

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES WITHIN THE
EXPANDED FOOD AND NUTRITION EDUCATION PROGRAM

by

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(Under the Direction of Abigail Borron)

ABSTRACT

The intent of this project was to critically examine university engagement specifically through the Extension organization using the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) as an entry point. Focusing on the applied understanding of engagement practices used by both EFNEP administrators and program assistants, research questions were developed to critically assess what engagement and communication methods are utilized in EFNEP programs. Qualitative research methods of in-depth interviews and program observation were used in the study to compliment critical theory methodology. Results of this study indicate a set of themes that point to valuable assets of a program that are in place, yet are met with significant obstacles to reaching the full potential of effective engagement through Extension.

INDEX WORDS: EFNEP, Extension, University Engagement

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the official poverty rate in the United States was 13.5% in 2015. This translates to approximately 43.1 million Americans living in poverty. Regionally, southeastern states have been traditionally associated with high levels of poverty and low levels of nutrition (USDA ERS, 2015). Georgia, for example, is ranked fifth in the nation for poverty, where 18.3% of the population lives at or below the poverty line, which is 4% higher than the national level (Georgia Talk Poverty, 2015).

Poverty is measured based on American level of income to cover basic needs. The U.S. Census Bureau defines poverty as a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition (2015). Families that fall below the poverty threshold are considered to be in poverty. The National Center for Children in Poverty (2015) describes poverty as families of four who have incomes less than the 2014 federal poverty threshold of \$23,624.

Poverty is a national epidemic that affects nearly every aspect of one's quality of life. One major issue that is a direct consequence of poverty is lower levels of nutrition (USDA ERS, 2015). Research has shown that there is a direct negative correlation between those in poverty and nutrition levels (Miller, 2012). As poverty increases, nutrition levels in daily consumption go down. Due to the importance and severity of low nutrition levels in the United States, specifically in the southeastern U.S., there are countless federal-, state-, and locally-funded organizations that have been created to help improve nutrition for low-income and impoverished Americans. Well-known organizations include food pantries, Children's Hunger Alliance, and

the Hunger Project, among others (Confronting Hunger and Poverty, 2015). Many of these organizations deal exclusively with combating food insecurity, where food insecurity is defined as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited and uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Miller, 2012, n.p.). Food insecurity is different from hunger because food insecurity is a method to measure food availability, whereas hunger is a psychological state that cannot be measured using the same constructs (Miller, 2012).

Extension is one example of an organization that is involved with fighting hunger and poverty in the United States, in addition to enhancing the viability and development of local communities. Extension was created in 1914 through the Smith-Lever Act as a means to provide practical and useful agricultural and home economics information from the land-grant university in each state to its local communities in every county (“Introduction to Extension,” 2016). Over 100 years later, the Extension service continues to provide research-based information in the areas of Agricultural and Natural Resources, Family and Consumer Sciences, and 4-H Youth Development.

Extension’s value is rooted in engagement with communities. To effectively engage with various audiences, there must be a commitment to constantly measure and research best engagement practices. Thomson (2013) explained “engagement is both an intellectual and moral philosophy that influences the programming in which we engage with the community” (p. 4). To have effective nutrition programs for communities, Extension personnel must assess how to effectively engage with unique audiences. One program that Extension offers to address the negative correlation of poverty and nutrition is the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), which EFNEP is a nutrition education program targeted toward low-income

and limited resource families and delivered through Extension to local communities. EFNEP focuses on improving diet quality and physical activity, food resource management, food safety, and food security (EFNEP, n.d.).

Statement of Problem

With 18.3% of Georgian's living in poverty compared to the national level of 13.5%, there is a clear need for programs to help Georgia citizens improve their lives and circumstances (Georgia Talk Poverty, 2015). While there are several programs that have been created to address people living in poverty, food insecurity, and hunger, these topics are still a prevalent issue in the state of Georgia. A deeper understanding of how Extension personnel engage with their audience is important to determine if programs are effective and serving their purpose to provide useful, research-based information to local communities. In order to provide more effective services and programs to local communities, increased efforts to understand best practices for engagement with low-income and impoverished audiences are needed to provide effective resource development and programming from the university level.

Purpose Statement

Select programs and initiatives within UGA Extension must focus on the ways to communicate and engage with low-income audiences. Using EFNEP as an entry point to critically examine engagement through Extension, this qualitative study focused on engagement and communication practices used by both EFNEP administrators and program assistants. From data collection and analysis from interviews and observations, the objective of this project is to contribute to scholarly research on engagement and communication through EFNEP program delivery.

Key Terms

Community Engagement: According to Moore, McDonald, McHugh-Dillon and West (2016)

community engagement is a “process whereby actors in a service system actively seek out community values, concerns and aspirations and incorporate them into a decision-making process, establishing an ongoing partnership with the community” (p. 2).

Cooperative Extension: The National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA, n.d.) describes

Cooperative Extension as a type of non-formal education offered to rural and non-rural Americans. Cooperative Extension places emphasis on taking scientific research and delivering it directly to American citizens to create positive change in areas of agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, and 4-H youth.

Culture: Texas A&M University (2015) defines culture as the “cumulative deposit of

knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving” (n.p.).

EFNEP: EFNEP is a nutrition education program targeted toward low-income and limited

resource families and delivered through Extension to local communities. EFNEP focuses on improving diet quality and physical activity, food resource management, food safety, and food security (EFNEP, n.d.).

Food Insecurity: Food Insecurity is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture

(USDA, n.d.) as either “reduced quality, variety or desirability of diet” (n.p.) with no indication of reduced food intake, or multiple incidents of disrupted or irregular eating patterns and reduced food consumption.

Good Nutrition: The United States Department of Agriculture defines good nutrition as adequate food security, which is when there are no instances of food access issues or limitations (USDA, n.d.).

Low-Income: According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (2015) families need an income approximately twice the federal poverty threshold to meet basic needs. Families with incomes below \$48,016 with two children are considered low income.

Poverty: Poverty is defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as a “set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty” (2015).

Scholarship of Engagement: Boyer (1996) defined the scholarship of engagement as “connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems, to our children, to our school, to our teachers and to our cities” (p.19).

Research Objective and Research Questions

This project critically examines university engagement, specifically through Extension, using EFNEP as an entry point. Focusing on the applied understanding of engagement practices used by both EFNEP administrators and program assistants, the following research questions were developed:

1. What does effective engagement look like from the perspectives of EFNEP administration?
2. What does effective engagement look like from the perspectives of EFNEP program assistants?
3. What communication and engagement methods are used in EFNEP programs?

Subjectivity Statement

As a researcher conducting a qualitative study of the communication and engagement practices used by EFNEP administrators and program assistants, I have life experiences that

shape my view of engagement in food education programs. I am a white, middle class female and I have lived in Georgia, the state in which I am conducting my research, my entire life. I am affiliated with Extension, through which the organization EFNEP is operated.

Prior to beginning my master's program in Agricultural and Environmental Education, I served as a 4-H program assistant in Athens-Clarke County for two years. This position is funded through UGA Extension. Due to my employment through Extension, I have had numerous experiences working both directly and indirectly with EFNEP program assistants and administrators. Experiences include leading and assisting food education programs to various audiences with EFNEP employees.

In addition, I am currently employed as a 4-H Youth Development Agent in Putnam County, Georgia. This role is also funded through UGA Extension. I had no personal ties to this research. While EFNEP is not the program I work in, it is important to recognize my background and professional role associated with the program.

Strengths/Limitations

This research study has several strengths that contribute to validity of the research design. Qualitative data collection methods of in-depth interviews and participant observation were utilized to gain a more intimate knowledge of EFNEP engagement and communication practices. This intensive, long-term involvement with the study is described by Maxwell (2012) as “repeated observations and interviews, as well as the sustained presence of the researcher in the setting studied, [which] can help rule out spurious associations and premature theories” (p. 126). Long-term association and involvement with the research over a period of six months helped to ensure that data reached a point of saturation.

Another strength in the study is the usage of rich data (Maxwell, 2012). Rich data is information provided from the research that is both detailed and varied in methods. Rich data in the study included verbatim transcripts of interviews, as well as detailed note taking from participant observation (Maxwell, 2012). Rich data helped to increase validity of the study.

A limitation in this study is that research only included EFNEP employees in the state of Georgia. Therefore, the study cannot be generalized on a regional or national scale but can be transferrable for possible duplication of the research design. Lastly, the qualitative study was dependent on the interpretation of the researcher, who has professional ties to Extension.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Research Objective and Research Questions

The intent of this project is to critically examine university engagement specifically through the Extension organization using EFNEP as an entry point. The purpose of this study is to delve into engagement practices used by both EFNEP administrators and program assistants utilizing qualitative research methods. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What does effective engagement look like from the perspectives of EFNEP administration?
2. What does effective engagement look like from the perspectives of EFNEP program assistants?
3. What communication and engagement methods are used in EFNEP programs?

The following review of the related literature helps to provide background information and studies similar to the present study on Extension engagement practices. This chapter is organized in the following manner: studies on the Scholarship of Engagement, Extension Service, Extension Engagement, EFNEP, Audience Analysis and Understanding, and Critical Theory are presented to provide context to the current study.

The Scholarship of Engagement

According to Boyer (1996) higher education in the United States has an inherent responsibility to become more engaged in issues outside of the university realm, specifically in communities. The scholarship of engagement has been defined as the “collaborative generation, refinement, conservation, and exchange of mutually beneficial and societally relevant knowledge

that is generated in collaboration with, communicated to, and validated by peers in academia and the community” (Driscoll & Sandmann, 2001, p. 10). The scholarship of engagement is a means of connecting university resources to social, civic, and ethical problems (Boyer, 1996).

Barker (2004) describes the scholarship of engagement as a movement among United States universities in increasing importance in the public spheres of academia. The scholarship of engagement is a “reaction against trends in traditional roles of scholarship” (p. 125). Barker (2004) describes five practices commonly used to employ the scholarship of engagement:

1. Public scholarship- “academic work that incorporates deliberative practices such as forums and town meetings to enhance scholarship and address public problems” (Barker, 2004, p. 129).
2. Participatory research- emphasizes the role citizens can play in creating academic knowledge and “responds to problems of exclusion by reaching out to a marginalized or previously excluded group” (Barker, 2004, p.130).
3. Community partnerships- promotes engagement through public agencies such as community organizations and schools.
4. Public information networks- these “networks typically help communities identify resources and assets by providing comprehensive databases of local activists, advocacy groups, and available services” (p.131). Public information networks work to provide better solutions to community problems.
5. Civic literacy- a way to enhance public discourse as well as improve communication with the general public. Barker (2004) describes, “This approach again aims at deepening practices of engagement with the specific aim of reducing the separation between expert

specialists and the lay public, as well as by its specific emphasis on skills that are relevant to political participation and democratic decision making” (p. 132).

While there are multiple methods to employ the scholarship of engagement in communities, it is important to recognize that these practices are not exclusive and it would be beneficial for new engagement methods to be introduced.

In *An Integrated Model for Advancing the Scholarship of Engagement: Creating Homes for the Engaged Scholar* authors Sandmann, Saltmarsh, and O’Meara (2008) describe a model for enhancing the scholarship of engagement in universities that is slightly different than Barker (2004) ideology. The model utilizes four elements to promote scholarship of engagement: (1) preparing future faculty, (2) the scholarship of engagement, (3) promising practices of institutional engagement, and (4) institutional change models (Sandmann, Saltmarsh, & O’Meara, 2008, p. 56). According to Sandmann, Saltmarsh, and O’Meara (2008) “the conceptual framework of this platform is designed to address the complexity of institutional change and the need for transformational change to address significant cultural shifts in faculty work” (p. 55-56). The model was designed to create a “transformational change” that is necessary for the scholarship of engagement to be successful in United States universities (Sandmann, Saltmarsh, & O’Meara, 2008, p. 57).

Fogel and Cook (2006) acknowledge that the concept of the scholarship of engagement is not new; rather, scholarship “has historical roots in the mission of land grant universities (Fogel & Cook, 2006, p. 595). Fogel and Cook (2006) discuss the scholarship of engagement and its benefits and potential downfalls for university faculty. Their research focused on the juxtaposition between the scholarship of engagement and meeting tenure and promotion standards for the university on behalf of the faculty. Fogel and Cook (2006) suggest “before

engaging in this work, it is critical that faculty members evaluate whether this activity will provide the professional material needed to launch or sustain a career” (p. 564). Fogel and Cook (2006) conclude by suggesting future research is needed to evaluate if expectations for engagement practices are being met between university faculty and community partners.

Kasworm and Abdrahim (2014) examined the perceptions of the scholarship of engagement among university faculty. The study was based upon understanding university faculty’s perceptions of engagement roles, experiences practicing scholarship of engagement, institutional support or lack-of, and differing understandings of engagement. Kasworm and Abdrahim (2014) found that exemplar’s understanding of scholarship of engagement were split between two contrasting enclaves of thought; “two interrelated but different groups emerged from the data, representing a university-centric enclave and a community engagement-centric enclave” (p. 121). The university-centric enclave was more influenced by traditional research methods and promotion through practicing the scholarship of engagement while the community engagement-centric enclave was more influenced by collaborative partnerships and various engagement practices (Kasworm & Abdrahim, 2014).

According to Alter (2003), more research is needed to understand the scholarship of engagement and what makes effective engagement possible in the Extension Service. Extension agents and program assistants are key to the scholarly process of creating and applying knowledge of the communities in which they serve (Alter, 2003). Alter (2003) suggested that current scholarship of engagement could be improved in Extension by addressing six major challenges: The successful integration of a more scholarly mentality by Extension professionals, expansion of the definition of scholarship, full comprehension of the scholarship of engagement, increased research on the scholarship of engagement, new implementation methods for research,

and the development of scholarly tools to evaluate the effects of engagement within Extension. Scholarship is essential to Extension and its overarching goal to provide research-based information to local communities.

In Measuring and Articulating the Value of Community Engagement: Lessons Learned from 100 Years of Cooperative Extension Work, Franz (2014) describes Cooperative Extension as the first formal nationwide structure for university-community engagement. Franz (2014) acknowledges the changing landscape of Extension community engagement: “once seen chiefly as a source of private value for program participants in local communities, Extension is now also expected to provide public value for those not directly involved in Extension programs” (p. 5). Franz (2014) describes Extension as an organization that is known nationally for its effective community-centered approach to engagement. For Extension workers to continue providing effective community engagement, Franz (2014) suggest five implications for engaged institutions:

1. Professional development- “Opportunities should build awareness and skills to measure the economic, environmental, and social value of engagement” (Franz, 2014, p. 12).
2. Program development- increase engagement value by creating new program planning tools and value determination methods to better show the value of engagement through Extension programs.
3. Funding- include methods for measuring impact in Extension funding proposals.
4. Structure- to increase support for engagement, there should be systems that “create and report the value of engagement during and after engagement activities take place” (Franz, 2014, p. 13).

5. Organizational development- “Incentives need to be in place for faculty, staff, and community partners to measure and articulate the value of engagement in ways that support the mission of the university and goals of the community” (Franz, 2014, p. 13).

Engagement is central to Extension fulfilling its purpose as an organization to effectively provide research-based information in communities. For Extension to continue to provide community engagement at the local level, it is imperative that Extension workers strive to meet community needs as well as measure their engagement impacts.

Extension Service

The Extension service was created in 1914 through the Smith Lever Act, with intentions to address and solve pertinent agricultural issues for American citizens (NIFA, n.d.). Over 100 years later, Extension still offers quality localized programs and resources to every state and territory in the United States. Extension has remained relevant and successful for over a century due to its inherent ability to assess informational and resource needs at the local level. The mission of Extension is to “serve the public by providing producers, consumers, and agribusiness with relevant, accurate, and unbiased research-based information, and to improve the quality of life through youth development and lifelong education” (Rodekohr, 2014). Rodekohr (2014) elaborated on Extension’s rich background stating, “Cooperative Extension Service has introduced methods and techniques that have enhanced economic stability in rural areas, protected the environment, guided communities through decision making processes, and improved the health and well-being of families” (Rodekohr, 2014). One of Extension’s biggest priorities is providing quality research-based information to local communities.

Extension is a complex organization that is both operated and funded at the federal, state, and local levels. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA, n.d.) oversees Extension

services on a national level. On the state level, Extension is run through land-grant universities. Land-grant universities are unique in that their mission is a tripartite. Not only do they provide research and teaching, but they also provide extension (outreach) to local communities. NIFA explains that university researchers translate findings that are both culturally sensitive and appropriate for various target audiences (NIFA, n.d.).

While Extension is a historically significant organization that is part of the United States land-grant system (Franz and Townson, 2008)—enabling it to have a variety of valuable touch points at every local level—it also creates a complex structure with a multitude of moving parts. In their article, *The Nature of Complex Organizations: The Case of Cooperative Extension*, Franz and Townson (2008) investigated the Extension Service in the United States and the difficulty of evaluating Extension programs from state to state. This difficulty arises from “complex funding, staffing and accountability structures combined with widely varying programs and delivery methods” (Franz & Townson, 2008, p. 5). While Extension is undeniably complex, its service in providing research-based information to local communities on a national scale warrants increased efforts to improve program evaluation practices.

Efforts to address and solve problems in society require approaches that are unique and catered to the specific situation (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco and Swanson, 2016). Extension is an outreach service of university systems, thus it has an “implicit responsibility to serve the public that created it and sustains it financially through tuition, government grants and contracts, corporate giving and partnerships, and public philanthropy” (Fitzgerald et al., 2016, p. 245). Fitzgerald et al. (2016) stated that there is an opportunity to demonstrate leadership by growing a culture of engaged scholarship at the university level. The growth of engaged scholarship

requires an equal priority of teaching, research, and Extension, rather than higher focus on simply teaching and research.

Extension Engagement

Culp III (2009) acknowledged that engagement is unique to academia in that its focus is primarily on solving problems for communities. Scholarship of Extension has been defined as “creative intellectual works that is validated by peers and communicated” (Culp III, 2009, p. 2). Communication is essential in disseminating Extension scholarship and is the basis for evaluating Extension worker’s competence (Culp III, 2009). Scholarship is vital to the success of Extension because it justifies the true value and overall impact of Extension programs.

Aronson and Webster (2007) argued “most state and land-grant universities have moved far away from their original mission and are struggling to become engaged with the communities they serve” (p. 1). To address this issue, Aronson and Webster (2007) created an “Engagement Ladder” with five levels to improve engagement efforts among universities in the United States: (1) Strategic vision involves a more united approach to close any gaps between teaching, research, and outreach efforts at land-grant universities; (2) Organize for engagement includes many facets of joining outreach programs at the university level; (3) Obtain faculty support of more engagement efforts in addition to their responsibilities of research and teaching; (4) Student support of more engagement efforts in addition to their educational experience is necessary; and (5) Community partnership is vital for engagement to happen successfully from land-grant universities. However, Aronson and Webster (2007) acknowledged that engagement is a complicated process and unique approaches may be necessary for land-grant universities to consider.

Measuring the value of Extension engagement is difficult due to the sheer complexity of the organization. Nevertheless, Extension is mandated by the land-grant mission to provide engagement to communities across the United States. Specifically, programs in agriculture, family and consumer sciences, and 4-H youth development among others are most heavily emphasized (Franz, 2014). Logic models are a common tool utilized for Extension engagement evaluation. According to Franz (2014), Extension is making changes to better assess the value of engagement and scholarship of Extension. A constant effort to engage with communities and meet their needs is vital for effective engagement from Extension to occur.

Engagement in relation to the Scholarship of Extension has opportunity to improve through innovative communication strategies identified by Extension workers' in their pursuits to better their communities through service. Labelle, Anderson-Wilk, and Emanuel (2011) conducted a study to investigate how Extension faculty perceive digital forms of scholarship in their efforts to create a Scholarship of Engagement. An email survey to Extension faculty and administrators found that most Extension faculty were open to using new technology in their engagement efforts. Labelle, Anderson-Wilk, and Emanuel (2011) suggest that to improve new media communication, Extension workers must be assured that their efforts will not be wasted, but rather rewarded for their engagement and scholarship efforts by their land-grant institutions.

Bringle and Hatcher (2002) acknowledge that even though land-grant universities are charged with proving outreach to local communities, there is relatively little research regarding university-community partnerships. There is a need to see how extension engagement services can best bridge the gap between universities and local communities. According to Bringle and Hatcher (2002) "campus-community partnerships involve multiple dyadic relationships that create social networks of campus staff, faculty, students, staff from community-based

organizations, clients of community based organizations, clients of community-based organizations, and residents of various communities” (p. 513). Service learning through Extension programs may be an effective way to create a more engaged university. Successful engagement occurs when both parties feel that the interaction is both meaningful and impactful.

EFNEP

The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) is a national outreach program that is funded through the United States Department of Agriculture’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA, n.d.). EFNEP is a nutrition education program targeted toward low- income and limited-resource families and delivered through Extension to local communities. EFNEP focuses on improving diet quality and physical activity, food resource management, food safety, and food security to low-income families with children (EFNEP, n.d.).

EFNEP administration and agents help to create nutrition programs for communities and train program assistants to teach lessons. Minimum degree requirements to serve as an EFNEP administrator or agent is a bachelor’s degree or a master’s degree (NIFA, n.d.). Job duties of EFNEP administration/agents include selecting agencies and groups to deliver EFNEP programs to as well as supervising EFNEP program assistants. EFNEP program assistants are considered support staff to EFNEP administration/agents. There is no degree requirement for this job except a high school diploma (EFNEP, n.d.). Program assistants are typically hired from the communities in which they live, making them indigenous and valuable program assistants. Their main job duties include delivering nutrition lessons to audiences, as well as supporting the EFNEP administration/agent in their county.

According to NIFA, EFNEP has a strong research base due to it being a program associated with both the USDA and the Extension system. To date, the majority of EFNEP

research studies are focused on cost-benefit analysis, evaluation of staff, food insecurity, methods of evaluation, or on race-specific audiences, among others (NIFA, n.d.). Moving beyond these common research areas, the following EFNEP qualitative studies have a focus that is primarily concerned with improving quality of life through nutrition education.

According to Hoover, Martin and Litchfield (2009), qualitative evaluation of EFNEP programs is very limited in research studies and most research primarily includes interviews and focus groups with participants within EFNEP programs. Hoover et al. (2009) sought to examine how different qualitative learning strategies are utilized by EFNEP professionals teaching curriculum to participants. From the study, Hoover et al. (2009) found that open-ended questions should be utilized in teaching EFNEP programs because it encourages higher-level thinking.

Other research has examined post-program engagement and continued learning. One particular study investigated the best ways to incorporate social media to communicate nutrition information to EFNEP program graduates (Leak, Benavente, Goodell, Lassiter, Jones, & Bowen, 2014). Methods used included focus groups with EFNEP graduates who used social media twice a week or more. Results from the study suggested that trustworthiness, or a “need for reliable information from known, credible sources” was viewed as extremely important for program participants (p. 204). This study is significant to the existing literature on EFNEP programs due to its suggestion that social media may be an effective way to engage and communicate with EFNEP program participants after they have completed graduation from the program.

Hlavacek (2010) conducted a study to better understand how past EFNEP graduates describe quality of life after completion of the program. A longitudinal analysis of 1,057 submitted EFNEP success stories were used in the study (Hlavacek, 2010). Common themes from the study, “increased knowledge, improved health, enjoyment and desire to learn, support

and confidence, impact on family, a new perspective on health, and positive change” were found (Hlavacek, 2010, p. 91). Results from this study were utilized and helped to create a national evaluation tool to help assess EFNEP’s effect on participants’ lives.

Through such research, EFNEP has proven to be a cost-effective program through its national campaign to improve nutrition among low-income audiences. However, innovative strategies are needed to enhance not only outreach but the overall quality of the program to better serve program participants. Ohri-Vachaspati (2008) suggests creating local partnerships to help enhance the quality of EFNEP programs through creating longer and more meaningful overall impact for EFNEP program participants. Ohri-Vachaspati (2008) describes local partnerships with schools, other nonprofit organizations, and churches are good starting places for creating partnerships with EFNEP.

Another study was conducted in Kansas City and St. Louis metropolitan areas to assess the impact of monetary incentives on nutrition education. Researchers Britt-Rankin, Gabel and Keller (2013) utilized EFNEP participants to compare EFNEP lessons with a grocery store tour and grocery tour gift card. Three treatment groups were used to add validity to the study. Findings from the study suggest that no matter which treatment was used; dietary conditions were somewhat improved. However, it did not appear that grocery store gift cards improved shopping behaviors. Britt-Rankin, Gabel, and Keller (2013) suggest that providing monetary incentives to EFNEP program participants does not significantly affect behavior change in regards to nutrition education.

One of the more recent methods utilized in EFNEP research is photovoice. Photovoice is a research method refined by Wang and Burris (1997), and is intended to enhance research findings by allowing project participants to share held meanings regarding a given issue through

the creation of images themselves. According to Borron (2013) photovoice allowed research participants (who were participants in an EFNEP program) take and share photographs for the purposes of gaining a deeper understanding of underlying issues around what good nutrition means to them on a daily basis. Photovoice was useful in that it served as a different form of knowledge production that could be used to the benefit of the entire study.

As part of the land-grant mission, Extension provides engagement to communities by addressing local needs and providing them with necessary services to accommodate these needs. The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service recognized that in the Appalachian communities of Kentucky, food security is a major issue. One study assessed the impact of EFNEP programs and their levels of outreach in Appalachian communities to determine if the University of Kentucky's outreach efforts were being effective (Jenkins-Howard, Stephenson, and Mains, 2013). Results from the study suggested that utilizing indigenous paraprofessionals to teach EFNEP lessons was a highly effective way to engage with the target community.

Research on EFNEP programs has been conducted for over 40 years. Participant observation is a scientific method of inquiry that can be utilized to understand community needs at an intimate level. Kolasa and Bass (1974) practiced participant observation to observe the food behavior of the residents of Hancock County, Tennessee as an entry point to create education materials that would be applicable to that specific population. The EFNEP program allowed the researchers to use their materials to see a more transparent view of the county's nutritional needs through observation and participation in the culture of the people. Kolasa and Bass (1974) concluded that it is vital for nutrition educators to be acutely aware of the culture in which they intend to educate.

Twenty years later, researchers still identified a need for continued research on nutrition research programs. Anderson (1994) described nutrition education as “a process in which we assist people in making decisions regarding their eating practices by applying knowledge from nutrition science about the relationship between diet and health” (p. 1828). Research efforts to improve nutrition education programs should be directed towards different ethnic groups, techniques for reaching diverse populations, and the varying levels of literacy in communities (Anderson, 1994). Research efforts in the field of nutrition education would be greatly enhanced by a greater emphasis on creating community partnerships.

Audience Analysis and Understanding

Audience analysis has been defined as “the process of gathering and interpreting information about the recipients of oral, written, or visual communication” (Callison & Lamb, 2004, p. 34). The key to effective audience analysis is for the educator to be aware of the needs and interests of said audience. Educators must make efforts to incorporate participants’ abilities and experiences to create effective communication.

Assessing the needs of a particular audience helps educators establish what they should focus on to best benefit their audience (Callison & Lamb, 2004). In addition, adjusting style, or making lessons more applicable to specific audiences in increasing communication efforts. Audience analysis helps to improve the atmosphere and learning environment so that higher levels of learning may be achieved. According to Callison and Lamb (2004) the overall goal of audience analysis is to lead to higher levels of audience engagement.

Cason, Scholl and Kassab (2002) conducted a study to examine the delivery methods of EFNEP education on maintaining adequate diets for participants. Methods tested were individual, group, or super cupboard methods. Cason, Scholl and Kassab (2002) describe the

super cupboard method as and educational tool for “frequent users of emergency food services using a combination of food assistance, nutrition education, food preparation, and basic living skills” (n.p). From the study, results suggested that a learner-centered approach was most effective in determining program impact (Cason et al., 2002). This finding further emphasizes the notion that paying attention to the needs of EFNEP participants can elicit positive results.

The previous qualitative research on EFNEP programs shows that much priority has been given to EFNEP and its potential to help low income people improve their lives through nutrition. However, more research should be conducted on how to effectively engage and communicate with audiences through the perspectives of EFNEP personnel. Learning best engagement practices has the potential to make EFNEP programs more applicable and desirable for participants to attend. The existing literature on extension engagement acknowledges the need for further research in this field.

Critical Theory

The foundation of critical theory dates back to 1923 with a revision of Karl Marx’s critique of capitalism, along with an analysis of current social and political conditions (Prasad, 2005). Early critical theorists such as Adorno, Fromm, Horkheimer, and Marcuse focused on critical critiques that would “raise fundamental concerns about the dysfunctional consequences of modernity” (Prasad, 2005, p. 137). Critical theory has been utilized by many academic disciplines including education, sociology, public administration, among others (Prasad, 2005).

Critical theory is a social theory utilized in many qualitative research studies, and has been described as a cultural critique. Prasad (2005) describes critical theory as a pursuit of “thoughtful and sustained critiques of organizations, institutional arrangements, social habits, and professional mindsets” (p. 139). Critical theory places emphasis on conversation and

engagement with participants making it relevant to both engagement and communication studies. The ultimate goal of critical theory is to have an enhanced public awareness on various topics.

Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) describe critical theorists as researchers or teachers who make conscious attempts to use their works as a form of cultural criticism. Main themes of critical theory include that all thought is mediated at a fundamental level by power relations, certain groups in society are privileged over others, and traditional research practices are a reproduction of systems including class, race, and gender (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). No matter the discipline, critical theorists have a commonality in their desire to empower individuals through research.

Paulo Friere's (1972) historic work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is essential to critical theory informing social research. Friere (1972) focuses on an inherent concern with human suffering and the pedagogy that helps to explain the origins of the suffering. Friere (1972) critiqued traditional methods of research for not going beyond to find the root of the problem. Friere (1972) placed emphasis between teacher, student, and society to create an improved social good. Central to the work is the belief that no knowledge is concrete and it can always be questioned.

Central concepts of critical theory include (1) instrumental reason, (2) one-dimensional culture, (3) communicative action and (4) systematically distorted communication (Prasad, 2005). All concepts revolve around the idea of cultural critique and its importance to society. Instrumental reason, as described by Prasad (2005) is the "cultural view of formal knowledge being detached from everyday human existence and intended to control nature, people, and social arrangements" (p.144). Instrumental reason is the belief that knowledge is separate from real world experiences. One-dimensional culture posits that humans live in a reality without

substance and is more “technical” in nature (Prasad, 2005). Prasad (2005) describes communicative action in critical theory is that to be human is the inherent ability to communicate and to have genuine consensus as the ideal form of communication. Lastly, systematically distorted communication is the idea that miscommunication is bound to take place between humans and meanings may often be misinterpreted between recipients (Prasad, 2005). The central concepts revolve around the constant need for cultural critique in all areas of life.

Davis (1982) utilized critical theory to assess the connections between socioeconomic characteristics, food expenditure patterns, and nutritional status of low-income families through an extensive review of the related literature. According to Davis (1982) the continuation of public support for nutrition assistance programs is highly dependent on whether or not programs are recognized for improving food and nutrition goals on a national scale. For future research on nutrition education programs for low-income families, Davis (1982) suggested it would be beneficial to have collaborative efforts from economists and nutrition scientists to develop an improved nutritional status criterion.

Research in the critical theory tradition typically involves the intense study of texts or transcripts or studying an ongoing situation in society (Prasad, 2005). In addition, those who practice research in critical theory should practice a certain amount of “skepticism about the innocence of social and institutional practices, however innocuous and commonplace they might seem” (Prasad, 2005, p. 153). The topics that may be studied through a critical theory framework are virtuously unlimited due to the frameworks inherent desire for cultural critique.

For this current study and its associated research objectives, critical theory provides an essential lens through which to consider a well-respected, well-received, and systematically designed program, such as EFNEP. In this case, food, food access, and a program designed to

build nutritional capital among low-income families become a key entry point to examine Extension engagement practices.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Objective and Research Questions

The intent of this project is to critically examine university engagement specifically through the Extension organization using EFNEP as an entry point. The purpose of this study is to delve into engagement practices used by both EFNEP administrators and program assistants utilizing qualitative research methods. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What does effective engagement look like from the perspectives of EFNEP administration?
2. What does effective engagement look like from the perspectives of EFNEP program assistants?
3. What communication and engagement methods are used in EFNEP programs?

Methodology in Critical Theory

Critical theory guided the design and data collection methods and analysis of this study. The origins of critical theory stem in 1923 from a revision of Karl Marx's critique of capitalism and analysis of current social and political conditions (Prasad, 2005). This theoretical framework serves primarily as a cultural critique and is utilized in many academic disciplines. Critical theory places emphasis on conversation and engagement with participants making it relevant to both engagement and communication studies. The ultimate goal of critical theory is to have an enhanced public awareness on various issues in society.

Methods of data collection such as in-depth interviews and program observation were utilized in the study to compliment critical theory methodology. According to Cohen and

Crabtree (2006), critical theory approaches typically utilize methods combining “observation and interviewing with approaches that foster conversation and reflection” (n.p.). From the in- depth interviews conducted on EFNEP administration and program assistants in addition to program observation, themes were then generated from the data.

Entry Point for Research

The researcher began the research process by first contacting the director for UGA EFNEP. After an in-person meeting with the EFNEP director and email confirmation, permission was granted for the study. A permission letter from the director is listed in the appendix (Appendix A). The UGA EFNEP director not only agreed to the study on EFNEP engagement, but also provided opportunities to access the targeted audience at the 2016 Georgia EFNEP Conference.

Participant Recruitment

Subjects recruited for the study were Georgia EFNEP employees, either serving in administrative/agent or program assistant roles. Methods for selecting participants in the study included the researcher attending the 2016 Georgia EFNEP Conference at Rock Eagle 4-H Center in Eatonton, Georgia to invite participants to the study. Willing participants were asked to write down their name, job title, county, phone number and email address. A more detailed explanation of in person recruitment methods is listed in the appendix (Appendix B). The researcher then sent a follow up email to request interview times with willing participants. The recruitment letters sent to both program assistants and administration are included in the appendix (Appendices C & D). Thirteen EFNEP employees who expressed interest in the study at the EFNEP conference were emailed with more information about the project. The researcher initially targeted 10-15 total participants for the study. The program assistant selected for the

program observation portion of the research project was selected by one of the EFNEP administrators due to her experience in working with EFNEP.

EFNEP Administrators

The targeted population was Georgia EFNEP administration/agents. The targeted gender was male and female employees. Age or age range was constricted to employees over 18 years of age.

EFNEP Program Assistants

The targeted population was Georgia EFNEP program assistants. The targeted gender was male and female employees. Age or age range was constricted to employees over 18 years of age.

Data Collection

Data collection methods for this study included in-depth interviews with EFNEP administrators and program assistants, as well as observation of one program assistant delivering "Food Talk" programming for seven meetings. Interviews were scheduled in April 2016 and were not scheduled any later than the end of June, 2016. Interviews were conducted from May to June 2016. Participant observation of a program assistant conducting a "Food Talk" program lasted from June to August 2016 over a span of seven meetings.

In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interview questions were developed by the researcher and the researcher's major professor, focusing specifically on EFNEP engagement and communication practices. Interview questions used in the study included:

1. How would you describe your target audience?
2. What does effective engagement look like in EFNEP programs?

3. What do you consider should be kept the same in EFNEP programs?
4. How do you think EFNEP programs could be improved?
5. Do you have any suggestions for improving communication with EFNEP audiences?
6. What, if any, obstacles keep participants from coming to programs or finishing programs?
7. What obstacles do you face in delivering effective programming?
8. How do you think EFNEP could further serve communities?

All interviews with EFNEP program assistants and administration received either an in-person contact or email requesting their participation in a 45-minute interview. If participants wished to participate, they were scheduled to interview at a convenient date for them at a location of their choosing.

A pilot interview was conducted on a recently retired EFNEP agent to ensure the interview questions were applicable to the study. Minor modifications were made to reflect agent feedback. In-depth interviews were conducted on all 10 participants. Nine interviews were conducted in person at the participants' home county offices. One interview was conducted over the phone due to the participant living 5 hours away from the researcher. All participants signed a consent form to participate (Appendix F), retaining one for their own personal records, and all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate data collection. Participants were made aware that they could stop the interview at any time during the interview process.

Program Observation

In addition to interviews, procedures also included observations of a seven-week EFNEP program known as "Food Talk." The researcher attended each class to observe the engagement between a program assistant delivering the program and the participants attending weekly. Field

notes were taken to help assess the program assistant's delivery of the program, his/her engagement practices with program participants, resulting interest level of the program participants, and learning environment and atmosphere of the program. To ensure that observations remained tied to the project objectives, an observation guide was developed (Appendix G).

Data Analysis

Interviews with EFNEP administration and program assistants were recorded and transcribed after the completion of each interview. Data was transcribed from the audio files and stored on a password-protected device. Audio files were permanently deleted after transcription. Transcribed files were then coded using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) utilizing initial, axial, and selective coding methods. After the completion of coding, themes were generated from all transcribed interviews by the researcher and her major professor. See Appendices H and I for an example of the data analysis method. Field notes from the program observation of a program assistant teaching “Food Talk” curriculum were analyzed using the same process and used to enrich the existing data from the interviews.

Institutional Review Board – University of Georgia

The researcher completed and submitted an official IRB application to the review board in February 2016. The application was classified as exempt. The application received approval on April 25, 2016.

Limitations of Methodology

A limitation in this study is that research only included EFNEP employees in the state of Georgia. Therefore, the study cannot be generalized on a regional or national scale but can be transferrable for possible duplication of the research design. Another limitation is that the

qualitative study was dependent on the interpretation of the researcher, who has professional ties to Extension.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Research Objective and Research Questions

The intent of this project is to critically examine university engagement specifically through the Extension organization using EFNEP as an entry point. The purpose of this study is to delve into engagement practices used by both EFNEP administrators and program assistants utilizing qualitative research methods. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What does effective engagement look like from the perspectives of EFNEP administration?
2. What does effective engagement look like from the perspectives of EFNEP program assistants?
3. What communication and engagement methods are used in EFNEP programs?

During the 2016 Georgia EFNEP Conference, nine EFNEP program assistants and six EFNEP administration volunteered for the study by writing down their name, county, phone number, and days/times they were available. A follow-up email was then sent and a final six EFNEP program assistants and four EFNEP administration consented for the interview. One EFNEP administration who has worked for EFNEP for the majority of her career agreed to do a pilot interview to ensure that the interview questions were applicable. Minimal changes were made following her interview and her interview responses were not included in this study. Following the pilot interview, the researcher then interviewed the remaining nine program assistants and administration for the study. Participation in the interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes.

The six EFNEP program assistants interviewed in this study represented a combined three areas of the state: northeast, northwest, and southeast Georgia. All program assistants were female. All program assistants interviewed had various experience working in EFNEP. Some participants worked as little as a year, while others had spent their entire career as an EFNEP program assistant.

The three EFNEP administration who consented for the interview represented counties in northeast, southeast, and southwest Georgia. All EFNEP administration were female. EFNEP administration interviewed for the study had spent the majority of their careers working for EFNEP. One EFNEP administration served as a participant in EFNEP programs prior to becoming an administrator. She accredited EFNEP for inspiring her to achieve her degree.

In the following themes from interviews, program assistants and administration are identified by numbers such as PA1 (program assistant 1) or AD1 (administration 1) to protect confidentiality. The program assistants and administration are labeled by the order in which they were interviewed for this study. This chapter is organized by first listing themes from interviews with EFNEP program assistants. The second portion of this chapter presents themes from interviews with EFNEP administration. Lastly, this chapter includes program observation themes that arose from the researcher attending an EFNEP “Food Talk” program taught by a program assistant over a span of three months.

Qualitative analysis of interviews was performed to develop a working understanding of what effective engagement and communication looked like from the perspectives of Georgia EFNEP program assistants and administration. Interviews with both groups were analyzed into codes and later grouped into themes. The final themes between program assistants and administration are presented separately to allow for comparison between the two groups.

Two themes emerged from the interviews with EFNEP administration: (1) Non-traditional lessons for a non-traditional audience and (2) Critical nuances of communication. With EFNEP program assistants, two themes also emerged: (1) Assessment of a complex target audience and (2) Obstacles in achieving effective engagement. Finally, with program observation, three themes emerged: (1) Challenges of dynamic rapport building, (2) Roadblocks in the program, and (3) Inconsistent membership.

Themes: Administration

Theme 1: Non-Traditional Lessons for a Non-Traditional Audience

The first theme for EFNEP administrators is “non-traditional lessons for a non-traditional audience.” EFNEP administration explained in interviews that low-income families with children were the federally mandated target audience for EFNEP programs, but felt that certain audiences were not being reached due to strict regulations. EFNEP administration believed that the interactive lesson format and curriculum content were effective ways to engage and communicate with program participants. The codes that make up this theme include unreached audiences and interactive curriculum.

Code A: Unreached Audiences

Some EFNEP administration described feelings of dissatisfaction that the current target audience does not reach certain groups in need of nutrition programs. They felt that due to the current parameters of the program of who can and cannot participate in EFNEP, many audiences in need were left unreached. AD3 described, “That’s where it gets kind of difficult when you can’t reach that audience but they need it just as much as the low income audience.” She explained that she lived in a military community and while the people were not considered technically “low-income” they needed to take the class just as much as the low-income families

in the area. AD3 described that families who have a moderate income could benefit from EFNEP nutrition classes.

When asked, “How do you think EFNEP could further serve communities?” two out of three EFNEP administration stated the desire to serve unreached audiences. AD1 described “I wish the income requirement was a little higher because I think there are a lot of people who are working poor who need help and they are not at the guideline...I think we could make a difference in their lives too.” The “working poor” as described by several administrators were excluded due to the fact that EFNEP programs must serve an audience of low-income families with children, as required by federal regulations. The administrators appreciated the opportunity to provide services for low-income families with children, but wished to expand their services to anyone who needed help with nutrition.

Code B: Interactive Curriculum

The concept of what effective engagement looked like in EFNEP programs resonated with all administrators interviewed for the study. AD1 described how interactive lessons helped to create a better connection with her audience. “Well to me what’s different about EFNEP classes, is traditional classes sometimes don’t work with the population we serve because they were intimidated or didn’t enjoy school when they went to middle school, high school, whatever.” AD1 then went on to describe engagement with these participants as, “We try to engage them like we are on their level, we care, we are friendly, and we don’t treat them like a student.” She stated it was important to keep lessons as informal and as casual as possible while still delivering educational information to keep participants from feeling like they were back in school.

The “Food Talk” curriculum that is unique to Georgia EFNEP was viewed by the three EFNEP administrators as an effective way to reach and teach audiences about nutrition education. When asked, “What do you think should be kept the same in EFNEP programs?” all three administrators described satisfaction with the “Food Talk” lessons. AD2 stated, “I think the food talk curriculum is a really good curriculum because it does engage the participants and is designed to be more of a dialogue rather than the educator stand up and lectures.” The “Food Talk” curriculum is unique in that it was specifically created for Georgia EFNEP. AD2 explained, “There are cultural differences by state and in order for the program to be effective, it has to be culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate.” She described how the curriculum was designed with Georgia families in mind and that may serve as a factor in why the demonstrations resonate with audiences.

“The target audience is low income families with young children...regardless of it I think it is different. There are cultural differences by state and in order for the program to be effective it has to be culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate. So I think that’s part of the reason why the curriculum differs from state to state.”

During interviews, EFNEP administrators all expressed the importance of non-traditional lessons for a non-traditional audience. EFNEP agents described how serving current unreached audiences may have the potential to improve engagement efforts with local communities. Additionally, EFNEP administrators felt that the “Food Talk” interactive curriculum was an effective way to reach audiences due to its informal nature and culturally unique approach to nutrition education.

Theme 2: Critical Nuances of Communication

The second theme that emerged from interviews with Georgia EFNEP administrators was “critical nuances of communication.” Administrators described that relationships with both agencies and participants were important in regard to effectively engaging and communicating with audiences. Additionally, the concept of communicating with program participants to understand their life obstacles was heavily emphasized. The codes that make up this theme include agency buy-in and participant investment-or lack thereof.

Code A: Agency-Buy In

EFNEP administrators were asked, “What obstacles do you or your program assistants face in delivering effective programming?” Their common responses indicated that there a lack of agency buy-in. AD1 described, “I think if you don’t have a lot of agency buy-in or you don’t have a good contact person at that agency who is really going to be a cheerleader for EFNEP when we are not there, I think that can interfere with delivery, effective programming.” She explained that if there is not a strong relationship with the agency, it would be very difficult to have a successful program held at that agency. AD3 described how it was important to not only establish, but also maintain relationships with agencies. She described how she would first come to the agency and be very transparent about the “Food Talk” program. She would then make sure she was very professional and always thanked agency partners for working with her.

Code B: Participant Investment-Or Lack Of

EFNEP administrators also recognized the importance of building relationships with program participants. AD1 suggested, “Get to know the EFNEP participants. What their motivation for being there is and try to highlight how the EFNEP programming is relevant and can be beneficial to them.” She explained that understanding the participants and their desires

can be insightful for building impactful relationships. AD3 described sharing personal experiences as an effective way to interact with participants. “I always use personal experiences. Something you might relate to the clients with...you know if you have ever received food stamps in your time or WICC, just some time of struggle you know that they might have experienced.” She described that after sharing personal experiences, such as her own struggles with eating fast food, her program participants felt more comfortable and were more inclined to engage with her.

Transportation was a major reoccurring concept regarding personal barriers that affect participants from completing EFNEP programs. AD1 explained that especially in rural areas, it was hard for participants to find ways to get to lessons. “We already try to go to where they are but in some cases that’s not possible.” She explained that most participants truly wanted to come to lessons, but could not find transportation to the program. AD2 suggested pairing with agencies that already have a set meeting location. She described that working with agencies with similar missions circumvented issues with transportation because the other agency had already addressed the issue.

Life demands were also seen as a major barrier in delivering programs to participants. AD1 described, “Well, a lot of the population we serve, they don’t just have income barriers, they have been dealing with substance abuse issues, and some with domestic violence issues.” The administrators acknowledged that it was hard for participants to prioritize a nutrition program over their immediate needs. Understanding the personal barriers that participants face is vital to creating programs that are applicable and feasible for them to attend.

Communication was viewed as a major theme in addressing what effective engagement looked like from the perspectives of EFNEP administration. The administrators felt that establishing agency buy-in was extremely important for EFNEP programs. They also expressed

that participant investment or lack thereof could be improved by furthering communication efforts in understanding their audiences' needs. Specific emphasis on establishing rapport, understanding transportation struggles, and competing life demands were identified in relation to participant investment for EFNEP programs.

Themes: Program Assistants

Theme 1: Assessment of a Complex Target Audience

The first theme is the “assessment of a complex target audience”. The desire for an expanded target audience for EFNEP programs was a concept reported in all six interviews with Georgia EFNEP program assistants. Program assistants expressed that nutrition education was an effective way to engage and communicate with the current federally mandated audience of low-income families with children. The main codes used to support this theme include utilization of more diverse audiences, approval of “Food Talk” curriculum and number of “Food Talk” demonstrations.

Code A: Utilization of More Diverse Audiences

When asked, “how would you describe your target audience?” each program assistant answered similarly describing an audience of low-income families with children. PA4 had worked the majority of her career for EFNEP in the northeast Georgia area, and described the target audience as “Families with children that have a need to improve their diets and shopping behaviors.” PA1 who also works in northeast Georgia answered, “My target audience is supposed to be low-income families with children. Sometimes that’s a little bit difficult, but I try to at least have 75% of my classes that have children because that is what this all is geared for.” According to PA1, “what this all is geared for” refers to the “Food Talk” curriculum, which is what EFNEP program assistants deliver to various community groups in their county. PA1

explained that it was difficult to formulate groups that were a majority low-income with children, and that she was often disappointed that she could not engage with a broader audience in her community.

Code B: Approval of “Food Talk” Curriculum

When asked, “What do you consider should be kept the same in EFNEP programs?” every program assistant described feelings of satisfaction with the content of “Food Talk” curriculum. A southeast Georgia program assistant, PA3, described a success story from one of her participants. “One of my participants told me, ‘Because of this program, I learned how to eat right and get stress out of my life. I learned how to make my money go farther when I grocery shop.’” PA3 described that the information taught to the participants was very useful and applicable to the target audience of low-income families with children.

PA5 located in northeast Georgia described how educational extenders helped increase interest in Food Talk curriculum. Educational extenders are cooking items that participants receive at each Food Talk lesson that are free to keep and use at home. She explained:

“Those are a real pull and incentive to come back and get those; they feel real special that we are giving those to them and I think it really helps them in terms of especially those with very limited resources, that is something that they can use whenever they are cooking.”

PA5 described how the educational extenders were given not only to increase likelihood of participants coming back to future lessons, but also to motivate them to cook at home.

Code C: Number of “Food Talk” Demonstrations

When asked, “How do you think EFNEP programs could be improved?” the majority of program assistants expressed that seven “Food Talk” sessions were difficult for agencies to

accommodate for and to keep retention rates of participants. One program assistant located in northwest Georgia, PA2, described “You will do pretty good with a group staying till the fourth one and then they will start dropping out.” PA2 explained that multiple “Food Talk” sessions created difficulties for their target audience of low-income families with children. The program assistants described how seven “Food Talk” lessons made it difficult for participants to stay and finish the program.

Several program assistants described that a major obstacle they faced in delivering effective programming was that it was difficult to graduate program participants due to the number of “Food Talk” demonstrations they were required to attend. PA6 stated,

“It is challenging to get them to complete. Seven weeks is almost two months; two months is a lot to ask the clients that we have now to dedicate themselves to finishing. That’s two months of their lives trying to finish the classes. That’s a lot.”

Graduating program participants was viewed as difficult because expecting a low-income audience with children to attend seven “Food Talk” demonstrations required a high level of commitment from both program assistants and program participants.

According to EFNEP program assistants, in order to practice effective engagement in EFNEP programs, there needs to be a concentrated effort in assessing the needs of a complex target audience. Program assistants suggested the utilization of more diverse audiences, continuation of “Food Talk” curriculum, and the reduction in number of “Food Talk” demonstrations participants are required to attend in order to graduate the program. Program assistants believed that modifying current practices would provide better engagement opportunities for the communities they serve.

Theme 2: Obstacles in Achieving Effective Engagement

The second theme that emerged from interviews with program assistants was the concept of “obstacles in achieving effective engagement”. Program advertising was a topic that was considered pertinent in reaching audiences, as well as promoting nutrition education to communities. Additionally, program assistants described that relationships must be formed and maintained with agency partners and program participants. Understanding participant barriers was also considered important when engaging with a low-income audience. The codes that make up this theme include program advertising, building relationships, and understanding participant barriers.

Code A: Program Advertising

Many program assistants felt that EFNEP could further serve communities by having a stronger presence in program advertising and awareness. PA2 suggested, “Let’s take one day or maybe two days of going out into the public, not just only looking in the internet for the agencies. Actually go walk to communities, go more to health fairs, go more where we can actually reach those families.” Many program assistants described that they felt they weren’t reaching people in need because most people did not know EFNEP services existed.

In another interview when asked, “How do you think EFNEP could further serve communities?” PA3 acknowledged that she was not aware of EFNEP as a program before she applied for the position. PA3 stated, “Well it’s not sufficient because I didn’t know about it before I started doing it. So I don’t know how you get it out there.” She felt that to engage and communicate with audiences, EFNEP should be a more known service in the community.

The use of media to promote EFNEP was a reoccurring concept in all of the interviews with program assistants. Most believed that current efforts to promote EFNEP were lacking, and

media advertising would be an effective way to reach new audiences. Several program assistants suggested public service announcements on the radio and local television channels to promote EFNEP. PA2 suggested doing sample food demonstrations on local television channels to reach audiences that could not come into meetings due to various circumstances.

Code B: Building Relationships

Building relationships with agency partners was considered highly important by EFNEP program assistants. Several described how effective or ineffective relationships with agency partners were a major indicator of whether or not the “Food Talk” program would be successful. PA3 described the benefit of finding a key stakeholder within an agency by sharing an experience of going into an agency and the site manager was supportive of her and the program. PA3 stated, “But she made sure they knew I was coming [to teach an EFNEP lesson], she is a jewel.” Many program assistants described having direct communication with EFNEP partners helped to create effective relationships.

However, miscommunication with agency partners was a common theme for program assistants. When asked, “Do you have any suggestions for improving communication with EFNEP audiences?” PA3 described a situation where she was working with a new agency and called ahead of time the first two lessons to let them know she was coming. For the third lesson, she didn’t call ahead because she thought they would know she was coming by the third time. PA3 recalled thinking, “Hey, I’m working with adults, they know I’m coming.” But instead, they forgot so she had to cancel the class. The program assistant expressed feelings of frustration because she had already purchased all the food and materials for the lesson that went to waste. To prevent the same situation from reoccurring, the program assistant described having to continue to build a relationship with the agency so that miscommunication would not continue.

“So communication, I’m finding, is hard. Dealing with people not being prepared. So I have to be more diligent. But if I am gonna come out here then I need to be considered, and they need to be considerate of my time. Just because it’s free [EFNEP] doesn’t mean I need to be treated like ‘Oh, she doesn’t matter if we are not ready today.’”

Program participants’ relationships with program assistants were considered vital to the success of “Food Talk” demonstrations. Many program assistants described that building positive relationships with participants was one of the best parts of their job. PA4 described, “So my goal was always to have fun, and learn from those ladies. Because I learned just as much from those ladies as they learned from me.” PA4 then suggested listening was just as important as teaching participants. PA4 elaborated, “So you just have to be mindful, everybody has issues and sometimes when they come to class that’s not what they want to hear.” She explained that listening to participant’s personal struggles helped her to make classes more applicable to her audience. Several program assistants described that establishing trust and rapport with participants helped keep them engaged throughout the program.

Code C: Understanding Participant Barriers

Transportation was viewed as a major obstacle for participants coming to or finishing programs. Even though most “Food Talk” programs were taught at agencies that were centrally located in communities, many program assistants expressed that transportation was still a major limitation in having high retention rates. PA5 described how in some of her classes, participants would have to get a taxi to take them to the meeting locations. “Unfortunately some of those parents will have to rely on a taxi. They will come for all the sessions but they had to pay quite a bit of money.” PA5 then described feeling awkward packing up her belongings to leave at the

end of the class and participants would be sitting outside 30 minutes after the class had ended waiting on a ride to take them home. PA2 explained that because their target audience is low-income people, they most likely do not have the resources to get to meetings.

In addition to transportation, personal life choices were another major barrier in having effective engagement and communication through EFNEP programs. PA5 described how it would frustrate her when people would stop coming to lessons. “I used to beat myself up with that. They have personal stuff that keeps them. But the thing is when you get with an agency that has a group combined, you don’t have that issue.” PA5 described that working with groups that were already formed for another purpose were more likely to have high retention rates because they were already committed to being there. Examples of groups were rehabilitation centers, the Salvation Army, child life development centers, etc. Personal life choices such as obtaining jobs, or choosing childcare to leave the program was another barrier for participants. PA6 expanded, “We have to accommodate them to get them finished because otherwise, if they have a choice between finding a home and taking a class or going to work and taking the class, they aren’t going to choose the class.” Program assistants understood that their clients had many competing life demands such as job searching or caring for their children, but wished there was a way to keep those participants from dropping out of the program.

EFNEP program assistants expressed that engaging with their audience required multiple methods due to the fact that they were serving a unique and complex target audience of low-income families with children. Variations in engagement elaborated on by program assistants included increasing program advertising to further serve communities. Program assistants also stressed the importance of building relationships with agency partners to increase EFNEP

awareness and success. Lastly, program assistants described how understanding participant barriers is significant to creating programs that are applicable and feasible for them to attend.

Themes: Program Observation

In addition to interviewing Georgia EFNEP program assistants and EFNEP administration, the researcher conducted a field observation of a “Food Talk” program from beginning to end to observe the engagement practices between a program assistant and participants in the program. The observation data collection included in-depth field notes and the researcher serving in an “observer as participant” role (Kawulich, 2005). According to Kawulich, (2005) the observer as participant role “enables the researcher to participate in the group activities as desired, yet the main role of the researcher is to collect data.” (n.p.). The researcher serving in an observer and participant role allowed for participation in “Food Talk” activities but also allowed for data collection of recording field notes throughout the lessons.

The program assistant who taught the “Food Talk” program was recommended by her district and county supervisor for her experience in working with EFNEP programs for multiple years. In addition to volunteering for the program observation portion of this study, she also was interviewed for the first portion of this study, identified as program assistant 5 (PA5).

The “Food Talk” program included seven individual lessons all held in the same location, at a Salvation Army center in north Georgia. All lessons were one or more weeks apart. From the first lesson the researcher observed, there were 13 total participants, four females and nine males. The participants were required to take the class as part of their arrangement of staying at the Salvation Army. In the following weeks, there were some original participants in addition to new participants each week. Around the fifth lesson, the majority of the original participants had

stopped coming to the “Food Talk” lessons due to leaving the Salvation Army. By the last and seventh lesson, there were only two original participants that had attended every class.

Field notes were taken to assess the program assistant’s delivery of the program, engagement practices with program participants, interest level of program participants, in addition to the learning environment and atmosphere of the program. The field notes taken at each lesson were then coded for reoccurring themes. Three main themes emerged from the program observation data collection: (1) Challenges of dynamic rapport building, (2) Roadblocks in the program and (3) Inconsistent membership.

Theme 1: Challenges of Dynamic Rapport Building

The first theme that arose from program observation field notes is the “challenges of dynamic rapport building” with participants. In each lesson, PA5 worked tirelessly to build trust and appreciation through delivery of the “Food Talk” program and various engagement practices. Even though she was very effective in her delivery of each lesson, she seemed to have to “start over” and reestablish rapport each time due to having a new audience in attendance almost every meeting. Due to the nature of the agency the “Food Talk” program was taught at, different participants were in attendance each week, which undoubtedly made the program more challenging for PA5. The codes that contributed to the development of this theme include delivery of program and engagement practices.

Code A: Delivery of Program

PA5 started each lesson at 7:00 P.M. In each lesson, she was well rehearsed and had a “flow” to her presentation. PA5 multitasked throughout each lesson, simultaneously cooking and teaching with multiple props. The researcher was impressed with her delivery of the program;

she obviously had much experience teaching for EFNEP. Everything about her delivery seemed almost second nature to her. From the researcher's notes:

From meeting with PA5 to interview her for the first portion of this study, I already knew that she is very knowledgeable about EFNEP. From watching her teach the first lesson, I was extremely impressed with her delivery of the program. She effortlessly taught the lesson, cooked, and engaged with the audience by asking them questions throughout. I got exhausted just watching her.

In addition, PA5 dressed neatly usually wearing a UGA EFNEP collared shirt. In a previous conversation, she told the researcher that she never wore "really nice clothes" because she did not want to make her audience feel uncomfortable because they didn't have the resources to dress up for the lesson. PA5 explained that she wanted everyone to feel comfortable and included whenever she taught lessons. While she looked professional, she was always conscientious of her audience and how to make the delivery of the program more comfortable and enjoyable for them.

Code B: Engagement Practices

PA5 engaged with participants by learning their names, being kind, and joking with them. In what appeared to be an effort to remove any stigma the participants felt in cooking, she said to the participants in the first meeting that, "meals don't have to be a fancy production, rather an essential time with family." PA5 seemed to enjoy teaching each lesson, even though there were certain factors that seemed challenging for her. For example, "voice by choice" is a term that EFNEP workers utilize, which means that they won't call on anyone unless that person volunteers to answer. This serves to make the lessons less "class like" but often led to lessons feeling awkward because no one wanted to speak for various reasons. During the first few

sessions, PA5 would ask the audience a nutrition question and no one would answer her, even if it was a simple question such as “what are some items you can add to your parfait?” PA5 did not seem phased, and would offer some suggestions to help the audience understand, such as “how about granola, or apple slices?” After a couple of lessons, the participants started feeling more comfortable and began answering questions. However, these participants did not return after the fourth lesson due to them leaving the Salvation Army. PA5 then had to explain the “voice by choice” process over again to an almost entirely new audience.

The need for volunteers to pass out food and various materials was obvious in each lesson due to PA5 having to multitask teaching and cooking for the audience. PA5 would ask for two volunteers to help pass out food samples or educational extenders. Each time, only one woman would volunteer to help pass out supplies. The researcher noted that this may be because all the participants seemed tired and may not have wanted to stand up and move around. In several meetings the researcher helped pass things out to keep the lesson moving. The men in attendance especially did not seem interested in getting involved or helping the program assistant. Instead, they would sit and talk to each other and ignore her request. They did not do this in a rude manner, they just did not seem concerned at all with what she was teaching.

The “Food Talk” lessons always featured an interactive activity or game to get participants involved in the learning process. The researcher noticed in each lesson that these activities always had mixed success. Typically, the women in the audience got excited, but the men did not seem interested. One game that the entire audience did seem to enjoy was a Jeopardy activity about nutrition. This allowed the audience to answer nutrition questions and discuss with each other. For example, one question asked was “What’s a unit ounce?” When no

one answered correctly, this allowed PA5 to give them valuable information in a straightforward way. From the researcher's notes:

They seem to enjoy the jeopardy food trivia game and have fun with it, all laughing-but also having good discussion. In my opinion, this is the best, most interactive activity for adult age groups, everything else seemed kind of childish, especially the adult storybook activity.

Establishing rapport with participants seemed to be high priority for the program assistant. PA5 under observation always conducted herself in a professional manner and kept her audience in mind. While there were certain challenges that PA5 had to deal with throughout the program, she did not let it affect her presentation. PA5 utilized several engagement practices such as “voice by choice,” asking for volunteers, and interactive activities.

Theme 2: Roadblocks in the Program

The second theme that prevailed through the “Food Talk” program was the presence of researcher-identified “roadblocks in the program”. The lessons were taught at a Salvation Army in Georgia at 7:00 P.M. on Tuesday evenings. All participants in the program were required to be in attendance as part of the regulations of staying at the Salvation Army. According to PA5, the residents stay at the Salvation Army on a short-term basis. They receive counseling (financial, family life skills, employment), housing, and meals. The residents are assigned chores and have to follow the rules of the Salvation Army in order to stay there. The researcher also noted a sign at the entrance of the building that stated, “Class at 7:00 ALL CLIENT MUST ATTEND.” All participants in the program were required to be in attendance as part of the regulations of staying at the Salvation Army.

In each lesson, the female participants sat in front and the men typically sat in the back of the room. From observations, it seemed that none of the participants knew each other well.

While all participants were respectful, it was clear that most would not be there if they were not required to be. The participants' mannerisms reminded the researcher of students sitting in a high school class that was mandatory for them to take. Most chose to sit in the back when there were several seats at the front of the room and slumped in their seats...seemingly disinterested. Only a select few actually seemed interested in what the program assistant taught each week. The codes that make up this theme include varied participant interest level and learning environment.

Code A: Varied Participant Interest Level

Interest level of participants varied. The researcher always came to the lessons at least ten minutes early to see if PA5 needed help setting up for the lesson. One female participant always came in a couple minutes early; she seemed to look forward to each lesson. The rest of the participants usually came slowly in, closer to the start time, usually around 7:00 P.M. PA5 would explain how to involve children in the cooking process at home, but most of the participants told her that they did not have children. This was established after asking the participants to raise their hands if they prepared meals for children at home. Only one or two hands were raised. The audience, while respectful, was not an ideal target due to the fact that in each class, it was mostly men with no children.

Code B: Learning Environment

The learning environment for this particular "Food Talk" program was suitable for the target audience. It was located in a Salvation Army communal kitchen and all participants were currently living at the center. However, the room that the lessons were taught in was usually not clean, with old food on the tables and the floor not swept. PA5 had multiple props to use during

each lesson, which she did not have adequate room for. The researcher noted it would be beneficial for her to only have one prop that has multiple uses rather than various items that seemed to distract her. From the researcher's notes:

The room we are in is really dirty, I had to throw away old McDonald's fries that were just lying on the table. The participants don't seem to mind the mess; it is probably the last thing they are worried about. They don't even seem to acknowledge that they are in a dirty room. If I were a participant in a cooking class, I would be grossed out if the room we were cooking in was dirty, but they don't seem bothered in the slightest.

Something that surprised the researcher during the lessons was learning that the audience members in attendance, regardless of turnover from week to week, were not allowed to cook for themselves. PA5 asked the audience if they had tried any of the recipes from the previous week's lesson. One woman sheepishly told her they weren't allowed to cook or be in the kitchen while staying at the agency. The participants were only allowed to use a small community microwave. PA5 paused, then said "Oh, I understand." She was very accepting and never seemed to judge the participants because of their environment or circumstances. PA5 simply went on and continued the lesson without skipping a beat.

Applicability of the program was a reoccurring "roadblock" throughout data analysis. While the audience in each lesson was respectful, it seemed evident that most did not have an interest in cooking lessons for families or even have children of their own. Additionally, having a nutrition education program for an audience that is not permitted to cook for themselves seemed somewhat counterproductive to the goal of EFNEP programs.

Theme 3: Inconsistent Membership

The third theme that arose from the program observation process was “inconsistent membership”. PA5 and the agency coordinator seemed to get along well. The agency coordinator was kind and often sat in with the participants during the lessons. However, the agency coordinator frequently had to cancel “Food Talk” lesson dates due to the participants having other obligations at the meeting location as required by the Salvation Army. This led to the seven sessions not happening each week, but rather being spread out over three months. The agency coordinator would tell PA5 if a meeting needed to be cancelled the week before. Consequently, this led to the majority of the participants having to leave the EFNEP program before completion. The codes that make up the final theme include support for program and transparency.

Code A: Support for Program

The host agency at the Salvation Army for the “Food Talk” program was supportive. All clients who stayed at the agency were required to come to lessons. At the beginning of the third lesson, the agency coordinator exclaimed, “I have to fight ya’ll tooth and nail to do this.” She seemed to want the participants to be involved more than the participants did themselves. PA5 seemed to ignore the comment, as did the participants. The agency was accommodating and appreciative of the program assistant and the EFNEP program in general. While the support for EFNEP was evident, communication about needs for the program such as having the same participants for all sessions and having a target audience of low-income families with children seemed to lack. From the researcher’s notes:

At around 6:55 P.M. right before the lesson starts, I overhear the agency coordinator and a couple of participants talking and laughing about how she has

to force them to do anything. After the agency worker jokingly got on to the participants for not wanting to participate, one participant says, “Sooner we do this, the sooner we will be done.” Once the lesson started, that particular participant was respectful and listening, but did not participate in anything the entire class.

Code B: Transparency

Lastly, the code of transparency with the agency was identified through the program observation process. It seemed that PA5 and the agency coordinator had set up dates prior to the first lesson, and the participants would be mostly the same throughout the program. However, due to the agency rescheduling meeting dates multiple times, the majority of participants were not able to complete the program due to leaving the Salvation Army. At the EFNEP graduation during the last lesson, only two male participants were left out of the original twenty. Most of the participants in the last session were confused because it was their first time being in a lesson.

From the researcher’s notes:

During the last meeting, I felt disheartened when I heard one man ask, “what is this class?” PA5 then had to explain EFNEP graduation and how the participants are getting a cookbook for completing all seven sessions. I felt bad for PA5, because it seemed that she had put so much effort in teaching this program yet hardly anyone would get to experience the full effects of it.

Inconsistent membership throughout the “Food Talk” program was a major theme in the program observation portion of this study. While the host agency for the “Food Talk” program was very supportive of the program, the researcher observed that there seemed to be a lack of transparency between the PA5 and agency worker. This resulted in the majority of participants’ in

the particular “Food Talk” program not getting the opportunity to complete the program or “graduate.” For effective engagement to take place in communities through EFNEP programs, there needs to be clear communication with agencies.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research Objective and Research Questions

The intent of this project is to critically examine university engagement specifically through the Extension organization using EFNEP as an entry point. The purpose of this study is to delve into engagement practices used by both EFNEP administrators and program assistants utilizing qualitative research methods. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What does effective engagement look like from the perspectives of EFNEP administration?
2. What does effective engagement look like from the perspectives of EFNEP program assistants?
3. What communication and engagement methods are used in EFNEP programs?

Summary

EFNEP Administration

Through in-depth interviews, EFNEP administrators all expressed the importance of non-traditional lessons for EFNEP audiences in regard to creating effective engagement. EFNEP administrators felt that the “Food Talk” interactive curriculum was an effective way to reach audiences due to its informal nature and culturally unique approach to nutrition education.

EFNEP administrators described feelings of dissatisfaction that they could not engage with certain audiences due to federal regulations of EFNEP programming. They felt that the expansion of EFNEP services to current unreached audiences could improve engagement efforts with local communities. The administrators felt that establishing agency buy-in was extremely

important for EFNEP programs. They also expressed that participant investment or lack thereof could be improved by furthering communication efforts in understanding their audiences' needs.

EFNEP Program Assistants

According to EFNEP program assistants, in order to practice effective engagement in EFNEP programs, there needs to be a concentrated effort in assessing the needs of a complex target audience. Program assistants suggested the utilization of more diverse audiences, continuation of "Food Talk" curriculum, and the reduction in number of "Food Talk" demonstrations participants are required to attend in order to graduate the program could increase EFNEP's impact on communities.

EFNEP program assistants expressed that engaging with their audience required varied methods due to the fact that they were serving a unique and complex target audience of low income families with children. Obstacles in engagement elaborated on by program assistants included increasing program advertising to further serve communities, building relationships with agency partners, and understanding participant barriers.

Program Observation

Applicability of the "Food Talk" program was a reoccurring theme throughout data analysis. While the audience in each lesson was respectful, it seemed evident that most participants did not have an interest in cooking lessons for families. Further, most participants did not have children of their own and, therefore, did not fulfill the target audience for the program.

A nutrition education program for an audience that is not permitted to cook for themselves seemed counterproductive to the goal of EFNEP programs. Lastly, inconsistent membership was a major theme in the program observation portion of this study. While the host

agency for the “Food Talk” program was very supportive of the program, there seemed to be a lack of transparency between the program assistant and agency worker, which led to the program only having two graduates.

Conclusions

The critical examination of EFNEP administration and program assistants’ engagement and communication efforts is essential for an improved social good, which is exactly a subsidiary goal of improving nutrition among low-income families. Consequently, EFNEP programs have the potential to reduce poverty, food insecurity, and hunger in the United States. To achieve this potential, it is necessary to go beyond traditional methods of research—which include cost-benefit analysis, evaluation of staff, food insecurity, methods of evaluation, or on race-specific audiences, among others (NIFA, n.d.)—and consider more critically the interconnectedness of complex obstacles. With this in mind, it is important to recognize that no knowledge is concrete and it can always be questioned and improved. While there are multiple methods to employ the scholarship of engagement in communities, it is important to recognize that these practices are not exclusive and it would be beneficial for new engagement methods to be introduced. Such scholarship is essential to Extension and its overarching goal to provide research-based information to local communities.

From data collection measures of interviews with EFNEP program assistants and administration, it can be inferred that there is a strong desire and significant opportunity for EFNEP programs to reach new audiences, often readily situated among those targeted by the program itself. However, federal funding parameters prohibit formal involvement of such audiences. There is also a desire to utilize more communication and engagement practices, but an uncertainty as what such alternative practices could look like.

The second method of data collection utilized in this study, program observation, helped the researcher in actually witnessing first-hand engagement and communication methods utilized in EFNEP programs. From this study, the importance of evaluating if Extension personnel can effectively practice engagement through EFNEP programs has the opportunity to add to the existing qualitative studies in this academic area. As part of the Extension service, EFNEP professionals must continually strive to provide effective engagement practices to the communities they serve.

Even with strong desires to improve program delivery, access traditional audiences, and negotiate varying degrees of engagement practices, there is significant room for improvement in regard to EFNEP engagement. There is a need to critically examine the modes of engagement that organizations are often so bound to in federal programming, comparing between that which works in theory and what actually does in practice. This is especially necessary as federal mandates and funding guidelines determine EFNEP parameters and structure of the program. Therefore, the following recommendations using critical theoretical frame of reference begin to potentially address EFNEP obstacles and challenges and how they can be effectively addressed.

Recommendations

In Prasad's application of critical theory (2005), communicative action and systematically distorted communication very much has a place in formulating recommendations for this study. Therefore, if human tendency is to communication for genuine consensus, yet miscommunication (and, in this case, ineffective engagement practices) takes place, leading to ineffective connection with and transfer of information to low-income communities. The researcher then argues for a valid critique of current program efforts and a consideration for alternatives. To do this, there is first the premise that Extension's value is rooted in engagement

with communities. To effectively engage with various audiences, there must be a commitment to constantly measure and research best engagement practices. A deeper understanding of how Extension personnel engage with their audience is important to determine if programs are effective and serving their purpose to provide useful, research-based information to local communities. Therefore, the researcher proposes the following recommendations for future EFNEP administration and program assistants to consider.

EFNEP personnel are directed to lead programs for groups that meet certain criteria: low-income families with children. From interviews and program observation, it appears that there is an apparent struggle to access these individuals. For this target audience to be more tapped into, several EFNEP personnel identified the need to canvas the community and build relationships with potential partner agencies. A possible solution of partnering with other Extension programs such as 4-H could help bring more awareness of EFNEP programs. For example, low-income parents could attend the EFNEP “Food Talk” program while their children are being taught 4-H nutrition programming afterschool. Through this partnership, transportation and childcare could be handled in a more efficient manner while also promoting other Extension programs.

From a critical standpoint, another question begs to be asked in regard to EFNEP engagement. Are EFNEP program assistants set up to be successful? Through data analysis of engagement and communication through EFNEP programs, the answer is no. For EFNEP program assistants to reach their full potential, it is important for EFNEP administration to support them through partnering with agencies that can accommodate an audience that fits the criteria of low-income families with children. Inappropriate audiences for “Food Talk” lessons may lead to program assistants experiencing feelings of failure due to not having the resources to

accommodate an audience other than the aforementioned target audience. Having an appropriate audience may help to ensure that program assistants are using their time and resources wisely.

EFNEP administration could also offer enhanced training to program assistants on how to communicate effectively with low-income audiences. Suggestions on future program assistant training could be how to make “Food Talk” lessons more applicable and unique to their specific audience. In addition, training on tips on keeping retention through “Food Talk” lessons are highly recommended to increase graduation rates. Training for program assistants should also include how to work around transportation issues of program participants.

Lastly, EFNEP administration should empower program assistants to reach out to current unserved audiences. Program assistants could be permitted to attend health fairs, church events and various community outreach programs to spread the word of EFNEP services. This could potentially make program assistants feel that they have more power to provide engagement through their role in the EFNEP program. For effective engagement to occur through EFNEP programs, it is imperative for program assistants to be able to reach their full potential through program delivery.

Future studies should include increased numbers of EFNEP personnel to provide a more accurate representation of their experiences. In addition, future research should also include program participants’ views on effective engagement in addition to EFNEP program assistant and administration perspectives. Lastly, a study should be conducted to include perceptions of EFNEP on behalf of partnering agencies to understand on a deeper level how EFNEP is viewed from outside groups.

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APPENDIX A

Permission Letter from Dr. Moore

Dear Dr. Moore,

I hope you have been well since we last spoke. Dr. Borron and I have been working to nail down final details for my EFNEP project, specifically as it relates to getting the IRB proposal submitted. I just wanted to check in to make sure that it was still acceptable to conduct interviews at the EFNEP conference in April.

In addition, and as I put necessary documents together for the IRB, what is going to be the best way to recruit volunteers for this interview? Can I draft an email that will go out to all the program assistants via a listserv? If so, is this something I provide to you and you send out on my behalf, or is this something I can access?

It is also my intent on observing a program assistant deliver a six-week program in its entirety.

Can you advise me on the best way to go about recruiting that individual? Do you have someone in mind? Is this something I can include in my recruitment message for the interviews?

Lastly, would you like to see the list of questions that I intend to use as an interview guide with the program assistants?

I appreciate your support and guidance in this project. It's coming together quite well, and I look forward to getting started on the data collection.

Lauren Morris

University of Georgia Graduate Research Assistant

Carla J Moore

Hi, Lauren:

Given that the schedule for the conference is nearly finalized, it will be difficult to block out enough time to conduct your interviews at the conference. However, we could arrange for you to introduce yourself and your project during one of the meals. I can send a follow-up email on your behalf after the conference to recruit volunteers. You could then travel to monthly PA training meetings to conduct your interviews with smaller groups. Alternatively, we could work you into the schedule for our next PA training, which will take place November 15 and 18, depending on your timeline for completion.

I can easily arrange for you to observe a full series of the Food Talk programming. Again, I just need to know your timeline. Please send along the questions that you intend to ask of the PAs as well as any additional questions you have for me. I am happy to accommodate you in any way that I can.

Best,

Carla

APPENDIX B

In Person Recruitment Methods

Principal Investigator: Dr. Abigail Borron

aborron@uga.edu

706-542-7102

Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication

University of Georgia

Co-Investigator: Lauren Morris

Laurenm2@uga.edu

706-254-3098

Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication

University of Georgia

Hello, my name is Lauren Morris. I am a master's student in the department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication at the University of Georgia. I have developed a thesis project in which the research is to critically examine engagement practices within EFNEP under the direction of Principal Investigator Dr. Abigail Borron. I am in the midst of data collection for my research study, which includes in-depth interviews. I believe your input could contribute greatly with the growth and development of the scholarship of engagement as it relates to underserved audiences. Therefore, if you are willing, I would like to interview you for my research. The interview should last no longer than 45 minutes.

In addition, I would also like to observe an EFNEP Food Talk program from beginning to end to observe the engagement between the program assistant and the participants in the

program. If this is something you would be willing to participate in, please contact me at laurenm2@uga.edu.

EFNEP program assistants' inclusion criteria is each participant must be of or older than 18 years of age and must be a current EFNEP employee.

EFNEP administration criteria is each participant must be of or older than 18 years of age and must be a current EFNEP employee.

EFNEP program assistants and administration may experience benefits in better understanding engagement and communication practices when conducting EFNEP programs. In addition, both groups may experience satisfaction in having their opinions voiced as well as improving engagement and communication practices for future EFNEP programs. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study.

Time required of subjects will either be a one-time 45-minute interview or allowing the co-investigator Lauren Morris to use participant observation methods in a 6 week "Food Talk" program. Location of the research will be at the participants' county extension offices across the state of Georgia.

For more information, please contact Dr. Abigail Borron, at aborron@uga.edu or Lauren Morris at laurenm2@uga.edu

Thank you for your consideration.

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Letter to Administration

Dear _____,

I am writing to you in your capacity as an administrator with the Expanded Food Nutrition and Education Program. Currently, I am working on my thesis titled: Critically Examining Engagement Practices within EFNEP under the direction of Principal Investigator Dr. Abigail Borron. I am in the midst of data collection for my research study, which includes in-depth interviews. I believe your input could contribute greatly with the growth and development of the scholarship of engagement as it relates to underserved audiences. Therefore, I would like to interview you for my research.

I am in the process of interviewing program assistants and administrators from both EFNEP and UGA Extension for the purposes of exploring their views and experiences of engagement with underserved audiences. My interview with you will contain the following general questions:

How would you describe your target audience? What does it mean to have effective engagement through EFNEP programs? What do you consider should be kept the same in EFNEP programs? How do you think EFNEP programs could be improved? Do you have any suggestions for improving communication with EFNEP audiences? What, if any, obstacles do you face in delivering effective programming? How do you think EFNEP could further serve communities?

I will record the interview using a digital recorder. However, your identity will remain confidential. Your involvement in this study is strictly voluntary and, if you encounter questions during the interview that you do not wish to answer, you are not obligated to do so. Scheduling a time and place for the interview will be at your discretion, as it is my goal that I remain as flexible as possible for the sake of your busy schedule.

Your thoughts and experiences are valuable. Therefore, I hope are willing to participate. If you have any questions, and if you would like to accept my invitation for the interview, please do not hesitate to reply to this email or call me at 706-254-3098

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Lauren Morris

Graduate Research Assistant

Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication

University of Georgia

APPENDIX D

Recruitment Letter to Program Assistants

Dear _____,

I am writing to you in your capacity as a Program Assistant with the Expanded Food Nutrition and Education Program. Currently, I am working on my thesis titled: Critically Examining Engagement Practices within EFNEP under the direction of Principal Investigator Dr. Abigail Borron. I am in the midst of data collection for my research study, which includes in-depth interviews. I believe your input could contribute greatly with the growth and development of the scholarship of engagement as it relates to underserved audiences. Therefore, I would like to interview you for my research. The interview should last no longer than 45 minutes. I would also like to observe an EFNEP Food Talk program from beginning to end to observe the engagement between yourself and the participants in the program.

I am in the process of interviewing program assistants and administrators from both EFNEP and UGA Extension for the purposes of exploring their views and experiences of engagement with underserved audiences. My interview with you will contain the following general questions: How would you describe your target audience? What does it mean to have effective engagement through EFNEP programs? What do you consider should be kept the same in EFNEP programs? How do you think EFNEP programs could be improved? Do you have any suggestions for

improving communication with EFNEP audiences? What, if any, obstacles do you face in delivering effective programming? How do you think EFNEP could further serve communities?

I will record the interview using a digital recorder. However, your identity will remain confidential. Your involvement in this study is strictly voluntary and, if you encounter questions during the interview that you do not wish to answer, you are not obligated to do so. Scheduling a time and place for the interview will be at your discretion, as it is my goal that I remain as flexible as possible for the sake of your busy schedule.

Your thoughts and experiences are valuable. Therefore, I hope are willing to participate. If you have any questions, and if you would like to accept my invitation for the interview, please do not hesitate to reply to this email or call me at 706-254-3098

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Lauren Morris

Graduate Research Assistant

Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication

University of Georgia

APPENDIX E

Data Collection Instruments

Interview Questions used in the study include:

- How would you describe your target audience?
- What does it mean to have effective engagement through EFNEP programs?
- What do you consider should be kept the same in EFNEP programs?
- How do you think EFNEP programs could be improved?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving communication with EFNEP audiences?
- What, if any, obstacles keep participants from coming to programs or finishing programs?
- What obstacles do you face in delivering effective programming?
- How do you think EFNEP could further serve communities?

In addition to interviews, procedures will also include observations of an EFNEP "Food Talk" program from beginning to end and observe the engagement between a program assistant and participants in the program. Field notes will be taken to help assess:

- Program assistant's delivery of the program
- His/her engagement practices program participants
- Resulting interest level of the program participants
- Learning environment and atmosphere of the program

APPENDIX F

Interview Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM

Critically Examining Engagement Practices Within EFNEP, Interview with EFNEP Program Assistants and Administrators

Researcher's Statement

I am/We are asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Abigail Borron
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and
Communication
Phone number: 706-542-7102
Email: aborron@uga.edu

Co-Investigator: Lauren Morris
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and
Communication
Phone number: 706-254-3098
Email: laurenm2@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study

The intent of this project is to critically examine University engagement specifically through the Cooperative Extension system using EFNEP as an entry point. The purpose of this study is to delve into engagement practices used by both EFNEP administrators and program assistants.

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to ...

- Participate in a 45-minute interview.
- Procedures will include a one on one interview by the researcher with program assistants and administrators.

- Interview questions include:
 How would you describe your target audience?
 What does it mean to have effective engagement through EFNEP programs?
 What do you consider should be kept the same in EFNEP programs?
 How do you think EFNEP programs could be improved?
 Do you have any suggestions for improving communication with EFNEP audiences?
 What, if any, obstacles do you face in delivering effective programming?
 How do you think EFNEP could further serve communities?

Risks and discomforts

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study.

Benefits

- EFNEP program assistants and administration may experience benefits in better understanding engagement and communication practices when conducting EFNEP programs. In addition, both groups may experience satisfaction in having their opinions voiced as well as improving engagement and communication practices for future EFNEP programs.
- This study aims to critically examine EFNEP engagement and communication practices. This study could potentially contribute to scholarly research on engagement and Cooperative Extension through EFNEP program delivery.

Audio/Video Recording

All transcriptions will be stored on a password protected device, and once all transcriptions have been coded and common themes have been identified, the audio files will be deleted. The final document will contain themes supported by quotes of participants in the study.

Privacy/Confidentiality

Interviews will be recorded on audio files. Participants will be identified as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. The identifiers will be kept during the coding process of the study. Once common themes have been identified from transcriptions, the identifiers will no longer be necessary. The identifiers will serve to keep order of the transcriptions while coding is taking place. Identifiers will also be useful when supporting the themes in the final written document for this study. All transcriptions will be stored on a password protected device, and once all transcriptions have been coded and common themes have been identified, the audio files will be deleted. The final document will contain themes supported by quotes of participants in the study.

Taking part is voluntary

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision to participate or not will have no bearing on your employment or evaluations.

If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

If you have questions

The main researcher conducting this study is Dr. Abigail Borron, professor, and co-researcher is Lauren Morris, graduate student, at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Lauren Morris at laurenm2@uga.edu or at 706-254-3098. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

APPENDIX G

Program Observation Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM

Critically Examining Engagement Practices Within EFNEP, Participant Observation with Program Assistant

Researcher's Statement

I am/We are asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Abigail Borron
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and
Communication
Phone number: 706-542-7102
Email: aborron@uga.edu

Co-Investigator: Lauren Morris
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and
Communication
Phone number: 706-254-3098
Email: laurenm2@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study

The intent of this project is to critically examine University engagement specifically through the Cooperative Extension system using EFNEP as an entry point. The purpose of this study is to delve into engagement practices used by both EFNEP administrators and program assistants.

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to ...

- Be observed by the co-investigator during an EFNEP "Food Talk" program from beginning to end (6 meetings total)
- The co-investigator will be observing the engagement between a program assistant and participants in the program. Field notes will be taken to help assess:
 - Program assistant's delivery of the program

- His/her engagement practices program participants
- Resulting interest level of the program participants
- Learning environment and atmosphere of the program

Risks and discomforts

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study.

Benefits

- EFNEP program assistants and administration may experience benefits in better understanding engagement and communication practices when conducting EFNEP programs. In addition, both groups may experience satisfaction in having their opinions voiced as well as improving engagement and communication practices for future EFNEP programs.
- This study aims to critically examine EFNEP engagement and communication practices. This study could potentially contribute to scholarly research on engagement and Cooperative Extension through EFNEP program delivery.

Audio/Video Recording

All transcriptions will be stored on a password protected device, and once all transcriptions have been coded and common themes have been identified, the audio files will be deleted. The final document will contain themes supported by quotes of participants in the study.

Privacy/Confidentiality

Interviews will be recorded on audio files. Participants will be identified as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. The identifiers will be kept during the coding process of the study. Once common themes have been identified from transcriptions, the identifiers will no longer be necessary. The identifiers will serve to keep order of the transcriptions while coding is taking place. Identifiers will also be useful when supporting the themes in the final written document for this study. All transcriptions will be stored on a password protected device, and once all transcriptions have been coded and common themes have been identified, the audio files will be deleted. The final document will contain themes supported by quotes of participants in the study.

Taking part is voluntary

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision to participate or not will have no bearing on your employment or evaluations.

If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

If you have questions

The main researcher conducting this study is Dr. Abigail Borron, professor, and co-researcher is Lauren Morris, graduate student, at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Lauren Morris at laurenm2@uga.edu or at 706-254-3098. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research

participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

APPENDIX H

Sample Coding from Program Assistant Interviews

-How would you describe your target audience?

P2: Low income families with children

P3: Low income people, anyone that utilizes government assistance

P4: Drug and alcohol rehab centers, Headstart programs, Low income single mothers

P6: Families that need improvement in their nutritional base

P7: Parents or grandparents raising children, receiving public assistance

P10: A group of low-income individuals with children

AXIAL CODING: Low-income families with children receiving government assistance

-What does it mean to have effective engagement through EFNEP programs?

P2: Engage by getting close to clients, engage by offering incentives such as Cookbook, accommodate to needs of audience, engage in and out of the classroom, listen to client's needs

P3: Teaching people they can overcome their circumstances through nutrition education, being professional, providing personal examples (husband's death due to bad nutrition), interact with participants, make lessons fun

P4: Engage by having fun with clients, develop rapport with participants, build relationships with agency partners, make lessons applicable to particular audiences

P6: Establish rapport with audiences, assess needs of individual groups, success stories, audience participation, have fun with audiences, providing opportunity and sense of accomplishment

P7: Engage by getting feedback from recipes, using icebreakers to interact with audience, use voice by choice, want the atmosphere in the room to be like friends getting together for a meal (welcoming atmosphere)

P10: Dress appropriately, be personable, smile, let them know you care

AXIAL CODING: Provide effective engagement through nutrition education, maintaining a professional appearance, providing personal examples, good interaction and rapport with participants, make lessons fun

-What do you consider should be kept the same in EFNEP programs?

P2: Content of sessions

P3: Content of program

P4: Free program services, content of program, participant success stories

P6: Graduations (celebrate clients for achieving a goal), communication with participants, being able to reach people who are in need

P7: Keep recipe demonstrations, keep food choice activities, keep the educational extenders

P10: Love learning from the participants, likes cooking, recipes are easy, curriculum is good

AXIAL CODING: Aspects of EFNEP that should be kept the same include the content of “Food Talk” sessions and services that reach people in need

APPENDIX I

Sample Coding from Administration Interviews

-How would you describe your target audience?

P1: Low income families with children, older youth 15-18

P5: Lower income families with children, receiving government benefits

P8: Low income families with children as well as receiving federal benefits, pregnant teens and older adolescents

P9: Low income, prepares meals for families, parents and grandparents, on health benefits

AXIAL CODING: Low-income with children, receiving government benefits

-What does it mean to have effective engagement through EFNEP programs?

P1: Engage by using indigenous peer educators, engage by assessing needs off audiences, engage by utilizing “Food Talk” curriculum

P5: Non-traditional classes to serve unique audiences, informal lessons, fun and interactive

P8: Targeting agencies to deliver programs to, maintaining contact throughout the series, contact beyond graduation-something to be worked on

P9: Provide examples of personal experience, use of educational extenders

AXIAL CODING: Effective engagement through EFNEP programs includes teaching non-traditional lessons, and making sessions fun and interactive for participants

-What do you consider should be kept the same in EFNEP programs?

P1: Peer educator model, recruitment through agencies

P5: Voice by Choice (voluntary participation), Food demonstrations, EFNEP has great materials (equipment and supplies), content of program, going to convenient locations for clients

P8: Food Talk curriculum, partnership with community agencies

P9: Food talk sessions, audience interaction, the graduation and certificate, overall satisfaction from program, educational extenders

AXIAL CODING: Content of program and educational extenders

-How do you think EFNEP programs could be improved?

P1: Number of classes, high dropout rates, outdated recipes

P5: Higher pay for program assistants, emphasis on getting program assistants formal education, more room for growth in program, difficulty in recruiting agencies

P8: Improve retention rates, better training for program assistants

P9: Allow more groups in besides low income, make target audience larger

AXIAL CODING: Improve retention rates

-Do you have any suggestions for improving communication with EFNEP audiences?

P1: Multiple levels of communication, communication between program assistants and agents, communication with agency partners, communication between programs assistants and participants, out of program contact, make sure all audiences are well trained and know roles

P5: Work with other organizations to keep communication with participants, partner with agencies, have transparency with agencies

P8: Improve EFNEP website, improve recognition of what EFNEP is to various audiences

P9: Maintain interaction with clients, tell personal experiences, make sessions your own, ask questions to audience, improve word of mouth communication to spread word of EFNEP programs

AXIAL CODING: Improve EFNEP visibility and recognition of program