



**Science
Societies**

Why representation matters in extension and outreach

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Representation in extension and outreach builds trust, challenges unconscious bias, and helps diverse audiences feel included and engaged. Small, intentional choices—like broadening whose voices and experiences are highlighted—can strengthen relationships, expand participation, and ultimately make extension work more effective.

Back when I was a Turfgrass Extension Specialist at Texas A&M, someone walked up to me before a CEU program started and asked a question many extension professionals have likely heard in some version:

“Are you a speaker, or are you helping with check-in?”

I don’t think it was meant to be rude. Maybe it was just an assumption. But I couldn’t help but wonder if it was because I was a female.

Moments like that tell us something important. They remind us that people carry expectations (or unconscious bias) about who looks like an expert and who doesn’t. As a member of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Committee, I think those expectations are worth paying attention to, especially in extension and outreach work where relationships are everything.

Extension runs on trust (and sometimes donuts)

Extension succeeds because people show up. Sometimes they come for continuing education credits. Sometimes they come for research updates. And then, sometimes they come for the food. But mostly (we hope), they come because they trust the people delivering the information.

Representation helps build that trust. [When audiences see a wider range of scientists, educators, and professionals involved in outreach, it signals something important: there is space for you here, too.](#)

That sense of belonging makes it easier to ask questions, share experiences, and stay engaged over time.

Representation is bigger than the speaker

When we talk about representation, it's easy to focus only on who is presenting. But it also shows up in smaller ways:

- whose farms or operations appear in examples
- whose challenges shape research questions
- whose success stories get highlighted
- whose voices are invited into conversations

Sometimes representation looks like translating materials into another language.

Sometimes it means choosing meeting times that work for more people. Sometimes it simply means making sure new participants feel comfortable speaking up.

These decisions shape whether extension feels open to everyone or familiar only to some.

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Our audiences are broader than we imagine

Agriculture systems continue to change, and so do the people working in them.

Extension audiences today include:

- first-generation farmers
- urban growers
- sports field managers and turf professionals
- bilingual crews
- new landowners
- students exploring careers in our disciplines

If these audiences don't see themselves reflected in extension programs, they may assume those programs are not meant for them. Representation helps close that gap.



Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/Phoebe.

Small steps can make a real difference

Improving representation in extension doesn't require a complete redesign of programs. Often it starts with small, intentional choices:

- Invite new collaborators into outreach efforts.
- Highlight a wider range of operations and experiences.
- Mentor students who may not have traditional entry points into our fields.
- Identify who is not in the room yet and why.

These steps help expand who participates in extension today and who becomes extension leaders tomorrow.

Representation strengthens extension

Extension is not a one-way flow of information. It is a conversation.

"I see representation not as a separate initiative from extension's mission, but as part of what makes extension effective in the first place."

When more people participate in that conversation, we gain new perspectives on management challenges, research needs, and practical limitations. That feedback strengthens both outreach programs and the science that supports them.

As a DEI committee member within ASA, CSSA, and SSSA, I see representation not as a separate initiative from extension's mission, but as part of what makes extension effective in the first place.

That sense of belonging makes it easier to ask questions, share experiences, and stay engaged over time.

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