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Preparing Extension Educators for Community-Based Research and Grant Partnerships

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Abstract

Two trainings to prepare Extension educators for research and grant partnerships were designed, implemented, and evaluated. These trainings further national goals to address health disparities, gain partnerships in the health care sector, and support health extension. The workshop Are You Research Ready? prepares Extension educators to participate in community-based human health research. Evaluations indicated that attendees gained a self-assessment of research readiness and felt more confident to position themselves for grants. Program evaluations also showed that educators needed additional training on how to create partnerships. A second workshop, Are You Partnership Ready?, addresses this need, increasing participants' confidence and skills for engaging in research projects and building partnerships.

Keywords: community-based research, evaluation, health, professional development, training

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Introduction

Cooperative Extension's National Framework for Health and Wellness (Braun et al., 2014; Rodgers & Braun, 2015) directs Extension systems to focus on building partnerships to address health and wellness in the United States. With demographic pressures such as an aging population (Colby & Ortman, 2017) and policy changes in the health care sector affecting national spending (Cuckler et al., 2018), there is substantiated need for community-based research to address health disparities. Our team of Michigan State University Extension health education professionals developed a model of health extension to guide implementation of strategies for improving connections between non-Extension human health researchers and Extension health program personnel (Dwyer et al., 2017). One of the strategies associated with our model of health extension is to create professional development endeavors that build organizational capacity and prepare Extension educators to participate in research and develop partnerships.

Professional Development Trainings

We designed, implemented, and evaluated a 5-hr workshop titled Are You Research Ready? This professional development offering provides baseline training to prepare Extension educators to participate in community-based human health research with university faculty. Training topics include common terminology in translational science, steps of the human health research process, responsible conduct of human health research, and strategies for communicating with human health researchers and the public. The workshop includes activities, research examples, and facilitated discussions related to conducting community-based human health research to encourage scholarship. Experiential activities based on adult learning principles such as practicing self-examination, sharing with others, building confidence, and acquiring skills and knowledge are incorporated intentionally throughout the workshop (Franz, 2007; Ota, DiCarlo, Burts, Laird, & Gioe, 2006). Table 1 provides examples of training topics and components used in Are You Research Ready?

Table 1.

Are You Research Ready? Workshop: Sample Training Components

Training component	Description
Five topics	Content presented at the workshop via slides and visuals addressed these topics: (a) types of research (e.g., basic, clinical, community-based participatory); (b) translational and implementation science terminology (e.g., *T1-T4 phases*); (c) steps of the research process; (d) aspects of responsible and ethical conduct of research (e.g, risk, consent, privacy, fairness in subject recruitment); and (e) methods of disseminating research.
Stepping on the research readiness continuum	In this activity, participants were directed to assess their perceptions of their own research readiness. Participants assessed and reported on (a) their current research skills, (b) their university and community connections, and (c) their overall readiness to engage in research. Participants placed self-stick dots with their initials on continuum charts on the wall at the start and again at the end of the workshop.
Flip chart brainstorm	To identify examples of research in Extension, facilitators used three flip charts to record participant comments. Flip chart titles were Educator-Initiated Research, Support of Others' Research, and Community-Initiated Research.
Dissemination bingo	In this interactive activity, participants identified their dissemination skills. Participants connected with each other by initialing "bingo sheets" containing squares listing dissemination efforts ranging from community presentations to manuscripts.
Videos featuring Extension leadership	In 3-min clips, leaders described the importance of Extension staff involvement in research.
Group discussions	Group discussions focused on community interventions and opportunities for educators to strengthen their skills as implementation scientists and research dissemination experts.

Through written evaluation feedback, the participating educators indicated a need for additional training focused on how they, as facilitators, could foster more meaningful connections between human health researchers and the communities they serve. To address this need, our team created a second professional development workshop: Are You Partnership Ready? A goal of this workshop is to continue to increase confidence and build skills. Educators attending the workshop were encouraged to move forward by discussing their research interests with their supervisors and including research in their plans of work.

Topics for Are you Partnership Ready? include negotiating roles on grants and funded projects; developing skills in reading funding solicitations; writing components of grant applications, such as scope of work, budgets, and budget justifications; and creating biographical sketches for inclusion as grant personnel.

Participant Outcomes

Between May 2015 and September 2016, 42 Extension educators participated in three workshops. When self-assessing their research experience prior to the Are You Research Ready? workshop, 75% of participants classified themselves as "beginner," 16% as "intermediate," and 9% as "advanced." Self-assessment is important because Extension educators have different levels and types of research experience and their training needs may differ. After the workshop, participants indicated through a postevent survey that they better understood the research process from beginning to end and because of the workshop would explore future human health research opportunities. Attendees reported gaining a self-awareness of research readiness and feeling more confident to position themselves for inclusion in grants. Only one third of participants had been through an institutional review board (IRB) process prior to the workshop. As a result, many attendees planned to pass the required modules to obtain IRB certification following the workshop.

As a result of attending Are Your Research Ready?, participants reported increasing knowledge in several ways:

- 75% became aware of Extension community-based research examples,

- 66% better understood types of research and types of funding for research,

- 66% could articulate the role of clinical and translational research,

- 75% were able to list key steps in the research process,

- 58% acknowledged the importance of being IRB-ready, and

- 70% reported overall improvement in readiness to become involved with research.

Evaluation results for Are You Partnership Ready? showed that 89% of participants increased their confidence regarding working with researchers. Ninety-five percent reported that the workshop helped prepare them for conversations with researchers. Additional results from the postevent survey showed that Extension professionals were planning several actions to improve their research and grant partnership readiness:

- 84% reported that they would search for funding supporting existing and/or new educational programming efforts,

- 79% planned to seek additional training (e.g., university online grants system, IRB) to be ready for research with partners,

- 74% indicated that they would explore opportunities for involvement in grant-funded research, and

- 58% planned to market their Extension-related skills needed by researchers (e.g., outreach and

dissemination).

Conclusion and Implications for Extension

We conclude that Extension educators benefit from professional development training focused on research and partnership readiness. In delivering these trainings, we confirmed that bringing together educators with different backgrounds encourages collaborative efforts for innovative programming (Sondgerath, 2016). Extension educators should be encouraged to move beyond program delivery and work toward becoming change agents. Professional development opportunities should include expanding confidence for taking part in research and improving skills in building community partnerships (Scott, Weeks, & Weeks, 2018).

The Are You Research Ready? and Are You Partnership Ready? workshops are apt for adoption by those in other states who want to increase staff competencies in applied research and partnership building. Providing trainings such as these supports Cooperative Extension's goal of recruiting, onboarding, and retaining qualified and competent staff (Angima & Carroll, 2019). Although some information is university-specific, such as the procedures for obtaining IRB approval, the underlying topics and activities form the basis of a highly effective professional development method for building organizational capacity that could be adapted by other universities. We encourage other Extension systems to use these workshops as a starting point or template for replicating the training and to adapt content for their organizations. An agenda, slides, and activity files for the training are available upon request. The actions of using the self-assessment approach to gauge readiness and holding facilitated discussions on specific community-based research opportunities help identify future training needs.

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