Development of Core Competencies for Paraprofessional Nutrition Educators Who Deliver Food Stamp Nutrition Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to describe the process used for the development of core competencies for paraprofessional nutrition educators in Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE). The development process included the efforts of an expert panel of state and multicounty FSNE leaders to draft the core competencies and the validation of those competencies by FSNE paraprofessionals. The result of the project was a comprehensive list of 10 core competency areas with specific competencies for each. The core competencies will be useful with FSNE for state and local program planning, implementation, evaluation, and decision making, with possible implications for other community-based education programs.

Key Words: core competencies, paraprofessionals, nutrition education, Food Stamp Nutrition Education, job tasks, cooperative extension (J Nutr Educ Behav. 2009;41:138-143.)

INTRODUCTION

Core competencies identify the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that competent employees should demonstrate in a particular job classification. Core competencies include the skills and abilities employees are expected to have or develop, as well as the processes required to achieve success. For example, nutrition educators need training to be well versed in the subject matter they are required to teach, and they need to have skills in teaching methodology, record keeping, and communication. Although core competencies are widely used in education, many community and professional organizations also have developed core competencies as the foundation for human resource actions and staff development efforts relative to staff positions in their organizations.2-5

In 2002, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy recommended that Cooperative Extension integrate core competencies throughout the Extension System as standard practice for effective Extension programming.1 In response, the Cooperative Extension system and its partners have completed a number of national and regional core competency initiatives. In 2004, the 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge, and Competencies Study identified competencies essential to conducting 4-H youth development.6 These competencies provide the basis for job descriptions, individual learning plans, performance management, and professional development strategies. The Cooperative Extension Curriculum Project had a narrower focus, with an emphasis on core competencies related to subject matter disciplines within the Extension System. The competencies identified in that project guided the development of an on-line subject matter training course system for Extension professionals.7

Core competencies also are widely used in Cooperative Extension at the state level. For example, Texas Cooperative Extension has implemented a competency-based professional development system that identifies core competencies and professional development planning for Extension employees.8,9 Other state Cooperative Extension programs that are using core competencies in program and/or staff development include North Carolina, Michigan, Colorado, and Wisconsin.10-13

Two projects to identify core competencies in Extension served as the impetus for this project. In 2001, an expert panel of 7 state program leaders of Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE—now SNAP-Ed), the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), and state Nutrition Networks was convened to identify essential core competencies for state program leaders of these programs.14 The core competencies identified for nutrition program leaders were validated and disseminated to all state Extension Systems. The second project, initiated in 2003, was conducted to identify core competencies for paraprofessionals in EFNEP. As a result, 14 state and 20 county EFNEP...
professionals developed a list of 37 personal attributes, 18 job competencies prior to hire, and 43 job competencies after training.15

The current project was initiated in 2005 under the leadership of 2 state nutrition program leaders and the national coordinator, FSNE, Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service/United States Department of Agriculture (CSREES/USDA). This project involved both professional and paraprofessional staff in identifying core competencies for FSNE paraprofessionals in the land-grant university system. Within the land-grant university system, a paraprofessional model for FSNE program delivery is generally used; this model requires effective staff development and training in nutrition content, teaching methodology, record keeping, technology, and other areas of job performance.

Specific goals of the project were to: (1) identify existing core competency resources currently in use at land-grant universities; (2) develop national core competencies that states could use with FSNE paraprofessional staff; (3) involve state and local professional and paraprofessional staff in the development and validation of the core competencies; (4) disseminate information on the core competencies to all state Extension Systems; and (5) provide training in the use of the core competencies. This report describes the processes used to accomplish goals 1, 2, and 3.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

The Human Research Committee of Colorado State University approved the design and methodology of this project.

Investigators conducted a review of literature to identify existing core competency resources relative to the use of core competencies in FSNE. Concurrently, investigators distributed an electronic survey through the land-grant university FSNE Coordinator/Director listserv (n = 106) to determine the extent to which states were using core competencies for FSNE nutrition paraprofessionals. In addition, investigators invited FSNE state leaders to nominate multicounty and/or state level staff to serve on an expert panel that would be involved in the development of the core competencies. From the list of nominees, investigators identified a nationally representative panel composed of 10 professionals selected to achieve a balance of county and state level appointments, responsibility for urban and/or rural programming, range of years of FSNE supervisory experience, and geographic distribution.

In response to the electronic survey, 10 states provided the investigators with copies of core competencies for nutrition paraprofessionals used in their FSNE programs. Examination of these documents revealed considerable variability in both content and application. After they reviewed the 10 documents, investigators were confident that a comprehensive list of core competencies developed by a nationally representative panel would be a useful resource for FSNE.

Development of the Core Competencies

Prior to convening a 3-day meeting to draft the list of core competencies, investigators oriented panel members to the project via conference call. The orientation included discussion of project goals and an introduction to the Developing a Curriculum (DACUM) process, the methodology selected for developing the core competencies.16 DACUM uses a facilitator to direct panel members in analyzing their job-related tasks through a brainstorming process. The result is a list of competencies that describes the specific duties and tasks of competent workers in a specific job classification.

Although the DACUM process stipulates that core competencies for a specific job classification be identified by individuals in that job classification, project investigators felt it necessary to modify the DACUM process to be sensitive to the needs of FSNE paraprofessionals without compromising the integrity of the process. Specifically, investigators’ concerns included the difficulty that travel could pose for paraprofessionals, their potential discomfort and thus reluctance to speak openly in unfamiliar surroundings, and their deference to authority figures. Investigators, therefore, used the 10-member panel of local and state FSNE leaders, rather than paraprofessionals, to develop the first core competency draft. Investigators determined that these leaders were well positioned to represent the viewpoints of the paraprofessionals because of their ongoing interactions with them. During a 3-day meeting facilitated by the investigators, the panel of experts completed the first draft of the list of core competencies and clustered specific competencies into 10 broad core competency areas that they deemed applicable to all FSNE programs within the land-grant university system.

Investigators did not share the core competency documents from other states with the panel of experts until after panel members had completed the first draft. Doing so ensured that panel members brainstormed as comprehensively a list of competencies as possible without bias from existing documents. Once the panel members completed the first draft of the competencies, they studied the 10 documents to determine if they had overlooked needed competencies.

Validating the Core Competencies

Each panel member nominated paraprofessionals from her state to be involved in the validation of the core competencies. Investigators then selected 27 nominees to participate in the validation of the core competencies. These paraprofessionals represented a range of characteristics similar to those of the panel (rural/urban, tenure in FSNE, and geographic distribution).

Investigators conducted conference calls with paraprofessionals in each of the panel members’ states to validate the core competencies identified by the expert panel. Prior to the conference call, paraprofessionals individually reviewed the draft list of core competencies. Using a focus group format, investigators invited each paraprofessional to share her thoughts and reactions to each core competency area as well as the specific core competencies associated with each broad core competency area. After reading aloud each competency, investigators asked questions such as, “Is this something you do as part of
Table. Core Competency Areas and Specific Competencies for Paraprofessional Nutrition Educators
Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) within the Extension/Land-Grant University System

Understand the Organization
- Understand the mission of Extension within the land-grant university system.
- Understand and adopt the mission and goals of FSNE.
- Understand the relationship of FSNE to Extension, the University, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).
- Understand the eligibility requirements for participation in the Food Stamp Program.
- Understand the importance of the paraprofessional role in achieving program goals.
- Follow state FSNE guidelines.

Understand and Respect Diversity
- Respect and value people’s differences.
- Remain objective and avoid imposing one’s own values on others.
- Meet the nutrition education needs of food stamp eligible learners of diverse race, ethnicity, gender, age, language, education level, sexual orientation, and disabilities.
- Meet civil rights requirements.

Achieve Excellence in Teaching
- Recruit adults and youth who are food stamp eligible.
- Schedule programs (with input from supervisor) to be convenient for participants.
- Assess the needs, interests, and abilities of participants.
- Understand the factors that influence an individual’s food behavior.
- Limit program content to FSNE topics as defined in state program guidelines and the USDA food guidance system.
- Use research-based, state-approved educational materials.
- Stay current in FSNE topics.
- Plan and prepare lesson plans, activities, and materials based on participants’ needs, interests, age, and abilities.
- Engage participants in hands-on learning to achieve program outcomes.
- Use teaching techniques that build on participants’ learning styles (ways of learning), strengths, prior knowledge, and skills.
- Create respectful learning environments in which learners feel comfortable to participate.
- Encourage participants to increase food and nutrition-related skills and become more independent.
- Acknowledge participants’ successes.
- Use evaluation results to focus programming and improve teaching skills/techniques.

Conduct Program Evaluation
- Use state-approved evaluation forms and methods for collecting participant and program outcome information.
- Meet expected goals for participation/caseload as designated by supervisor.
- Provide constructive feedback to supervisors and state leaders on program effectiveness.

Maintain Accurate Records and Reports
- Submit records and reports neatly, accurately, completely, and on time. Document time and travel regularly on appropriate forms.
- Secure and/or document match.
- Secure and submit participant signatures indicating consent for photographs, and/or other personal information that may be used to improve programming.

Maintain Effective Internal and External Partnerships
- Know community demographics, resources, needs, and issues.
- Build and maintain effective partnerships with other Extension programs and community agencies.
- Respect the missions of partnering agencies.
- Understand and follow program memorandum of understanding and/or collaborative agreements.
- Communicate regularly with partnering agencies to coordinate services.
- Respond to agency referrals in a timely manner and report follow-up with the person/agency that made the referral.
- Refer participants to the Food Stamp Program, Extension programs, and other appropriate community resources.
- Strengthen programming by involving volunteers.
- Participate in the research mission of the university as approved by supervisor.

Communicate Program Value
- Serve as a good representative of the university.
- Include required logos, Food Stamp Program message, and FSNE funding statement on all print materials.
- Share program outcomes and successes with stakeholders, media, and the public.

Ensure Productive Interpersonal Relationships
- Maintain positive working relationships with support staff, co-workers, and supervisors.
- Share program materials and ideas with co-workers. Be open to new ideas, concepts, and information.
- Mentor new co-workers as directed by supervisor.
- Use effective verbal, writing, and listening skills.

(Continued)
your job?" Across all calls, the paraprofessionals concurred that the list of competencies was accurate and complete. They also suggested a number of changes to improve clarity of wording. For example, to ensure universal understanding of the term "learning styles," the paraprofessionals suggested inserting "ways of learning" in parentheses after the term "learning style." Investigators conducted a final conference call with panel members, who revised the list of core competencies based on paraprofessional input.

To further validate the core competencies, the investigators distributed the document nationally to all FSNE coordinators and invited them to participate in 1 of 3 national training conference calls, in which they were also given the opportunity to suggest additional competencies and validate the competencies provided. During the 3 national conference calls, consensus was reached that the 10 broad core competency areas applied in all FSNE settings. Although some FSNE state coordinators indicated that certain specific competencies did not apply in their program model, others confirmed that each of the specific competencies did indeed apply in their FSNE settings. Once investigators clarified that the specific competencies were not intended to apply in every setting and that state programs were expected to determine which specific competencies were appropriate to their program model, there was unilateral support for the core competency document by FSNE coordinators.

The outcome of this project was a validated list of 10 broad core competency areas applicable to all FSNE paraprofessional nutrition educators. Within each core competency area, specific competencies were identified and were intended to be selected by state program leaders as appropriate to their program models. The complete list of broad core competency areas and their corresponding specific competencies are presented in the Table.

**DISCUSSION**

The processes used to develop core competencies for paraprofessionals have broad potential application both in the land-grant university system and community organizations. Investigators found that the use of a listserv to conduct a national electronic survey and the use of conference calls were both efficient and economical. Disseminating the survey electronically enabled investigators to gather baseline information from more than 100 FSNE state program leaders and to avoid paper and postage costs associated with a mailed survey, while also shortening response time. The survey software facilitated rapid analysis of survey data as well as the tallying of nominations of

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<td><strong>Volunteer and/or accept additional responsibilities when appropriate and with supervisor approval.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Accept constructive criticism and suggestions.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Demonstrate Technology Literacy</strong></td>
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<td>Demonstrate basic computer skills, including e-mail and accessing the Internet.</td>
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<td>Use basic office equipment, including the telephone system, fax, and copier.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use Web sites approved by supervisor.</td>
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<td>Use audio visual equipment and materials appropriately in teaching.</td>
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<td>Enter data accurately and print reports.</td>
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<td><strong>Demonstrate Personal Accountability</strong></td>
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<td>Balance multiple responsibilities, including teaching, recruiting, recordkeeping, and reporting.</td>
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<td>Communicate concerns and issues to supervisor in a timely manner (sickness, leave requests, change of schedules, accidents, and conflicts with agencies, participants, co-workers).</td>
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<td>Practice positive work ethics (loyalty, honesty, integrity, perseverance).</td>
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<td>Demonstrate an understanding of job responsibilities and boundaries.</td>
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<td>Use good judgment about health and personal safety at work.</td>
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<td>Dress appropriately (as defined by state FSNE guidelines) and practice good hygiene.</td>
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<td>Meet scheduled commitments; arrive prepared and on time; cancel appointments only when absolutely necessary.</td>
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<td>Model positive nutrition, health, and food safety behaviors.</td>
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<td>Maintain reliable transportation.</td>
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<td>Organize and maintain teaching materials, supplies, and equipment.</td>
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<td>Use time and travel resources wisely.</td>
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<td>Participate actively in staff development/training.</td>
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<td>Develop a personal staff development plan, including setting goals to improve work performance in conjunction with supervisor.</td>
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<td>Use technology and program equipment/materials appropriately and for work purposes only.</td>
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<td>Work independently with confidence.</td>
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<td>Maintain confidentiality of participant and program information (appropriately file, transport, and store records).</td>
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<td>Comply with state laws regarding the reporting of criminal activity (copyright laws, reporting child abuse, and issues related to court cases).</td>
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**FSNE** indicates Food Stamp Nutrition Education; **FNS**, Food and Nutrition Service. These core competencies should be used within the context of the federal and state program guidelines.
panel members. Similarly, the use of conference calls for ongoing communication with the expert panel was both inexpensive and effective. Investigators also found that conducting focus groups with paraprofessionals by telephone to validate the core competencies was an efficient use of time and monetary resources. With some planning by the investigators, a safe, comfortable environment was created for the conference calls, and paraprofessionals seemed at ease sharing their opinions openly.

Some results of the project were unexpected. Investigators expected the panel to focus on competencies related to nutrition knowledge and teaching skills, since these were the types of competencies most commonly listed by the 10 states that had submitted documents for the initial stage of the project. Instead, the expert panel focused on competencies related to personal accountability. This result might suggest that the behaviors related to these competencies are the behaviors that present the most challenging supervision issues. It might further suggest the need to emphasize the development of these competencies in new staff orientation and training efforts.

Investigators also did not anticipate the level of agreement on the list of competencies among members of the expert panel, paraprofessionals, and state coordinators (although a similar level of agreement was noted in the study conducted by Wakou et al.).

Neither the paraprofessionals nor the state coordinators participating in the national training suggested additions or deletions to the list of competencies developed by the panel of experts. The paraprofessionals did, however, suggest that a number of competencies were expressed in language unfamiliar to them. Investigators found that in most instances, the paraprofessionals understood the concept conveyed in a competency once it was explained to them, but they preferred that it be expressed in words they were more likely to use. Thus, investigators learned that if core competencies are to be a useful tool for both paraprofessionals and professionals, they must be expressed in terminology that is understood by all.

Some limitations of this project should be noted. First, although the DACUM process requires that competencies for a particular job classification be identified by the staff members in that classification (as was done in the CSREES study of core competencies for state coordinators), investigators in the current study chose to have a nationally representative panel of FSNE state and multicounty coordinators (professionals) develop the first draft of the list of core competencies and subsequently have paraprofessionals validate the list. Investigators considered this a reasonable alternative to standard DACUM methodology, enabling them to circumvent the barriers associated with paraprofessional travel and at the same time acquire the necessary input of paraprofessionals. Another limitation was the decision to have panel members nominate paraprofessionals from their home states. Although doing so limited the participation of additional states, it maintained national representation of paraprofessionals and enabled panel members to orient the paraprofessionals to project objectives, explain the investigators’ expectations of the paraprofessionals’ participation, and address any anxieties the paraprofessionals might have had. As a result of the orientation provided by panel members, the paraprofessionals were well prepared for participation in the focus groups.

The methodology used in this project differed somewhat from other related projects designed to identify core competencies for use in FSNE, EFNEP, and other Extension nutrition education programs. This study used a peer nomination process to identify state coordinators to serve on an expert panel and followed the DACUM process for developing the list of competencies. Contrasting with the professional competency development project, the use of teleconference focus groups for this study provided opportunity for discussion as part of the validation process, which not only resulted in the validation of the core competencies, but also revealed literacy issues that investigators would otherwise not have addressed. The procedure used by Wakou et al. in a prior study of core competencies was substantially different from the procedure used in the current study.

It used a national convenience sample of state and county Extension professionals rather than a nomination process to solicit input into the development of core competencies for paraprofessional staff. Additionally, investigators in that study used a Delphi process to identify competencies and personal attributes needed and focused on the professionals’ perceptions. Through the use of a modified DACUM process as described, this study incorporated paraprofessionals’ perceptions for whom the attributes and competencies were developed.

A comparison of the results of this study with those of similar studies revealed a difference in how the term “core competency” was defined as well as how the competencies were intended to be used. The CSREES study used the term “core competency tasks” and did not stipulate how these tasks were to be applied in FSNE other than as necessary to the success of FSNE coordinators. Wakou et al. organized their results as “personal attributes,” “job competencies prior to hire,” and “job competencies after training.” In the current study, investigators used the term “core competency areas” and considered them applicable to all FSNE paraprofessionals throughout their tenure in FSNE. Experienced paraprofessional nutrition educators are expected to demonstrate the competencies at a higher level of performance than less experienced colleagues. The use of broad core competency areas with specific competencies assigned to each allows for flexibility in expectations of new versus experienced staff and for necessary variations in program implementation across states, resulting in consistency and yet flexibility in a national competency system.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

The outcome of this project was a comprehensive list of core competencies for FSNE paraprofessional nutrition educators, providing the foundation for decision making related to position descriptions, steps in the hiring process, new staff orientation, ongoing staff development,
performance appraisal, as well as program policy. The competencies are expressed at an appropriate literacy level for paraprofessionals, providing an important resource for administrators involved in program development and staff supervision as well as for paraprofessionals who need clarity in performance expectations. State FSNE leaders may develop a customized list of core competencies appropriate to the FSNE program model in their states by choosing the specific competencies listed under each broad core competency area. These will need to be updated as programming evolves and organizational structures change in response to the needs of the target audience.

The importance of appropriate language was a central topic of discussion during the validation by paraprofessionals, suggesting the need for additional research in this area. Although most nutrition educators are well aware of the need to develop printed materials at a literacy level appropriate for the target population, little attention has been paid to the use of appropriate literacy levels for paraprofessionals in both verbal and written communication.

Lastly, these core competencies will be useful for program planning, implementation, evaluation, and local decision making for FSNE. Other community-based education programs that use paraprofessionals will likely find many of these core competencies applicable to their programs, as well. In addition, the processes used in the project may be helpful to organizations seeking to identify core competencies pertinent to their programs.

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FSNE Paraprofessionals. Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, Utah, Montana, Virginia.

REFERENCES