

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

Susan S. Baker, EdD¹; Meredith Pearson, PhD²; Helen Chipman, PhD, RD³

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.¹ 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

¹Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO

²College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Maryland, College Park, MD

³Families, 4-H and Nutrition Unit, Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC

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Address for correspondence: Susan S. Baker, EdD, Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition, Colorado State University, 214E Gifford, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1571; Phone: (970) 491-5798; Fax: (970) 491-7252; E-mail: sbaker@cahs.colostate.edu

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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 comprehensive 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

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