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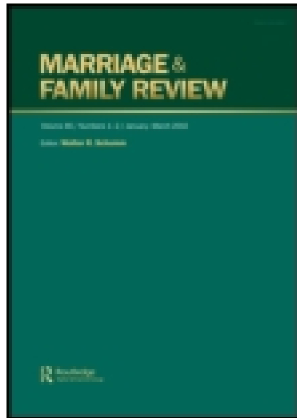

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Healthy Relationship Education: A Statewide Initiative Case Study and Outcome Evaluation

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Healthy Relationship Education: A Statewide Initiative Case Study and Outcome Evaluation

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Couple and relationship education (CRE) is effective in improving relationship quality and communication skills. However, its methods and structures of delivery (e.g., content, intensity, and settings) vary widely and have lacked empirical scrutiny. This article examines both the structure (i.e., initiative inputs and outputs) and the outcomes of one healthy relationship initiative. First, we use the comprehensive framework for CRE proposed previously to examine ways in which relationship education may be delivered by way of a statewide initiative in which 19 Cooperative Extension County Faculty provided education. Second, we analyze and report outcome data from 2,219 participants. A variety of CRE delivery methods significantly increased perceived levels of relationship knowledge regardless of gender, income, marital status, and whether participants had previous relationship education. Perceived knowledge acquisition differed by participant ethnicity, participant satisfaction with the education, and by CRE format such as single events versus multiple events. Programmatic implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS *family life education, marriage, program evaluation, relationships*

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the healthy marriage movement, relationship education initiatives have emerged in widely varied forms and structures (Administration for Children and Families, 2010; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). Although it is known that relationship education is effective in improving relationship quality and communication skills (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008), the methods and structures by which couple relationship education is disseminated vary widely and are topics in need of additional empirical scrutiny. Using a statewide Healthy Relationship Initiative as a case study, our purpose is twofold: first, to describe the initiative's structure (i.e., initiative inputs and outputs) and, second, to report the summative evaluation (i.e., initiative outcomes).

The Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative is collaboration between Utah State University Extension and the Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS) that seeks to enhance relationship quality and interpersonal skills. The impetus for the initiative stems from the extant research on healthy relationships (Adler-Baeder, Shirer, & Bradford, 2007), the social and financial costs associated with family dissolution (Scafidi, 2008; Schramm, 2006), and the aims of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families grants, specifically noting the benefits for children in two-parent families (Administration for Children and Families, 2010).

The initiative has two primary objectives. The first is to provide couple and relationship education (CRE) throughout Utah. In this endeavor, County Extension Faculty play a central role in each participating county, working with local stakeholders to offer programs and resources through various methods of delivery. County Extension Faculty are land-grant university employees based in communities around the state. They develop and deliver preventative education on topics ranging from agriculture to family life. With funding from the Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative, County Faculty in Utah serve as project leaders on their county-specific relationship education programs. The second objective, and a purpose of this article, is to evaluate outcomes and document impacts of the initiative.

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HOW IS CRE DONE? A COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK

CRE programs vary widely, and each program's dimensions and delivery shape the ways in which relationship education is disseminated. Hawkins et al. (2004) proposed a comprehensive framework for CRE with seven dimensions:

1. **Timing:** *When* in the life course education is offered (e.g., adolescence, mid-parental years) and what important life events most warrant education (e.g., premarriage, divorce, remarriage, etc.)

2. **Target:** *Who* receives education (recipients at various socioeconomic levels, racial-ethnic groups, urban vs. rural populations)
3. **Methods:** *How* the content is *conveyed* and *learned* (e.g., general or specialized instructors, media; how content is tailored to learning style)
4. **Intensity:** *Dosage* may be low or high (e.g., brief or in-depth curricula; one-time programs vs. multiple classes)
5. **Content:** *What* is taught (ranging from specific relationship skills to relationship knowledge, and finally to motivations and virtues in relationships)
6. **Setting:** The location of the intervention (home, community center, church)
7. **Delivery:** *How* education is *disseminated* to the public (via specialists; integrated into other human services)

The comprehensive framework (Hawkins et al., 2004) is used here to highlight this statewide healthy relationship initiative and provides examples of the many ways in which CRE may be delivered. We use "education" as a general term that in CRE may include nontraditional educational events or experiential learning.

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How Was *This* Initiative Done? Initiative Inputs and Outputs

At the state level, a portion of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families funds was allocated to support education and research programs focusing on healthy relationships. In Utah, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families is administered by DWS. The Utah Commission on Marriage, formed in 1998 through the Governor's office, advises DWS on their relationship education efforts. In 2009, DWS contracted with the local university Extension to facilitate county-based relationship education services. Extension specialists served as intermediaries to write and release the request for proposals, evaluate proposals, provide technical expertise for funded projects, track the ongoing progress of each project, and evaluate the inputs, outputs, and outcomes. Proposals were only solicited and accepted from county Extension Faculty. Extension Faculty were engaged as the project leaders based on the following factors: (1) Extension serves all counties in the state, (2) Extension has a long and successful history of delivering family life education to the community, and (3) Extension has experience and history partnering with community organizations (Goddard & Olsen, 2004).

Implementation of the Initiative

This study examines the initiative over 2 years: 2009–2010 and 2010–2011. A request for proposals was sent out to all county Family and Consumer Science (FCS) Extension Faculty ($n = 28$) in the state in the spring of 2009

and 2010. Grant requests were made based on specifications given for two levels of funding: smaller grants ($500–$10,000) and larger grants ($11,000–$25,000). Smaller grants could include multiple or single activity programs (e.g., one-time seminars or presentations, newsletters, or conferences). Larger grants required multiple programs and the involvement of a community coalition/advisory board. Extension specialists suggested research-related curricula, but each faculty member was allowed to use topics and curricula of their choosing. All grantees had to agree to (1) track service offerings; (2) post upcoming events on the state's healthy marriage website; (3) participate in the evaluation process, which included administering surveys to participants; (4) comply with the Domestic Violence Protocol; and (5) ensure that educators complete the Domestic Violence Council's (2009) web-based domestic violence training.

During the first year, 13 proposals were received and all were funded (12 faculty were women and 1 man). During the second year, 19 proposals were received and funded (18 faculty were women and 1 man).

METHODS

Participants

Data for this study were collected using self-reported surveys from the 2,219 participants in evaluated CRE programs. Data collection procedures were reviewed and approved by the authors' university Institutional Review Board; participation in the research component was voluntary. The sample was 57% women, 43% men, with 78% married, 12% single, 6% dating, and 4% cohabiting. Of those married, about 22% were in remarriages. The mean age was 37 (standard deviation [SD] = 12.7), with a mean income just above $39,000.

Other sample demographics were consistent with overall state demographic figures. In terms of race and ethnicity, 86% were White, 10% Latino, 1% African American, 1% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1% Native American, and 1% identified as "other." The mean number of children was 3. Approximately 48% had no previous relationship education. Participants completed surveys that asked about relationship skills and program satisfaction. These methods, used in examining initiative outcomes, are discussed later.

RESULTS

The results are presented in two sections: structure (inputs, outputs) and summative evaluation (outcomes). Note that in each county, CRE was facilitated by a Cooperative Extension Faculty who lived in the respective county and was familiar with the population and local needs (Vaterlaus, Bradford,

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Skogrand, & Higginbotham, 2012); thus, these results represent faculty attempts to tailor CRE to local needs.

Structure (Inputs, Outputs)

Study procedures are described within the framework of the comprehensive model of CRE (Hawkins et al., 2004). Hawkins and colleagues' theoretical model describes possible constellations of how CRE is implemented; the following results describe how these components were actually structured and implemented in the Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative.

Timing and Target

Hawkins and colleagues' (2004) component of *timing* refers to how education is tailored to life course stages. *Target* refers to socioeconomic status, race-ethnicity, and urban versus rural settings.

Of the 2,219 participants in a total of 137 events and activities across the 19 counties in 2 years, the typical participant was a married (78%), middle-class White (86%) adult (mean = 37 years, SD = 13.38) with children (mean = 3, SD = 2.43) and a resident of a metropolitan county (50,000 or more). In terms of urban versus rural setting, 91.4% resided in metropolitan counties; only 4.9% resided in micropolitan and 3.7% in rural counties (8.6% non-metropolitan). Given that 11.4% of the state's population is rural (U.S. Census, 2010), the sample was representative of 75% of rural residents of the state. The programs most commonly targeted general adult audiences (e.g., 85% of the programs included couple classes). Surveys were systematically collected from adults only, but approximately one-half of the educational programs included family or included a small youth component. Eight programs (about 6% of the total) specifically targeted special populations: six programs were presented to Latino populations, and one county presented classes tailored to Native American participants. This programming was based on content developed for this particular population (see Skogrand et al., 2008).

Method

Method refers to how relationship education is taught (Hawkins et al., 2004). An advantage to having Extension Faculty as program leaders is that they are typically sensitive to the cultures of their respective counties and understand how to adapt content to participants' needs. In terms of credentials, all faculty hold master's degrees from accredited universities and are employees of Utah State University's Cooperative Extension System. On average, faculty have worked 11.7 years in Extension (SD = 9.13) and all have broad areas of focus including family relations, nutrition, finance, and some in 4-H. *Method* also

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includes learning style (e.g., cognitive vs. experiential learning). In this regard, 97 of the 137 programs offered over the 2 years (71%) could be classified as primarily didactic, although these ranged widely and included a mix of traditional didactic and experiential formats (e.g., 9% were celebration of marriage events). About 25% of programs were primarily experiential (e.g., date-night events), and roughly 7% consisted of local newsletters and brief radio shows featuring healthy relationship information independent of face-to-face CRE.

INTENSITY AND CONTENT

The dimension of *intensity* refers to the brevity or depth of education and thus includes format. Rather than imposing a format and specific content on the FCS faculty, the decision was made to allow faculty to build programs that fit their counties and that fit into their own already busy agendas. It should be noted that this goal necessarily shapes participant outcomes. At this stage of the initiative, this "bottom-up" approach meant wide variation in program inputs, outputs, methods, and content—and thus in outcomes. An important part of the initiative was the notion of "cultural seeding" (Hawkins et al., 2004); that is, the initiative represented a small step toward creating micro- and even macro-cultural change in which CRE might become a common part of public awareness within communities and where a variety of professionals is recruited to assist in strengthening couple relationships. At this stage, then, the initiative's dimensions of delivery are at least as important as participant outcomes, the latter of which may be varied and general at such an early stage.

Of the 137 programs statewide, one-time events were most common at 54% of the total, and recurring programs (two to seven sessions) constituted 40% of the total. Thus, the intensity of many of the interventions was light, consistent with the goal of introducing relationship education in these venues, rather than immediately offering full curricula. In terms of *content*—that is, the specific programming offered—the variability of programming is too diverse to list comprehensively. Typical one-time program topics included effective communication, enhancing friendship, managing conflict, and characteristics of healthy relationships. Recurring programs offered curricula such as *How to avoid falling in love with a jerk* (Van Epp, 2007). Another county was funded to deliver the *Smarts PLUS* curriculum (Pearson, 2007) to youth in foster care to help strengthen relationship skills in the context of dating.

SETTING AND DELIVERY

Setting is where CRE is delivered (e.g., community center, church), and the *delivery* component addresses how education is disseminated (Hawkins

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et al., 2004). Settings work best where individuals and families frequent naturally, such as the workplace, schools, churches, military, or healthcare facilities. By working with community partners, education can be implemented for relatively more (and potentially more diverse) individuals and families (Vaterlaus et al., 2012). Accessible, familiar settings may help encourage participation, especially for those who lack transportation to programs, and may even help boost sustainability. For example, 23% of the first year programs were classes and lectures given by licensed therapists or other healthcare service providers (i.e., specialized education), and 62% were partnerships that added CRE to community programs that partners were already conducting, such as existing nutrition and finance classes, and community celebrations of marriage.

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Summative Evaluation (Outcomes)

MEASURE

Relationship knowledge was the outcome variable of this study. It was chosen for two reasons. First, relationship knowledge, including awareness and cognitive change, is a primary component of CRE programs (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). Second, this measure was chosen because many of the educational offerings were one-time-only, and behavioral change is not possible in such a time frame. Moreover, Hawkins and colleagues (2004) identified awareness, knowledge, and attitudes as crucial components of CRE, situating knowledge among relationship skills and relationship motivations and virtues.

Using a posttest-then-retrospective-pretest evaluation tool (Marshall, Higginbotham, Harris, & Lee, 2007), participants rated their knowledge of relationship skills on "what you knew *BEFORE* and now *AFTER* the program" (1 = poor, 4 = excellent). Survey items included participants' ratings of their knowledge of how to "listen effectively," "settle disagreements well," "solve problems," "deepen a loving relationship," "have a strong friendship," and "have an awareness of the importance of spending time together." The reliability coefficients for the six-item relationship knowledge scale were high for most pre- and post-measures ($\alpha = .77$ and .60 for men, .87 and .86 for women, pre- and posttest). Thus, the six relationship knowledge questions were combined as an integrated measure rather than being analyzed separately.

A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to test the mean levels of knowledge pre-versus posttest and to simultaneously examine potential moderating effects on knowledge acquisition of gender, income, marital status, age, race, satisfaction with relationship education, and single-event versus multiple-event relationship education programs. This procedure was also used to account for potential dependence of data among partnered

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respondents. In an effort to control for the confounding of previous relationship education, respondent reports of "number of previous relationship courses already taken" was also entered. Participants reported a mean of 1.53 (SD = 4.62), with 49% reporting no previous relationship education at all. However, there were 36% missing data on this item; moreover, respondents were not asked how recently they had received any previous relationship education.

The significant evaluation results are reported in Table 1 (nonsignificant moderators are not reported). There were significant increases in posttest knowledge of relationship skills for both men and women, suggesting that, on the whole, participation in the programs led to an increase in relationship knowledge. The preeducation mean for all participants was 2.73 (SD = .56) versus 3.32 (SD = .50) posteducation.

In terms of moderators, mean knowledge scores did not differ significantly by gender, income, marital status, age, or previous relationship education. However, relationship knowledge varied according to three moderators, reported in Table 1. Participants' perceived levels of relationship knowledge varied according to *ethnicity* (here grouped as White and non-White). Before education, the mean level of relationship knowledge among minority participants was significantly lower compared with perceived levels among White participants, but the posteducation mean level did not significantly differ by ethnicity. Knowledge acquisition also varied by *satisfaction* with the education: relationship knowledge before education did not differ, but the posteducation mean differed significantly according to participants' levels of satisfaction (the higher the level of satisfaction, the higher the perception of relationship knowledge). Finally, relationship knowledge varied according to *single-versus multiple-event programs*: before

TABLE 1 Changes in Relationship Knowledge Before and After Education (Retrospective)

	Retrospective*					
Demographic	Preeducation	Posteducation	F	*df*	*p*	Cohen's *d*
All participants	2.73 (.56)	3.32 (.50)	1398.87	1	.000	1.111
Ethnicity						
White	2.75 (.55)	3.32 (.48)	33.62	1	.000	1.104
Non-White	2.65 (.71)	3.37 (.46)				1.203
Satisfaction with Education			8.44	2	.000	
Low-av. satisfaction	2.75 (.60)	3.16 (.47)				.760
Average satisfaction	2.73 (.53)	3.28 (.48)				1.088
Very high satisfaction	2.71 (.61)	3.49 (.43)				1.478
Single vs. multiple events			3.58	1	.000	
Single	2.80 (.57)	3.33 (.49)				.997
Multiple	2.62 (.60)	3.31 (.46)				1.290

n = 2,219. Scale: 1 = poor; 4 = excellent.

*Values are means with SD in parentheses.

education, the mean level of relationship knowledge among those who attended multiple events was significantly lower than the mean of those who signed up for a single-event course; posteducation levels did not differ significantly.

PROGRAM SATISFACTION

Participants rated their perceptions of the value of the programs with five questions (1 = very low; 5 = very high): "Helped me strengthen my relationship," "I'd take this class in the future," "Presenter was knowledgeable," "Presenter was caring," "I'll recommend this experience." These questions reliably measured program value overall ($\alpha = .91$) and were thus combined. Both men and women rated the programs high in value (mean = 4.37 of 5, SD = .54; mean = 4.50 of 5, SD = .52, respectively). There were no significant differences in the rated level of value by gender or between the various counties.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this case study and evaluation was to empirically examine both the structure and the outcomes of a statewide healthy relationship initiative. Results are discussed in the context of Hawkins and colleagues' (2004) framework to illustrate how certain elements of the framework were actually operationalized. This discussion focuses first on the structure (inputs and outputs) and then on the summative evaluation (outcomes).

Structure (Inputs, Outputs)

As an intervention, the number of proposals submitted, content (e.g., projects), and scope of submitted proposals are "lessons learned" in and of themselves. For example, the finding in the first year that nearly half of all county faculty applied for funds means that half did not. All 28 faculty received the request for proposals. Administrators even allowed faculty the option of changing their plan of work, if funding was granted, so that workload or time constraints would not be barriers. Yet, half did not pursue the chance to apply for funds that would either (1) enhance their existing relationship education programs or (2) support new programs. That two-thirds of faculty applied in the second year may mean that some were encouraged by the success of others.

A study of faculty who did not apply has not occurred, but antidotal feedback to the state Extension specialists suggest that some faculty simply did not want one more thing to do, did not know where to start, or did not have community partnerships in place. Granting agencies, statewide

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administrators, and state specialists need to recognize that although Extension Faculty are situated around the state, not all have the same interests, community connections, and resources. Consequently, trying to mandate a comprehensive statewide initiative (i.e., services in every county) may not be a realistic goal of new healthy relationship initiatives. Starting with those who are interested and demonstrating the possibilities may be a more strategic approach.

The content and scope of programs may reflect the respective faculty's comfort level, but the way the structure was enacted in this initiative may also reflect the conditions and faculty–partner relationships in the community. Organizers of large-scale healthy relationship initiatives need to recognize that at the local level "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" (Olsen & Shirer, 2007, p. 1). Furthermore, planning may become "political" because "consideration needs to be given to the people with whom the planner works, the employing organization, and the larger community, as well" (Olsen & Shirer, 2007, p. 1). Not all faculty will want to face the social and political challenges of implementing relationship education. However, faculty who understand the individual, family, and community benefits associated with relationship education (see Adler-Baeder et al., 2007) may be willing to try—if they have support.

In this initiative, two state Extension specialists took the direct role of technical assistance advisors in their roles as codirectors of the statewide initiative. They helped brainstorm, troubleshoot, and encourage. One of the resources they used that may be helpful is the guide book, *Cultivating Healthy Couple & Marital Relationships: A Guide to Effective Programming* (NERMEN: National Extension Relationship and Education Network, 2007).

It is also important to note that left to their own devices, many county faculty chose light-intensity, short-term programs such as date nights. This may be due to not wanting to add multinight events to their schedule, or it may be because they know the challenges of trying to get couples to come a sequence of traditional marriage education classes. County faculty may have tried multinight programs in the past and have been unsuccessful. These faculty might have also done what has been suggested by other researchers (Hawkins et al., 2004; Markman et al., 2004): relationship educators need to do what makes the most sense for the communities they serve. "One size does not fit all," and relationship education should depend on the resources available and the needs of the targeted population (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). It should be noted that this study's focus on the initiative's structure leaves other important issues only partially examined or unexamined. Previous literature on university–community initiatives has found other defining factors, such as the people involved, their relationships, and their vision (Carlton, Whiting, Bradford, Dyk, & Vail, 2009). Many of

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these issues are examined in separate studies from this initiative (see Bradford, Huffaker, Stewart, Skogrand, & Higginbotham, in press; Vaterlaus et al., 2012).

It has been suggested by Hawkins et al. (2004) that low-intensity education may serve a unique population. We might speculate that those who would not attend an intense program might attend a date night, and therefore the educational program provided by these faculty might be a draw for populations not typically served. The kinds of programs proposed by these faculty were often out-of-the-box, and many of these kinds of programs have not been evaluated for effectiveness.

Finally, it is important to note that these faculty were very efficient in their plans to make requested funds go a long way for relationship education. They built many of their programs and other Extension programming such as 4-H into what they were already doing, capitalized on existing partnerships and collaborations, and used existing recruitment and implementation structures. They also held programs in buildings that were already meant to serve the public and were familiar to potential participants, such as schools, healthcare facilities, and social service agencies. All these strategies provide optimal use of funds and capitalize on the strengths and structures of the Cooperative Extension system.

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Summative Evaluation (Outcomes)

The results suggest that, on average, participants' knowledge of relationships increased significantly due to the relationship education (CRE) they received. Statewide, the various types of relationship education provided by Extension Faculty resulted in better knowledge measured by effective listening, how to settle disagreements, solve problems, deepen love in a relationship, and the important of spending time together. It is important to note the context of this finding: There was a very wide variety of educational formats, varying in content and length.

Of the three significant moderators, most notable perhaps is the finding that minority participants rated their relationship knowledge as significantly lower before CRE and that the difference disappeared posteducation. This result is in harmony with the purpose of the funder, the Utah Department of Workforce Services and the Utah Marriage Commission, which is "to help couples, who have chosen marriage for themselves, gain greater access to marriage education services, on a voluntary basis." This finding takes a modest step toward addressing recent calls in the literature to test the efficacy of CRE among underserved populations, such as minority ethnicities and low-income participants (Hawkins & Ooms, 2010). CRE has been relatively more available to (and tailored to) the middle class members of the cultural majority. The current finding on ethnicity suggests at least that CRE is effective for those minorities to whom it was made available. It may also have

been important that some of the courses were tailored specifically for minority groups (e.g., classes for Latino couples and families).

It is perhaps not surprising that those who were more satisfied with the programs rated their knowledge as higher. The finding regarding single-event versus multiple-event education seems to verify that those who were lower in their knowledge of relationships (or at least perceived themselves to be) availed themselves of the opportunity for more education—and thus (on average) signed up for multiple-event courses. Posteducation, there were no significant differences in knowledge by format.

This study has several limitations. One of the most prominent limitations is the difficulty of evaluating an intervention so varied in curricula, format, and length. Testing for moderation of format (single event versus multiple event) solved part of this problem, but the content presented varied widely. Still, there were common themes of communication, conflict resolution, and expressing affection, which allowed for a common measure. In addition, the posttest-then-retrospective-pretest evaluation tool (Marshall et al., 2007) does not allow for a true pre-then-postevaluation. However, the inclusion in this study of one-time programs and multiclass programs makes this design somewhat of a necessity. Finally, the measure of relationship knowledge is limited in at least two ways: it measures knowledge, not behavior, and it was designed to capture the central themes of educational programming; the impact of other content remains unexamined.

Taken together, however, the results illustrate that a broad-based, statewide relationship education initiative is feasible and succeeds in realizing some of the components important in disseminating CRE (Hawkins et al., 2004). Moreover, the outcome results suggest that, over the varying content and formats, the CRE offered by the 19 Cooperative Extension Faculty resulted in significant increases in participants' knowledge about relationships.

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