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Nutrition Education Program Assistants: A Leverage Point for Collecting Authentic Program Data

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Abstract: Extension administrators and educators wonder why low-income audiences refrain from participating or underparticipate in educational opportunities. This may be due to a gap between administrator or educator views of program participation barriers versus the lived experience of low-income audiences. Virginia Cooperative Extension worked to bridge this gap in perspectives by using Nutrition Program Assistants as a leverage point for recruiting and gathering authentic data on program participation from low-income individuals. Even though program assistants rarely serve in this role, their connection with low-income clientele and groups that serve them is invaluable for gathering authentic program data.

Authentic assessment of client needs has been a hallmark of successful Extension work (Caravella, 2006). However, Extension administrators and educators often wonder why low-income audiences refrain from participating or underparticipate in educational opportunities. This may be due to a disconnect or gap between administrator or educator views of program participation barriers versus the lived experience of low-income audiences. The Virginia Cooperative Extension Family Nutrition Program (VCEFNP) worked to bridge this gap in perspectives by using Nutrition Program Assistants (PAs) as a leverage point to gather authentic data on program participation barriers from their low-income target audience (McFerren, 2007). In the past, Extension agents have served in the role of providing program information on clientele (Franz, Piercy, Donaldson, Richard, & Westbrook, 2009); however, PAs have rarely served in this role.

Meeting the Needs of Low Income Women through Nutrition Education

The VCEFNP wanted to explore the incentives and barriers perceived by low-income women of child-bearing age related to their participation in nutrition education programs. The specific programs of concern were the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and the Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) program. Personal interviews were conducted with 23 women to hear their voices so that nutrition programs could more successfully reach this population (Patton, 1990). The interviews were held in their homes or appropriate local sites to explore their past experience with education, their daily routine, their interest in learning about health and nutrition for themselves and their children, and barriers to participating in nutrition education.

How We Used Program Assistants to Collect Data

Extension Nutrition PAs in Virginia are often indigenous to the audience they teach, know their communities, and have easy access to the targeted population. For this project, district nutrition coordinators provided names of five PAs to the program director. The director called the 30 women, informed them about the project, and asked if they could recruit five to 10 women to attend interviews. After speaking with all of the PAs, nine were chosen to assist with the project. The PAs were chosen due to their positive interest in the project and their belief that they could recruit the necessary women to interview. These PAs also had previously developed relationships with agency representatives who work with limited-income audiences.

The PAs contacted agencies that work with our mutual population, including Head Start, Department of Social Services, and Healthy Families, and extended an invitation to each agency representative to recruit participants with the specific criteria of the research study. The agency representative was asked to invite three participants to an interview conducted by the researcher and the PA. The PA followed up with contacting the participants in their localities personally using face-to-face invitations or phone calls. The PAs made a reminder phone call to each participant the day before meeting and assisted with selecting appropriate sites and times of day for each interview. The PAs arranged transportation for the women to attend the interviews if necessary. The PAs also helped determine the amount and type of remuneration appropriate for this group's participation in interviews.

The program director conducted the interviews, and the PAs observed and took notes. Prior to the interviews, the program director worked with each PA to prepare her for taking notes during the interview. This preparation involved in-depth discussion about observing and making notations about non-verbal actions. The interview questions were partially developed with the PAs as they gave suggestions to the program director on how to ask the questions so they would be more understandable to the participants. The program director served as the interviewer; however, the PA from the respective county or city accompanied her because the PA is a member of the community. Upon completion of each interview, the PA and the program director discussed the occurrences observed and recorded them in the field notes.

What We Learned About Using Program Assistants in Data Collection

Because the use of Extension program assistants in collecting data on clientele for any Extension program is relatively new, the following observations may be helpful for Extension workers who wish to use this process.

- Program assistants have built strong trust with their clientele over time to be effective educators. This trust results in a protective stance towards their clientele. Therefore, PAs want to know specifically how their clientele will be asked to share data and how that data will be used.
- Program assistants have strong ties with local residents, government agencies, and nonprofit groups. These strong ties or social capital help facilitate data collection from clients of those agencies and groups by Extension (Coleman, 1988).
- Because the contact with the potential interview participants comes from a person they know (the agency representative), this may increase the willingness of the clients to participate in the interviews.
- The PAs' presence during the interviews may promote a higher level of trust and less anxiety for the participant, therefore resulting in more authentic data for program improvement.
- This process could easily be used with Extension Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, 4-H Leaders, or other groups to help collect program data (Franz, 2009).

Conclusion

Extension administrators and educators often struggle with determining how to improve program quality so low-income audiences fully attend educational opportunities. Extension nutrition PAs in Virginia helped the nutrition education program director gain insight on program participation of this audience by helping recruit participants for interviews, providing reminders and transportation for the interviewees, helping develop interview questions, and assisting with observing and analyzing the interviews. This approach of using PAs who are known by the target audience helped reveal important information to improve the participation of low-income women in Extension nutrition education programs. This method could also be used by other Extension programs to enhance program data collection.

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