Cultivating healthy couple & marital relationships

A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

Building community collaborations to support healthy and stable marriages

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Introduction

The involvement of the community, in general, and particularly stakeholders and the target audience, is an important element in the development and implementation of quality programs (Dumka et al. 1995). For example, these persons can help identify the needs of the community as well as the resources or barriers that can influence the program's impact. They can also serve as sounding boards for assessing the quality of the program and how the community will receive it.

From an ecological and developmental perspective (Bogenschneider 1996), the community may be a viable partner in resolving the challenges associated with forming and sustaining healthy marriages. In other words, the community can help define the problem of programmatic need, identify effective strategies for addressing these needs, and generate various resources to assist in carrying out and evaluating your program. More importantly, involving the community in planning "helps ensure that prevention programs fit the community, promotes local ownership, and engenders commitment to seeing that the program is implemented and maintained" (Bogenschneider 1996, 132). This chapter will describe the role and importance of community collaborations, their advantages and challenges, as well as effective strategies for developing sustainable community collaborations that support healthy relationships and marriages.

Sustaining community-based programs

As educators, we strive to maintain, or sustain, quality programs that yield positive impacts. In fact, program sustainability, defined as the capacity of programs to provide continued benefits to families and communities, is contingent on seven major elements (Mancini and Marek 2004). These elements, illustrated in Figure 1, include:

- Competent leadership, or the ability to clearly develop a program's vision and objectives, perform regular needs assessments, facilitate ongoing program planning and adaptation, secure funding, support and supervise staff, and foster healthy communication among stakeholders and collaborators;

- Intentional planning for continued funding from diverse sources;

- The inclusion of committed, qualified staff (or volunteers) in the development and execution of the program, particularly persons who are from the community being served;

- An ability to effectively evaluate the processes and outcomes of the program;

- A clear understanding of the community needs and resources as well as the inclusion of community members in the program;

- The ability of a program to adapt in response to changes in the community needs; and of particular focus in this chapter,

- Strong and effective collaborations with relevant stakeholders who actively support the goals of the program and have clearly defined responsibilities.

Figure 1. **The seven major elements of program sustainability**

Source: Mancini and Marek (2004)

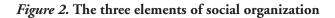**The community saturation model**

Specific to relationship and marriage education programming, there are various approaches to fostering sustainability that rely heavily on effective community collaborations. For example, local and state efforts are emerging across the country to facilitate what is referred to as a community saturation model of marriage education (Hawkins et al. 2004). The intent of this model is to recruit partners and leaders from within communities who will support marriage education efforts and "then flood the community with messages and opportunities to build and sustain healthy marriages" (Hawkins et al. 2004, 553). These initiatives strive to create cultural-level changes where marriage is viewed, not only as a private concern but also a public matter that impacts the well-being of the community. Hence, a community's involvement in the development of programming is as important as its involvement in delivering and sustaining the message that the program is intending to convey; in this case, that healthy marriages are important!
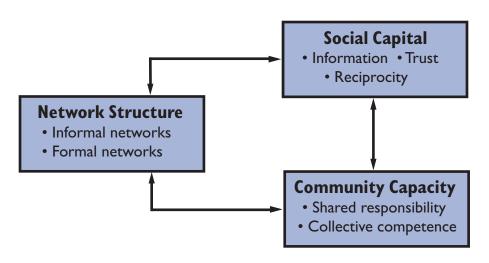
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Community social organization

Similar to what is accomplished through community saturation is what has been referred to as social organization or "the collection of values, norms, processes, and behavior patterns within a community that organize, facilitate, and constrain the interactions among community members" (Mancini, Martin, and Bowen 2003, 319). In the case of supporting healthy marriages, this would involve the process by which communities build and sustain healthy and stable marriages by creating a culture and support mechanisms to help individuals and couples acquire the necessary skills and resources to do so. Another way of thinking about social organization is to view it as a process that builds community assets or maximizes opportunities for individuals, families, and the community as a whole (Mancini, Bowen, and Martin 2005).

Mancini and his colleagues (2005) note that "social organization includes networks of people, the exchanges and reciprocity that transpire in relationships, accepted standards and norms of social support, and social controls that regulate behavior and interaction" (572). As illustrated in Figure 2, they discuss three key elements that affect social organization:

- Community networks composed of informal and formal relationships. Informal networks include those with work colleagues, friends, neighbors, and other voluntary relationships, and formal networks consist of associations between agencies and organizations. These networks are interrelated and each has the potential for strengthening the other.

- Social capital, a key component of community social organization. This is the accumulation of resources – including information, opportunities, and instrumental support – that are created through the reciprocity and trust that forms in these community networks.

- And last, community capacity, or the action component of social organization.

Figure 2. **The three elements of social organization**

Source: Mancini, Bowen, and Martin (2005)

Bowen, Martin, Mancini, and Nelson (2000) define community capacity as "the extent to which community members (a) demonstrate a sense of shared responsibility for the general welfare of the community and its members, and (b) demonstrate collective competence in taking advantage of opportunities for addressing community needs and confronting situations that threaten the safety and well-being of community members" (7). More specifically, they note that community capacity focuses on:

- A concern for both the community in general and for particular parts of the community;

- The degree of capacity, rather than simply the presence or absence of it;

- Taking action, rather than merely making statements about supporting the community;

- Seizing opportunities to take action as opposed to be being reactive; and

- Incorporating action into normative everyday life situations as well as responding to situations of threat.

Hence, effective social organization yields community action where shared outcomes desired by community members are the result, and direction is given for "targeted application of resources to resolve issues and address concerns, as well as to achieve positive community goals" (Mancini et al 2005, 575).

A central element of social organization (and community saturation) that produces social capital and fosters community capacity to support healthy marriages, is the bringing together of formal and informal networks. The needs of couples (and families) cannot be fully addressed by any single entity. Examination of successful community marriage initiatives across the country (e.g., Doherty and Anderson 2004) shows that they include collaborators from various sectors of the community.

These partners, or stakeholders, assume clearly identified responsibilities and work together to actively support a shared vision that leads to helping couples and marriages grow and develop in healthy ways. Also, as noted earlier, including couples and other volunteers from the target community is critical to building community capacity that supports healthy marriages. For more information about important formal networks to approach, review The Lewin Group resources on coalition building for a community healthy marriage initiative (**http://www.lewin.com/Spolights/LewinHP/Marriage.html**).

Defining community collaboration

It may be helpful to clarify certain characteristics that define a collaborative. Although community groups may be working toward supporting healthy relationships and marriages, the extent to which groups share resources and develop a common identity or shared vision may vary. As shown in Table 1, Hogue (1994) defines five levels of relationships that differ in their purpose, structure, and process. These relationships vary along a continuum from low to high integration:

- Networks function primarily to exchange information and foster communication;

- Alliances are a bit more formal in process and serve to reduce duplication of efforts;

Possible Community Collaborators
- Government
- Social Services
- Cooperative Extension
- Head Start agencies
- Faith community
- Housing/Urban Development
- Family Services
- Other agencies or groups
- Community action agencies relevant to your community
- School/youth programs
- Volunteers
- Public health and WIC
- Couples

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Table 1. Community linkages – choices and decisions

Levels	Purpose	Structure	Process
Networking	• Dialogue and common understanding • Clearinghouse for information • Create base of support	• Non-hierarchial • Loose/flexible link • Roles loosely defined • Community action is primary link among members	• Low-key leadership • Minimal decision making • Little conflict • Informal communication
Cooperation or alliance	• Match needs and provide coordination • Limit duplication of services • Ensure tasks are done	• Central body of people as communication hub • Semi-formal links • Roles somewhat defined • Links are advisory • Group leverages/raises money	• Facilitative leaders • Complex decision making • Some conflict • Formal communications within the central group
Coordination or partnership	• Share resources to address common issues • Merge resource base to create something new	• Central body of people consists of decision makers • Roles defined • Links formalized • Group develops new resources and joint budget	• Autonomous leadership but focus in on issue • Group decision making in central and subgroups • Communication is frequent and clear
Coalition	• Share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems • Develop commitment for a minimum of three years	• All members involved in decision making • Roles and time defined • Links formal with written agreement • Group develops new resources and joint budget	• Shared leadership • Decision making formal with all members • Communication is common and prioritized
Collaboration	• Accomplish shared vision and impact benchmarks • Build interdependent system to address issues/opportunities	• Consensus used in shared decision making • Roles, time, and evaluation formalized • Links are formal and written in work assignments	• Leadership high, trust level high, productivity high • Ideas and decisions equally shared • Highly developed communication

Source: Teresa Hogue (1994)

- Partnerships involve sharing helpful resources to support each others' interests and goals and some joint planning and activity, while still maintaining autonomy;

- Coalitions bring members together to work toward complementary goals through coordinated efforts and sharing of resources; and

- Collaboratives entail working toward a common vision, jointly taking action, and sharing the decision-making process.

In some cases collaboration is the ideal relationship, while in other cases a partnership or coalition may be more appropriate. What's important is that members understand and agree upon the mission or purpose of the group. In the remainder of this chapter I refer to collaborations, but similar ideas and strategies presented could apply to other forms of community relationships.

Advantages and challenges of community collaboration

Building community collaborations to support healthy marriages and families offers several advantages. For many couples, particularly among low-income populations (Ooms and Wilson 2004), the issues and risk factors that inhibit movement to or the sustainability of a healthy marriage are interrelated, such as employability, economic stability, health concerns, relationship maturity (e.g., skills and knowledge needed to develop/maintain a relationship). Working together helps the community not only deliver a consistent message (e.g., that marriage is important and that healthy marriages require work) and develop joint goals and objectives to convey that message, but creates opportunities to reach couples through a variety of channels. Collaborations link available community resources and produce new resources that make it possible to support healthy marriages.

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Building community collaborations can also be challenging. Disagreements are likely to arise in formalizing project goals and carrying out strategies to achieve the collaborative's mission. Turf and boundary issues may exist regarding who specializes in the delivery of certain services. Competing demands for other worthy projects in the community coupled with limited funding to carry out these projects may impede collaboration. And, opposing perspectives and opinions about priority needs or strategies can create friction within the collaboration and delay progress. Hence, it is important (yet challenging) to find the balance between broad community representation and having people who work well together.

Composition of community collaborations

When selecting community partners, it is important to be inclusive to ensure representation from the community being served as well as the diverse services available for couples and families. Working with a core leadership group or steering committee – which is also diverse and representative – to think strategically about which agencies or partners to involve, in what order, and the best way to approach them is an important first step (The Lewin Group 2003). Here are some questions to consider in determining the composition of your collaboration (**http://www.helpingamericasyouth.gov**):

- What skills, information, and resources do we need?

- What resources already exist in the community?

- How can we reach stakeholders?

- What expertise and services can other groups and organizations contribute?

- What members of the community can help bring credibility to our cause?

- Do members represent a variety of different constituent groups or cultural perspectives?

As noted earlier, recruiting a broad and representative number of partners to work together will enable the collaboration to effectively address community issues around marriage as well as access and attract a great number and variety of resources to support the collaboration's efforts. Importantly, a broad membership will increase the community's "buy in" because of the multiple perspectives contributing to the group's decision and action plan (The Lewin Group 2003). While some community members are natural partners already working on marriage enrichment issues, others may need to be approached carefully and sounded out to understand their issues and concerns (The Lewin Group 2003). Once you identify potential members to participate in the community collaboration, consider the following questions (**http://www.helpingamericasyouth.gov**):

- What can each potential member contribute (e.g., staff time, money, space, allies, data, media relations, credibility, skills)?

- Do the individuals represent a variety of different constituent groups or cultural perspectives? Are any groups or perspectives missing?

- Will certain organizations or individuals need incentives to join? What will they gain by joining the effort (e.g., increased skills, networking, access to policymakers)?

- What constitutes membership within the community partnership?

Making community collaborations work

The Lewin Group (2003) provides a rather complete outline of the critical steps to follow in building a successful healthy marriage coalition and establishing a collaborative partnership among a diverse set of members. While each of these steps needs to be addressed, they do not need to be implemented in a particular order. Briefly, these steps include the following:

- Clearly define the core working group

- Assemble the broad membership

- Clearly define the leadership

- Clearly define the shared mission and vision, goals, and action steps

- Define structure, staffing, and communication

- Identify resources and funding sources

- Implement strategies and action plans to achieve the mission and goals

- Evaluate the work of the collaboration as it progresses

- Sustain the collaboration

The first two steps have been discussed already. I will briefly describe the remaining steps, but for more information and a list of questions to consider

in making sure the essential components of each step are addressed, visit
http://www.lewin.com/Spotlights/LewinHP/Marriage.htm.

Clearly defined leadership. It is crucial to select a leader or a steering
committee able to attend to the many aspects of organizational functioning,
including convening meetings, communication, clarifying roles and
responsibilities, and decision making. A good leader will also maintain the
focus and momentum of the collaboration and facilitate and coordinate
activities. The leader should be able to effectively negotiate between
organizations and individuals with different agendas and assist in bringing
conflicts to the surface, addressing those conflicts, and resolving them.
Successful leaders will also demonstrate trustworthiness as well as establish
trust among members of the collaboration and the community. Last,
leadership should be shared or rotated, rather than falling on the shoulders of
one or two individuals.

Clear and shared mission, goals, and plan. A successful collaboration
is defined by its ability to accomplish a shared vision and meet its impact
benchmarks. Thus, creating a clear mission that is shared by the members of
the collaboration and to which everyone is highly committed is a critical step
in achieving this success. There are several resources available to guide this
process, and it may be advantageous to seek expertise from the community,
including your local or state Cooperative Extension Service, to facilitate a
workshop or retreat to cultivate the group's vision, short- and long-term goals,
and action plans. The process should include the following steps (The Lewin
Group 2003):

- State the **mission** to concisely describe what will be accomplished and why
  it is important. The mission should be outcome-oriented and use widely
  inclusive language to enroll potential new members and avoid limiting
  participation.

- Specify the **goals and objectives** to indicate what and how much will be
  accomplished by when. These should be realistic and include a combination
  of short- and long-term goals. Clearly specify the changes to be achieved
  that represent your goals and objectives.

- Identify **action steps** that specify which members will do which tasks by
  when. During this planning process identify **strategies** for how the work
  will be accomplished and try to anticipate potential challenges and
  obstacles. Create a plan that is flexible enough to respond to unanticipated
  changes in the community, resources (e.g., funding, staff support), or the
  composition of the collaboration. Periodically review your plan and analyze
  its effectiveness.

> A successful collaboration is defined by its ability
> to accomplish a shared vision and meet its impact benchmarks.

Structure, staffing, and communication. To function efficiently and
effectively, the collaboration should establish a **structure** that defines the
procedures for building and sustaining collaborations within the community.
This may include how members are identified and accepted, leadership
is chosen, differences are resolved, decisions are made, and work and
responsibilities are delegated. Pending the availability of funding, hiring **staff**

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with strong organizational and communication skills and a connection with or understanding of the community can help organize, facilitate, and mobilize the collaboration. If funding is limited, recruit committed volunteers or use existing staff within partnering organizations. Last, open communication – both internally, among the collaboration's members, and externally, with the broader community – is important to ensuring that a clear understanding of what the collaboration is attempting to accomplish and how exists, as well as engendering trust, commitment, and credibility. Allow for adequate time to network and develop these processes and relationships.

Identify resources and funding. Funding is needed to sustain the collaboration's efforts of coordination, information exchange, resource development, and program deployment. Before seeking funding, consider for what purposes funding will be used (e.g., hire staff, pay for printing and mailings, support marketing activities, pay for projects or activities). Identify and build a diverse "portfolio" of funding through a variety of sources, including grants, fund-raising activities, in-kind support, private sector (e.g., businesses), foundations, membership dues, or other creative approaches to soliciting support. Note, however, that collaborations that cooperate only to seek funding are more likely to fail than collaborations that form as comprehensive community-wide responses to a problem (National Network for Collaboration 1995).

> …collaborations that cooperate only to seek funding are more likely to fail than collaborations that form as comprehensive community-wide responses to a problem.

Implement strategies and action plans. In addition to establishing processes to achieve the collaboration's mission and goals, take action on achieving the short- and long-term goals to fulfill the mission. Build on your successes in meeting small goals as you strive to achieve the next set of goals – celebrate small and big successes both within the collaboration and the broader community. Sharing the collaboration's milestones and accomplishments can help engender feelings of success among the members, maintain momentum and energy, and help to continue to attract new members, resources, and support from within the community. Use media outlets to share these successes.

Evaluation and documentation of impact. Evaluation efforts are essential to monitoring progress related to the collaboration's goals and objectives and to make modifications where necessary. Although a brief overview of what to evaluate is provided here, a thorough description of this process is beyond the scope of the current chapter (see Chapter 2). Collaborations would benefit from partnering with universities or other specialists to assist in evaluation and documentation of their accomplishments. Seek out existing resources that outline effective strategies for evaluating programs, in general, and, more specifically, collaborations. For example, the University of Wisconsin Extension has developed a compilation of such evaluation guides that are available on-line (**http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/index.html**).

Consistent with a logic model, evaluation efforts should assess process, outcomes, and impacts that coincide with the mission and goals of the collaborative. Evaluating **process** involves documenting and assessing the inputs, or the investments being made, and outputs, or the procedures, activities, and products produced. This may involve asking questions such as:

- Are the right people on board? What is the level of involvement?
- Are we working effectively together as a group? Are members satisfied? Are we achieving what we want?
- Are programs being implemented as planned?
- Are we using resources wisely?
- How can we sustain people's involvement?

Outcomes represent the desired conditional changes that the collaboration seeks to achieve that answer the question, "What was accomplished?" In other words, outcomes are the verifiable results of the activities and products delivered, and may include changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations of the participants and community. Last, **impacts**, the highest level of outcomes, include those results that usually take longer to achieve and have wider socioeconomic and environmental benefit (University of Wisconsin-Extension 1998). Impacts answer the question, "What were the long-range effects?" and are associated with the mission of the collaboration (e.g., reductions in divorce rates, fewer out-of-wedlock births, and healthy/stable families).

> "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."
>
> —Margaret Mead

Sustainability of the collaboration. Effectively following the steps outlined in this chapter for building a collaboration should move communities towards achieving capacity to sustain efforts that support healthy and stable marriages. According to The Lewin Group (2003), a collaboration needs to develop a maintenance plan to sustain its

- Guiding vision and mission, and related goals and objectives.
- Basic governance structure and rules for operating within that framework or structure.
- Leadership and membership.
- Roles, responsibilities, and functions of members.
- Funding and public support.
- Visibility in the context of the broader community.

Instituting systems to provide sustained membership, resources, and strategic program planning will enable collaborative efforts to continue and for healthy and stable relationships to flourish.

Conclusion

Making positive and sustainable impacts on current and future marriages is more likely to occur when the community is actively engaged. Effective community collaborations create cultures and support mechanisms that help individuals and couples acquire the necessary skills and resources to form healthy and stable marriages. This chapter provides ideas to help move communities forward in supporting healthy marriages. Use the resources specified here for more details on how to build and evaluate a collaboration. Reach out, build collaborations, and work together to make a difference in the quality of marriages and families in your community.

NATIONAL EXTENSION RELATIONSHIP & MARRIAGE EDUCATION NETWORK