

***Paraprofessional Core Competencies Teleconference/PowerPoint Training***  
**January 2006**

**By Meredith Pearson, Susan Baker, and Helen Chipman**

**Note: These remarks correspond with the “Core Competencies for FSNE Paraprofessionals” PowerPoint slide presentation and associated training evaluation form (January 2006), also on this website.**

**Title** (slide 1)

A national teleconference training on the use of recently developed core competencies for paraprofessional staff was offered to state FSNE coordinators within the land-grant university system in January 2006. Sixty-six individuals, representing 37 states – primarily coordinators and other state level staff – participated in the 90 minute training sessions.

**Acknowledgements** (slide 2)

Drs. Meredith Pearson and Susan Baker were commissioned to develop core competencies for paraprofessional staff who conduct FSNE through the land-grant universities. Dr. Helen Chipman provided national leadership and oversight.

Guidelines for planning and implementing the project were to:

- develop the core competencies with national, regional, state, and county input
- validate the list of core competencies with FSNE paraprofessional input
- use a scholarly approach to project methodology
- provide a national training on the core competencies

**Agenda** (slide 3)

Today, we will summarize the project methodology, briefly review the core competencies, and share how they can be used in FSNE. We will have some time for discussion and will close with future plans.

**Methodology** (slides 4, 5, and 6)

The literature review focused on the current use of core competencies in Extension and the **Developing A Curriculum** (DACUM) process, which is a group process often used to identify the key duties and tasks associated with a specific job. Also reviewed were resources developed by other agencies, organizations, and disciplines.

The web-based survey of state program coordinators was designed to collect data on the current use of core competencies and called for nominations of Extension professionals to serve on a panel of experts for this project.

Ten nominees were selected for a representative expert panel. Along with professional expertise, urban/rural programming, years of Extension employment, FSNE/EFNEP experience, and

1890's institutional involvement were considered to reflect the diversity of programming through which paraprofessional staff serve.

The panel met in Kansas City, Missouri for a three-day meeting to begin the modified DACUM process and create the initial draft of competencies.

Panel members identified outstanding FSNE nutrition paraprofessionals to review the initial draft. Paraprofessionals were selected according to urban/rural geographic area, adult/youth programming responsibilities, and limited/long-term experience in FSNE.

Nine conference calls were held, with 6-10 paraprofessionals participating in each. Panel members introduced the contractors to the paraprofessional staff and then exited the call. The contractors and paraprofessionals then discussed each competency for clarity, accuracy, and appropriateness with respect to their responsibilities. Paraprofessional staff were also asked to identify other aspects of their position that might not have been captured.

Revisions were made to the themes, number, and organization of competencies based on paraprofessional input.

### **Core Competency Themes** (slides 7, 8, and 9)

The next three slides list the themes, or headings under which the competencies were grouped. The specific competencies that fall under these themes can be accessed at [\[hyperlink\]](#).

### **Potential Training Themes** (slides 10 and 11)

In some case the contractors were able to change the wording of specific core competencies for better understanding by paraprofessionals. In other situations, these terms were considered important to paraprofessional understanding. The terms on the next two slides are given for consideration in future training of FSNE paraprofessional staff.

### **Potential Uses** (slides 12, 13 and 14)

State program administrators/coordinators may find a number of uses for these competencies. The next few slides provide a few examples for consideration, with respect to performance management, training, and hiring processes.

### **Program Value** (slide 15)

#### Why this project was considered important at this time

In 2003 and 2004 the FSNE Program Development Team identified paraprofessional staff development as one of several priorities that needed to be addressed nationally. Similar feedback was shared by state coordinators during site visits and informal conversations with Dr. Chipman. State coordinators were concerned about staff understanding roles, responsibilities, and boundaries, particularly given the requirements attached to this source of funding. With such feedback Dr. Chipman determined to initiate this project in January 2005.

### Building on Previous Work – Expectations

Lessons learned from the development of professional state coordinator competencies were used in determining the methodology for this project. Additionally, models, research, and resources from the land-grant university system, CSREES, other agencies, and disciplines other than nutrition were expected to guide this work. In most cases, such resources focused on teaching content and delivery, and did not capture the full essence of the position.

The final product was also expected to have practical application and some form of interactive training was to be provided, according to what the project budget would allow.

### Provide foundation for FSNE paraprofessional management - Application

Importantly, the competencies needed to fit across paraprofessional skill levels. Initial thinking was that separate competencies might be developed for new staff, staff with one year of experience, and staff who had been employed longer. What ultimately made more sense was to create a broad set of competencies from which states could select, depending on the paraprofessionals' specific levels of expertise and the organizational dynamics of the institution. More experienced staff would be expected to demonstrate a higher level of competency and/or be competent in a greater number of areas (e.g. to have increased depth and breadth of skill sets for each competency theme).

Flexibility was also critical. Some states have several layers of staff, and responsibilities are shared or more narrowly defined. In other states, paraprofessional staff are fewer in number and their responsibilities are broader in scope. In all cases, these competencies needed to capture the bigger picture of how paraprofessional responsibilities fit with the overall contract requirements, university structure and priorities, and partner relationships and expectations.

States also vary as to resources available for creating staff development materials. Some have put considerable effort into staff development; others have not. These competencies may either fill a void, or complement existing resources.

Response to the evaluation form included with this training and electronic feedback over the next several months will provide insight as to how these competencies are being applied. For example, in some states personnel management is handled by state coordinators or program supervisors, whereas in other cases, other individuals in the university have that responsibility. Implementation of these competencies, likely will be handled differently in these two types of situations. By gathering information on the adoption of these competencies, we can share lessons learned and best practices more systematically.

### National Expectations – Use of these core competencies in FSNE is not mandatory

These competencies were developed for paraprofessionals in the land-grant university system. CSREES' relationship with the universities is supportive and cooperative; therefore, use of these competencies is not mandatory. That said, from a personal perspective, when I (Helen) asked the contractors to develop these competencies, I was looking for a model that could be used in situations with specific funding requirements, using FSNE as an example. In other words, I was looking at creating a model that potentially would have broad application. FNS, ERS, ARS, and

CSREES have all expressed interest in what we are doing, as has the Society for Nutrition Education. Upon viewing the final product, administrators at CSREES have commented on their potential adaptability to other nutrition programs and other disciplines, substituting the educational content for the respective discipline. That would be my hope.

Currently, there is considerable interest in the skills and expertise of staff providing nutrition education. People understand credentials (e.g. RDs, LDs,) and degrees much better than they understand the qualifications that would be important for paraprofessional staff. ***It would be good to be able to say that we have a system in place that supports strong performance of paraprofessional staff.*** Being able to articulate this with federal partners speaks well of our universities as being ideal partners – e.g. to communicate capacity and expertise along with the financial commitment that universities provide. Such a system would also speak to the credibility of paraprofessional staff to the extent that these competencies are applied.

## **Discussion** (slide 16)

How is “paraprofessional” defined?

This question was discussed in some detail with the expert panel before even beginning to establish the competencies. Our intent was not to determine who should provide education, as that is a state decision. Rather, we were looking at who could get the job done, what skill sets were needed for working with a particular audience. We were looking for what they could bring to the position, and what they would need to be most successful, going beyond the educational experience that they may or may not have had.

Why were paraprofessional staff not involved in the initial stages of competency development?

This question was seriously considered in developing the project design. There were a number of factors that were weighed in the decision to solicit paraprofessional comment strategically once an initial draft had been created. Among the most critical determining factors were: 1) the potential for getting a better response if paraprofessionals could speak among co-workers – people they knew; 2) the potential for getting a more representative response by including more paraprofessionals in a subsequent stage of development; 3) the need for having a broad perspective of responsibilities (getting beyond the day-to-day tasks to how their work fit into the overall program and organizational structure); 4) concern about confusion that could result as paraprofessionals learned of differences in expectations across states; and 5) potential financial and time burdens to paraprofessional staff, since we could not pay upfront costs and given that some may have family situations that make leaving home for an extended time difficult. Input from paraprofessionals during the conference calls, suggest that the approach used worked.

What about existing resources – how might they fit with these competencies, and how might we share best practices/resources/potential speakers for training on these competencies?

This would be a great next step – adding detail to the structure. Dr. Chipman will explore this possibility. States are encouraged to send ideas/information as a starting point to flesh out how state developed resources can be shared.

**Next Steps** (slides 17 and 18).

Plans are underway to submit this work for publication in a peer reviewed journal. Also, we plan to submit an abstract for potential presentation at the Society for Nutrition Education 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference for broader sharing of this work.\*

Thank you for your active participation today. Please send completed evaluations of this training to Sandy Jensen at [sandra.jensen.edu](mailto:sandra.jensen.edu) by 31 January. For questions or additional information about the competencies and/or training, contact Dr. Helen Chipman, National Coordinator, FSNE, CSREES/USDA at [Helen.chipman@sdstate.edu](mailto:Helen.chipman@sdstate.edu) or 605-688-4944.

\*March 2006 - The Society of Nutrition Education chose to incorporate development of these core competencies into an SNE Post-Conference Workshop.