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Time Allocation Changes for Family Life Extension Educators: The Impact of COVID-19

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COVID-19 has caused a shift in Extension educators' daily routines and a transition to virtual programming. This case study analyzed time logs and interview data of Extension educators hired by Utah State University to facilitate fatherhood education programming. Comparison data indicate less time was spent teaching and traveling while more time was spent managing technology and marketing, following restrictions imposed by COVID-19. Educators recommended that aspiring educators should be made aware of expectations for virtual teaching. They also stressed that supervisors should look for these skills and technological competence in future hiring. Implications for best practices for future programming are discussed.

Keywords: family life education, family life educators (FLEs), Extension, time allocation, virtual programming

Introduction

COVID-19 has forced Extension services to adjust and reevaluate normal operations (Jewkes et al., 2020) and how educational services are provided (Arnold & Rennekamp, 2020; Fawcett et al., 2020). The provision of family life education, which focuses on strengthening family relationships (Duncan & Goddard, 2017), has not been exempt from these changes. Family life education is traditionally offered outside of the formal education system in the form of in-person workshops and seminars (Allen, 2013). Due to social distancing regulations, these formats largely became unavailable at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study highlights the transition of the *Healthy Relationships Utah* initiative from in-person to virtual family life education programming, with a particular focus on the adjustments that family life educators (FLEs), initially hired to facilitate fatherhood education programs in face-to-face settings in both community and correctional environments, were required to make to their daily work routines in light of the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Healthy Relationships Utah's Transition to Virtual Family Life Education Programming

Utah State University Extension's *Healthy Relationships Utah* initiative facilitates grant-funded family life education, serving more than 70,000 adults and youth since 2012. Prior to restrictions imposed by COVID-19 in March 2020, workshops were offered in-person in high schools, state government offices, jails and prisons, and community agencies across the state. Various contracts and grants support workshops that cover a wide range of topics, including relationship enhancement, parenting, divorce, stepfamily development, and fatherhood education. Once restrictions were imposed, in-person workshops were prohibited per university policy and those of cooperating agencies. As a result, educational services were transitioned to virtual classrooms in April 2020. In virtual classrooms, participants were provided with the same programming, with the only difference being that workshops were facilitated through Zoom technology. Pivotal to this transition were the efforts of the FLEs who facilitated these programs. With the persistence of social distancing policies, learning about the experiences of these FLEs and the adjustments they made could help inform family life education programming moving forward (Higginbotham et al., 2023).

Method

Grant Description

This study focused on the experiences of nine FLEs hired to implement a multi-year fatherhood education grant funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Principal Investigator was an Extension Specialist with 15 years of experience administering family-life programming. Additional university and Extension employees with backgrounds in prevention science and family life education helped administer and supervise the project. Funding supported responsible fatherhood workshops for adult fathers throughout the state. During their first year of employment, FLEs were trained and certified to teach multiple curricula offered through eight hours of instruction in community and correctional settings.

Data and Sample

Activity logs were analyzed for all nine FLEs working on the fatherhood education grant. Activity log data reflected actual time allocations from 2019 and reported time allocations for summer 2020 after the onset of COVID-19. Qualitative data were collected through exit interviews of FLEs at the conclusion of the grant cycle, which ended in September 2020. Of the nine FLEs, five were male and four were female; five had earned a bachelor's degree, three had earned a graduate degree, and one had earned an associate's degree. On average, FLEs were 51 years of age.

Measures and Analysis

For this study, a mixed-methods approach was employed, applying best practices as proposed by Creswell (2013). In June 2019, FLEs logged their weekly activities in increments of quarter hours over ten working days. In September 2020, during their exit interviews, the same FLEs estimated their time allocations for the same activities after workshops transitioned to a virtual format (see Appendix A for exit interview questions). Activity categories included (a) teaching, (b) administrative, (c) professional development, (d) travel, (e) marketing, (f) planning, (g) equipment maintenance, and (h) miscellaneous activities.

During exit interviews, FLEs also responded to questions focusing on (a) how time allocations changed in the context of COVID-19, (b) what they believed aspiring FLEs should be informed of during the interview process regarding time allocation, and (c) what skills or attributes they believed supervisors should look for when hiring future FLEs. Interview data were analyzed through applied thematic analysis of the open-ended exit interview questions (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Emphasis was placed on the opinions of the FLEs and their views on best practices for the program moving forward. Thematic analysis was considered an appropriate analytical approach, as the major goal of the analysis was to find consistent patterns in participant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As part of the analysis, two coauthors who were well-versed in qualitative analysis reviewed the interview data separately for major themes. After separate reviews, coauthors then worked together to address any discrepancies in their thematic coding until a consensus was reached and strong interrater reliability was achieved (Gisev et al., 2013). Such methods allowed coauthors to identify the study's major themes (Guest et al., 2012).

Results

Time Allocation Differences

Differences in time allocations were calculated by subtracting 2020 time allocations from 2019 time allocations. Percent change in time allocations reflected how much more (or less) time was allocated in each category in 2020 (see Table 1). Teaching activities accounted for the greatest amount of time for both periods, followed by administrative and professional development activities. With the transition, travel time decreased by nearly 79%, while time spent marketing and planning more than doubled.

Table 1. Family Life Extension Educators Time Allocation Differences: 2019 vs. 2020

Activity	2019*	2020*	Change	% Change
Teaching	33.71	29.33	-4.38	-12.99
Administrative	25.84	18.78	-7.06	-27.32
Professional Development	13.88	16.22	2.34	16.86
Travel	10.71	2.28	-8.43	-78.71
Marketing	6.81	15.33	8.52	125.11
Planning	5.65	12.06	6.41	113.45
Equipment Maintenance	1.97	2.17	0.20	10.15
Miscellaneous	1.43	3.83	2.40	167.83
<i>Totals</i>	<i>100.00</i>	<i>100.00</i>	--	--

Note. *Numbers reflect the percent of time spent during the time period.

Exit Interviews

Change in Time Allocation

FLEs reported multiple examples of time allocation changes resulting from the transition. The most frequently identified themes were related to travel and technology challenges. As one FLE mentioned, “Time allocations changed dramatically with almost zero travel and increased classes, additional curriculum training, and more collaboration with other educators with Zoom meetings and strategy meetings.” FLEs expressing technology challenges commented, “More time spent figuring out Zoom: how it works and how to teach with it,” and “Zooms and practicing Zooms. Prepping to make classes online successful. Teaching through Zoom was more mentally exhausting.”

Informing Aspiring FLEs

When asked what they thought aspiring FLEs should be informed of during the interview process regarding time allocation, FLEs discussed matters related to virtual teaching and the flexibility required of FLEs. While discussing virtual teaching, one FLE stated, “Teaching online is not the same as doing it face-to-face.” When discussing the flexibility FLEs must have, another FLE warned: “Expect plenty of unexpected! Reach out often to peer educators. A willingness to learn from others.”

Skills/Attributes of Future FLEs

FLEs offered a wide range of answers when discussing what skills or attributes they believed supervisors should look for in future hires. Several FLEs discussed the importance of being flexible, offering statements such as, “Flexibility, ability to think on their feet.” Two others discussed the importance of being technologically savvy, with one FLE noting that when bringing on new FLEs, supervisors should place “higher emphasis on technology skills and background.” The same FLE continued by saying,

Zoom, effective use of PowerPoint and other online methods, and networks, etc., require some knowledge. The ability to speak to a camera and to hold an audience while online, with a good voice, is important. The new teaching is different than standing in front of a room.

Discussion

COVID-19 has forced university Extension services to make adjustments to how educational services and workshops are provided. This study highlighted the transition of the *Healthy Relationship Utah* initiative from in-person to virtual family life education programming. A specific emphasis was placed on the adjustments that FLEs hired to facilitate these workshops in person had to make to their daily routines in order to continue to provide quality programming. Through comparisons of activity logs, results indicated that travel time was significantly reduced, as were administrative activities. Another notable finding was the decrease in teaching, which was reduced by 13% after the transition to virtual programming. Conversely, time allocations for marketing and planning, two activities that each accounted for less than 10% of the FLE's time prior to the onset of COVID-19, more than doubled. Rapid transition from in-person to virtual workshops may not be possible for all grants, but the implications of this study suggest it is not impossible. This study's findings may serve as a case study for Extension planners regarding the possible changes that can take place when program delivery is forced to adapt, and alternative formats must be offered to meet programmatic and contractual demands.

Exit interview data reflected the challenges and changes brought on by the transition, especially in terms of the adjustments FLEs were required to make in order to facilitate virtual programming. Perhaps most telling for the implications for future family life education programming were their thoughts on what aspiring FLEs should expect and what supervisors should look for in potential hires. Being technologically savvy and flexible were qualities that FLEs considered crucial for the success of aspiring FLEs, as several FLEs saw virtual classrooms as something that might become a permanent fixture in the provision of family life education. This sentiment was summed up in the exit interview of one FLE who stated,

Now that the use of Zoom, staying and working from home, and other COVID-19 realities have normalized, I think it is much easier to discuss the impact with people in the interview process. If they have kids at home who will be present during classes, there should be a discussion about how that can be a challenge at times. To me, the lack of human contact and inability to go into the jail or prison is a big downside so that reality needs to be hit head on (some will be happy about that fact). On the other hand, AP&P [Adult Probation and Parole] classes may be better online in some respects and not having to buy food is a big plus. Still, teaching online is not the same as doing it face-to-face. It feels different but can still be good. I think there just has to be the real discussion that for now this is where we are—we teach remotely most of the time. When we can go

live we will and you will be able to really dive in. I think given the realities of the moment, people will simply be more responsive to what is. Having said all of that—I had many amazing experiences online and really got to know and feel the people in class. There is still a lot of good there.

This statement, as well as other findings from the analysis of exit interview data, may be helpful to Extension and family life education programs that are considering transitions to more virtual or dual-delivery modalities (i.e., in-person and virtual). In particular, a specific lesson learned is the importance of collaborating amongst team members and sharing best practices of what works in times of crisis or change. Leaning on and learning from other educators and participating in relevant and timely professional development meetings was crucial to adapting to new circumstances. Likewise, it will be important to consider scheduling and technology issues when transitioning to a virtual or dual-delivery model. Access to the audience and program participants will also be an important consideration. Access was a specific challenge for the FLEs in this study, who had to account for the residential status of participants (i.e., community-dwelling versus incarcerated fathers). Certainly, this is an ongoing challenge for Extension services that have historically sought to serve harder-to-reach and isolated populations. The recruitment and hiring of prospective FLEs who can be versatile and adapt to different delivery methods could prove beneficial if and when Extension programs need to quickly pivot in the future due to another health crisis or other shifts in approaches to program delivery. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic, although challenging and inconvenient, demonstrated the ability of Extension services to pivot, adapt, and respond quickly by learning and adopting new technology to offer programming in alternative formats. This is an important consideration for programs wishing to explore dual-delivery methods further.

Conclusion

The change in time allocations and the statements offered by the FLEs illustrate the responsibility that Extension services have to respond quickly in times of crisis (Fawcett et al., 2020). Results of this case study provide evidence demonstrating that Extension services are capable of doing just that, as FLEs from the *Healthy Relationships Utah* initiative were able to transition to virtual programming in approximately one month. There is still much that needs to be learned in terms of participant outcomes and best practices for virtual family life education. However, what is becoming increasingly clear is that flexibility will be crucial to the future success of family life education offered through Extension.

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Appendix A: Exit Interview Questions

- 1) *How did your time allocation change in the context of COVID-19?*
- 2) *In terms of time allocation (post COVID-19), what should we tell potential employees during the application/interview process about what they should expect?*
- 3) *In light of how time is allocated, as we hire new employees, are there specific attributes or skills that we should look for?*