Extension Nutrition Program Uses Retrospective Survey to Determine Impact on Participants

The Situation
During the eight years that the Extension Nutrition Program (ENP) has been in operation, the evaluation component has been continually re-examined. ENP has worked to find a valid way to track the program’s impact on its participants. ENP uses the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) Evaluation/Reporting System (ERS) to track participant demographic data. This program provides a complete profile of adult participants which includes: numbers, gender, ethnic characteristics, distribution of ages, enrollment in other programs, places of residence, types of instruction received, number of lessons given, and numbers of participants completing, graduating, or terminating early from the program.

Efforts to monitor participants’ nutrition, food safety, and resource management behavior changes have included the use of the EFNEP Behavior Checklist. This is a survey administered to participants at program entry and then again at exit. These pre and post self-reported behavior scores were used to document behavior change in those who graduated from the program. In FY 2000 ENP revised that checklist in order to collect data that was more closely aligned with overall program objectives. We used the first four questions from the original EFNEP survey on Food Resource Management and chose eleven additional questions from the EFNEP survey about nutrition, food safety, and money management practices.

While using this survey, program personnel felt that the data collected from participants when they were first enrolled in ENP was not a valid assessment. Many participants did not fully understand the survey questions until after they had been exposed to the ENP lessons on nutrition, food safety, and resource management. Also, they thought that many participants experienced a reluctance to indicate their true behavior at the beginning of their participation in the program.

Our Response
In FY 2002 ENP again revised the survey in order to better measure the program’s impact. We began administering the ENP Survey using the “Post-then-Pre” (Retrospective) method. Research conducted at Oregon State University and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln found that retrospective surveys are valid and reliable evaluation tools for tracking behavior outcomes. We now administer the ENP Survey after participants have completed a minimum of six lessons. Graduates complete each survey item by answering two questions: one by indicating their behavior after completing the ENP lessons (Post), and the other by reflecting on their behavior before they had participated in the series of ENP lessons.
This method allows the participant to respond to both questions within the same frame of reference, thus reducing response shift bias that is often found in self-report, pre-post designs.

Program Outcomes

During FY 2002, ENP compared 135 pre/post survey results with 65 retrospective survey results. We found that 100% of the retrospective surveys were completed, compared to only 35% of the pre/post surveys. When the two surveys were compared we also found that a higher percentage (6-19%) of participants completing the retrospective survey made favorable behavior changes in eating, food safety, and resource management practices, compared to those that completed the pre/post survey. By the end of FY 2002, ENP had a total of 346 completed surveys with post-then-pre scores to measure participants’ behavior changes.

Using a retrospective survey has given ENP a more realistic view of behavior change among program participants. By using this retrospective survey at graduation, ENP Nutrition Advisors think that participants have a clearer understanding of the behaviors and skills this program is trying to affect; therefore they have a better understanding of what the survey questions ask. Participants also seem less threatened by the survey questions and are able to be more truthful, with the result that program outcomes show improvement in participant behavior that is more accurate.

During FY2002, ENP reported the following outcomes:

91% of graduates showed improvement in one or more of the following food resource management practices: plans meals, compares prices, does not run out of food, uses grocery lists. 77% of graduates showed improvement in two or more of these practices.

In the area of nutrition 72% of participants reported more often eating three or more servings of vegetables per day. 70% more often ate two or more servings of fruit per day, and 63% more often ate low-fat foods instead of high-fat foods. 77% of ENP participants were also more likely to make food choices using food labels.

In food safety practices 59% of participants reported that they less often thawed meat at room temperature. Improvement in specific money management practices was reported with 72% more often keeping a written spending plan, and 64% more often setting aside money for emergencies.

42% of ENP participants had also increased their physical activity by walking, gardening, etc.

For More Information

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