Fostering a Sense of Belonging in Urban Extension for Internal and External Stakeholders

Ramona Madhosingh-Hector
University of Florida, ramona.m.hector@ufl.edu

Linda M. Seals
University of Florida, lseals@ufl.edu

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In urban areas, the communities are as diverse as the issues, and different educational and engagement strategies must be deployed to support urban Extension clientele. Urban communities must connect with and feel a sense of "belonging" with Extension–this connection can strengthen Extension's presence and value proposition to urban constituents. This study found that although Extension was engaged in efforts to support belonging, its efforts were hampered by a lack of collaboration and commitment to supporting a system-wide effort to change the culture. Intentionality, emotional intelligence, and dialogue were presented as strategies to foster a sense of belonging for Extension personnel and clientele. If the tools provided are used to implement strategies leading to belonging, Extension may evolve further as a high-performing, inclusive, accountable, and equitable workplace that is responsive, representative, and relevant to an urban clientele.

Keywords: belonging, urban, Extension, stakeholders, relationships, diversity

Extension addresses public needs by providing non-formal education to multiple stakeholders and communities of all sizes. According to the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d.), Extension empowers stakeholders to meet challenges, including nutrition, food safety, disaster management, and stewardship of the environment. The National Urban Extension Leaders (NUEL, 2019) identifies urban Extension as a subject of great interest for Extension professionals given trends in population growth and evolution of diverse urban communities across the United States. NUEL's work is focused on the long-term value of Extension for urban constituents and increasing capacity within Extension to serve urban communities. Urban communities are diverse, and Whitehall et al. (2021) highlight that "many populations remain underserved, and the Extension system faces the challenge of being inclusive in our multicultural world" (p. 21). To address the increasing diversity of urban communities, it is "important that Extension educators receive training on intercultural knowledge and competence" (Whitehall et al., 2021, p. 21).

The sheer complexity of urban communities regarding geography, partners, service availability, and commute patterns presents barriers for societal integration that support strong relationships and identities. To adequately respond to issues facing urban constituents, Extension must look

inward on its systems and policies to ensure programs, partnerships, personnel, and delivery methods are relatable and accessible to its diverse clientele. Thus far, through its Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP), Extension has identified diversity, equity, and inclusion as a priority issue with a commitment to close the gap through new and existing programs and resources (Extension Foundation, 2022). Land-Grant Universities are committed to research, teaching, and outreach, and many are already promoting cultural awareness training for Extension professionals (Whitehall et al., 2021). Many universities, however, have not addressed belonging in the context of communities. Chazdon et al. (2021, p. 2) identify six dimensions of inclusion which include "leadership energy to promote inclusion," "resources to address inclusion," and "policies and practices that promote inclusion," which may be used to foster a sense of belonging.

Theoretical Framework

The complexity and diversity of urban communities make it difficult for individuals and families to "belong." Belonging involves an emotional attachment, and people belong to "collectivities and states, as well as on the social, economic, and political effects of moments when such belongings are displaced as a result of industrialization and/or migration" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 198) as would be applicable with refugees or disaster displaced individuals. Yuval-Davis (2006) and Chin (2019) argue that belonging is connected to social and political theory, and Chin (2019) connects belonging to the concept of social cohesion. Walton and Cohen (2007) echo Baumeister and Leary (1995) that belonging has a social component and "social connectedness predicts favorable outcomes" (p. 82), which aligns with Chin's (2019) concept of social cohesion. Malone et al. (2012, p. 311) claim that it is "evolutionary" to belong, an important part of "human existence and culture," and "personality traits" influence individuals to seek "acceptance and avoid rejection." Chin (2019, p. 716) claims that "belonging surrounds the ideal model of political membership; how political community should be constructed in light of contemporary diversity, the stress that diversity places on citizenship and the forms of rights and accommodation sought. In critical social theory, belonging concerns how the political community is constructed and lived; how power, agency, and "the politics of belonging" affect group belonging, inclusion, and exclusion." Baumeister and Leary (1995) cite the fundamental nature of belonging as reflected in Maslow's (1968) hierarchy which places "belonging and love needs" on the third tier, above physiological and safety needs.

It is possible for people to "belong" with varying levels of attachment in "concrete or abstract" terms based on three analytical levels related to "social locations," "individuals' identifications," and "ethical and political value systems" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199). These analytical levels are interrelated, reinforcing the notion that belonging is a "dynamic process," and social and economic locations vary based on age group, profession, or kinship. Belonging can also be aligned with positions of power, especially in the context of socioeconomic locations, which might be heavily influenced by historical context, and Yuval-Davis (2006) highlights that

intersectionality is important when reviewing social divisions given that individual identities are complex. The experience of a Caucasian woman under 25 years of age living in the city or countryside would be different from that of a woman of color. Experience would also vary based on socioeconomic status (middle or low income), sexuality, and ability. In short, the ability to review the contexts of belonging is based on an individuals' familiarity, a process Yuval-Davis (2006) likens to a rainbow wherein the "colors we distinguish depends on our specific social and linguistic milieu" (p. 201).

A further examination of the concept of belonging and its connections to social cohesion, Chin (2019) reports on "groupness," which goes beyond a collection of individuals. It examines "why and how we belong to any group," which in turn is connected to "inclusion and relations," which leads to belonging and can be "described in terms of safety and familiarity" (p. 717). Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 204) raises the issue of "boundary maintenance," an imaginary line that reflects the "us" versus "them" approach in the "politics of belonging," which aligns with Chin's (2019) idea of membership or "groupness." Belonging is also a value judgment that is aligned with individual and collective identities, which are influenced by social locations and politics of belonging. Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 205) discusses that belonging is comprised of roles and narratives relative to social locations and identity and contends that belonging has a "participatory dimension of citizenship as well as in relation to issues of status and entitlements such membership entails." Some researchers have identified "cultural citizenship" and connected it with community activism as an important "signifier" of belonging (Rosaldo, 1997, as cited in Yuval-Davis, 2006). The emphasis here is on recognizing differences among citizens rather than ignoring them and identifying ways to support the different social needs of citizens. Belonging, therefore, is "both a status, something held, and a practice, the ability to navigate symbols, ideas, and institutions of a group (Ignatieff, 1993, as cited in Chin, 2019).

The "politics of belonging" can also extend to the "requisites of belonging," which would include social locations, identities, ethical, and political values. Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that race, national origin, and place of birth are boundaries that are not permeable, and it is easier to use a "common set of values, such as 'democracy' … as the signifiers of belonging" since it offers "permeable boundaries" (p. 209). Extending the concept of "politics of belonging," Randel et al. (2018) highlight that "inclusion" is a strategy in the workplace to ensure diverse members of a "work group or organization" feel a sense of "belonging" given "uniqueness of needs" and are motivated to "reach their full potential" (p. 191). These researchers (Randel et al., 2018) couple the concept of individuality (uniqueness) with belonging and determine that inclusive leadership will emphasize "groupness" (Chin, 2019) while promoting "effective functioning of diverse work groups" and "contributing to group processes and outcomes" (p. 191). Chin (2019) suggests that belonging must be associated with recognition. Individuals in the group recognize you, and you identify as belonging to that group; it is coupled with "identity." Belonging can also have directionality and depth, and Chin (2019) describes it as "extent and strength" (p. 717);

for some individuals belonging is "central to identity," and the type of group (community, global society, workgroup) may influence belonging and member roles in that group.

In some studies, measures of belonging include items where individuals "report a sense of belonging" and others claim a sense of belonging "because they do not feel excluded" (Malone et al., 2012). Walton and Cohen (2007, p. 82) suggest that in academic and professional settings, "socially stigmatized groups" are "more sensitive to issues of social belonging," a concept termed "belonging uncertainty," which can impact the "intellectual achievement" of excluded minority groups. "Belonging uncertainty" may also be reinforced by lack of representation within the workforce, promoting the hypothesis that "people like me do not belong here" (Walton & Cohen, 2007, p. 83). Shore et al. (2011, p. 1264) suggest a "tension between belongingness and uniqueness" and identify that some demographic groups (women, minorities) have limited opportunities to belong given their uniqueness. This uniqueness, in turn, limits their promotion potential within the organization. Diversity scholars advocate for a work environment in which "diversity is pervasive and part of an overall perspective and strategy inclusive of all employee differences" (Chrobot-Mason & Thomas, 2002, p. 324, as cited in Shore et al., 2011).

Organizations and individuals must demonstrate a readiness to engage with the subject of diversity, equity, inclusion, access (DEIA), and many researchers (Chung, 2013; Chung et al., 2017; Moncloa et al., 2019; Whitehall et al., 2021) have connected diversity readiness with diversity effectiveness and training outcomes. Chung (2013) has underscored that diversity trainings assume that "trainees attend … under similar conditions" but "if trainees believe that a diversity training program will not be useful, they are not motivated to learn, and/or are ill-prepared, the success of the program is likely to be reduced" (p. 77). The effectiveness of diversity training depends on "trainees' attitudes and reactions," which Chung (2013, p. 77) frames as "motivational, behavioral, and cognitive" readiness. Readiness at the organizational level must also assess and reflect "demographic dissimilarity and diversity climate" with the knowledge that "training alone cannot improve diversity climate" (Chung, 2013, p. 82). Although Chung (2013) supports voluntary engagement with DEIA training as it reduces resistance and improves readiness, organizations often proceed with this work on a system-wide level. Without strong organizational support, employees are unlikely to undertake DEIA training and dedicate the time to improving knowledge and skillset. Chung et al. (2017) highlight the "cynicism" that exists toward diversity training programs which could be "rooted in employees' low pretraining interests in diversity training" (Kulik et al., 2007, as cited in Chung et al., 2017). Research on training readiness addresses motivations to "learn … intention to use, and perceived utility," which can be used to "improve diversity training outcomes and strengthen the connection between workplace diversity and improved company products and services" (Chung et al., 2017, p. 26). Moncloa et al. (2019) advocate for recruiting individuals with high levels of intercultural competence given the intensive organizational effort needed to undertake successful DEIA efforts, while Whitehall et al. (2021) confirm that while training efforts improve knowledge and skills, "professional behaviors" are not impacted (p. 31).

Data Collection and Methodology

We used purposive sampling to identify urban Extension professionals who were working on issues of DEIA and belonging and relied on groups such as the Epsilon Sigma Phi Urban and Culturally Diverse Affinity Group, Coming Together for Racial Understanding (CTRU, 2020), and the NUEL Professional Development Action Team. Maxwell (1997) defines purposive sampling as a type of sampling in which ''particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices'' (p. 87). Selection criteria focused on participants who were active members of groups engaged in activities pertaining to the topic with an eye toward gathering geographically diverse individuals. This approach also mirrored elements of phenomenological research as outlined by Moustakas (1994), wherein the research question explored "grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic" and "personal history brings the core of the problem into focus" (p. 104).

A total of 10 individuals were identified, and eight participated in informal, structured interviews with equal representation (50% male, 50% female). Participants were aware their contributions would be reported in the aggregate without any personal identifiers. The states of New York, Oregon, Oklahoma, Idaho, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri were represented with one participant from a Historically Black College and University. Of the participants, 75% lived in and/or worked with urban Extension clientele in their home state and had professional alignments with Extension groups focused on urban activities.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, with each interview lasting no longer than 30 minutes. The interview notes were transcribed while reviewing the audio recording and data captured in an Excel spreadsheet organized by question. The Excel spreadsheet utilized participant codes and tracked the location of participants by state without any additional identifiers. In one instance, the participant responded via email, and that information was also captured in the Excel spreadsheet. Three questions were used to capture participants' level of awareness with current activities relating to DEIA on a personal or institutional level, future activities proposed for DEIA, and strategies that could be employed to foster a sense of belonging for Extension. Data analysis was facilitated through multiple steps, including data familiarization, data categorization for themes, and identification of themes and quotes that best represented the overall findings.

Findings

The study's findings will be highlighted in two ways. First, participant responses will be grouped into three overarching categories of information: (a) current activities that foster DEIA, (b) challenges that limit activities to foster DEIA, and (c) opportunities to align DEIA within Extension. Second, the authors will present common characteristics identified by participants that could contribute to and improve Extension's ability to foster a sense of belonging and

combine that with strategies, tools, and outcomes that would support a change in culture and lead to a greater sense of belonging.

Current Activities

Study participants highlighted positive efforts to address organizational culture and improve DEIA. These included the following positive efforts.

Existing Programs

DEIA work has gained national visibility in recent years given high-profile events highlighted in the media, leading to a renewed interest in social justice and equity work. Extension already had existing programs to support and encourage cultural awareness. Programs such as Coming Together for Racial Understanding, Juntos, and Navigating Differences were already underway to engage Extension personnel and support Extension clientele. Research shows that belonging in youth increases when they experience positive social interactions, so developing programs that focus on social interactions could help 4-H participants feel like they belong (Crouch et al., 2014).

DEIA Committees

All respondents indicated their respective universities had established a working group to address DEIA issues, including formal committees, task forces, ad-hoc groups, and work teams. The activities of these committees and teams varied from issue identification to professional development activities to strategic plan preparation. In general, these committees had the charge of coordinating and/or managing DEIA efforts organizationally at all scales (university, Extension, regionally, or locally).

Professional Development

All universities included in the study sample had offered or were offering trainings, workshops, and webinars for Extension faculty and staff. Participants reported that webinars or workshops were offered to staff and volunteers. Some were modified from large-scale trainings such as CTRU. In some instances, tools such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI; Hammer et al., 2003) were utilized. New efforts such as learning circles, Race Matters webinars, and train-the-trainer for racial understanding were offered to encourage dialogue in other situations. Unique programs included photography and technology to support learning about social justice and equity and, in one instance, a new on-campus center to foster continued engagement on DEIA.

Coupled with increased professional development opportunities, 25% of respondents shared that professional development evaluations would now include DEIA metrics to help individuals engage more fully with the concept, support accountability, and lead to a system-wide change.

Additionally, position descriptions would be reviewed to remove potential entry barriers and shared on diverse hiring platforms to increase visibility and promote diversity in the Extension workforce.

Motivation

Before participants are ready to engage, they must have a desire to learn and intend to use the knowledge and skills learned. Also, participants who already possess some knowledge, skills, and abilities will be more ready to engage in DEIA training (Chung, 2013). Across universities and Extension clientele groups, there is increased visibility and motivation for DEIA work to be meaningfully undertaken. Participants said that groups such as Master Gardener Volunteers, 4-H volunteers, 4-H staff, and Master Food Safety Advisors are encouraged and supported in the process of improving DEIA knowledge. There is a willingness to engage that is palpable, and although every stakeholder might not be "ready," continuing to provide opportunities to learn and dialogue supports engagement and action on the issue.

Challenges

All the study participants, regardless of geographic location and position within the Extension system, indicated there were challenges with aspiring toward and fostering a sense of belonging. A total of five major challenges were identified by participants.

Lack of System-Wide Effort

Except for one participant, many of the Land-Grant Universities represented in this study did not have an Extension-wide or university-wide effort to support DEIA activities. In many instances, only parts of the organization were addressing DEIA issues. Additionally, in instances where DEIA efforts were initiated, the level of engagement focused on issue identification versus strategies and implementable actions.

Lack of Time

In cases where Extension systems were actively engaged in DEIA activities, instructors and/or participants lacked time to fully "do, reflect, and apply" information from DEIA sessions. Lack of time contributed to further disengagement with the topic as trainings were not tailored for attendees' knowledge and skill level and did not demonstrate connections with programs and Extension clientele.

Lack of Commitment

Many interviewees noted genuine disengagement on an individual level with DEIA, which, when coupled with organizational lack of commitment, limited the extent of DEIA activities. Workshops and trainings were sporadic and lacked continuity to support sustained DEIA

engagement. At the organizational level, DEIA is viewed as "voluntary" versus "mandatory," which further de-emphasizes the value of the topic. Often DEIA trainings that employees or volunteers are "strongly encouraged" to attend lack time for personal reflection that fully engages participants, which fails to overcome some participants' strongly held biases.

Lack of Collaboration

In instances where DEIA work was ongoing, there was limited collaboration with other on-campus units and offices. Many on-campus university departments did not want to partner with Extension, or Extension was excluded from planning and engagement efforts to further DEIA work. In some situations, DEIA efforts were only approved from on-campus offices, and Extension efforts were considered less meaningful.

Lack of Designated Position

Across all interviewees, it was clear that many of the challenges could be addressed if there was a designated Extension position or office directing DEIA activities. In cases where there was a college or university designated position, the collaborative element was lacking. This showed there was an opportunity for university administrators to demonstrate a strong commitment by reframing the narrative for DEIA work that would lead to belonging.

Opportunities

Study participants also provided information on how Extension could respond to and take advantage of opportunities to promote and align DEIA. These opportunities could lead to individual and organizational belonging.

Hold Administration Accountable

Participants underscored the need to work with administrators while also engaging in actions that would hold administrators accountable for supporting DEIA activities that lead to belonging.

Reassure Extension Stakeholders and Clientele

Participants shared that the importance of DEIA work must be communicated to Extension stakeholders and clientele. Extension has a responsibility to engage in this work, to reflect the diversity of communities, and to avoid penalties or repercussions for DEIA work in the areas of stakeholder support or funding.

Fully Engage with Community Partners

Extension has many program partners, and the potential to gain new partners with a renewed emphasis on diversity could be beneficial and rewarding. Supporting and working with existing

and new partners increases the stakeholder base and builds new community support for Extension.

Energize DEIA Commitment

Extension personnel are more likely to be committed to DEIA work if they "see" their institutions are committed to the work. Institutions can demonstrate a strong commitment to DEIA by clearly communicating their expectations and allocating time and resources to do the work necessary to foster a sense of belonging.

Finally, we present a set of common values that participants indicated were fundamental to creating and sustaining a culture of DEIA that leads to belonging. These include trust, transparency, intentionality, reliability, inclusivity, representational, conversational, empathic, integrative, and collaborative. These values will be explored in the discussion.

Discussion

Increased population growth in urban areas presents challenges and opportunities for Extension. As urban populations become more diverse, Extension professionals need to learn new skills and improve current skills to deliver impactful educational programs to diverse audiences (NUEL, 2019; Whitehall et al., 2021). Before they can effectively work with diverse audiences, Extension professionals must increase their personal cultural competency. Institutionally, barriers to creating a diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible environment for staff, faculty, volunteers, clientele, stakeholders, and partners should be addressed.

Across the board, interviewees agreed that there are many challenges facing Extension when investing in diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, which ultimately leads to a sense of belonging. Many universities have implemented DEIA programs, but implementation is often slow, and there are few metrics in place to assess the success of these programs. Extension is often excluded from institution-wide efforts to address DEIA, and those efforts often focus on identifying programs instead of developing strategies for action. As Randel et al. (2018) noted, contributing to group processes and outcomes leads to belonging, so excluding others in the development of DEIA programs is a barrier to belonging. In some cases, professional development programs were created using a top-down method which further alienated Extension professionals and devalued the importance of the work. DEIA initiatives are often an add-on task for Extension professionals, so there is little time to engage and reflect on growth and learning. Extension administration may not be fully committed to DEIA initiatives, and that lack of commitment trickles down to staff and leads to a lack of commitment institutionally. To enhance belonging, administrators should demonstrate inclusivity through a unified commitment to DEIA (Randel et al., 2018). Professional development is often looked upon as voluntary, which further diminishes the value and need for the work. All interviewees stated that an Extension position solely dedicated to DEIA would help address many of these challenges.

While there are many challenges to effectively address diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in Extension, interviewees shared many successes. Existing programs such as Navigating Difference, Juntos, and Coming Together for Racial Understanding are making a difference. According to Whitehall et al. (2021, p. 31), "participants in Navigating Difference not only show increases in awareness, knowledge, and skills but also achieve changes in professional behaviors." Many institutions have implemented DEIA committees and workgroups to address institutional challenges and barriers. Some metrics such as the Intercultural Development Inventory, which measures cultural competency, are being utilized more broadly by Extension in many states (Moncloa et al., 2019), but more metrics need to be developed to assess the effectiveness of training and professional development. Most institutions have evaluated their position descriptions and hiring practices to attract and hire diverse applicants. More than ever before, Extension professionals are motivated to address DEIA issues in their institutions, educational programs, and communities.

With challenges come opportunities, and Extension has many opportunities to help staff, volunteers, clientele, stakeholders, and partners feel like they belong. Interviewees underscored the importance of holding administrators accountable for addressing DEIA. Administrators can help by delivering consistent messages emphasizing the importance of this work, setting expectations for Extension professionals to engage in personal and professional growth, and providing funding for DEIA trainings and positions. Administrators are needed to help communicate to stakeholders and clientele that our institutions are dedicated to increasing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility and stand firm if there is pushback from those groups. Extension can expand its stakeholder base in urban areas by increasing its capacity to partner with diverse organizations. If Extension professionals can recognize a strong commitment to DEIA by their institution, they too will be committed to addressing these issues. A commitment to inclusive leadership (Shore et al., 2011; Walton & Cohen, 2007) will support DEIA in Extension and ensures that team members are heard, respected, valued, retained, and feel a sense of belonging to the organization.

Figure 1 illustrates the process of moving from values to belonging. The outermost circle lists the values expressed by the interviewees as integral to Extension's DEIA work. Extension is poised to build capacity and create an environment of belonging by holding to these values. The next circle identifies the strategies Extension can use to achieve belonging: dialogue, intentionality, professional development, emotional intelligence, and relationship building. Relationship building is a strategy that will help Extension professionals build trust within the organization and with those we serve. Extension has many tools at its disposal to support DEIA work, and more effective use of these tools could yield organizational dividends with DEIA impacts. Navigating Difference, Coming Together for Racial Understanding, and the Intercultural Development Inventory are formal programs that educate participants; self-directed learning through webinars or book clubs can also lead to personal growth.

Figure 1. A Diagrammatic Representation of the Process of Moving from Values to Belonging
(Source: Created by authors Madhosingh-Hector and Seals)
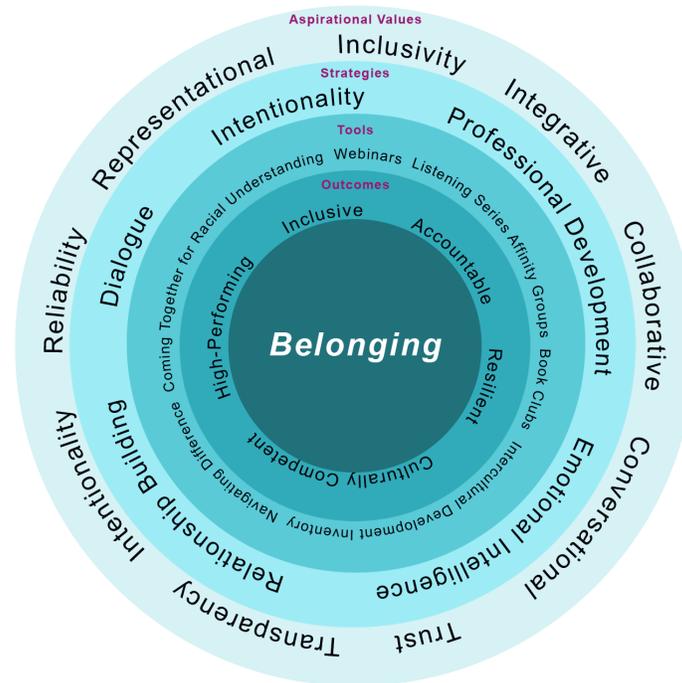
The tools to employ the strategies will result in the outcomes listed in the next circle, i.e., culturally competent, high-performing, inclusive, accountable, resilient, and equitable (equitable workplace and equitable educational programs). The outcomes will ultimately lead to belonging and a deeper connection with urban constituents and position Extension as a reliable, representative, and desirable entity to work with and work for to solve community issues.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the challenges, successes, and opportunities facing Extension as it strives to achieve belonging. Interviewees expressed a need to move from identifying the value of DEIA to using the tools we have available to implement strategies that lead to belonging. Ultimately, the intention is to instill a strong sense of belonging in our staff, volunteers, stakeholders, clientele, and partners. Extension professionals who demonstrate a high degree of intercultural competence feel a greater sense of belonging to the organization and can build authentic relationships with the communities served.

Strengths and Limitations

This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the experiences of urban Extension professionals who are viewing DEIA work through the lens of personal and professional experiences. DEIA activities, which lead to belonging, continue to evolve. As such, the

perspectives provided are associated with a specific time period leading up to publication and do not reflect activities that may have occurred since interviews were conducted.

The sample size was small and did not reflect the entire Extension system or all experiences with DEIA across the Extension system. We relied heavily on known groups engaged in this work to recruit participants, and it is highly likely that perspectives and activities were omitted due to sample size and recruitment strategy. Although the sample size was small, interviewees shared openly and honestly because of their relationships with the interviewers through professional associations and committees.

Implications and Recommendations

This study's findings have significant implications for Extension research and practice. It is apparent that support for and engagement with DEIA activities is still in its infancy. To achieve a strong sense of belonging, Extension training in DEIA needs to become more robust and widely supported. Although there are workgroups (i.e., committees, ad hoc teams) that support DEIA, evaluation and impact data are limited. Improving evaluation by using tools such as the Intercultural Development Inventory could be extended to hold Extension accountable.

This study could be expanded by including the perspectives of Extension stakeholders, partners, volunteers, and clientele to gather data on the techniques and impact of trainings. This input could inform future DEIA activities that lead to belonging in settings such as the urban-rural continuum and political landscapes.

There is a huge gap in scholarship on belonging across the Extension system. More focused effort on this subject could provide strategies and techniques to support long-term engagement and demonstrate measurable impact.

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Ramona Madhosingh-Hector, M.S., M.S.P., is a Regional Specialized Agent with the University of Florida and works throughout the Southwest Extension District. Her areas of specialization include sustainability education, community engagement, urban extension, and community resource development. Ramona has participated in Navigating Difference, is a certified administrator for Intercultural Development Inventory, and is currently a WCMER fellow contributing to the development of an urban Extension toolkit. Please direct correspondence to Ramona Madhosingh-Hector at ramona.m.hector@ufl.edu.

Linda Seals, M.S., is a Regional Specialized Agent with the University of Florida in the Southeast Extension District. Her areas of programmatic interest include community resource development, deliberative dialogue, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Linda has participated in Navigating Difference, is an Intercultural Development Inventory certified administrator, and is part of the Coming Together for Racial Understanding program team.

Acknowledgments