

Jacobs' Five-Tiered Approach to a Systematic Review of Retirement Education Programs

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Objective

Growing concern that Americans are inadequately prepared to finance their retirement has generated substantial interest in strategies to address this issue. Retirement education is one solution. Despite widespread implementation of different forms of retirement planning programs, little is known about their effectiveness. The purpose of this study is to conduct a systematic review to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of retirement education programs. Jacobs' (1988) Five-Tiered approach to program evaluation provided the framework to organize the range of programs and assess each program based on their stage of program development.

Significance

Previous comparable systematic reviews about retirement-focused financial education programs do not exist. This program review fills this gap and sheds light on the efficacy of current implementation of retirement education programs. Moreover, it provides guidance for program implementers who intend to develop a retirement planning program in the future.

Method

An electronic search of databases was conducted to identify relevant programs. The search was guided by the following key words: financial-literacy education, workplace financial education, retirement planning intervention, and program. The final review included 15 financial education programs aimed at retirement planning. The authors analyzed each program using the following characteristics: target audience, setting, the length and content of program, theoretical model or approach that underlies the program, delivery method, evaluation design, and data collection instruments.

Results

Among the retirement-focused financial education programs, 13 out of 15 programs were workplace financial education and only two were community based programs. Most programs targeted audiences who were working age, from 30 to retirement age, with one targeting participants already retired. As for program content, some focused only on retirement issues, while others covered a range of topics beyond retirement planning. With regard to data collection methods to demonstrate program effectiveness, surveys were the most widely used method.

In terms of the quality of these programs, all of the programs showed effectiveness to varying degrees, however, the data still suggests that there is considerable room for improvement. In fact, no one program met all of Jacob's Five-Tiered evaluation framework. Only three programs conducted a needs assessment and only four carried out a follow-up survey to examine the long-term impact of the program. A major limitation was that the majority of programs employed self-assessment methods to evaluate program outcomes to demonstrate program effectiveness. Moreover, this review reveals a lack of experimental or quasi-experimental approaches among the programs.

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Conclusion

Despite considerable room for improvement in program implementation and evaluation, this systematic program review revealed that most the programs positively impacted the participants' financial knowledge concerning retirement, retirement planning behavior and their perceived financial wellbeing. The review provides sufficient evidence to suggest that a carefully designed and implemented program will lead to desired outcomes. Therefore, retirement education can be considered an effective way to increase financial knowledge and awareness about retirement preparedness. However, it is important to build evaluation into the program design and delivery, since it serves as a foundation for measuring program efficacy.