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Family and Consumer Sciences Focus on the Human Dimension: The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program Example

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FEATURE

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The history of family and consumer sciences (FCS) and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) is discussed with an emphasis on the critical importance of the human dimension. EFNEP's focus on people, education for change, accountability, strategic partnerships, and public value are highlighted as an example and model for Extension and FCS programs in general. Future FCS success and sustainability depends on ensuring continued attention to the human dimension, while also addressing workforce, societal, and technological developments.

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The Foundation of Family and Consumer Sciences

The current family and consumer sciences (FCS) paradigm emphasizes interactions and influencers within individual, family, and community systems. A human dimension is integral to the social, physical, emotional, environmental, and economic elements of these systems. FCS professionals are unique in that they *personally* connect these systems through

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research and education, which leads to improved personal, family, and community quality of life, standards of living, and well-being (McGregor & Goldsmith, 1998; Nickols et al., 2009).

Foundational to this paradigm is the pioneering work of Emma Hart Willard (Crocco & Davis, 2002; Brown, 1985, as cited in Jerpbak, 2005), Catherine Beecher (Roberts, 2006), and Mary Hemenway (Snodgrass, 2011), who created learning opportunities for women, elevated the status of FCS, and showed that "domestic economy" skills could and should be taught. They used interdisciplinary lessons rich with illustrations, graphic organizers such as concept maps, hands-on learning, subject matter relevance, cooking demonstrations, and experimental kitchens—approaches that still apply today. Land-grant colleges and universities were established in 1862 with passage of the Morrill Act. They included domestic science as a formal course of study. These institutions reached out to their local communities through the Cooperative Extension System (a.k.a. Extension), which was established through the Smith Lever Act of 1914 (Scholl, 2013).

Whether referred to as *domestic economy, domestic science, home economics*, or *family and consumer sciences*, as it is called now, the discipline still focuses on the importance of experiential, hands-on, and practical learning provided by a relatable and familiar person. FCS professionals must be nimble and responsive to social, physical, emotional, environmental, and economic facets of people's lives, and they must educate using current and relevant content and methods. Through such actions, FCS and Extension continue to be social arbiters of equality and progressive ideals with an emphasis on the human dimension.

The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program: Education Grounded in the Human Dimension

One noteworthy program within Extension is the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). EFNEP has been an integral part of the FCS Extension legacy for nearly 50 years; it remains as relevant and important today as it was in the 1960s when the program began (USDA/NIFA, 2015).

EFNEP's Beginnings

EFNEP developed from the Lyndon B. Johnson Administration's "War on Poverty," through which poverty and hunger began to receive national attention and societal concern. Existing efforts to alleviate hunger through distribution of agricultural commodities were considered insufficient. Leaders in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) viewed nutrition education as one potential solution to resolve hunger and inadequate nutrition. USDA funded Extension projects in Alabama, Massachusetts, Missouri, Rhode Island, and Texas between 1962 and 1966 to determine best practices for serving disadvantaged families more effectively. The projects focused on how to reach low-income families, who should educate, and what methodology should be implemented (Leidenfrost, 1975).

Project researchers concluded that the most effective educational programs were tailored to the needs, interests, competencies, economics, and educational levels of the families to be served. They found that indigenous paraprofessional educators (i.e., peer educators), supervised by professional home economists, had superior abilities to establish rapport and communicate with participants (Brink, 2000).

Upon completion of the USDA projects, then Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman wrote a letter to the President recommending funding authorization for a national program. He stated, "I don't know anything that could do more to reach human needs, particularly pregnant women and children, than an expanded homemaker program that would train and inspire ladies in rural communities to reach out as [paraprofessionals] giving individual attention to the millions of people in the [extreme] poor category who are literally isolated from society" (Leidenfrost, 2000). On November 8, 1968, the Federal Extension Service received $10 million approval for an expanded nutrition education program with a paraprofessional as the teacher, under direct supervision of a professional home economist. By 1974, the program became widely known as EFNEP (Brink, 2000). Sometimes within, and sometimes as a partner of FCS Extension, it naturally aligned with Extension programs, given its focus on the human dimension and

emphasis on personal and family nutritional health and well-being (USDA/NIFA, 2015).

EFNEP Today

Since its inception, EFNEP has reached more than 32.5 million low-income families and youth directly and helped them make healthier choices through education about nutritious eating and physical activity; selection, purchase, and preparation of food (known as food resource management); food safety; and food security (USDA/NIFA, 2015; USDA/NIFA/EFNEP, 2016). EFNEP remains true to its legislative requirement to utilize a paraprofessional (i.e., peer educator) model that draws upon shared life experiences and fosters credibility and trust between participant and paraprofessional (Leidenfrost, 2000; USDA/NIFA, 2015).

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EFNEP is also built upon five supporting elements, which are essential to program sustainability (USDA/NIFA, 2015). These elements—focus on people, education for change, accountability, strategic partnerships, and public value—could not be accomplished without the human dimension.

Focus on people. The use of peer educators to deliver the program in a family and community context builds upon community connections that participants have with those around them (USDA/NIFA, 2015). EFNEP also utilizes the vast infrastructure of Extension, which connects counties in all states, U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. Extension "distinctively addresses national nutrition and health priorities on a personal level" (USDA/NIFA, 2015). This focus on the human dimension at the personal, community, and national levels is the "essence" of EFNEP and is key to its success in effecting behavioral change.

Education for change. Utilizing the paraprofessional relationship, EFNEP delivers a series of evidence-based, learner-centered lessons on basic food and physical activity skills to low-income youth and families with young children. Lessons are designed to provide hands-on, interactive experiences that build participants' skills and encourage healthy behavior choices (USDA/NIFA, 2015).

Annual reports and research studies show that EFNEP participants gain knowledge, skills, and improved behaviors through their participation in EFNEP (Scholl & Paster, 2017). For example, in 2015, more than 95% of adult participants improved their diets, 84% improved food resource management practices, 65% improved food safety practices, and 38% increased physical activity levels (USDA/NIFA/EFNEP, 2016). Similarly, a recent randomized control study found that participants who completed at least six of eight recommended lessons showed significant improvement in nutrition, food resource management, and food safety behaviors and that those changes were retained at least 8 weeks following completion of the program (Dollahite, Pijai, Scott-Piece, Parker, & Trochim, 2014).

Accountability. In 1973, federal funding for EFNEP totaled $50.5 million, with all 50 eligible land-grant universities and colleges—one institution per state—participating. Since then, increases in federal funding have been modest, given inflation rates and an increase in eligible institutions. In 2016, federal funding for EFNEP totaled $67.4 million, with all 76 eligible land-grant universities and colleges participating—including 1862 and 1890 land-grant institutions from all states, U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia (H. Chipman, personal communication, December 5, 2016; USDA/NIFA/EFNEP, 2016). This overall "increase" actually represents a decline in dollars per institution.

Despite fiscal challenges, FCS leaders and program staff remain committed to EFNEP through program and fiscal accountability. They secure grants, donations, and in-kind resources to supplement and support EFNEP-related activities and they expand programmatic reach through flexibility and creativity in determining program delivery methods and settings (Hardison-Moody et al., 2015). EFNEP national leadership, similarly, has made strategic adjustments supporting operational practices and program delivery

techniques that ensure EFNEP integrity while increasing program efficiency (USDA/NIFA, 2016).

Accountability is documented and reported through measurable results, which, in turn, provide justification for EFNEP's appropriation.

EFNEP maintains a high level of program and fiscal accountability. Accountability is documented and reported through measurable results, which, in turn, provide justification for EFNEP's appropriation (Baral, Davis, Serrano, You, & Blake, 2013). EFNEP documents measurable outcomes and demonstrates its private and public value through annual impact reports (USDA/NIFA, 2016). As an example, in fiscal year 2015, adult participants reported a total food savings of $1,364,013.05 (USDA/NIFA/EFNEP, 2016).

Strategic partnerships. Consistent evidence indicates that multi-sector coordination and collaboration is needed to help families change their eating and physical activity behaviors (USDHHS/USDA, 2015). EFNEP's cooperative leadership structure includes NIFA, Land-Grant University/Cooperative Extension, and state and local public and private partnerships, which enables EFNEP to collectively address issues at the individual level. Throughout the years, EFNEP has successfully created and maintained solid relationships and active engagement within multi-level, multi-agency collaborative partnerships to help families change their eating and physical activity behaviors and achieve positive outcomes (USDA/NIFA, 2015).

Conveying public value. Another factor that supports EFNEP's sustainability is its ability to articulate not only the private value for individuals, but also the public value. Public value refers to a service that benefits society as a whole, resulting in an endorsement for public funding, even by those who do not benefit directly (Kalambokidis, 2004). Researchers of Extension's public value are emphatic that Extension needs contemporary methods of measuring public value and articulating outcomes (Franz, Arnold, & Baughman, 2014; Haskell & Morse, 2015). Conveying public value is critical to increasing visibility and credibility and to communicating the impact of any program effectively.

Outcome data indicate that the behavior changes resulting from EFNEP are likely to improve future health and reduce healthcare costs.

Within EFNEP, public value has been measured in terms of economics and health. Outcome data indicate that the behavior changes resulting from EFNEP are likely to improve future health and reduce healthcare costs. Virginia Cooperative Extension published the first state-level analysis of the economic value of EFNEP and found an initial cost-benefit ratio of $10.64/$1.00, meaning that $10.64 was saved in future healthcare costs for every $1.00 spent (Lambur, Rajgopal, & Lewis, 1999). A subsequent sensitivity analysis was conducted to address uncertainties in chronic disease incidence among low-income populations. Results showed a cost-benefit ratio ranging from $2.66/$1.00 to $17.04/$1.00 (Rajgopal, Cox, Lambur, & Lewis 2002). A cost-benefit ratio of $8.34/$1.00 was calculated in California using EFNEP demographics and food-related dietary behaviors from participants (Joy, Pradham, & Goldman, 2006). Dollahite, Kenkel, and Thompson (2008) identified program costs of $892 per graduate and a cost-benefit ratio of $20,863 per quality-adjusted life-year saved from an economic evaluation of costs and estimated potential health benefits of New York state data. The authors concluded that "societal resources devoted to EFNEP" were highly valuable and worth the investment.

EFNEP's Future: Addressing Challenges to Sustainability

In 2014, Atiles and Eubanks emphasized the need for greater diversity and use of technology to support the face-to-face experiential education and interaction that they deemed necessary to reach the ultimate goals of FCS Extension over the next century. EFNEP has been a model of program sustainability, with its focus on the human relationship as

a catalyst for behavior change, while also attending to shifting social and cultural norms, family structures, learning approaches, and emergent technologies. Throughout its history, EFNEP has adapted to changes in the lives of the population it serves. Still, like other FCS Extension programs, EFNEP must remain vigilant in addressing continuing and emerging needs. Notably, EFNEP must attend to paraprofessional recruitment, training, and retention, and to societal and technological developments, while also staying true to its core value—the human dimension.

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Paraprofessional recruitment, training, and retention. When EFNEP began, the legislated paraprofessional approach was seen as "an effective and cost-efficient strategy to reach and teach food and nutrition information and skills to low-income families" (Brink, 2000). EFNEP's commitment to this model has served EFNEP well. Historically, EFNEP has noted consistent improvements in reported food and physical activity behaviors of participants (USDA/REEIS, 2016). The paraprofessional model also has inherent challenges that must be addressed for the model to be successful. Some challenges reported by Taylor, Serrano, and Anderson, (2001) for another paraprofessional program, also apply to EFNEP. These include recruiting paraprofessionals with the skills and characteristics needed to be effective educators, providing adequate compensation and hiring staff with good work habits, and meeting training needs.

Paraprofessionals are hired from the community as a way to build credibility and relationships with those communities. Therefore, recruitment of current and former EFNEP participants as paraprofessional educators is a viable strategy for developing continuity and deepening the community connection (Hibbs & Sandmann, 2011). Among EFNEP paraprofessionals, a belief in the value of the program and the quality of the supervisory relationships also have been important to their satisfaction and retention (Dickin, Dollahite, & Habicht, 2010). Recruiting peer educators who are committed to the health of their community and teaching these skills to others is paramount to the success of the program and job retention rates (Hibbs & Sandmann, 2011). A pre-existing ability to work with diverse audiences and knowledge of community networks also have been identified as important job competencies for EFNEP paraprofessionals (Wakou, Keim, & Williams, 2003). Among millennials in the workforce, generally, an opportunity to advance—perhaps into supervisory positions—and to have some autonomy and choice in their work are important for retention in years ahead (TD, 2016). For FCS programs—including EFNEP—to remain relevant, cultivating diversity in culture and gender in workforce recruitment is essential. It will benefit clients and can broaden program reach (Atiles & Eubanks, 2014).

Because of the "high-touch" nature of the community interaction and their relationship-based job responsibility, it is imperative that EFNEP paraprofessionals exhibit certain personal qualities and dependable work habits. Wakou et al. (2003) identified specific attributes to consider when hiring paraprofessionals, including interpersonal, communication, and problem-solving skills; ability to read and understand materials, adapt to various situations, follow oral instructions, and honor confidentiality; and previous experience working with youth and adults. A dependable EFNEP paraprofessional can broaden the reach and strengthen the impact of the local FCS Extension program through EFNEP's targeted nutrition education efforts.

Once hired, paraprofessionals who support educational programs often leave due to poor wages (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). With relatively flat funding, the issue of compensation for EFNEP paraprofessionals can affect job satisfaction and turnover. This becomes a challenge. Ghere and York-Barr (2007) found that paraprofessional wages must meet a threshold in the local economy that makes the position attractive when compared to other local jobs. Program leaders may have to make hard decisions, such as whether to decrease

the number of overall EFNEP paraprofessional staff to increase wages and retain staff.

Competent and effective FCS supervision of paraprofessionals is required for program fidelity and quality.

Providing initial and ongoing nutrition education training and development opportunities for staff is another important aspect of successful programming. Not only do EFNEP paraprofessionals need subject matter training, they also require psychosocial skill-building in areas such as teaching strategies, dealing with difficult situations, and role modeling best practices for their clientele (Hibbs & Sandmann, 2011). Continued, consistent support for the professional development of paraprofessionals is an important determinant in retention (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). Additionally, competent and effective FCS supervision of paraprofessionals is required for program fidelity and quality. In 2016, EFNEP national and university leaders created a committee to develop a framework for paraprofessional supervision. The committee outlined responsibilities, traits and skills, and critical support needed by and for those who supervise EFNEP paraprofessionals. They concluded with action items to address the needs expressed by those who implement EFNEP on a daily basis (Baker et al., 2017).

Societal and technological changes. Related to the discussion of workforce development is the reality that contemporary society is far more diverse than it was in the past. The last 50 years have seen divorce (and resulting co-parenting) rates increase, cohabitation rather than marriage, "blended" families of both gay and heterosexual couples, and children born or adopted by single or partnered parents. Since the 1960s, society also has become more diverse in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and life experiences. FCS programs have not always reflected this diversity, and it is incumbent upon current programs to do so because the focus on and connection to human needs must reflect the communities that are being served. With legislative and program policy requirements to serve low-income families with young children and youth (USDA/NIFA, 2015), EFNEP reaches out to all such families, whatever their composition may be. EFNEP respects and values diversity through hiring and training practices and through the development of educational materials (USDA/NIFA, 2015).

Initially, EFNEP paraprofessionals conducted nutrition education to homemakers in their homes. Now, education sessions are held in a variety of places for participants. Examples are youth classes in low-income schools, after-school programming for pregnant teenagers, evening classes for single mothers and fathers, activities coordinated with human services agencies in urban areas, and programming at worksites, housing developments, faith-based organizations, and youth and community centers.

The challenge for the future is to innovate and create ways to connect individually with participants in a world that often seems devoured by screen time and asynchronous, virtual experiences.

EFNEP is dedicated to reaching people where they are and in ways they are searching for nutrition and health information. As such, EFNEP is building upon its history of providing high quality, effective nutrition education by incorporating digital technology (Fox, 2011). An initiative is underway to integrate emerging technology with paraprofessional teaching, while also maintaining program integrity (McCaffrey & Brooks, 2016). The challenge for the future is to innovate and create ways to connect individually with participants in a world that often seems devoured by screen time and asynchronous, virtual experiences. Indeed, today's children are spending an average of 7 hours a day on entertainment media, including television, computers, phones, and other electronic devices (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016). Preserving the human touch in this digital environment is critical.

Maintaining the Human Connection for Program Sustainability in FCS

In today's world of instant-gratification, the essential underpinning of FCS—represented within the enduring success of EFNEP—is found in the relationship between the teacher and learner. This is the foundation for conveying knowledge and skills and achieving behavior change. The FCS focus to address the social, physical, emotional, environmental, and economic dimensions of individuals within the context of their family and community necessitates that programs do not ignore the personal touch. FCS Extension programs have always valued the person, which sets the tone and philosophical position from which the program's goals and objectives follow. The hallmarks of FCS Extension, reflected in EFNEP's focus on people, accessibility, engagement, empowerment, learner-centered education, and individual relationships, illuminate how Extension develops the capacity of individuals and families while strengthening families and building community in an ever-changing society.

Herein lies the challenge: many programs experience pressure to increase technology in a way that deemphasizes the personal element. Instead, if it is accepted that a relationship is required for learning—or at least enhances learning—how do FCS programs maintain accountability and balance time constraints with the desire to have a human connection? This is true beyond Extension, as is reflected by the rise of online courses and degrees (Hew, 2016; Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005).

It is inconceivable that the question, "Who was your favorite teacher?" would ever be irrelevant. For it is the teacher who values the student/participant, who can apply the lessons within the FCS paradigm, and who strives to understand and adjust for contexts of all kinds. It is the teacher who can apply relevant evidence-based information on adult learning theory and youth pedagogy. It is the teacher who provides the opportunity and guidance for students/participants to practice in real-time what they learn. This is formally called "program mission" but in reality, it is the reason FCS professionals do the work: the human dimension. The rest—the structure, processes, curricula, delivery, and technology used—are the tools used to build that foundation. Over time, the tools have changed, and in the future, they will change again. The human dimension foundation has—and must—remain the same. This is the grand challenge ahead.

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