

**Preliminary Report Executive Summary: Call-to-Conversation
A Path Forward for an Effective, Relevant, and Inclusive 21st Century
Food and Nutrition Education Program
27 September 2017**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Situation

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture (NIFA/USDA), is committed to improving health and reducing hunger and poverty in America through food and nutrition education. Low-income families develop healthy habits in eating, physical activity, food handling, and food storage through peer educator-led training using credible, research-based nutrition information from the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). NIFA and its predecessor agencies have provided leadership to EFNEP for nearly 50 years. Changes to America's social, cultural, and learning environment, combined with Cooperative Extension resource challenges in recent years, and a call for a social ecological approach to nutrition and health from the U.S. Dietary Guidelines 2015-2020, prompt the question what should NIFA-funded nutrition education look like in the 21st Century.

As NIFA looks to the future, the agency and its program implementing partners need to ensure that NIFA-funded nutrition education [EFNEP] is commensurate with demographic, social, and technological change, and determine what is essential for continued and even greater programmatic success. Further, NIFA's place within the new collective action paradigm that is called for by the U.S. Dietary Guidelines, needs to be clearly elucidated.

Process

On June 14th and 15th, 2017, 64 stakeholders, representing the EFNEP audience and frontline staff, program and university leadership, and federal, state, and organizational partners met to begin a discussion of how to efficiently and effectively scale up nutrition education efforts to expand program reach, while also maintaining its high rate of return. Participants were charged to think long-term – Having nearly 50 years of experience with EFNEP, and knowing what we know, if we were to start with a blank slate, what should programming look like in 30 years?

Participants were divided into small discussion groups and responded to five questions:

- Who in the target audience would not be served if EFNEP remains the same in 2047 – 30 years from now?
- What do we need to do to reach these audiences – not worrying about resources?
- What barriers and challenges exist for making needed changes, and how might these be overcome?
- What is the role of partners – who are potential partners, why are partnerships important, and what are the mutual benefits in having partnerships?
- What are your recommendations for the future of nutrition education?

Following the meeting with invited stakeholders, NIFA reached out broadly to land-grant universities through website postings, electronic newsletters, and listserv messages to Extension Directors/Administrators, Family and Consumer Science Leaders, and EFNEP leadership and program staff. Feedback was requested for the same questions that had been previously asked, except for the question on partners, since requests for feedback were targeted to universities that conduct EFNEP. Thirteen university responses were received – 2 individual and 11 group responses.

All responses were transcribed, organized, and then evaluated by content analysis.

Results and Conclusions

No clear consensus emerged from respondents as to what would constitute an “Effective, Relevant, and Inclusive Food and Nutrition Education Program in the 21st Century.” However, certain themes emerged across all questions that were asked.

Unless there are changes to programming, the current target audience will be less accessible – especially rural and mid-size communities, Native Americans, people from other cultures or who speak other languages, the working poor, intergenerational families, tech savvy youth and young adults, low-literacy and technologically challenged youth and adults, and people transitioning out of incarceration or drug rehabilitation centers. Responses were mixed as to whether programming should reach out to those who may fall between the cracks or should focus on easier to reach audiences.

Innovation and adaptability has been a hallmark of EFNEP and is essential. Combined face-to-face and technology learning strategies are especially needed. Historically, the flexibility within EFNEP allowed the program to evolve from one-on-one home visits to hands on engaged, group learning experiences. Without new approaches to reaching the culturally diverse population and new generations of technologically dependent learners, EFNEP will become obsolete. EFNEP will no longer be a leader in integrating successful strategies for working with low-income audiences. Training will be essential at all levels to assure quality, consistency, and integrity of programming.

New learning strategies must be theoretically-grounded and evidence-based. Data-driven programming that is supported by evaluation and research is also essential. As new learning models are considered, it will be important to maintain a deep commitment to experiential learning based on education theory. Data is essential for program improvement and reinforcement. Evaluation and reporting needs to keep pace with changes to program content and approaches used, and should be streamlined, and yet rich and relevant in the short term and over time. **Funding support for program implementation research is a critical need.**

Greater flexibility is needed with the paraprofessional model to address a local supervisory crisis that is emerging and to support expanded community partnerships and the implementation of policy, system, and environmental (PSE) changes that complement and extend the influence of direct education.

Equity in funding 1862, 1890, and 1994 institutions is supported on a high level to more effectively and efficiently reach the target audience. Care must be taken to not upset current program impacts and already challenged Cooperative Extension infrastructures.

Partnerships need to evolve at every level to improve program reach and impact and to achieve the collective action called for in the U.S. Dietary Guidelines. Other benefits of partnerships are leveraged resources and shared expertise, enhanced program capacity and synergy, and increased participant access to personally relevant programs and learning opportunities. Although Extension has a key role in facilitating programming and coordination at the local level, strategies are needed for improving coordination, cooperation, and collaboration within and across universities, with existing and potential partners, with NIFA funders, and with other agencies and organizations that engage in nutrition education programming. An effective, strategic national partnership with public and private partners and a coordinated national nutrition education plan may be needed. **Marketing strategies** are also imported to facilitate program reach and to maintain program identity.

Respondents expressed pride in the success and influence of EFNEP over the past half century. Yet, they also voiced concern as to whether it – or any such program – could survive without a serious infusion of funds and corresponding evolution of programming.

Next Steps

In coming weeks, NIFA will form a group of key stakeholders to examine this report and other relevant documentation and provide specific recommendations for a path forward to an effective, relevant, and inclusive 21st Century food and nutrition education program. The majority of members will be selected from among those who participated in the June meeting. This group will:

- Identify and flesh out the critical elements that are essential to a successful and sustainable program;
- Determine how NIFA's food and nutrition programming intersects with and is part of other food and nutrition efforts and what is essential for successful collective action across nutrition education programs; and
- Develop a shared vision and communication strategy that university and other essential partners can embrace.

Ideally, the efforts of this working group will result in a successful, national initiative and facilitate:

- Support and buy-in from all affected stakeholders, with an expanded network of advocates;
- Development of a functional framework that fleshes out the critical elements that are essential to a successful and sustainable food and nutrition education program – one which identifies university and national needs, sets priorities, coordinates efforts and achieves synergies among federal, university, and other key partners;
- Increased investment in low-income food and nutrition education from federal and non-federal sources; and
- The essence of a food and nutrition education program that supports the nutritional health and well-being of low-income populations of the 21st Century through:
 - a greatly expanded reach;

- maintained high program impacts and positive return on investment;
- adoption of strategies to meet demographic, social, and technological change; and
- alignment with other programs for collective nutritional health impacts.

NIFA will provide support and serve as a liaison among stakeholders represented by the working group and other federal agencies, as needed.