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Intergenerational Programming in Extension: Needs Assessment as Planning Tool

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Intergenerational Programming in Extension: Needs Assessment as Planning Tool

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a needs assessment study conducted to plan and develop a statewide intergenerational program. Twenty-eight Extension personnel, primarily Extension educators in the Family and Consumer Science and 4-H/Youth Development program areas, noted their preferences regarding program content and delivery format. Results were subsequently used in making several key decisions about curricular directions and program delivery strategies. To further explore ways in which intergenerational programming strategies can be developed to enhance Extension programming, it is proposed that additional research be conducted with a broader base of Extension personnel.

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Introduction

The Cooperative Extension system, with roots dating back to the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, represents a distinct approach for meeting the educational needs of citizens and helping them lead high-quality, productive lives. With an emphasis on improving rural life, efforts were made to disseminate the results of agricultural research to farmers and to provide families with needed information on nutrition, childcare, home management, and youth development. Considering its organizational structure and underlying philosophy for addressing relevant social issues, Cooperative Extension has established a responsive system for adapting its program focus to accommodate social trends and changing societal needs (Decker, Noble, & Call, 1989; Rogers, 1995).

This article reports the results of a needs assessment conducted to develop a statewide Extension program in Pennsylvania in the new area of "intergenerational programming." Intergenerational programming, which is gradually receiving the attention of county-based and state-level Extension personnel across the country (CSREES, 1999), refers to the wide range of initiatives that aim to bring young people and older adults together to interact, stimulate, educate, support, and provide care for one another.

The International Consortium for Intergenerational Programs, an organization founded in 1999 for the purpose of bringing together policy makers, academics, and practitioners to promote intergenerational practice, defines intergenerational programs as "social vehicles that create purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations." Intergenerational programs are found in a variety of settings, including schools,

community organizations, retirement communities, hospitals, and places of worship. These initiatives tend to mobilize the talents, skills, energy, and resources of older adults (as well as young people) in serving people of other generations (Henkin & Kingson, 1998/99).

Over the past 20 years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of the intergenerational program area to Extension. Intergenerational activities have often been integrated into Extension program areas such as human development and aging, 4-H/ Youth Development, horticulture, and community development. The intent is typically to provide educational enrichment and additional social support in the lives of young people and older adults and to produce tangible benefits at the community level, such as through community gardens, 4-H curriculum materials or projects, reading programs and murals (CSREES, 1999).

However, these efforts tend to result in small-scale initiatives that are not easily sustained. To sustain such work, there needs to be a greater commitment--displayed at the local, state, and national levels--to systematically develop and support intergenerational approaches and integrate them into existing Extension programs (Kaplan & Brintnall-Peterson, 2001/2002).

In 2000, Penn State Cooperative Extension established an "Intergenerational Programs and Aging" specialist position to provide statewide support for Extension educators and other professionals interested in conducting/facilitating intergenerational programs. Once this position was filled, the specialist pursued the following three-pronged strategy to provide direction on program development issues.

1. Conduct a series of "exploratory" site visits to Cooperative Extension county offices. Twelve visits, conducted over a 10-month period, provided basic information on local needs and how county-based Extension offices work to address those needs. County Extension personnel were also engaged in discussions about intergenerational relations issues and program possibilities.
2. Establish an "Intergenerational Initiatives Advisory Group." The advisory group consists of Extension educators and other professionals interested in the intergenerational programming area (including university-based outreach staff, agency and community organization staff involved in Extension programs, and university faculty members). Members serve the dual function of communicating county needs and ideas to the university community and bringing information and program development opportunities to each of the county Extension offices. Advisory group members also provide input regarding the development of new intergenerational models and concordant resource materials (e.g., curriculum guidebooks, fact sheets, circulars).
3. Conduct the "Intergenerational Program Possibilities" Assessment. Through this needs assessment, Extension educators were asked about their interests and preferences for intergenerational program/resource development. Most of the items on the assessment were derived from program development ideas that emerged from the county site visits and Intergenerational Initiatives Advisory Group meetings and discussions (noted above).

Purpose

The primary intent of the needs assessment was to ensure that new intergenerational program development efforts evolve in line with local needs and Extension educators' concerns and that they function to supplement and support existing Cooperative Extension programs, particularly in the children, youth, and family area. At a more fundamental level, the assessment was intended to function as a vehicle for conveying to Extension educators two important points:

- That an organized statewide initiative was being instituted, and
- That their input would weigh heavily in decisions made regarding program direction, structure and offerings.

Methods and Procedures

The study utilized a convenience sample (n=161) drawn from Extension personnel, primarily Extension educators, in Pennsylvania. A needs assessment using a mail survey, sent to all Family and Consumer Science (n=94) and 4-H/Youth Development educators (n=67) in the state, was developed to collect data for the study. Copies of the assessment were further distributed via the quarterly intergenerational newsletter (which was sent to the same sample noted above, as well as approximately 50 other professionals with varied levels of interest in intergenerational programming) and the Penn State Intergenerational Program Web site. A simultaneous e-mail message was sent to these Extension educators (n=161) as a prompt to submit surveys.

Items selected for inclusion in the assessment were identified during site visits conducted by the Intergenerational Programs and Aging specialist or in consultation with members of the Intergenerational Initiatives Advisory Group. Three sections were included in the instrument: (1) intergenerational initiative components, (2) delivery format for inservice training and educational resources, and (3) demographic information.

The first section, intergenerational initiative components, was divided into five sub-sections:

1. Demonstration programs (9 items),
2. Activity packages (4 items),
3. Public education (3 items),
4. Other initiatives (5 items), and
5. Additional items, which were open-ended questions allowing respondents to add components.

While some of the latter categories, above, reflect singular or short-term activities, the "demonstration programs" represent larger initiatives, each aiming to integrate outreach and research objectives.

Brief descriptions were provided for each of the items presented in the first four sub-sections. The items in these sections were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale with the following choices: 1 = lowest level of need to 5 = highest level of need. In addition, respondents were asked to check an "already met" box if the need has already been met as well as a "yes/no" box to indicate whether the proposed projects are a high priority for them. The preference level for section two (9 items) was measured by a five-point Likert scale ranged from 1 = lowest level of preference to 5 = highest level of preference.

Face and content validity were established by having members of the Intergenerational Initiatives Advisory Group review the instrument and provide recommendations for revision; accordingly, several minor revisions were made.

A total of 28 Extension educators and other professionals involved in Extension responded to the survey. This represents a response rate of 17.4%. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results

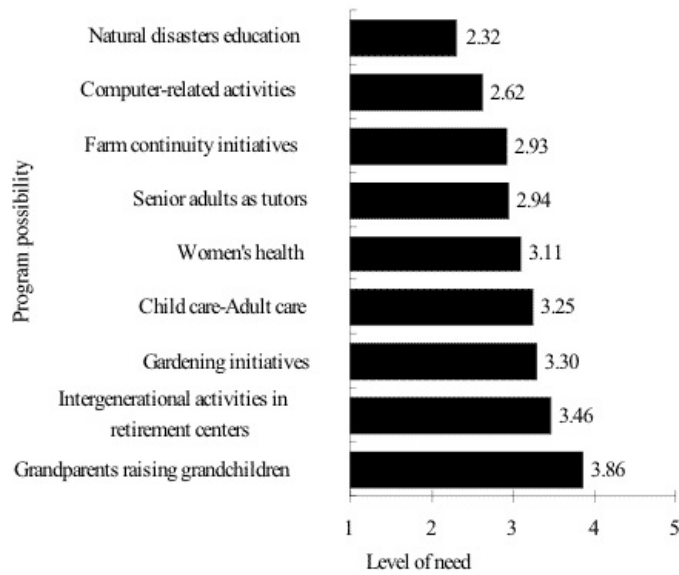
Demographic Information

A majority of the respondents were female (88%). The respondents were from 19 different PA counties. On an average, respondents have been in Extension for over 11 years. Regarding highest education level, 4% had an associates degree, 41% had a bachelors degree, 48% had a masters degree, and 7% had a doctorate degree. Respondents received their highest degree in a variety of fields of study. Examination of professional titles revealed that 87% were Extension educators, followed by specialists and other professionals, (some of whom were Intergenerational Initiatives Advisory Group members) (13%). Regarding primary area of program responsibility, 57% were in family living/home economics, 18% were in 4-H/youth development, and the remaining 25% were in other areas such as food safety, urban gardening, and EFNEP.

Demonstration Programs

Nine demonstration program ideas were listed in the survey (Figure 1). "Grandparents raising grandchildren" was indicated as the highest priority (68.2% of the respondents checked the high priority box) and the most needed ($\bar{x} = 3.86$). The programs involving the implementation of "intergenerational activities in retirement centers" ($\bar{x} = 3.46$) and an intergenerational "gardening initiative" ($\bar{x} = 3.30$), rated second and third in terms of perceived need, were checked as high priority by more than one-half of the respondents. The initiatives rated as least priority were a "natural disaster education" model in which senior adults share survival skills and strategies ($\bar{x} = 2.32$) and a model in which specially trained youth engage senior adults in "computer-related activities" ($\bar{x} = 2.62$).

Figure 1.
Perceived Level of Need for Demonstration Programs

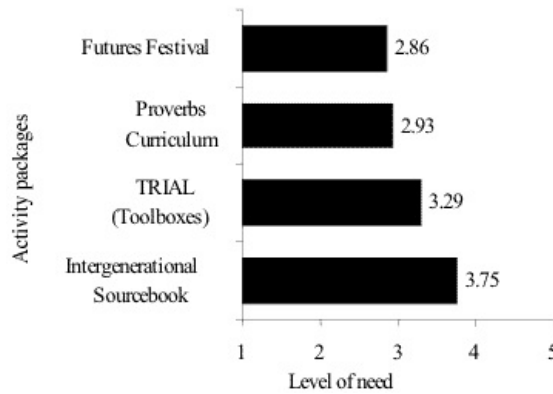


Activity Packages

There were four activity packages. "Proverbs Curriculum" contains activities using proverbs in different languages to promote understanding across generations and cultures. In "TRIAL" (Tool & Resources for Intergenerational Action & Learning) young people and senior adults collect and share items that they deem significant to people of their generations. The "Intergenerational Sourcebook" is a compilation of intergenerational activity ideas, including photography, storytelling, quilt-making, dance, gardening, and poetry. The "Futures Festival" model represents a special events approach for bringing people of age groups and public officials together to share their ideas about community development.

Figure 2 shows that respondents perceived the "Intergenerational Sourcebook" and "TRIAL" activities to be the most needed. In addition, except for "Futures Festival," all the other three activity packages were considered as high priority by about half of the respondents.

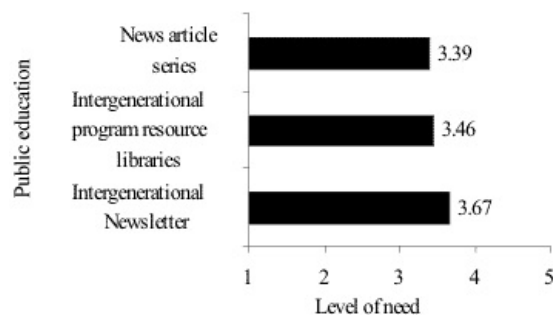
Figure 2.
Perceived Level of Need for Activity Packages



Public Education

Three types of public education were listed in the survey. More than half of the respondents indicated that all three of these educational resources were a high priority for them. Figure 3 also shows that the average level of need of the public education was fairly high.

Figure 3.
Perceived Level of Need for Public Education Resources



Other Initiatives

There were five other types of initiatives listed in the instrument:

1. Establish joint projects with Extension specialists in other states,
2. Contribute to national Web sites highlighting Extension-oriented intergenerational initiatives around the country,
3. Develop a university-based intergenerational studies course,
4. Take a leadership role in developing the Pennsylvania Intergenerational Network, and
5. Develop/explore the 5-H concept as a strategy for creating a special category of senior adult involvement within the 4-H system; the 5th H would be for "History." A total of 47% and 44% of respondents rated 5-H concept development and involvement in the PA Intergenerational Network as high priority, with mean levels of need of 3.29 and 3.30, respectively.

Additional Items

Several additional items were identified by respondents as issue areas that should be considered in intergenerational programming. These included:

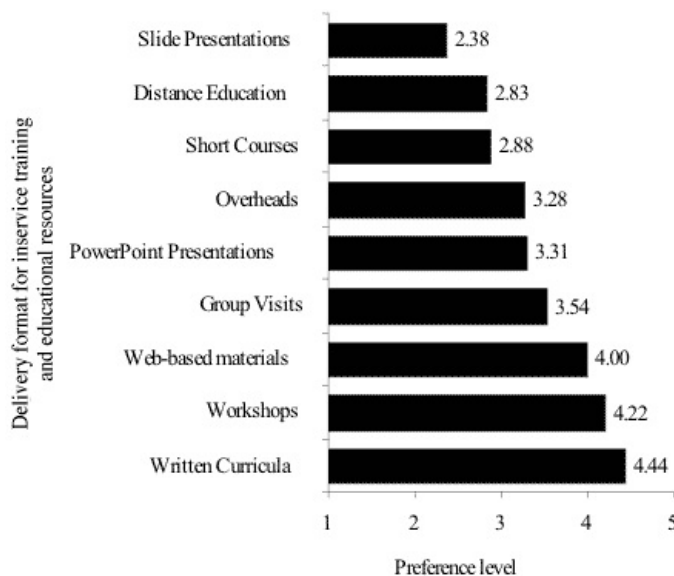
- Public education on aging issues,
- Mid-life issues,
- Retirement issues,
- Senior adult volunteer recruitment,
- Grandparenting issues, and
- After-school care programs.

Delivery Format

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of preference for nine delivery formats for receiving information and distributing educational resources (Figure 4). Written curricula ($\bar{x} = 4.44$), followed by workshops ($\bar{x} = 4.33$), and Web-based materials ($\bar{x} = 4.0$) were the most highly preferred delivery formats. Slide presentations ($\bar{x} = 2.38$), distance education ($\bar{x} = 2.83$), and short courses ($\bar{x} = 2.88$) were rated the least preferred formats.

Figure 4.

Preference Level of Delivery Format for Inservice Training and Educational Resources



Discussion and Implications

By providing information about the program direction and format preferences of Extension field staff, this needs assessment tool served an important program-building function. For example, the Intergenerational Programs and Aging specialist, in utilizing data on perceived level of need for the various demonstration program ideas, rearranged program development priorities. The development of a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren ($\bar{x} = 3.86$) program model was placed at the top of the work agenda, and plans to develop intergenerational programs to facilitate natural disaster education ($\bar{x} = 2.32$) and computer-related activities ($\bar{x} = 2.62$) were put on hold.

Considering limitations in resources, such a program prioritization strategy aims to focus attention on those program areas deemed most important by the largest number of Extension staff. The downside of this strategy is that it might work against some worthy program ideas that might not have wide appeal.

For instance, the natural disaster education program idea, which would entail creating a corps of senior adults to deliver educational workshops on survival skills to children and youth, made great sense from the perspective of one county that had a history of flooding and other weather-related

natural disasters. Because this enthusiasm was not shared by other county educators, the initiative was given a low priority. Yet this may soon change. In view of the post "9/11" environment, where there are increasing concerns related to terrorism, the line between natural and "unnatural" disasters is in some ways becoming a thin one, and there has been renewed attention to preparing for disasters of all kinds.

There were other applications of survey results. The Intergenerational Programs and Aging specialist stopped conducting slide presentations as a program delivery format because it was rated lowest in respondents' expressions of preference ($\bar{x} = 2.38$) and placed added emphasis on developing written curricular materials ($\bar{x} = 4.44$), conducting workshops ($\bar{x} = 4.22$), and building the Web-based materials ($\bar{x} = 4.00$). In fact, most of the program components noted in the survey instrument have already been developed and are posted on a Web site established for the Penn State intergenerational program (see: <http://intergenerational.cas.psu.edu/>).

Needs assessment is a vital part of any Extension programming. It can serve as a particularly valuable tool for developing programs in emerging program areas such as intergenerational programming because of the lack of consensus regarding program content and program delivery methods. Although intergenerational practitioners agree on a common definition of intergenerational programs, there is great diversity in terms of the settings in which programs are implemented, the intended beneficiaries of intergenerational exchange, program approaches, and the intensity and duration of intergenerational exchanges (Kaplan, 2002).

Against this backdrop of extreme program variability, it becomes all the more important to assess program needs as perceived by the field staff who will deliver the program. In turn, needs assessment information has value for helping to make decisions regarding program priorities.

The needs assessment results reported in this article represent a first step towards developing a broad-based, statewide intergenerational program. This sample of respondents consisted mostly of Extension educators in the areas of Family and Consumer Sciences and 4-H/Youth Development. Insofar as the intergenerational program has great potential for enhancing the work currently being conducted in most Extension programming areas (Kaplan & Brintnall-Peterson, 2001/2002), further study, with a broader base sample, is recommended.

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