

SNAP-Ed Communication Environmental Scan*

Executive Summary

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Note: SNAP-Ed refers to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - Education, which was called Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE), prior to 1 October 2008. These terms are used interchangeably in this document.

BACKGROUND

In 2007, the Extension Committee on Organization and Public Policy (ECOP) convened an ad hoc FSNE Planning Team to identify priorities for FSNE/SNAP-Ed during a transition in national leadership of FSNE/SNAP-Ed through the Land-Grant University (LGU) System. This team identified communication as one of the top priorities to be addressed.

SNAP-Ed leadership for the LGU System called upon the SNAP-Ed Program Development Team (PDT) to help operationalize the FSNE Planning Team's recommendations. The PDT includes SNAP-Ed Coordinators and Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Administrators from the LGU System who administer the SNAP-Ed program. The team serves as a communication conduit and contributes to the development of resources and completion of projects for SNAP-Ed within the LGU System.

The PDT's efforts, along with those of FSNE Planning Team members, resulted in a recognized need to develop a comprehensive communication strategy that allows for open and transparent communication on multiple levels across the LGU System strengthening work in all nutrition education programs including SNAP-Ed and EFNEP. In spring of 2009, LGU SNAP-Ed Leadership contracted with Dr. Jo Britt-Rankin of Missouri to develop and conduct an on-line survey of Extension Directors/Administrators, FCS Administrators, and SNAP-Ed Coordinators in 1862 and 1890 Land-Grant institutions. Results of this survey will be used by LGU SNAP-Ed Leadership and the PDT to develop the most efficient model of communication.

PROCESS

A 14-item survey was developed by Dr. Britt-Rankin and approved by Dr. Helen Chipman, Dr. Shirley Hastings, and Dr. C.Y. Wang, of the LGU SNAP-Ed Leadership Team. Two goals of the survey were to: 1) assess purposes of communication, intended audience, other potential audiences, and possible communication methods for SNAP-Ed including written, electronic and emerging media; and 2) assess general versus specific uses of communication, and the preferred types and frequency of communication based on professional position within the Extension system. The final version was posted to the Internet through the survey tool called Survey Monkey.

An email invitation was sent in mid April, 2009 to Extension Directors/Administrators, FCS Administrators, and SNAP-Ed Coordinators in 1862 and 1890 Land-Grant institutions asking them to complete the 14-question on-line survey taking approximately 20 to 30 minutes within the following two weeks. The rapid response request was made to increase participation by

adding a heightened level of importance and minimizing potential for losing or deleting the email.

RESULTS

Respondents. A total of 84 responses were received and of those, 94% were completed in full. Respondents represented each Land-Grant geographic region relatively evenly. Of the total responses, 80 were from 1862 and 4 from 1890 institutions. Of the respondents, nearly half (47%) identified themselves as SNAP-Ed Coordinators, 24% as FCS Administrators, 11% as Extension Directors/Administrators, and 2% as SNAP-Ed Educators. Approximately 16% identified themselves as *other* and specified titles including Associate Dean, SNAP-Ed Principal Investigator and Network Coordinator, etc. For this question, 19 respondents self identified with more than one of the categories.

Level of involvement. In terms of level of involvement, 93% of the Coordinators and educators reported daily involvement with SNAP-Ed. Of the Extension Directors/Administrators 40% reported monthly, 40% annual, 10% daily and 10% weekly involvement. FCS Administrators reported more frequent involvement with 46% indicating weekly, 27% monthly and 18% daily involvement. Of those in the *other* category, 71% indicated that they were involved with SNAP-Ed daily and 14% were involved weekly.

When expressing their level of decision making regarding SNAP-Ed, Coordinators and *others* indicated that they make decisions in consultation with others approximately 75% of the time. Extension Directors/Administrators make decisions when requested 80% of the time and FCS Administrators are evenly split between making decisions when requested and in consultation with others.

The types of issues or decisions communicated about were consistent among all groups of respondents for all types of issues identified. Respondents could select as many issues as appropriate and 86% selected program management decisions, 83% selected program growth decisions, 82% selected resolution of internal university concerns, 81% selected resolution of university/state agency concerns, 74% selected personnel decisions and 63% selected resolution of university/federal concerns.

These two questions offer insight into communication and decision making. The data suggests that Program Coordinators are most actively involved, on a daily basis. They do, however, maintain weekly to monthly involvement with Extension Directors/Administrators and FCS Administrators. Additionally, all levels of management are involved in critical decision making, either in a direct, consultation, or as requested manner.

Frequency of communication. The next three questions assessed frequency of communication. For all groups, email was the most often used method for communication regarding SNAP-Ed followed by telephone, face-to-face, website, on-line discussion and group hub/blackboard. Among the groups, Coordinators were slightly more likely to call than meet face-to-face. However, both Extension Directors/Administrators and FCS Administrators were more likely to meet face-to-face. This is likely due to distance between the parties involved with the direct communication. Often Extension Directors/Administrators and SNAP-Ed Coordinators are

campus-based. Coordinators, however, communicate with educators and state agencies that are located off-campus and often in various locations around a state.

In terms of frequency of receiving information about SNAP-Ed, FCS Administrators indicated that they received communication weekly whereas Coordinators receive communication daily. The daily communication for Coordinators was mostly with educators. Coordinators reported that their weekly communication was most often with FCS Administrators and other university faculty while their monthly communication was with Coordinators from other states, Extension Directors/Administrators and FCS Administrators, and the funding agency. In addition, Coordinators had quarterly communication with USDA/federal agency personnel. Extension Directors/Administrators indicated that they had little to no communication with the state agency, USDA/federal agency, other university administrators and other faculty regarding SNAP-Ed. Extension Directors/Administrators communicated with other Extension Directors/Administrators daily, FCS Administrators weekly, and Coordinators monthly. FCS Administrators are more involved, with weekly contact with Coordinators and monthly contact with Extension Directors/Administrators. The responses by the different groups did not contradict each other.

Preferences, challenges and suggestions. All subgroups of respondents indicated that email was their preferred method of communication. Extension Directors/Administrators indicated that funding issues, cost share and overall program direction/goals were the issues of greatest importance. FCS Administrators as well as SNAP-Ed Coordinators more often identified budget/funding, cost share, and changes in program guidance as most critical. The *other* group identified budget/funding, changes in guidance and state sharing as most critical. Regarding changes in the program guidance, respondents spoke of the importance of timely updates, as well as the varying interpretations of the guidance by each FNS region. Respondents were given the opportunity to identify additional issues. Included were: evaluation and assessment; personnel; collaboration between SNAP-Ed and EFNEP; training and growth of the program.

Respondents were asked to share challenges or barriers that they perceived existed *within the LGU System* regarding SNAP-Ed. The leading response (23%) was few to no challenges or barriers within the system. Challenges or barriers identified by the 77% of remaining respondents, included: lack of communication between various levels of the system; lack of coordinated messages; not being perceived as an Extension program; too much information; being seen too much like EFNEP; and the variation in SNAP-Ed programs from state to state.

Respondents were then asked to share challenges/barriers they perceived *with other partners such as the state agencies, other implementers, and federal partners*. Although, the most common response was “none” (25%), approximately 13% of the responses, mostly SNAP-Ed Coordinators, indicated some level of concern or found it difficult to establish effective relationships with the state agency; and an additional 13% expressed frustration with the communication channels between the state, regional and federal FNS offices. Roughly 11% wrote they had challenges with competition and turf battles with other groups targeting the same audience or when multiple SNAP-Ed providers were present within the state, and 8% of respondents cited challenges due to inconsistent interpretations of the guidance by region, lack of understanding the guidance and/or lack of understanding of the Extension system.

The final question asked for recommendations to improve communication strategies regarding SNAP-Ed across the LGU System. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of respondents indicated that an annual meeting to support communication between states or some other venue to highlight program best practices would be most beneficial. Nineteen percent (19%) felt that regular, routine electronic communication such as email or a newsletter with short, clear and concise updates would be beneficial. Twelve percent (12%) desired the development of a website to serve as a repository of current materials and program guidance. An additional twelve percent (12%) indicated that they had no recommendations for the system. Other recommendations that were mentioned included having a national representative for SNAP-Ed among the LGU System, using technology such as Twitter for future communication and having conference calls.

CONCLUSIONS

Through this environmental scan with these respondents, it appears that most people find the current frequency of and strategies for communication within the LGU System to be working. Three common concerns remain: 1) interaction between SNAP-Ed and EFNEP; 2) integration into the overall Extension system; and 3) collaboration with other SNAP-Ed subcontractors. The respondents, however, do see several avenues to improve communication with all partners and among all levels of the organization. The three most desired communication strategies include: 1) face-to-face meetings; 2) email; and 3) a website; all of which may assist in providing clear, concise, and timely messages regarding program delivery, program guidance, best practices, and evaluation strategies and results.

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