

Operational Issues for Marriage Education Programs

Many practitioners put great effort into preparing to deliver healthy marriage content and recruitment activities.

For those who are new to workshop delivery, the logistics can demand equal time and preparation. A potential participant's first impression of your program can be the deciding factor in their involvement. Regardless of how helpful your program may be; neglecting factors like comfort, convenience and environment can negatively impact perceptions of and participation in your program. Remember that participants in your program have numerous demands on

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Below are some operational issues that you may want to consider:

Scheduling

People are generally busy! They may work long hours, care for children or have other commitments. Be conscious of the time commitment you are expecting.

- Schedule program activities at times that are convenient. Those times are often going to be evenings or weekends. Most participants will be against giving up an entire weekend day and attending more than one activity per week.

- Ask potential participants to indicate their schedule preferences during workshop sign up. Although you can not please all of the people all the time try to create a schedule that reflects the needs of the majority.
- Be aware of potential scheduling conflicts like holidays, religious celebrations and other events. Be flexible and willing to reschedule workshops as needed.
- Make sure that participants have enough time to arrive to your program. Keep in mind that they may be coming from work or other prior commitments. For example starting a weekday evening workshop at 6 or 6:30p may be better than 5 or 5:30pm.
- Be aware of the length of your activities. Two to three hours is about the longest that many people can devote to your program on a given day.



Transportation

Some of your participants will have vehicles and others will rely on other means of transportation. Make sure that participants have clear directions to your location. Make sure those without vehicles are clear about other convenient modes of transportation.

- **For drivers:** Make sure there is sufficient parking available nearby.
- **For public transportation users:** Make sure they have detailed information on bus and train stops/routes. Be sure that whoever answers your phone can provide good directions and information. You can keep schedules on hand for attendees.
- **For low-income participants:** Consider subsidizing transportation expenses by providing bus tickets, train tickets or gas vouchers for each session. Remember this when planning your budget.

Childcare

Providing childcare on-site may be the most convenient option for participants. This can however raise budgetary and liability issues. If you decide to pursue this option, think about some of the following points:

- Consider partnering with agencies in your community that already offer children's programs. A few options are the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, faith-based groups and non-profit childcare providers. These partners may allow you to use their facility to host your workshop, or if they are nearby, can offer drop-off childcare services.
- Think about what ages you will include and make sure that your programming is appropriate for that group. For example, programs for older

children and teens require very different staffing needs and resources than those serving infants.

- You can also provide childcare vouchers or reimbursement so that participants can secure their own childcare. This is particularly important if you are working with disadvantaged couples or individuals.
- When planning your program operations, identify childcare providers in your community that offer high-quality services, extended hours or reduced rates and provide that information to participants during registration.

Accessibility to participants during registration

When selecting a location, consider whether the space is welcoming and easy to navigate. Imagine what it would be like to walk through a large building complex where it is difficult to find the workshop space. For some this would signal them to turn around and go back home. If any aspect of the space feels intimidating or inconvenient, it may deter participants from proceeding.

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- Operating a secular marriage education program in a house of worship might also discourage participation from individuals or couples that are not of that faith.
- Holding your program activities in a facility that houses substance abuse or mental health or government assistance programs might also carry negative connotations and deter some participants.

- Think about whether the space you are using provides sufficient privacy for participants who may be uneasy attending a marriage education program to begin with.
- Try to locate a space that is accessible to people with disabilities.

Décor and Comfort

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Consider whether your space is equally welcoming to men, women and couples. You should make sure that any literature, posters and other decorations in your space appeal to both genders and depict both two parent families and single parents. You may need to bring decorations with you to achieve this kind of balance.

Also, consider whether the proposed space will be consistently available at the times you want to offer your program. Abruptly moving your program to a different location partway through a workshop series may confuse and inconvenience participants.

- Find out whether any other groups may be able to reserve the space you are considering or whether any other programs' space needs might take precedence over yours.
- Make sure that you will be able to access the space during evenings or weekends.
- You may want to consider paying at least a nominal fee to the managers of your space. Consider signing a formal contract or agreement guaranteeing your rights to the space at certain times.

Given that participants may be spending extended periods of time in your space, make sure it is comfortable. Sufficient seating, a mild temperature and minimal background noise will go a long way in promoting comfort. If you are working with pregnant women, take extra measures to ensure comfortable seating. Use extra pillows, blankets, plush love seats or other cozy amenities to maximize comfort. The way you configure your room is also important. A traditional classroom setup with desks or chairs in rows may appear academic and not very inviting. A circular setup will allow for a panoramic view. With large furniture though this setup may not be possible. Select your setup based on what is reasonable for the room and furniture size.

Signage

Make sure that your participants can find your program space and that they know when they are in the right place.

- Decide beforehand who will create and post signage before participants arrive.
- Place signs in parking lots and on the appropriate building entrance. Give further directions inside the building directing people to the correct room. You can never have too many signs!
- In addition, signage should clearly point out where your program is located while still being discreet and protecting the privacy of your participants.
- Make sure your signs “match” your registration materials. For example, if your marketing pieces advertised “Couples Workshop” but your signs say “PAIRS” because that is the curriculum you are using participants may be confused.

Program materials and equipment

It can be very frustrating to participate in a program or activity where the facilitator is not prepared. Participants should not have to wait for their facilitator to get ready.

- Set up equipment before participants arrive and understand how to operate it in advance.
- Test equipment. If you are using anything that plugs in to an electrical outlet (speakers, laptops, LCD Projectors, overhead projectors, DVD players, etc.) Test it before participants arrive.
- Have extra light bulbs, batteries, extension cords, power strips, ink pens, paper, workshop materials and other supplies on hand. Having a portable supply closet or bin on hand will be very handy if anything unexpected happens.
- Pre-determine who will be responsible for copying materials. Also delegate who will pick up and transport equipment and materials.

Breaks and refreshments

Breaks and refreshments are two simple ways to create a welcoming environment. The budgetary requirements of providing food are minimal but the benefits are countless.

- Be sure to include breaks if the program is longer than one hour. Studies on how adult learning show that it is difficult for most people to focus on content for longer than this. Remaining stationary may become physically uncomfortable for some participants.
- Providing refreshments will certainly add to the comfort of the participants in your program. Many

will be coming directly from work and will appreciate a meal.

- Try to offer a vegetarian food option. Also, avoid foods that contain, or are prepared with, wheat, gluten, peanuts and other common problem/allergy causing foods.
- If you don't have a refreshment budget, contact local businesses that may be willing to donate refreshments. Local businesses are often eager to be associated with positive community efforts. For example, there is a National bakery chain that has a policy to give away food at the end of the day. Identifying these types of programs will be helpful.

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- In order to stretch your resources, think about purchasing food in bulk from discount "big box stores." Purchase non-perishable items such as chips, crackers or snack packs so that you can use them for a future workshop and not waste them.
- Designate someone to purchase, deliver and set out refreshments at the program location. This can be a single staff person's responsibility or can rotate between staff and will allow you to focus on welcoming your participants and setting up program materials.