



COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION

Form a Diverse Network

The CSUE Program Planning for Impact framework focuses on impact because that is the ultimate goal of Extension programming. In order to maximize impact in Colorado communities, it helps to engage (and eventually co-create programs with) a wide variety of people. The set of individuals who you engage in the program planning process are referred to here as your network. The purpose of a network here is to provide important perspectives and firsthand knowledge of the community and more specifically, the needs of the community. Network members can help you understand why something is happening or the history and context of an issue.

A ‘diverse’ network in this context refers to individuals that bring different perspectives. In involving a diverse network, it is important to seek out individuals who may not be familiar with CSUE. Broad participation in program planning beyond the “usual suspects” can: (1) empower people who have not previously been involved in community-level problem solving; (2) create relationships between people from various backgrounds, disciplines, sectors, and levels; and (3) bring together people and organizations with a sufficient range of knowledge, skills, and resources so the group, as a whole, can achieve the breakthroughs in thinking and action that are needed to understand and solve complex problems (Lasker & Weiss, 2003).

A diverse network is not valuable just to inform needs at the beginning of the program planning process. Rather, a diverse network can also help select community issues to address from among those needs, help define appropriate interventions, develop programs and resources alongside CSUE, and even refine approaches over time based on evaluation data. This is embedded in CSU’s concept of a [Continuum of Engaged Scholarship](#). This continuum holds that we can move from “outreach” to “engagement” when we switch from simply informing, consulting, or involving our community members in activities to collaborating and eventually co-creating activities with them. Examples of co-creation include citizen science, participatory research, and co-hosting of events. Results of true community engagement include the emergence of new perspectives, capacity-building, innovation through trust, and the production of joint and mutually beneficial outcomes by university and community.

Practically speaking, census data can help you ensure that the demographics of your network align with the demographics of the community you are serving, whether that is a geographic community or an issue-based community (such as agriculture). A Stakeholder Engagement Wheel identifies different types of individuals and groups to be represented in a diverse network. This includes your planning team, community members with lived experience, content experts, decision-makers, elected officials, funders, traditionally marginalized voices, potential opponents, and action partners. Use of a Community Engagement Resource Chart can help you figure out how to engage individuals that have been traditionally underrepresented in your network.