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Extension Connection: Workforce Development and Cooperative Extension Working Hand-in-Hand

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Extension Connection: Workforce Development and Cooperative Extension Working Hand-in-Hand

Abstract

The Extension Connection enhances life skills to support workforce development of low-income families by providing education promoting self-sufficiency. This program helps develop life skills that provide structure within the family and community. Project STRIDE supports workforce development in a high-crime, at-risk area with education. Project STRIDE increases stability within the family, helps families be productive in their community, and helps them overcome barriers to entering the work force, achieve job stability and advance in life for themselves and their families. Families also learn nutrition for healthy living and money management.

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Introduction

- June never thought spending 10 months in prison would turn out to be a blessing. Upon her return to the old neighborhood at 35 years old, she was rehabilitated from a life of drugs and alcohol addiction and knew that she needed a new life.
- Carol finished high school and had numerous incarcerations in her twenties because of drug and alcohol abuse. She ended up on the streets, and the addictive lifestyle eventually led to prison. She wondered how she could even make it in a normal job and turn her life around.
- Denise floated in and out of low-paying jobs, but could not seem to find her direction.
- Robert received an Associate's degree and had a steady job; his addiction to drugs cost him a comfortable life.
- Steve needed direction in his life, but he was sure he would not benefit from any program.

Most Extension professionals may not automatically think of the people just mentioned as potential clients, but faculty from the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension in Maricopa County saw an opportunity to combine the best of their Family and Consumer Sciences programs to meet the needs of these people. In 1997, the collaboration of Cooperative Extension's Extension Connection, a comprehensive life skills education program, Keys Community Center's job training component, and community partners came together to form Project STRIDE. The Southwest Leadership Foundation, Cooperative Extension and the City of Phoenix provided partial funding.

Extension's Role with Hard-to-Place Adults

Extension often teaches adults who are already interested in life-long learning and willing to get involved. Extension's role in educating hard-to-reach adults has led to several very successful programs. Since the 1960s, Extension faculty have brought nutrition and life skills education to

low-income audiences, an often difficult audience to reach. Such education included a variety of personal development and management skills, such as time management, identifying and using resources to meet needs and emergencies, budgeting, meal planning and nutrition, communication, conflict resolution, self esteem, teamwork, parenting, and balancing work with family. Since the late 1980s, the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension has provided nutrition education to families through the Extension Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) at Keys Community Center.

Community Profile

The south Phoenix area where Keys Community Center is located had one of the highest crime rates in Phoenix, a city of more than 1 million residents. The neighborhood is known as a haven for drug dealers, alcoholics, burnt-out and boarded-up homes, and people just "hanging around." Leaders knew action was needed, so funding for affordable housing, social services, increased police presence, and economic development was provided. According to Richards (1999), from 1996-1999 total crime dropped 18% and gang-involved crime dropped 64%. The area was beginning to turn the corner, but more was needed.

The STRIDE Program

In October 1997, the City of Phoenix awarded a 2-year demonstration grant of \$200,000 to Keys Community Center to work with unemployed, low-skilled, and disadvantaged residents in the South Phoenix Enterprise Community (EC) (Richards, 1999). Community partners came together, and Project STRIDE, (Successful Training Resources for Individual Development) began. Extension played a lead role in implementing Project STRIDE by bringing its Extension Connection to Keys.

Extension faculty introduced life skills as a critical part of obtaining and keeping a job while balancing work and family. Faculty adapted existing life skills programs called the "Extension Connection" for high-risk audiences. Extension Connection includes lessons on nutrition and meal planning, money management, teamwork communications, self-esteem, and conflict management. These skills have proven to be critical to successful job placement and readiness, work maturity, self-sufficiency, job stability, and career advancement to eliminate barriers between employers and job-seekers.

Keys' staff and community-partner organizations, including Extension, presented 8 hours of instruction 5 days a week for 9 weeks. Project STRIDE's objectives included the following.

- Linking community residents with employers.
- Enabling community residents to have qualified and sustainable employment.
- Providing vocational and work maturity skills training to participants with academic tutoring and GED preparation.
- Promoting the completion of nine weeks of pre-employment training.

Project STRIDE Curriculum Areas

The topic areas covered in Project STRIDE include:

- Job readiness skills included: job and interviewing; job application, punctuality, and job responsibility; job placement assistance; test-taking; and multi-cultural diversity training.
- Basic computer skills included: MS Office 97, Windows, Internet, and basic office procedures.
- Managing goal achievement included: a 9-week goal kit that guided participants step-by-step in achieving their goals.
- Life skills training included: Six-part nutrition training,* Parenting, Family budgeting and financial management,*Self esteem and relationships,* Speaking up,* Conflict management,* and Challenge, A series of interactive games for teamwork and processing change.* (* denotes classes that are provided by the Extension Connection, and classes are taught by Extension paraprofessionals and an Extension agent.)

Recruiting High-Risk Adults

Priorities for recruiting participants were identified by level. Level 3 were unemployed individuals, TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) recipients, teen parents, those with incomes below the poverty level, former drug users, former parolees, and probationers. Level 2 were single heads of households earning less than \$8.00/ hour, former AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) recipients, and people who were homeless. Level 1 defines underemployed, employed at minimum wage, and people who wanted to improve their jobs and careers. All applicants were 18 years or older, lived in the EC zone, and had two forms of identification. Participants had to pass a drug test before enrollment. The City of Phoenix provided initial screenings and random drug tests.

Word-of-mouth was the leading means of bringing many residents to Project STRIDE. Although many recruits simply wanted to use the program, they were not ready to do what was necessary to be successful workers (Welch & Sandler, 1999). Flyers, door-to-door outreach, and church presentations were used to recruit participants. A community jobs team was also formed with organizations in the area. Each organization referred clientele to Project STRIDE.

In the first year, classes were large, averaging 16-20 participants every 9 weeks. Over the years, however, Project STRIDE classes got smaller, with 10-12 participants (Welch & Sandler, 1999). Forty percent had less than a high school diploma, and 49% had a diploma or GED. In general, Project STRIDE served EC residents who were African-American, under the age of 25, and parents with minimal employment experience and limited academic achievement (Welch & Sandler, 1999).

Project STRIDE participants had similar barriers to employment as a national sample of welfare recipients (Ranarajan, Schochet, & Chu, 1998). Among the first 77 graduates of Project STRIDE, 69% had never held a job longer than 1 year, 27% of the graduates had criminal records, and 42% had less than a high school diploma or no GED. Other statistics include:

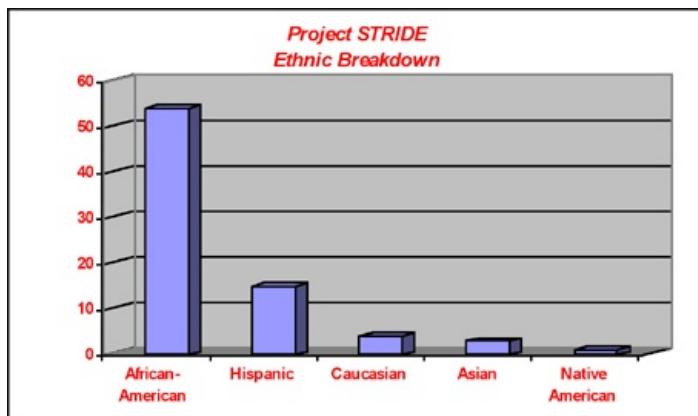
- 61% of the initial program participants were female.
- 68% of these women were single heads-of-household.
- 51% of Project STRIDE graduates were aged 18-25 years old.

Figure 1 shows a breakdown of graduates by race and ethnicity, denoting that 95% of graduates were minorities:

- 70% African-American
- 19% Hispanic
- 5% Caucasian
- 4% Asian
- 1% Native American

Figure 1.

Project STRIDE Ethnic Breakdown



Since 2000, funding support has come mostly from the Southwest Leadership Foundation and small mini-grants. The participant profile changed greatly. The first few years brought community residents with medium to high capabilities. These participants had some training and job skills, but more were needed. The participants have had a wider range of barriers to overcome. Class sizes were reduced to 5-8 students per session. Case management became a high priority. Many participants had to go through basic readiness training before they could enter Project STRIDE.

Substance abuse was a real barrier after state funding ended, because Project STRIDE was not funded to conduct participant drug testing. Many applicants could not enroll due to obvious addictions. Each applicant had to sign an Employment, Education, and Training Agreement clarifying role expectations.

Project STRIDE Program Results

The City of Phoenix Demonstration Project (funded from 1997-1999) had 107 participants beginning the STRIDE training. Twenty-seven percent had prior criminal records. Seventy-seven graduated from STRIDE. Nineteen needed additional counseling before starting work, and seven graduated and sought more education and training. Fifty-one graduates began jobs, with three-quarters receiving benefits including health insurance. A few examples of STRIDE jobs include:

- Twenty-six participants being placed as technicians at \$8.00/ hour;
- Three starting in dock and inventory jobs at \$6.50-7.00/ hour;
- Three going into cosmetology as stylists, beginning at \$8.00/ hour;
- Four going to the Arizona Department of Economic Security doing clerical/eligibility at \$7.76/ hour; and

- Two being hired by Marriott in customer service and one at Super Shuttle at \$7.00/ hour.

Other individuals started clerical servicing at Bank One, Bank of America, a temporary staffing service, an insurance company, and Keys, earning \$7.00-12.60/ hour. One graduate earned a position at the United States Post Office earning \$8.00/ hour.

From 2000-2004, 500 people made inquiries to STRIDE, but many did not meet minimum requirements. Two-hundred and sixty applicants were accepted (N = 260).

- 84% (218) of participants successfully completed the program.
- Half of all participants showed improvement in working positively with others.
- 50% (130) learned at least two skills that boosted their self-esteem.
- 60% (156) of participants completed their personal goals set at the beginning of STRIDE.
- 20% (52) needed extra help after program completion.
- 43% (112) of graduates received jobs.

Many of the participants came back for more computer training and special needs classes, such as fathers groups, self-help groups, and technical training at a local community college (Community Jobs Teams Program Report, 2003).

The EFNEP nutrition component of STRIDE showed major changes in behavior by graduates. As a result of the classes:

- 74% (192) of participants consumed a more balanced and nutritious diet, including an increase of fruits and vegetables and less foods high in fat and sugar,
- 49% (127) of participants pre-planned meals more often,
- 46% (120) of participants prepared foods without adding salt,
- 44% (144) of participants properly thawed frozen foods,
- 44% (144) of participants more often thought of feeding their families healthier foods, and
- 41% (107) of participants shopped more often with a grocery list. (United States Department of Agriculture Evaluation Reporting System [USDA, ERS], Cooperative States Research Education Extension Service [CSREES] 2002-2004)

Project STRIDE Evaluation

The City of Phoenix contracted with the Morrison Institute of Public Policy at Arizona State University to evaluate Project STRIDE as a model program. Their report recommended the following:

- Reducing the program length to 4 weeks,
- Holding smaller classes,
- Providing follow-up activities for participants after graduation,
- Including participation in school and working part-time as positive outcomes, and
- Reflecting on how to better retain participants who do not follow through after-training (Welch & Sandler, 1999).

Why Life Skills Education Makes A Difference

Over the years, Project STRIDE participants refer to the Extension Connection classes as a critical foundation to build other job skills. Life skills education made a difference because many of the participants had never had basic skills education before. While it is critical to have an education model for self-sufficiency to help manage the barriers in life, it is even more crucial for families who experience economic crisis, drug abuse, employment problems, or other barriers. Adults with negative life experiences carry these experiences with them to any learning program they encounter. Extension educators must consider this when planning or developing programs, because the best model for adult learners considers those life experiences (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2000).

The University of Arizona's Extension Connection incorporated similar training characteristics outlined by the Parenting and Consumer Education Project (PACE), (Wise & Ezell, 2003). Wise and Ezell feel that all effective educational training must also take into account that:

- Training is learner centered.
- Training demonstrates productive behavior and effective life skills.

- Good training inspires and motivates participants.
- Good training celebrates personal and group achievements.

Extension Connection classes helped participants improve work and life skills. For example, one participant with five children who never seemed to have enough money for groceries learned to plan meals ahead of time and how to use a shopping list to better stay within the parameters of her food budget. These skills helped her manage the demands of work and family responsibilities when she started working in her new job (McGinley, 2001-2002).

Project STRIDE Graduation

The Morrison Institute's evaluation captured the essence of the graduation ceremonies in the following passage,

The Extension Connection component of the STRIDE program forms a base of personal skills needed to succeed in everyday life. Nowhere is the project's personal impact and spiritual dimensions more on display than at the graduation ceremonies that conclude the four-week sessions. These joyous occasions often draw as many as 100 guests. Many STRIDE graduates report that the program is the first thing they have ever finished. So—dressed, polished, and proud—they introduce their children, friends, sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, spouses, and others who come to witness their success. One at a time, the graduates step up to the small one-step stage to receive certificates from the program's leader and have an official picture taken. The graduates come back individually to the podium to tell the audience what STRIDE has meant to them. Nearly everyone expresses their gratitude to STRIDE instructors and staff for their help and understanding. Graduates often tell how they have learned to set goals and talk about their new jobs. Other graduates draw vivid "before and after" portraits of themselves. Many thank God for bringing them to this caring place. The responses to these occasionally funny, but always touching, testimonials make one appreciate the faith that is fundamental to this community. Some of the participants will make it immediately. Some will keep struggling. But they will all remember the event's sense and spirit of revival (Welch & Sandler, 1999).

Individual Successes

- After completing Project STRIDE, June found success working in an outreach program for homeless women. June said, "If I hadn't been clean and sober I couldn't have learned from the program, the [educators] were so understanding and caring."
- Carol's turning point was during her last stay in jail. She recalls hearing that if she did not care about herself, who would? She realized she needed to change her life. She stated, "STRIDE put pride in my eyes." She became a counselor at a drug rehab home helping other women get off the street. Project STRIDE helped her understand her strengths and weaknesses and how to work towards her goals.
- Denise credits STRIDE with helping her focus on goals, setting reachable steps and believing she could succeed. She connected with a local small business development center after her training and now owns and operates her own neighborhood beauty salon. She also returns to the STRIDE program's graduations to speak to new graduates (Sexton, 2002).
- Robert completed the program and said, "The program helped me to get my life on the right track. I'm sure I'm going to find some work now that I can work a computer."
- Steve graduated from STRIDE and got a job at Hadco, a local circuit manufacturer. Six months after placement, he moved to the lab making \$12.50/ hour. One year after placement, he was making a good salary and purchasing a home.
- One early STRIDE graduate went on to college and earned an Associate's of Arts degree and received an academic scholarship to attend an Arizona college.

Project STRIDE's Future

Plans are underway to restructure the program with bilingual education to serve the Hispanic community. Future plans include comprehensive individual case management with participants. New monies are available, and a new advisory board has been established. A childcare program on-site will help participants who are economically disadvantaged. The building is being refurbished and Project STRIDE is at the top of the list for funding by Southwest Leadership Foundation. "Extension educators play an important role in harnessing collective resources with non-profit, faith-based, and local community organizations," (Rupured, Koonce, & Bales, 2002).

Challenges for the Future of Project STRIDE

Project STRIDE's future success depends on if Keys Community Center can:

- Find more diverse money sources to support the program.

- Recruit mentors to work with Project STRIDE graduates.
- Upgrade staff skills, using Cooperative Extension expertise.
- Locate more companies as potential employers in the EC zone.
- Improve follow-through after training for additional assistance and support.

Conclusion

The staff and instructors of Project STRIDE agree that education may not be the main predictor of readiness or program success, but work history seemed to be a more reliable indicator of who would stay and finish the process. In answering the question Welch and Sandler (1999) pose, "Who will be successful? The real answer may lie in the intensity of the barriers each of the participants individually face."

Project STRIDE has a great future and definitely meets a critical need. According to Clemetson (2003), 12.4% of the American population are families living in poverty. Programs like Project Stride will be a catalyst to help people improve their lives and ultimately move into the workforce. The program will continue to be an asset to the community and to the participants, enabling the participants to make a positive contribution to society.

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