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Cultivating healthy couple and marital relationships: Introduction from the Guest Editor *

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There is mounting research evidence that trends of increasing marital and family instability are negatively impacting children, adults, families, and communities. The research is clear: *healthy* relationships and *healthy* marriages, and resulting family stability, benefit the physical, social, and emotional well-being of adults and children as well as the community. (See Adler-Baeder, Shirer, and Bradford in this issue.) Recognizing the importance and challenges of sustaining healthy relationships, the general public has developed a great interest in relationship and marriage education. A recent report, based on a national telephone survey of 1,503 Americans age 18 and older, revealed that although only 37 percent of currently or previously married persons had any kind of premarital counseling before marriage, 73 percent of unmarried respondents said that they would attend premarital education classes; of those who were currently married, 57 percent expressed an interest in attending a marriage education class (Glenn 2005). State specific surveys reveal an even higher level of interest in relationship education opportunities. (See Adler-Baeder, Shirer, and Bradford in this issue.)

In an effort to support healthy and stable relationships for those who choose to marry, the federal administration has emphasized the need to promote the availability and accessibility of educational resources that strengthen relationships and families (Brotherson and Duncan 2004; also see www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage). The Cooperative Extension Service (CES) has a long history of addressing marital quality in educational programs; therefore Extension is a natural partner in this current effort (Goddard and Olsen 2004). Recent CES work has focused on building a coherent system of resources and guides for best practices in this program area (e.g., Alberts et al. 2000; Futris 2006; Greder 2005). One such organized effort includes *The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network* (NERMEN; www.nermen.org).

NERMEN envisions a nationwide outreach through Extension specialists and educators in

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partnership with agencies and organizations at the national, state, and community levels that supports individuals and couples preparing for, developing, and enriching healthy relationships and healthy marriages. The organization's mission is to *provide research-based resources and promote partnerships to advance the knowledge and practice of relationship and marriage education*. To this end, NERMEN has been involved in identifying and promoting existing CES resources as well as creating new educational resources to support the development and maintenance of healthy couple and marital relationships for diverse audiences. (See www.nermen.org for more information.)

Educators and professionals in the field are also creating and striving to effectively implement quality, research-based programs that support the development and maintenance of healthy couple and marital relationships. As such, there is a clear need to ensure that these practitioners are informed of current research on this topic and the practical implications of this research for programming with diverse audiences. To support Cooperative Extension educators and partnering professionals in acquiring the knowledge needed to effectively conduct this programming, *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* presents this special issue, ***Cultivating Healthy Couple and Marital Relationships***. This collection of papers, authored by members of the *National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network* and originally peer-reviewed and presented during the 2006 Family Life Electronic Seminar on Relationship and Marriage Enrichment Education (Futris 2006), presents examples of theoretically and empirically informed implications for relationship and marriage education.

The first set of papers establishes the empirical basis for relationship and marriage enrichment programming as well as strategies for developing these programs in partnership with the community. In the first article, authors Francesca Adler-Baeder, Karen Shirer, and Angela Bradford explain the impact of couple functioning on individual, family, and community well-being, articulate the rationale for addressing couple relationships in family life education, and describe appropriate goals and approaches for relationships/marriage education. Next, Brian Higginbotham, Katie Henderson, and Francesca Adler-Baeder delineate two aspects of research, broadly labeled "research informed programming" and "programmatic research," and describe a framework to develop and modify programs using existing research as well as techniques to evaluate existing marriage education programs. Authors Charlotte Shoup Olsen and Karen Shirer follow with a presentation of principles and strategies for designing relationship and marriage education programs and common challenges that may arise while planning and implementing these programs. Last, Ted Futris reviews the importance of building community collaborations, the advantages and challenges of doing so, and effective strategies for developing sustainable community collaborations that support healthy relationships and marriages.

The next set of papers outlines the needs of diverse audiences and programmatic strategies for serving them. Jennifer Kerpelman reviews aspects of adolescent relationships, proposes goals and objectives of relationships and marriage education targeting youth, and offers an example of an existing youth-focused relationships education curriculum. Next, Francesca Adler-Baeder, Mallory Erickson, and Brian Higginbotham summarize the unique needs of stepcouples in marriage education, review appropriate theoretical approaches, offer specific content and learning objectives, and present ideas to consider when working with stepcouples. Last, Linda Skogrand and Karen Shirer provide educators with an understanding about how to learn about

and partner with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences. They also share ideas, based on their own and existing research, about how relationship and marriage education might be different for low-resource and culturally diverse audiences.

The final two papers focus on two critical skills for strong couple relationships: skills for building and maintaining commitment and skills for effective communication. Wally Goddard provides an overview of various dimensions of and strategies for cultivating commitment in intimate relationships. Next, Angela Wiley describes some of the emotional communication skills that foster strong couple relationships. The concepts presented in these latter two papers, and introduced in some of the earlier papers, will be further expounded upon in the forthcoming NERMEN resource, *The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model*. (See <http://www.nermen.org/projects.php> for more information.)

I encourage readers to consider these papers as a whole as they establish an empirically informed foundation for marriage education that reaches diverse audiences. I also call on readers to follow the recommendations of Higginbotham and Henderson to evaluate the efficacy of these programs in order to clarify how CES is impacting the health and stability of relationships and marriages as well as to continually enhance the quality of programs being delivered. Emerging outcome research is showing that premarital education is generally effective (Adler-Baeder et al., forthcoming; Carroll and Doherty 2003; Gardner, Giese, and Parrot 2004; Stanley et al. 2006), however many marriage enrichment programs have received little or no rigorous empirical validation (Jakubowski et al. 2004). Given its connection to university and community-based resources and expertise, CES is a clear partner in advancing this effort.

I want to thank all the authors for their contributions to the development of theoretically and empirically informed resources to advance the delivery and impact of relationship and marriage education programming. I also wish to extend my appreciation to Jacquelyn McClelland, Editor-in-Chief, Jill Steffey, Editorial Associate, and other colleagues who served as external reviewers for their advice and assistance in the development of these papers and this special issue. I hope this special issue provides a useful guide to what we know about, and effective approaches for creating programs that support, healthy couple and marital relationship development.

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