# Successes and Challenges in a Statewide Relationship Education Initiative

Kay Bradford[1], Stacey Huffaker[2], Joshua Wade Stewart[1], Linda Skogrand[1], and Brian J. Higginbotham[1]

[1]Utah State University, [2]Brigham Young University, Idaho

*Although healthy relationship initiatives are becoming more common, relatively little is known about the processes of these initiatives. This study uses a phenomenological qualitative approach to examine the experiences of Family and Consumer Science (FCS) Extension faculty in the implementation of couple and relationship education in the Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative. Data were collected through quarterly report forms submitted by Extension faculty describing successes and challenges to their work. Successes in the project related to collaborative partnerships, attendance or participation, and positive outcomes for participants. Collaborative partnerships were instrumental in reaching more participants and finding cultural resources. The challenges included constraints for participants and limited faculty resources. The findings underscore the benefits of creating flexible, low-intensity, and low-cost activities that attract participants and reduce some of the barriers to participation, as well as partnering with community organizations.*

*Keywords: couple education; Cooperative Extension; marriage; relationship*

Couple relationships and family structure can have an important impact on child well-being (Bradford & Barber, 2005; Schulz, Pruett, Kerig, & Parke, 2010) and on families in communities (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Thus, relationship education has become an increasingly common form of community intervention (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). Community interventions can be classified along three levels (Caplan, 1964): primary (universal) interventions, applied to whole populations and used prior to any onset of disorder or problem; secondary (selective) interventions, provided to members of at-risk groups; and tertiary (indicated) interventions, provided for individuals or groups with symptoms or those at very high risk (Turner & Dadds, 2001). This study examines success and

challenges in the practices by which a universal-level intervention was offered in communities in several sites in one state.

Meta-analytic studies of couple and relationship education (CRE) show that CRE improves couple communication and relationship quality (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008), and emerging research suggests this is the case for low-income populations as well as middle-class populations (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). However, evaluations of specific initiatives have produced mixed results. For example, the Building Stronger Families initiative found that the eight programs which were evaluated did not have positive effects. Indeed, only programs in Oklahoma had positive outcomes (Wood, McConnell, Moore, Clarkwest, & Hsueh, 2012). Important differences in Oklahoma's program included a different curriculum (*becoming parents*), the program's relatively shorter time period, and participants' higher likelihood of completing the program.

Taking a macroapproach, a recent study examined the potential impact of CRE at a demographic level. Hawkins, Amato, and Kinghorn (2013) showed that, taken together, healthy marriage initiatives in the United States have produced small, but significant impact in terms of increased percentages of married adults, children living with two parents, and decreases in percentages of single-parent households, nonmarital births, and children living in poverty. When data from Washington D.C. were excluded, (the location with the most CRE funding—13 times the national average), the nation-wide findings were no longer significant, but the findings were in the expected directions. Based on these results, Hawkins and colleagues suggested that the CRE programs have a positive effect. Thus, further applied research is warranted. Given the potential impact of CRE on family process and family demographics, the structure of CRE and methods of delivery for CRE deserve scrutiny.

## FACTORS IN PROVIDING CRE

As CRE has become more common, researchers have begun examining factors that lead to its success, including who offers it and how it is done. In recent years, county Extension faculty, sometimes referred to as county agents, have become more involved in the delivery of CRE (Goddard & Olsen, 2004). Emerging studies have explored county Extension faculty delivering CRE to diverse populations (e.g., Vaterlaus, Bradford, Skogrand, & Higginbotham, 2012). This study focuses on the successes and challenges unique to Family and Consumer Science (FCS) county Cooperative Extension faculty in their planning and implementation of CRE using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007).

## ASPECTS OF SUCCESSFUL CRE INITIATIVES

Research confirms the importance of several factors in successful CRE, including community involvement and collaboration, attention to audience and format, and issues of recruitment and retention (cf., Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). Community involvement in planning CRE programs is as important to successful program implementation as is community involvement in delivering these programs (Futris, 2007). But

obtaining this local support can be a challenge (Olsen & Shirer, 2007) because of competing demands for community projects, differing opinions, power and control issues, and boundary issues (Carlton, Whiting, Bradford, Dyk, & Vail, 2009; Futris, 2007).

To gain local support, scholars suggest working with a coalition or partnership that is representative of the community (Futris, 2007). Coalitions or collaborations should involve all relevant stakeholders, including those who are not in favor the program (Futris, 2007; Olsen & Shirer, 2007) as well as members of the target audience (Futris, 2007). These groups can help to identify the strengths and diverse needs of community members (Futris, 2007; Olsen & Shirer, 2007), ensure that programs fit those needs, and create a sense of commitment toward the programs (Futris, 2007).

Community partnerships can help draw communities together by sharing common goals and pooling social capital (Futris, 2007). Successful collaborations involve shared vision (Carlton et al., 2009), strategic planning and action (Futris, 2007; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007), clearly defined role expectations (Carlton et al., 2009), and competent leadership of the program leader (Futris, 2007). However, the characteristics of collaborations that add to their success (such as differing opinions and experiences) can also present challenges that need to be overcome. Collaboration and program implementation involve stressors which occur, such as staff changes, conflict of interests, and other problems.

Research has indicated that in the United States and Australia, between one quarter to one third of marrying couples participate in CRE (Halford, 2004); participation is lower for cohabiting couples. Additionally, many who are at risk for problems in their relationships do not seek CRE (Halford, O'Donnell, Lizzio, & Wilson, 2006; Larson, 2004). Duncan and colleagues found that valuing marriage, kindness, and maturity predicted involvement in CRE—although perceived relationship problems were also predictive (Duncan, Holman, & Yang, 2007).

Recruiting and retaining low-income or diverse populations can be challenging (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Consequently, scholars and experienced CRE providers recommend that CRE be offered in varying forms of intensity, that it be integrated into existing services, and offered along with or in collaboration with other services for the target population (Halford, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). Programs should be offered at a convenient time and place, and in a familiar setting (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ecological theory is used as a framework in this study because it focuses on the complexities of different environments that affect individuals and their families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory informs family life educators about ways to meet diverse needs in the recruitment of participants, build relationships of trust, use partnerships, employ various modes of teaching, consider various levels of intensity of education, and use incentives (cf., Hawkins et al., 2004; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). Moreover, ecological theory suggests that problems such as familial instability are often caused by problems within an individual's exosystem (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007); a prominent example includes the ways

in which the marital context has impact on child well-being (Schulz et al., 2010).

## PURPOSE

Cooperative Extension Services faculty have offered family life education for many years, and in the past decade, these county faculty have taken an increased role in delivering CRE (Goddard & Olsen, 2004). The role of county Extension faculty includes collaboration with community organizations and meeting the needs of diverse audiences. Thus, Extension faculty may be uniquely prepared to implement CRE. However, more information is needed about lessons learned in implementing CRE and about the specific successes and challenges faced by Extension faculty. In keeping with phenomenological theory, two general research questions were asked based on Extension faculty's experiences in facilitating a statewide healthy relationship initiative: (i) What were the successes that county Extension faculty experienced in implementing couple and relationship education? and (ii) What were the challenges to implementation?

## METHOD

### Initiative Design

The Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative (UHRI) is a collaboration between Utah State University Extension and the Utah Department of Workforce Services. The initiative stems from the aims of federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grants, specifically encouraging the maintenance of two-parent families (Health & Human Services, 2011). UHRI seeks to provide relationship education throughout Utah with Extension faculty taking a central role in each participating county. Information on implementation, populations served, and outcomes has been detailed by Bradford, Higginbotham, and Skogrand (forthcoming). In the first year of the UHRI, 14 of the state's 28 FCS Extension faculty provided some type of relationship education. Over 8,000 contacts were attributed to the initiative, although not all activities were evaluated.

### Participants

In this study, participants were the 14 FCS Extension faculty who were funded as county project leaders to provide couple and relationship education. These faculty offered CRE during September 2009 to June 2010. There were 13 female FCS faculty and one male faculty member. The mean age was 49 ($SD$ = 10.46); all were Caucasian. Nine were married, three were single, and two were divorced. All faculty held master's degrees from accredited universities and were employees of Utah State University's Cooperative Extension System. All had broad areas of focus including family relations, nutrition, finance, and some in 4-H. CRE programming was selected separately by each agent and differed by county; thus, faculty were not given additional training for this project.

Agents consistently chose to offer "out-of-the-box" curricula that did not require special training. However, each faculty member had a background in family relations, and each faculty member had previously offered family relations education in their counties.

On average, faculty members had worked 11.7 years in Extension ($SD$ = 9.13). Eight of the faculty (57%) worked in metropolitan counties, two (14%) worked in micropolitan counties, and four (29%) worked in rural counties (The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2012). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), 10 of the counties had Latino populations above 7%, ranging from 7.9% to 16.3% of the population. In one county, 54.3% of the population was Navajo Native Americans.

### Measures

Throughout the project year, the Extension faculty provided quarterly data to the principal investigators of the project. As part of the quarterly report, the faculty responded to two questions: "What successes have you had?" and "What barriers have you encountered?" This measure is consistent with the phenomenological approach as described by Creswell (2007), in which researchers ask participants open-ended, general questions that help researchers to gather data about the subjects' experiences.

### Procedure and Data Analysis

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to explore the experiences of Extension faculty as facilitators of CRE. This approach is used when a researcher wishes to identify themes and meanings among the experiences of a group of people who have undergone similar events (Creswell, 2007). Although the focus is initially on individual experiences and the telling of individual stories, phenomenological inquiry focuses on the "essence" of the shared human experience. This approach was chosen to allow details of individual experiences to emerge from the data, but in a way that might highlight relatively typical experiences among participants, thus emphasizing commonalities rather than elements of divergence. The phenomenological approach of searching for shared experiences was also chosen, so the findings might be useful in intervention.

Two investigators repeatedly read the data from 1 year of the project, searching for and highlighting significant statements or quotes that explained the faculty's experiences. This step is referred to as horizonalization (Creswell, 2007). Next, the investigators grouped similar statements into categories to allow themes and meaning to emerge from the data. The investigators came together and agreed upon themes. The investigators then separately coded the data. Intercoder reliability was calculated by rating "agreement" or "disagreement" of the two coders sentence by sentence.

For the successes theme, the coders reached an intercoder reliability of 83%. The same process was repeated for the challenges theme, which had an intercoder reliability rate of 95%. Discrepancies were discussed until the coders came to a complete consensus. Next, these data were grouped into categories that described the faculty's experiences. This is referred to as a textural description (Creswell, 2007). The investigator also used the grouped data to

describe how the context or setting influenced how the faculty experienced the successes and barriers. This is referred to as the imaginative variation or structural description (Creswell, 2007).

## RESULTS

The results from the interviews are presented in two main categories: successes and challenges to implementation. These two categories are then broken down into several subthemes. Themes that were included by only a few of the interviewers were not included in this article. Despite differences in programming, including intensity in dosage of programming, the themes that emerged from the interview data were largely common among faculty. This possibly suggests common successes and challenges in implementing CRE even when intensity and content differ.

### Successes

Three themes emerged from the data that faculty identified as successes: resources, outcomes, and attendance or participation. The resources theme included subthemes of collaborations, or organizations that faculty partnered with to carry out their projects, and resources that faculty accessed without the help of collaborative partners. The outcomes theme describes positive results of the programs for participants and staff, and impetus for the future of CRE. Attendance or participation refers to the number of people that participated in the projects.

*Resources.* All faculty talked about resources in some way. The theme of resources generally included partnerships with individuals and organizations that could help them to reach out to their communities. Eleven of the faculty talked about collaborative partners as critical. Partners brought new ideas and different perspectives to the project. As faculty met with their collaborative partners or coalitions, they were able to collectively brainstorm ideas to adapt activities to meet community needs. Together the faculty and partners were able to coordinate possible dates for events and activities, plan menu ideas, and find ways to publicize events. For example, one county coalition agreed upon the importance of building a blog to promote awareness of the relationship strengthening event in their community.

Collaborative partner support also helped faculty to be able to teach more classes because they were able to reach participants that would not otherwise be reached. Once collaborative partners were excited about the programs, they were often eager to take these programs to individuals within their reach, with increased enthusiasm. High schools and junior highs allowed faculty to teach curricula in their classes; organizations provided information to people on their mailing lists, and agencies that worked with low-income individuals advertised to their clients. For example, one faculty stated, "The [county] Housing Authority Self-Sufficiency Program coordinator was very excited to have her clients learn positive communication skills and money management techniques to use with spouses, partners, and children. She sent program flyers out to all the clients."

Working with other organizations and individuals also brought an added dimension of expertise and information to the participants. For example, one

faculty's partnership with the Food$ense program "augmented opportunities for value-added activities" by helping participants learn about nutrition and the possibilities of integrating healthy relationships with healthy eating (e.g., planning and preparing meals together; sharing meals in families).

Six of the faculty talked about resources that were not in connection with collaborative partners. Some of these resources had already been used in other programs, such as mailing lists and staff members. Key resources included appropriate facilities and qualified speakers, completion of the required domestic violence prevention training, and advertisement efforts of staff members. Additional resources included things that helped with attendance and participation, such as the "ability to get the word out to [county] residents through [a] newsletter and news release outlets."

Other successes that were identified included faculty contribution to the programs such as curricula, incentives, and flexibility. For example, in one county, the faculty created marriage punch cards with various activities that couples could complete together to receive a $10 stipend. He reported, "The marriage punch cards were successful because the couples had to complete at least 10 activities together." "We printed about 300 of the cards and I'm just about out of them already."

*Outcomes.* All 14 faculty members talked about outcomes related to perpetuation of programs, positive participant outcomes regarding knowledge gained and changed behaviors, and positive feedback from participants. One subtheme that emerged was perpetuation of programs. Ten of the faculty reported that their programs led to more awareness about the need for CRE, interest in relationship education, and even a shift in community attitudes. Successful programs led to expansion of programs and the ability to form or continue partnerships with community organizations. For example, many faculty members received ongoing support from collaborative partners, and their partners were excited about the next year's programs. In one county, the reporter from the community paper who interviewed the participants stayed to attend the class and "was most impressed with the comments." In another county, the marriage week celebration's popular speaker created visibility for the existing marriage coalition, whose members were motivated to get an equally popular speaker for the next year's marriage celebration:

> One of the greatest results of the entire month, from the tips of the day and essay contest to the assembly, was raising awareness of how we as students are treating each other. We know that if we continued to raise awareness throughout our school and community we could make progress towards ending unhealthy relationships.

This awareness of the importance of healthy relationships even led to a shift in some community members' attitudes and interest in CRE. Evidence of this shift was demonstrated by individuals and libraries purchasing or requesting recommended books about CRE and by participants requesting future classes and telling their friends and family members about the benefits of the programs. One county reported, "We… cannot keep up with the demands for relationship-building/strengthening activities."

The majority of faculty stated that another outcome of their programs was that individuals and couples improved their relationships. Eight of the faculty

talked specifically about positive participant outcomes. One wrote, "It's fun to watch how much a husband and wife bond together when they are playful with each other." Individuals of all ages, including youth, gained important skills and knowledge that would help them in their current or future relationships. Another said, "I think this class helped them to recognize certain behaviors, emotions, trust issues, etc." The program may have helped youth who are confused about relationships to begin to recognize differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Some faculty included participant comments about the positive impact that these programs had on them. In a positive reflection activity, one adult shared how an activity reminded them of why they fell in love with each other and helped rekindle the flame:

> I realized the time spent "dating" keeps our boyfriend/girlfriend status more intact and I remember why we fell in love. When our dating time is amiss, he starts becoming that "roommate" that leaves me dirty laundry and dishes to clean up after instead of the man I fell in love with. Dating reestablishes our interest in each other and I'm so glad we participated.

*Attendance or participation.* Twelve of the faculty talked about the theme of attendance or participation. This referred to numbers of people recruited to and attending the programs, reaching a target audience, and individuals' enthusiasm before or during program participation.

Eleven of the faculty talked about successes in terms of numbers of people whom they had recruited or who had participated in programs. Initially, faculty were excited about the number of people that were already signed up, prior to the event. For example, one was "delighted that 20 people [had] registered for the workshops via online registration and another 20 people in person in [the] office. Another shared, "Just by word of mouth (we hadn't even gotten our promotional flyers out yet), we have 15 couples signed up for the Valentine's Event."

As the project continued, some faculty talked about growing numbers or building success, and being able to count on an average number of people each week to be there to attend the classes. For example, one of the classes "remained consistent with an average of 27 participants in each class." In another county, "seven couples attended four or more sessions." According to one faculty member, "People are attending classes as anticipated, based on previous events." For some faculty members, program participation exceeded their expectations. One program "had 125 people attend and almost ran out of room and food for them." Another county "had a better-than-expected turnout to most events."

### Challenges

All faculty members reported challenges or barriers during the implementation of CRE programs. Analyses of these challenges yielded two themes: participant-related challenges and resource-related challenges. Participant-related challenges included issues with recruitment and attendance and providing programming for culturally diverse audiences. Resource-related challenges included a scarcity of money, staff, and time.

*Participant-related challenges.* All faculty talked about participant-related challenges including recruitment and attendance of participants, and challenges of providing programming for the culturally diverse or those with special needs (see Vaterlaus et al., 2012). Many faculty members described struggles in getting people to sign up or to retain participants in the classes. While 39% of the activities were one-time events, 26% of the programs included recurring activities of 2–7 sessions, and 35% of the activities were not specified in duration, but were one- or two-time events. One quarter of the events were recurring activities; therefore, it is not surprising that faculty members would be concerned about retaining participants. Faculty members also talked about participant issues that might keep them away from classes such as time, perception of marriage classes, and participant characteristics.

Although many faculty had talked about successes with the number of people participating in programming, some of the same faculty also found it to be challenging. Eight of the faculty talked about the challenge of having enough people attend the activities or classes. One faculty member said, "We would like to see more people attend events. It is an ongoing struggle to continually recruit more participants…." Some faculty members struggled with getting people to register for their programs. For example, one county struggled with getting people used to a new online registration system and speculated this was the reason that a class had to be cancelled due to low numbers.

Faculty also found that "… despite verbal support… individuals have not been attending as they stated they would." Even when events were held with low enrollment, faculty struggled with participants following through with their commitments, such as attending all classes in a series or turning in evaluations. One report stated:

> Another barrier has been getting people to attend a series of classes. [Taking] classes in a series can produce a continuity of education and can support couples making changes in their relationships. One-time only classes are great and can give nuggets of information but may not influence much change. How do we get a group of people to attend a series of relationship classes successfully?

Faculty members seemed frustrated that despite great efforts they had made to advertise the programs, they still struggled to get people, especially low-income audiences, to attend their classes. In the final quarter of the project, one county reported fewer barriers, but still "the same frustrations of reaching the community." Another, after exhausting known resources, said, "We would like ideas for better advertising strategies in the future. We advertised in the media, newsletters, flyers, county email, advertising in classes, postcards, libraries, worked with other agencies to copartner, but still had limited enrollment at some sites."

Eight faculty members felt that participants' time was a barrier from getting them to attend. This challenge included competing in terms of scheduling with the events that are already offered in the community. Because faculty members were aware of peoples' busy schedules, they tried to schedule classes around other community events that may have created conflicts, but still had difficulty finding a good time to hold the events. For one, it seemed "there is so much going on right now" that "it has been hard to find a good night to hold the couple's communication class."

Faculty found that scheduling was an ongoing challenge, and were creative in making the workshops more appealing for people with busy schedules. For one county, this meant rearranging their day-long workshop and holding workshops at a convenient time and avoiding Saturdays. Another county adapted their stand-alone program and offered less formal relationship-building activities alongside other activities.

*Resource-related challenges.* Twelve of the faculty members talked about challenges relating to their resources, or the lack thereof, or challenges in collaborating with community organizations. This theme included limitations of time, challenges working with collaborative partners, difficulties finding cultural materials and instructors, and other resources such as money and staff. Eight of the faculty members talked about scarcity of resources or scarcity of money or staffing problems.

Eight of the faculty members talked about time required for planning and carrying out programs. Because faculty have "so many varied responsibilities," they sometimes had trouble "just trying to fit everything in." This barrier was "not new" or unique to this program. Faculty members had to complete other responsibilities such as "canning season, [the] county fair, and other programming" before they had time to focus on the relationship education programs. Also, many faculty split their responsibilities between FCS and 4-H programming. This meant focusing more on 4-H programming during the summer and then focusing on FCS programs during the rest of the year:

> Time is my biggest barrier. I have so many varied responsibilities that this second week of October is really the first week I've had time to sit down and focus on this project. My next responsibility will be to complete the [domestic violence] training (and have my assistant do so as well). I am trying to be organized and make sure I work on something with this project each week; it's been challenging so far, but I plan to make it a regular habit.

Other faculty members' time barriers included completing the required domestic violence training and "time to plan, teach, and prepare food and all." One reported, "time is always a factor, especially having enough 'lead time' to promote an event." For another, finding Native American speakers was "painstakingly time-consuming" and caused delays in being able to offer classes on the reservation. By the time she was able to offer classes, they were not able to complete as many sessions as they would have liked due to time constraints.

## DISCUSSION

Findings from this study were consistent with existing literature. In terms of the outcomes of offering CRE, a notable outcome is that most faculty stated that individuals and couples had reported improvement in their relationships. This finding is particularly encouraging, given the importance of healthy relationships for child well-being (Bradford & Barber, 2005; Schulz et al., 2010). In terms of the process of offering CRE, findings also mirrored prior research in that successes included work in collaboration with partners and having access to

resources and doing so linked to positive outcomes (Futris, 2007; National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, 2009).

Challenges while working with projects were also similar to previous research, in that challenges were related to limits to resources, constraints experienced by participants, and struggles with attendance (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005; Bir, Pilkauskas, et al., 2005; Carlton et al., 2009; Dion et al., 2008; Futris, 2007; Joshi, Pilkauskas, Bir, & Lerman, 2008; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). It is notable that sometimes the factors that increased success in the programs were also factors that added to challenges and stress for the faculty. This is consistent with literature that describes the successes and difficulties of collaborating (Carlton et al., 2009). That is, variables such as communication, flexibility, power and control, commitment, and expectations can vary in ways that can lead either to successful or unsuccessful outcomes.

A frequent topic that emerged among both successes and challenges was that of partnerships. The relevance of collaborative partners and recognition of the complexities of families' lives within the context of their communities highlight the salience of the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Partnerships in the community underscore the impact of the exosystem in terms of amplifying knowledge about or access to CRE. The FCS faculty facilitated CRE in different settings and "systems" within individuals' and families' environments and found it both important and sometimes challenging to work closely with partners. These findings confirm that, especially when working with low-income and culturally diverse audiences, professionals should team up with other agencies who already work with these audiences in order to build relationships of trust and to better meet the needs of these audiences (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). The Hawkins' et al. (2004) framework also suggests offering CRE across multiple community settings.

This study contributes to the literature by describing the "on the ground" experiences, both positive and negative, of working collaboratively. Collaborations helped faculty to know their audiences, brainstorm ideas, and increase program appeal to local communities. However, time and effort was spent debating and compromising on ideas that would help meet community needs but still fit within project guidelines. Other facilitators of CRE programs have described similar difficulties with partners having differing goals and viewpoints which make collaborations complex (Carlton et al., 2009). Because working with larger programs brings added stressors, adapting to fit the needs of all the organizational partners is an ongoing challenge (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005; Bir, Pilkauskas, et al., 2005).

An implication of this study and others (Dion et al., 2008) is that faculty might work with partners that have similar goals to make their work less challenging. Faculty members' access to established resources contributed to their success in the project. These resources included familiarity with the community and the ability to be flexible—tools that are important in offering CRE. FCS Extension faculty have for many years served people in a variety of ways; thus, they have well-established networks, methods of advertisement, and programs including mailing lists, newsletters, and word-of-mouth advertisement which were all instrumental in this project.

They also had access to CRE training. Because community members have come to trust Extension programs, many faculty felt that their programs achieved success by simply making CRE visible in the community and by giving

couples skills and enjoyable ways of spending time together. A conclusion one might draw from this study, which supports previous research (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005), is that well-established and trusted entities are more likely to be successful in bringing programming to communities than those that are less well established and trusted. Cooperative Extension Service is one of those trusted entities, and there are certainly others in communities around the country.

Scholars suggest that more research is needed to know why more people who would benefit from CRE do not participate (see Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markham, 2009). Faculty members were generally addressing barriers that researchers have identified in the literature, including time and the perception of CRE. Yet, faculty were not always successful in getting people to attend their programs. At this point, we might consider asking prospective participants why they do not attend. We might learn that we need to pursue different models to provide programming, such as couple mentoring.

The comprehensive framework proposed by Hawkins et al. (2004) suggested that CRE can be offered in varying intensities and durations. It was suggested that lower intensity activities might remove barriers for some participants and attract couples who may not normally attend. Lower intensity activities may also serve as a means of prevention because they may reach participants who are not seeking remediation for an immediate need. Some faculty were able to reach low-income, at-risk audiences but, consistent with previous findings (Joshi et al., 2008; Ooms & Wilson, 2004), other faculty described reaching these audiences as their greatest challenge. Even though Hawkins et al. (2004) suggested that offering lower intensity programs would attract more low-income audiences by reducing such barriers as time and cost, research is needed to know why more people did not participate. Asking these participants why they do not attend, even after removing barriers, might shed light on the answer to this question. There is real urgency to conduct this research with high-risk populations, since variables such as socioeconomic status have impact on couples' relationship quality and stability (see Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010).

The faculty in this study were able to perpetuate program support. In other words, many of their programs created increased interest, which resulted in larger numbers participating as time went on. Past research suggests that implementing CRE can begin to change the culture of the community, and this was observed in our data. Hawkins et al. (2004) described this as cultural seeding through what the ecological perspective calls the macrosystem. This is a system that is not directly connected to the individual but affects individuals and society as a whole through changes in social norms and attitudes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

As previously indicated, one challenge that faculty members had was awareness of CRE. Some faculty involved in this project were hesitant to be involved because they had experienced difficulty in getting people to come to multisession CRE programs. Thus, rather than providing high-intensity workshops, these faculty provided one-time or short-term CRE classes and activities. Additionally, with support from collaborative partners, faculty were more in tune with community needs and interests and were able to utilize this knowledge to create programs that appealed to their audiences, creating both visibility and interest.

The end result of this cultural seeding was that community members became excited and ultimately became involved in CRE programming. The implication

of this finding is that programming might need to start small to create community interest and let participation grow. This seemed to be especially important in rural counties where CRE was a new concept. This also means that programs need to be provided over the long-term in order that the increased participation might be realized. It is believed that one-time and short-term CRE classes can change the culture of the community to the point that more intense programming will be well received.

### Limitations

The goal of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of county faculty as they implement CRE programming. However, the fact that the programs implemented in each county were unique to each county (i.e., some were one-time guest speakers and others were a series of classes) was a limitation of this study. We asked faculty about their shared experiences, even though their programming was very different among the faculty.

In addition, we had participants from counties that were very different from each other. For example, some were very rural (e.g., at least 29%) and some were very urban, and some had populations that were ethnically diverse. Therefore, with an initiative covering the entire state, many counties have unique cultural differences. Therefore, along with including faculty who provided dissimilar programming, they also had dissimilar community contexts for providing that programming. Although we asked these county faculty about their shared experiences in providing CRE, in many ways, their experiences were unique.

Another limitation might be faculty or researcher bias. Because the county faculty members submitted their feedback forms to the principal investigators that funded the project, they might have reported information that they felt the investigators wanted to hear, thus over- or underreporting successes and challenges in an effort to meet project requirements.

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