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Our Cornerstone: Developing a Collective Understanding of Research-Based and Evidence-Based Programming within the Human Sciences

Introduction

As the use of evidence-based programming is likely to become more critical to Extension practice, Extension educators should be positioned to select and provide programs within their specialty areas that meet commonly accepted standards. By most of these standards, a program is considered to be evidence-based after it has been rigorously evaluated with a randomized controlled trial and shown to produce positive outcomes. A research-based program is one that contains research-based content but has not necessarily been evaluated.

This poster describes a series of professional development opportunities (“PD Series”) that were designed to create a shared understanding of what it means for a program to be research- or evidence-based and to facilitate the application of this knowledge within Human Sciences Extension and Outreach.

Professional Development Series

A series of six professional development opportunities related to research- and evidence-based programming was developed through collection of baseline data and guided by adult learning literature. Key messages were reinforced through the provision of sequential learning opportunities spaced throughout the year (2014), and the inclusion of a variety of learning methods for maximum engagement.

Three existing mechanisms within the organizational infrastructure were used for dissemination and delivery of the PD Series. The use of these pre-existing, structured channels was designed to communicate to all educators engaged with human sciences programming, to encourage participation in these opportunities by offering a variety of engagement methods, and to assist with message repetition.

Existing Mechanisms for Delivery of the PD Series

- **Community Chat:** A PDF digest of relevant information sent via email each Friday.
- **First Thursday:** One-hour webinars that provide information and education across a variety of topics and often include guest presenters. Participation is voluntary.
- **Inservice:** Two-day, face-to-face professional development meetings that occur twice yearly. Participation is highly encouraged for state-level educators; invitations are extended to county-level educators.

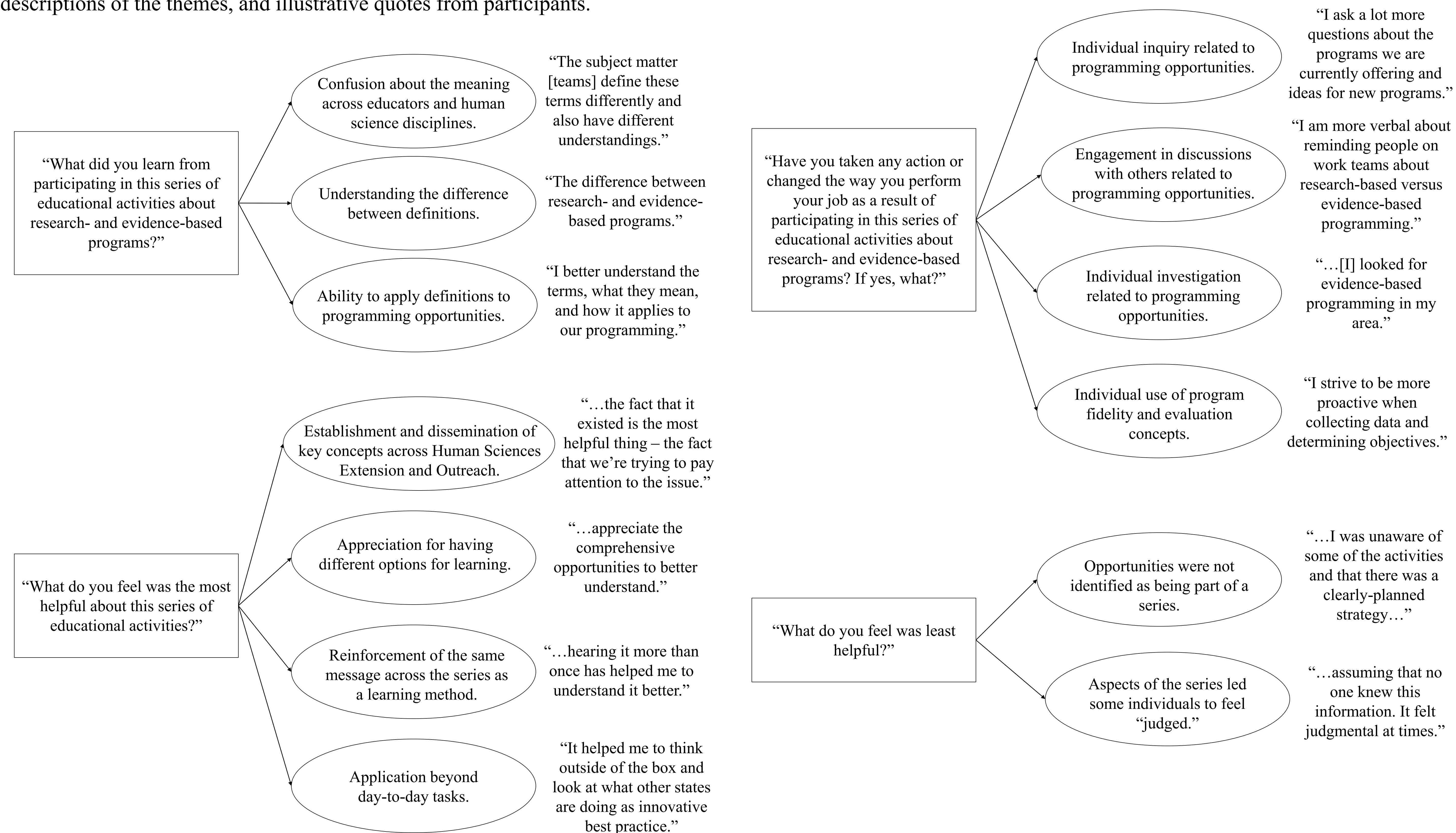
Methods

- Participants were state and county-level educators.
- Participation in data collection activities and the PD Series was voluntary.
- Data were collected before and after implementation of the PD Series via anonymous web-based surveys.
- 106 educators participated in the baseline survey; 77 participated in the follow-up survey.
- Surveys included multiple choice and open-ended questions.

Results

The two relatively higher participation rates were for the First Thursday and Inservice opportunities, both of which were synchronous activities. The average participation rate was 35% with a range across the professional development opportunities of 16%-55%. There was generally lower participation in asynchronous and self-directed learning activities. Additionally, state-level educators were more likely than county-level educators to have participated in each professional development opportunity.

Follow-up survey participants were asked four open-ended questions intended to assess their response to the Professional Development Series. This qualitative data was analyzed through the use of open and focused coding processes and codes were inductively generated from the data. When disagreements occurred, the codes were examined in detail and debated until agreement was reached. Codes were then grouped into broader themes via consensus. Below we provide the questions, descriptions of the themes, and illustrative quotes from participants.



Implications for Extension

Educator reactions to the series on this topic varied, ranging from appreciating the opportunity to learn about the topic to feeling “judged.” The varying levels of pre-existing knowledge and engagement with the PD Series across educators suggest that a train-the-trainer model could be a practical implementation strategy for other Extension systems. A baseline survey could be used to identify educators with the prescribed level of knowledge on research- and evidence-based standards. These individuals would then receive a standardized training to fill any gaps in their knowledge before they were deployed to train other educators. Alternative delivery mechanisms that use the strengths and knowledge of current faculty and staff to elevate the knowledge of the entire unit may be beneficial.

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