ALABAMA HEALTHY MARRIAGE & RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Healthy Couples, Healthy Children

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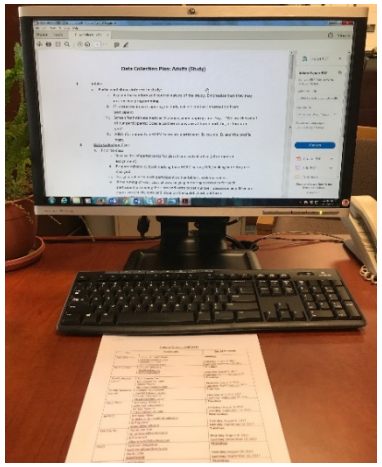

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Action Research: A Bridge Connecting a University and Local Communities

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Introduction

- ***The Alabama Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Initiative (AHMREI)*** is a large-scale, federally funded, applied-research project at Auburn University
- Partnership among Auburn University and 9 implementation partners that are part of the Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers
- Access to free, comprehensive, educational resources have been offered to over 40 counties in Alabama, and to multiple target populations
- Currently focusing on the recruitment of Adult Couples to participate in a randomized control trial (RCT) of Couples' Relationship Education

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Purpose

- To describe our university-community partnership jointly implementing an efficacy study of couples relationship education that uses random assignment
- To illustrate principles of action-oriented research through a description of the training and skill-building plan used
- To present results related to community educators' perceptions of readiness to implement and perceived training benefits

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Background

- Our vision for collaboration emphasizes openness among partners and maximizing opportunities for shared learning (Strier, 2011)
- Best practices for education & research implementation partnerships:
  - An agreed upon purpose
  - Shared meaning
  - Clearly defined roles
  - Support innovation in research and teaching
  - Increase available resources within communities

  (Buys & Bursnall, 2007)

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From Evidence-Informed to Evidence-Based

- The vital next step in an evidence base for a program model is to conduct a rigorous efficacy study that involves random assignment
- Efficacy studies are typically conducted in more controlled environments - usually university-based delivery
- We collaborated with community partners to empower co-ownership of research design and program implementation
- Trained community partners in critical elements of an Efficacy Study:
  - Consistency in "what" we do- *program delivery* and *data collection*
  - Recruiting into a *study*
  - Random Control Assignment
  - Data collection timeline and protocol

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Strategies for Collaborative Training & Skill Building

- Strategies to maintain a collaborative atmosphere and ensure protocol fidelity:
  - Pacing of training and activities allowed for layered learning
  - Feedback was solicited from community members and educators at key points
  - Experiential skills-training was used
  - A variety of communication methods are used for technical assistance

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Assessing Partners' Understanding of RCT Design and Perception of Preparedness to Conduct an RCT

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- Community educators (*N* = 37) completed a process survey before the start of local impact evaluation programming. Example process statement:
  - *"Teaching the program exactly as it was developed by experts is critical to getting expected results."*

- Community educators (*N* = 4) were invited to participate in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Example interview questions:
  - *"What was the most helpful part of the research protocol trainings?"*
  - *Did you feel prepared to implement the research protocol as designed?*

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Findings

- Community partners are successfully implementing the program and research protocol
- Recruitment targets have been exceeded for study enrollment and participants' completion of program surveys
- High program retention rates (71%) indicate good program engagement
- 80% of individuals that are assigned to a program group attend at least 1 class

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Findings

Question	Range	*M*	*SD*
I am prepared to deliver the program as intended regardless of the obstacles that might arise.	1 - 7	6.30	1.10
Teaching the program exactly as it was developed by experts is critical to getting expected results.	1 - 7	6.43	1.09
REVERSE - Adaptations can be made in how the program is taught without jeopardizing its effectivenss.	1 - 7	4.00	2.06
REVERSE - I intend to add material to the curriculum.	2 - 7	5.97	1.18
I intend to follow the curriculum guide in the process of teaching the program.	1 - 7	6.58	1.05
REVERSE - I will make modificaitons in the activities used to teach the program	2 - 7	5.43	1.48
REVERSE - I plan to create my own examples in the course of teaching the program.	1 - 7	4.37	1.99
I intend to use the examples as presented in the curriculum guide. I plan to add class activites to the program.	1 - 7	6.06	1.45
REVERSE - I plan to add class activities to the program.	1 - 7	5.88	1.45
I am confident that I can implement the activities in the program in strict accordance with the curriculum guide.	1 - 7	6.43	1.09

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Findings: Perceived Benefits

- **Theme: Confidence -- after trainings and in practice**

  …anything people can learn to increase their knowledge and their confidence and their comfort with sharing is great.

  …the more comfortable I feel knowing the information, the more comfortable I am when the phone rings and somebody calls having questions.

- **Theme: Change -- in thinking and in implementation**

  …but it was really switching our way of thinking and recruiting and the actual implementation of the curriculum…

  …and we've learned something new every cohort and so we continue to change…

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Findings: Ability to Implement

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- **Theme: Effective Communication Network**

  …the fact that you've got dropbox and that you can look back at that, that's a diamond.

  …the good news is that because we all talk together, we stay on the same page, we can help each other and the more information we have, we have tweaked it every cohort.

- **Theme: Recognized bias against RCT but willingness to implement**

  You really kind of hope they get in the classes.

  Apprehension of what that would look like…

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Discussion

- Collaboration, information sharing, and a supportive skill-building environment promotes the self-efficacy of the implementation partners
- Findings of our assessment revealed readiness to implement and perceived training benefits among community educators
- Effective university-community partnerships promote shared learning and play a positive role in the community (Strier, 2011)
- Working directly with community partners to share the ownership of community-based applied research implementation:
  - Extends the reach of University resources
  - Broadens opportunities for using rigorous methods to answer challenging and practical family studies questions

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Implications and Future Directions

- An action-oriented framework that includes "layered" learning and shared meaning develops confidence among implementation partners, as well as changes in thinking about research at the community level
- Effective university-community partnerships empower community partners to serve as members of the research team implementing community-based experimental design program evaluation
- *We are in this together*
- The process of developing a meaningful university-community partnerships, requires an organizational system that is fluid, evolving, and collaborative

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