Development of EFNEP and SNAP-Ed Core Competencies in the Land-Grant University System

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ABSTRACT

This report describes the development and revision of core competencies for the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education program leaders, supervisors, and paraprofessional educators across the land-grant university system. The developing curriculum methodologies were used to engage panels of exemplary employees and an advisory panel of program leaders. A crosswalk examined key documents, and a gap analysis explored the competencies of similar professions. The resulting job duties and tasks reflect cultural, environmental, and educational trends. The core competencies are critical for writing job descriptions, guiding hiring, evaluating performance, and providing initial and ongoing training for the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education.

Key Words: core competencies, EFNEP, SNAP-Ed, paraprofessional educators, program leaders (J Nutr Educ Behav. 2023;55:30−37.)

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INTRODUCTION

Core competencies (CCs) articulate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes capable employees should demonstrate in a specific job classification, including skills that employees are expected to have or develop and processes required to succeed.1 Core competencies are often used to develop job descriptions and select, train, and assess employee performance. Understanding their significant contribution to program success, the land-grant university Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed) program Development Team funded the development of CCs for use by the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and SNAP-Ed program leaders, supervisors, and nutrition educators at land-grant universities (LGUs).

This development process began in 2005 when program leaders in Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE), now SNAP-Ed, sought to establish CCs for paraprofessional educators. Program leaders are administrators at the university level who lead program planning, implementation, evaluation, reporting, and collaboration. A panel of 10 FSNE program leaders convened to produce the list of CCs through the developing a curriculum (DACUM) process,2 which is a group method to develop competencies in which a trained facilitator works with a panel of employees to identify and describe key duties and tasks necessary to be successful in their position. Once developed, a panel of 27 FSNE paraprofessional educators validated those competencies.1 In 2016 and 2017, competencies were developed through separate DACUM processes: 1 for SNAP-Ed supervisors and coordinators and 1 for EFNEP supervisors. The purpose was to develop competencies specific to implementing policy, system, and environmental changes (PSEs) in EFNEP and SNAP-Ed to help guide PSE training for both programs.3,4

Job descriptions for nutrition educators have traditionally focused on their capacity to teach food and health to individuals. Over the past 2 decades, the field has moved toward a more comprehensive approach to integrating systems and environments that support behavior change with individual-focused nutrition education. As a result, skills and qualifications described in personnel documents, including hiring, performance, and training documentation, have become dated and do not describe current needs.5 Nutrition education programs now implement more complex, multilevel programs. As PSE strategies have become common, there is a need to recruit, hire,
and train employees prepared to do this broader scope of work. Competency-based job descriptions add value to an organization by focusing on the experience and skills needed to be successful.6,7

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

The purpose of this project was to revise existing and develop new CCs specific to SNAP-Ed and EFNEP employees at LGUs. These 4 job classifications are program leaders, supervisors, professional educators, and paraprofessional educators. Project processes (Figure) to ensure the CCs were complete, current, and relevant to LGUs included: reviewing job descriptions and job announcements, identifying exemplary employees from each classification who represented LGUs located throughout the country, facilitating DACUM with exemplary employees, and conducting a crosswalk and resulting gap analysis with other professionals’ job descriptions and CCs. The protocol for this study was deemed exempt by Colorado State University Institutional Review Board; therefore, consent was not required.

Developing a Curriculum

For this project, we selected the DACUM process2 as the primary method for developing CCs. This process allowed us and DACUM panelists to build on competencies developed in 2005 for program leaders and paraprofessionals and develop new CCs for supervisors and professional educators. The DACUM process is a facilitated job analysis that incorporates 2 major features: identifying exceptional workers to provide accurate information about the skills, knowledge, and behaviors needed to be successful in their jobs; and describing specific tasks that must be accomplished for the worker to be successful. As described in the DACUM handbook, every job can be divided into major areas of responsibility or job duties, and each job duty consists of smaller units of meaningful work or job tasks. This method involves recruiting nominations for a representative panel of exemplary employees who work with a trained facilitator to create a set of job duties with related job tasks. By relying on successful employees currently performing the job and being specific about tasks rather than broad qualifications, DACUM yields CCs proven to work well for the position. The goal is to create a chart of job duties with related job tasks as a guide for new employees to be successful. This process has been used to develop CCs with diverse groups, including federal agencies such as the US Department of Agriculture, industry, and higher education, for >50 years.8

We solicited nominations for DACUM panels through an online survey (n = 76) emailed to EFNEP and SNAP-Ed LGU program leaders. We defined each job category and provided examples of criteria for exemplary employees to help guide program leaders’ decisions about appropriate employees to nominate for the process. State program leaders had the option to nominate themselves for the program leader panel; however, there were no self-nominations. The 62 survey responses yielded a total of 120 exemplary employee nominations in 4 categories: program leaders (32 nominees), supervisors (19 nominees), professional educators (15 nominees), and paraprofessional educators (54 nominees). We reviewed all nominations and invited 15 program leaders, 11 supervisors, 16 professional educators, and 33 paraprofessional educators to serve as DACUM panelists for their respective job categories. Nominees were prioritized to represent the diversity of EFNEP and SNAP-Ed across LGUs with panelists from different regions across the country, from small to large EFNEP and SNAP-Ed programs, as well as from both 1862 and 1890 institutions. The 1862 institutions are the original land-grant colleges and universities established through the Morrill Act of 1862. Under the Second Morrill Act of 1890, 19 historically Black universities were established as LGUs. The program leader panel also served as the project’s advisory panel, with the responsibility to review and provide feedback for each set of competencies for all job classifications.

The expert program leader panel reviewed and revised the CCs developed for their job category in 2001, and the expert paraprofessional panel reviewed and revised the CCs developed for their job category in 2005. One reason for the revision was to update the language and wording. For example, in 2005, SNAP-Ed was known as FSNE. More significant revisions included the program shift that emphasized PSE efforts.

The program leader panel met face-to-face over 2 days. We planned and conducted this meeting with a national conference that most panel members attended. Through the DACUM process, program leaders reviewed and created a revised version of existing job duties and tasks.9 Consensus was obtained by reviewing changes and checking in with each group member for agreement. Disagreements were resolved by discussions on each side that resulted in agreed-on wording modifications. These consensus-building methods worked for all of the panels except the professional educators, which will be discussed later. Of the original 6 job duties, program leaders did not change the wording for 3 and revised the wording for the other 3. They created a new job duty related to evaluation and reporting. We refined program leader job duties to focus on leadership for programs and staff; advance program goals through collaborations, stewardship, and leveraged funding; and improve and promote program outcomes through evaluation, reporting, and communication.

Similar to the job duties, program leaders revised the wording for 33 existing job tasks; 12 remained the same, and 4 were deleted. They identified and added 27 new job tasks. Revisions and additions increased clarity and information that program leaders deemed critical to success in their positions.

Paraprofessional educator panels reviewed and revised the original version of their existing job duties and tasks.10 Because of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) travel restrictions, we conducted the paraprofessional DACUM process virtually through webinars with nominated members divided into subsets of 5 to 6 people. These subsets worked on different job
duties and job tasks. All panels were guided through a review of the 2005 competencies. Each panel reviewed 2 or 3 major job duties with the related job tasks. Once all the competencies had been reviewed, the revised list was emailed to the full paraprofessional panel for their input. All suggested revisions were incorporated into the competencies. We shared this final list with the program leaders’ advisory panel, who reviewed and suggested additions and revisions.

Out of the original 10 job duties for paraprofessional educators, 5 had no changes, 3 had minor wording revisions, 1 had major revisions, and 1 was deleted. One new job duty was created. The paraprofessional job duties focused on different aspects of program delivery, from working with partners and recruiting participants for delivering and evaluating programs. For the job tasks,
paraprofessionals revised the wording of 50 existing job tasks, 8 had no changes, and 11 were deleted. Panelists identified and added 27 new job tasks.

Unlike program leaders and paraprofessional educators, there were no existing competencies for supervisors and professional educators for LGU EFNEP and SNAP-Ed programs. Supervisors needed competencies specific to providing support and guidance to paraprofessionals and professional educators. Professional educators need unique competencies because they have different expectations than paraprofessional educators, such as increased involvement with PSE interventions.

The supervisor DACUM panel met face-to-face over 2 days and developed job duties with related tasks specific to their supervisory roles and responsibilities. We held this meeting before the COVID-19 outbreak in conjunction with a national conference to reduce travel burdens. The draft of competencies was emailed to the participants for review and updated on the basis of suggested revisions. After we incorporated all their input, the program leader advisory panel reviewed the final list for additions and revisions.

Supervisors created 9 job duties and 68 related job tasks. The supervisor’s job duties focus on activities related to being an effective leader for staff, such as hiring, coaching, and evaluating staff delivering nutrition education programs. Other job duties involved supporting program efforts by building and maintaining partnerships and evaluating program progress.

We conducted the professional educator DACUM process with virtual panels because of COVID-19 travel restrictions. Nominated professional educators were divided into subsets of 5 to 6 members. Each subset panel focused on different job duties and tasks. The first subset panel identified job duties and then worked on tasks for 2 of the duties. Each subsequent subset panel reviewed and revised the job duties and related tasks developed by the previous panel.

In contrast to the paraprofessional subsets, professional educator subsets often suggested major revisions to job duties and related tasks developed by previous subsets. They created 11 job duties and 79 related job tasks for professional educators. The DACUM process is optimal for jobs that have similar duties and tasks. Given the heterogeneous nature of the professional educators, the subset panels failed to reach a consensus on these job duties and tasks, preventing the development of a finalized list of competencies for this group. We recommended to the project funder that an in-person DACUM expert panel be used to develop professional educator CCs.

Crosswalk

A crosswalk identifies similarities and differences between key documents (such as educational curricula or workforce competencies). It typically includes a brief description of each key document and is organized into a table format to visually display the comparisons and contrasts in their content. To validate the DACUM findings, we identified and considered competencies from nutrition and health professional organizations. These documents guide public health/community nutrition workforce preparation and include the Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior nutrition educator competencies, the Guide for Developing and Enhancing Skills in Public Health and Community Nutrition, and the Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals.

For this project, we generated a list of potentially relevant nutrition and public health organizations’ member categories and aligned job descriptions and competencies. We added further sources through an iterative process (eg, a source for one EFNEP/SNAP-Ed job position could be relevant for another position, or a new resource became available). In the case of paraprofessional educator competencies, there are few existing resources. Therefore, we conducted a Google search using the terms community health worker, promotora, lay health advisor, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children paraprofessional, paraeducator (in kindergarten to 12th-grade schools), certified home health care worker, and nursing aid.

Next, a table was designed to compare EFNEP/SNAP-Ed existing or newly drafted competencies to those of other professions. For each job classification, we thoroughly reviewed the competencies of other professions for content and organization. We matched comparable job duties and responsibilities to the most relevant EFNEP/SNAP-Ed competency. Different professions’ competencies were color-coded and numbered for source identification. This also allowed the comparison of similar competencies across different professions. In some cases, one profession’s competency overlapped with several EFNEP/SNAP-Ed competencies. Duplicate matches were noted. Some professional organizations’ job duties and tasks did not align with those of EFNEP/SNAP-Ed positions, for example, clinical or dietary counseling responsibilities. These were noted in external documents but not included in the table.

Position titles and sources of other professions’ job duties and tasks are provided in the table. These include nutrition educators, registered dietitian nutritionists, and public health nutritionists. They also include the US and global public health practitioners and relevant Extension positions. The format of these competency documents varied by a professional organization, as did the detail and description of their development. Some were formal development and review processes, whereas others were less formal and structured. Some sources were organized to include a wide breadth and depth of job titles and duties within a single core function (eg, public health, public health nutrition), whereas others focused narrowly on a job position. Some combined knowledge, skills, responsibilities, and educational requirements, whereas others separated them.

Gap Analysis

A gap analysis systematically identifies strengths, deficiencies, and redundancies in a set of CCs. This can be done by comparing these to the competencies, educational
requirements, and knowledge and skill statements of similar professions.

For this project, we noted and highlighted potentially relevant job duties and tasks of other professions missing from the 4 EFNEP/SNAP-Ed job classifications in each crosswalk analysis. At this stage, 2 team members reviewed the brief description of each external source and the table content. We confirmed general alignment or misalignment of EFNEP/SNAP-Ed duties and tasks with other professions’ competencies and discussed highlighted content. In these instances, we determined if the new content was appropriate, inappropriate, or redundant with existing competencies. These were shared with the program leader advisory panel when needed to determine addition or deletion.

Through an iterative process, we compared job duties and tasks for each EFNEP/SNAP-Ed job classification with those of other relevant professions, highlighting potential gaps. The process found no relevant job duties of other professions unaccounted for in the job classifications. However, several job tasks and content areas were highlighted to be reviewed and discussed. We brought potential gaps to the program leader advisory panel for review and confirmation of inclusion or exclusion into the final CCs.

Across all job classifications, there was a potential gap in concepts related to social determinants of health and capacity building. For the program leader CCs, there were also gaps in the area of PSEs. Some professions include this concept in job tasks using terms such as built and social environments, promoting policies supporting systems that produce healthy food, and food systems. Other concepts addressed economic determinants of health, social justice and human rights principles, and social capital. The program leader advisory panel reviewed these potential gaps. We made minor revisions to capture PSE concepts by addressing multilevel nutrition education programs and including public health approaches under the foundational knowledge needed for program leaders to be successful. The program leader advisory panel agreed that most of these gaps were already reflected in the competencies in more general terms that could remain relevant and understandable over time rather than developing additional CCs. For example, human rights principles were captured under necessary knowledge related to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

For the supervisor’s CCs, program leader advisory panel members considered including job tasks aligned with terms such as creating a culture of ethical standards and applying social justice and human rights principles. Other examples included: interpreting and transmitting current scientific information and knowledge of community food access, food safety, dietary and physical activity guidance, and education theory. Potential gaps in skills included initiative, judgment, discretion, and decision-making. As a result, the program leader advisory panel revised job tasks to include language related to creating a culture of ethical standards. They added several concepts to the foundational knowledge that supervisors need to be successful, including those related to specific nutrition concepts such as food safety, dietary and physical activity guidelines, and knowledge related to educational theories.

For paraprofessional educator CCs, only the terms capacity building and social determinants of health were brought to the program leader advisory panel for review as potential gaps. They determined these concepts were captured in job tasks related to understanding and respecting diversity and building and maintaining effective partnerships; therefore, no additions were made.

For the professional educator CCs, challenges in alignment and potential gaps noted through comparison with other professions’ job duties and tasks were broader and more varied than for any of the other job classifications. Tasks and duties included in other professions but not addressed in the professional educator draft document included action plan development and monitoring; a wide variety of communication skills; responsible and ethical job performance, including organizational abilities, decision-making, problem-solving, and nutrition-related knowledge and skills. Because of significant gaps and inconsistencies in the DACUM results and crosswalk and gap analysis processes, we terminated this portion of the project without sharing a draft with the program leader advisory panel.

Job Description Analysis

Job and position descriptions were solicited from EFNEP and SNAP-Ed programs for the job classifications of program leader, supervisor, professional educator, and paraprofessional educator. Thirteen states and 3 US territories submitted 61 job descriptions which we sorted into job classifications. We selected a submitted job description in each classification which provided a comprehensive and clear example as a starting document. Using a constant comparison inductive approach, the starting document was modified by comparing each job description within a classification. We reviewed the composite job description with the final CCs in each job classification. We organized and edited the composite job descriptions using DACUM results for each job classification to ensure consistency and triangulate the data sources.

Composite job descriptions for program leader, supervisor, and paraprofessional educator classifications were consistent with DACUM job duties and tasks. For paraprofessional educators, the DACUM process resulted in greater emphasis on relationship building compared with traditional job descriptions in which program delivery was emphasized. We noted variation among LGUs regarding program leader rank and position, with faculty appointments and professional staff included in the dataset. There was some overlap between supervisor and professional educator duties, with positions having 50% or greater supervisory responsibility sorted into the supervisor classification.

DISCUSSION

New or revised EFNEP and SNAP-Ed CCs were developed through a comprehensive process, including a
review of existing competencies for EFNEP and SNAP-Ed and other professions, a review of job descriptions, development of competencies using a participatory method (DACUM), and finally, a comparison of the DACUM competencies with the CC review. Final CCs for program leaders, program supervisors, and paraprofessional educators can be found online in Supplementary Figures 1–3. Significant effort is devoted to recruiting, hiring, training, and evaluating personnel for EFNEP and SNAP-Ed at LGUs. Although there is a need for consistency across programs, each LGU has unique administrative processes. A national set of CCs for these positions can help administrators and program personnel navigate their unique LGU system while maintaining fidelity in EFNEP and SNAP-Ed programs.

As evidenced by this process, it is important to periodically review and revise competencies to remain relevant and effectively address changing program priorities. For example, the original paraprofessional competencies had few references to online programs or PSEs. Recent cultural shifts have increased the importance and emphasis on cultural competency, diversity, equity, and inclusion. These areas are critical for program success and were identified by panelists as needing to be more explicitly stated in the revised competencies.

This process highlighted the need for competencies specific to LGU EFNEP and SNAP-Ed positions. Despite having several competencies developed for nutrition educators (Table 1), clear gaps were identified in the crosswalk. For example, the Society for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position Title</th>
<th>Sources From Professional Societies and Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program Leader</td>
<td>4-H Youth Development Director (Colorado) EFNEP Coordinator (PSE) Global Public Health Workforce (Master) Certified Health Education Specialist Nutrition Educator Public Health Nutritionist Public Health Professional Regional Extension Director (Colorado) Registered Dietitian Nutritionist SNAP-Ed Coordinator (PSE) WIC Program Supervisor (Washington) WIC Program Educator and Paraprofessional (Washington)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor (focused only on supervisory functions)</td>
<td>4-H Extension Specialist for Youth/Volunteer Development (Colorado) Certified Nutrition and Wellness Educator EFNEP Coordinator (PSE) Global Public Health Workforce (Master) Certified Health Education Specialist Nutrition Educator Public Health Nutritionist Public Health Professional Registered Dietitian Nutritionist SNAP-Ed Coordinator (PSE) WIC Program Educator and Paraprofessional (Washington)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraprofessional Educator</td>
<td>Community/Lay Health Advisor EFNEP Coordinator Global Public Health Workforce Nutrition Educator Public Health Nutritionist Public Health Professional WIC Program Educator and Paraprofessional (Washington)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EFNEP indicates Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program; SNAP-Ed, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education; PSE, policy, systems, and environment; WIC, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.
Nutrition Education and Behavior

Education and Behavior nutrition educator competencies were developed for professionals with a minimum of a bachelor’s degree and thus were not fully appropriate for EFNEP paraprofessionals. The Academy of Nutrition and Diets’ Accreditation Standards for Graduate Degree Programs in Nutrition and Diets (future education model) also assumed bachelor and graduate degrees and was clinically oriented for registered dietitian nutritionists.

Others were focused on multiple positions within international public health nutrition, and others on the broad field of public health. Although all contributed useful information, none aligned completely with the unique positions within the LGU EFNEP and SNAP-Ed system. The DACUM process was developed before online meetings were commonplace and were structured to be a 2-day, face-to-face group facilitated process in which panelists work together with the facilitator to develop job duties and tasks related to their specific position. One drawback of conducting DACUM workshops for national programs like EFNEP and SNAP-Ed is the cost of bringing together representative employee panels across the US and territories. Online methods we employed because of the pandemic may be useful for developing competencies in the future. Our online panels presented a new method for revising paraprofessionals and establishing professional educators’ CCs. As noted earlier, this method worked when revising CCs for paraprofessionals but did not work when attempting to develop new CCs for professional educators. In addition to meeting in small groups virtually, the professional educator panels faced the additional challenge of having more heterogeneous job tasks and duties.

One limitation of DACUM is that job duties and tasks are structured to be action-oriented. This works best for jobs that are task-driven, such as manufacturing. It can be more challenging for jobs with theoretical and abstract elements, including program leaders, supervisors, and professional educators. To address this challenge, we allowed increased flexibility in the wording for some of the competencies to convey meaning and nuance. Although we aimed to gather a broad range of nutrition and public health organizations’ job descriptions and competencies for the crosswalk process, it was not an exhaustive list.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

Core competencies can inform employment recruitment by providing accurate, specific job duties and tasks. These job duties and tasks can be incorporated into job announcements and job descriptions confidently because they reflect the work of a group of exemplary employees from the position the organization seeks to fill. Specific job duties can become the basis of interview questions, candidate ranking, and hiring decisions. Final CCs for program leaders, program supervisors, and paraprofessional educators can be found online in Supplementary Figures 1–3.

Core competencies can also inform the development of training programs. This practice is critical when hiring employees, such as paraprofessional educators. These employees are hired on the basis of life skills and experience rather than academic preparation or formal training. Therefore, they require a comprehensive initial training program that addresses each core competency. In other professional positions in which formal academic training may be required, CCs can offer a self-directed checklist for new employees to use during their orientation to confirm their skill set. Core competencies assist program leaders and training managers in determining topics for continuing education opportunities for individuals and groups of employees. The CCs can be given varying levels of importance or weight and then used for detailed evaluation feedback for guidance toward exemplary performance.

Future research is needed to develop CCs for LGU EFNEP and SNAP-Ed professional educators. A new process is underway with professional educators to identify CCs, particularly PSE-related job duties. In addition, we recommend that CCs for LGU EFNEP and SNAP-Ed program leaders, supervisors, and paraprofessional educators are used to develop relevant job descriptions for each of these job classifications. Recruiting, hiring, training, and evaluating the best people for these jobs will allow EFNEP and SNAP-Ed programs to reach their full potential.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**SUPPLEMENTARY DATA**

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2022.10.001.

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