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NFSC 465L Community Nutrition Field Work

Field Report: VECTORS

May 3, 2012

Veterans Executive Committee to Organize Rehabilitative Services (VECTORS) is a non-profit organization who gives homeless veterans a place to live while they learn job and life skills. The Jerry L. Knight Transitional Housing Facility is the name of the house in Chico, California and is the only facility of its kind in Northern California. The Jerry L. Knight house provides up to fifteen veterans housing, meals, and other resources as needed. Funding for the program comes from donations from various charities as well as federal, state, and local government (Graham, 2011). VECTORS also hold fundraiser events to raise money for the house. Much of the food in the kitchen is donated to the house from Trader Joe's, who donates food that is not fit for sale, but are safe for consumption (Neighborhood Involvement, 2012). Other food ingredients come out of a food budget which is paid for through a grant.

In conjunction with the Nutrition and Food Science Community Nutrition (NFSC 465) class, I was placed with VECTORS in order to “develop, implement, and evaluate a nutrition education plan” (Morris, 2012). As a community educator, it is my job to assess the individual needs and special circumstances of a target group in order to conduct a theory based nutrition education plan. In order to most effectively educate a specific target audience, I looked at multiple sources analyzing the typical learning styles most relative to veterans. The learning style and theory

most effective for veterans is when they are part of a team or family dynamic. Another way to promote learning for veterans is when the educator can effectively make a direct connection between a behavior or concept and the outcome (Redden, 2008).

Incorporating specific learning styles of veterans into a theory-based nutrition education plan proved challenging. On one hand, the residents at VECTORS are a group who would benefit greatly from nutrition, lifestyle and behavior change; on the other hand, the majority of the residents are not open to formal (or even semi-formal) nutrition education. They are displaced from their homes, struggling with psychological and emotional hardships, and many times trying to stay clean and sober from drugs and alcohol. With these factors in mind, cooking demonstrations held once per week at the Jerry L. Knight house was decidedly the best approach to subtly implement an education plan.

As a nutrition student, it is important that I learn how to develop nutrition education from theory to implementation. I established two goals and four corresponding objectives to be accomplished throughout the Spring 2012 semester at VECTORS. The first goal is to increase my nutrition education skills and competence. The second goal is to gain confidence speaking in front of a group. The following objectives relate to each goal, but are specific and measurable in order to evaluate my progress and efficacy in accomplishing the goals. First, I am to provide a 30- minute cooking demonstration, one time per week for the duration of the semester using healthy recipes from cookbooks and online recipes and food ingredients available at the VECTORS. The second objective was to create one recipe book with recipes used during cooking demonstrations throughout the semester. The third objective was to provide at least two tips on increasing nutrient density in a meal per week. Lastly, to engage in a thirty minute question and answer discussion following one cooking demonstration per month throughout the

semester using prepared discussion questions relating to the nutrients, ingredients, and cooking techniques utilized in the demonstration.

Often an underestimated piece to nutrition education planning is evaluation. Evaluating the efficacy of a curriculum is beneficial for future educators who might use the curriculum. This evaluation is important to analyze the overall quality of the curriculum, any improvements that need to be considered within the structure of the plan, and, if applicable, justification of funding from outside sources. Future students who are interested in conducting nutrition education at VECTORS may be interested in utilizing all or some of this plan. In which case, it is important to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses so that necessary adjustments can be made. Due to the nature of the project, funding was not an issue, but the overall effectiveness of my performance and design of the curriculum should be thoroughly critiqued. I passed out a needs assessment at the beginning of the semester in order to see if there was a topic of interest of the veterans. I intended to also distribute a follow-up survey to track any changes in knowledge that could have related to this education plan.

Assessing the outcome of the education plan, I feel that I successfully accomplished my first goal to increase my nutrition education skills and competence. The second goal to gain confidence speaking in front of a group was also accomplished. Throughout the implementation period, which lasted from February to May, 2012, I became aware that some of the objectives that I had proposed were unrealistic for the target population. The first objective was to cook one meal per week at the VECTORS facility throughout the semester. This objective was met and proved to be a great way to be present and available in the house, without intimidating any of the men who were not interested in discussing nutrition or cooking. The second objective to create a cookbook compilation of all of the recipes that were used throughout the semester was also met.

The third objective to provide at least two tips to increasing nutrient density per meal was not met. The recipes chosen for each week's meals decisively included subtly added nutrient dense ingredients in order to promote familiarity to these foods. For example, vegetables were cut up small and added to a classic spaghetti sauce, and brown rice and whole wheat pasta were always substituted for their enriched counterparts. However, the majority of days, there was not an audience for me to explain these tips. The residents would come to the kitchen only when dinner was complete and ready to be served, and then return to their rooms to eat. Every opportunity that I could find to explain cooking techniques and nutrition was taken, but a formal setting where I spoke about nutrition seemed inappropriate and unsolicited for this group. The last objective to engage in a thirty minute question and answer discussion following one cooking demonstration per month was also not met. Again, this was accomplished informally on a one-on-one basis with anyone who was interested. Five fliers were made throughout the semester and posted for the men to read on their own. Topics of the fliers were: Boost Your Health with Fiber, Go Nuts, Beans: They Really are the Magical Fruit, The Beauty of Bell Peppers, and Omega-3s. The fliers were then compiled and arranged on a poster board to be put on display at the VECTORS house. The surveys that I distributed the first day of my arrival were not returned to me until the last day, despite multiple attempts in the beginning for them to be returned earlier. Because I did not have baseline information to compare them to, follow-up surveys were not distributed at the end.

Despite my personal agenda to promote good nutrition and healthy cooking, I found that building relationships with the residents of the VECTORS house was priority. I felt privileged when the men would talk to me about their personal experiences from the war, thoughts about family, politics, or other topics that came up while I cooked dinner. These conversations helped me

establish rapport and build trust with most of the men. It is a greater priority to promote a positive and social eating environment by creating mutually respectful relationships in this setting than to force formal nutrition education. Future students developing and implementing nutrition education plans at VECTORS could benefit from this information and from the surveys that were returned to me in the end of the semester. I believe that the men enjoy nutrition students coming into the house to cook for them and that this program should be continued in future semesters if possible.

## **Bibliography**

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