

# Adapting Healthy Marriage Programs for Disadvantaged and Culturally Diverse Populations: What are the issues?

By Theodora Ooms

## Introduction

A decade ago marriage was the “m-word” in the U.S. public arena, viewed as a private matter beyond government intervention. Now, marriage is clearly on the public agenda. Since 2002, more than 300 healthy marriage (HM) programs have been funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The first wave of competitive HM grants were funded using discretionary vehicles available in various ACF offices. The second wave of grants were awarded in October 2006 for five years, drawing mostly on a

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### *About the Author*

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dedicated stream of funding in the reauthorized Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. In addition, a handful of state governments have used state dollars to fund HM programs. The result is that marriage education is now being provided to large numbers of people across the U.S. from a diversity of economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

Many of the critics' initial questions and concerns about a federal healthy marriage initiative lessened as they learned about the underlying research rationale for this new agenda and about what happens in these programs. Also, ACF responded to certain concerns by taking useful steps to ensure that participation is voluntary and that all grantees develop protocols on

how to deal with domestic violence issues.

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But an important question remains unanswered: These programs were designed for—and have mostly served—white, middle-class, educated couples who are engaged or already married. Can they be effective with much more diverse populations, many of whom are neither married nor committed to marry?<sup>1</sup>

It is far too early to be able to answer this question. Instead, this brief describes the types of adaptation that are already underway and gives some examples. It identifies some of the key issues and challenges

involved in making marriage education relevant for and accessible to culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged populations, and it raises some questions for the future.

### **The Marriage Education Field Prior to 2000**

What did the marriage education field look like before the advent of government funding? Its research and program roots go back to the 1950s, but the field was really launched in the '70s and '80s by mental health practitioners and researchers concerned about the rising rates of divorce and single parenthood and convinced that existing counseling and therapy services offered too little help, too late, to too few people. Their experience and research convinced them that individuals could develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to have a healthy and happy relationship, make wise marital choices, and stay successfully married.

Since then, dozens of programs have been and continue to be developed and tested. While varied in style and substance, they have much in common.<sup>2</sup> Before government

funding, the following generalizations characterized the marriage education field:<sup>3</sup>

- Marriage education programs were offered to engaged couples, to prepare for marriage; to married couples, to enrich and strengthen their marriage; and sometimes to highly distressed couples in crisis.
- The participants were white and middle class and were typically referred by their pastor/minister or by another couple. A few programs served minority and more economically disadvantaged couples, generally in the military.
- Marriage education's psycho-educational approach was preventive. The curricula generally aimed to provide basic information about the benefits and challenges of marriage and to teach communication, problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills, anger management, and emotional regulation. They encouraged positive interaction, promoting intimacy and friendship and building commitment and trust. They did not discuss issues of domestic violence or

refer couples to other services.

- The leaders/educators would teach groups of couples in a classroom setting, generally for a couple of hours a week for six to eight weeks but sometimes in daylong or weekend retreats. Teaching methods included lectures, group discussion, videotapes, role playing, interactive skill-building exercises, and homework tasks. Educators aimed to make classes entertaining and enjoyable.
- The programs were generally free-standing, not embedded in a larger program—although they were commonly offered in faith-based, university, or community settings.
- Programs typically charged a fee of \$50 to a maximum of \$600.

The advent of federal and state government funding and the subsequent rapid increase in the number of programs have resulted in substantial changes in participant demographics, curriculum content, and program design and infrastructure.

## Demographic Diversity

**Marital/family status.** As noted, the traditional marriage education programs were designed for engaged or married couples. Now, federally funded HM programs serve individuals and couples at many points along the marital continuum. They include unmarried parents who may or may not be living together or have plans to marry. They also include single custodial and non-custodial parents, along with increasing numbers of high school students and other individuals and couples who are “interested in marriage.” Some HM programs also serve foster parents and adoptive parents, most of whom are married.

This expansion of the target population means that HM programs are often not advertised as “promoting marriage” per se but rather as teaching general relationship skills relevant to many types of couples. ACF, however, has firmly insisted that, whatever the characteristics of the participants, the programs must provide information on the benefits of a healthy marriage and encourage and help participants who are interested to

take steps toward marriage themselves.

**Income/education.** Federal HM programs are not required to serve only low-income populations. But since most of the funding comes from the TANF welfare program, many programs do serve mainly economically disadvantaged families.<sup>4</sup>

Thus this question arises: what do marriage educators need to know about couples and marriage in low-income populations?

Until recently, very little research was available on this subject. But in the last few years, the poverty research community has “discovered” marriage, just as the marriage field has “discovered” poverty.<sup>5</sup> Researchers have found that disadvantaged individuals value marriage very highly but face many barriers and disincentives to marriage—and that their marriages are less likely to last.<sup>6</sup> Disadvantaged couples are more likely to experience external stressors such as financial hardship, isolation and lack of social support, unemployment, and poor health. They have fewer economic and personal resources with which to cope with set-

backs. They also experience higher rates of personal problems (such as substance abuse, domestic violence and abuse, and depression) and have a much harder time getting help for these problems. All these factors take a toll on couple relationships and on the well-being of any children they may have.

It is now generally understood that to be effective serving disadvantaged populations, marriage education programs need to respond to many of the real-life challenges these couples face.

**Cultural/racial/ethnic diversity.** Until recently, educators believed that the core concepts and components of marriage education were universally shared and hence that their programs could be effective across different racial and ethnic cultures. As programs began to serve more diverse participants, many leaders in the field developed an appreciation of the need to be culturally sensitive. Some programs select and train workshop leaders who speak the participants’ language and are familiar with their cultural background. They are encouraged to use the core curriculum flexibly, incorpo-

### BOX 1: PROGRAM AND CURRICULUM ADAPTATIONS FOR SERVING AFRICAN-AMERICANS

The African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI) and other organizations have hosted conferences and other forums to better understand the complex array of economic, historical, and cultural issues that underlie the “decline in marriage” among African-Americans at all income levels.<sup>1</sup> As a result, several marriage and relationship education and enrichment programs have been developed that incorporate relevant Afrocentric themes.<sup>2</sup> These themes include:

- the legacy of slavery in eroding marital ties and breaking families apart,
- effects of patriarchy on male-female relations,
- gender distrust and infidelity,
- strengths of extended families,
- the important role of churches in black communities,
- the value of bonding rituals and traditions, and
- the impact of racial discrimination on couple and family relationships.

In addition, some curriculum adaptations now also incorporate topics especially germane to many urban, low-income African-Americans—especially to unmarried parents:

- multiple-partner parenting,
- male unemployment and incarceration,
- domestic violence issues, and
- involvement with the justice and child support systems.

1 See African American Healthy Marriage Initiative at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage>.

2 These include *African American Marriage Enrichment Program* by Lorraine Blackman (<http://www.aafle.org>), *Basic Training: A Black Marriage Education Curriculum* by Nisa Islam Mohammed and Rozario Slack (<http://www.blackmarriage.org>), and *Exploring Relationships and Marriage Among Fragile Families* by Pamela Wilson and Ademola Ekulona (<http://www.cfwd.org>).

rating familiar ideas and examples.<sup>7</sup> In addition, a handful of curricula have been translated into other languages.

Some marriage educators now believe that they need to go further and become culturally *competent* in order to effectively serve populations from different cultural backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> Cultural competence requires more extensive changes in curriculum content and program design. This is a complex task, since HM programs are now being offered to so many different cultural, racial, and ethnic groups and subgroups, and it is important not to stereotype all members of one broad racial or ethnic group. For example, among Latinos and Asians cultural beliefs and traditions about marriage and family may differ depending upon the country of origin; religion; or whether they are first-, second-, or third-generation immigrants. The challenge is to find ways to acknowledge, respect, and tolerate these cultural differences without sanctioning or excusing behavior that is unacceptable in the dominant U.S. culture.

**Special populations.** The first wave of federal funding added a marriage and relationships education component to services offered to clients of child welfare, child support enforcement, and refugee programs. The second wave added couples with experience of incarceration. Also, some states chose to tap welfare funds to serve TANF clients. Staff of all these programs have been challenged to think through the relevance of marriage education to their clients’ situations. Likewise, marriage educators involved in these grants have had to learn a great deal about the needs and circumstances of these particular client populations and about the mission, policies, and regulations of the “host” program (i.e. TANF, child support enforcement, child welfare, refugee and migrant programs, and prison systems).<sup>9</sup>

Boxes 1-4 offer a few examples of the kinds of cultural adaptations being made by curriculum developers and program administrators for several different major groups.

## Two Dimensions of Adaptation: “Trains” and “Tracks”

To borrow a metaphor used by Scott Stanley, effective marriage education requires both “trains” and “tracks.”<sup>10</sup> Trains are the instructional services (curriculum content, format, and teaching method). Tracks are the organizational infrastructure and modes of delivery needed to effectively reach and serve the clients. Adaptations are being made to both of these dimensions of marriage education, in order to respond to the more diverse populations being served. Both types of adaptations require both marriage educators and human service providers to change how they think about and do their work.

**Domestic violence.** One of the most complex and difficult issues involving both trains and tracks has been how HM programs should safely respond to concerns about domestic violence. ACF has required each federally funded HM program to develop a site-specific domestic violence protocol, which addresses how domestic violence is discussed in the curricula and/or in the program

design and infrastructure (recruitment, intake and referral procedures, staff training, etc.). Independently of this requirement, several established programs have incorporated new materials and procedures on domestic violence (e.g., the Survival Skills for Healthy Families/Family Wellness, Relationship Enhancement [RE], and Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program [PREP]). A preliminary guide has been developed—drawing upon discussions at a May 2006 conference—to help healthy marriage, responsible fatherhood, and domestic violence programs get to know and work with each other.<sup>11</sup>

**Trains: Curriculum adaptations.** Many of the HM programs are informally adapting standard curricula to fit the needs of more diverse clients. A program might use certain parts of an existing curriculum, rewrite others, omit some parts, blend sections of different curricula together, and/or add new content. There is relatively little information available about these informal adaptations. And several of the best-known curriculum developers are (or already have) systematically

## BOX 2: PROGRAM AND CURRICULUM ADAPTATIONS FOR SERVING LATINOS

The Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative (HHMI) has sponsored three research conferences in which participants identified and discussed the issues that need to inform healthy marriage programs targeting Latino populations.<sup>1</sup> Some of these issues are gradually being incorporated into existing marriage programs and curricula. In addition, a few curricula have been designed specifically for Latino populations.<sup>2</sup> Specific issues include the need to:

- Acknowledge the tensions families face in accommodating to American ideals of gender equality and individualism, which conflict with the gender roles and group-oriented values of their traditional cultures.
- Build on traditional cultural values—such as *machismo*, *marianismo*, and *familismo* (prioritizing parent-child relations over spousal)—to emphasize their positive aspects and de-emphasize negative concepts (i.e. those related to power and control).
- Recognize Latinos’ dependence on extended family and the stressful experience of separation from children and extended family who remain in the home country.
- Adapt to Latinos’ nonverbal, indirect communication styles and to their preference to avoid conflict.
- Acknowledge that discrimination, lack of legal documentation, and involvement with the immigration and justice systems can highly stress spousal and family relationships.

1 Resources for programs serving Hispanics—based on these conference discussions—are posted on the Hispanic Healthy Marriage Web site: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage>.

2 See HHMI Web site.

### BOX 3: PROGRAM AND CURRICULUM ADAPTATIONS FOR SERVING NATIVE AMERICANS

Since 2003, the Administration of Native Americans (ANA) has used discretionary dollars to fund 23 tribal healthy marriage programs and to provide them with training and technical assistance. Some of these programs are also supported by tribal funds beyond the required match. Curriculum and program adaptations are shaped by the particular tribal context and by whether the target population lives on a reservation or is disbursed in the general community. However, there are several cultural challenges that have been experienced across most of these programs.

Native Americans in general regard couple and family issues as intensely personal and private and are uncomfortable talking about them, especially to strangers. There is considerable distrust of “government-sponsored” programs. The fact that federal officials do not acknowledge the validity of traditional tribal marriages (which have the status of common-law marriages within the tribe) has also been a problem. Nevertheless, these and other challenges are typically overcome when tribal leaders and elders strongly endorse and support the program—for example, as the governor of the Chickasaw Nation has in Oklahoma.

revising or rewriting their traditional curricula, or adding new material. Some of these curricula are available “out of the box,” while others are available only to participants in curriculum training. Others are not yet available except as part of federal demonstrations. Box 5 (p. 8)

contains examples of curriculum adaptations developed as part of federal demonstrations, while Box 6 (p. 9) contains examples of programs developed independent of federal demonstrations.

Following current recommended practice in adult education, many of these adapted and new curricula are placing less emphasis on didactic, lecture-oriented teaching and more on interactive exercises and group discussions, videos and DVDs, “coaches” who help couples practice communication skills, and workbooks written for lower literacy levels. Some programs also use opening and closing group-bonding rituals.

Since these programs often incorporate a great deal more content than traditional marriage education programs, they may take more time to complete and may be offered over a longer period. The federal demonstrations are the longest; for example, the BSF programs are offered over a period of roughly 40 weeks.

**Tracks: Infrastructure adaptations.** There are many types of challenges involved in creating and laying down

effective tracks. Several of these are discussed in preliminary implementation reports from the three federal HM demonstrations, as well as in an Urban Institute exploratory study.<sup>12</sup>

■ **Organizational structure and settings.** Most programs use one of two design options. The more common is to embed an HM program in an existing program—for example, a home-visiting program or a retreat program for adoptive parents—or in a multi-service agency. A few programs are being designed from the ground up, existing as free-standing programs. The resources and constraints of a particular setting influence almost every aspect of the program, from how participants are recruited to the location and duration of the program. Each type of setting seems to have advantages and disadvantages.

■ **Hiring and training staff.** HM programs try to hire and train individuals who have some familiarity with the circumstances of the particular population to be served. One of the challenges is that most social

service agency staff with the required kinds of backgrounds have spent their careers helping individual single mothers, and they often find it difficult to shift to involving men and addressing the needs of a couple.

- **Gateway to other services.** HM programs are increasingly being viewed as gateways to getting help for other problems that can profoundly affect the quality and stability of a relationship—including substance abuse, depression, domestic violence, and economic problems such as unemployment, low wages, and heavy debt burdens.<sup>13</sup> As noted, discussion of these and other issues is now being included in some of the marriage education curricula. In addition, both the Building Strong Families (BSF) and the Supporting Healthy Marriages (SHM) demonstrations include additional components that provide individualized support and referral to other needed services. The BSF model includes a family coordinator, who meets with the couple on a regular basis over a period of up to three years. The SHM

model includes a family support coordinator and an array of other services designed to extend or enrich the core curriculum, including booster sessions, peer mentoring, and group activities such as social events and date nights.

- **Recruitment and retention.** Programs funded by federal grants are expected to meet certain participation targets, as set out in the grant application. This creates pressure to find effective ways both to recruit couples and to help them stay the course. For both cultural and economic reasons, many HM programs have had difficulty with recruitment. It is often especially difficult to recruit men, so hiring male staff and married couples is considered especially important. The African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI) has hosted many discussions about how to most effectively market marriage and relationship education to African-Americans. Once individuals and couples attend a class, they generally like it and report that it is very helpful. However, the lives of many of the disadvan-

#### **BOX 4: PROGRAM AND CURRICULUM ADAPTATIONS FOR SERVING REFUGEES**

In 2006, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) funded about 50 five-year healthy marriage programs serving refugees from countries in Central Europe, Africa, and South Asia. (This was the second wave of programs.) Refugees make up an extremely diverse population. They are also quite vulnerable, as they have multiple and urgent needs for housing, jobs, health care, language programs, and so forth. The traumas refugees have experienced in the past and the challenges of assimilation to American culture place a great stress on their marriage and family life. And women and children often become Americanized more quickly than men, whose adaptation is hampered by their sense that their traditional authority is increasingly being questioned and undermined. These tensions can threaten the stability of families.

Generally, refugees' gender role expectations, attitudes toward seeking help from strangers, and communication styles are very different from the dominant American culture. Healthy marriage programs have worked together with leaders of these refugee communities to find ways of designing programs and choosing and adapting curricula that will be acceptable to and effective with individuals from more traditional cultures. Successful strategies for recruitment have emerged, including public endorsements from community leaders and advertising that the programs will also offer help to parents (e.g., with unruly teenagers) or provide concrete financial services (e.g., information about how to claim the Earned Income Tax Credit.)

## BOX 5: FEDERAL DEMONSTRATIONS AND CURRICULUM ADAPTATIONS

*The Healthy Marriage, Healthy Relationships (HMHR) program.* This Grand Rapids, Michigan program targets low-income, largely African-American populations (see [www.healthymarriagegr.org](http://www.healthymarriagegr.org)). HMHR—a community-based initiative funded in June 2003 as a five-year Child Support Enforcement Demonstration Section 1115 waiver—is a partnership between an established marriage program and 10 grassroots, community faith-based institutions, called the Institutions of Trust. The partnership is coordinated by City Vision, an intermediary, and the partners have established a close working relationship. One of their achievements was to select three curricula from a number of options that they believed best met the needs of their target population and to then make a number of adaptations to each.<sup>1</sup>

*The Building Strong Families (BSF) demonstration.* In this federal demonstration, three well-known curricula were selected as options for seven program sites. The curriculum developers worked with the sites to make various adaptations to the chosen curricula to better fit the needs of low-income, unwed expectant and new parents—for example, by including information about parenting newborns (see [www.buildingstrongfamilies.org](http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.org)).<sup>2</sup> In addition, a group of curriculum experts were commissioned to develop and pilot test four new supplemental modules, which were then incorporated into these curricula. These modules address major barriers to marriage in this population, such as building or repairing trust, the complexities of having children and co-parents from previous unions, financial management and partnership, and understanding the benefits and challenges of marriage.<sup>3</sup>

*The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) federal demonstration* (see [www.supportinghealthymarriage.org](http://www.supportinghealthymarriage.org)) has selected four curricula and is at present following a similar approach to adaptation—but focusing on low-income married couples.<sup>4</sup>

1 Anupa Bir and Robert Lerman, *Piloting a Community Approach to Healthy Marriage Initiatives: Early Implementation of the Healthy Marriage, Healthy Relationships Demonstration*, RTI International, 2005, [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/strengthen/eval\\_com/reports/grand\\_rapids/grand\\_rapids.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/strengthen/eval_com/reports/grand_rapids/grand_rapids.html).

2 These curricula are *Loving Couples, Loving Children* by John and Julie Gottman ([info@lclconline.org](mailto:info@lclconline.org)), *Love's Cradle* by Mary Ortwein and Bernard Guernsey (<http://www.nire.org>), and *Becoming Parents Program* by Pamela Jordan (<http://becomingparents.com>).

3 M.R. Dion, S.A. Avellar, et al., *Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Unmarried Couples with Children: Early Lessons from the Building Strong Families Project*, 2006, <http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.org>. At this point, these curricula and the additional modules are available only to BSF sites.

4 These curricula in development are *Within Our Reach* (PREP), *For Our Future, For Our Family* (PAIRS), *Becoming Parents Program*, and *Loving Couples, Loving Children*. Personal communication with Virginia Knox, SHM project director, February 14, 2007.

taged participants are in great flux, and frequent schedule and job changes mean that many do not complete the program.

To address recruitment and retention, most programs provide help with child care and transportation, offer food and drink, and hold classes in a community setting that is familiar, convenient, and comfortable. Programs use creative advertising and marketing and often offer attractive incentives, such as meals, prizes, and vouchers for baby supplies.

## Future Directions

This rather rapid process of expanding marriage and relationship education to serve more diverse populations has required adaptations to both trains and tracks. In the process, the mission and goals of the field of marriage education—and of the federal healthy marriage initiative—have broadened. Meanwhile, practitioners and administrators are already learning many lessons about the kinds of adaptations that are necessary, and they are testing many creative approaches.

The ACF-funded Healthy Marriage Resource Center

hopefully will serve as one mechanism through which lessons will be shared with other programs and new grantees, to avoid their reinventing the wheel.<sup>14</sup> However, it is the individual curriculum developers who decide when and under what circumstances a modified or new curriculum will be shared with others.

Numerous questions remain. How much adaptation is really necessary, and of what kinds? What factors account for the success of an HM program that aims to serve a particular minority group: the skills and rapport of the leader, the content of the curriculum, the program setting and design components, support for marriage education in the community, all of these combined, and/or other factors? We can hope and expect that the evaluation of federal demonstration experiments and other programs will eventually provide some answers.

The fact that these new HM programs are funded with tax dollars means that questions about accountability—to date, largely unaddressed by marriage educators—will undoubtedly become more important as the field matures and seeks to reach more peo-

ple. Are the monies being well spent? Are the programs being faithfully implemented? Are staff properly qualified and adequately trained? Will the programs last? Such questions about program fidelity and quality, staff credentialing

and licensing, evaluation and cost effectiveness, and sustainability will likely be addressed in the future.

#### **BOX 6: CURRICULA DEVELOPED INDEPENDENT OF FEDERAL DEMONSTRATIONS**

***Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families*** was developed by the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development and the Louisiana Department of Human Resources. Designed for romantically involved, never married, low-income African-American parents, the curriculum has three different versions: the first and second for mothers and fathers separately and the third for couples who are interested in further exploring commitment and marriage (see [www.cfwd.org](http://www.cfwd.org)). Each of the three is offered over eight sessions. The curriculum explores many issues especially salient to this population; one example is its integration of information about domestic violence.

***Within My Reach (WMR)*** is a 15-hour curriculum, developed by Scott Stanley and Marline Pearson, that is designed for individual economically disadvantaged adults, typically single parents. The curriculum grew out of the experience of delivering PREP workshops to welfare clients as part of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. WMR is based on a six-session, twelve-hour PREP foundation, with additional material on choosing partners wisely, deliberative decision making, leaving damaging and dangerous relationships, and achieving desired relationship success and stability to benefit participants and their children (see [www.prepinc.com](http://www.prepinc.com)).

***Love U 2***—which grew from developer Marline Pearson’s experience teaching low-income, working adults—offers a comprehensive relationship education program for teens. It consists of four self-standing units that offer young people guides, knowledge, and skills for developing emotionally healthy and ethically sound relationships. *Love U 2* includes a major focus on the elements of a “healthy” relationship; engages teens on the emotional and social aspects of sexuality; and motivates teens by raising awareness of how a child is affected by parents who are young, unmarried, and unprepared. Teens develop ideals and goals for their future family life while learning about the benefits of appropriate sequencing (i.e. marriage before babies), using real-world scenarios written with the help of low-income youth (see [www.dibblefund.org](http://www.dibblefund.org)).

## Endnotes

- 1 See T. Ooms and P. Wilson, “The Challenges of Offering Relationship and Marriage Education to Low-Income Populations,” *Family Relations* 53 (2004), 440-447.
- 2 For summary descriptions of many of these programs, see <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org> and <http://www.lewin.com/spotlights/LewinHP/marriage.htm>.
- 3 For further background about marriage education, see Theodora Ooms, *The New Kid on the Block: What is Marriage Education and Does it Work?* Center for Law and Social Policy, 2005, <http://www.clasp.org>.
- 4 The exceptions are the *Building Strong Families* (BSF) and *Supporting Healthy Marriages* (SHM) multi-site experimental demonstration programs, which are required to serve only low-income couples.
- 5 This discussion draws on a paper by David Fein and Theodora Ooms, *What Do We Know About Couples and Marriage in Disadvantaged Populations? Reflections from a Researcher and a Policy Analyst*, Center for Law and Social Policy, 2005/ revised 2006, <http://www.clasp.org>.
- 6 See Paula Roberts, *Out of Order? Factors Influencing the Sequence of Marriage and Childbirth Among Disadvantaged Americans*, Center for Law and Social Policy, 2007, <http://www.clasp.org>.
- 7 A good example is the Survival Skills for Healthy Families program, which has been successfully offered to Latino and Asian communities in California by Family Wellness Associates (<http://www.familywellness.org>).
- 8 “Cultural competence” is a term becoming widely used in the education, health, and mental health care professions. For the marriage education field it refers to the ability to understand the specific cultural differences—the shared values, attitudes, beliefs, customs and traditions, history, and institutions—that may affect couple, marital, and family behavior in a specific population group or subgroup.
- 9 The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative has had extensive experience with making adaptations of one “flagship” program—PREP—to offer to special client populations across the state, including TANF clients, adoptive parents, state prison inmates (male and female), juvenile first offenders and their parents, and high school and middle school students. See R.M. Dion, *Oklahoma Marriage Initiative: An Overview of the Longest Running Statewide Marriage Initiative in the US*. Mathematica Policy Research Inc., 2006, <http://www.acf.hhs/healthymarriage>.
- 10 See S.M. Stanley, M. Pearson, and G.H. Kline, *The Development of Relationship Education for Low Income Individuals: Lessons from Research and Experience*, Paper presented at the APPAM Fall Conference, November 3-5, Washington DC, p. 31, <http://www.prepinc.com>.
- 11 See Theodora Ooms et al., *Building Bridges between Healthy Marriage, Responsible Fatherhood, and Domestic Violence Programs: A Preliminary Guide*, Center for Law and Social Policy, 2006, <http://www.clasp.org>.
- 12 See Bir and Lerman (2006) *supra*; Dion, Avellar et al, (2006) *supra*; MDRC, *Guidelines for Supporting Healthy Marriage Demonstration Programs*, 2005, <http://www.supportinghealthymarriage.org>; and J.E. Macomber, J. Murray, and M. Stagner, *Service Delivery and Evaluation Design Options for Strengthening and Promoting Healthy Marriages*, 2004, Urban Institute, <http://www.urban.org>.

- 13 The idea that marriage education is often a “gateway” to other services was first articulated by Scott Stanley. See “Making the Case for Premarital Education,” *Family Relations* 50 (2001), 272-280.
- 14 The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center’s principal mission is to support ACF in furthering its commitment to promoting and supporting healthy marriages and child well-being by providing key audiences with research and program information and generating new knowledge about promising and effective strategies. See <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org>.

## Couples and Marriage Series

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### ABOUT CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national non-profit that works to improve the lives of low-income people. CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects, and family stability of low-income parents, children, and youth and to secure equal justice for all.

The Couples and Marriage Policy Brief series seeks to inform the debate about public policies to strengthen and stabilize two-parent families and marriage. The series focuses on the effects on child well-being, with a special interest in couple relationships and marriage in low-income communities.

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CLASP POLICY BRIEF

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