

**Reaching All People: An Examination of Felt Community Representation in Tennessee
Extension Programming**

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Introduction

The mission of Tennessee Extension is to guide the improvement of its residents' quality of life and solve problems through the application of research and evidence-based knowledge. To accomplish this, Extension needs to reach and represent all communities within its system and demonstrate public value within its programs (Franz, 2015). When groups and individuals are underrepresented or excluded from programs altogether, it diminishes the efficacy of the system (Franz, 2015; Kalambokidis, 2011; Maulu et al., 2021; Settle et al., 2019). This is especially important within Tennessee as more cities urbanize and the population becomes more diverse. Changing population demographics provides a unique opportunity to enhance the visibility and reach of Extension (Campbell et al., 2023). Research has shown that Extension agents believe there is a significant need for program improvement and development for underrepresented populations within their system (Hlatshwayo et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2022; Narine et al., 2019). As Tennessee's population becomes further removed from areas represented by Extension, it is important to acknowledge and address change within its practices. The Diversity & Inclusion Theory of Change provides a conceptual perspective to evaluate ways of implementing change within the Extension system related to promoting equity and inclusion for all (Rutherford, 2021).

Purpose and Objectives

We conducted this research as part of a statewide effort to inform the new Extension strategic plan. Specifically, we sought to examine if Tennessee communities feel represented in Extension services and how we can better reach diverse communities with our programming. To do so, we developed four research questions:

1. To what extent do Tennessee residents feel their community is represented by Extension?
2. Do residents' feelings of community representation differ based on whether their community is metro or nonmetro?
3. Do residents' feelings of community representation differ based on income group?
4. Do residents' feelings of community representation differ based on whether they identify as a racial minority?

Methods

We launched an online survey through Qualtrics recruitment panels to obtain a non-probability sample of adult residents across the three primary regions of Tennessee. Non-probability sampling is an approach commonly used to make population estimates when establishing a true sampling frame is not possible (Baker et al., 2013). We developed the survey instrument with the purpose of informing the new Tennessee Extension Strategic Plan. The instrument items were developed in consultation with a panel of twenty Extension experts across the state who represented one of several sub tasks forces on the Strategic Planning Team. One task force included the Engaging Diverse Communities (EDC) group, who was charged with implementing strategic plan items geared toward enhancing representation and inclusion in Extension programming. We worked with those group members to develop five items for inclusion in the questionnaire that would help direct their efforts. We also collected demographic information to help us better examine different community groups' experiences with and perceptions of inclusion in Extension.

Data collection resulted in 1,508 usable responses from Tennessee adult residents, comprising a response rate of 57.6%. Based on the rigor of the demographic quotas associated with the response panels, we deemed the response rate sufficient. The EDC segment of the data collection instrument was only displayed to respondents who indicated they had at least heard of Extension,

which resulted in a revised sample ($N = 338$) for primary data analysis in this study. Data analyses for the remaining research questions included independent samples t-tests (racial minority, metro/nonmetro, high/low income group).

Results

Overall, respondents felt their community was represented by Extension. Specifically, 121 (35.8%) respondents felt very represented, 131 (38.8%) felt represented, 67 (19.8%) were neutral in feelings of representation, 16 (5.6%) felt unrepresented, and 3 (0.9%) felt very unrepresented. When we examined differences in respondents' feelings of community representation, we did not find significant differences based on whether respondents were from metro ($n = 274$; $M = 4.04$; $SD = .93$) or nonmetro ($n = 64$; $M = 4.02$; $SD = .83$) communities, $t(336) = .24$, $p = .81$. However, we did observe differences based on their income level, $t(336) = -2.73$, $p = .006$. Respondents in the lower income group of less than \$49,999 annual income ($n = 91$; $M = 3.81$, $SD = .88$) felt less represented than respondents in the higher income group of >\$49,999 annual income ($n = 247$; $M = 4.12$; $SD = .91$). Lastly, we observed significant differences in felt community representation based on whether respondents identified as white ($n = 281$; $M = 4.10$; $SD = .87$) or a racial minority ($n = 57$; $M = 3.74$; $SD = 1.06$), $t(336) = 2.4$, $p = .018$.

Implications and Recommendations

While our descriptive findings for research question one indicates the majority of respondents felt represented in Extension programming, we have to consider the demographic makeup of our respondents. Only those who indicated having ever heard of Extension participated in this section of the survey. Of those respondents, only 57 identified as non-White. This, along with the significant differences observed in feelings of community representation based on racial association, supports the need to expand the reach and content of Extension programs (Hlatshwayo et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2022; Narine et al., 2019). We also observed differences in feelings of representation based on respondents' financial status in that those in the lower income group felt less community representation than those in middle to upper group. This finding holds implications for programming in high-poverty communities in both urban and rural areas and calls for improvement upon current or outdated programming that may not be reaching the population of the state equally (Rutherford, 2021). We did not observe differences based on metro or nonmetro communities, which may warrant further investigation with a larger sample with enough statistical power to compare communities across all rural urban continuum codes rather than only the two groups. Future research in this area may also benefit from setting race quotas for underrepresented groups higher than the state population data to allow for better comparisons across groups. This could help determine a more precise account of the felt representation and inclusion among the different communities or groups affected by limitations in the reach of Tennessee Extension programming.

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