Cultivating healthy couple &marital relationships

A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

CHAPTER 4:

Offering relationship and marriage education in your community

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Introduction

Principles and strategies for designing relationship and marriage education programs require a thoughtful, responsible approach. Even though a program may address a huge need in the community, the response can sometimes be disappointing. Successful program planning efforts in any community require attention to the environment, the setting, potential participants, and the type of educational program that will be delivered. Thus, this chapter will address the following questions:

- What does a professional need to know to plan relationship and marriage education that produces positive outcomes for the community and the families that are being served?

- How does a professional work with others in the community to offer relationship and marriage education especially when controversial issues arise?

- What are the different elements that need to be considered when planning relationship and marriage education in a community?

Professional requirements for delivering relationship and marriage education

Scholars in the field of adult education (Cervero and Wilson 1994) delineate three types of knowledge and skills needed to plan responsible community-based programs. For relationship and marriage education, they include technical skills and knowledge, an ethical vision of what constitutes beneficial relationship and marriage education, and negotiation skills for effectively partnering with the numerous constituencies within a community.

Technical skills and knowledge. The practical skills and knowledge (sometimes called "technical") probably are familiar to many community educators. Over time, various program planning models that incorporate these steps have been developed and tested. A successful community-based professional uses this knowledge and these skills to design and implement new

programs as well as to sustain programs over time (Apps 1979; Hughes 1994; Dumka et al. 1995; Taylor-Powell 2005). These models all share these critical steps:

- Bring to the planning table all relevant stakeholders (both those who support the specified effort and those who do not).

- Identify community needs and strengths to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current situation, including what factors can be changed for the target audience(s).

- Design and implement the program.

- Conduct an evaluation that shows program impact as well as effectiveness of the entire programming process.

- Re-design the program and continue implementation.

Ethical vision for relationship and marriage education. The next requirement for professionals wanting to deliver relationship and marriage education is thinking about and developing an ethical vision for this kind of programming. Just the fact that a family life educator decides relationship and marriage education programs need to be offered in a community suggests that this type of education is important. This vision implies a good use of public and private resources to help people gain skills and knowledge to improve their lives and the lives of their families, to increase the well-being of their communities, and to ultimately meet the needs of our society and the world (Cervero and Wilson 2001).

An ethical vision includes a professional's personal beliefs related to program planning for improving people's lives. Questions to be answered include:

- What does the community educator see as the purpose of relationship and marriage education for the families within a community? What does the professional hope to gain? What are the desired outcomes or impact? Will the community educator's intended audience share this same purpose?

- What is the best way to go about program planning? Does the initial organizer believe that planning needs to include all relevant stakeholders, including other organizations and participants? Engaging other interested groups within a community and allowing their voices to be heard during program planning and delivery indicates a value given to a democratic planning process and participation of all key stakeholders, including those most affected by the proposed program.

By asking insightful questions throughout the program planning process, ethical consideration also is being given to personal beliefs and values of adult learners.

- How does the community professional view adult learners? As empty vessels that passively permit themselves to be educated, or as people having rich experiences that can contribute much to the educational environment?

- Other aspects to be considered are personal belief systems and how people learn. Is it by sitting and listening or by becoming actively involved? Do they learn better in groups or alone?

Thinking about these questions is important when embarking on a new area of program planning. Discussing these questions with community partners helps the planning group come to agreement on the ethical vision for working together on relationship and marriage education.

Negotiation skills and knowledge. A program planner does not work in a vacuum, and therefore, cannot ignore the context or the community in which he or she works. Planning a community educational program, in reality, is a social activity. Consideration needs to be given to the people with whom the planner works, the employing organization, and the larger community, as well. As a result, planning becomes "political."

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Politics is important when considering community-based program planning since people working together most probably will represent specific interests, with some having more power than others (Cervero and Wilson 1994). Hence, a family life educator needs to understand the community's power relationships and who has a vested interest in relationship and marriage education to determine which agencies, organizations, and individuals can "make or break" the program. Others may have more power and a larger say in deciding the purposes, content, and format for a program to be successful.

Being sensitive to timing also is important for programsuccess. For example, the federal initiative of promoting healthy marriages (see **www.acf.hhs.gov/ healthymarriage**) needs to be considered along with the way it fits into the mix among a community's interested parties. The skills and knowledge needed to do this effectively include being able to work with others to develop trust, to locate opposition and support, and to understand the informal "ropes" as well as the formal community structures (Forester 1989, as quoted in Cervero and Wilson 1994).

Effectively working with others also involves intentionally thinking through assumptions about the program and the community (Taylor-Powell 2005). What assumptions are being made about relationship and marriage education and the community's readiness, one's own organization's readiness, or one's personal and professional readiness for the initiative? What assumptions are being made about the people in the community who might have a vested interest? Who are they and why do they have a vested interest? For example, a family life educator may assume that affirming marriage does not imply that an individual remain in a physically or emotionally abusive relationship. Can it be assumed that others who have the power to impact program planning make the same assumption? The definition of who can legally marry is another assumption that needs very intentional thought as perspectives among individuals and organizations on this issue will have critical importance in program planning.

The importance of reciprocity and negotiation

Knowing how and when to respond to differing assumptions in an ethical way and with thoughtful discussion is the key to nurturing a democratic planning process. Two important requirements to successfully navigate these potential conflicts are reciprocity and negotiation. Reciprocity is a practice that involves exchanging resources with others for mutual benefit. Negotiation involves discussions aimed at reaching an agreement. These two processes are often referred to as "collaboration." Success in negotiations results in reciprocity and, thus, a successful collaboration.

A program planner needs skills to be reciprocal and to negotiate between conflicting interests such as in the previously identified examples (i.e., Healthy Marriage Initiative; abusive relationships). It also means remembering that relationships of power among interested community organizations and people are never constant and can shift as program planning proceeds. An effective planner is aware of exchanges that occur and watches for potential conflict that can undermine successful collaborations (Cervero and Wilson 1994).

Skills of reciprocity and negotiation begin with asking ethically insightful questions at the right time and place. Central ethical questions to getting started in program planning are (Cervero and Wilson 1994):

- Whose interests will be represented?
- How will those persons be represented?
- When should they be involved?

These questions are vitally important for community-based programming and inherently involve power relationships. For example, if an organization is interested in offering relationship education to youth, it is important to ask whose interests will be represented in the program. One community entity may be interested in promoting abstinence education with youth and teaching this through assertive skills. However, others may want to include information on family planning. If youth were asked what they wanted, what would their answer be? Would the youth's answers be considered? Even more important, how will youth be involved, not only in identifying needs and interests, but also in decision making about the program content? Typically youth are not involved in decision making about programs that are designed for them.

Intentionally thinking about the questions to be asked helps others to move the program planning process along. A program planner needs to be clear on what issue is being addressed as well as who should be asked to answer. A strategic question does not allow a situation to stay stuck, but creates motion by generating new options to consider equally. Questions that ask "why" or require only a "yes" or "no" answer generally stop discussion and do not generate alternatives. Strategic questions are empowering because they imply confidence in the person being asked. However, it is important that these questions not be manipulative or perceived as such.

Addressing taboo issues must be done delicately because they can challenge the values and assumptions that the whole issue rests upon. For instance, going back to the earlier example of who can be legally married, a community-based marriage education planning process may stall if no one is willing to take up the risk of having a conversation about this issue. Finally, simple, straightforward questions will be easier to answer than long, complex questions that create confusion and perhaps distrust (Peavey 2004). For example, the question, "How should we recruit our audience?" is more easily understood and has a more definite focus than a question such as, "What are the marketing strategies necessary in attracting persons to programs in which one or both partners need to attend?"
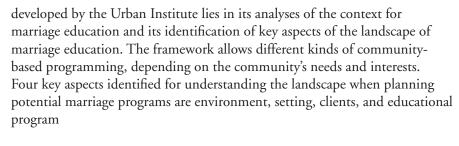
Specific elements of community program planning and implementation

In 2005, the Urban Institute published the results of an investigation they conducted on existing programs to strengthen and support healthy marriages (Macomber, Murray, and Stegner 2005). The strength of the framework

Guidelines for managing difficult conversations

Asking questions is integral to having a formal conversation process in community-based program planning. Margaret Wheatley (2002), a scholar in the field of leadership, describes several guidelines necessary for people with differing viewpoints to start the process of listening to each other. Acknowledging each other as equals is not always easy with the reality of power relationships within a community, but each entity needs the other for creatively expanding programming ideas to address the challenge. Being curious about each other requires humility and helps the conversation become more truthful, but takes time to happen.

Understanding also requires learning to listen to each other. Listening slows a conversation and gives time for reflection rather concentration on who "wins" the conversation. Language is a means by which people get to know each other, but interrupting others, monopolizing the conversation, or speaking too fast drives others away. Even though conversations can become difficult, the important issue is that everyone is heard or is given an opportunity to be part of the conversation. It may take time to make sense of the conversation, but it is necessary for thinking, getting things done, and creating richer relationships in community-based programming (Wheatley 2002). Often program planners can begin group discussions by establishing guiding principles for the ensuing conversation to protect everyone's participation and involvement.

developed by the Urban Institute lies in its analyses of the context for marriage education and its identification of key aspects of the landscape of marriage education. The framework allows different kinds of community-based programming, depending on the community's needs and interests. Four key aspects identified for understanding the landscape when planning potential marriage programs are environment, setting, clients, and educational program

Environment. Planning relationship and marriage education and its funding possibilities does not occur in isolation from what is happening in the larger environment. Environmental influences include (1) public and private funding streams to support marriage education; (2) federal, state, and local policies and initiatives; and (3) other relationship and marriage education programs available in the community.

Funding includes the way planners hope to support relationship and marriage education. It might be from (a) mixed sources, including government grants, foundation grants, client fees, and private donations; (b) client fees only, which give program planners more flexibility, but increase the cost of services; and (c) public funding, in which social service agencies might have government funding for relationship and marriage education. The latter source of funding could mean redirecting current funds to marriage education efforts or obtaining additional funding.

A second part of the environment is involvement in *local, state, and/or federal healthy marriage initiatives.* Many communities have initiated a healthy marriage initiative, receiving federal funding that is a part of the Healthy Marriage Initiative. An important set of questions needs to focus on the community's awareness and participation in these healthy marriage initiatives that results in three options: (1) being fully on board, (2) still deciding if it is a feasible option for the community, or (3) deciding that it is not a good fit. Again, these options need to be discussed with community partners in offering relationship and marriage education.

Last, any group considering relationship and marriage education needs to be highly aware of *what is being offered in the community.* If there is education available and the providers are not involved in current planning efforts, collaboration might be an option for creating a more successful program (For more about building community collaboration in this program area see Chapter 8).

Setting for relationship and marriage education. The setting for relationship and marriage education is the location where the program is delivered and the organizational context in which the program operates. Four elements of setting need to be considered during the planning process. The first element is the *organizational setting* and whether the program will be free-standing or a part of a menu of programs offered by an organization or community collaboration.

The second element is *collaboration.* How formally will a collaboration with partners be established? Sometimes there may be an agreement in which another organization's space is used for meetings or referrals come from another agency. These arrangements tend to be more informal, but can become more formal with a memorandum of agreement or even a contract.

The third element of the program setting relates to *staffing decisions.* What kind of credentials, background, and training are desired for the program facilitators? Because there are a number of choices, determining training needs and level of supervision will enter into the decision making.

Clearly, the presenter is extremely influential in the effects of a program. If the presenter is not interesting or is inappropriate, the intended message of the program may be missed. It is important for educators to be sensitive to group dynamics and the specific needs of their audience in order to cultivate this trust and credibility. Flexibility and changes in teaching methods, material, or even the facilitator may be needed.
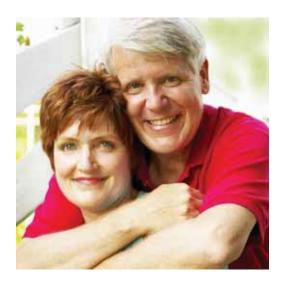
Scholars (e.g., Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, and Willoughby 2004) have noted in regard to facilitator characteristics that "gender may be an important issue. Some men are more responsive to the content of a program if delivered by a male-female team instead of just one instructor" (pp. 26-27). As well, facilitators who are familiar with the issues being covered may be the most credible presenters. Credibility is vital in order to gain trust and respect of program participants (Hawkins, et al. 2004). Morris, Cooper, and Gross (1999) have found that in marriage education, participants prefer a facilitator they can trust; one who can be supportive, empathic, and caring. However, successful instructors do not necessarily have to have the exact life-experiences or characteristics of their program's participants. The more the instructor has experienced and learned about the participants' context, the better the instructor will be able to understand and relate to his/her participants (Hawkins, et al. 2004).

The last element of setting focuses on the *range and level of services* that a program will offer. Perhaps an organization or collaboration wants to offer only educational programs. However, the decision might be made to work with an audience requiring additional services, such as therapy, job training, or even intensive family support services.

Program participants. This aspect focuses on the people who will be served or reached by the relationship and marriage education program. To effectively target a program, consideration must be given to the population served, attendance issues, and the target life stage of the potential participants.

First, for the population to be served, program planners will need to *identify the income group to be reached.* Most curricula have been designed for middle- or upper-income couples of European descent. Typically, relationship and marriage education has not been offered to low-income audiences; however, the government is increasingly funding program development for this audience.

Several years ago Michigan State University Extension worked with the Michigan Department of Human Services to develop a relationship and marriage education curriculum *Caring for My Family* (Michigan State University 2003) for low-income, unmarried new parents. If this is the target audience, several approaches can be taken (see Chapter 7). Clients could be referred to a provider of relationship and marriage education in the community for that specific audience, or an educational curriculum such as *Caring for My Family* could be integrated or adapted into an existing menu of services. The Cooperative Extension Services in most states has access to a number of low-cost relationship and marriage education resources.

Where possible, participant groups should be homogeneous in regards to socio-economic levels as well as other characteristics (e.g., first vs. repeat marriages; couples with vs. without children). Not only does this help the facilitator tailor his/her message, stories, and examples, but it also appears to help participants feel more comfortable (Lengua, Roosa, Schupak-Neuberg, Michaels, Berg, and Weschler 1992). Although group-specific program content can be infused into general marriage education curricula for mixed-group participants, the program will likely be more effective if couples participate in a homogeneous group.

The second area to consider when making decisions about program participants focuses on *attendance issues.* What is the target number that the program hopes to serve? The target audience will determine whether or not potential participants will encounter barriers to participation. If serving low-income couples, location, child care, and transportation may be necessary issues to consider. In addition, thinking carefully about how participants will be recruited and enrolled into the program could result in inexpensive ways to get the word out, depending on the target audience. It may be through news releases, TV and radio spots, newsletters, school and web announcements, community groups such as social services coalitions and faith-based alliances, and flyers posted at grocery stores, laundromats, and other businesses.

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The final area of decisions related to program participants is targeting the program based on the *participants' stage in the life course.* Relationship and marriage education is not a one-size-fits-all program. Participants' stage in the life span will determine what content will best meet their needs. Will the program target couples that are premarital, having their first baby, in crisis, raising children, or empty-nesters caring for elderly parents? Or is the program interested in reaching youth or young adults who are not yet in a serious relationship? Some communities are looking at ways to promote healthy dating and stem dating violence among youth (see Chapter 5).

Educational program. Educational programs include any face-to-face interaction that occurs with the target audience. Macomber, Murray, and Stegner (2005) use the term "intervention" to describe this aspect of the relationship and marriage education framework. Health care professionals often use this term to describe their services; however, prevention specialists also apply this term to educational programs as well as services such as therapy and job skills preparation. To attain healthy couple relationships, program participants may require an array of intervention strategies.

Four elements of the educational program will require program planners to make decisions: curriculum, dosage, format, and approach. First, in terms of *curriculum,* think about these questions:

- Is there an already developed curriculum in mind for the program?
- Or will pieces from several curricula be used?
- Or does the program need to develop its own curriculum?
- Does a curriculum need to be translated into another language?
- How will the target audience be included in the review and selection process?

Also, culturally appropriate material is an important factor in creating a successful program. Culturally insensitive examples, as well as material that under- or overestimates the reading ability or educational level of the participants, may quickly induce an audience to tune out or dismiss the presenter's message. With a diverse audience (e.g., ethnically, economically, number of times married, etc.), the program and staff must be able to meet the needs and expectations of everyone in the room. This is not an easy task. For example, citing a Biblical scripture about marriage may be really meaningful to a Christian participant. However, for non-Christian participants the use of the Bible in what was billed as a community relationship education program may be seen as inappropriate or even offensive. That being said, if a family life educator is interested in offering a program in a religious setting, Hawkins et al. (2004) suggest that "couples united by a particular faith may be best served by those who can communicate content within their culture and language of their religious beliefs and practices" (pp. 26-27) better than those who are not.

Next, planners need to consider *program dosage*. This term refers to the length of sessions and the number of sessions offered in a program. Most commonly, the higher the dosage, the more likely meaningful participant change will occur; however, participants are very busy and oftentimes do not want to make large commitments of time to programs. An appropriate balance is needed.

Next, planners need to determine the *format* of their program, which refers to the way the educational program will be offered. A variety of formats may be used, but they generally follow three basic means of delivery:

- Work with only one individual or couple at a time, such as in a home visit format, which tends to be more therapeutic and costly, but can be better tailored to the couple's specific needs.
- Offer educational sessions to a group of individuals or couples. These sessions usually include some lecture followed by interactive strategies to let participants practice what was learned.
- Use support groups in which the group discusses specific topics with the help of a trained facilitator who may or may not have a pre-planned list of topics or curriculum.

Last, providers of relationship and marriage education programs may select a variety of *approaches* to program delivery. The first approach involves clarifying the *reason for the program*. There are generally three reasons for a program, and the program may focus on all three. However, one of the reasons will tend to dominate. First, is the primary purpose to improve the couple relationship? Often this purpose indicates that program planners believe that relationship and marriage education is the solution to other problems facing a couple. Second, is the program interested in strengthening people's human capital, including their education, job skills, and income? Or, third, is the program interested in helping people meet their basic needs for food and shelter so that they can address their personal relationships?

A second approach involves deciding the *focus of the intervention,* whether that includes the couple, the child(ren), or the family. Most marriage curricula focus primarily on the couple and are designed to improve their communication skills. Many providers who target low-income families are

interested in reaching the child and the family as well as the couple, taking a more comprehensive approach. At the child level, this usually involves a focus on father involvement and co-parenting. At the family level, this may mean including other education such as money management or work-family balance, and providing family support services.

The third and final approach involves specifying the professional orientation of the program. In other words, will the program have a therapeutic or clinical approach, or will it focus more on skill building? Very often, planners of relationship and marriage education try to take an approach that includes both orientations. Often people enroll in educational programs and later discover that they need more intensive services than the education can provide. The facilitator needs to have providers of therapeutic service to which participants can be referred.

Conclusion

These program planning elements are designed to be used by an organization or by a group of organizations that are working together to plan relationship and marriage education. All relevant members of a planning team need to be aware of each element and understand how it is to be used. Second, participation of the target audience throughout the planning process is critical. A program planning effort can have the people with positions of power involved, but if meaningful participation of the target audience is neglected, efforts may fail. Third, using these elements should be within the context of what was discussed throughout the article. In particular, an ethical vision for relationship and marriage education programs needs to be developed and retained throughout the entire planning process. In addition, addressing the political dimensions of planning relationship and marriage education is important for a program's success and sustainability.