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The Nutrition Information and Resource Center at Penn State University

Katherine L. Carson

The Pennsylvania State University, klc13@psu.edu

Julie A. Haines

The Pennsylvania State University, jah15@psu.edu



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The Nutrition Information and Resource Center at Penn State University

Abstract

Consumers are barraged with nutrition and health information. This presents a challenge for educators to keep abreast of the latest information. In order to help address this need, a Nutrition Information and Resource Center (NIRC) was developed. NIRC has an informational Web site (<http://nirc.cas.psu.edu/>) with online fact sheets, links to credible Web sites, an email question and answer system (eat4health@psu.edu), and a lending library. The NIRC provides resources for educators that they can use to help children, youth, and families to acquire knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary to improve their health.

Katherine L. Cason

Associate Professor
Department of Food Science
Internet Address: klc13@psu.edu

Julie A. Haines

Program Coordinator
8L Borland Laboratory
Internet Address: jah15@psu.edu

The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

Introduction

Consumers are bombarded with a tremendous amount of nutrition and diet information every day. This information overload often leads to requests for additional information or clarification from nutrition educators. This presents a challenge for nutrition educators in having up to date and accurate information about food and nutrition. To maintain professional credibility, to offer viable nutrition advice, and to initiate contemporary nutrition services, nutrition educators must keep abreast of the latest food and nutrition information.

In order to address this information need, a Nutrition Information and Resource Center (NIRC) was developed. The purpose of NIRC is to provide educational resources for Extension agents and other nutrition educators so that they can more effectively and efficiently educate consumers.

Project Description

The NIRC is an innovative mechanism for providing nutrition information and educational resources to nutrition educators. The NIRC development began with a needs assessment of Extension agents. Informal interviews, a Web-based survey, and focus group interviews were conducted. The information obtained indicated a strong need for accurate and up-to-date information provided in a timely manner.

The project coordinator believed the best approach to meeting these needs would be through a Web-based educational resource center. Extension Program Priority Initiative (EPPI) funding was acquired to begin the development of the NIRC in Spring 2000. Graduate assistants and staff were employed to begin the development of the NIRC. Using the framework developed by the project coordinator, the NIRC was developed with the following components.

Information

NIRC has an informational Web site (<http://nirc.cas.psu.edu/>) with online fact sheets that can be downloaded and printed. The Web site was constructed by a Web master at a local company, By The Numbers. The NIRC Web site has links to many other food and nutrition Web sites, making it a great place to begin searching for information on any nutrition-related topic. These Web sites have been evaluated for accuracy, objectivity, currency, coverage, and design and format.

Nutrition educators may submit questions about various nutrition and food science topics through an email question and answer system (eat4health@psu.edu). The answers to the questions are researched and responses provided in a timely manner. Questions may also be submitted in person, over the telephone, through the mail, or by using the form on the Web site.

Resource

The NIRC has a lending library with the inventory of listings maintained on the Web site. The food science and human nutrition materials consist of books, journals, nutrition education curriculums, nutrition activities and displays, and audiovisuals covering a broad range of topics from children's literature to technical nutrition information. The materials collection is reviewed, categorized, annotated, and listed in a database.

Center

A physical location for the NIRC was acquired within the Food Science Department at Penn State University. The center serves as the storage place for educational resources, and a site where educators can preview materials.

NIRC Site Maintenance

The NIRC resources are easily maintained through the Web site. Authorized NIRC staff access the NIRC site administration page to process requests. When a site user sends a request, a notification appears on the NIRC administration page. The NIRC staff process the requests and record the status on the administration page.

An email message is automatically sent to borrower to let him or her know when the request has been processed. Another email message is sent to the borrower a few days before the resource is due back to remind him or her to return the item. NIRC staff may also add or delete items in the library, online publications, and Web site databases from this site administration page.

Evaluation

The NIRC was introduced to a group of Cooperative Extension agents attending inservice training in March 2001. The NIRC has also been publicized through articles in departmental and professional association newsletters and through various email listservs. When NIRC was first introduced, several users and NIRC staff requested resource processing and site administration changes. These requests were incorporated into the Web site by the Web master.

Users of the NIRC have included Cooperative Extension Agents with foods and nutrition responsibilities, EFNEP and FSNEP agents and paraprofessionals, Food Science and Nutrition students and dietetic interns, Family & Consumer Science Teachers, and Public Health Department Educators.

NIRC user responses have been overwhelming. Educators have reported that the availability of NIRC materials has enabled them to supplement and/or update existing nutrition lessons/curriculum with current and attractive materials, activities and displays that they could not otherwise afford to purchase. Others have reported that the NIRC materials have allowed them to preview new materials in a timely and cost effective manner for input when making their own purchasing decisions. These comments provide project staff with insight into the success of the NIRC.

- "Thank you! This is wonderful!"
- "You gave us a start on where to get information. The Web site is great. It will be especially helpful for new agents."
- "Excited about the availability of Web site. This is great! Fantastic job!"

Conclusion

The NIRC is a valuable resource that can be replicated by Extension in other states. Extension Specialists traditionally conduct many of the NIRC activities, such as the development of publications and informational Web sites and the loan of educational resources. The publications developed for consumer use could readily be adapted for placement online. With publications organized on a searchable Web site, the users can more easily locate the needed information.

By using the Pennsylvania NIRC as a model, others can consolidate, and organize existing Web sites to become a searchable site with links to other credible sites. Educational materials can be acquired, reviewed, and made available for loan. Many resources are free or have a nominal fee. Others may be purchased with grant funds, and when appropriate, with EFNEP or FSNEP funds.

The NIRC has helped Extension educators to locate accurate, up-to-date information and resources

that they can use to help children, youth, and families to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to improve their nutrition and fitness.

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