Factors Associated with Perceived Feasibility of Offering an Online Nutrition Education Program for Low-Income Adults

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Abstract

Background: Research examining the implementation of online nutrition education programs for low-income populations is lacking. Understanding perceived feasibility and related contextual factors from the perspective of program facilitators is needed to determine best implementation practices.

Objective: To understand the perspectives of Cooperative Extension Services (CES) employees regarding perceived feasibility of implementing the University of Georgia Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (UGA SNAP-Ed) online nutrition education program, Food eTalk, in their professional settings to the communities they serve.

Study Design, Settings, Participants: In-depth, individual interviews were conducted with 15 UGA CES employees (100% female, 13.3% African American, 53.3% from urban county) interested in offering Food eTalk to their low-income clientele. The Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR), an implementation science meta-theory for evaluating interventions, informed the development of semi-structured interview guides. Topics included nutrition education, community collaboration, and the feasibility of implementing Food eTalk through UGA CES.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: Multi-coder data analysis included deductive coding of predefined CFIR constructs and the use of inductive methods to capture emerging themes.

Results: At the time of the interviews, most participants were offering online nutrition education programs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Contextual factors such as organizational structure and culture, and the types of nutrition education programs UGA CES personnel currently offered to their clients played a role in perceptions of program feasibility. Adequate personnel and time to offer Food eTalk influenced perceptions of program feasibility, as well. Challenges associated with offering Food eTalk included skepticism about the effectiveness of online programs, managing multiple job responsibilities, client SNAP-Ed eligibility for Food eTalk, and concerns about client internet access.

Conclusion: While most UGA CES employees found implementing an online nutrition education program to be a feasible programming opportunity, organizational culture, structure, and target audience influenced educator perceptions of feasibility. The findings from this study will inform and guide statewide Food eTalk implementation efforts in UGA CES.

Background

Since 2014, UGA SNAP-Ed has developed and evaluated the eLearning nutrition education and obesity prevention program, Food eTalk, to reach an expansive statewide low-income, SNAP-Ed eligible audience in Georgia (Stotz and Lee, 2018).

Research examining the implementation of online nutrition education programs for low-income populations, such as Food eTalk, is lacking.

- Studies have examined barriers and facilitators to online nutrition education programs from the perspective of program participants (Loehmer et al., 2016; Neuenschwander, Abbott, and Mobley, 2013).
- However, little is known about the perceptions of nutrition educators on the feasibility of offering eLearning programs to low-income clientele.

Understanding perceived feasibility and related contextual factors from the perspective of program facilitators is needed to determine best implementation practices of eLearning nutrition education programs.

Study Objective

To understand the perspectives of CES employees regarding perceived feasibility of implementing the UGA SNAP-Ed online nutrition education program, Food eTalk, in their professional settings to the communities they serve.

Methods

Study Design, Settings, Participants:

- In-depth, individual interviews were conducted with 15 UGA CES employees (100% female, 13.3% African American) interested in offering Food eTalk to their low-income clientele.
- Participants represented a combination of urban (53.3%) and rural (46.7%) UGA CES programming counties in Georgia.
- Job titles included County Extension Coordinators (CECs) (26.7%), Agents (46.7%), and several employees with combined titles (CEC+Agent, 26.7%).
- All **three programming areas of UGA CES** were represented (FACS, ANR, and 4-H).
- All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Study Sample (N=15)

Characteristics	n (%)
Female	15 (100%)
Black or African American	2 (13.3%)
Serving an Urban Georgian County	8 (53.3%)
UGA CES Programming Area	
Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS)	10 (66.7%)
Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR)	3 (20.0%)
4-H Youth Development (4-H)	2 (13.3%)

The Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR), an implementation science meta-theory for evaluating interventions, informed the development of semi-structured interview guides.

Interview topics included nutrition education, community collaboration, and the feasibility of implementing Food eTalk through UGA CES.

Sample questions included:

- Tell me your thoughts on the feasibility of offering an eLearning nutrition education program to your participants.
- What benefits (if any) do you think an eLearning nutrition education program like Food eTalk might offer your participants?
- Describe any challenges you perceive your county office facing in offering eLearning.

Analysis: Multi-coder data analysis included deductive coding of predefined CFIR constructs and the use of inductive methods to capture emerging themes.

Results

Due to the **impact of COVID-19**, many participants had switched from offering in-person to online nutrition education programming.

- Participants used **various online platforms** such as Facebook and UGA CES websites to provide education, as well as virtual meeting platforms like Zoom to hold classes.
- Some participants felt **prepared to meet the high demand** for virtual educational opportunities, while others shared feeling **challenged or inadequate**.

P3: "So there's a whole new set of skills. I think for myself, I might be a bit behind on some of those skills as far as online. I would think statewide we'll have Extension agents that can just do really, really well with that, or will be challenged."

UGA CES structural characteristics and culture played a role in perceptions of program feasibility.

- 4-H and ANR participants shared concerns regarding a **lack of FACS Agent** present in their county to administer online nutrition education.
- Many participants had **multiple job responsibilities** that impacted their perceived ability to take on offering an additional online program.

Results, Cont'd

Perceived challenges to program feasibility included:

- Participants shared concerns regarding the **time and personnel** needed to implement an online program alongside existing programming.
- **Internet accessibility** was identified as a barrier to client participation, especially by those offering programming in rural counties.
- Some participants were skeptical of **a lack of in-person interaction** associated with online programming that could impact **client interest and motivation**.
- Client SNAP-Ed eligibility arose as a concern when participants were asked to envision an ideal partnership to offer Food eTalk. A partnership that offered access to a low-income target audience was the most popular response.

P13: "I guess it's just that, at this point that it's not that I don't think it's not feasible. It's just that I don't have that time."

P8: "I mean, we just at this point have to rely on other agents, you know, and we all have our own programs so it's not like there's a lot of time that we can you know promote the resources that might be online."

P9: "If I were thinking about participant challenges... there are people with access issues, when it comes to internet capability and devices on which to do programming."

P4: "Some people truly enjoy having somebody, like an instructor in front of them, and they're the student... So maybe that dynamic being missing."

Conclusions

- While most UGA CES employees found implementing an online nutrition education program to be a feasible programming opportunity, organizational culture, structure, and target audience influenced educator perceptions of feasibility.
- The findings from this study will inform and guide statewide Food eTalk implementation and dissemination efforts in UGA CES.

References

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