
**CONTINUING EDUCATION NEEDS OF NUTRITION
EDUCATION AND TRAINING PERSONNEL**

PREFACE

This research was conceived as part of *The Strategic Plan for Nutrition Education*, and it became a reality through partnerships with Nutrition Education and Training Program personnel and others involved in nutrition education in Child Nutrition Programs. It is our hope that information from this research will be used in planning continuing professional education for nutrition educators.

This research was begun by **Dr. Jeannie Sneed** and completed by **Dr. Martha Conklin**. We are grateful to both for their expertise in conducting the research and working with the NET Advisory Committee. **Dr. Mary Frances Nettles** and **Ms. Deborah Carr** reviewed the final report and provided constructive advice. **Ms. Lisa Barrett** prepared the manuscript. We appreciate all the contributions of an efficient and dedicated staff.

Roy S. Maize, III, PhD, RD
Director of Applied Research

Josephine Martin, PhD, RD
Executive Director



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	ii
Executive Summary	vi
Introduction	1
Method	1
Results	3
Conclusions	17
References	18
Appendix A: Net Advisory Committee Participants	19
Appendix B: Study Questionnaire	21



LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Rate of return of study questionnaires 3

Table 2. Reliability of continuing education need content areas 6

Table 3. Ratings for continuing education needs for personnel involved in nutrition education 7

Table 4. Topics for continuing education rated as moderate-to-high need for nutrition education personnel 8

Table 5. Ratings for continuing education needs for personnel involved in nutrition education by level of employment 10

Table 6. Topics for continuing education rated by personnel involved in nutrition education at the state and district levels 12



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Level of employment	4
Figure 2. USDA regions	4
Figure 3. Education	5
Figure 4. Area of education	5
Figure 5. Areas of continuing education needs rated by state and district NET professionals . . .	11



CONTINUING EDUCATION NEEDS OF NUTRITION EDUCATION AND TRAINING PERSONNEL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The United States Department of Agriculture authorized a strategic planning process in 1992 to strengthen the Nutrition Education and Training (NET) Program. Research scientists at the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) initiated a study in 1994 to help achieve the goal of defining roles and responsibilities of nutrition education personnel.

Continuing professional education is a prime vehicle for assuring that nutrition education personnel at all levels of employment perform consistently with national guidelines. The purposes of this study were to determine continuing education needs of NET personnel employed at the national USDA, regional USDA, state, and school district levels as perceived by professionals working in these positions, and to determine how ratings of continuing education needs differ based on level of employment.

A mail questionnaire was sent to 194 national, regional, state, and school district professionals involved in the NET Program. The questionnaire consisted of a list of areas/topics for which continuing education might be needed by NET personnel. Respondents were asked to indicate the level of need for continuing education using a four-point scale: no need (0), low need (1), moderate need (2), and high need (3).

One hundred and seventeen individuals (60%) returned the survey. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents were employed in nutrition education activities at the state level, 35 percent in school districts, 4 percent at the regional USDA level, and 2 percent in national USDA offices. All USDA regions were represented by the respondents with the largest percentage (35%) working in the West. The majority (90%) were employed full-time and devoted 53% of their time strictly to nutrition and food service education responsibilities. Respondents had been employed in a job with nutrition and food service education responsibilities an average of 14 years.

Major Study Findings

The area for continuing education rated the highest by all respondents was program evaluation. Delivery of educational programs/instructional activities and needs assessment areas also were ranked



among the highest areas of need for continuing education. The use of new technology for education (i.e., CD-ROM, interactive video) was the specific continuing education topic with the highest mean rating.

State NET personnel rated program evaluation and community outreach/marketing as the areas with the highest need for continuing education. District-level nutrition education professionals gave the highest mean ratings to needs assessment, delivery of educational programs/instructional activities, and community outreach/marketing content areas. The mean rating of district personnel with regards to the need for continuing education in the delivery of educational programs/instructional activities was significantly higher ($p < .05$) than the mean rating given by state NET personnel.

CONCLUSIONS

The need for continuing education as perceived by nutrition education personnel employed at the national USDA, regional USDA, state, and school district levels was determined. Most of the ten content areas received overall mean ratings indicating a moderate need for continuing education. Administrators can use this information in planning continuing professional education for nutrition education personnel.

CONTINUING EDUCATION NEEDS OF NUTRITION EDUCATION AND TRAINING PERSONNEL

The Nutrition Education and Training (NET) Program was started in 1977 with the passage of PL 95-177. The purpose of NET Program funding was to encourage states to provide nutrition education to children, train food service workers, and collaborate with teachers to incorporate nutrition into the curriculum.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture initiated a strategic planning process in 1992 in response to recommendations from a report entitled *Nutrition Needs of Children*. One of the goals developed by *The Strategic Plan for Nutrition Education* stated that the proportion of nutrition education personnel in Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) at all levels of employment with roles and responsibilities that are consistent with national guidelines should be increased to at least 75 percent by the year 2000. The strategy for achieving that goal was to collaborate with the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) and other agencies in developing national guidelines on roles and responsibilities of nutrition education personnel in CNPs (Mandell, 1993).

Continuing professional education is a prime vehicle for assuring that nutrition education personnel at the national USDA, regional USDA, state, and school district levels of employment perform consistently with national guidelines. One of the ways to determine the continuing education needs of NET personnel is to ask them, because professionals make judgments on a consistent basis about their need for updated knowledge and skills to enhance effectiveness. The purposes of this study were to:

- ◆ Determine continuing education needs of nutrition education personnel employed at the national USDA, regional USDA, state, and school district levels as perceived by professionals working in these positions.
- ◆ Determine how ratings of continuing education needs differ based on level of employment.

METHOD

Advisory Committee

An advisory committee was formed to assist in the development of the project. This committee helped formulate plans for a study on roles and responsibilities of NET personnel (Conklin, 1995) as well as this study on continuing education needs of NET professionals. The advisory committee was composed of nutrition education professionals from each level of the NET program including national USDA, regional USDA, state, and school district (Appendix A). The advisory committee

membership included one representative from the national NET staff, one representative from a regional office that is responsible for NET programs, two state NET coordinators representing various sizes of states and funding levels, three district NET specialists representing various geographic regions, one representative of the Society for Nutrition Education (SNE), and the president of the National Association of State NET Coordinators (NASNET). The role of the advisory committee relating to this research was to review the objectives of the entire project and to identify the topical areas for which NET personnel may have continuing education needs. This list of topics, organized by content area, was used as the basis for the study questionnaire.

Questionnaire

A mail questionnaire was developed to collect empirical data about the continuing education needs of NET personnel. The questionnaire consisted of two parts (Appendix B). Part I consisted of a list of content areas/topics for which continuing education might be needed by NET personnel. Respondents were asked to indicate the level of need for continuing education using a four-point rating scale: no need (0), low need (1), moderate need (2), and high need (3). Part II of the questionnaire contained respondent and program characteristics. Included in these questions were state in which respondent lived, level of employment, position title, highest level of education, and certification.

The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Education Information Advisory Committee (EIAC) from the Council of Chief State School Officers, and an individual from EIAC approved the final draft of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was approved by members of the NET advisory committee, and the final questionnaire and corresponding cover letter were approved by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee at The University of Southern Mississippi.

Study Population

The study population consisted of four individuals employed at the USDA Nutrition and Technical Services Division with NET responsibilities, individuals at the seven regional USDA offices who had responsibility for the NET program, all state directors of CNPs and NET Coordinators, and all district NET specialists identified by state NET coordinators or major city directors of CNPs.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was mailed to 194 national, regional, state, and school district professionals involved in nutrition education during the summer of 1994. A reminder postcard was sent three weeks after the initial mailing, and two weeks after that an additional cover letter and questionnaire were mailed to all nonrespondents.

