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EDUFAIM: A Successful Program Helping Empower Rural Families Toward Self-Reliance

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Abstract

In this article we briefly describe the development, implementation, and preliminary evaluation of EDUFAIM: Educating Families to Achieve Independence in Montana as a model for statewide integration of efforts to help families dependent on public assistance move toward a more self-supporting lifestyle. The project is deemed by collaborators an integral part of their efforts to help families achieve self-sufficiency, and it has been dubbed a "model of collaboration." It is hoped that this model will be helpful to other states engaged in self-reliance education.

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By creating the Families Achieving Independence in Montana (FAIM) program in 1994, Montana became one of the first states to undergo welfare reform. One assumption of the program is that families coming off welfare often need life skills education that supports the goals of economic self-support. Working in partnership with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS), Montana State University Extension Service developed EDUFAIM: Educating Families to Achieve Independence in Montana. The program is in its fourth year of funding from the Children, Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) Initiative of the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES).

In this article we briefly describe the development, implementation, and preliminary evaluation of EDUFAIM as a model for statewide integration of efforts to help families dependent on public assistance enhance family resource management and move toward a more self-supporting lifestyle. We hope this model will be helpful to other states engaged in self-reliance education.

Theoretical Framework

EDUFAIM is based on principles of empowerment (Cochran & Woolever, 1983). Empowerment theory implies that individuals and families have strengths that can be mobilized and that they have some idea of what their goals are and what they need to do to achieve them. Even if they are not functioning well, this perspective holds that individuals and families can develop the necessary skills and strengths they need to have the quality of life they want.

One criticism of empowerment theory as it is applied in American culture is that it overemphasizes individual responsibility for change at the expense of societal factors (Minkler, 1997). To counter this criticism, EDUFAIM program development has also been guided by an understanding of the complex needs of limited resource families. Program offerings are tied to participant needs and reflect a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to helping individuals and families function effectively in the community context (CES, 1991).

From a human ecological perspective, there are limiting factors at different levels of the social ecology that impede individuals' and families' access to basic resources (McCray & Williams-Willis, 1991, cited in CES, 1991). Some of these are found at the household and individual level, the community services level, and the community characteristics level. Families receiving public assistance have earnings insufficient for adequate health care, adequate nutrition, quality childcare, and adequate housing. These families may require skills in managing limited finances and family responsibilities. EDUFAIM helps families acquire these skills through focused education programs.

EDUFAIM: The Program

FAIM, the state's welfare program, has three components: the Job Supplement Program, the Pathways Program, and the Community Services Program. EDUFAIM is offered through the second component, the Pathways Program, which is designed to provide families with "educational opportunities leading to permanent public assistance alternatives." Also, families not on FAIM are referred to the classes by a wide variety of collaborators.

EDUFAIM is designed to help limited resource families gain the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed for effective family resource management and progress toward a self-supporting lifestyle. Specific educational program content is determined by the needs identified and prioritized by individual families and communities. Program areas may include, but are not limited to, the following.

- Nutrition and health (e.g., preventive health education, maternal and infant nutrition, food preparation, shopping, and food safety),
- Individual and family development (e.g., parent education, building family strengths, balancing work and family, building self-efficacy and positive expectations, and managing stress),
- Resource management (e.g., time management, money management, and consumer skills),
- Community development (e.g., small business development), and
- Housing (e.g., housing affordability and availability, protection of housing investment, and health-related environmental issues).

EDUFAIM originally began at two regional sites serving five counties. At the request of their constituency, these regional sites have now expanded services to nine counties.

Upon entering the Pathways Program, families develop a Family Investment Agreement (FIA) in consultation with a FAIM coordinator. Families indicate in this agreement the kinds of EDUFAIM courses they believe they need to help them move toward a more self-supporting lifestyle.

These classes are taught by an EDUFAIM Family Educator assisted by an EDUFAIM Program Aide in small group settings or one-on-one, if dictated by the circumstances of the individual. The Family Educator is a Master's-prepared professional with training in family and consumer sciences who has considerable experience working with limited resource families. Program Aides are paraprofessionals indigenous to the limited resource population and have real-life experience on public assistance.

EDUFAIM staff work collaboratively with the local Community Advisory Council for FAIM, consisting of agency representatives, volunteers, and members of the target audience. Together they have developed their own vision, mission statement, and strategic plan that are in line with the state vision. They hold regular meetings to review and update their plans.

Local staff are supported with educational materials and training, evaluation, and computer technology by the state EDUFAIM Team. This team is comprised of resident and Extension faculty representing 10 disciplines:

- Family science,
- Adult development,
- Adult education,
- Child development,
- Foods and nutrition,
- Family economics,
- Community development,
- Housing,
- Youth development, and
- Computer technology.

Each site has two computers, one for office use and one for public use. These computers provide Internet connectivity, allowing the sites access to many Web-based resources for their clientele

and the ability to stay connected with each other, with like-minded professionals nationally, and with the state EDUFAIM team.

The State EDUFAIM Team is in turn supported by college deans, department heads, Extension administration, and state directors of the DPHHS who, together, have developed a shared vision, mission statement, and strategic plan for addressing the educational needs of at-risk families in Montana, using EDUFAIM as a vehicle. The vision, mission, and strategic plan are reviewed and updated annually, and course corrections are made where needed.

Evaluation

We had five evaluation objectives for EDUFAIM. The evaluation objectives related to changes in knowledge, skills, behaviors, and health orientation that promote self-sufficient living in a cost-effective manner. The objectives included measuring:

1. Client empowerment for obtaining employment,
2. Changes in mental health/well-being,
3. Changes associated with participation in core EDUFAIM classes,
4. Transformative learning, and
5. Cost containment associated with welfare programming (Dunnagan, Duncan, & Paul, 2000).

Client Empowerment for Employment

Four measures were used to evaluate client empowerment for employment: motivation, cognition, locus of control, and self-efficacy. These measures were included because of their relationship with empowerment (Zimmerman, 1990) and obtaining employment (Vinokur & Caplin, 1987).

Changes in Mental Health/Well-Being

The mental health/well-being measures evaluated levels of self-esteem, global life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, anxiety, and depression. These variables were selected because of their positive association with healthy relationships/families, positive social networks, and employment status.

A group of EDUFAIM participants at both sites (n=34) completed a survey containing these measures at entrance into EDUFAIM and at a 3-month follow-up. Findings indicated statistically significant increases in internal locus of control ($p = .029$) and significant reductions in anxiety and depression levels ($p = .02$ and $p = .03$, respectively) over the course of 3 months.

Changes After Participating in Core Classes

Using a one group pretest-posttest design, five core classes were evaluated: nutrition, parenting, money management, job readiness skills, and housing improvement. The evaluation tools were designed to measure relevant changes in self-reported skills, knowledge, and behavior. Ideally, we would have used a quasi-experimental design that employed random assignment of individuals to a treatment and a delayed intervention group (control group) to assess program impact. However, because sample sizes in many of the classes were small and delaying client participation in a program designed to empower persons toward self-support was not acceptable, we chose the less rigorous design with its recognized limitations.

Despite these limitations, the data analysis showed positive changes in relevant measures of knowledge and behavior in participants who completed core EDUFAIM classes. These changes were consistent across all five of the core classes. Key results included increased percentages of participants reporting increases in nutritional status, food safety behaviors; and healthy cooking techniques; increased feelings of self-worth; increased parenting skills; increased money-management skills; increased decision-making and relationship-building skills; and increased job-search skills.

Transformative Learning

With regard to the fourth objective, in-depth interviews were conducted with 34 participants on 10 open-ended questions to gather formative evaluation data related to the program and to assess transformative learning as a result of participation in EDUFAIM.

Transformative learning is a concept that comes from adult education. Transformative educational processes occur when learners reassess personal assumptions and examine whether their present approach to doing things is right for them (Clark, 1993; Courtenay, Merriam, & Reeves, 1998; Sokol & Cranton, 1998). This self-reflection helps learners prepare to take action. Programs that result in

transformative learning create real-life changes in participants; a "conversion" to a way of thinking about themselves; and doing things that are "better" for themselves and their families.

Outcomes of transformative learning include:

1. An empowered sense of self and an increase in self-confidence in new roles and relationships,
2. Fundamental changes in the way learners see themselves and their life assumptions,
3. More functional strategies and resources for taking action and gaining control over their lives,
4. Compassion for others, and
5. New connectedness with others (Courtenay, Merriam, & Reeves, 1998; Taylor, 1997).

Other, less common outcomes mentioned in the literature include enhanced spirituality and an involvement in ways of knowing other than rational. These outcomes are fostered by:

1. Teachers who are empathetic, caring, authentic, and sincere, and who demonstrate a high degree of integrity;
2. Learning conditions that promote a sense of safety, openness, and trust; and
3. Instructional methods that support a learner-centered approach that promotes student autonomy, participation, reflection, and collaboration (Robertson, 1996).

The 34 interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. NUD*IST (Nonnumerical, Unstructured, Data-Indexing, Searching Theorizing) qualitative software was used for data analysis (Sage, 1996). Analysis was conducted based on methods described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), Patton (1987; 1990), and Bogdan and Bicklen (1992). All authors participated in the data analysis. Analysis revealed seven themes that cross-cut the 10 interview questions. The themes were:

- Life skills,
- Empowerment,
- Social benefits,
- Program value,
- Facilitating learning,
- Program weakness, and
- "Just do it" (see Christopher, Dunnagan, Duncan, & Paul, submitted).

Life Skills

Responses subsumed under the life skills theme related to information and skills respondents learned in areas of money management, job readiness skills, parenting, and nutrition. The information and skills that respondents shared related directly to the content offered in four of the five core educational classes and reveal transformative learning outcomes. For instance, one participant remarked about changes in money management skills:

They helped me a lot on managing my money and paying my bills on time. I was behind on paying my rent a lot of the time. I have gotten it to where I can make payments on it. My food bill has gotten a lot easier. Even at the end of the month I have groceries.

Empowerment

Responses under the empowerment theme related to changes respondents made in the way they saw themselves and in the way they interacted with the world. Issues under empowerment were separated into five areas: empowered to try skills they learned in class, empowered to teach other people skills they learned, a sense of self-respect and hope, feelings of confidence, and taking better care of themselves.

The respondents talked about changing their world-view due to participation in the program. Regarding changes in the area of self-respect and hope, one participant stated:

I respect myself more and have more hope for the future. Because before I was always depressed and always mad. Now I have something to look forward to every week, because it is really hard to find jobs around here. They just keep my hopes up, before I was really depressed and now I have more to look forward to.

Social Benefits

One benefit of the program discussed by most clients was the social rewards they received from their involvement. Included under the theme social benefits were responses related to benefits received by participants that came from decreased isolation, getting to talk about issues, being around other people with similar situations, and meeting new people and making friends, suggestive of transformative learning. For instance, one participant said: "[Coming to EDUFAIM] made life easier: I guess by making more friends. I don't feel so completely alone."

Program Value

Under the theme of program value, clients expressed general comments about the positive aspects of the program, many of which echo transformative learning outcomes. One client described the program value in this manner:

It educates you for getting a job. How to help your family out more, how to take care of your family and yourself. It helps to educate, get an education. If you don't have an education it can help you get one by going for the GED. You can get the equivalency of the high school diploma if you don't have one, which will help get a better job later on.

Facilitating Learning

Under the theme of facilitating learning were responses related to the content of the classes, the learning environment, instructors, and educational strategies used in educational sessions. The responses reported in this section were all positive. The benefits of a positive learning environment were discussed by one client this way: "They [the instructors] make it fun and interesting to want to come here all the time. You sit there and listen to them and participate in what they are doing."

Program Weaknesses

Comments related to rules and regulations, content dislikes, and the inconvenience of the program were included under program weaknesses. Most responses under the questions "what are some of the things you really don't like about the program?" and "what about the EDUFAIM program has made your life more difficult?" were actually positive responses. A small minority of the clients reported program weaknesses. One participant shared this example of program inconvenience: "Traveling the distances. I go 50 miles each time."

"Just Do It"

The "Just do it" category came predominantly from responses to the question "if another person was about to enter the EDUFAIM program, what would you tell him or her?" Respondents made clear the benefit they derived from the program. The majority of the respondents made comments about getting as involved as the person can, taking advantage of what is offered, and using the information provided. One participant offered the following advice: "To go to the classes every week. Not to miss any cause if you do you miss out on something new, something different that could help you out."

Cost Containment

Under the fifth and final evaluation objective, an analysis of state welfare data supplied by the state welfare agency was conducted. Using data from the EDUFAIM sites between 1996-1999, a logistic regression was conducted to evaluate the impact of EDUFAIM affiliation (EDUFAIM participant vs. non-participant) on cost-related measures.

The control variables used in the regression equation included gender, age, education, and household size. The binary dependent variables (participants and non-participants) used in four separate regressions included: 1) any employment for 1998, 2) any earnings for 1998, 3) any unearned income for 1998, and 4) any food stamps for 1998. Using an alpha level of .10, significantly less unearned income was seen with the EDUFAIM participants than the non-participants ($p=.04$). No significant changes were seen with any employment for 1998 ($p=.25$), any earnings for 1998 ($p=.12$), or any food stamps for 1998 ($p=.98$).

However, the odds ratios generated through the regressions showed that the EDUFAIM participants had almost two times the probability of obtaining any employment in 1998 and more than two-times the probability of generating any earnings in 1998. Therefore, the preliminary results are encouraging and merit additional investigations that incorporate larger sample sizes and additional data on EDUFAIM participants and non-participants throughout the state.

A Successful Collaboration

The EDUFAIM federal liaison has termed the EDUFAIM project a "model of collaboration." One indicator of a successful collaboration is when collaborators give unsolicited praise for the program. Of the interviews with collaborators, the federal liaison wrote that:

agencies and local officials are able to articulate the positive changes that EDUFAIM is having on connecting users to appropriate services and education. It was noted many times that the educational component was what the state's FAIM effort lacked. Using a collaborative approach, they are able to see real progress in the targeted population. Several of the agency leaders noted that other communities that they served were interested in the EDUFAIM model (Woods, 1998).

We hope to see EDUFAIM expand to serve the needs of Montanans throughout the state. We also hope the EDUFAIM model will be helpful to other states engaged in self-reliance education.

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