

Strengthening Gender Responsive Global Agricultural Education and Outreach in Higher Education: The Origins of a Community of Practice

Carmen N. Benson

Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication
Texas A&M University, USA
cnbyce@tamu.edu
1(706)627-5663

Danette Philpot

Texas A&M University, USA

Theresa Murphrey, PhD

Texas A&M University, USA

Manuel Piña, Jr., PhD

Texas A&M University, USA

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Introduction

Growing consensus in the global development community underscores the central importance of gender equality and women's empowerment, not only as necessary social justice objectives, but also as being essential towards the achievement of broader development outcomes in agriculture, education, health, and economic growth (Johnson et al., 2020). As such, development programs in the past two decades have increasingly emphasized women's empowerment in agriculture (World Bank, 2011). As active partners in the global development community, U.S. universities are among the organizations striving to better understand the gendered aspects of agricultural research, extension, and education. Universities contribute significantly to global development efforts by leading collaborative international research, providing direct technical assistance in communities, and serving the critical role of preparing graduates to enter careers in the development community (Leal Filho, 2011; National Research Council, 2006). As such, it is imperative that university faculty are prepared with the tools, resources, and know-how to integrate gender into their global development teaching, research, and outreach.

How it works

Emerging from a collective realization of these identified needs, the Gendered Lens Curriculum in International Development (GLCD) project, led by Texas A&M University in partnership with volunteer advisory board members from six universities and other organizations, aims to provide engaging, evidence-based, and practically-relevant curriculum that explores a broad range of development issues through a lens of gender equality and women's empowerment. Though originally launched around the development of tangible curricula, the process of collaboratively developing and disseminating the curriculum has birthed a new Community of Practice (CoP). This poster presents lessons learned through the establishment of an emerging CoP for instructors seeking to bring gender-responsive learning opportunities to their students in global development and to advance knowledge and sharing among university educators and practitioners striving for improved gender-responsiveness in global development.

Communities of Practice (CoPs) have been formally implemented in the social and education fields for over thirty years, building on social learning theories that suggest that individuals and communities learn by sharing knowledge and observing one another (Wegner, 1998). The US Agency for International Development (USAID) encourages CoPs around central development issues, defining a CoP as "a group of people who share a common interest and interact often to learn from each other to advance their work" (USAID, 2013). A CoP generally focuses on a specific topic or subject matter area, openly engages community members from various stakeholder groups, and often hosts a repository of materials, evidence, and publications. Wegner (1998) presents five stages of development for a CoP: potential, coalescing, active, dispersed, and memorable.

In the potential stage, individuals generally face similar challenges but are not benefitting from a shared community, individuals begin to find each other and discover their commonalities (Wegner, 1998). As is the case with many CoPs, potential for the *Gender Responsive International Agricultural Education and Outreach in Higher Education* CoP was recognized by

many individuals separately, first by individual faculty and graduate students working in relative isolation to integrate gender-responsiveness into their international research, outreach, and teaching. Notable efforts were made to bring together the university community and other implementers around issues related to gender and women in development. However, a community focused on a shared commitment to gender lensed curriculum in global development teaching, research, and education, particularly in agricultural education and extension in a global context, did not exist.

In the second stage of CoP formation, during the coalescing stage, members come together, begin to recognize potential, and negotiate the future of the community. Funding of the GLCD project, which formally brought together partners from multiple universities, served as a catalyst for the coalescing stage of this CoP beginning in 2020. Now in the active stage, the CoP is actively working together to conceptualize and develop a curriculum that is free to use and easily accessible for instructors and learners. Further, the CoP's activities have grown as members meet regularly to share lessons learned, present results, and brainstorm around challenges to integrating gender lensed research, extension, and outreach in global development efforts, particularly among university implementers.

Results to date

To date, the following key results have been accomplished: 1) establishing a multi-disciplinary, multi-university advisory team including 13 professionals with roughly 175 years of combined experience, from six organizations, and across seven disciplines; 2) hosting of three dissemination meetings with 61 attendees; 3) signing up of 31 individuals to receive updates from the community, including updates as new curricula are available for use; 4) sharing six presentations at national and international conferences; 5) releasing three ready-to-use modules for faculty testing, including instructor and learner guides; and 6) launching a website that houses a curriculum and other products that serves the repository and point of connection for the community.

Future plans

Momentum and interest in this emerging CoP is growing! In the coming year, the partner universities are seeking modest grant funding to continue and formalize the CoP, with a strategy to both expand and diversify. The CoP will continue to expand naturally but also through purposeful efforts to identify and connect to other interest groups and CoPs that may exist at the university level. The CoP will also expand the community with broader participation from the NGO and donor community. Diversified activities will likely include launching additional regular international web-based events, connecting with international speakers to share their practical experiences, scholarly work, and best practices, while also pursuing collaborative research to grow the body of evidence to inform gender responsive teaching, research, and outreach.

Resources needed

The CoP is largely a volunteer effort. However, it was catalyzed and is rooted in the tangible products produced through funding provided by the U.S Department of Agriculture and Texas A&M University through two projects, with a budget that supported the activities. However, success of the CoP was largely a result of volunteer faculty and student time.

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