Finding the Community's Voice: Community-Based Participatory Research in Three Iowa Counties

Tera R. Hurt, Soyoung Park, Margaret C. O'Connor, Chanelle Murtha, and Maya Bartel

Abstract

Engaging all Iowans in building a stronger state, preparing for a thriving future, and solving contemporary problems in research, education, and extension are central to the mission and vision of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach (EO). Achieving these goals will hinge upon EO's ability to innovate and respond to the needs and interests of Iowa's diverse residents. Similar to other rural states, the composition of Iowa's population is evolving in terms of race, nationality, economics, and education. The identities of EO staff do not reflect the communities EO is committed to serving; therefore, programming and activities may lack cultural relevance. In three small studies, Iowa State faculty and research assistants, EO staff, and community consultants (CCs) collaboratively organized local "study circles" and "action forums" in an effort to better understand underrepresented families' needs in three Iowa counties. The team recruited 98 adults and youth to participate in these group discussions. Often, participants were not aware of EO's mission, logo, or programs and services. Residents offered ideas for fostering familiarity, trust, and connection. CCs also listened to residents' barriers to engagement, such as program formats and topics, and documented useful resources to enhance accessibility. Participants shared ideas for programs that they would be motivated to engage in. In this article, the authors outline connections to prior work, recommendations, and limitations.

Iowa State University (Iowa State) Extension and Outreach (EO) must rise to the challenge of serving a diversifying population. As Atiles and Eubanks (2014) noted, underrepresented residents are "mostly untouched by [Extension] programming" (p. 4). Community assessments have provided insight into how EO professionals can be more effective in their outreach and practices (Ingram & Syvertsen, 2005; Teuteberg & Cummins, 2017). Scholars have also considered how best to attract diverse participants to programs and employment opportunities (Atiles & Eubanks, 2014; Settle et al., 2019) and ways of improving EO's visibility, relevance, and levels of engagement (Duke, 2014; Ingram & Syvertsen, 2005; Settle et al., 2019; Swick et al., 2021). Rogers (2004), drawing on the diffusion of innovations theory, explained how new information is communicated through "channels over time among members of a social system" to advance from no knowledge to implementation and confirmation (p. 13; Taylor & Miller, 2016). Researchers have also emphasized the importance of customer satisfaction, trust, relationship involvement, and emotional commitment for cultivating service loyalty (Salegna & Goodwin, 2005). Equally important are Extension professionals' skills and competencies (Ingram, 2013; Ross & Stoecker, 2017; Swick et al., 2021).

Despite these gains, few scholars have considered how these findings translate in Iowa. Focusing on underserved groups advances the mission and vision of EO at Iowa State to engage all Iowans in building a stronger Iowa, prepare for a thriving future, and solve contemporary problems in research, education, and extension (Iowa State EO, n.d.). State-funded, family-focused programs might give Iowa residents useful information and resources to help them build stronger relationships, enhance their well-being, and make better use of resources.

In this article, we describe an effort in the state of Iowa to learn more about gaps in EO service delivery and community outreach via a partnership between EO and community consultants (CCs). The CCs were neither employed by nor representatives of Iowa State. Rather, CCs were individuals whose significant relationships with and local knowledge of particular underserved communities allowed them to offer valuable information about locale and place that EO staff likely could not have accessed otherwise (Anderson et al., 2014). Without CCs, EO staff may not have been able to reach underserved audiences. One objective of this effort was to "facilitate interaction and build relationships that increased the adaptive capacity of local people to … organize, manage,

utilize, and enhance those resources available to them in addressing local issues and problems" (Brennan, 2007, p. 7), the end goal of which was to illuminate innovative opportunities to strengthen local communities and tap into the "motivation of the people to voluntarily come together to improve their local society" (Brennan, 2007, p. 7). Ultimately, the purpose of this research was to work in partnership with community members to identify pathways for residents to engage more effectively in EO programs and services, which in turn could build a stronger Iowa.

Method

Approach

The first author received support to conduct research across three counties, hereafter described as Studies A, B, and C. The funding opportunity for Study A focused on building a stronger Iowa (Iowa State EO, n.d.). The first author saw an opportunity to listen to African American residents in Study A, where there was a disproportionately high, and growing, populations of African American residents in the county (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015; The State Data Center of Iowa and the Iowa Commission on the Status of African Americans, 2022). Study A ran from September 2017 through June 2018. The first author later received EO financial support to replicate the work in two additional counties. This latter work comprised Studies B and C, which both ran from September 2019 through May 2020.

The first author drew on principles of community-based participatory research and collaborated closely with the EO administrative team to identify target groups whom EO had traditionally underserved, such as racial and ethnic minority, immigrant, and economically or educationally underprivileged residents (O'Fallon & Dearry, 2002). The first and third authors communicated with relevant campus offices (e.g., the Office of the Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, the Veterans Center, and the Center for LGBTQIA+ Student Success) and Iowa State faculty and staff. The first and third authors also conducted online searches of newspapers and other media to find potential CCs. The first author prioritized a list of key individuals who could be effective CCs, with the goal of finding four CCs in each of the three counties. Potential CCs were contacted and introduced to this project via phone and/or email. CCs accepted the opportunity based on their availability to meet the 3-month-long project's expectations and requirements.

CCs were well-respected lay leaders. Their knowledge of and familiarity with informal networks that allowed them to connect with underrepresented research participants was critical to the success of this project. CCs representing various underserved communities provided guidance about how to improve EO service delivery among underrepresented families. EO staff, though ineligible to serve as CCs themselves, collaborated with the CCs.

Recruitment

The CCs, the first author, and EO staff collaborated on a plan to recruit approximately 25 residents in each county to participate in community conversations about ways to engage with EO. After integrating CCs' recommendations for engaging residents and ensuring that the research strategy was culturally appropriate, the first author submitted an application to the institutional review board (IRB). All team members passed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Program certification. After the IRB granted approval, the first author met with the CCs again to train them on recruitment and data collection procedures and delivered project materials to each county's EO office (O'Fallon & Dearry, 2002).

CCs, who were familiar with the nuances of engaging underrepresented families, then used their contacts to recruit families and build the sample. They circulated an advertisement explaining that county EO staff, Iowa State faculty and staff, and lay leaders were interested in learning more about how to strengthen connections between underrepresented residents and EO. These advertisements were distributed via community newsletters and bulletins, local radio, neighborhood lists, local conferences, and listservs. CCs also recruited adult and youth participants as they crossed paths with them in the community (e.g., at the grocery store, at school, and at local events).

Discussing the project with eligible participants proved to be more beneficial than simply distributing flyers. In 5-minute conversations about the project, CCs were able to connect with potential participants and listen to residents' comments and questions about EO and their communities. CCs invited participants to scheduled group sessions based on their availability. If participants asked who else from their community would be participating, CCs shared general information about the group's composition in terms of age (e.g., youth, older adults), race (e.g., Latino, African American), and parenting status

(e.g., raising young children). Facilitators noted, however, that this was an irrelevant concern for most participants, who enrolled in the group that best fit their schedule and availability. In light of budgetary limitations and time constraints for the study period, CCs recruited small numbers of underrepresented adults and youth to participate in groups based on gender, marital status, and LGBTQ+ identity.

Data Collection

Group sessions were held at EO offices or community centers. To begin the sessions, CCs served food and drink. Then, CCs carefully read the informed consent agreement to all participants to ensure their comprehension and to minimize the likelihood of misunderstandings due to functional illiteracy or language barriers. Participants aged 18 and older consented to their own participation. Parents/guardians completed informed consent agreements on behalf of their youth either in person (at the beginning of the study group/action forum) or via mail or email prior to the group meeting. After parent/guardian consent was obtained, youth signed the informed consent agreement as well. The CCs in Study C translated the document into Spanish to increase accessibility for some participants. In all three studies, participants had an opportunity to ask questions before consenting to participate in the study.

Participants then completed demographic forms. An average of 32 people participated in each of the three studies (range 26–42). More persons identifying as women than men took part. Study A was limited to African American participants due to the recruitment criteria; Studies B and C comprised mostly Latino residents. Though the Study A adults were on average older and more educated than Study B and C participants, they were mostly unmarried, which may have contributed to their lower reported personal and household incomes. Residents in all three studies mostly reported a Christian religious affiliation; the authors did not ask Study A youth about their religious affiliation. Study B residents noted raising more children on average participants (see Table 1).

The research team modeled its approach to engagement, participation, and reflection after the methods used in the Mid Life & Beyond project (Iowa State EO, 2017). Community conversations began as study circles, which allowed residents to brainstorm ideas and recommendations. Conversations then switched focus to become action forums, in which residents advocated for the most promising and impactful solutions to implement in their communities (Iowa State EO, 2017). Each group comprised three to eight residents and was facilitated by two CCs. In these settings, residents had the opportunity to share their perspectives, talk freely with one another, and experience camaraderie, though social desirability bias could still have affected their responses. The small group size ensured that the groups were manageable for the facilitators and effective in meeting the study's goal (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the informed consent agreement, participants were advised:

> Due to the nature of the group discussion, the researchers cannot guarantee that the information shared in the communication conversation will be kept confidential. Therefore, participants should only share what they are comfortable having other people know. Participants will be asked to protect the group and individual privacy and confidentiality by not discussing who was present or what was shared.

Facilitators asked follow-up questions or probed for additional information as needed, and they focused on ensuring that all participants felt welcome and included.

CCs used digital recorders to capture the conversations and spoke in English (Studies A and B) and Spanish (Study C). To address the study's research question, the first author drafted focus group questions, and the CCs revised and approved them. The following questions were asked of the participants:

1. What do you know about Iowa State EO?
2. How could your knowledge and awareness of Iowa State EO programs and services improve?
3. What kind of programs and services would be of use and interest to you and your family?
4. What are barriers to you participating in Iowa State EO programs and services?
5. In what other ways can Iowa State EO better engage you and your family to build a stronger Iowa?

Each group session lasted approximately 60 minutes. Facilitators paid residents $25 for their participation.

Data Analyses

The first, second, third, and fourth authors reviewed all meeting recordings and notes, which made up the data set. This comprehensive review added to the dependability of the results. It was

Table 1. Sample Characteristics Across Three Studies

	Study A (*n* = 42)		Study B (*n* = 30)	Study C (*n* = 26)
	Adult sample (*n* = 32)	Youth sample[g] (*n* = 10)	Adult sample	Adult sample[h]
Gender (mode)	Female	Female	Male and Female	Female
Gender (frequency) Female Male	 24 8	 6 4	 15 15	 17 9
Race (mode)	African American	African American	Latino	Latino
Race (frequency) African American or Black Latino White Biracial Other	 32	 9 1	 9 10 7 2 2	 2 24
Age[a] (mean) *SD* Range	50.69 14.47 26-69	14.00 2.83 10-18	34.63 14.38 18-75	36.88 13.36 18-59
Marital status (mode)	Unmarried	Not applicable	Married	Married
Marital status (frequency) Married Unmarried	 9 23		 16 14	 15 11
Education (mode)	College graduate	≤ Some high school	Some college	High school diploma/GED
Education[b] (frequency) ≤ Some high school High school diploma/GED Some college or technical school College graduate Advanced degree	 1 6 9 10 6	 10	 5 6 7 6 2	 8 9 6 1 1
Number of children[c] (mean) *SD* Range	1.78 1.36 1–5	Not applicable	2.03 2.75 0–12	1.23 1.28 0–3
Religion[d] (mode)	Christian	Not applicable	Christian	Christian
Religion (frequency) Christian and related denominations Islam Mormon Nonreligious	 26 1 2		 16 2 8	 9 2

Table 1. Sample Characteristics Across Three Studies (continued)

	Study A (*n* = 42)		Study B (*n* = 30)	Study C (*n* = 26)
	Adult sample (*n* = 32)	Youth sample[g] (*n* = 10)	Adult sample	Adult sample[h]
Personal income[e] (mode)	≤ $10,000	Not applicable	$30,000 to $39,999	$30,000 to $39,999
Personal income (frequency)				
≤ $10,000	10		6	4
Between $10,000–19,999	5		3	2
Between $20,000–29,999	3			
Between $30,000–39,999	2		10	5
Between $40,000–49,999	4		3	
Between $50,000–59,999	3			
Between $60,000–69,999	1			
≥ $70,999	3		1	
Household income[f] (mode)	$20,000-$29,999		$70,000 or more	$70,000 or more
Household income (frequency)				
≤ $10,000	8		1	1
Between $10,000–19,999	3			
Between $20,000–29,999	1			
Between $30,000–39,999			2	
Between $40,000–49,999	1		4	1
Between $50,000–59,999			1	1
Between $60,000–69,999			2	1
≥ $70,999			9	5

Notes

[a] 1 participant did not provide a response in Study A and 3 participants did not provide a response in Study B.
[b] 4 participants did not provide a response in Study B and 1 participant did not provide a response in Study C.
[c] 13 participants did not provide a response in Study C.
[d] 3 participants did not provide a response in Study A, 4 participants did not provide a response in Study B, and 15 participants did not provide a response in Study C.
[e] 1 participant did not provide a response in Study A, 7 participants did not provide a response in Study B, and 2 participants did not provide a response in Study C.
[f] 3 participants did not provide a response in Study A; 11 participants did not provide a response in Study B and 4 participants did not provide a response in Study C.
[g] Youth were not asked about their marital status, religion, income, or number of children.
[h] Due to an oversight not observed until the data analysis stage, questions about children, religion, and income were only included on the English forms. The Spanish translator overlooked this page in the English document and thus did not translate the questions for the Spanish-speaking participants. Thus, 13 participants who completed Spanish forms did not respond to these demographic questions. These data are not available. Data are reported for adults (*n* = 13) who did note children, religion, and income. This is a data limitation.

not possible to isolate each participant's responses because of the nature of the group discussions. CCs in Study C translated the Spanish group discussion into a meeting summary for the first author, who was not bilingual. The first author checked this translation using Google Translate and made additional written notes about her observations. The authors cycled through iterative sequences of reviewing, categorizing, verifying, and drawing conclusions from the data. The authors created content-analytic summary tables to lay out participants' insights and to conduct initial and exploratory analyses (see Miles et al., 2020, p. 143 for an example of a content-analytic summary table).

The authors then performed data reduction to focus on the most important aspects of the dialogue among participants (Miles et al., 2020), particularly similarities and differences in the

participants' reflections and observations. The themes derived solely from the meeting discussions and reflected the participants' familiarity with EO, barriers to engagement, programs of interest, and program recommendations. The CCs then reviewed a draft of the main themes, added details, and collaboratively developed the recommendations (Carlson, 2010). This use of collaboration and peer debriefing added credibility as well as confirmability and assurance that these findings reflected the respondents' experiences and comments without influence of the authors' interests (Miles et al., 2020). Lastly, the fourth and fifth authors assisted with manuscript development.

Results

Familiarity With EO

Lack of Awareness. Participants were generally unaware of Iowa State EO's mission or branding. One person said, "I have lived here for more than 15 years and I didn't know about it." This sentiment was true for two other residents who lived in close proximity to one EO office. As one participant reflected, "I have lived here 22 years. I have seen [the facilitator] at my mom's. When I look out, I see the university sign. But this is my first time here." In only a few cases were individuals aware of the EO logo (e.g., "I have seen the logo but I am not informed."). Yet EO's brand confused them. One resident asserted, "I think it's for college students, but really, it's for the community."

Others had varying levels of familiarity with EO's programs and activities. One resident had participated in an Iowa State program at the EO office and recalled how the program helped high school students learn about agriculture and other county resources. One person was aware of 4-H, while another participant was somewhat familiar with an EO program but did not know what the program's purpose was. Among Study C residents, many of whom were immigrants, one participant said, "No one knows what 4-H is!" Only a few residents were aware of EO programming such as the Master Gardener program, ServSafe®, and nutrition initiatives. In one case, a resident was aware of EO programming but conceded, "I did not realize EO was involved in all of these programs on the brochure." Another resident concluded, "There's work being done, but awareness about the effort and who's involved is lacking."

Ways to Increase Familiarity. Residents underscored the importance of highlighting the office location by increasing signage and visibility. One resident conceded, "It's hard to recruit. You need to advertise better." Participants recommended advertising information about youth and adult programs through schools, ethnic minority-owned businesses, churches, and family-friendly events. They also suggested that EO could collaborate with area agencies with complementary missions and reach a more diverse and wider audience via social media platforms. A participant conceded, "It may not be a lack of effort, but it may be not connecting in the right places."

Advertisers should also write content in different languages (e.g., Spanish), and bilingual personnel should share literature with residents. Any poster or flyer should use pictures of attractive youth and adults and show different fashions and styles. The ads should clearly name collaborative partners because clarity is also important to program success.

Cultivating Relationships and Trust. The success of any program in a diverse community will depend upon the degree to which participants view group leaders and organizations as dependable and reliable. Professionals who want to work with diverse residents can build relationships by visiting neighborhoods, interacting with residents as they go about their daily activities (for example, gardening or walking a dog), attending community events, and regularly communicating with residents. One participant underscored the importance of building relationships in this way:

> I think knowing your community first. You can have an idea, but if you don't know the people you need to give the idea to, it is kind of hard. I guess being around the community more. Having more connections. Once you have a connection to someone, they start to conform and want to participate in your idea and all that. So, if you give an idea to a stranger, they are less likely to kind of do it. I feel like if you try to connect to more people and that way introduce the whole idea, I think it would work a lot better. This is how community is. Everyone kind of knows everyone and that's how it works best for people.

Another participant concluded, "There's a difference between receiving a flyer and having someone approach you about attending an event." A third resident offered, "It is hard to recruit. You need to build trust." Participants emphasized the

importance of EO staff showing genuine care and concern and committing themselves to being a part of the solution. On this point, participants remarked, "Act like you care," and "Be transparent." A resident cautioned EO by saying, "Do not be a company after a coin for the underprivileged." Key ways to build relationships and trust with underrepresented residents also included standing up for justice and following through on promised efforts and initiatives.

Connecting With Residents. In reflecting on how EO could better connect with diverse communities, participants described the importance of good communication skills like listening and communicating respectfully, showing care and concern, and wanting to work with families. Residents also discussed the importance of providing information about a program's mission and listing its goals.

Residents suggested that EO staff could better display the EO brand and logo, make sure that programs are family based, and provide more information about resources and opportunities. This might include working to overcome and prevent the weaknesses of earlier programs that did not include persons of color; for instance, EO staff may not have distributed program information in close enough proximity to residents' neighborhoods for them to be aware of these programs.

Attending to Context. Participants also encouraged EO to pay attention to language, culture, and lifestyles. Important suggestions for increasing the cultural sensitivity of programs and outreach included collaborating with community members on EO efforts and hiring diverse EO staff that reflect changing community demographics. It would also be helpful if residents could see themselves and their experiences represented among those working on behalf of the EO office. EO must ensure that they staff programs with relatable people from the community—"equal representation from my community," as one resident said. This may require EO to hire more local residents who speak the same language as community members and who are familiar with local norms and resources. Participants also recommended: "Hang out," "Talk to people," and "Stop. Have a conversation." One participant shared, "At the Latinx Festival, be sure Latinos are involved in sharing the message, not middle-aged White ladies." It must be clear that [EO staffers] want to engage the residents.

Showing Care and Concern. Participants emphasized the critical importance of hiring EO staff who truly care about strengthening families and who are willing to give freely of their time. Showing genuine care and concern and committing to being a part of the solution when residents raise concerns is key.

Barriers to Engagement

Residents described barriers to engagement with EO programming and resources including language (e.g., Spanish, Arabic, Sudanese), time, cost, childcare, transportation, program location, and lack of awareness. One respondent reflected, "I had some privilege to get here and participate in this, such as a car that I could afford to put gas in." Offering programs at different times on weekdays and weekends would help accommodate varying work schedules, as would offering programming at businesses or area industrial plants where people are located. Residents would also be receptive to coming to the EO office for an open house to learn about Iowa State programs and opportunities.

Given concerns about the current political climate, respondents also had concerns about engaging in new things away from home and disclosing personal information. The participants reflected on this psychological barrier in this way: "People are fearful because of the current [federal and state] administration. You may not want to engage with someone in a suit who knocks on your door."

Programs of Interest

Participants offered a list of programs that they would be motivated to take part in. They suggested that relationship-focused workshops should emphasize parent-youth communication and domestic violence prevention, while health programs should stress mental and physical well-being (e.g., home health care, yoga). Participants advised expanding internet access. They recommended courses focused on life and social skills (e.g., finances, budgeting, nutrition, cooking, work-life balance, parenting, engagement with law enforcement) and suggested leveraging the privilege among White families who farm and take part in 4-H to share skills and knowledge with Spanish-speaking youth and families.

There was a particular focus on education in participants' suggestions, including workshops to address academic engagement, parent engagement and advocacy, and college preparedness and financing (especially for nontraditional adult students and immigrants). Increasing access to English as a second language classes for older adults would be a fruitful avenue. Civic

engagement courses would advance participants' understanding of Iowa history, American culture, voting, and laws, and accompanying support groups could give residents a safe space to ask questions as they confront new challenges in their communities or apply the information they learn in the civics sessions. Participants also recommended offering programming to increase understanding about Iowa State, covering such topics as Iowa State Latino Visit Day and scholarships. Another parent added:

> I have [military experience that paid for my education], but when it came to my daughter to go to college, I was ignorant. I am embarrassed to say it. I did not come from a family that was college educated. But we do need to do that.

Programming focused on career exploration and job readiness would also be helpful.

One participant said, "A lot of people leave for Des Moines [the state capital and an urban center]." Another resident suggested offering programs that involved

> bringing representative people from different jobs like engineers, welding companies, electricity, plumbing… things like that. That they talk about the job description and what young people need to do that job. They also can bring nurses to talk about what the young people need to work in the health area.

A third participant chimed in:

> I think something that would empower the community is to have a vision after high school. If youth leave, you will not see the future here. As in jobwise. Everyone is focusing on having the youth stay here because a lot of people don't really want to be here. They want to move.…You don't really see a lot of focus on youth here. I mean you see education-wise or college-wise, but you don't see opportunity after.

Other residents spoke about men's difficulty with finding employment and a general lack of professional opportunities. One participant lamented, "My husband has a master's and he has found it very hard to find a job after being 7 years in the military. It's very hard so I cannot disagree with that."

Participants also desired events to promote inclusion and togetherness. One participant shared, "We have a lot of potential in our community, but people always knock us down." There is a perception that the White community does not want to engage with underrepresented residents. Structured activities will help to break down misperceptions, cultivate racial literacy, and develop community pride. One way to achieve this goal, according to the residents, is to have one event that celebrates all ethnicities inspired by African immigrants, Latinos, and refugees—that is, do not divide events based on various ethnicities. One participant supported this point, saying, "We come to this country to get our children ahead and help our families." Overcoming local community challenges and isolation is a key route to forward progress.

Participants advised holding programs near people's jobs and homes: "Take the program to the people." Programs should feature small group discussions, be interactive, and be held in "safe places." EO staff should have protocols developed to effectively respond to situations that undermine inclusiveness and community. Using food and appropriate audiovisual equipment (e.g., microphone) to ensure accessibility for all, including the hearing impaired, is important.

Desired Program Features

Adults and youth suggested a list of qualities that good group leaders should display. Participants appreciated group leaders who used eye contact to show commitment, friendliness, warmth, honesty, and openness to communication. Participants also noted the significance of speaking tone to convey an environment that is welcoming to those with different backgrounds and ways of thinking. Good group leaders should know the program content and relevant information well and should teach the program without injecting their own values. Participants also commented that good group leaders should be comfortable in admitting when they do not know the answer to a question.

Participants discussed the many problems that can arise in serving underrepresented youth and adults. Sometimes agencies only focus on assisting individuals instead of whole families. Agencies may hire workers from other diverse backgrounds who are not committed to working with diverse families or are not supportive of underrepresented families' strengths. Participants sometimes felt that agency professionals lacked problem-solving and listening skills and did not show an understanding

of family challenges. Participants also needed more information about community resources and programs; they recommended adding funding to support underrepresented families' well-being. They talked about a need for ethnic minority-owned and ethnic minority-operated businesses and agencies to bring together their interests and efforts and to build a network to better support the community's needs.

Discussion

This article provides context-specific information for EO professionals, practitioners, and other faculty and staff engaged in community-campus partnerships who seek to increase their reach and impact in Iowa (Atiles & Eubanks, 2014; Ingram & Syvertsen, 2005; Teuteberg & Cummins, 2017). Underrepresented residents shared their views about their familiarity with EO, barriers to engagement, programs of interest, and desired program features. Residents lifted their voices, providing specific examples of how their lack of awareness affected their interest in program participation and offering guidance on how to improve EO visibility (Atiles & Eubanks, 2014; Duke, 2014; Ingram & Syvertsen, 2005; Rogers, 2004; Settle et al., 2019; Swick et al., 2021; Taylor & Miller, 2016). Participants corroborated themes highlighted in earlier work related to the need for EO professionals to cultivate trust and show care and concern in service delivery (Ingram, 2013; Ross & Stoecker, 2017; Salenga & Goodwin, 2005; Swick et al., 2021). These elements are foundational to any programming tailored to community residents' interests and needs (Ingram et al., 2004). CCs played a pivotal role in leveraging their knowledge of local context to recruit, engage, and hear from area residents (Anderson et al., 2014; Brennan, 2007). From this research, the authors derived the following recommendations that corroborate previous literature and align with the residents' perspectives.

Recommendations

Building on the framework that Sero and Lachapelle (2018) proposed, we outline the following four recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Improve awareness about what people know.

- Use communication networks that underrepresented residents listen to, read, or follow. Post flyers and billboards in their neighborhoods, churches, and schools and in businesses owned by underrepresented entrepreneurs.
- Make use of visuals relevant to residents' culture (e.g., attractive youth and adults).
- Educate residents about EO staff members and all available EO programs; connect these programs to the EO logo, brand, and mission.

Recommendation 2: Increase participation and promote what people do.

- Point out the opportunity to take part in programs and meet new people in one's community.
- Make program topics relevant to residents' lifestyles, interests, and well-being.
- Be clear about program goals.
- Offer incentives (e.g., food, cash, in-kind gifts, certificates of completion, transportation).
- Plan brief programs (no more than 90 minutes) with welcoming atmospheres at convenient locations.
- Build trust by keeping promises and truly serving families.

Recommendation 3: Provide opportunities to talk with residents to improve what people hear.

- EO should communicate with residents and stay in contact with the community.
- To ensure continued involvement in the community, EO can work with social groups with mostly underrepresented memberships, such as fraternities, sororities, and social service organizations, or could open a satellite office with another agency or liaison.
- EO can contribute to a network of community resources that includes ethnic minority-serving businesses and agencies with related missions. These groups can better work together in supporting one another.
- Invest time and resources to build trust among EO and county residents working with underrepresented leaders or professionals. Increase opportunities for EO staff to regularly connect with area residents at community events.

Recommendation 4: Enhance knowledge about resources and activities.

- Include respected and trusted leaders with backgrounds in ethnic minority-serving, family relationships in EO hiring, program recruitment, implementation, and evaluation. Be active in endorsing EO initiatives across the community (e.g., the Juntos program's use of "cultural navigators") (Iowa State EO, 2016).

- Make sure that there are chances for EO staff and group leaders to (a) achieve professional development related to problem-solving, understanding, openness, excellence, and listening; (b) be aware of strengths and unique qualities of underrepresented families; and (c) be committed to serving underrepresented youth and adults.
- Make sure that group leaders who know about program content also solicit participant opinions and feedback; model communication skills such as using eye contact to show commitment, loyalty, and investment; and listen well. Make sure that group leaders are friendly, warm, relatable, honest, and open. Promote an environment that respects and includes different backgrounds and ways of thinking. Group leaders should be experienced with the topic being discussed.
- Create a position within County Extension that would allow a staff member to be consistently present at community events and to build bonds with county residents. Look to other Iowa counties for models (e.g., Northwest Iowa Human Science educators).

Limitations

This project had some limitations. First, the group discussions took place on weekend days or weekday evenings; the dates and times may not have been convenient for some adults who might have liked to join. The results are thus transferable to residents who do not hold employment or other commitments on weekend days or weekday evenings.

A second limitation is that the qualities and experiences of the participants did not reflect all underrepresented people in their county of residence and, thus, do not represent all of their county-residing peers.

A third limitation is that some residents were unable to differentiate between Iowa State, the university, and Iowa State EO, the entity designed to bring research-based information to the community from Iowa State. Recall one resident who asserted, "I think it's for college students, but really, it's for the community." Therefore, their lack of knowledge about Iowa State and EO may have constrained their awareness about the presence of EO in their neighborhoods and communities. It may be beneficial to educate all participating residents about this distinction in order to provide clarity about EO's role in the community—that is, that EO offers resources and information to the residents themselves (not just college students)—thus facilitating an opportunity to receive actionable feedback from residents.

A fourth limitation is that the demographic form did not include a nonbinary option for gender. Though the facilitators noted the oversight and were supportive of the participants, this point may have unintentionally affected participants' engagement and disclosure in the focus group discussion. Participant forms should be more inclusive of these identities (e.g., adding "other").

A fifth limitation is that though lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) persons were a targeted audience of interest, parents/guardians of youth who identified as LGBTQ were reluctant to sign the consent form out of concern for their youth's engagement with others in the community and their well-being, as noted in previous work (Grafsky, 2014). Thus, there was very little representation from these residents despite the CCs efforts, and their perspectives were less represented in this study than desired. The authors advise proactively discussing this recruitment barrier with LGBTQ parents in the future to gain buy-in and earn their trust as far as allowing their children to participate in these kind of opportunities.

A sixth limitation was that participants' ages ranged from 10 to 75, and thus their lived experiences of residing in the counties and their knowledge of and engagement with EO varied.

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About the Authors

Tera R. Jordan publishes scholarly work using the name, Tera R. Hurt. She is the assistant provost for faculty development and an associate professor of Human Development and Family Studies at

Iowa State University. Soyoung Park is a Master's student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State University. Margaret C. O'Connor is a doctoral student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State University. Chanelle Murtha is an undergraduate student at the University of Northern Iowa. Maya Bartel is a doctoral student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State University.

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