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Lessons Learned from Organizing a Multi-County Marriage Celebration Event

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It is well documented that individuals in communities need and value opportunities to engage in marital education and enrichment programs. Often individuals are interested in learning strategies that will enhance their interpersonal relationships. One way in which this can be done is through educational events that focus on specific topics. This paper focuses on specific strategies and lessons learned in hosting a collaborative relationship enrichment event, Marriage Celebration, across multiple counties.

Keywords: relationship education, marital education, marriage, healthy relationships, event planning, lessons learned

Introduction

Since the 1950s, there has been an increase in the creation and proliferation of relationship education programs in the United States, as evidenced by recent meta-analyses (Cowan & Cowan, 2014; Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010). One major reason for the increase could be attributed to the high cost associated with divorce for individuals, children, parents, and society (Fagan, Patterson & Rector, 2002). One study estimated that divorces cost taxpayers 33.3 billion dollars every year in the United States, not to mention the multiple struggles created by the erosion of marriages (Fagan et al., 2002; Schramm, 2006). Conversely, strong and healthy marriages have been associated with positive outcomes, especially for children (Adam & Sawhill, 2002; Amato, 2001; Institute for American Values, 2005). Accordingly, the implementation of structured education with the intention of promoting healthy couple relationships has grown in frequency (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013; Hawkins & VanDenBerghe, 2014), with many seeking these educational experiences, and often before they are distressed to the point of needing therapeutic intervention. As such, many couples participate in relationship education programs with the hope and intention of improving factors such as communication, positivity, maintenance, and satisfaction (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013).

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It is well-documented that individuals in communities need and value opportunities to engage in marital education and enrichment programs (Cowan & Cowan, 2014; Halford & Bodenmann, 2013). It has also been documented in several meta-analyses (Cowan & Cowan, 2014; Halford & Bodenmann, 2013; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008) that generally these programs may have small but statistically significant impacts on marital quality, as often indicated through self-reports. For example, evaluation generally found the programs were effective in increasing relationship skills such as communication (Hawkins et al., 2008), which in turn increased relationship quality.

Researchers with expertise in relationship education indicate there are a variety of settings and delivery modes which can be effective to enhance interpersonal relationships (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). One way in which relationship education can be delivered is through educational events that focus on specific topics (e.g., marriage, parenting). As such, the Weber County Marriage Coalition hosts an annual event in conjunction with Utah State University Cooperative Extension that is well-known and presented as a “date night” enrichment event for those attending.

The Weber County Marriage Coalition was organized by Utah State University Cooperative Extension in response to the high divorce rate in the county as an effort to strengthen relationships and prevent struggles associated with the erosion of marriage (Fagan et al., 2002; Institute for American Values, 2008; National Center for Family & Marriage Research, 2009). The goal of this coalition was to determine how to best support individuals within the local community in creating and sustaining healthy relationships. An invitation was extended to leaders of local social service organizations, counseling services, and other groups with potential interest within the community. While coalition members self-selected their involvement, a broad range of organizations were represented (e.g., domestic violence coalition, Department of Child and Family Services, Department of Workforce Services, the county health department, local school family resource centers, local counseling services, private citizens) who could provide feedback about how to best meet the relationship education needs of their respective groups. Input from these individuals, along with past success with similar events led to the creation of the Marriage Celebration, a date night of education and entertainment. The purpose of the event was to encourage couples to participate in healthy relationship education who may not normally attend traditional healthy relationship events. This was accomplished by providing an educational date night experience with an emphasis on a celebration of healthy relationships in a fun and positive atmosphere. The overall objective of the event was to strengthen couple relationships through educational enrichment.

As a result of the Marriage Celebration’s subsequent success, other Extension-affiliated groups have requested resources and support to create similar events. In an effort to support others, this paper focuses on specific strategies and lessons learned in hosting a similar collaborative

enrichment event across multiple counties. While it is important that events such as marriage celebrations focus on both the process of creating events that meet the needs of constituencies and the outcomes of hosting such events on the participants, this paper will focus solely on the process by which this event was created and highlight lessons learned.

Methods

The Marriage Celebration event was developed and organized by Marriage Coalition members in Weber County for individuals within the county and was held each year at a collaborating university within the county. In order to maximize attendance, the event was advertised in five surrounding counties that were within approximately one-hour driving distance.

While most participants were couples, the target audience for this event was any individual or couple interested in learning about tools and skills to support healthy relationships. Participants were recruited or self-selected to participate through a variety of marketing efforts in Weber County and various surrounding communities. Details of the event organization and marketing efforts follow.

Event Organization

In an effort to maximize attendance and planning efforts, the event was strategically held in February, when individuals often celebrate relationships. The event was held on a Friday night, from 4:00 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. and included four 50-minute break-out workshop sessions and an entertaining keynote speaker at the end of the night. Each of the workshop sessions included three to five topics to choose from. Participants who attended all sessions could acquire over five hours of relationship education in one night. The event had a yearly theme such as “Creating the Best Ever Marriage,” or “Shake it Up.” See Appendix A for a sample program agenda.

Speaker topics were selected through a needs assessment conducted with the Marriage Coalition members and participant feedback from previous events. While workshop topics varied slightly from year to year, most topics fit into the popularly requested themes of communication, conflict resolution, intimacy, staying connected (fun), parenting as a couple, blending families, finances, and protecting relationships from negative outside influences. The targeted outcome of the workshops was increased knowledge and/or skill development, depending on the subject. Based on participant requests, many of the workshops were taught twice so participants had more opportunity to attend the workshops that interested them most.

Conference Speakers

Speakers for the conference were professionals recruited from the community and were selected based on their topic expertise. Coalition members, previous presenters, and participant feedback from previous years provided suggestions for potential speakers. Presenters were screened based on relevant educational background and experience, with an emphasis on selecting engaging speakers. Presenters were secured three to six months in advance and a modest \$50 payment was provided as a thank you for their time and effort and to help cover travel costs. In addition, while each workshop provided content specific to an assigned topic, presenters were also allowed to promote their books or products when requested by attendees, although no sales pitches were allowed. As a side note, although speakers were only provided small monetary compensation, most were honored to be part of the event and some even chose not to be compensated for their involvement. Additionally, strategic selection of speakers, such as graduate students, university faculty, and other Extension professionals, allowed for high quality presenters at low cost to the conference coordinators.

Efforts were made to select keynote speakers who were well-known, fun, and dynamic relationship experts or were entertainers who had experience in sharing relationship messages. Reduced speaker fees were negotiated in order to keep the costs of the conference low. Some previous keynote speakers included local or national entertaining relationship experts such as Richard and Linda Eyre, John Lund, Matt Townsend, and Liz Hale. Because of their busy schedules, keynote speakers were generally secured one year in advance.

Maximizing Attendance

Venue selection. For those planning to conduct an event similar to the Marriage Celebration, selecting a large venue with multiple break-out session rooms and a large capacity for the combined keynote session is essential to hosting a large conference. In most cases, the room with the largest capacity should be utilized for the keynote presentation and have the maximum seating capacity. Some venues may have the option to add or remove walls between ballrooms in order to maximize space. For example, the venue for our Marriage Celebration featured three adjoining ballrooms that could be utilized as individual breakout rooms (approximately 300 seats per room) or the walls could be removed for the keynote presentation to allow for maximum seating (approximately 900 seats). In order to fit the maximum capacity of participants, it was also helpful to arrange chairs theatre style, without tables.

Registration cost. Keeping the cost of registration low (\$30-\$40 per couple or \$20-25 per single, depending on when they registered) helped promote attendance. Some of the ways registration costs were kept low was through partnering with an organization to provide free or reduced venue costs, using grant dollars (when available), providing refreshments rather than a

full meal for participants, utilizing a variety of low-cost marketing efforts, and receiving free or reduced fees from presenters (especially the keynote speaker). Providing scholarships to those in financial need helped to include low-income audiences.

Keeping it fun. Marketing the event as a fun date night with appealing and positive themes and class titles also encouraged attendance. Providing a variety of workshop topics taught by engaging speakers who appealed to couples in any phase of a relationship was also beneficial. Distributing door prizes donated from local businesses throughout the night (randomly placed in participant packets, thrown out into the audience at intervals, and presented during a prize drawing at the end of the night) helped create a fun atmosphere.

Volunteers

Members of the coalition, interns, and members of the community were utilized to help with planning, marketing, door prize collection, and compiling participant packets. They also helped facilitate the conference by assisting with registration, taking pictures, and providing assistance to participants. In return for their efforts, conference volunteers and their partners were allowed to attend the conference at no cost. Conference volunteers generally returned yearly to help with the event and, when needed, recruited additional volunteers. Qualified conference volunteers were also utilized as conference speakers when needed.

Marketing

A professionally designed poster and flyer about the event were created by the university marketing department and distributed in both electronic and printed formats. Marketing development was started about three to four months in advance and distribution of marketing materials started about two months before the event, with the greatest emphasis one month before the event. Free and reduced-cost marketing efforts were employed where possible to keep costs low. Some of these efforts included marketing through radio advertising, newspapers, newsletters, community calendars, email lists, doctor offices, local businesses, social media sites, local schools, churches, and other organizations. Speakers and coalition members were also encouraged to share conference materials within their areas of influence (e.g., local community organizations, university students, clients). Expanding similar marketing efforts into surrounding counties also helped to maximize attendance.

Registration

In order to encourage registration and to estimate what would be necessary to plan for the size of the conference, early-bird ticket sales began mid-December (for those who wanted to give tickets as a present during the holiday season) and concluded approximately two weeks before the

event. Regular-priced ticket sales continued until the morning of the event and tickets still available were sold at the door. Tickets were sold per couple (\$30 early bird/\$40 regular) or single (\$20 early bird/\$25 regular). Registration was provided through a local ticket vendor that charged a small fee per ticket. The registration fees covered the major costs of the conference, including marketing, facilities (including parking), speaker fees, participant packet materials, refreshments, and other miscellaneous conference supplies.

Participant Materials

A packet of information was provided to each registered couple or single individual the night of the event. The packet contained a map of the building, a brochure of upcoming Extension events, two evaluation forms with door prize tickets (one per person), a notepad, and a program listing the schedule, workshop description, and biographies of the presenters. Select door prizes, such as passes for free date night activities or coupons from local vendors, were also included. Pens were also provided to participants. Packets were compiled approximately one week before the event.

Participants

The average number of participants was approximately 675 ($N = 625$ in 2015; $N = 700$ in 2016). The average number of evaluations collected yearly is 517 individuals ($N = 480$ in 2015; $N = 554$ in 2016). Evaluations have found an average participant age of 41 ($SD = 10.9$), with approximately half males and females (48% and 52% respectively). While the goal is to continually broaden the reach of this event, the sample of participants is representative of the state's population in terms of race and ethnicity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

Evaluation of the Marriage Celebration

When holding an event such as a Marriage Celebration, it is critical that feedback is obtained from participants in order to assess the immediate outcomes of the program on participants' knowledge, skills, and/or aspirations and, later, if a follow-up evaluation is used, possible behavior changes.

Therefore, a pen and paper evaluation, approved through the University's Institutional Review board, was given to each individual in their participation packets to determine the outcomes of the event. Door prize tickets were attached to the evaluations. Each participant was encouraged to complete and return the evaluation and door prize ticket just prior to the keynote session. Door prize tickets were separated from the evaluations and then used for prize drawings to conclude the evening.

The evaluation tool included an opportunity for feedback about presenters, a posttest-then-retrospective-pretest questionnaire, demographic information, and open-ended questions (Marshall, Higginbotham, Harris, & Lee, 2007). This evaluation design was chosen because of the ease of administration to a large group of participants, especially within a constrained amount of time (Davis, 2003). The posttest-then-retrospective-pretest questionnaire asked participants to rate six levels of relationship knowledge before and after the program (e.g., “how to effectively communicate with my spouse/partner,” and “how to settle disagreements well”) on a rating scale from 1 = *poor* to 5 = *perfect*. Demographic information collected included participants’ gender and ages. Open-ended questions asked participants their “biggest relationship concern, problem, or question that [they] hoped the workshops at the conference would address,” what they “learned or found interesting” and what changes they planned to make as a result of the information learned. A space for the participant’s email address was also provided for those who were willing to complete a follow-up evaluation for a chance to win an additional prize. See Appendix B for an example of a generic evaluation with a similar pre-post design.

An electronic follow-up survey was sent approximately two weeks after the conference to those who provided email addresses (approximately 300 surveys sent each year) and a total of 330 individuals completed the evaluations ($N = 147$ in 2015; $N = 183$ in 2016). Utilizing this method in conjunction with the posttest-then-retrospective-pretest may reduce some of the possible overestimation of the program impacts (Hill & Betz, 2005). The follow-up survey included open-ended questions the participants about their “biggest relationship concern, or question before attending the conference,” their “most important concept, or result” gained from attending, and changes they saw in their relationship as a result of what they learned. It also included questions about how much the conference helped with their biggest relationship concern, problem, or question and how much they talked with their partner about what they learned at the conference on a rating scale of 1 = *none* to 5 = *a lot*.

Preliminary analysis of the Marriage Celebration evaluation data suggests that the event is successful in helping individuals and couples focus on aspects of their relationship that may need maintenance or enhancement. A forthcoming article will provide detailed outcomes from the evaluation whereas this piece focuses on the process of hosting a similar event.

Implications for Extension

This article outlines event organization strategies based on several years of successful multi-county healthy relationship conferences that can serve as best practices for similar Extension events. In addition to event organization tips that have been previously shared, the following lessons learned may help other event planners minimize mistakes and duplicate the successful efforts of the Marriage Celebration event.

Planning

Creating a comprehensive timeline can be a reminder of all conference preparations that need to be completed from year to year. See Appendix C for an example planning timeline. It may be helpful to note that each element of planning this event (e.g., timing, registration timeline, and program agenda) has been adjusted multiple times to fit the needs of the community and to maximize attendance. These elements can be adjusted to fit the needs of other communities.

Additionally, recruiting a group of invested individuals, such as members of a marriage coalition, can help with assessing community needs and planning efforts for the conference. These individuals can also help with marketing in their respective spheres of influence, and potentially offer assistance the night of the event.

Marketing

The Marriage Celebration coalition maximized limited marketing funds by spending the majority of available marketing dollars on one large multi-county event and then promoting future smaller Extension healthy relationship events to participants at the Marriage Celebration event and through emails to Marriage Celebration participants who provided email addresses. This targeted marketing approach has led to an increased demand and expansion of smaller healthy relationship events across multiple counties without additional marketing costs.

Maximizing Attendance

Two of the biggest factors in maximizing attendance has been marketing the event as a fun date night of education and entertainment and ensuring that the theme and titles of the classes sound positive and engaging. The needs assessment found that couples often expressed a desire to get away from everyday problems and wanted to attend workshops that sounded uplifting and fun rather than workshops focused on hard issues they deal with every day (e.g., parenting, addictions). While some of the presentations did address difficult issues, they were presented with a positive spin, such as how to protect your marriage from negative outside influences, rather than how to cope with addictions or infidelity.

Door prizes were another way to add fun to the evening. Although it is often challenging to elicit monetary donations, local businesses were willing to give door prizes, providing an opportunity for them to advertise with minimal contribution, while at the same time adding a fun element for participants. An effort was made to find door prizes that would encourage couples to spend time together to strengthen their relationships, such as gift certificates to local restaurants, rock climbing, or a free night's stay at a hotel. Feedback from participants indicated they enjoyed the surprise of finding a potential prize in their packets and having candy tossed out

before the keynote presentation. Additionally, distributing door prizes after the keynote speaker encouraged couples to stay until the end of the event.

The cost of registration was also kept as low as possible to promote attendance. Providing a reduced-cost early bird registration that ended approximately two weeks before the event was especially helpful in encouraging couples to register early and allowed for better conference planning for refreshments, supplies, and other logistics.

The chosen venue can have a large impact on the cost of registration and, of course, the capacity of the event. Many venues require the use of their dining services, which can often be expensive. In addition, providing a sit-down meal for participants can also limit seating capacity. Because of these factors, the coalition opted to provide only dessert for participants. However, a dinner break was included in the schedule for those who wanted to bring their own take-out (allowed by the facility) or purchase food from the available on-site venues. Based on participant requests, workshops were still held during the dinner hour and participants could either choose to bring their food with them to a workshop or choose to take a break to spend time with their partner. Additional ideas for the dinner hour include providing entertainment such as a musician for background ambiance or arranging for food trucks or discounts at nearby eating establishments.

Future Directions

The Marriage Celebration has become an annual tradition for many couples in the region. Participants receive up to five hours of relationship education in a one-night event. Preliminary findings indicate the event is successful in helping individuals and couples focus on various aspects of their relationships that may need maintenance or enhancement. Because of its successful attendance and outcomes, it is anticipated that the Marriage Celebration will continue on a yearly basis with minimal changes in organization, but with a continuing effort to reach more diverse audiences (e.g., Latino, low-income, younger audiences, engaged couples).

One challenge of expanding the reach of the conference has been meeting the needs of diverse populations (i.e., Latino and low-income audiences) while also maintaining the size and reach of the conference. While the Marriage Coalition has made efforts in the past to engage diverse audiences, attempts have been mostly unsuccessful. For example, while efforts were made to market to the Latino community and provide Spanish-speaking interpreters at the conference, the number of Latino participants was minimal. When a focus group was asked about how to increase attendance from the Latino community, suggestions for change included moving to a different venue and providing dinner and child care. While these suggestions may have potentially increased attendance from the Latino community, it was determined by the coalition that in order to keep registration costs low and maximize overall attendance, a separate event would be organized that would appeal to and better meet the needs of the Latino community.

Another example of attempting to meet the needs of diverse audiences includes efforts to increase marketing to low-income audiences and providing scholarships to allow these individuals to attend at no cost. While a few couples, who would not have otherwise been able to attend, have taken advantage of the scholarships, it has been difficult to entice couples to attend through scholarships. Often, they did not attend, even though they received a scholarship to do so. Despite past minimal outcomes, continuing efforts are being made to address these challenges, including different kinds of marketing to reach new audiences (e.g., engaged and younger couples), continuing to provide scholarships to those in financial need, and providing healthy relationship events on a smaller scale targeted to meet the needs of diverse communities.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the process of how a successful relationship enhancement program can be hosted by a university's Cooperative Extension Service. It is the hope of the authors that this information will provide helpful assistance and structure to allow others to create similar healthy relationship events of their own. In addition, the authors intend to assess and publish the evaluation data from the Marriage Celebration events from 2015 through the present.

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Appendix A: Sample Program Agenda

Bonus Workshops Session #1 4:00-4:50 p.m. (check in starts at 3:30 p.m.)	Workshop A	Workshop B	Workshop C	Workshop D	Workshop E
Bonus Workshops Session #2 5:00-5:50 p.m.	Dinner On Your Own (Limited food venues available.)		Workshop C (repeat)	Workshop D (repeat)	Workshop E (repeat)
Session #3 6:00-6:50 p.m.	Workshop F	Workshop G	Workshop H	Workshop I	Workshop J
Session #4 7:00-7:50 p.m.	Workshop F (repeat)	Workshop G (repeat)	Workshop H (repeat)	Workshop I (repeat)	Workshop K
7:50-8:10 p.m.	Dessert Break				
8:10-9:30 p.m.	Keynote Speaker/Door Prizes				

Appendix B: Example Evaluation

4:00 Name of Presenter(s):	Poor	Fair	Okay	Good	Excellent
The information was well prepared and presented well	1	2	3	4	5
Comments:					
5:00 Name of Presenter/Entertainment:	Poor	Fair	Okay	Good	Excellent
The information was well prepared and presented well	1	2	3	4	5
Comments:					
6:00 Name of Presenter(s):	Poor	Fair	Okay	Good	Excellent
The information was well prepared and presented well	1	2	3	4	5
Comments:					
7:00 Name of Presenter(s):	Poor	Fair	Okay	Good	Excellent
The information was well prepared and presented well	1	2	3	4	5
Comments:					

Please circle the answer that reflects your understanding *BEFORE* and now *AFTER* the conference.

<u>BEFORE</u> the Conference:						<u>Now, AFTER</u> the Conference:				
Poor		Perfect				Poor		Perfect		
1	2	3	4	5	My knowledge or understanding of...	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	... how to effectively communicate with my spouse/partner.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	... how to settle disagreements well.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	... how to solve problems and reach compromise.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	... ways to deepen a loving relationship (including intimacy).	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	... the importance of spending time together.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	...ways to strengthen/protect my relationship.	1	2	3	4	5

I am a (please check one) Male Female Age _____

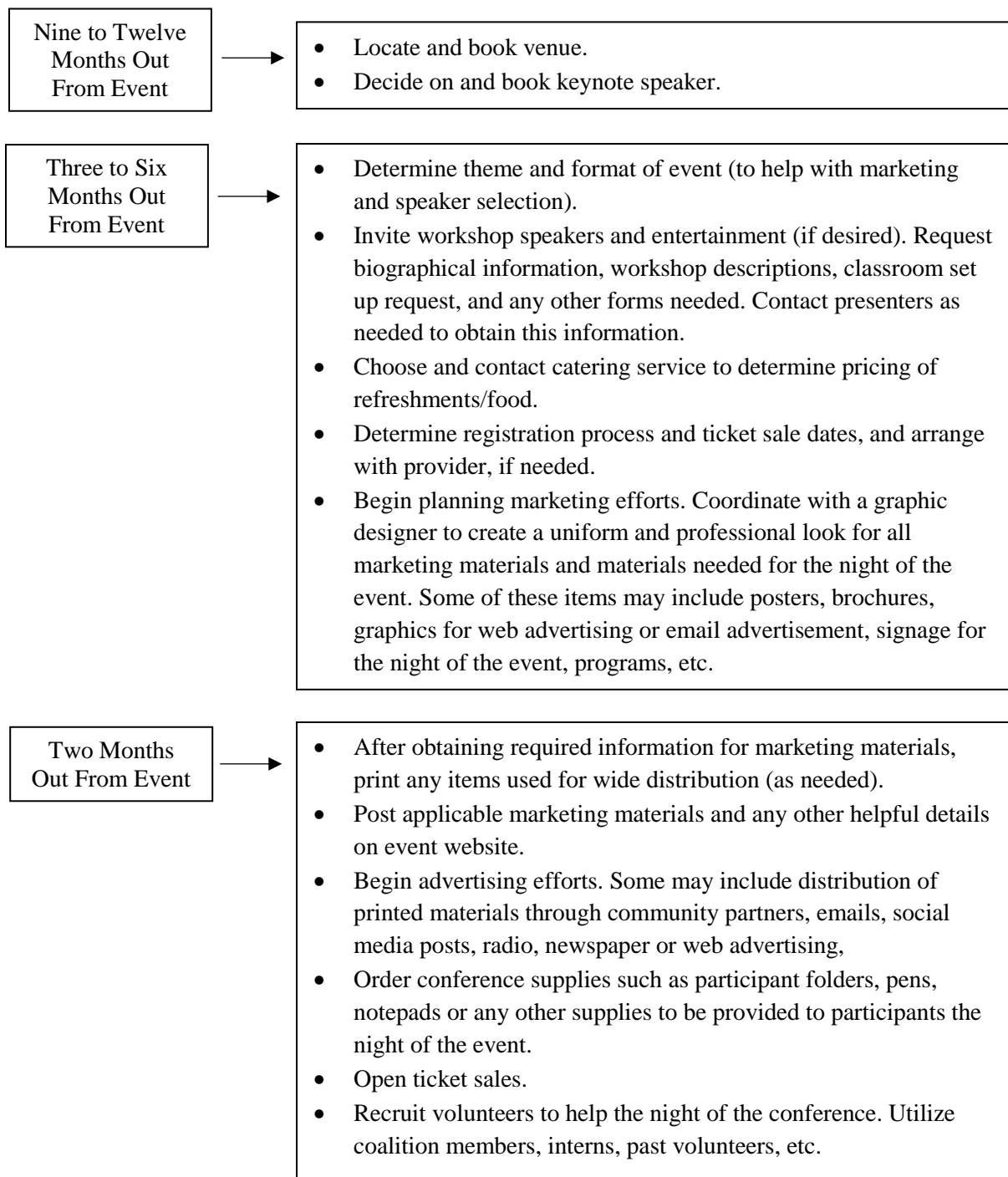
How did you hear about this event?

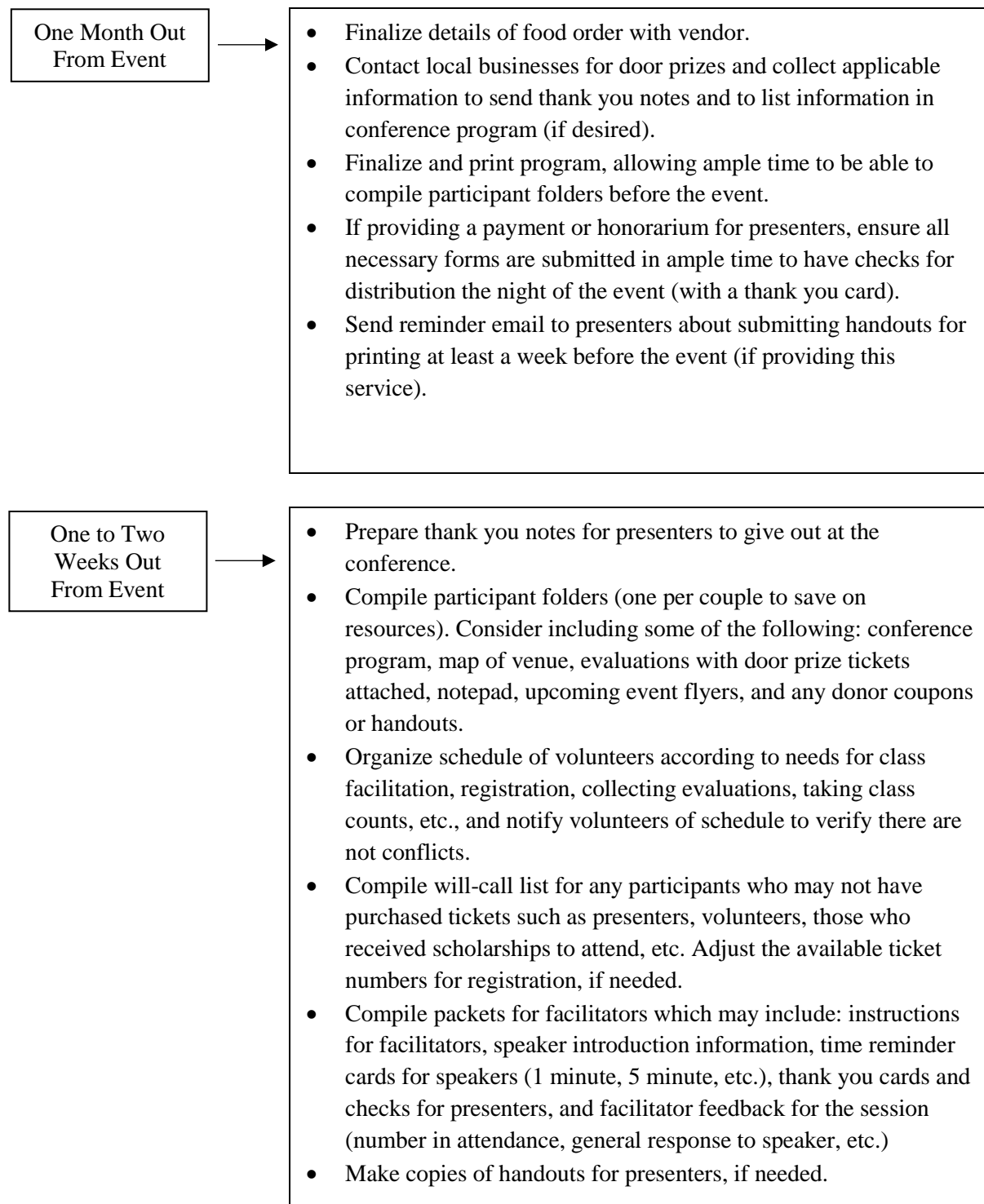
What is your biggest relationship concern, problem, or question that you hoped the workshops at the conference would address?

Please list one or two things you learned or found interesting tonight.

What changes do you *plan to make* as a result of the information you have learned?

Other suggestions/comments? (Feel free to use the back.)

Appendix C: Example Planning Timeline

Appendix C: Example Planning Timeline (Continued)

Appendix C: Example Planning Timeline (Continued)