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ENCOURAGING FINANCIAL CONVERSATIONS: COMBINING COACHING AND FINANCIAL COMPETENCY SKILLS TO BUILD CAPACITY AMONG HELPING PROFESSIONALS



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ABSTRACT

Social service staff are on the frontlines of supporting economically vulnerable populations but may lack training in personal finances. The Encouraging Financial Conversations (EFC) course teaches helping professionals strategies to initiate financial conversations with their clientele. Based on a series of pre and post-surveys, EFC participants reported higher levels of comfort when discussing finances with clients. Participants also had a better understanding of the role they can take in supporting clients' financial goal attainment. These results support strategies that expand financial literacy professional development for social workers and helping professionals.

ROLE OF THE HELPING PROFESSIONAL

Helping professionals include social workers, home visitors, case managers, and other front-line staff at social service agencies and organizations. These individuals frequently work with economically vulnerable populations, particularly when program guidelines limit access to individuals at or below the federal poverty level. Helping professionals may see the need for clients' access to financial education and yet may not have the training, time, or resources to address this need. Sherraden and Huang (2019) define financial capability as a person's opportunity to act (their access to beneficial financial products and services) and their ability to act (their financial knowledge and skills.)

Therefore, when an individual has access to beneficial financial services, and can apply the knowledge of how to utilize them, they have better outcomes at achieving financial functioning and improved financial well-being (Sherraden, 2017). Helping professionals often take a capabilities approach; but lack a background in financial capability building specifically.

According to Huang et al. (2021), “social work can play a key role in addressing financial capability and asset building in financially vulnerable populations.” McHenry and Pacheco (2021) found that social workers were highly interested in financial literacy and identified poverty as one of the main threats to society. Sherraden et al. (2017) found that social work students gained an increased understanding of financial capability and asset building, and more confidence in helping clients with financial management after courses on the topic were added to their college curriculum. Kindle (2013) surveyed social work students and determined that it would be best if financial literacy education were targeted to traditionally aged social work undergraduate students because they are least likely to have had the opportunities to gain significant personal financial experience.

A newer strategy to build financial capability is financial coaching (Theodos et al., 2018). In financial coaching, the financial coach and the client establish a trusted alliance, explore perspectives to help the client increase awareness of their financial behaviors, formulate plans for reaching goals, and follow up on actionable change (Collins et al., 2013). Applying a financial coaching approach within a social service setting has been shown to improve client’s financial stability (Geyer et al., 2019).

The Encouraging Financial Conversations (EFC) training incorporates a unique combination of teaching coaching skills and self-reflection strategies for helping professionals to learn how to support their client’s financial capability. The EFC training also includes support for helping professionals on how to approach their work with a cultural humility lens. Using a cultural humility lens involves addressing the individual client’s needs within their environmental context. Practitioners also need to acknowledge their own personal money values and biases in order to practice a nonjudgmental approach to their work.

EFC combines practicing coaching skills and understanding the financial competency skills needed by individuals throughout their lifespan. This article contributes to the literature by providing a summary of surveys of participants in the EFC course. These findings inform recommendations for future social work practice for those professionals who are already working in the field and may not have had previous financial education or training on facilitating financial conversations with clients.

PURPOSE

Talking about finances is not easy or comfortable for many people. It may be regarded as very personal and private.

The University of Wisconsin’s Division of Extension developed EFC to equip social workers and other helping professionals with tools to help them better meet the needs of their clients and to empower their clients to reach financial goals.

Participants learn strategies to help guide conversations with clients around financial competencies, such as budgeting or debt management. As staff who are on the frontlines of serving Wisconsin’s most vulnerable populations, providing them with financial education, resources, and skills could help their clients make the best use of their limited resources. The three main objectives of this program evaluation are to increase helping professionals:

- Comfort level when working with clients on financial matters
- Preparedness to bring up a financial topic with clients;
- Understanding of their role in helping clients with financial concerns

METHOD

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Through the EFC curriculum, professionals are provided a 6-hour training on financial conversations with clients who express financial concerns. The training includes both financial knowledge and communication techniques. The participant learning objectives are to:

- Recognize how values and biases surrounding money affect financial decision-making,
- Review aspects of financial capability and six core financial competencies, and how these relate to financial well-being; and
- Identify opportunities for assisting clients with common financial management topics and explore financial approaches and resources relevant to clients’ needs.



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	Maximizing Income
	Spending
	Saving
	Borrowing
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	Financial Problem-solving Guide



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The EFC curriculum provides resources to engage and coach clients on financial problem-solving around six financial competencies: goal setting, spending plans, saving, building credit and debt management, maximizing income, and protecting themselves from fraud and identity theft. In addition, the training engages participants in discussions revolving around weaving a cultural humility lens into their approach with clients. EFC includes a focus on inclusivity. Allowing open dialogue about sensitive topics such as race provides an opportunity to facilitate meaningful conversations with participants (Dixon-Kleiber et al., 2021).

The cultural humility lens approach during EFC training activities provides opportunities to reflect on participants' own values and biases, to be more sensitive to others' situations, and create a less judgmental approach during client conversations.

The curriculum can be offered online or in-person and provides flexibility for organizations to offer 6 individual one-hour sessions, two half-day programs, or one full-day program. This study is based on the work of 10 virtual courses in Wisconsin between November 2020 and December 2021.

RECRUITMENT

Educators promoted EFC through local, regional and statewide Division of Extension channels for community agency partners to share with their staff. Promotional methods included the use of flyers, social media posts, agency listservs, and word of mouth by colleagues. As of December 2021, over 300 helping professionals, including those from Head Start, Community Action Program agencies and homeless shelters, participated in an EFC professional development training.

The course evaluation sought to answer how comfortable trainees feel utilizing the course information, barriers to utilizing it, how useful the training was, if they see having financial conversations as part of their role, and whether they have used this information with clients. The survey questions included items about comfort level with financial content, relevancy of course topics addressed, usefulness of course activities and materials, application

intent of material use, potential barriers to using information with clients, and identifying the support needed to use what was learned during the course. Paired t-tests were used to determine if statistically significant changes in outcome variables were achieved between the three-time points of the surveys. Open-ended survey data was initially reviewed by a financial program specialist to create code categories and then analyzed by two educators and one evaluation specialist. Survey comparisons were conducted in three waves to assess program effectiveness over time. Wave one provided pre-course and after-course survey comparisons based on 131 matched responses using a two-tailed t-test, as seen in Table 1.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

All registered participants received an emailed link to an online pre-survey before the training, a post-survey link after taking the course, and a follow-up survey link emailed two months after course completion. The surveys were administered online using Qualtrics. The follow-up survey was sent four times to ensure maximum participation. The UW-Madison Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB determined that this project is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations. 1

Table 1

Pre-Course and After-Course (immediately after the course) survey comparisons of participants' self-assessed outcome variables – comfort, preparedness, importance, and clarity of role

Outcome Variables	Pre-Course Mean	Pre-Course Standard Deviation	After-Course Mean	After-Course Standard Deviation	p value
I feel comfortable working with clients on financial matters. (n=131)	2.7	0.8	3.4	0.6	<0.01*
I feel prepared to bring up a financial topic with my clients. (n=131)	2.7	0.9	3.6	0.6	<0.01*
Dealing with financial concerns is an important part of my work with clients. (n=131)	3.5	0.7	3.6	0.7	0.56
I understand the role I can take in working with clients on financial concerns. (n=131)	2.9	0.8	3.7	0.5	<0.01*

Notes: Likert Scale: 1=Not at all, 2=A little, 3=Somewhat, 4=Very Much; * p value of ≤ 0.05 , a commonly used standard for a statistically significant difference between two means, using a paired two-tailed t-test.

Wave two provided pre-course and 2-month follow-up comparisons based on 63 matched responses, as seen in Table 2. Lastly, wave three provided post-course and 2-month follow-up comparisons based on 64 matched responses, as seen in Table 3.

Table 2
Pre-Course and Course-Follow-Up survey (8-10 weeks after the course) comparisons of participants' self-assessed outcome variables – comfort, preparedness, importance, and clarity of role

Outcome Variables	Pre-Course Mean	Pre-Course Standard Deviation	Course-Follow-Up Mean	Post-Course Standard Deviation	p value
I feel comfortable working with clients on financial matters. (n=63)	2.7	0.8	3.3	0.7	<0.01*
I feel prepared to bring up a financial topic with my clients. (n=63)	2.8	1.0	3.4	0.8	<0.01*
Dealing with financial concerns is an important part of my work with clients. (n=64)	3.6	0.6	3.5	0.8	0.46
I understand the role I can take in working with clients on financial concerns. (n=62)	3.0	0.8	3.5	0.6	<0.01*

Notes: Likert Scale: 1=Not at all, 2=A little, 3=Somewhat, 4=Very Much; * p value of ≤ 0.05 , a commonly used standard for a statistically significant difference between two means, using a paired two-tailed t-test.

Table 3
After-Course (immediately after) and Course-Follow-Up (8-10 weeks after) survey comparisons of participants' self-assessed outcome variables - comfort, preparedness, importance, and clarity of role.

Outcome Variables	After-Course Mean	After-Course Standard Deviation	Course-Follow-Up Mean	Course-Follow-Up Standard Deviation	p value
I feel comfortable working with clients on financial matters. (n=64)	3.4	0.6	3.3	0.6	0.32
I feel prepared to bring up a financial topic with my clients. (n=65)	3.6	0.5	3.5	0.7	0.12
Dealing with financial concerns is an important part of my work with clients. (n=63)	3.6	0.6	3.5	0.7	0.46
I understand the role I can take in working with clients on financial concerns. (n=64)	3.8	0.4	3.6	0.6	<0.01*

Notes: Likert Scale: 1=Not at all, 2=A little, 3=Somewhat, 4=Very Much; * p value of ≤ 0.05 , a commonly used standard for a statistically significant difference between two means, using a paired two-tailed t-test.

FINDINGS

SURVEY ANALYSIS

Survey respondents reported statistically significant improvements (p value of ≤ 0.05) over time on three main outcome variables: (1) participants feeling more comfortable working with clients on financial matters, (2) participants more prepared to bring up a financial topic with my clients, and (3) participants understanding the role they can take in working with clients on financial concerns. For these outcomes, respondents show a change of almost a one-point increase over time on a four-point scale where 1="Not at all", 2="A little", 3="Somewhat", 4="Very Much". For example, participants reported feeling somewhere between "a little" and "somewhat" prepared to bring up a financial topic with clients before the course (mean 2.7, SD 0.9) whereas after the course, they reported feeling somewhere between "somewhat" and "very much" prepared (mean 3.6, SD 0.6). These changes were significant when comparing a) pre-course survey results to immediately after the program (as seen in Table 1) and b) pre-course survey results to two months after the program (as seen in Table 2). The degree of change reported immediately after the program were sustained for at least 8-10 weeks, except for "I understand the role I can take in working with clients on financial concerns" which decreased from a mean of 3.8 (after-course) to 3.6 (follow-up) as seen in Table 3.

The following data includes all respondents at post-survey and the 2-month follow-up survey time point. The top three ways that respondents plan to use or have used information from the training include: discussions with clientele (92% on post-survey; 69% follow-up), personal financial management (80% on post-survey, 63% follow-up), and visit websites (88% on post-survey, 55% follow-up). About one-third of respondents to the follow-up survey said they are spending more time working with clients on financial topics than before the course.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

A qualitative analysis of open-ended questions provided feedback for program improvement. When asked to share something meaningful they learned and will apply from the training, participants (29%) reported examples of specific content that was covered, including the following quote: "Maximizing Your Income (module) was an especially helpful resource/session for me and the work I do with clients. I appreciated the attention to my questions about immigrants and documentation, as my clients are primarily immigrants." More than one-quarter of participants (28%) reported examples of resources that they shared, including: "I plan to provide budgeting information, websites, names of helpful agencies to the families I work with." and "The income and benefits tracker sheet is a great tool that I will use with the population that I work with." Lastly, many participants (15%) shared examples of how their mindset was changed from the program, for example, "The values activity/list helps me be less judgmental." and "This can be a daunting topic, especially with low-income families. I really appreciated the conveyed understanding that there are emotional aspects to spending."

The addition of cultural humility exploration and examples during the course provided the opportunity to take the perspective of the client and create awareness of our own values and biases. One participant stated: "What I really liked was when you would remind us to put our attention to incorporating a cultural humility lens. To think about our clients and what is relevant for them. You repeated that, gave examples which really made it hit home for me. Thank you! So important and a message that we can never hear enough about."

The responses also revealed several potential barriers for professionals when using the EFC materials in their work with clients. One participant wrote, "Not all clients have budgeting issues. But would use when the topic arise. Also worried that a lot of clients are so tight with money or so far behind on bills that when these ideas are talked about, they will feel defeated already." Another responded, "I feel that the biggest barrier I see is just getting people to talk about finances before there is a crisis, and continuous conversation."

LIMITATIONS

These data are limited to those who responded to surveys. It is plausible the participants who were most engaged and most likely to use EFC are those who are included in the data, especially for multiple survey follow periods. This could result in these findings being more favorable than if all EFC participants were included.

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PROGRAM ADAPTATIONS

EFC participants indicated through unsolicited email feedback to facilitators and through post-course surveys that ongoing updates of emerging financial information and additional supplemental topics would be beneficial. Therefore, additional "Booster" sessions covering COVID-19 impacts, engaging in financial conversations, and rebuilding credit were added in August 2021 to provide ongoing support, practice, and updated information to previous program participants. In addition, while the materials are designed to be used in six 1-hour sessions, educators have also adapted the materials to present one-time 6-hour trainings for organizations.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, social workers and other helping professionals benefit from learning about personal financial management and financial coaching strategies to help understand the role they can take with clients. EFC equips helping professionals with tools and materials to help them meet the needs of their clients and to empower their clients to reach financial goals. Post-survey and follow-up survey results show the intentions of participants to use information from EFC and to apply EFC content to their work, for both discussions with clients and with their own personal financial management.

EFC is a promising professional development curriculum that can aid helping professionals when working with clients on financial matters. EFC prepares helping professionals with activities around financial coaching conversation skills and self-reflection on personal values and biases to ensure a nonjudgmental approach when working with clients on personal finances.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The barriers identified by participants in the program evaluation provide feedback for EFC course improvement to be inclusive of the needs of helping professionals. Due to time constraints as a frontline professional, keeping trainings flexible by offering one-hour sessions multiple times per year or virtual sessions to reduce travel and expenses may help with consistent attendance during the duration of the training. Creating additional “Booster” sessions with updated financial information that benefits clients and an opportunity to practice applying coaching communication skills and materials could provide a supportive network with their peers. In addition, by focusing on limited-income audiences and scenarios for the core training and subsequent “Booster” sessions, EFC participants could discuss with other helping professionals who are experiencing similar case management challenges.



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