

A Win-Win Partnership: MRE and Cooperative Extension

Supporting healthy relationships through public outreach

Every university engages in research and teaching, but each state also has at least one university specifically charged with the mission to “reach out” to its citizens. Through the Morrill Act of 1862, states were granted federally owned land to develop a university with a federal government-mandated outreach responsibility. These “land-grant” universities were directed by law to translate university research into public non-credit, tax-supported educational programs and resources.



Today this is called “Cooperative Extension” and it is under the federal leadership of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), an agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Cooperative Extension System (CES) advances knowledge and educates citizens in promoting agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being, and community and economic development. Cooperative Extension does this through an extensive network of state, regional, and county Extension offices. These offices include trained

professionals and volunteers who respond to diverse community needs through educational workshops, events, and materials. Historically, CES has focused on agriculture and reaching out to rural communities. The CES has adapted to changing times to offer a broad variety of programs including Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) in both urban and rural areas.

Educating Youth, Young Adults and Families

Cooperative Extension supports healthy relationships in two areas of programming: Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) and 4-H Youth Development (4-H). The goal of FCS programming is to help families become resilient and healthy. FCS Extension is not to be confused with the family consumer sciences taught in middle schools and high schools (what used to be called “Home Economics”). Areas of FCS programming (depending on state or county program priorities) may include family relationships and child development, parenting, nutrition and food preparation, housing and interior design, personal money management, and other home- and family-related subjects. 4-H Youth Development programming assists young people ages 5 to 19 in developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes to enable them to become self-directing, responsible, productive citizens. 4-H programs may include organized clubs, school enrichment programs, special interest groups and other projects as determined by the needs of the community.

One of the ways FCS seeks to help families is through relationship education for couples. Additionally, the CES offers 4-H programs to help youth develop important skills that build character and assist them in making appropriate life and career choices. This may include relationship education.

Cooperative Extension professionals within these programs are tasked with monitoring community trends and issues. They use this information to determine local program needs and to design programs that meet the needs of their target audience. In response to community trends, an increasing number of Cooperative Extension professionals are developing, delivering, and evaluating relationship education programs specifically targeting couples who are engaged, married, or in stepfamilies, as well as programs for youth. There are two types of Cooperative Extension professionals within the system: Specialists and Educators.

FCS Extension Specialists are usually housed within university departments or colleges such as Family and Consumer Sciences, Human Ecology, Child and Family Development, or Human Development and Family Science. 4-H Extension Specialists may be housed in university departments of agriculture. The focus of an Extension Specialist is to:

- Develop programs through workshops, seminars, etc.
- Identify resources to support programs
- Facilitate program implementation
- Evaluate programs

Extension Educators are housed in county or regional offices and may be called “Extension Agents.” They work closely with the Extension Specialist and their community partners. Their concentration is to:

- Ensure that programs are developed and implemented to meet their county/regional needs
- Serve on internal committees and advisory groups at both state and local levels
- Coordinate and communicate with county governments, partners and funders
- Conduct outreach to constituents
- Partner with state, regional and national agencies to advance programming

CES and MRE Partnerships

There are many ways that CES and MRE can work together to assist national, state and local efforts to strengthen couple relationships and stabilize marriages and families. The CES’s capacity for partnership will vary across states depending on the Extension Specialists’ and Educators’ familiarity, interest, and training in this area of programming. Thus, it is necessary to research your specific area’s CES (see Additional Resources).

Public Awareness. Building sustainable outreach programming requires forming strong community partnerships. The CES has a long and productive history partnering with state and local government, education, social service, faith-based, and civic leaders and organizations to build community coalitions and capacity to address various needs. Their connections and established trust within the community make Extension Specialists and Educators ideal partners in promoting and facilitating community healthy marriage initiatives and encouraging participation in local community programs. Extension Educators’ experience in successfully engaging community volunteers in local

programming make them valuable resources in coordinating community events and workshops.

An important component of CES is outreach efforts. Extension Specialists and Educators are often affiliated with professionals in various media outlets including newspapers, radio, and television. Also, many Extension Educators develop and distribute their own newsletters (in print and/or electronically), maintain content on a county website, write public service announcements, and display exhibits at community functions. Thus, they may be able to assist in drafting and delivering announcements from MRE providers through these outlets, as well as through any related programs they offer.

Training and Education. Extension Specialists and Educators may be able to provide and assist in coordinating MRE trainings as well as offering ongoing technical assistance. Given their community connections, Educators may also be able to help identify and secure facilities for trainings and couples' workshops at little to no cost. Not every Educator is prepared to offer relationship education. However, they may supplement a couple and marital enrichment program with content from other areas they are experienced in teaching such as nutrition, food preparation, financial management, or parenting.

Evaluation and Applied Research. In general, it is a good idea to invest time and resources in 1) identifying programs that are well-grounded in research and 2) evaluating whether the program had the intended impact on your target audience. Cooperative Extension programming is research-based, meaning that the content and method of delivery has been informed by theory and university research. In addition, CES programs are often evidence-based, meaning the program has been tested and proven to be impactful. With experience

in identifying, interpreting and conducting research, Extension Specialists and Educators are not only able to share this knowledge but can also assist with community program development and evaluation. They are positioned to connect with other university evaluation/research experts when needed.

Access to a National Network. The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN) is a nationwide Extension outreach effort. NERMEN partners include a network of Extension professionals, agencies and organizations at the national, state, and community levels. They all share the common goal of supporting individuals and couples in preparing for, developing, and sustaining healthy relationships and healthy marriages. NERMEN's mission is to provide research-based resources and promote partnerships to advance the knowledge and practice of relationship and marriage education. To facilitate the sharing of these resources, to foster partnerships, and to stimulate the creation of new resources, NERMEN hosts a website, www.nermen.org, where relationship and marriage education professionals can:

- Access low- to no-cost Cooperative Extension developed resources (e.g., fact sheets, curricula) and training materials to support local educational programming. These resources could be used as articles in local newsletters, handouts at programs, and links to promote additional resources on your local website.
- Identify collaborative efforts and programs within Cooperative Extension that are emerging within the state and across the country. Learn what projects Cooperative Extension is engaged in locally to see if there is a fit with what you are doing. If not, approach the contact person listed to discuss opportunities.

- Locate colleagues across Cooperative Extension who are also working to support healthy couple and marital relationships. There may not be an Extension Specialist or Educator in your state who is working in this area, but don't hesitate to contact another Specialist in a nearby state for consultation.

The Cooperative Extension System provides MRE practitioners with a vast network of state and national resources to access locally. Be sure to visit www.nermen.org to learn more about the relationship and marriage education resources that Cooperative Extension has to offer. Contact your local Extension Specialist and/or Educator to identify ways you can partner to strengthen couple and marital relationships in your community.

Additional Resources

http://nifa.usda.gov/qlinks/partners/state_partners.html

To learn more about the Cooperative Extension Service and locate the land-grant institution in your state

<http://nifa.usda.gov/Extension/index.html>

To find your nearest Cooperative Extension office

http://www.nermen.org/documents/whoisnermen_web.pdf

Fact Sheet providing an overview of NERMEN

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