diversity and inclusion	73	76
Understand that cultural issues may generate emotional reactions	64	64

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Table 4. Knowledge Area with over Two-Thirds Panel Consensus for Importance within the First Three Years of a Career in Extension

Knowledge Area	Percentage of respondents who rated the area as very important	Percentage of respondents who believe the area should be developed in the first three years of an Extension career
Self-awareness of one's cultural/social identities, assumptions, values, norms, biases, stereotypes, preferences, experience of privilege and oppression, and how they shape one's worldview	76	91
Knowledge of how to build trust with people who are different from themselves across race, class, disabilities, gender, sexual orientation and other human differences	70	85
Understand the barriers for diverse cultures to engage in Extension programs and services, including the impacts of previous interactions and engagement with programs.	70	91
Understand the multiple dimensions of diversity	67	82
Knowledge of the impacts of race and racism on various aspects of today's society	67	82
Understand white supremacy, its basic functions, and how it may manifest in the workplace or classroom	67	73
Knowledge of the target community's composition and how it relates to county, state, and national demographics	67	91
Understand how culture, class, gender, age, experiences, etc. affect individuals and their decisions, reactions and interactions	64	85
Recognition of the importance of diversity in the educational team	64	85
Knowledge of cultural blindness: inability to understand how particular matters might be viewed by people of a different culture because of a rigid adherence to the views, attitudes, and values of one's own culture or because the perspective of one's own culture is sufficiently limiting to make it difficult to see alternatives	64	79
Knowledge of the history and culture of the Land Grant system and its relation to the local communities it serves	64	85
Understand how anti-Blackness exists, operates, and manifests in society	64	85
Understand the centrality of whiteness within the culture, values, mission, and history of 1862s, which often reinforces dominant Western perspectives/ideologies and approaches	64	85

Table 5. Skills With over Two-Thirds Panel Consensus as Important Within the First Year of an Extension Career

Skill Area	Percentage of respondents who rated the skill as very important	Percentage of respondents who believe the skill should be developed within the first year of an Extension career
Ability to appreciate diversity and inclusion	79	73
Ability to seek and find the humanity in every individual	73	67
Ability to see self as an educator/facilitator and not an expert or savior	73	70
Communicative ability	70	64
Ability to be accountable	70	79
Ability to acknowledge “not knowing” when one doesn’t understand and seeks clarification when appropriate	70	73

developed during an Extension professional’s first year in their career, first three years, and years two through seven, with the goal of systematically laying the groundwork for the development of a contextually-grounded and consensus-driven intercultural competence framework for Extension professionals.

We believe that our findings provide a foundation to inform professional development curricula tailored to the distinct career phases of an Extension educator. We consider this approach distinct from existing intercultural competence models used by Extension—such as Navigating Differences and Coming Together for Racial Understanding—as well as from rudimentary racial sensitivity trainings or workshops that rely on commercial instruments such as the IDI (Moncloa et al., 2019). One prominent takeaway from our results is that Extension professionals should develop six out of nine personal attributes and attitudes embracing cultural diversity within the first year of their career. We believe that we should use these six personal attributes and attitudes as a criterion for recruiting individuals who are quickly capable of working effectively with diverse client groups. Moncloa et al. (2019)’s assertion that “Extension administrators should consider hiring individuals with higher levels of intercultural competence” (p. 9) supports this emphasis on attribute- and attitude-informed recruitment by placing desired intercultural competence attributes in position descriptions and asking questions in position interviews that “allow candidates to demonstrate their intercultural knowledge and skills” (p. 10). In addition to leveraging the identified attributes, attitudes, knowledge, and skills within the recruitment process, Extension can use these competencies

to inform onboarding and training processes for first-year professionals in an effort to further equip newly-recruited Extension professionals to work with diverse communities.

To effectively develop intercultural-competent attributes and attitudes, we argue that instructional strategies should focus on directing the mindset of early-career Extension professionals toward the attributes and skills identified in this study. The attributes and attitudes, knowledge, and skills for early career professionals (those within first three years from hire date) can inform in-service trainings and other targeted professional development opportunities in order to facilitate continuous and gradual improvement toward intercultural competence. Our findings indicate that some of the skills for working with diverse cultural groups should be developed within two to seven years from hire date (see Table 7). As a result, Extension professionals should prioritize in-service trainings that focus on integrating and prioritizing the development of these skills during this career phase to ensure that they can continue their progression towards intercultural competence—a recognized precursor critical to effectively serving diverse communities (Deen et al., 2014; Moncloa, 2019).

We believe the findings presented in this study can be used to develop a holistic change pathway for building intercultural competence among early-career Extension professionals. As recognized by Moncloa et al. (2019), the process to create positive organizational change requires anchoring intercultural competence building efforts into Extension’s unique organizational culture, as embedding intercultural competence education into existing professional development trainings may reduce employee resistance

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Table 6. Skills with over Two-Thirds Panel Consensus as Important within the First Three Years of an Extension Career

Skill Area	Percentage of respondents who rated the skill as very important	Percentage of respondents who believe the skill should be developed within the first three years of an Extension career
Ability to ensure equitable participation where all voices are heard	79	79
Openness to giving and receiving constructive feedback	76	91
Ability to recognize the role of power in the potential dynamics arising from the discourse	76	70
Ability to create safe space for learning, dialogue and discussion	76	91
Ability to identify their own ethical commitments and responsibilities	76	91
Critical thinking ability	73	94
Champion for diversity, equity, and inclusion in Extension	73	67
Ability to step outside of comfort zone and embrace or be comfortable with discomfort	70	85
Ability to look beyond self and acknowledge the worldviews and perspectives of others	70	88
Self-reflective: The ability to assess one's own cultural norms, values, beliefs, behaviors, biases, prejudices and perspectives in addition to any potential positions of power and privilege based on group membership or social identity.	70	85
Ability to remain fully present during conversation to be able to observe and respond to what is actually happening in the moment (mindfulness)	70	79
Ability to identify unconscious and conscious biases	67	79
Ability to remain nonjudgmental or suspend judgement	67	91
Ability to be proactive instead of reactive	67	79
Ability to build trusting relationships with a diverse set of individuals and groups	64	85
Ability to practice active listening: The ability to focus completely on a speaker, understand their message, comprehend the information, and respond thoughtfully	64	94
Ability to evaluate over-generalization and stereotypes	64	91
Ability to demonstrate a positive perspective towards others including parents, families, and communities	64	91
Ability to create and maintain personal boundaries	64	88
Ability to measure parity in program participation to understand efficacy in reaching the various cultural demographics within their community	64	67

Table 7. Skills with over Two-Thirds Panel Consensus for Importance within the First Two-Seven Years of an Extension Career

Skill Area	Percentage of respondents who rated the skill as very important	Percentage of respondents who believe the skill should be developed within the first two to seven years of an Extension career
Ability to identify and build relationships with cultural guides/brokers to help connect with and navigate culturally different communities	70	82
Ability to develop strategic alliances or partnerships with non-traditional groups	70	88
Ability to provide a participant-centered learning environment that helps to create new knowledge through dialogue, debate and the application of analytical tools and frameworks	64	82
Ability to manage the facilitation role appropriately by remaining neutral, interjecting with questions/comments appropriately and summarizing key points	64	82

and/or other barriers to behaviour change. To achieve this change, the core intercultural competencies agreed upon by the Delphi panel should be mapped to existing curricula and interventions to solidify and clarify a strategy for organizational change within Extension. This exercise can ensure that this pathway of change incorporates effective approaches and helps to identify salient gaps, ensuring that new activities, curricula, or interventions are created to ensure progress towards an intercultural-competent Extension workforce. While we ultimately believe our findings serve as a baseline for contextually-driven intercultural competence in Extension, we encourage program planners and administrators to further explore professional development opportunities that target the core cultural competencies necessary for reaching all audiences.

While we identified 54 intercultural competencies, there may be other competencies relevant to Extension professionals. Validation of our findings is necessary to identify other competencies that may be appropriate to specific and localized situations. Validation may be accomplished by adapting identified competencies into construct- or domain-specific scales (e.g., first year skill area competencies) and assessing the representativeness and overall adequacy of the scales through confirmatory factor analysis and/or additional reliability testing (Liles & Mustian, 2004; Rogers et al., 2012; Tigelaar et al., 2004).

CONCLUSION

As Extension clientele continue to diversify, it is important that Extension institutions recognize the need to develop and refine the intercultural competencies of their workforce in order to provide relevant and responsive education for multicultural audiences (Deen et al., 2014). In many respects, Extension's institutional pivot towards intercultural-competent engagement is already underway. In the United States, training programs in states such as Kansas, North Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin have leveraged existing competency frameworks to improve clientele outreach and impact. While these programs have been successful, they are limited in scope since the constructs and competencies they prioritize for personnel may not always be best suited to Extension's non-formal education context (Deen et al., 2014). To address this concern, our study applied a consensus-building approach to identify a set of competencies grounded in the Extension education context. We hope the 54 competencies identified in this study will prompt further exploration and refinement of salient intercultural-competence requirements for Extension professionals. The adaptation of this process across Extension contexts can ensure that the identified competencies remain locally relevant, paving the way for the successful implementation of intercultural-competence building efforts across Extension.

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