

A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education

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The findings and conclusions presented in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the Administration for Children and Families.

Executive Summary

In a progressive society such as the United States, we usually take problems, such as high divorce and non-marital childbearing rates, as a cause for action rather than a reason for resignation. Thus, it should surprise no one that the beginnings of a marriage movement have emerged in the United States over the last decade. A prominent part of this marriage proto-movement has been a wide array of educational initiatives. However, to date there has been no formal effort to develop an integrative conceptual framework of marriage education.

This monograph provides marriage educators with a set of concepts that will help them better understand their craft and discover unseen possibilities. We offer a map, or framework, depicted in Figure 1, that helps marriage educators think more thoroughly, systematically, and creatively about opportunities to strengthen marriage. We draw attention to the elements of content, intensity, method, timing, setting, target, and delivery, and their implications for marriage education. We note that we have much to learn about marriage education for more disadvantaged individuals and couples who potentially have the most to benefit from educational initiatives. We point out the value of developing marriage education with greater specificity in content, timing, and target. We call for more organic intervention that embeds marriage education in diverse institutional settings with access to couples across the economic spectrum. In the end, we address the need to take marriage education beyond a valuable helping profession and even an expanding educational service integrated into the human service professions to a vibrant social movement.

Dimension I: Content—What is taught?

We discuss three sub-dimensions of content: (1) relational skills; (2) knowledge/attitudes; (3) motivations/virtues. The content of most marriage education is based in some way on the excellent research over the past 20 years that has illuminated couples' interactional processes as central to the maintenance or breakdown of marital relationships. Less attention, however, has gone to basic knowledge

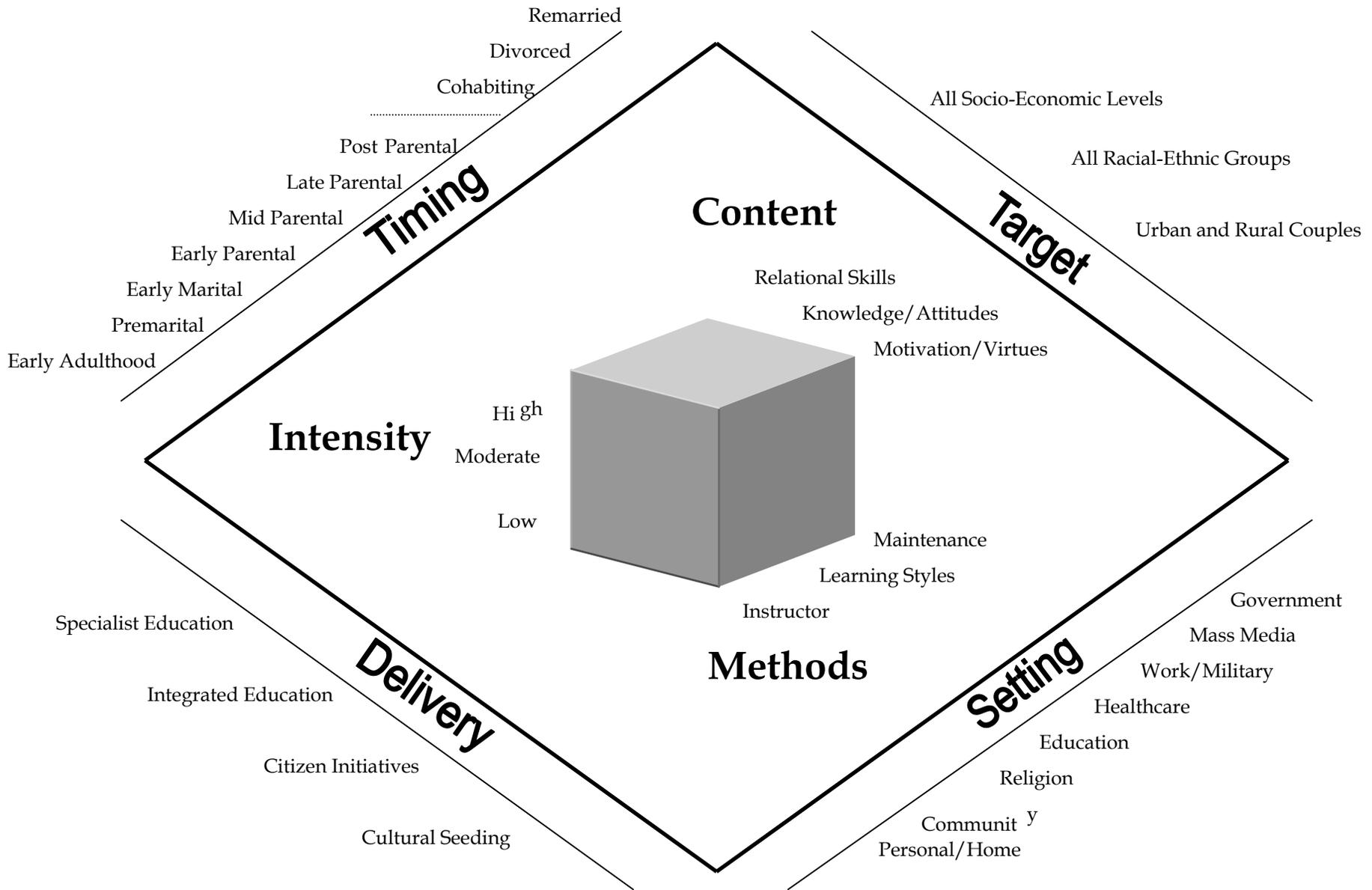


Figure 1. A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education

about the institutional features and benefits of marriage, or to the virtues that sustain healthy marriages, despite the real possibility that the mental and ethical elements of the marital infrastructure that support healthy marriages have been eroding for some time. We encourage marriage educators to give these content areas more attention.

Dimension II: Intensity—What is the proper dosage?

Proper dosage is an important part of any intervention; too little means ineffective treatment but too much can be costly and limit access. Marriage educators need to think carefully about the intensity needed for an intervention to achieve its goals. For instance, some have hypothesized that marriage intervention for disadvantaged, lower-income couples will need to be more intensive than traditional approaches to be effective. On the other hand, practical concerns suggest the need for some marriage education to be less intense. Lower-dosage offerings may be needed to attract couples less inclined to seek out marriage education. This is especially true with preventative education, which targets less distressed couples who may not sense the immediate need for intervention. We call for a creative and flexible approach to marriage education that varies the dosage along a continuum of intensity from low to high.

Dimension III: Methods—How is it learned?

Teaching processes may be as crucial to educational outcomes as the content itself. We sample three important method issues for consideration: instructor, learning styles, and maintenance. The provider of marriage education affects program outcomes. The more instructors are familiar with the particular issues participants face, the more credibility they will have. They will also be able to adapt and present curricular content to fit the lived experience of participants more effectively. Curricula differ in how much emphasis they place on cognitive versus experiential learning. Well-educated individuals and couples, who are the most likely to seek out marriage education on their own, are accustomed to more cognitive and didactic approaches. This approach may be less effective for individuals without extensive formal education; they may prefer more active, experiential learning methods. Given the steady stream of new

stresses that couples face, it is not surprising that the effects of marriage education appear to diminish over time. We encourage marriage educators to build creative ideas for following up with participants to maintain educational effects. And as a profession, marriage education needs to stretch the temporal horizon of their work to think about multiple interventions across the life cycle.

Dimension IV: Timing--When does it occur?

Marriage educators frequently teach general principles and skills for building and sustaining healthy marriages that appear to transcend temporal and circumstantial boundaries. But couples actually experience several different marriages over time. Certainly general principles exist, but there are good reasons for marriage educators to consider temporal tailoring of their work. Probably the most important reason for temporal specificity is that it makes curricula more concrete. The more tailored educational offerings are to the temporal and life circumstances of their students the more likely they are to fit their perceived needs. By extension, they may also attract more students in the first place. Marriage education has focused primarily on young, engaged or newly married couples. Reaching back to adolescents and young adults who are forming attitudes about marriage as well as forward to couples who are in the busy chauffeuring years and to those whose nests are emptying will reveal rich educational possibilities. Also, contemporary unions often follow more diverse temporal and developmental paths than in the past. Cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage introduce greater complexities, but creative marriage educators will find ways to help these individuals and couples build and sustain healthy marriages.

Dimension V: Setting--Where does it take place?

For at least three reasons it behooves marriage educators to think more concretely about where their craft takes place. First, there are settings that lend themselves well to particular educational topics (e.g., workplace lunchtime seminars on balancing work and marriage; religious firesides on sexual fidelity). Second, we may easily overlook fruitful venues for marriage education, such as the workplace or healthcare settings. Finally, the more settings in which effective marriage education occurs, the greater the

proportion of individuals who will be reached. Marriage education needs a more organic approach to intervention; it needs to weave itself naturally into the systems and sectors of professional work where opportunities exist to strengthen marriages. We explore possibilities, strengths, and weaknesses for various settings, including: personal/home, neighborhood/community, religious organizations, education, healthcare, work/military, mass media, and government/public services.

Dimension VI: Target—Who receives it?

There is a need for marriage education to meet the needs of all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. The empirical verdict is still out on whether interventions developed primarily for white, middle-class couples will be as effective for racial, ethnic, and low-income groups. Marriage education, which has labored for half a century to gain respect among social scientists, may finally gain it by demonstrating the efficacy of marriage education in service to disadvantaged and minority populations, whom marriage educators have been slow to reach. The promise of well-designed marriage education for more disadvantaged groups is substantial, at least theoretically, because stability rates are lower compared to more advantaged groups. Marriage educators need to direct primary attention to those who can benefit the most from their efforts. Throughout the article, we suggest ways that marriage education will need to be modified to serve more disadvantaged groups.

Dimension VII: Delivery—How is it disseminated to the public?

Marriage educators have a lot to consider in relation to the content, intensity, methods, timing, setting, and target of marriage education. But there is still a crucial dimension left to consider: delivery. This dimension goes beyond who provides marriage education to whom in what settings and when to address the broader issue of how marriage education will be disseminated to the public to make a measurable impact on the institution of marriage. We identify four general approaches to delivering marriage education, each essential to the overall purpose of strengthening marriages. (1) *Specialist Marriage Education*. Specialized marriage educators are helping professionals with a depth and skill that will provide a valuable

opportunity to individuals and couples who seek out marriage education. Specialized education provides interested individuals and couples with formal, programmatic sessions with significant content breadth and intensity. (2) *Integrated Marriage Education*. This approach recognizes that marriage education needs to be integrated into a more comprehensive set of human services provided to individuals in multiple settings and multiple times of the life course. Generally, the more an educational initiative can symbiotically attach itself to an established setting that already serves couples, the greater its outreach. (3) *Citizen Marriage Initiatives*. A third approach to delivering marriage education to the public recognizes that not all effective educational experiences are managed by professionals. Rather, grass-roots, citizen-led initiatives responding to a shared, local problem can be an effective way of reaching neighbors and community members with valuable educational experiences. Moreover, citizen marriage initiatives have the added bonus of going beyond providing educational opportunities to consumers to inviting those consumers to enlist in the cause and become producers or supporters of marriage education. An interesting distinction with this approach is that marriage education is about more than strengthening an isolated marriage; it also has the purpose of uniting communities and making them better environments to nurture all marriages. (4) *Marriage Culture Seeding*. The fourth approach refers to both formal and informal attempts to spur macro-cultural change. Formal attempts at cultural change include such means as media campaigns. Formal attempts often generate informal intervention—create a “buzz”—that gets people talking with each other and acting in small ways that build a momentum of positive cultural change. Cultural currents sweep individuals along almost imperceptibly toward a destination.

The goal of marriage education is to give individuals and couples the knowledge and skills needed to build and sustain a healthy marriage. Marriage education has been growing as a field over the last decade. But if marriage educators hope to reach every one who desires these educational opportunities, and indeed, if they want to expand the number of people who are interested in marriage education, marriage education needs to attain the status of a broad, mature social movement.

A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education

Nearly all individuals in our society, regardless of their socioeconomic location or cultural background, place a high value on marriage, both as a personal relationship and as a social institution (National Marriage Project, 1999; Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1998). And a generation of research documents the general value of healthy marriage to adults, children, and the communities in which they reside (Ribar, 2003; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Yet marriage also seems like a fragile institution; high divorce and non-marital childbearing rates are primary witnesses that testify to this vulnerability. However, in a progressive, “how-to” society such as the United States, we usually take problems as a cause for action rather than a reason for resignation. Thus, it should surprise no one that the beginnings of a marriage movement have emerged in the U.S. over the last decade. Its goal is to improve child and adult well-being by strengthening marriages for the challenges they face at the beginning of a new century (Gallagher, 2000).

A critical part of this proto-movement to strengthen marriage has been a wide array of educational initiatives. Currently, however, there is no map or conceptual framework of marriage education that helps practitioners and observers see all this work in perspective. This monograph is an attempt to produce a map, or framework, depicted in Figure 1, of the marriage education world and an initial guidebook for traveling in it. Our hope is that this framework will provide marriage educators with a set of concepts and terms that help them better understand and practice their craft. In addition, we hope this framework will help practitioners discover the un-seen or un-tried educational possibilities within the field which we believe will be essential to strengthening the institution of marriage. Our goal is to offer a framework that helps marriage educators think more systematically, thoroughly, and creatively about intervention efforts and opportunities to strengthen marriage. We draw attention to the curricular dimensions of content, intensity, method, timing, setting, target, and delivery, and their implications for marriage education. Our discussion

throughout the paper points out the potential value of developing marriage education with greater specificity in content, timing, and target. It notes that we have much to learn about effective marriage education for disadvantaged individuals and couples who potentially have the most to benefit from educational initiatives. And it calls for more organic intervention that embeds marriage education in diverse institutional settings with access to couples, and that spreads the burden of marriage education beyond those who readily identify themselves as marriage educators to professionals in other settings who can graft marriage education into their on-going work. In the end, we address the challenge of taking marriage education beyond a valuable helping profession and even an expanding educational service integrated into the everyday work of human service professions to a vibrant social movement capable of sustaining a marriage renaissance.

Contextualizing Marriage Education: Categories of Intervention

The primary focus of this framework is educational intervention, especially primary, preventative intervention (Coie, Watt, West, & Hawkins, 1993). Nevertheless, education is only one kind of intervention. It is helpful to think about other forms of intervention to strengthen marriage in order to place marriage education in a broader context. Two other forms of intervention are therapy and policy. In this framework, it is tempting to argue that education is primary intervention, or preventative; that clinical efforts are secondary intervention, or remedial; and that policy initiatives are supportive intervention, as they attempt to promote healthy marriages. These distinctions, however, are not pure. Clinicians do individualized educational intervention, for instance, in the context of premarital counseling, in which couples explore the strengths and weaknesses they will bring into a marriage. They also occasionally prescribe group psychoeducation as part of a clinical treatment plan (DeMaria, 2003). Policy interventions can promote educational opportunities, such as providing vouchers for low-income couples to take a marriage-preparation seminar, or incenting marriage education for distressed couples for whom divorce is a proximal

possibility. Distinguishing between education as prevention, therapy as remediation, and policy as support is only valid as a broad generalization.

Clinical. Therapy to help distressed couples overcome serious problems that immediately threaten their marriages is a critical form of intervention. Recent meta-analytic studies have documented the efficacy of couple therapy (Bray & Jouriles, 1995). Individual therapy can also help solve problems that may threaten marriages. Clinical intervention recognizes the reality of acute marital distress and addresses the need for intensive, personalized, professional assistance. It also recognizes the need for mental health services to deal with individual problems that inhibit healthy relationships (e.g., addiction, anger). A strong clinical community is essential to a complete intervention system to sustain healthy marriages. Nevertheless, it is easy for the drama of clinical intervention to overshadow the equivalent need for more prosaic, educational intervention. Preventative education may reduce the acute need for clinical services. Furthermore, couples who have participated in educational interventions may seek clinical help sooner when challenging problems arise (Stanley, 2001).

Policy. Marriages exist in a social and cultural ecology that support or work against them. Both directly and indirectly, public policy is crafted to support—or unintentionally weaken—marriage. Because healthy marriages provide communities and society valuable benefits, marriage is a defensible target of public policy (Haskins & Sawhill, 2003; Horn, 2003; Ooms, 1998; Parke, 2003). This assertion has been recognized increasingly over the past five years as several analytic streams have converged. First, federally funded research has shown that low-income, unmarried couples are usually together at the birth of their child and often desire marriage, but only a small fraction attains that goal (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2002; 2003a; 2003b). In addition, several primary objectives in welfare reform that passed during the Clinton administration highlighted the need for policy to promote marriage and stable, two-parent families. Welfare analysts have been exploring the connections between marriage and economic independence (Ribar, 2003). Scholars and social policy makers have also

expressed concern that the institution of marriage appears to remain beyond the grasp of many economically disadvantaged groups (Gallagher, 2004; Horn, 2003) who have lower rates of marital formation and higher rates of marital dissolution. Reacting to these insights, policy makers are just beginning to explore ways that government can do a better job of supporting couples' desires to marry and create a stable family situation for their children. One part of those efforts is providing educational services to disadvantaged couples, showing again that intervention categories will overlap.

Legislative action intended to strengthen marriage is one form of policy intervention. For example, numerous states have considered reforming divorce law to give greater substance to the social pillar of marital permanence that has been crumbling over the past century. Three states have passed "covenant marriage" legislation which allows couples to choose a more demanding set of laws to govern the entrance into and potential exit from marriage (Hawkins et al., 2002). A handful of states have passed legislation that provides couples with incentives (in the form of reduced fees on the marriage license) to take marriage preparation classes before marrying. Other states are considering imposing a brief waiting period for marriage licenses hoping to discourage impulsive marriages which are at much greater risk of divorce. Of course, it will continue to be important for research to evaluate the efficacy of these and other legislative interventions. There is potential, we believe, for well designed legislative intervention to impact a large number of couples in positive ways. Moreover, legislation, because it can impact so many lives, and because it garners considerable media attention, also has the ability to shift the cultural conversation about marriage in ways that may better support healthy relationships. (For a more comprehensive report on government policy to strengthen marriage, see Gardnier et al., 2002; Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke, 2004).

Government policy indirectly impacts marriage in numerous ways, as well, and the total indirect effect may even exceed the effect of direct efforts to build and sustain healthy marriages. Thus, in the same way that law makers are required to evaluate the impact of new legislation on environmental goals, it is important that policy makers wanting to support marriage cast their analytic eyes across a broad set of

legal and social policies to discern its effects on the institution of marriage (Bogenschneider, 2002). For instance, public policy is keenly concerned with the human and social capital that undergirds social and economic well-being, which in turn positively affect marriage. The ability to provide for a family is a critical foundation for marriage, and policy efforts to promote employment may have positive effects on the ability to form and sustain marital permanence. Economic and social policy that helps reduce the financial stresses individuals experience in their everyday lives will support healthy, stable marriages. Educational attainment also has been consistently correlated with better marital outcomes. Policy is legitimately concerned about such things as addiction, abuse, mental health problems, and incarceration which undermine people's abilities to form and sustain healthy marriages. Some policy analysts (Ooms, 2002a; Parke, 2003) use the term "marriage-plus" to refer to marriage intervention that explicitly recognizes the need for policies to increase "marriageability" regardless of couples' marital status. Public efforts to address these problems are essential to an agenda to strengthen marriage. Moreover, sometimes policy can unintentionally provide disincentives for couples who want to marry. For instance, some welfare regulations economically penalize the choice to marry (Rector, Pardue, & Noyes, 2003). Thus, policy intervention that eliminates marriage disincentives in sensible ways may be valuable to the overall effort of strengthening marriage.

Social policy intervention is not limited to government, of course. Important policy in the corporate world, healthcare, media, and elsewhere can have significant impact on marriage. Workplace policies that explicitly recognize, respect, and support employees' family bonds strengthen marriage (Bogenschneider, 2002; Browning, 2003). Similarly, corporations that offer health benefits to as many employees as possible enhances the economic role of providing, thereby strengthening marriage. Even media policy that, for instance, limits or constrains the delivery of sexually explicit material may provide an indirect support for marriage. Clearly, public policy to support couples' efforts to build and sustain a healthy marriage includes more than governmental efforts. If educational efforts to strengthen marriage must swim upstream against

heavy institutional and cultural currents, they will not go as far. Hence, broad levels of public policy intervention are a needed to compliment clinical and educational intervention to strengthen marriage.

Preliminary Caveats and Comments

The framework we present here centers on educational intervention. Before beginning to elaborate on the framework, however, a handful of caveats and general comments are in order.

First, we acknowledge our positive bias toward marriage education. Although there is reason for early optimism (Gallagher, 2004), there is a need for more data to confirm the general efficacy of marriage education as an intervention tool to help a full range of couples build and sustain healthy marriages. This is especially true regarding disadvantaged and minority couples. While we wait for those data to accumulate, we know enough to continue the work marriage educators have begun. We are optimistic that the cumulative efforts of marriage researchers will eventually yield sufficient evidence of the value of marriage education. Accordingly, although we will critique shortcomings and gaps, we adopt a positive tone in our discussion of marriage education.

Second, we use the term *marriage education* in this framework. Some would argue that the broader term *relationship education* would be more appropriate because it more comfortably encompasses education for couples who are in a relationship, but not married. While there is a role for relationship education that is independent of any specific relationship status, we employ the term marriage education for specific reasons. One reason is that we find the term relationship education too reductionistic in the context of marriage; that is, it suggests that marriage is only about a private, romantic relationship between two people. But marriage is more in the view of many scholars (Browning, 2003; Nock, 2002; Waite, 2002). It has institutional features that are potentially an important part of educational curricula. In addition, people bring attitudes and virtues to marriage that seem to dangle rather unattached to the rubric of relationship education. Accordingly, we prefer the term *marriage education*. We use the term marriage education,

however, with a life course perspective that refers to education that covers many issues of importance to youth, uncoupled individuals, and unmarried couples in different circumstances.

Furthermore, and third, we employ a broad meaning for the term marriage education rather than limit the meaning to more formal, programmatic efforts. We draw from the 19th century philosopher Henry Adams, who wrote that *“the profoundest lessons are not the lessons of reason; they are sudden strains that permanently warp the mind”* (Adams, 1918). A correlate of this assertion is that learning that leads to action may be as likely to come from less formal educational settings as formal ones. Conceivably, “mind-warping” moments about forming and sustaining healthy marriages could occur across the full range of educational offerings, from a media campaign's attention-grabbing message on a billboard to a 120-classroom-hours workshop led by trained facilitators. Insight that leads to positive action is the goal of educational intervention. Delivering a potent idea that “clicks and sticks” is just as valid as more formal efforts that strive for full absorption and retention of a whole curriculum. We should be careful about force-fitting insight into formal educational formats. This is not to diminish the value of programmatic education, but only to enlarge the potential for less formal and intensive education to help couples gain the skills, knowledge, and virtues that sustain healthy marriages.

A fourth concern we have is that the framework is easily interpreted as representing distinct, non-overlapping dimensions and neat separations of categories within the dimensions. Just as the three general types of interventions just discussed overlap, so do the educational dimensions. The framework uses the heuristic of a model to guide thinking, but the user will need to exercise caution because the framework inevitably will suggest more categorical independence and structure in marriage education than actually exists or would be beneficial.

Finally, we do not emphasize description of current educational efforts in the framework. We provide some illustrative examples, but we stress possibilities rather than a taxonomy. Marriage educators have made considerable progress in some areas, but the field is wide open in other areas.

DIMENSIONS OF MARRIAGE EDUCATION

The first three dimensions in the framework—content, dosage, and methods, located inside the diamond in Figure 1—are related to core curricular decisions in marriage education. The next three dimensions in the framework—timing, setting, and target, on the outside of the diamond in Figure 1—are related to the temporal, physical, and human context of marriage education. The final dimension—delivery, also on the outside of the diamond in Figure 1—raises the crucial issue of dissemination or outreach.

Dimension I: Content—What is taught?

Formally asking what is taught in marriage education can be beneficial because it can open up marriage educators to content that has received less attention. Most marriage education programs are based in some way on the excellent research of psychologists over the past 20 years that has illuminated couples' interactional processes, communication patterns, and problem-solving behavior as central in the breakdown of marital relationships (Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Gottman & Silver, 1994, 1999; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001). Less attention has gone to, for instance, basic knowledge about the institutional features and benefits of marriage, or to the marital virtues that sustain healthy marriages (Fowers, 2000), despite the real possibility that these mental and ethical elements of the marital infrastructure have been eroding over the past generation, like the national power-transmission grid. We explore three sub-dimensions of marriage education content: (1) skills; (2) knowledge/attitudes; (3) motivations/virtues.

Skills. Relationship skills have been the primary emphasis of most of what we typically refer to as marriage education. There is justification for this. As mentioned previously, a generation of research points to the importance of interactional processes, communication patterns, and problem-solving behaviors that sustain healthy marriages and that predict marital breakdown when they are lacking (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). Recently, prominent scholars have emphasized that the core of a lasting, healthy marriage is friendship, and that friendship is developed and nurtured by a set of interactional behaviors (Gottman &

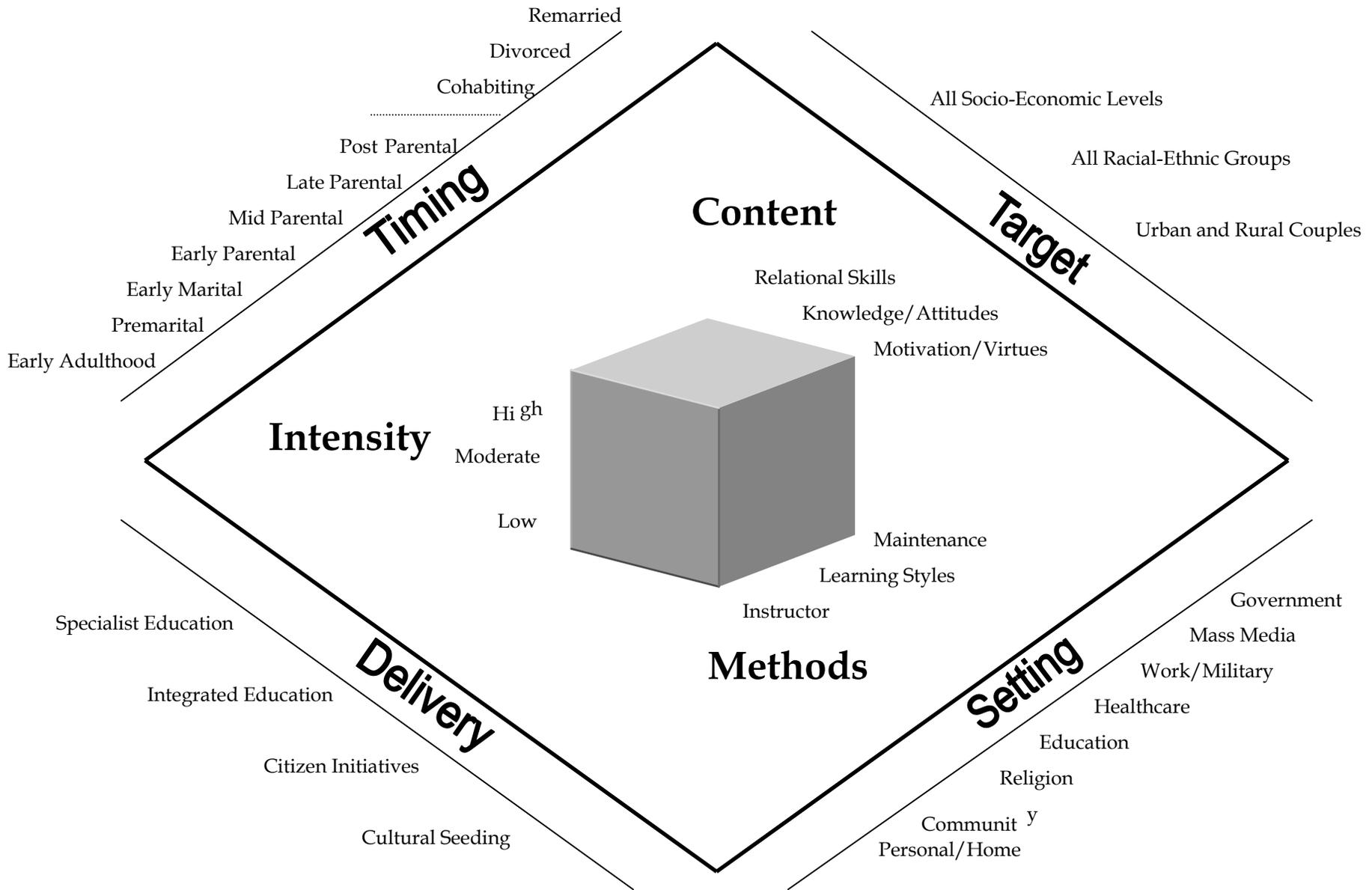


Figure 1. A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education

Silver, 1999). Marriage educators are indebted to a generation of talented researchers who indexed both the correlates of marital decline and the predictors of marital growth, and whose continuing research will inform the practice of marriage education. The importance of good interactional skills has increased because our cultural expectations for marriage have increased. We expect marriage to bring us joy, companionship, personal growth, parenting partnership, profound meaning, sexual fulfillment, and more, and we expect it to do so for a long life time. Many believe this is an unrealistic standard. Nevertheless, expectations about marriage are higher today than in the past, so it comes as no surprise that couples need better skills to achieve their personal visions of marital success.

Evaluation research provides hope that relationship skills can be learned in an educational setting and sustained over time (Fagan, Patterson, & Rector, 2002; Stanley et al., 2001; Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Relationship skills have been and will continue to be a vital domain of marriage education. Nevertheless, as Wilcox (2002) and Browning (2003) have argued, skills education tends to see marriage within a therapeutic worldview. This worldview is less attentive to the institutional features of marriage and the virtues that undergird healthy marriages. These are important to include within the content dimension of the framework.

Knowledge/ Attitudes. It seems reasonable that relational skills will develop and work best in the context of a good understanding about marriage and healthy attitudes that foster it. Most programs, even when they focus primarily on relational skills, still teach participants some basic knowledge about what can be realistically expected in married life. For example, most programs deal directly with partners' personal expectations and how these may contribute to relationship conflict. Many programs discuss common problems that arise for married couples to make couples aware of potential pot holes that could be better absorbed or avoided all together. In addition, virtually all programs discuss or strongly imply that sustaining healthy marriages is an on-going process that requires work. Doherty (2001) argues that we live in a social context that will pull marriages apart unless couples are intentional about their relationships and protect

them from neglect and decay. In essence, most marriage education invokes a principle of social entropy; that is, the natural order of a system is to decay unless energy is put into it to maintain it and to keep it orderly in the midst of change. And this knowledge or attitude may be gaining increasing importance in a society with less social regulation and more psychological buy-in to the notion that a pre-destined, magical soul mate is out there waiting to be found and taken to the alter to crown a perfect relationship (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2002). Without understanding the principle that relationships require intentional action, even well learned relationship skills will deteriorate and place a marriage at risk. These are just a few examples of basic knowledge that is critical to forming and sustaining healthy marriages.

There are other areas of knowledge, however, that appear to be less integrated into current marriage education curriculum, despite, as we mentioned earlier, the real possibility that the mental and ethical elements of the marital infrastructure that support healthy marriages have been eroding for a long time (Bellah et al., 1985; Blankenhorn, 1995; Fowers, 2000; Wilson, 2002). One domain of knowledge that is usually taken for granted, and thus absent in curricula, is a basic discussion of the institutional and societal features of marriage (Nock, 2002; Waite, 2002). For instance, what societal purposes does a strong, stable marriage serve? What are the public responsibilities inherent in this private relationship? With the roots of marriage education in clinical psychology (DeMaria, 2003) rather than sociology or anthropology or law, it's not surprising that marriage educators have given scant attention to basic knowledge and attitudes about the public dimension of marriage. Indeed, a potential criticism of marriage education is that its lack of attention to the public dimension of marriage reinforces the notion that marriage is just a private relationship and that the health of one's marriage has no relation to the public good. Moreover, in some disadvantaged communities, healthy marriages—or any marriages—are a minimal feature of the social environment. Some disadvantaged couples have virtually no models of healthy marriage (Edin & Kefalas, in press), suggesting the value of supplemental curriculum that touches on some of the most basic elements of healthy marriages.

Motivation/Virtues. In addition to needed relationship skills and basic knowledge about marriage, the personal motivations and virtues one brings to marriage are important content domains for marriage curricula. In general, however, this content domain receives less direct attention from educators. Doherty argues that we are in danger of handing marriage over to the consumer culture that governs so many other aspects of our modern, affluent, individualistic lives (Doherty, 2000a). Consumer marriage is weak because individuals are in it for the personal benefits it can give them today. If a consumer ethic is a dominant motive in marriage, then even good skills and knowledge may not be enough to keep marriages together.

Commitment is one important motivation that is usually directly addressed in marriage education curricula. This emphasis is in line with a growing body of research that has found that commitment is a central feature of healthy, stable marriages (Amato & Rogers, 1999; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Strengthening commitment in educational settings is an objective of many programs. Other motivations, however, that individuals bring to marriage which support or undermine its health and stability have received less attention. Fowers (2000) has critiqued marriage intervention—both clinical and educational—because of its single-minded dedication to relationship skills as the core of a healthy relationship. Fowers argues that attention to individual character and the motivations individuals bring to relationships are fundamental to understanding healthy marriage. Attention to communication technique is helpful but insufficient, and may not even be primary. He puts character virtues, such as loyalty, generosity, justice, and courage at the center of healthy marriage. They form the motivational foundation that skills-based education largely assumes to be in place.

Fowers' criticism of marriage intervention may be overstated somewhat because some quality marriage education programs do attend to issues such as loyalty, equitable allocation of domestic labor, and forgiveness. These programs may not frame the issues as one of character and ethical conduct, but they address them nonetheless. Still, we think it is useful to distinguish this third domain of motivations and virtues in marriage education from the other two—knowledge and skills—because it draws greater attention

to their value in a comprehensive curriculum to promote and sustain healthy marriages. Relationships, in general, and marriage, especially, are and always have been fundamentally moral endeavors because they are interconnected with the well-being of others, including spouses, children, and civil society (Doherty, 1996; Doherty & Carroll, 2002). Thus, when educators teach relational skills and knowledge they do so in a moral domain, not just an instrumental one. Explicit attention to the moral context of marriage curriculum likely strengthens anything else that is taught (Browning, 2003). Admittedly, it can be challenging to include explicit attention to character and virtue in some settings, especially in groups that bring together individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences. But we suspect that the most effective portrayal of the moral dimension of marriage is seldom done with flashing, harsh lights; rather, softer, unobtrusive lighting is probably even more effective in illuminating the ethical and moral principles marriage educators teach. Addressing the religious and spiritual beliefs that couples hold is another way of naturally inviting the moral element to be an active component of the curricula.

Dimension II: **Intensity**—*What is the proper dosage?*

Proper dosage is an important part of any intervention; too little means ineffective treatment but too much can be wasteful or costly. In the pharmaceutical world, dosage is a constant issue in testing, approving, prescribing, and monitoring drug intervention. In clinical intervention with couples, many therapists are concerned that managed care policies artificially limit a consideration of proper “dosage,” or number of sessions needed to intervene effectively. In policy intervention, intensity of intervention is a critical issue at least because public resources to support policy intervention are scarce and must be allocated efficiently. However, it seems that marriage educators have given less attention to the issue of dosage. Coming from its roots in clinical psychology, most marriage education efforts probably lean to the more intense end of the intervention scale. Moreover, some scholars have expressed concerns that it may be unethical to conduct educational interventions without including a strong clinical diagnostic procedure that can identify and treat serious individual pathology (Gottman, 2002), suggesting the need for

educational interventions to be more, not less intense. Others have hypothesized that marriage intervention for disadvantaged, low-income couples will need to be intensive to be effective (Dion et al., 2003). Nevertheless, we believe the question of effective dosage in marriage education is empirically wide open and in need of much more explicit attention in both practice and evaluation research.

Dosage has practical as well as clinical connotations. If a drug-treatment regimen for a specific health problem is too complicated, intrusive, or expensive, it will be less effective because patients will make mistakes or not follow fully the treatment plan or simply will not be able to afford it. This may hold true for marriage education intervention, as well. Another problem with dosage is that, while education is less resource intensive than therapy, it is usually targeted at less distressed couples who may not sense the immediate need for intervention. Indeed, this is one of the biggest problems facing marriage education. Even if it is beneficial for those who submit themselves to its treatment regimen, it reaches only a small proportion of the target population. A common response to this problem is to teach educators more effective marketing. Certainly, marriage educators could stand to learn to be better marketers of their services. But this does not override the need to explore the question of how much treatment is sufficient to produce meaningful learning and that will fall within the resource budgets of a substantial proportion of target “customers.”

In short, we are trying to set the stage for a more critical, creative, and flexible approach to marriage education that varies the dosage along a continuum of intensity. More comprehensive, intensive educational programs will always be a staple of marriage education. Even these staple programs, however, may be sensitive to the dosage issue. Already, several, established marriage programs have confronted the need to become more efficient, modifying their curricula to fit into fewer sessions or distilling the most valuable skills and ideas into a more condensed form. We believe the practice of marriage education needs to address the dosage issue more directly. And intervention researchers regularly need to include dosage as a design feature in their studies. It may be that lower-dosage interventions—especially if they are

repeated across the marital life cycle—will yield better, long-term results—and reach more people—than one-time, intensive educational interventions.

Low-level. The field of public health is instructive as we think about intervention intensity. Public health practitioners strive to increase the general health of the population. They do so with educational interventions at many different levels of intensity. They provide intensive educational programs to help motivated individuals facing an immediate problem. But also included in public health efforts to promote healthy living are lower levels of intervention. Public awareness campaigns and public service announcements are cleverly marshaled to teach a basic, helpful strategy to reduce disease or promote well-being. Brief, readable brochures are placed in strategic spots in communities for consumers to read at their leisure. As part of a more comprehensive, population-level intervention plan to address the problem of marital health in our society, marriage educators need to explore the potential of lower-level interventions.

There are some noteworthy efforts beginning to emerge in the area of low-intensity interventions aimed at strengthening marriages. For instance, the organization *First Things First* (<http://www.firstthings.org>) of Chattanooga, Tennessee, as part of their community-wide marriage initiative, has used creative, low-level messages in the media and on billboards to teach some basic principles of healthy marriages and to invite further, formal education. They have also produced a pamphlet for wide distribution to young people about popular misconceptions about cohabitation: “What you need to know about living together.” Similarly, the *National Marriage Project* (<http://marriage.rutgers.edu>) has produced a short pamphlet, “Ten Things Teens Should Know about Marriage,” that challenges some contemporary, harmful myths about marriage, and gives concrete suggestions of things young adults can do to maximize their chances for a lasting, loving marriage. The impact of these brochures, of course, depends first on their wide circulation. The potential of these kinds of efforts to promote and sustain healthy marriages is, to date, uninvestigated. However, we believe that the documented successes with low-level public health

campaigns (Hornik, 2002), such as smoking cessation (Glantz & Goldman, 1998), could be replicated in the marriage education arena.

Low-level interventions are likely to be most effective when communicating specific ideas, principles, or skills, or when addressing a specific problem. Low-level educational interventions need to find creative ways to address issues that attract people's attention. Marriage educators commonly have professional training in the human behavioral sciences and are trained in a traditional services-provider framework that assumes clients will come to them rather than they go to wherever their clients are (Doherty & Carroll, 2002). Public health educators are more likely to have the experience needed to be effective with low-level interventions, and will need to be recruited to assist with these efforts.

Moderate-level. Providing specific cut-offs that distinguish low-level from moderate-level interventions may be impossible. Intervention dosage is likely a more fluid, or "natural concept" (Hegelson, et al., 1987), in which the boundaries that distinguish categories are relatively fuzzy (Rosch et al., 1976). Hence, categories are more continuous than discrete. We provide, however, some examples of moderate-dosage efforts, as well as some elements that tend to produce higher dosages. For instance, a one-day marriage-enhancement seminar does not demand the on-going time of a programmatic workshop but accommodates more content than low-level efforts. Also, flexible, self-guided interventions may fit well here. "Empowering Couples" (Olson & Olson, 2000) is a book based on the well known "PREPARE/ENRICH" program, and provides individuals who do not want to invest the time and money in formal classroom education a way to learn the material on their own. Larson's (2003) "The Great Marriage Tune-Up Book" shows promise as a self-guided intervention. And a pilot study of the flexible, self-guided "Couple CARE program in Australia (Halford et al., in press, 2004) provides evidence that these kinds of interventions can strengthen couple relationships. With the widespread availability of the Internet, web-based "programs" that capitalize on flexibility and self-guided participation may also fit in a category of modest-level education. For example, Utah State Family Extension Service has built a web-based, marriage preparation course, "Saying 'I Do':

Consider the Possibilities,” [www.utahmarriage.org]. Moderate-dosage interventions may be especially well suited to primary, preventative intervention that can attract individuals and couples who are not experiencing serious relationship problems and thus may lack immediate motivation for extensive program participation. A modest dosage is also more likely to fit into some settings better. Educational programs run through work or healthcare organizations whose primary missions lie elsewhere may match up well with moderate-dosage interventions.

The amount of information dispensed and time required to consume material are probably not the only criteria delineating a moderate-level intervention. Dishion (2003) has shown how shorter, less intensive interventions for parents of adolescents can attract more participants and still be effective. Financial cost to participants also will likely be modest at this level of marriage education. We can envision exceptions to this general rule, but again, it is important that many interventions be affordable to a large proportion of individuals and couples. More disadvantaged couples who otherwise would value participating in programs may not be able to do so unless low-cost or subsidized options are available. And remember that for many couples program participation will involve ancillary costs, such as a child care, transportation, and recommended program materials. Marriage educators should actively seek outside funding support for their programs to provide vouchers or scholarships for disadvantaged families.

Another relevant criterion that may delineate moderate-level marriage education is the amount of professional training required of intervention facilitators. Some scholars have implied that graduate-level, clinical training is essential for educators so that participants with serious problems can be diagnosed and recommended for further, personalized intervention (Gottman, 2002). We would argue, however, that moderate-level intervention try to avoid as much as possible this requirement because the more stringent the “licensing” requirements for instructors, the fewer educators there will be, which rations the amount of the service available and increases cost for clients. And at least one marriage educator-therapist-scholar has suggested that educators who are also therapists can bring clinical baggage as well as insight with

them into the educational setting that may diminish their effectiveness (Stahmann, 2000). Moreover, as Stanley and his colleagues (2001) have shown in their research with the PREP program, lay practitioners can be very effective in part because they are well connected to the participants.

Moderate-dosage intervention should also be identified, we would argue, by some restrictions on the psychic “costs” required of participants. This observation is connected to Doherty’s (1995) levels-of-intervention framework. Levels 4 and 5 in his model involve participants delving into highly personal issues that can be psychologically difficult, either in a group counseling setting or individual therapy. While recognizing that even modest educational interventions can evoke unpredicted, psychological responses in some individuals, they nevertheless should be designed with caution to minimize these responses, and should inform participants of available services for those who desire further help. There are good reasons, we believe, for marriage education to offer a range of services that steer clear of psychic landmines. First, having to tread through dangerous mind fields undoubtedly will scare many potential participants away from participating in what could otherwise be a valuable educational experience. A second, related reason is that psychologically intensive interventions are probably less inviting to men, who already are more suspicious of the value of relationship education, and who are more uncomfortable with public disclosure of their personal and emotional lives. Similarly, some work suggests that disadvantaged, lower-income couples are less comfortable with self-disclosure of the intimate and emotional aspects of their lives (Dion et al., 2003), which is a common pedagogical process in more intensive interventions.

A final criterion relevant to delineating moderate-level intervention may be the scope of the curriculum. Some moderate interventions may try to condense a wide array of topics into “nuggets of truth.” But there is also a need for marriage education that focuses on just one or two topics. For instance, personal financial debt is a rising, serious problem impacting marital quality and stability. Even good communication and problem-solving skills may fray in the face of mounting financial stress. Similarly, such contemporary issues as preventing indulgence in Internet pornography and virtual affairs may be difficult to

cover adequately as just one of many topics embedded in a seminar. Interventions aimed at couples with a unique circumstance such as couples who spend considerable time apart due to employment travel or couples who are caring for an elderly parent may be useful as well. Half-day seminars or other formats focused on specific problems would fill an important niche in a comprehensive ecosystem of marriage education offerings. They may also be better attended because they are more likely to hit a concrete problem that many couples can label and may be worrying about in the present moment.

High-level. Educational offerings with a high-level dosage will also be crucial to a comprehensive marriage education strategy. Higher levels of marriage education may allow for in-depth exploration of a fuller range of topics. It is also may allow for individuals and couples to explore personal issues at deeper levels with trained facilitators. A hard and fast delineation of what constitutes a high dosage of marriage education will be somewhat arbitrary. Some relevant factors would include whether participation requires an on-going commitment of significant time, a financial cost that requires budgeting, the depth of personal, psychological exploration, and the amount of professional training required of program leaders. Again, some suggested examples may help to clarify. For instance, the “PAIRS” program (DeMaria & Hannah, in press) requires of participants a commitment of 120 classroom hours and a significant tuition. “Becoming Parents” is a marriage and parenting curriculum adapted from the PREP model targeted specifically to couples going through the transition to parenthood (Jordan, Stanley, & Markman, 1999). The time commitment is considerably less than PAIRS but still more than minor—27 classroom hours plus some “homework”—that probably crosses a resource threshold that feels like “a lot” for most couples. Moreover, the intervention involves extensive coaching of communication and problem-solving skills by licensed instructors who must go through an extensive (and moderately costly) two-day training workshop. Accordingly, we would place this program in the high-dosage category.

Some marriage educators designing interventions explicitly for disadvantaged, lower-income couples have included “family coordinators” to supplement and enhance educators’ efforts. The role of these

individuals would be to support program participants by offering encouragement, helping them to meet logistical needs for program involvement, detecting problems that increase family stress (e.g., employment skills, substance abuse), and linking participants to helpful services. In effect, these coordinators work to minimize problems that diminish the potential of the intervention to strengthen couple relationships. While this approach adds to the intensity of the intervention requires additional resources to implement, it likely increases the power of the intervention.

Dimension III: **Methods**—*How should it be taught?*

Regardless of the content and dosage of marriage education offerings, critical decisions need to be made about how the content will be presented and learned. The process of learning is as crucial to positive outcomes as the content. Although our list is not exhaustive, we highlight three important method issues for marriage educators to consider: instructor, learning styles, and maintenance. Our comments on these method issues generally assume more traditional formats for marriage education.

Instructor. Just as important as who *receives* marriage education is who *provides* it. The more instructors are familiar with the particular issues participant individuals and couples face, the more credibility they will have. They will also be able to adapt and present curricular content to fit the lived experience of participants more effectively. For instance, disadvantaged, African American couples face daunting challenges to forming and sustaining marriages. Instructors who has “been there” and understands these complex barriers may be as important to the success of the program as its content. Hispanics now constitute the largest minority population in the United States. Unless marriage educators can tailor instruction and program materials in culturally sensitive ways, they will struggle to help an important population who experience serious stresses to their relationships. Gender can also be an important issue. Men, who generally are less enthusiastic about marriage education, at least to begin with, may be more responsive to the content of a program if delivered by a male-female team of co-instructors rather than just a female instructor. Similarly, a group of couples united by a particular faith may be served

best by an educator who can communicate content within the culture and the language of their religious beliefs and practices.

In short, messages are enhanced or inhibited by messengers. If the general principle is that the more connected instructors are to their students the better the educational outcome is likely to be, then this suggests the need to recruit and train a more diverse corps of marriage educators in graduate programs in the behavioral sciences. A complimentary strategy would be to train existing front-line personnel in many different settings to deliver marriage education, including religious leaders, childbirth educators, and social workers, among others. Marriage educators to date have probably been most successful at working with religious leaders to offer marriage programs to their congregations, some of which serve lower-income and minority couples. People who simply have a passion for marriage education and are connected to the lived experiences of their students may be more important to the quality of the education than the advanced educational training of the instructor.

Learning Styles. Educational curricula differ in how much emphasis they place on cognitive versus experiential learning. Most marriage education programs include a variety of methods tailored to diverse learning styles such as didactic presentation of information, showing examples of a principle being taught (i.e., in a video), interactive discussion, role playing, and practicing new skills. The balance of methods requires careful consideration, however, including taking into account the needs and preferences of participants. Well-educated individuals and couples, who are the most likely to seek out marriage education on their own, are accustomed to more cognitive and didactic approaches. This approach may be less effective for individuals without extensive formal education; they may prefer more active, experiential learning methods. Similarly, some individuals from some cultures may be uncomfortable with public disclosure of personal lives and emotions, a method marriage educators commonly rely on to normalize issues and increase perspective. For others, however, externalizing their thoughts and emotions is a primary conduit for effective learning. Unfortunately, no iron rules exist for making these decisions. But one

guiding principle is that these decision should be made by people who are well connected to typical participants and have a great deal of experience with them in educational settings, reprising the earlier point about the need for culturally sensitive instructors.

As sensitive and experienced educators tailor program methods to fit better the differing learning styles of distinctive groups, some marriage educators may become concerned about fidelity to tried-and-true programs. Fidelity is a legitimate issue; many program designers have thought hard about their interventions and refined content and method over time. Marriage educators often receive substantial training from program developers before being certified to teach in order to maintain fidelity to the program. However, we argue that fidelity needs to be measured with broader strokes. As program methods are altered to fit specific audiences, fidelity can be assessed with questions such as: Are the program goals and objectives congruent despite divergent teaching techniques? Are the essential, underlying principles clearly evident? Do participants end up with an equivalent set of knowledge, skills, and virtues? Fidelity is better conceptualized as replication of a foundation rather than copying every educational detail. Indeed, complete fidelity to methods that are ineffective at helping diverse groups learn foundational principles distorts the real meaning behind the term.

Maintenance. Although there is encouraging, initial evidence that marriage education helps couples build and sustain healthy relationships (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Fagan, Patterson, & Rector, 2002; Gallagher, 2004), these effects may diminish over time. Given the steady stream of new stresses and challenges that virtually all couples face, diminishing effects are not surprising. For some time, marriage educators have speculated about the benefits of “booster” sessions at periodic intervals to reinforce learned ideas and behaviors, but few programs actually integrate this idea directly into their curricular process. Booster sessions may hold some promise. Cowan and Cowan (2000) effectively included standard booster sessions after the birth of a baby in their intervention to strengthen marriages during the transition to parenthood. Because attendance at follow-up sessions may be spotty, other ways to deliver booster

curriculum deserve consideration. Some parenting educators have experimented with parenting newsletter intervention (Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997; Walker & Riley, 2001). Perhaps follow-up newsletters sent to program “graduates” periodically to reinforce program effects and encourage on-going maintenance activities could help maintain program gains over time. Marriage educators could consider employing electronic communications efficiently and creatively to follow-up with participants and reinforce learning.

Doherty and Carroll (2002) take the concept of booster sessions in a different and potent direction. They argue that nearly all marriage education fits a consumer model, with couples consuming education and then making use of it (or not) when they return home. Instead, Doherty and Carroll argue for a citizen model of marriage education in which couples who first consume education then give back to their communities by reaching out to help other couples in some fashion. Giving back could include a wide array of activities with different levels of personal investment, including mentoring other couples, becoming educators themselves, recruiting others to invest in marriage education, advocating in their communities for healthy marriages, and more. Doherty and Carroll argue that post-program involvement as a citizen of a community of healthy marriages helps to maintain and even increase educational effects at the same time it reaches out to encourage others to strengthen their marriages and builds a community of citizens who are intentional about their marriages.

Marriage educators need to give more attention to how they can help participants maintain program benefits. Intervention with effects that endure over time is a challenging goal, but accepting less than that clearly diminishes the value of marriage education. Indeed, it may be helpful for marriage educators to stretch the temporal horizon of their goal to think about multiple interventions across the life course. As one marriage educator suggested, we need regular marital inoculations, like yearly flu shots, against the changing seasons and contours of our lives. Helping marriage educators to think more systematically about the temporal and developmental context of their work is the topic of our next section.

Dimension IV: **Timing**--*When does it occur?*

Marriage educators often treat time and life circumstance as a constant. They teach general principles for building and sustaining healthy marriages that transcend temporal and circumstantial boundaries. They tend to think of marriage education curricula as covering the waterfront of important skills and knowledge unmediated by time, generally applicable across the marital life cycle and changing life circumstances. But couples married for a long time actually experience several different marriages. Certainly general marriage principles exist, but there are good reasons for marriage educators to think carefully about the temporal context of their interventions.

Probably the most important reason for temporal specificity is that it makes curricula more relevant. For example, learning general problem-solving skills is important, but young, engaged couples basking in the rose-colored sunlight of fresh love may not even sense that they will ever encounter difficult differences. Hence, just as important as problem-solving skills may be attention to such issues as assessing risk and protective factors in the relationship and understanding the basic duties that marriage imposes on those who enlist in its ranks. Similarly, couples facing the transition to parenthood face specific challenges that older couples interested in enhancing their marriage have likely already worked out. Couples beginning a second marriage with responsibilities to children from a previous union bring specific concerns and challenges. In other words, explicit attention to timing and circumstances modifies the content of marriage education, making it more relevant to learners. The more tailored educational offerings are to the temporal and life circumstances of their students the more likely they are to fit their perceived needs. By extension, more temporally tailored teaching will be easier to apply and more likely to be effective. It may also attract more students in the first place, a constant struggle for marriage educators. While there are reasons to construct temporally indiscriminating curricula, as well, we believe many marriage education initiatives should be tailored for specific life course times and circumstances.

Developmental Changes. A benefit of temporal sensitivity in marriage education is that it stretches educators to reach further backward and forward in time to address developmental needs of learners. To

date, marriage education has probably focused most on young engaged or married couples in the first few years. Reaching back in time to adolescents who are forming attitudes and beliefs about marriage as well as forward in time to couples whose nests are emptying alerts marriage educators to more educational possibilities.

Adolescence. Developmentally, adolescents are beginning to think abstractly about their personal future. They are building their own identities, full of hopes, dreams, and fears. They are keenly attuned to the adult world of relationships. Accordingly, this may be a fertile time to address a major life goal that almost all youth share: having a loving, lasting marriage. Adolescents are likely to be eager students of marriage education if it is done well. As mentioned previously, some high school curricula, such as “Connections,” have tried to integrate relationship and marriage education into adolescents’ education. Healthy relationship skills are a staple of these programs, but it may be equally important that they attend to other issues as well, such as basic knowledge about marriage, marriage myths, constructive attitudes about marriage and divorce, and guidelines for preparing effectively for marriage (Stahmann & Salts, 1993). Adolescents have grown up in a society with an unprecedented tolerance for divorce and non-marital childbearing. Many have experienced these circumstances personally; some will even struggle to point to any healthy, long-term marriages in their circles of family, friends, and in their neighborhoods. And adolescents consume large helpings of television and other media that send out confusing and false messages about the nature of marriage and healthy, intimate relationships. Under these circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that many adolescents’ will lack a solid understanding of what marriage means, how society benefits from marriage, and how healthy, stable marriages are built and sustained. As Pearson (2000) has argued, marriage educators should attend to adolescents’ basic understanding of marriage.

Moreover, curricula should not sidestep important issues weighing on adolescent minds, such as early sexual experience. One experienced youth educator argues that teens are bored by the typical educational messages about sex that focus on body parts and sexually-transmitted diseases (Pearson,

2000). She asserts that teens need and want to understand a fuller and richer meaning of sexuality. In addition, myths about effective ways to prepare for marriage would be an important topic to address with adolescents before they move into early adulthood.

Parenthetically, marriage education for adolescents should take place in other settings besides high school, such as religious youth groups. Media also could help to balance misleading and false ideas about marriage in primetime media with program offerings based on solid research. Effective marriage education for adolescents in multiple settings carries the promise of fewer bad choices later on. Early dosages will likely be lower than what is possible in later periods. But even small course corrections, if they occur early on, can produce developmentally different destinations.

Early Adulthood. The early adult period of the life cycle is emerging as one of the most critical times for marriage education because we have seen in the last third of the 20th century a substantial elongation of the time between adolescence and the time when most individuals want to marry. There is now, on average, a 12-15-year period between the onset of sexual capacity and interest and the time young adults enter the institution designed by society in the past to regulate it. And this lengthened period of the life cycle now coincides with unprecedented sexual freedom. Not surprising, some marriage scholars have given this changing life cycle demographic a great deal of attention. The National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values, for instance, have been influential publishing insightful reports focused on understanding young adult attitudes and behaviors regarding dating, mating, cohabitation, and marriage (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Popenoe & Whitehead, 2002; Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001).

We believe that marriage educators could be more active in addressing the specific educational needs and possibilities of this period. Young adulthood is not a period of cognitive and behavioral latency about marriage; formal education should not be postponed until individuals are thinking seriously about marrying a specific person. Marriage educators could address in more concrete and explicit ways topics touched on in adolescence, specifically about dating patterns (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2000), sexual

involvement (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001), and cohabitation (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2002). Colleges and universities should be a prime setting to fill this educational gap. Scholars have Glenn criticized the texts available to support these course offerings (Glenn, 1997; Larson & Hickman, in press, 2004). But given the pace of societal change over the last few decades, texts understandably will have some deficits. Better texts probably are on the horizon. Larson and Hickman (in press, 2004) have provided constructive suggestions for improved texts so that they address comprehensively the known premarital predictors of marital success. Educators of young adults in college may be tempted to divorce sexual experience from future considerations of marriage in their curricula, but research shows how sexual history impinges on marital choices and marital success (Teachman, 2003).

Another educational possibility during the young adult period is helping children of divorce to develop better mental models of healthy marriages and greater confidence that they can succeed. Research indicates that young adults are less confident than previous generations about their chances for marital success (Glenn, 1996), no doubt in part to childhood experience with divorce. For some young adults, especially disadvantaged African Americans, marriage is not only missing from their childhood experience but nearly absent in their communities. These young adults still hold aspirations for marriage, but they may need effective education to help them see a relationship and an institution that is mentally and emotionally dim in their minds and hearts. This is hardly an exhaustive list of marriage education needs for contemporary young adults, but clearly there is a need for more work in this period of the life cycle.

Premarital and Early Marital. This period of the life cycle has received the most attention from marriage educators. It is an obvious candidate for sound, preventative intervention. Many couples at this time are eager to engage their minds as well as their hearts in the task of building a strong foundation for their marriage. On the other hand, too many couples are blinded by the romance of falling in love and establishing a life together to see the pitfalls in front of them. These couples focus primarily on the wedding rather than the marriage, a problem that reality television has probably exacerbated recently. To help,

religious organizations have been leading the way in turning wedding preparation into marriage preparation. Increasingly, churches, synagogues, and mosques are encouraging and even requiring involvement in formal marriage preparation in order to marry within a religious tradition. While some religiously-based marriage preparation programs in the past have not been much more than instructions for staging the wedding, many now are sound. The best programs combine religious instruction on the sacred nature of marriage with secular wisdom on building and sustaining healthy marriages. In addition, the best programs include couples taking a relationship inventory (e.g., FOCCUS, PREPARE, RELATE) to help them identify strengths and challenges in their relationship, and encourage intentional efforts to address identified challenges. (See Larson et al, 2002, for a critical review of the major inventories.) Some have speculated that formal premarital education may serve the purpose of preventing some ill-advised marriages from happening (Center for Marriage and Family, 1995; Stanley, 2001). A few couples may be discouraged from going through with their decision to marry because they have come to see dangerous flaws in their relationships. In addition to formal premarital education, some churches assign newlyweds a mentor couple trained to be a personalized support system during the sometimes stressful first few years of marriage. Workplace settings, as well as religious settings, could be involved at this time. Given that individuals are generally delaying marriage into their mid and late 20s, workplaces have become a more important venue for meeting potential marriage partners (Glenn, 2002).

Enrichment education in the early years of marriage could be very effective in helping to prevent little troubles from growing into serious, long-standing problems that threaten the stability of the marriage. For many couples, issues which seem insignificant before marriage quickly litter the early marital landscape. For some couples, the division of domestic labor, decisions about who to spend holidays with, in-law relations, and other issues challenge budding skills. For other couples, even more complex problems must be addressed in the early years of marriage, such as co-parenting relationships with ex-partners, or dividing time between biological children from a previous union and time with step-children of a current union.. The

early years may be an ideal time to encourage couples to work on the foundations of their marriage with skills and knowledge education. An enrichment program in the first year of marriage as a planned “booster” to premarital education holds particular promise. Religious organizations could do a better job of capitalizing on their successes offering premarital education to couples by extending their programs to include planned sessions during the first year or two of marriage to help couples navigate the choppy waters of early marital life. Progress is needed here. (Issues regarding premarital cohabitation will be discussed in a later section.)

Early Parental Years. Marriage educators have given a lot of attention to premarital and early marital couples. Not unexpectedly, then, marriage educators are beginning to shift their attention forward in the marital life cycle to the challenges associated with the transition to parenthood. The challenge this transition presents to couple relationships is now one of the most well-established findings in the family sciences (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). Researchers over a generation have found that shifting from partners to parents (Cowan & Cowan, 2000) creates a marital crisis for a small, but significant set of couples. A recent meta-analysis suggested that recent cohorts of transitioning parents appear to be experiencing more of a decline in their marital satisfaction compared to their parents generation, perhaps because cultural changes have made parenting feel more restrictive of personal freedom and caused more role conflict than in the past (Twenge et al., 2003). Even when it doesn't create an imminent crisis, the transition to parenthood is still stressful on the marital relationship for most couples, potentially foreshadowing a future season of marital drought, especially for couples whose relationships were shaky before children arrived.

A number of scholars over the years have noted the fertile possibilities for marriage educators to develop interventions to help transitioning couples deal with these unique challenges (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2002; Shapiro et al., 2000; Twenge et al., 2003; Worthington & Buston, 1986). Research suggests that simple awareness of parenthood's pitfalls can decrease the

negative influence of the transition to parenthood on marital satisfaction (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Issues around gendered family responsibilities and domestic labor are heightened during this period. Often spouses' feelings about their new identities and responsibilities are as much a surprise to themselves as they are to their partners. Economic pressures, both proximal from decreased time in the paid labor force and distal from worries about supporting the financial costs of raising children, impinge on transitioning couples with greater force. For many spouses, the timing of the transition to parenthood is "unexpected"; often one spouse, usually the husband, was not ready to take that step. An unplanned pregnancy has been shown to be a predictor of marital problems down the road (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Thus, there may need to be remedial work on couple decision making, rebuilding a sense of partnership, and rebuilding a pattern of teamwork with these couples.

It is important not to forget about adopting couples, too. Although adoption has decreased dramatically with the loss of stigma for unwed childbearing and abortion, there is still a sizable number of couples who become parents almost instantly, rather than having a natural, nine-month adaptation period. Adopting couples will have unique needs. For instance, many of them have strained their marital relations as they have dealt with long-term infertility, intrusive medical and sexual treatments, and accumulating disappointments. These problems may affect husbands and wives differently, contributing to a sense of separateness rather than building a sense of partnership common to pregnant couples.

Because couples are already overwhelmed with the demands of caring for a new infant, topical, moderate-dosage educational offerings addressing these and other issues may be necessary. A natural setting for reaching out to couples during the transition to parenthood is the healthcare system (Hawkins et al., 2002). In fact, several scholars have suggested that marriage education for transitioning couples be integrated into childbirth classes (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Duncan & Markman, 1988; Institute for American Values, 2000; Polomeno, 2000; Powell & Cassidy, 2001). A large number of couples participate in childbirth education classes at the urging of their physicians. They are already in a learning mode and may be open

to dealing with relational issues as well as the perinatal health issues. Some marriage educators are finding that childbirth educators are quite receptive to including marriage education in their curriculum, especially if it can be done in a way that doesn't displace too much of the time to cover traditional material (Hawkins et al., 2002). Other practitioners are also finding ways to use the perinatal healthcare system to invite prenatal couples to participate in marriage and parenting education programs (Doherty, Erickson, & LaRossa, 2003; Shapiro & Gottman, in press). One program in Chattanooga, Tennessee, "Boot Camp for Dads" (http://www.firstthings.org/red/fathering_bootcamp.html), reaches out to expectant dads in childbirth classes with a curriculum tailored to their specific concerns, and covers important marriage topics. Prenatal couples have more flexibility and time than postnatal couples, so prenatal education may be more effective, even if the looming problems are still over the natal horizon. Other educators may want to attempt to wiggle themselves into the temporal cracks of couples' lives after the baby is born when relational struggles are no longer abstract. Many communities have developed new-parent, home-visiting programs to teach new parents about principles of infant development, help them learn optimal care for their newborns, and alert them to community resources that support their parenting efforts (Gomby, Culross, & Behrman, 1999). These programs also may be open to including a marriage module in their curriculum. Many transitioning couples, especially in disadvantaged communities, are not married but are living together or still romantically involved and have high hopes for marriage and giving their child a stable, loving home. Their situation will be discussed in more detail later in this section.

Mid-Parental Years. Having successfully traversed the high wire of the early years of marriage and finding their balance again after becoming parents, it would be easy to view the middle parenting years as uneventful, requiring little attention from marriage educators. There are good reasons to reject this perspective, however. This period of the family life course is becoming known for its time-starved quality, when more children and more commitments mean less couple time. The daily investments of couple time that lubricate marital functioning dry up with chauffeuring hyper-scheduled children, meeting increased

work demands, and physical exhaustion at the end of the day (see Daly, 1996; Doherty, 2001). Lower-income families, who struggle constantly even with two incomes to meet the economic needs of their families and still find time to monitor and nurture their children, may be even more likely than middle-income families to be affected by this time crunch. Accordingly, marriage education, especially dealing with creative ways to prioritize marital time, would be valuable for couples in the mid-parental years. These years have not received adequate attention.

Ironically and unfortunately, couples will have little time to accommodate this educational need. So marriage educators will need to be creative in how they overcome this barrier. Marriage education in a neighborhood setting disguised as “Friday night date” activities for couples could be an option. Embedding low-dosage, topical curricula in other settings where active parents are involved is worth considering. For instance, parents may already be involved in religious groups encouraging their children’s religious education. This may offer a temporal cloister for marriage education. Marketing some lunchtime seminars in a workplace setting could also attract time-impooverished parents to topical marriage education. One scholar-educator, Bill Doherty, of the University of Minnesota, has been instrumental in successfully lobbying for a national “Take Back Your Time” Day (<http://www.timeday.org>) that draws public attention to the time dearth so many families are experiencing, and urging individuals, families, and communities to take positive steps to resist contemporary time pressures on marriages and families. Even healthcare providers, who encounter busy, married parents in the course of children’s doctor visits, could put on their holistic medicine hat and take a minute to diagnose a temporal infirmity and prescribe a resource book or web site to keep a chronic marriage malady from becoming an acute or even terminal marital illness. Marriage educators could encourage and help physicians to improve their practices to support marriages by recommending resource materials.

Late- and Post-Parental Years. As children grow through adolescence and young adulthood, the temporal crunch of the middle parenting years dissipate. The financial pressures, however, may even be

inflated for middle-class families who are funding their children's higher education. Added to this continuity of financial pressures are new challenges that often emerge during this later period of the marital life course. Launching children can be disorienting for couples, especially if parenthood has become the primary bond between spouses and the marital bolts have become rusty through neglect. There is some evidence that marital quality declines somewhat with the duration of the marriage (Glenn, 1998; VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001).

Yet diminishing parenting demands hold possibilities for reprioritizing and reinvigorating intact marriages that could prevent later-life divorce. Living longer and healthier lives means that contemporary adults in intact marriages could have many more post-parental years together as a couple than they had active parenting years. The dark side of that cloud is that there are more at-risk years for problems that could threaten the marriage. Yet middle-aged couples will also have more time and resources to invest in long-term returns for their marriages.

All this suggests possibilities for marriage educators to merge relevant relationship education with midlife and later-life interests. However, if we hold only a utilitarian view of marriage—that it is the institution designated by society to raise children in the best possible environment—then a concern for post-parental marital quality and stability would be purely sentiment, and interventions to strengthen marriages in the later years could be considered a luxury. For at least three reasons, both pragmatic and philosophical, we believe educators should reject this perspective. First, strong marriages are a primary and critical support system for aging individuals. Keeping marriages strong in the later years is a pragmatic concern about better, more efficient care for the aging that places fewer burdens on public coffers. And research suggests that strong marriages are associated with better health in the later years (Cohen & Lee, 1979; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Second, the break-up of a long-term marriage that seemed to children to be functional and satisfying can be psychologically difficult for the adult children of that marriage. And third, marriage has deep and even sacred intrinsic meaning apart from its parental function. Both publicly and privately,

marriage has a place of honor. To treat marriage in the post-parental years as a utilitarian union that eventually loses its meaning and value, like an old car that is getting too costly to repair, is both short-sighted and irreverent. Accordingly, we believe the efforts of marriage educators to serve aging couples is justified and important.

Marriage curricula that revisit the fundamentals of marital communication and problem solving is another intriguing possibility for education in this time period (Arp et al., 2000). By this time, couple interaction paths are well worn and predictable, but they can be less than ideal and create unnecessary bumps and bruises. Marriage educators face the challenge of helping couples un-learn less functional, ingrained interaction patterns and replace them with healthier ones. Programs like "MATE" (Olson & Adams, 1996), specially modified from the "PREPARE/ENRICH" program to help couples in the later years have an important educational niche to fill.

Even couples who have established healthy communication and problem-solving patterns could use a comprehensive tune-up for the longer journey of the mature years that lie ahead. The curricula for these tune-up sessions, however, would likely be quite different from well known, off-the-shelf marriage education programs that were designed for couples earlier in the marital life cycle. Retirement may be as disorienting to familiar marital patterns as children leaving the home (Kulik, 2001). Marriage curriculum on this topic could be helpful. Health issues will be increasingly important for aging couples (Goldin & Mohr, 2000). Certainly issues of physical health and its impact on marital relations should be prescribed for midlife and later-life marriage curricula. Disadvantaged couples are likely to experience these health problems sooner and more frequently with fewer economic resources to help. Research confirms the benefits of a good marriage to a diverse set of health outcomes such as longevity, recovery from acute illness, positive health practices, and even immune system functioning (Kielcolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Waite & Gallagher, 2000) Gerontology education is a booming field, given our aging population; educators in this field could be recruited to work with marriage educators in developing helpful programs. Gerontology educators, no

doubt, could also help marriage educators develop marriage-focused curricula to help individuals deal with the death of a spouse, both preparing for it and coping with it after the fact. Helping spouses to let go of past hurts, unrealized marital dreams, and to hold on to precious moments, potentially could make the passing of a loved but imperfect life companion easier and happier.

Life Course Changes. Contemporary unions often follow more diverse temporal and developmental paths than the traditional family life course discussion above suggests. Indeed, research indicates that at the beginning of the 21st century, more than half of all couples cohabit with each other before marrying (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), and in about half of all marriages one partner was previously married, or both (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, divorce, and remarriage introduce greater complexities that marriage educators must accommodate in their efforts to help all couples build and sustain healthy marriages. Much more could be written about these topics than we will do so here. But we provide some initial comments to spark some critical and creative thinking for marriage educators.

Cohabiting. More than five million couples are currently cohabiting, nearly 10% of all unions in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). About half of cohabiting couples see themselves as assessing the relationship with a view to marriage (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin 1991). And nearly two-thirds of high school seniors, in a recent national survey, said they agreed that it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married to assess compatibility (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2002). For both lower-income and middle-income Americans, cohabitation is common and relevant to the institution of marriage. Thus, marriage educators have much to offer cohabiting adults.

Recent research from the Fragile Families Study documents that most urban, low-income, single mothers still are intimately involved with their baby's father at the time of the birth (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2002). About half are cohabiting; another 30% of fathers are frequently visiting and romantically linked to the mother; almost 75% have high hopes that their romantic relationship will mature into marriage. Unfortunately, early reports suggest that less than 20% ever do

(Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2003b). According to a recent Heritage Foundation report (Rector et al., 2003), this low rate is not due just to a lack of marriageable men, although it is a contributing factor. Although about a third of these couples have serious problems that make them poor prospects for a healthy marriage (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Child Wellbeing, 2003b), most of these men are employed, do not suffer from substance abuse or serious mental health problems, and are not violent towards their partners. Policy makers have found these statistics encouraging and are anxious to experiment with ways to capitalize on this “magic moment” around the birth of a child and help many disadvantaged, unmarried parents who want to marry develop the skills, knowledge, and virtues needed to build and sustain a healthy marriage. Some believe that other supports for these couples, such as job skills training and substance abuse counseling, could be more effective when integrated with marriage education efforts. A large, long-term, federal research project is under way to explore what kinds of efforts can be successful with couples in these circumstances.

Marriage educators reaching out to serve these couples have both a tremendous opportunity and a significant challenge. As mentioned earlier, there will be unique curricular demands. These couples often have complex fertility histories and obligations that make the commitment of marriage more challenging. Marriage education in this setting will require helping many couples figure out how to manage prior relationships, obligations to other children, and other relational complexities. In addition, recent research documents that there is a higher level of distrust, in particular about sexual fidelity, among disadvantaged families, especially among African Americans (Cazenave & Smith, 1990; Edin, England, & Linenberg, 2003). Some of this mistrust is related to past romantic relationships and children born from these unions. Marriage educators cannot assume a strong infrastructure of basic trust; curricula will do well to focus on these issues and help couples build boundaries and commitments that enhance the trust. Of course, earlier preventative education may help some young people avoid these complicating factors. In addition, a disproportionate number of these poor, unmarried mothers have experienced childhood abuse (Cherlin, et

al, 2003). These tragic experiences can be exacerbated by adult intimacy and may become a barrier to healthy marriages. Educators should not overlook these curricular needs of many couples. Existing curricula will need to be modified substantially or new curricula will need to be developed if they are to succeed in helping these hopeful, but hurting couples. Marriage educators will need to think more ecologically than is their norm, supplementing their educational offerings with links to support services for these couples (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Child Wellbeing, 2003b). (A thoughtful, innovative framework for helping these couples, developed by a research group under contract with the federal government, can be viewed at www.buildingstrongfamilies.info.)

Cohabitation is hardly unique to disadvantaged, urban couples. It is a common pattern before marriage across the socioeconomic spectrum and geographic regions. Cohabitation appears to be a risk factor for later divorce, unless one only cohabits with the partner he or she eventually marries (Teachman, 2003). Some preliminary research with mostly white, middle-class couples suggests the need to distinguish between those who cohabit before engagement and those who cohabit after engagement (Stanley et al., 2004). Post-engagement cohabitators appear not to have the risks to marital quality and stability associated with pre-engagement cohabitation and especially serial cohabitation, though researchers are not clear on why these differences exist. Both premarital education and marriage-strengthening curricula need to be tailored to fit these challenges.

Many cohabiting couples probably believe that they are already in the premarital laboratory experimenting with the long-term viability of their relationships. They may think that formal premarital education is unnecessary because they are learning all they could in day-to-day life. Cohabitation undoubtedly teaches couples a lot about each other, but research suggests it is not a reliable lesson in the factors that predict long-term marital success. One study (Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003) concludes that the *experience* of cohabitation is responsible for the greater risk of divorce these couples face if they marry, even more than selection effects (i.e., those who are already at greater risk for divorce choose to cohabit).

Some scholars have speculated that, in fact, cohabitation may even “trap” some individuals into getting married because the costs of leaving are higher and the expectations for the relationship are greater than dating relationships (Stanley & Markman, 1997).

Premarital educators may need to be proactive about reaching cohabiting couples. Premarital education is usually much more than assessing compatibility; it emphasizes learning the knowledge and skills that support strong marriages, and challenges a common myth that marriage is a magical union of soul mates. Cohabitation may help to take some of the romantic luster off the relationship and build more realistic notions of everyday life together, but by itself it is unlikely to teach effectively the knowledge and skills needed to build and sustain a healthy marriage. Hence, marriage educators have an important role to play with couples who choose to cohabit before marriage. Religious organizations that require couples—cohabiting or not—to participate in premarital education before marrying will help, especially if they are designed to emphasize needed skills and knowledge, and not dwell as much on issues, such as sexuality, with which cohabiting couples are already familiar. It is important for these religious institutions to involve rather than shun cohabiting couples who may need their services more than couples who do not cohabit before marriage. It will also be helpful for marriage educators to make use of the media to try and combat widespread myths about cohabitation as a strategic way to prepare for marriage. These low-dosage educational interventions may or may not reduce cohabitation, but they could succeed at urging cohabiting couples, who may be at greater risk for divorce should they marry, to seek out formal educational opportunities in order to reduce their risks.

Divorce/ Separation. Recent estimates are that 40-50% of first marriages will end in divorce (National Marriage Project, 2001). Most of these divorces involve children. Divorce can have long-term, negative impacts on children and adults (Amato & Booth, 1997; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000), although many children are resilient. Marriage educators see their roles primarily as preventing divorce. But there may be some untapped educational opportunities for

creative educators among individuals who have recently gone through a divorce. Many marriage educators relate anecdotes from individuals in second marriages in their classes who say that if they had learned these skills and principles earlier in life they might still be married to their first spouse. Similarly, some research in Minnesota suggests that about a third of divorced individuals say they had some regrets about their decision to divorce, and two-thirds said they wished they had worked harder to work through their differences (Waite et al., 2002). Individuals who have recently divorced could use the help of talented educators to help them adjust and try to maintain a functional co-parenting relationship with their ex-spouse for the sake of their children. But they also may be open to and even searching for understanding of what went wrong and how they could avoid serious problems again should they remarry. If done sensitively, educators in various settings could capitalize on this desire and reach out to divorcees with helpful curriculum.

Marriage educators also should make a more concerted effort to reach couples who are making mental plans to divorce. Rather than cede these couples to the divorce industry that has a financial stake in helping unhappy couples take the leap to dissolve their marriage, marriage educators can help these couples consider options, including fixing marital problems. Legal practitioners generally see marriage as developmentally dichotomous: marriages are either happy or they have become unhappy with no hope of improvement, like spoiled fruit. Yet recent research suggests that many marriages do indeed go from good to bad to good again. One study showed that nearly 60% of individuals who said their marriages were “very unhappy” at one point in time but stuck it out reported five years later that they were now “quite happy” or “very happy,” and another 25% report significant improvement (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Several processes appear implicated in helping to turn unhappy marriages around, from ultimatums to personal changes to the simple passage of time that outlives stressful circumstances. Moreover, researchers have marshaled evidence that casts reasonable doubt on a common belief that divorce is a reliable path to eventual personal happiness (Waite et al., 2002).

In short, marriage educators have something to offer highly distressed couples. One faith-based effort—Retrouvaille—that attempts to intervene to save marriages on the brink of divorce reports a success rate of around 80% (Rubin, 1998). As daunting as it may seem, marriage educators perhaps need to reach out to legal practitioners who are as wearied by the sadness of their day-to-work as they are profited by it. Some divorce mediators and lawyers may respond to an invitation to serve their clients by first inviting them to participate in marriage education efforts to examine if their relationship can still be repaired. Still, once couples have begun the road to divorce, the momentum is hard to break. So finding ways to reach unhappy, separating couples before they are entangled in the legal system will be valuable. Curricula for these hurting individuals who may not even be speaking to each other probably cannot begin in the typical ways. Instead, education may need to begin with a strong dose of basic information about how marriages can and do recover and a reality check that divorce may not be the well lighted path to happiness it seems to be when things are so dark around them now. This may open up a window of opportunity to work on the quality of the relationship with important knowledge, skills, and virtues.

In addition to this strategy, marriage educators should be in the front lines of policy making regarding divorce education. Several states now mandate that divorcing parents participate in education to inform them of the potential difficulties their children will face and encourage them to co-parent in ways that can minimize these effects. Marriage educators could urge policy makers to upgrade the curricula of divorce education to reflect recent research on how many unhappy marriages turn around and why.

It is important to consider building these programs not just for couples but for individuals, as well. In many instances, both spouses may not be willing, at least at first, to participate together, or even at all. But there is evidence that even one partner can salvage a marriage (Waite et al., 2002; Weiner-Davis, 2001). The challenges of marriage education to individuals already drifting toward divorce are substantial. But marriage educators who enjoy a challenge should explore more thoroughly the possibilities of swimming upstream to help these couples. Incidentally, the fact that these couples are in enough pain to be thinking

seriously about divorce does not mean that marriage educators should bow out of the picture and leave intervention up to therapists. Many separated individuals may be wary of therapy. Some therapists are inclined to see little value in trying preserve a marriage that has serious problems (Doherty, 2001). Although marriage education for separated couples takes it somewhat outside of its preventative orientation, many marriage educators are well trained to work with individuals in pain and are up to the challenge.

Remarriage. Even if remarriage is the triumph of hope over experience, hope is hardly in short supply. As mentioned earlier, nearly half of marriages in the U.S. today involve a second marriage for one or both spouses (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Accordingly, there is a growing need for tailored marriage education to serve this large population. The complexities of remarriage call for enhanced communication and problem-solving skills, which are a staple of numerous marriage education programs. But tailored programs may be more attractive as they integrate these generic skills with important topical content that addresses the added challenges of remarriage, such as dealing with ex-spouses, obligations to children from a previous marriage, step-parenting roles, blending finances, and others.

Dimension V: **Setting**--Where does it take place?

We often think of education as unmediated by its setting. That is, a curriculum specifies the relevant ideas which can be dropped into any welcoming host setting. While there may be some validity to this perspective, for at least three reasons it behooves marriage educators to think more concretely about where their craft takes place. First, there may be settings that lend themselves well to particular educational topics (e.g., workplace lunchtime seminars on balancing work and marriage; religious firesides on sexual fidelity in marriage in the modern age). Second, we may easily overlook fruitful venues for marriage education. For instance, healthcare settings are involved extensively in health education and potentially could become a fertile field for marriage education (Hawkins et al., 2002), especially when it links itself to health issues (e.g., marital relations and substance abuse recovery). Finally, the more settings in which

effective marriage education occurs, the greater the proportion of individuals who will be reached.

Throughout this section, we suggest the need for a more *organic approach* to intervention; that is, marriage education needs to weave itself naturally into the systems and sectors and professional work of civil society where opportunities exist to strengthen marriages. Of interest, this same point—that intervention should be delivered within existing institutions that already have access to the people that the programs hope to serve—has been made by Haine and her colleagues (Haine et al., 2003) in the context of a public health strategy to help divorcing families. If marriage education remains an unnatural element of these systems, or outside the systems altogether, then it will be difficult to sustain and propagate. (Note that the word *sector* would be a synonym for setting because generally the settings discussed in this section are also definable sectors of a complex, civil society.)

Personal/ Home. An important purpose of this framework is to shed light on areas of educational intervention that have received less attention but may have significant potential. Thus, we begin a discussion of educational settings highlighting informal, personal, home-based interventions to strengthen marriage, a category that seldom appears on the marriage education radar screen. One individual who has tried to encourage informal, personal interventions is Michelle Weiner-Davis, a prominent marriage educator and therapist. She speaks about “guerilla divorce busting” (Weiner-Davis, 2002), which is brief, informal, and personal interchanges among friends or associates aimed at educating people who are thinking out loud about divorce that there are effective ways to solve their marital problems and that marriage is worth the effort of the salvage work it sometimes requires. Similarly, Weiner-Davis and others encourage marriage educators and advocates to reinforce the value of marriage and the value of marriage education in our daily interactions with people, in beauty shops, locker rooms, hallway conversations, and the like, in effect, becoming “marriage missionaries.”

An untapped educational opportunity during this period of the marital life cycle is the chance to teach about and intentionally model for one’s children a healthy marriage. Children are exposed to failed

marriages of their friends on a regular basis raising their curiosity and concern about their parents' marriage. Parents can be effective educators of impressionable young minds about the value of marriage and their commitment to it. Pearson (2000) expressly calls for parents to be primary educators to their children about love, sexuality, commitment, and marriage. It may be especially important for unmarried or divorced single parents to reinforce for their children the value of marriage and encourage their children to make that a high priority for their lives. Marriage educators could help parents envision how to approach this task effectively. One intriguing educational possibility that emerges in midlife is parental mentoring of adult children. Parents can be a support for adult children who are marrying and beginning families. But Glenn (2002) notes that young adults today receive less monitoring and input from parents and family about courtship and marital choices. Many parents have much to offer their children as they prepare for marriage and parenting. Marriage educators could develop programs to help parents be a supportive—as opposed to intrusive—and appreciated resource to help their children establish their own healthy marriages.

The informal, spontaneous nature of these personal and family education efforts, however, makes it difficult to see them as something that fits a formal category of marriage education. We argue that marriage education can be avocational as well as vocational. The potential for these informal interactions is probably substantial, producing a learning effect out of proportion to the educational effort required. Yet the potential is substantially unrecognized at this point, and marriage educators could help teach us how to do it. We choose to give these personal, informal “interventions” a category in this framework to highlight the possibilities. We can imagine creative programs to help “lay” marriage advocates to learn techniques for micro-interventions and marriage modeling moments in the home.

Neighborhood/Community. Community settings for marriage education are a staple of the educator's curricular diet. But before turning to a discussion of this setting, we begin at an even more proximal setting—the neighborhood. Although various changes to contemporary civic life have reduced the

importance of neighborhoods for many (Putnam, 2000), for many others the neighborhood remains a salient and enriching part of their social landscape. An important point to remember is that the closer and more accessible and more familiar a setting is, the more likely it is to attract many couples, perhaps especially couples in disadvantaged circumstances who struggle with easy transportation. There are creative possibilities in organizing educational efforts on a smaller, geographically more intimate basis. For instance, topics can be tailored to specific expressed interests. It may be easier to recruit participants when the people and setting are familiar, especially if the content is clearly about enrichment and not about “fixing” (and thus openly discussing) personal problems. In addition, when couples participating together in an educational offering know each other better and are more likely to interact with each other in the future, they can become a support system for couples, reinforcing lessons learned, and even becoming stakeholders in each others’ marriages. Although the neighborhood setting for marriage education is easily overlooked, interesting possibilities reside in it.

Beyond a single neighborhood, community settings for marriage education are common. Public libraries and other civic buildings are often made available for community service classes at low or no cost, helping to hold down expenses for participants. Attaching an educational program to a civic institution, such as a YMCA or United Way, may offer the program instant credibility. Moreover, educational opportunities in a community setting may be the balanced blend of familiarity and accessibility yet relative anonymity for some individuals and couples who wish to discuss relationship challenges without worrying about their neighbors drawing conclusions or seeing their “dirty laundry.” At the same time, they benefit from listening to other participants discuss their challenges, perhaps normalizing the experience of relationship problems, which is a helpful educational process.

An additional model of community involvement in marriage education has emerged recently that holds promise. Activists in several communities have advocated the potential of a “*community saturation*” model. In this model, marriage activists recruit multiple sectors and institutions of a community and its

leaders to get involved in various ways with marriage education efforts. They attempt to empower the community with messages and opportunities to build and sustain healthy marriages. One of the premier examples of this is “First Things First” of Chattanooga, Tennessee (<http://www.firstthings.org>). They work with and organize local media, businesses, religious and civic institutions, and other organizations into a sustained, community-wide effort to fight the problem of family instability and support healthy marriages. An intriguing feature of these initiatives is that they seek a cultural-level change in a locale as well as individual involvement in marriage education opportunities. That is, these initiatives seek to shift the culture from one that sees marriage as a private concern to one that sees marriage as an important component of a healthy, civic infrastructure. The educational efforts in these initiatives range in intensity from broadcasting healthy-marriage messages in the media and on public billboards to promoting weekend seminars to advertising on-going, time-intensive workshops. The Administration for Children and Families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) recently has been providing some financial support for how to conduct these community healthy marriage initiatives (CHMIs), and is beginning a challenging, long-term study of their effectiveness.

Religious. Religious institutions are an important thread in the fabric of any community. Although the proportion of civil weddings may be increasing (Grossman & Yoo, 2003), a significant majority of weddings are still solemnized by religious institutions. One recent national poll suggest that more than 80% of weddings are performed in religious settings (Latimer & McManus, 2003). Religious settings are probably the most frequent setting for marriage education in the United States. They are undoubtedly the location for the vast majority of premarital education and counseling that occurs in conjunction with weddings. A few religious institutions have expanded their marriage education offerings to support marriages at other points in time and in other circumstances. For instance, a handful of churches are trying to support couples when a first child is born, including providing them with marriage education opportunities. The Catholic-based ministry, “Retrouvaille,” mentioned earlier, supports an intensive educational effort to repair marriages on

the verge of divorce and claims a high success rate (Rubin, 1998). Many clergy have professional training as marriage educators or therapists. Others clergy engage motivated lay individuals and couples to operate a “marriage ministry.”

Sometimes these efforts of individual faith communities grow into larger networks of support. Mike and Harette McMannus’ “Marriage Savers” organization (<http://www.marriagesavers.org>) has trained hundreds of communities to organize local congregations to band together to require premarital education (with a longer engagement period to accommodate the education), and provide mentoring for newly weds. In essence, they attempt to create a religious wedding cartel in a community by committing all local religious leaders to require these steps of marrying couples before they will perform a wedding for them. An initial study of these initiatives suggests that they are effective in reducing divorce rates in a community (Birch, Weed, & Olsen, in press, 2004).

Religious settings hold particular benefits as an effective venue for marriage education. First, it is easier to invite and recruit participants into religious settings if they are already associated with the faith community. Thus, more individuals and couples will likely be reached with valuable services. Second, participants in marriage education in religious settings are likely familiar with the instructor and other individuals, or at least share much in common. And they are likely comfortable in this setting. These advantages can enrich the teaching and learning processes. Some research provides optimism that lay instructors in a religious setting can be as effective as university-trained, secular marriage educators (Stanley et al., 2001). Third, when participants end their formal participation in some marriage education program, they are more likely to maintain on-going involvement with congregants and religious leaders who also were involved and can serve as a support system, helping to maintain program effects over time. And fourth, as mentioned previously, religious settings comfortably invite the ethical and moral domain into the curricula which can provide powerful supports for learning the skills, knowledge, and virtues needed to build and sustain a healthy marriage. Clearly, a religious setting for marriage education will not be effective for all

individuals, but for many who profess a faith, associate with a religious community, and who imbue marriage with deep spiritual meaning, a religious setting may be the most effective setting.

Education. Secondary and higher education are obvious, natural settings for marriage education curricula. Scholars recently examined what is being done and taught in high schools and colleges in the United States (Glenn, 1997; Mack, 2000; Pearson, 2000). These reports have critiqued the adequacy of curricula and texts commonly used, and made constructive suggestions for improvement. In the few years since those reports, there has been considerable development in secondary and higher education settings related to marriage education. Since 1998, Florida has mandated some basic marriage and relationship skills education in public high schools. Oklahoma has implemented a “Connections” curriculum in high schools that holds promise. Anecdotal evidence suggests that college classes dealing with marriage have increased in number and students over the last few years. Family life educators in the national cooperative extension service embedded in land-grant universities across the country are increasing their attention to marriage education. Parenting education has dominated their attention over the past generation, but marriage and relationship curriculum is now being developed. And it is delivered to clients often in more remote, rural, poorer, underserved locations traditionally supported by the cooperative extension system.

These educational settings present some clear benefits to marriage education. The first is numbers; marriage curricula embedded in high schools and colleges can reach a large number and substantial proportion of teens and young adults across the full range of the socioeconomic spectrum. Moreover and second, teens and young adults understandably possess a keen curiosity and appetite for reliable information to help them prepare for the critical life goal of a stable, healthy marriage. They are a generation of children born to parents who had the highest rates of divorce ever recorded; they don't take marital success for granted, they are more squeamish about marrying, and they have less permissive attitudes than their parents about divorce. The more marriage educators can reach these eager students with solid, research-based information before they begin serious dating, cohabitation, and marital formation,

the more likely they are to prevent weak relationships from forming and encourage strong relationships to grow. Unfortunately, to date there is limited, good evaluation outcome research on the effects these classes and modules have on students' short- and long-term abilities to build and sustain healthy relationships. Meanwhile, however, marriage education efforts in high schools and colleges probably will continue to grow and hold promise for good outcomes. There is a need for talented teachers well versed in the empirical literature on healthy marriages and marriage interventions to staff these classrooms. High school teachers may be asked to cover marriage education curricula without much formal background. Accordingly, there is a serious need for good curriculum development in this area and efficient training opportunities. Marriage educators could provide this needed training.

Institutions of higher education would offer much to marriage education if they were more effective in teaching future human service professionals about the importance of healthy marriages to adults, children, and their communities, and informing them about research-based interventions to strengthen marriages in diverse situations and across the life course. As these students move into their various professions, they would be better prepared to lead and support marriage education initiatives. The Administration for Children and Families has supported university efforts to do this with a handful of some significant grants.

Healthcare. As a setting for marriage education, healthcare may have received less attention than any other discussed here. Yet the healthcare system is extensively involved in public education. Moreover, scholars have linked healthy marriages to a host of physical and emotional health advantages, and connected divorce to notable health problems for adults and children (Keilcolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Thus, it seems that the healthcare system should be a natural venue for marriage education, especially when marital issues intersect health concerns (Hawkins et al., 2002). For instance, education for couples transitioning to parenthood has been integrated into childbirth education settings (Hawkins et al., 2003; Shapiro & Gottman, 2003). Because both acute and chronic healthcare problems can impact marital relationships, health educators could give more explicit attention to both

general and specific knowledge and skills needed to maintain healthy relationships when physical health fails.

Healthcare settings may be more open and conducive to specific, topical marriage education closely related to health problems than the more common general skills education. For example, substance abuse puts relationships at serious risk, yet successful recovery is enhanced by a positive, social support system (Richardson, 2001). A marriage of public health practitioners and marriage educators should be a happy and productive one. Of course, marriage education is restricted by scarce resources just as physical care is rationed. Thus, educators will want to consider where they are most likely to make significant differences. Furthermore, few healthcare educators will have extensive formal training in relationship skills and knowledge to feel comfortable in offering tailored marriage curricula. This suggests the need for creative alliances between health and marriage educators, both in the design and possibly the delivery of marriage education.

A potential strength of the healthcare setting, especially community clinics, for marriage education is that it is well suited to reach out to the racial, ethnic, and economically diverse populations that it regularly serves. Indeed, many healthcare organizations are not-for-profit and have an explicit mission of helping these diverse populations with educational outreach services.

Work/Military. The workplace will also be a profitable setting for marriage education. To date, however, the potential of a marriage education-workplace merger is largely unrealized. The rationale for educational services in the workplace to strengthen marriages is straightforward. From a micro-perspective, employee productivity is reduced directly by domestic problems and indirectly by health problems and other issues connected to marital breakdown. Hence, businesses should expect a bottom-line productivity return on their investment in marriage education. From a more macro-perspective, a stable, healthy marriage has demonstrated positive effects on men's employment stability and earnings (Ahituv & Lerman, 2003), which is also good for the business bottom-line. And stable, higher-wage jobs are an important foundation for

lower-income individuals striving to realize their aspirations of marriage. Moreover, corporations demonstrate their social responsibility by acknowledging that work has significant impact on marriage and family, and then seeking to help individuals manage this contemporary challenge.

The educational infrastructure to support workplace-based marriage education already exists, at least in larger corporations which have well developed employee assistance programs (EAPs). Many EAPs support some counseling for employees struggling with serious problems, including marriage. Preventative, educational services focused on strengthening marriages are emerging, as well, though more is needed.

The corporate setting offers some potential advantages for marriage education. First, to the extent that work organizations make education available in the workplace during the workday, and support attendance, this helps overcome the major hurdle of recruitment to preventative intervention. Similarly, the hassle of arranging childcare to participate in educational programs outside of work time, and the understandable desire to spend precious non-work time with family, are barriers to participation reduced by offering programs during regular work hours (e.g., lunchtime seminars). Second, many of these educational offerings in the workplace are underwritten or subsidized by the work organization, thus limiting or eliminating cost as another barrier to participation. Third, corporate sponsorship will lend a presumption of quality to the educational experience; when companies provide financial support for these efforts, they will inspect them (and perhaps even evaluate them) for quality and effectiveness. Fourth, the workplace may be a natural setting to address important, contemporary topics such as balancing work and personal lives, managing family finances, and training managers on how to be more accommodatating of employees' family situations. Lastly, EAP managers are comfortable working with outside vendors, so marriage educators can be employed directly by organizations to offer their services rather than rely on corporate trainers with limited background in marriage education.

Of course, there are educational limitations to the workplace setting, as well. One significant, pragmatic challenge will be the difficulty of including both spouses. Most couples do not work for the same

employer. While companies could be accommodating and encourage employee spouses to participate, it may be logistically hard to do. Much marriage education assumes delivery to a couple, not an individual. Educators will need to accommodate this difference or find ways to involve the non-employee spouses without them actually present. They also may want to emphasize unilateral change that strengthens marriages rather than mutually learned and coached skills. These potential problems will challenge marriage educators to develop new ways of working with individuals to strengthen couple relationships.

Another potential limitation of the workplace setting may be making educational offerings available to lower-wage workers (and part-time employees) whose schedules may be less flexible. Marriage educators in corporate settings should attend to this basic justice issue. However, to the extent that employees from across the socioeconomic spectrum participate together in marriage education offerings, the curriculum will need to be sensitive to the different experiences and needs of diverse groups. This can be a pedagogical challenge for educators requiring careful program design and implementation.

The military (including reserve units) consumes a significant proportion of the U.S. workforce these days, so it is also a defensible setting for marriage education. In fact, marriage education in the armed forces is considerably advanced compared to the private workforce. The rationale for marriage education in the armed forces is similar to that of the corporate world. That is, marital problems impinge on force readiness, as well as saps budgetary resources. Furthermore, military service places significant stresses on the marriages of military personnel, so it is harder to retain these valuable human resources for extended military service (Stanley et al., 2004).

As with other educational settings, the military has both advantages and challenges. One set of advantages has to do with its ability to reach individuals and couples who would benefit from marriage education. An infrastructure for education exists in family support services attached to major military bases. Many professionals in these settings are already developing and offering marriage education to the military personnel they serve. For instance, a version of the PREP program suitable for the military setting is seeing

active duty at several Army bases, embedded in a broader curriculum of health and well-being for military personnel and families. Military chaplains are the primary coordinators and trainers for these programs. Some of these chaplains also have professional training in the human behavioral sciences. Hence, there is an existing infrastructure available generally for military personnel to support marriage education. Just as important, there are some available resources to back up these support services. Consequently, the programs are more likely to be sustainable. Also, they are usually available at no cost to military personnel. Again, this lowers barriers to program participation. In addition, both the resources and the mind-set to evaluate the effectiveness of these marriage education programs generally exist within the military setting. Early evaluations of the Army PREP program have shown promise for strengthening relationships (Stanley et al., 2004).

The military setting also has its challenges for marriage educators. There a number of unique circumstances to military service that likely weaken the applicability of standard, off-the-shelf marriage education programs. For instance, long deployments and spousal separations common to military service place exceptional demands on marital relationships. Marriage educators need to address not just generic marriage skills and knowledge, but also specific skills and knowledge on how to cope with and manage these unique challenges. Similarly, military service involving combat places strains on marital relationships. Research indicates that veterans who have seen combat have a significantly higher than predicted rate of marital disruption (Wilson et al., 2002). In addition, high mobility among military personnel can leave couples more isolated from the informal social support available to other couples. Marriage educators may need to emphasize these issues and find ways to help military personnel compensate for this risk factor to building and maintaining healthy marriages.

Mass Media. Mass media in our society educates as well as entertains. Furthermore, we live in a media saturated society, and mass media have substantial power to shape our beliefs and behaviors (Hornik, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Marriage education in the media ranges from brief public awareness

campaigns to information-filled web sites to extensive documentaries. Media can be focused on specific groups (e.g., young Latinos in urban settings) or broadcast to huge, general audiences. Some marriage educators already use the reach and power of mass media directly to teach important knowledge and skills. Other marriage educators build web-based, marriage resource sites for their communities, an inexpensive way to begin a community initiative (see <http://www.OCmarriage.org>). Still others stretch their educational influence by building helpful, on-going relationships with reporters and producers. Diane Sollee, director of the Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education in Washington DC (<http://www.smartmarriages.com>), has played a strategic role by becoming the central media contact for reporters and producers working on stories related to marriage education.

The mass media setting for marriage education may be particularly well suited to reach young people who consume large amounts of media (Roberts, 2000). Moreover, younger people seem more comfortable and adept at computer-mediated information technology. Of course, one of the primary advantages of mass media for marriage education is its potential to reach large numbers of individuals at relatively low costs. The potential for creating cultural-level change is one of the most exciting possibilities of media-based marriage education. These efforts take time, resources, and great skill. But there is ample evidence of how media helps shape our attitudes and modify our behavior for the better (Hornik, 2002). Mass media can quickly pump up the volume of the marriage education message in a community or society.

Nevertheless, there are clear limits to this educational setting as well. Higher-dosage, sustained offerings will be difficult to accommodate and few in number in this medium. Instead, mass media lends itself to lower doses of marriage education with bottom-line messages rather than individualized and nuanced instruction. Initial production costs can be a daunting barrier for marriage educators to overcome. And media consumers demand that programming be new and current, so on-going attention to the message is required. In addition, marriage educators in this setting will need to understand the challenges

of capturing and holding the attention of a remote-control generation, and adapt their programming accordingly.

The specialized knowledge and connections required for success in the communications industry suggest that marriage educators, with a few exceptions, will be most effective building positive working and consulting relationships with reporters and producers rather than striking out on their own, although effective web sites are relatively easy to build and maintain. In addition, marriage educators need to partner with trained public relations professionals who understand how to attract and enlist mass media. The possibilities for creative integration of marriage education in mass media are virtually limitless. Marriage educators must not overlook the potential of mass media as a setting for helping individuals and couples gain the knowledge and skills needed to build and sustain healthy marriages.

Government/Public Services. Marriage is a public institution as well as a private relationship. A strong institution supports governmental goals, both broad ones to promote the general welfare of its citizens and specific objectives to assist more disadvantaged individuals (Browning, 2003; Gallagher, 2004). Thus, it should not surprise us when government also gets involved in marriage education efforts. Strictly speaking, government is more involved as a catalyst for marriage education in other settings than a setting in itself. But government has a potentially valuable role in promoting the involvement of its citizens in marriage education that can help them form and sustain healthy relationships. For example, under current TANF policy, several states are using a small portion of their federal funds to subsidize marriage education efforts, especially for disadvantaged couples. Arizona helps pay for premarital education programs for lower-income couples. Oklahoma has made a major commitment to building a state-wide network of marriage educators formally trained in the PREP program to make this validated intervention available to as many interested, individuals and couples as possible. It has paid special attention to reaching more disadvantaged groups. Other states, such as Utah, are providing helpful, free information booklets to marrying couples (Governor's Commission on Marriage & Utah Department of Workforce Services, 2002).

A handful of state legislatures have reduced significantly the cost of a marriage license if couples take a premarital education program.

Government policy is also encouraging social service agencies, including child and family support and income security entities that serve at-risk populations, to explore the potential of marriage education for their clients. Federal demonstration projects are identifying agencies, both private and public, and including an array of state and community entities, that have an interest in helping their clients form and sustain healthier relationships as a tool for reducing poverty, dependence on government subsidies, and domestic violence. One invaluable consequence of government support of marriage education efforts is that it encourages and stretches marriage educators to serve more economically disadvantaged individuals and couples who have not been a primary target in the past. In turn, marriage educators working to serve disadvantaged couples are necessarily adapting their curricula to be more ecologically sensitive to the unique challenges these couples experience to a healthy marriage. Of course, a critical way that government encourages marriage education is by providing funding support. Programs that serve the poor are always stretched to meet the demand; they do not have discretionary funds to support new programs. Another valuable consequence of government involvement in marriage education is its dedication to evaluation. The federal government has committed funding to several long-term, marriage education demonstration and evaluation studies over the next decade. These and other state-funded evaluation studies will investigate how effective interventions can be that include educational components and other services to strengthen marriages.

Marriage educators working under the auspices of government support will undoubtedly experience frustrations. Bureaucratic entanglements and requirements are ubiquitous in this setting. Government imposes multiple constraints on those organizations who receive funding. This can be discouraging, but a fortitude to work within these constraints will open up possibilities for reaching underserved populations that otherwise would be difficult to reach.

Dimension VI: **Target**—*Who receives it?*

In this section, we briefly make explicit the point that has been implicitly stated numerous times so far: there is a need for marriage education to meet the needs of different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic populations. Marriage education until very recently has been fairly criticized as not actively reaching out to non-white, more disadvantaged couples (Ooms, 2002). The empirical verdict is still out on whether programs developed primarily for white, middle-class couples, and based on research subjects mostly of the same population, will be as effective for other racial, ethnic, and lower-income groups. Ironically, the value of marriage education mostly has been established on white, middle-class (and often religious) couples who have the lowest rates of divorce (and non-marriage), and who also have the most resources to deal with the consequences of marital problems. Perhaps it is also ironic that marriage education, which has labored for half a century to gain respect among social scientists skeptical of its value or need, may finally gain it by demonstrating the efficacy of marriage education in service to disadvantaged populations, whom marriage educators have been slow to reach. Marriage education must expand to include populations with lower rates of marital formation and higher rates of marital dissolution (Bramlett et al., 2003). A new form of social inequality is emerging (Horn, 2003); marriage is a source of economic well-being, but the most disadvantaged struggle the most to benefit from it. Marriage educators need to direct substantial attention to those who potentially can benefit the most from their efforts.

We have already suggested many ways that marriage education will need to be modified to serve more disadvantaged groups. One additional point is that marriage educators will need to understand that racial and ethnic minorities have as much within-group diversity as between-group diversity. Programs designed for first-generation Mexican Americans may not serve Cuban Americans any better than programs designed for European Americans (Gonzalez-Kruger et al., 2003); Americans of African descent are similarly dissimilar. The work of diversifying curricula is likely to be more fine-grained than many marriage educators anticipate.

An easily overlooked population is rural Americans whose lives are substantially different from urbanites (who are the typical targets of marriage education efforts) and who have less access to services urbanites take for granted. Also, marriage education need to think more creatively about reaching men. Anecdotal evidence from marriage educators indicates that men generally show less interest in participating in marriage education, and when they do participate, they are usually the “drag-ees,” just trying to be supportive of their wives interests (although they are often pleasantly surprised about how much they enjoy the experience). Marriage educators have speculated that cultural notions of masculinity discourage men from participating in educational offerings they perceive to be “touchy-feely” and requiring disclosure of intimate experiences and emotions. What seems lost in these speculations, however, is a lack of reflection on the part of marriage educators. Coming from its roots in clinical psychology, it’s not surprising that marriage education curricula stress psychological inquiry and insight. Does the practice of marriage education require a “touchy-feely” approach, however? Recently, some scholars are constructively questioning therapeutic practice, trying to understand better why it appeals less to men and how it can be redesigned to be more effective (Furrow, 2002). Marriage education could stand similar scrutiny. Creative marriage educators may actually find it liberating to design an educational experience that challenges the conventional boundaries of psycho-educational interventions. Many principles for building and sustaining marital relations could be recast and taught in less “touchy-feely” terms. Private exploration of intimate, personal issues might be stressed over public disclosure. Attention also could be given to educational settings and activities. Rather than conducting sessions in an indoor, classroom-like setting where participants sit passively in chairs, perhaps sessions could be offered in more “masculine” places, or even conducted outdoors, with a creative emphasis on physical or even athletic learning activities. If marriage educators see men’s lesser interest in relationship education as simply evidence of a character deficit rather than a curricular preference they will continue to struggle to engage men—and the women married to them—in potentially helpful intervention.

Discovering inductively over time what an array of diversified curricula serving different target groups share in common will be a fascinating learning process that will highlight principles of strong marriages and strong interventions that approach universal understanding and application. Ironically, the work of curricular diversification may be key to building universal principles common to all programs.

A related note is that marriage educators laboring to diversify their curricula to fit diverse groups will need the assistance of talented basic researchers who unearth the differences and similarities of healthy marriages in diverse populations (see Fein et al., 2003). Indeed, the efforts of dedicated practitioners will be, to some extent, guesswork without the help of basic researchers who can shine a light ahead on the processes of healthy marriage among these different populations.

Finally, some marriage educators should target legislators, judges, executive branch personnel, and their staff. These public policy makers can be strong supporters of government efforts to strengthen marriage, or alternatively, they can be powerful barriers. Marriage educators can help them see how strong marriages are a critical foundation for civil society, and help them gain a vision for how marriage education can be harnessed to serve the public good. Brief, well organized seminars that provide state and community policy makers with the research foundation for supporting stronger marriages and show them examples of innovative and effective educational policies, could till the soil for marriage education to take root. An excellent model for doing this is the Family Impact Seminar (see Bogenschneider et al., 2000).

Dimension VII: **Delivery**—*How is it disseminated to the public?*

Marriage educators have a lot to consider in relation to the content, intensity, methods, timing, setting, and target of marriage education. But there is still a crucial dimension left to consider: delivery. This dimension goes beyond earlier discussions of who provides marriage education to whom in what settings where and when to address the broader issue of how marriage education will be disseminated to the public and make a large enough impact on the institution of marriage. For this framework, we identify four general

approaches to delivering marriage education: specialized marriage education; integrated marriage education; citizen marriage initiatives; and marriage culture seeding. Each approach plays an essential role in the larger task of strengthening marriages. In discussing these four delivery approaches, part of our purpose is to acknowledge that we will need more than well designed, formal educational programs, even ones that reach out to larger and more diverse groups of people. We will also need initiatives led by citizens and community activists with a concern and a passion to meet a pressing, local need. And we will need educational efforts directed broadly at seeding the culture with influential messages that place greater value on and support for the institution of marriage.

Specialist Marriage Education. There is a need for formal marriage education programs led by trained and often certified specialists. Specialized marriage educators approach the craft as helping professionals with a depth and skill that will provide a valuable opportunity to individuals and couples who seek out marriage education. Specialized education provides interested individuals and couples with formal, programmatic learning with significant content breadth and intensity, and multiple methods. Specialized marriage educators work at the “retail” level of the marriage education movement. But the inevitable limitation of this approach is that it works closer to the “mom and pop shop” level than the Wal-Mart level. Specialist marriage education struggles to reach large numbers of people. Even with creative marketing, the number of individuals who will seek out these specialized services and invest the time, money, and energy they require will be limited. Accordingly, as we have suggested several times so far, we need additional approaches to delivering marriage education that can reach farther.

Integrated Marriage Education. This approach recognizes that marriage education needs to be integrated into a more comprehensive set of human services provided to individuals and couples in multiple settings and multiple times of the life course. Generally, the more an educational initiative can symbiotically attach itself to an established setting that already serves couples, the greater its outreach. When other organizations and institutions integrate the goal of strengthening marriages as an valued part of their

mission, then marriage education becomes a component of a larger system with resources and momentum rather than a distinct enterprise hawking its wares for interested customers. Professionals working with individuals and couples in, for instance, religious, healthcare, employment, and community settings, can provide valuable marriage education services as an organic supplement to their primary work. These professionals likely already know and understand the people they work with and can adapt marriage education to meet their particular needs and circumstances. In many instances, integrated marriage education will be less intense than that offered by specialized marriage educators. But because they are more available to people in the course of their everyday lives through professionals and institutions with which they are already familiar, this approach to marriage education holds promise.

Specialized marriage educators will play a role in this integrated approach in at least three ways. First, specialists can take the lead in helping various professionals and institutions recognize the value and potential of marriage education as a part of their services. Second, specialists can provide training to professionals—adjunct marriage educators, if you will—in these settings to help them deliver marriage education. Third, specialist marriage educators could also consult with professionals and institutions to adopt and adapt educational offerings to meet their unique situations. Nevertheless, specialist marriage educators work more at the “wholesale” level assisting other professionals and institutions to integrate marriage education into their repertoire of services. Of course, it is possible that some institutions would be large and dedicated enough to marriage education that they would also want specialists marriage educators inside the organization.

Citizen Marriage Initiatives. This third approach to delivering marriage education to the public recognizes that often the most effective educational experiences are not managed by professionals in a top-down manner. Rather, grass-roots, citizen-led initiatives responding to a shared, local problem can be a powerful way of reaching friends, neighbors, and community members with valuable educational experiences. Moreover, citizen marriage initiatives have the added bonus of going beyond providing

educational opportunities to consumers to inviting those consumers to enlist in the cause and become producers or supporters of marriage education in some manner (Doherty, 2000b; Doherty & Carroll, 2002). An interesting distinction with this approach is that marriage education is about more than strengthening an isolated marriage; it also has the purpose of uniting communities, and making them better environments to nurture all marriages. In other words, citizen marriage initiatives attempt to create micro-cultural change. Educational opportunities that emerge from citizen marriage initiatives likely will lack the depth that specialized marriage educators could provide in a workshop. However, the strength of a citizen-led initiative is that it is closely linked to local problems shared by neighbors and community members. Hence, the educational offerings are more likely to meet a real-time, immediate need and attract enthusiastic learners. And these learners often go on to become a part of the initiative, stretching its reach.

Again, specialist marriage educators have a role to play in the citizen marriage approach, albeit more limited. For instance, one role is to help community members articulate a shared but inchoate problem. Then, the specialist can provide whatever support citizen leaders require, including cheerleading. The specialist also can provide citizen leaders a crash course in healthy marriage research to help them grasp the bigger picture of their local efforts. But specialist marriage educators are “on tap” rather than “on top” in this approach.

Marriage Culture Seeding. This final approach to delivering marriage education may be the most amorphous and unfamiliar to specialist marriage educators. It is also the approach with the least amount of action at this time. But it is just as critical to strengthening the institution of marriage.

Marriage education has its origins in the therapeutic, helping professions. Thus, marriage educators generally think of themselves as helping professionals with clients or students who seek out their services. The integrated marriage education approach invites specialist marriage educators to train and assist other professionals to assist in this helping profession. The citizen marriage initiative approach stretches specialist marriage educators to move beyond the helping professional role to assist in generating micro-

cultural change as supporters of grass-roots initiatives. Similarly, the fourth approach for delivering marriage education—cultural seeding to strengthen the institution of marriage—differs from the traditional helping professional approach. Cultural seeding refers to attempts to spur cultural change. Formal attempts at cultural change include such means as media-based, public awareness and education campaigns. Formal attempts have as a goal generating informal intervention—creating or feeding a “buzz”—that gets people talking with each other and acting in small ways that over time creates a momentum of positive cultural change (Rogers, 2002). Cultural currents sweep individuals along almost imperceptibly toward a destination. The marriage educator who helps generate a stronger macro-culture of marriage ultimately helps all individuals and couples in the cultural mainstream to achieve their personal goals for a stable, healthy marriage.

The cultural seeding approach to delivering marriage education uses a different set of tools than is common in traditional marriage education. The tools of public health work and mass communications are central to this approach (see Hornik, 2002). These tools allow education, condensed and reduced to summaries or sound bites, to reach large proportions of the population. For instance, a broad, public health campaign that discredits myths that contribute to marital dissolution could slowly shift the common perception that marriage is primarily about romance, impervious to rationale processes. Similarly, if enough journalists over a sustained period drew attention to the value of better preparation for marriage (rather than mere preparation for an elaborate wedding), they could help create a norm of more intentional preparation for marriage, and reduce the number of impulsive or higher-risk marriages in the first place. Public policy may also be a tool of the cultural seeding approach. One important role that public policy plays is that it sends strong signals about what leaders believe is important to the general welfare of our society. Thus, for instance, when a state passes legislation reducing the fee for a marriage license for couples who engage in significant marriage preparation activities, the state indicates that society reaps a benefit from citizens who approach marriage intentionally rather than casually. All who marry within that

state are officially invited to be more intentional. Even those who do not take advantage of the reduced license fee receive an important message about the value of stable marriages. The strength of delivering marriage education in a cultural seeding approach lies not in its ability to place a complete set of skills directly in people's hands, but in its potential for slowly moving the cultural ground under people's feet in directions that ultimately strengthen all marriages.

The specialist marriage educator has an essential role in the cultural seeding approach, as well. Clearly, the specialist can be a catalyst to bring attention to important issues and to attract the attention of media professionals. Some specialist marriage educators should regularly work with public relations specialists and cultivate relationships with local and national media professionals to get important ideas out. Similarly, specialists can be catalysts and consultants to public awareness campaigns, working with public health and communication professionals who share a concern for strengthening the institution of marriage. Marriage educators and scholars also can help to procure the substantial funding public awareness campaigns require. They can also be intricately involved in encouraging legislators and public policy makers to support marriage education.

TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED STRATEGY FOR MARRIAGE EDUCATION

Despite the impressive growth of marriage education over the last decade as a helping vocation, and even with encouraging signs that it is weaving itself into various institutions that provide human services to broader segments of the population, still this will not be enough to make a substantial difference in the institution of marriage if it is unaccompanied by micro- and macro-cultural change. While it is valuable for each marriage education enterprise to think about expanding its outreach to more people, getting marriage education infused into the culture is more than the sum of its formal, programmatic parts separately growing and extending its boundaries. What is needed is a social movement that infuses marriage

education into the normative infrastructures of our society and everyday lives in a manner similar to how the environmental and personal health movements have changed our individual and collective lives.

Unquestionably at this early, developmental stage of the marriage education movement, it is a bit presumptuous to propose a grandiose, population-level treatment plan for marriage education. But there are hints of what such a model could resemble. One possible template comes from an emerging public health issue. Our society now is well past the age when medicine is just a valued social service. Health is a deeply held, widely shared personal goal and a valued public good. We are no longer content with treating disease, as important as that is. And we are even past the time when a proto-profession was beginning to succeed at integrating the practice of health promotion into the mainstream of the healthcare system. Instead, as a society, we desire preventative education that gives individuals the knowledge and skills they need to sustain a healthy life. Obesity education is a timely, specific example. Health scientists have recently realized that we are on the verge of a health epidemic that will have serious, deleterious consequences for generations, and that even now threatens smoking as the leading cause of preventable deaths in the United States (Mokdad et al. 2004). The Centers for Disease Control has proclaimed obesity a national epidemic, with more than a quarter of adults obese and an additional third overweight (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Moreover, obesity is increasing rapidly, especially among children and disadvantage populations. Obesity will spin off future health crises, as well, such as diabetes.

Treating obesity is extremely difficult. The best treatment, in this case, is prevention. And prevention success in this area will produce happier and healthier lives, with reduced personal and public costs. The importance of this cause is such that public policy makers are unwilling to sit on the sideline and cheer the individual efforts of healthcare workers. The federal government will spend more than \$100 million dollars over the next few years for programs and research to prevent and control obesity (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2003). States will also invest funds in the fight. Even

the Internal Revenue Service now treats obesity as a disease allowing expenses for weight reduction to be deducted for tax purposes, like other healthcare expenses. The U.S. Surgeon General has issued a comprehensive, strategic action plan that calls for private and public partners to fight the epidemic of obesity. This plan involves low-, moderate-, and high-level educational initiatives with multiple messages delivered in numerous settings and sectors of society tailored to different age and socioeconomic and racial groups and accompanied by substantial public and private resources to promote and evaluate these efforts (see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). The effort to promote healthy marriages, we believe, requires no less an effort.

The goal of a marriage education movement is to give contemporary individuals and couples the knowledge, skills, and virtues needed to build and sustain a healthy marriage. Marriage education has accelerated as a helping vocation over the last decade, and is beginning to integrate itself into the portfolio of human services provided by various institutions. These efforts to date have helped many. The movement will mature as marriage educators reach out to assist every one who desires these educational opportunities, and as they expand their intervention efforts to include micro- and macro-cultural change. We hope that this article helps marriage educators think more systematically and creatively about their craft in ways that will produce wise action to bless the lives of children, adults, and the communities in which they reside.

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