Wellness IN the Rockies (WIN the Rockies)
A tri-state community-based healthy lifestyle promotion project based on healthful & enjoyable eating, physically active living, and respect for body size diversity

Insights and observations we would like to share with others

Planning, implementing, and evaluating a tri-state integrated project between research and community outreach offered both challenges and rewards. As we reviewed our efforts over the four-year duration of our project, we outlined the following information we would like to share with others attempting a project of this scope.

We hosted five nationally recognized consultants at our initial retreat where we developed strategies for implementing and evaluating our project in six rural communities. The consultants represented a variety of viewpoints and perspectives in preventive medicine, health education research, qualitative assessment methodologies, community capacity building, and community-level assessments. The group of consultants recommended adding a cross-sectional survey at pre- and post- intervention times in the demonstrator communities. This community survey proved to be an extremely valuable addition to our research, and was also a great way to launch the project in our communities. Our consultants also participated in our third annual all-team retreat. We highly recommend that others consider the use of consultants when implementing projects of this broad of scope.

Our project included three land grant universities, six intervention communities, and 20 team members housed in eight different locations. Hundreds of miles separated team members. Communication was key to the success of WIN the Rockies. Electronic communication links among team members included a project website, a computer list serv, monthly conference calls, and regular e-mail communications. Project staff from all three states wrote monthly narrative reports and posted the reports to the list serv. Minutes from all staff and all-team conference calls were also posted to the list serv. The wonders of the modern electronic world were used extensively, but we also found that electronic communications cannot (and must not) replace face-to-face dialogue opportunities. Our budget included yearly retreats for all team members, as well as mini retreats for staff members two to three times a year. Community coordinators repeatedly stated the face-to-face gatherings were important for minimizing their sense of isolation, as well as offering them opportunities to “cross-pollinate” ideas.

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The graphic above depicts the major intervention and research components of WIN the Rockies. Intervention communities were selected based on several criteria including population size (5,000 - 10,000), supportive county Extension personnel (the local Extension program had to include a food and nutrition education program for limited resource families), supportive primary care physicians with commitment to the WWAMI program, and similar population demographics and community characteristics between the demonstrator and comparator communities in each state (similar minority populations, medical facilities, and separation from large population centers). Team members in each state selected their communities based on this criteria. Selection of the intervention communities was a key task in the first year.
The initial team retreat was designed to establish a shared philosophy among team members. With the guiding principles from Wellness in Wyoming (WIN Wyoming) as a guide, the team developed a mission statement for the project along with 15 guiding principles in the areas of body-size differences and size acceptance, physically active living, healthful and pleasurable eating, and positive self-acceptance. The mission statement and guiding principles united the team with a shared vision. Throughout the four years of the project, team members demonstrated a willingness to disagree constructively with each other because all team members were committed to this shared vision. To ensure the synergy of the tri-state effort, team members from each state were involved in all major efforts including reviews of intervention tools, selection committees for community grants, and the narrative research team.

Four rounds of community mini grants were awarded during the project. The community grants were offered as a way to embrace the WIN the Rockies’ principles through local efforts developed by local community members. Grants ranged in amount from $100 to $2,500. The first round of grants was designated for demonstrator communities, and the last round was reserved for comparator communities. Two rounds of grants were offered to any community in the project states of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. The application process was kept very simple to encourage participation of groups and organizations that may have never written grants previously. The project team was very impressed with the creativity and dedication of the individuals and groups implementing the mini grants at the local level. Some of the successful grants included purchasing milk machines for local schools, implementing a community garden program, and improving community walking trails.

The project team included both quantitative and qualitative researchers. WIN the Rockies attempted to balance these two basic forms of research. Quantitative research efforts included the cross-sectional survey, an adult cohort study (assessments included written surveys, blood analysis, 6-minute walk test, height/weights), and a 4th and 5th grade student cohort study (assessments included a written survey, a one mile run, height/weights). The major effort for qualitative research was the collection of narratives (or life stories) from 103 individuals in the demonstrator communities. Narratives consisted of 57 one-on-one interviews and six focus group discussions. Both males and females were included in the narratives, and ages varied from 17 to 87. The two forms of research (quantitative and qualitative) were found to strengthen the findings from each other, as well as offer deeper insights. For example, one finding from the cross-sectional survey was that a significantly higher percentage of women than men had low body satisfaction scores. Several quotations from the narratives offered insight into this finding, including one man in his 60's who said, “Weight seems to be more of an issue with women that it does with men in most cases. Women don’t seem to accept themselves as being overweight, maybe as much as men do.”
Project coordinators were hired in each state to work with local community members to implement the project in the intervention communities. During the initial discussions to write the grant proposal, the team discussed the advantages and disadvantages of housing the project coordinator in the community. The team was concerned that having the coordinator live in the community might encourage a perception in the community that the person was responsible for implementing the project, and the overriding goal was to have the community take ownership of the project. Based on this reasoning, each state hired a state project coordinator external to the intervention communities who was responsible for working with community members to implement the project in both the demonstrator and comparator communities. Within a few months of the project starting in Wyoming, the state coordinator resigned to take another position on campus. In order to gather the initial assessments with the adult and student cohorts and to initiate the interventions in a timely fashion, community coordinators living in their respective community were hired for the demonstrator and comparator communities in Wyoming. This also allowed the project to review the advantages and disadvantages of housing the project coordinator within the community and external to the community.

**Housing coordinator external to community:** Travel quickly became a major hurdle for coordinators not housed in the community. Winter travel on snow packed and icy roads was not only a time factor, but also a safety factor. Several tasks for the project had to be completed within a few days when the coordinator was scheduled in the community, which made it difficult to connect with some community members if they were not available on those specific days. In comparison, the Wyoming coordinators, who were housed in the communities, could make connections with community members for any day of the month. One advantage of having a coordinator not housed in the community was the objective perspective the person brought to community issues. The coordinator in Idaho was accessible with a local phone call, but a call to the Montana coordinator initially required a long distance call. To alleviate this problem, the Montana coordinator obtained a local phone number with an answering machine. Because the project coordinators were not members of the community, they had to rely on key community contacts to make connections broadly in the community. Among the key contacts in the communities were the educators and support staff of the Cooperative Extension Service.

**Housing coordinator in the community:** The savings in travel time by housing the coordinator in the community could be invested in community intervention efforts. Additionally, the project coordinators in Wyoming had been residents of their perspective communities for several years and knew many of the community members. The initial concern that a project coordinator housed in the community may not be able to establish community ownership for the program did not seem to be a major problem, but the issue would be dependent on the skills of the individual coordinator hired for the position.

**Recommendations for other projects:** Based on our experiences, we found the advantages of housing the project coordinators within the communities outweighed the disadvantages. Sustainability of project efforts was very similar across the six intervention communities, indicating a project coordinator housed in the community could successfully create community ownership and buy-in for the program.
A graduate student assistantship was budgeted for each state for each of the four years of the project. Each state was allowed to define the role of the graduate student in relation to the project. At the conclusion of the grant, team members were asked to highlight the successes of WIN the Rockies. Several team members mentioned the contributions from graduate students as one of the successes of the program. Primary roles of graduate students included studying the effectiveness of the \textit{WIN Kids} lesson plans in public classrooms, implementing the \textit{WIN Kids Fun Days} in a summer youth program, developing a body image assessment tool and analyzing its effectiveness, conducting male interviews and focus groups with the narrative research team, and determining the effectiveness of the healthy lifestyle prescription tool designed for use by primary care physicians. Based on the accomplishments of the graduate students, and the spark of enthusiasm and unique perspectives they brought to WIN the Rockies, we highly recommend the inclusion of graduate student assistantships with other grant projects.

As manuscripts were starting to be planned from our research and outreach project, a committee was formed to establish authorship guidelines. The committee included representatives from all three land grant universities. Main points from the authorship guidelines included the following: 1) individual taking the lead role with the writing of a manuscript or publication was entitled to first authorship, 2) All manuscripts and publications directly related to WIN the Rockies were required to include the two primary investigators as coauthors (this was to insure a consistent message from the project), 3) Manuscripts and publications based on the data collected from all three states had to include coauthors from each state, and 4) authorship listings from manuscripts or publications from graduate students were made on a case by case basis. We highly recommend that projects involving multiple states and universities establish authorship guidelines in the early stages of project development to avoid any potential controversial issues surrounding the listing of authors.

The main avenue for sharing results broadly at the national and even international level was with the project’s website (www.uwyo.edu/wintherockies). After the intervention tools were developed, tested and then revised, they were placed on the website for distribution. Results from research were also placed on the website, including a current list of published articles in peer-reviewed journals. In addition to the website, team members from WIN the Rockies presented highlights from the project at several state, regional and national meetings and conferences. The diversity of team members (Extension, WWAMI medical education, and university professors) allowed the highlights from the project to be shared broadly. WIN the Rockies was one of the guiding forces for a similar project in Australia called \textit{The Everybody Project}. One member of the WIN the Rockies project traveled to Australia for the kick-off of \textit{The Everybody Project}. 
The grant from the USDA (IFAFS - Initiative for Future Agriculture and Foods Systems) was awarded to the University of Wyoming. Subcontracts from the University of Wyoming were then given to Montana State University and the University of Idaho. Each university then hired staff for the project. Supervision of staff was under the regulations and guidelines in place with each university. Subcontracts to Idaho and Montana included support dollars for the project coordinator including phones, postage, supplies, computers, copying and travel; along with salary dollars for a half-time support staff person.

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**Etta Saltos;** National Program Leader; Competitive programs (nutrition & food safety)

**Susan Welsh;** National Program Leader; Families, 4-H, and Nutrition

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One of the unique aspects of our project was the inclusion of positive body image messages with materials promoting healthful and enjoyable eating along with physically active living. At the conclusion of our project, we became even more committed to this strategy as being key to effective educational programs promoting healthy lifestyles. Several individuals from the narrative interviews and focus groups shared their failed attempts at regular physical activity due to stares and rude comments from others. Sometimes the rude behavior from others was real, and sometimes it was imagined, but always it was effective at discouraging the continuation of daily physical activity. Other individuals from the narratives talked about how food was often a solace in a world unrelenting and unforgiving of larger body types. One male in his 20's said: “You’ll be walking through the store and you’ll hear a little kid say ‘Now that guy is pretty fat.’ . . . I mean, they’re not meaning to do harm. They’re just little kids. . . . But being teased about it would force me to go home and have some ice cream or something. Kind of kill the pain with food.” Promoting acceptance of diverse body types is a difficult goal under the current societal and media influences. The vast majority of us inevitably find our bodies inferior when we compare ourselves to the media standards of extreme thinness for females and extreme muscularity for males. The message from WIN the Rockies and others is that healthy human bodies come in a wide range of sizes including different heights, weights, and proportions. We believe that promoting acceptance of body size diversity is key to promoting enjoyable healthy eating and physically active living.
As we concluded our four-year project, we reflected on the hurdles and challenges we had faced. We offer the following items for others to consider when addressing the complexities of implementing an integrated program with multiple universities.

* Staff members for the project were under three different employment policies with three different universities. One coordinator was classified as non-exempt (40 hour work week) and the others were classified as exempt (salaried with no compensation for work weeks over 40 hours). Although the budget for the grant allowed for pay increases over the duration of the grant, the pay increases were not implemented uniformly due to the regulations of each university.

* The four project coordinators were housed in three states and in four different communities. Hundreds of miles separated them from each other. Although e-mails, phone calls, faxes, written communications, and staff retreats helped to keep them connected to each other, they often stated a sense of isolation.

* Travel time and distances became a major hurdle. Project coordinators drove up to three hours one way to reach an intervention community. Icy and snow packed roads in the winter increased the time and stress with traveling. Due to the long distances between team members, air travel was a preferred form of transportation for some team members. Air travel expenses were included in the travel budget for the grant.

* One unforeseen hurdle emerged with the first cross-sectional survey. The surveys were scheduled to be mailed on September 11, 2001. After the terrorists attacks on that day, we decided to postpone the mailing of the surveys for several days. We found that even with the best developed plans, flexibility was an important key to successful project implementation.

* The uncertainty of future funding was a major hurdle with our project. The loss of federal funding for continuation of the IFAFS program forced us to look for other avenues for funding. Although we wrote several proposals, we were not successful in continuing the WIN the Rockies project at its original level of funding. Team members continue to be committed to the vision of WIN the Rockies, but it is a difficult process to no longer be able to fund the salaries for the talented staff members of the project.

* Due to budget restraints, not all team members received salary release dollars from the grant, and this limited the time commitment they could make to the project.

We believe the disadvantages of implementing an integrated multi-state project are far outweighed by the advantages. Each team member brought a unique perspective to our project that strengthened the project and improved our effectiveness. Some team members were unwavering in their commitment to serve limited resource audiences, other team members brought strategies for community capacity building, and still other team members offered important connections with the medical communities in each state.
We viewed the IFAFS grant of WIN the Rockies as *Phase I* of a project dedicated to promoting healthful and enjoyable eating, physically active living, and respect for body size diversity. At the conclusion of *Phase I* of WIN the Rockies, each state, and indeed each individual, had to define what WIN the Rockies *Phase II* would look like for them. We are committed to sharing our intervention tools broadly with others and the tools are available on our website.

The Cooperative Extension Service in each state was a key partner for continuing WIN the Rockies. Currently, a major research and intervention project called *Steps to A New You* is being implemented in all three states. The program combines a pedometer-based walking program with the intervention program called *A New You* (series of educational programs to help individuals embrace healthful and pleasurable eating with physically active living while embracing the concepts of self-acceptance and respect for body size diversity).

At the conclusion of *Phase I* of WIN the Rockies, a pedometer-based walking program was also established for the EFNEP and Food Stamp Nutrition Education programs in all three states.

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**Where do we go from here?**

*Key*

★ = Land grant University  
● = Demonstrator Community  
■ = Comparator Community