National Health Educator Competencies Update Project

Synopsis

The National Health Educator Competencies Update Project (CUP) was a six-year multi-phase national research study (1998-2004) designed to re-verify the role of entry-level health educators, and further define and verify the role of advanced-level health educators in the United States. Four research questions were addressed:

1. What is the current generic role of the entry-level health education specialist as compared to the role previously defined?
2. What are the generic areas of responsibility, competencies and sub-competencies of advanced-level health education specialists?
3. Are there commonalities in the roles of entry-level and advanced-level health education specialists across practice settings?
4. Are there differences in the roles of entry- and advanced-level health education specialists based on degrees held and years of work experience in health education?

The project was guided by the CUP National Advisory Committee (CUPAC) that included representatives from 12 national professional groups with interests in health education. The CUP Steering Committee (CUPSC) served as a working group to lead the project, with additional statistical consultation. The study was supported by a variety of sources (professional associations, government, universities, and individuals) along with more than 10,000 hours of in-kind time contributed.

A 19-page questionnaire was completed by 4030 health educators from every state in the United States and the District of Columbia working in a wide array of work settings (e.g., community, school, college/university, health care, business/industry). The questionnaire was divided into three sections: analysis of activities, in which participants rated how frequently they performed each skill, and how important it was to carrying out the responsibilities of their current position; assessment of responsibilities, in which participants approximated the percent of time they spent carrying out each of ten areas of responsibility, how important each of the ten areas of responsibility was to their current job, and participants supervisory responsibilities; and demographic data about participant’s professional identity, present position, educational background, years of experience as a health educator, and type of organization where employed. The questionnaire was sent by postal mail, followed by postcard reminders. A 10% non-respondent follow-up study was also completed. The adjusted response rate for the major research phase was 70.6%. The study produced the largest national data set ever constructed from practicing health educators in the USA (more than 1.6 million data points).

The validated competency-based CUP hierarchical model derived from the research has important similarities and differences, when compared with the original entry-level model (1985) and the graduate standards’ model (1999).

- There are 7 Areas of Responsibility and 35 Competencies defining the role of the health educator in all practice settings studied. The Areas of Responsibility are:

I. Assess Individual and Community Needs for Health Education
II. Plan Health Education Strategies, Interventions, and Programs
III. Implement Health Education Strategies, Interventions, and Programs
IV. Conduct Evaluation and Research Related to Health Education
V. Administer Health Education Strategies, Interventions, and Programs
VI. Serve as a Health Education Resource Person
VII. Communicate and Advocate for Health and Health Education
There are 163 Sub-competencies performed by all health educators, many of which were included in the original entry-level model (1985) and the graduate standards’ model (1999).

Some of the Sub-competencies are performed more frequently and are perceived as having greater importance to the individual’s current position based upon years of experience and degree held.

Three levels of practice emerged from the research:

- **Entry:** Health educators with a Baccalaureate or Master’s degree and less than five years of experience.
- **Advanced 1:** Health educators with a Baccalaureate or Master’s degree and five years or more of experience.
- **Advanced 2:** Health educators with a Doctoral degree and five years or more of experience.

The CUP model is hierarchical, rather than linear, meaning that there are three distinct levels of practice, each one building upon the other in terms of the Sub-competencies incorporated into one’s roles and responsibilities.

The methodology used to conduct this national role delineation research should be useful for guiding future efforts to verify the roles and responsibilities of health educators, as well as for others preparing to engage in similar discipline-related studies. The results of this research have implications for the professional preparation, practice, and certification of health educators in a multiplicity of practice settings.

How well each of the sub-competencies was performed by individuals with varying degrees and varied levels of experience was beyond the scope of the present research. Moreover, the results are based on responses from health educators in four major work settings (community, school/K-12, health care, college/university – professional preparation). The study findings cannot be generalized to health educators practicing in business/industry or university health service settings because there were too few respondents from these sub-groups. In terms of future research, it is suggested that secondary analyses of the data be conducted, additional research questions and hypotheses be generated, and additional sub-competencies be identified for study as the profession continues to evolve. It is recommended that the research be conducted at least every 10 years with adequate funding and sufficient staff support to facilitate timely completion of such an important undertaking for the profession.

Additional information on the study, including the planning, process, rationale, and results, can be obtained from the Copyright Holders:

- American Association for Health Education – [www.aahe/aahperd.org](http://www.aahe/aahperd.org)
- National Commission for Health Education Credentialing – [www.nchec.org](http://www.nchec.org)
- Society for Public Health Education – [www.sophe.org](http://www.sophe.org)