

Does Legislation to Encourage Formal Premarital Education Make Sense for Utah?

Utah Commission on Marriage **
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Executive Summary

A generation of research confirms that a stable, healthy, two-parent family is the optimal environment for children's development and well-being. And a healthy marriage has significant benefits for adults, as well. When marriages dissolve, however, the public bears a substantial economic cost. A Utah State University study conservatively estimated that divorce in the United States costs more than \$33 billion a year. The cost to Utah's government of 9,735 divorces in 2001 was more than \$125 million in direct and indirect costs, about \$13,000 per divorce. The cost to the federal government of Utah's divorces that year was nearly \$175 million.

Utah's divorce rate is slightly higher than the national average. This figure translates into the discouraging estimate that 40-50 percent of Utah marriages may end in divorce. And married Utahns are four times more likely than their national counterparts to have thought recently about getting a divorce (8 percent vs. 2 percent). Not surprisingly, more than 90 percent of Utah adults believe that divorce is a major problem in our society.

Figures like these have some public policy makers and legislators wondering whether there is a constructive role that government can play to strengthen marriages and reduce divorces. Six states have passed legislation encouraging engaged couples to participate in formal premarital education—education or counseling for engaged couples to explore relationship strengths and weaknesses and learn what it takes to have a successful marriage. Utah has considered but not passed similar legislation. Less than four in ten recently married Utahns have taken some kind of formal marriage preparation, even though more than 90 percent of Utahns believe it is important to do so. Nearly 90 percent of Utah adults believe that a statewide initiative to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce is a good idea.

Mounting scientific evidence suggests that formal premarital education can improve marital relationships and prevent unnecessary divorces. And Utah has the professional and lay capacity to support a substantial increase in the number of couples seeking formal marriage preparation.

The Utah Commission on Marriage believes legislation to encourage engaged couples to participate in formal premarital education will help to increase the number of couples who are better prepared for marriage and will help reduce the state's divorce rate. This report summarizes the case that government action to encourage more effective marriage preparation is justified and will reduce the number of unnecessary divorces in the state of Utah.

** The report is authored by the Utah Commission on Marriage, which is a volunteer group of Utah citizens, practitioners, and scholars who are dedicated to strengthening marriages and reducing divorce in Utah. The Commission functions under the guidance of the Utah Department of Workforce Services. The Coordinator of the Commission is Melanie Reese (801-526-9317).

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Table of Contents

Introduction:.....	3
Question #1: Are efforts to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce needed in Utah?	4
Question #2: What is premarital education? (And what is it not?) Why does premarital education make sense for contemporary couples?.....	6
Question #3: How many Utah couples have formal premarital education before marrying? Do they think marriage preparation is a good idea?	8
Question #4: Is there evidence that marriage preparation can promote healthy marriages and reduce divorces?.....	9
Question #5: How does premarital education work to promote healthy marriages and reduce divorce?	11
Question #6: Does Utah have the capacity to support a large increase in premarital education in the state?	13
Question #7: Are there other public policy alternatives for encouraging premarital education?	15
Question #7: Should Utah vigorously pursue passage of legislation to encourage couples to participate in premarital education?.....	16
Endnotes:	17

Introduction

A generation of research confirms that a stable, healthy, two-parent family is the optimal environment for children’s development and well-being.¹ Also, healthy marital relationships are a strong predictor of positive parenting practices.² And a healthy marriage has significant benefits for adults, as well.³ Moreover, communities are weaker when healthy marriages fail to form or fall apart.⁴

Some public policy makers and legislators are wondering whether there is a constructive role that government can play to strengthen marriages and reduce divorces. Six states—Arizona, Florida, Maryland, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Tennessee—have passed legislation encouraging engaged couples to participate in some kind of formal premarital education—education or counseling to help couples explore relationship strengths and weaknesses and learn what it takes to have a successful marriage. Couples who participate in marriage preparation in these states can

Premarital education can be defined as education to help couples explore relationship strengths and weaknesses, learn what it takes to have a successful marriage, and develop and practice relationship skills that sustain healthy marriages.

receive a discount on their marriage license in the range of \$20–\$50. Given that the average cost of a wedding in the United States now is more than \$20,000,⁵ the reduction in the cost of a marriage license

may not seem like much of an incentive. Nevertheless, legislators reason that this invitation-incentive will encourage greater personal investment in marriage preparation activities. Researchers have not documented

yet if this legislative incentive has increased the number of couples participating in marriage education, although one state (Minnesota) anecdotally reports a significant increase in couples seeking premarital education since passage of their legislation.⁶

Utah considered similar legislation in recent legislative sessions (H.B. 252 “Marriage Preparation Education,” sponsored by Rosalind J. McGee). The purpose of this legislation was to enhance the possibility of couples achieving more stable, satisfying, and enduring marital relationships by encouraging the use of premarital education prior to securing a marriage license. The legislation provided a \$20 reduction in the marriage license fees for couples who voluntarily undergo premarital education of at least eight hours covering important topics, including (at least): commitment, communication, conflict-management skills (including what constitutes domestic abuse), and financial management skills. An ordained minister (or designee), someone authorized to perform marriages, or a licensed counselor were authorized to provide premarital education. The legislation, however, did not make sufficient progress for a floor vote.

Does legislation to encourage engaged couples to participate in formal premarital education make sense in Utah? The purpose of this report is to explore this question in depth. In this report we: (1) provide an overview of marriage and divorce in Utah in an effort to understand whether public policy and legislative efforts to reduce divorce may be justified; (2) explain in some depth what premarital education is, Utahns’ involvement in it, and their attitudes about it; (3) summarize recent scientific evidence investigating whether formal premarital education can be effective in strengthening marriages and reducing divorce; and (4)

examine potential public policy alternatives to encouraging premarital education. Following this outline, we address eight pertinent questions to understand the value of greater participation of Utahns in premarital education.

Acknowledging Necessary Divorce.

Before continuing, however, we present a brief caveat. We recognize that some divorces may be necessary. There are behaviors outside the moral boundaries of marriage that threaten the viability of a relationship and diminish the institution of marriage. These behaviors may put spouses and children at risk physically and psychologically.

Certainly, it is difficult for those not a party to a deteriorating marriage to discern whether or not a divorce is justified. However, recent research suggests that most divorces are not the result of behavior outside the moral boundaries of marriage. That is, most divorces are initiated because of “softer” personal or relationship problems, such as falling out of love, changing personal needs, lack of satisfaction, feelings of greater entitlement, and so forth.⁷ And this is especially true for more educated and well-off individuals. Another study of a representative sample of U.S. adults found that about two-thirds of divorces come from marriages with low amounts of conflict.⁸ This study also found that it was the children of divorce from low-conflict marriages who had the poorest outcomes. The children of divorce who experienced volatile, high levels of conflict in their parents’ marriage actually did better when their parents divorced compared to children whose parents had a volatile, high-conflict marriage but stayed married. In addition, one national study suggests that there are more “bad patches” in marriage than there are “bad marriages.”⁹ This study followed individuals who were unhappily married for several years and found that 60

percent of these individuals reported being happily married five years later, and another 20 percent reported significant improvement in marital satisfaction. These same researchers also reported that nearly 75 percent of unhappily married individuals were married to happily married individuals. So usually at least one person in the marriage wants to keep it intact, and presumably would want to work to improve the relationship in order to do so. We recognize that some divorces are in the best interests of the spouses and children involved. However, current research suggests that most divorces are for the “softer” reasons and may be preventable.

Question #1: Are efforts to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce needed in Utah?

Utah’s divorce rate is slightly above the national average.¹⁰ This figure translates into the discouraging estimate that 40-50 percent of Utah marriages may end in divorce. In addition, a recent survey by Utah State University researchers documented that married Utahns are substantially higher than the national average on a measure of divorce proneness. Married Utahns, for instance, are four times as likely to have thought recently about a divorce (8 percent vs. 2 percent).¹¹ Despite Utahns’ strong pro-marriage and pro-family values, we struggle much like the rest of the U.S. population to sustain healthy marriages.

Utah’s divorce rate is slightly above the national average. This figure translates into the discouraging estimate that 40-50 percent of Utah marriages may end in divorce. On average, each Utah divorce involves one child.

Researchers do not know all the reasons for Utah’s above-average divorce

rate, but there are some clues. One important factor may be that, on average, Utahns are quite young when they first marry.

Nationally, marrying before the age of about 21 is a substantial risk factor for divorce.¹⁵

Utah women and men, on average, marry four years younger than the national average. Utah women average 21 years old

41% of ever-married Utahns were under age 20 when they first married.

when they marry for the first time; men average 23.

This compares to the national average of 25 for women and 27 for men.¹⁶

Furthermore, the USU marriage survey reported

that 41 percent of Utahns who were ever married were under age 20 when they first married,¹⁷ although this figure is declining with younger cohorts of Utahns.¹⁸ Of course, one reason that Utahns are younger at first marriage is because less than 20 percent live together (cohabit) with a partner before marrying him or her, compared to more than 50 percent nationally.¹⁹ (We discuss the risks of cohabitation later in this document.)

Another factor that may contribute to Utah's divorce rate is that 34 percent of Utah brides had only a high school education or less when they married. More education is associated with lower divorce rates.²⁰

The USU survey also asked questions about some of the reasons for divorce. More than 95 percent of Utahns agreed with the statement that young couples focus too much on the happiness they expect from marriage and not enough on the hard work required for a successful marriage. More than 80 percent of Utahns thought too many couples rushed into marriage,²¹ a judgment that may be connected to Utahns' young age at first marriage. Utahns in this survey who had experienced a divorce were asked about the most significant factors that contributed to their divorce. Eighty-three percent of respondents said that a lack of commitment

was a major factor. About half said that infidelity was a major factor. Similarly, about half said that too much arguing was a major problem. Of note, about four in ten said that marrying too young was a major factor contributing to their divorce. And finally, 37 percent of women respondents reported that domestic violence, tragically, was a major factor in their divorce.²² Nearly a third of ever-divorced men in this survey said they wished that they had worked harder to save their marriages. About one in seven women wished they had worked harder to save their marriages. A large majority of divorced men (74 percent) and women (65 percent) reported that they wish their ex-spouse had worked harder to save their marriage.²³ Utahns' reported reasons for divorce differ somewhat from those found in a nationally representative survey of the United States. This study listed infidelity, incompatibility, communication problems, and drug/alcohol abuse as the major reasons for divorce.²⁴

Of course, more than two married adults are involved in most divorces. On average, each Utah divorce involves one child²⁵ who is the innocent victim of family breakdown. Although most children of divorce manage to become productive adult citizens, divorce still puts children at two to three times the risk for a host of serious psychological and behavioral problems.²⁶

Not surprisingly, then, Utahns consider divorce to be a serious problem. The recent statewide survey on marriage by Utah State University researchers found that more than 90 percent of Utahns believe that divorce is a major problem in our society.²⁷ A more challenging question

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in the survey probed whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “When married people realize they no longer love each other, they should get a divorce even if they have children.” Sixty-four percent of Utahns disagreed with this statement (but 27 percent agreed).²⁸

The Cost of Divorce. Although divorce is a challenging personal issue for those involved, it is more than a personal issue. The public bears a substantial economic cost for divorce. Another study by a Utah State University researcher conservatively estimated that divorce in the United States costs more than \$33 billion a year. The cost to Utah’s government of 9,735 Utah divorces in 2001 was more than \$125 million in direct and indirect costs, about \$13,000 per divorce. The cost to the federal government of Utah’s divorces that year was nearly \$175 million.³³ These substantial

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costs include child support enforcement, Medicaid expenses, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families funds, and increased costs to society associated with social problems linked to family breakdown. These figures do not include the additional personal costs to the

divorcing family members (e.g., lawyer fees, relocation expenses, etc.), which the researchers estimated to be, on average, nearly \$15,000 per divorce.

Utahns believe—correctly—that divorce is a significant problem in our society. And it has an expensive price tag. Moreover, divorce intrusively inserts government control into people’s personal lives in the form of divorce settlements, child support enforcement, visitation rights, and many other family decision-making

issues. Healthy, stable marriages get the work of society done with minimal government involvement in personal lives.

Question #2: What is premarital education? (And what is it not?) Why does premarital education make sense for contemporary couples?

Formal premarital education involves some kind of standardized approach to preparing engaged couples for marriage. It is preventative rather than remedial intervention, although during the course of premarital education individuals and couples may identify problem areas in themselves or their relationship that would be good to address before they marry. Premarital education can be defined as education to help couples explore relationship strengths and weaknesses, learn what it takes to have a successful marriage, and develop and practice relationship skills that sustain healthy marriages.

There are numerous formal marriage education programs developed in and for both secular and religious settings. Typically, premarital education includes discussions about expectations for marriage, effective communication and problem-solving skills, and managing finances. In addition, it is common for premarital education programs to have couples complete a relationship inventory that provides them a profile of their personal and relationship strengths and possible weaknesses. These inventories are based on factors that research has shown to be related to marital success.³⁴ Formal premarital education varies in length from about 8 hours to more than 20 hours.³⁵ Most formal premarital education takes place under the auspices of a religious organization in conjunction with religious-based wedding plans. (Eighty percent of marriages in Utah

are performed by a religious officiate.³⁶)
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information, many marriage education programs also include religious instruction about the sanctity of marriage and religious principles related to forming and sustaining healthy marriages. Some premarital education is offered free, but other programs will charge amounts ranging from nominal to expensive. Some premarital education is done in private, one-on-one settings

with a professional counselor or religious minister, but is still oriented toward preventing problems. Preventative premarital education with a trained counselor, however, is different from therapy by trained counselors to help unmarried individuals and couples deal with specific, serious relationship challenges they are facing.

In addition, we differentiate formal premarital education from efforts to instruct adolescents about healthy relationships. Many high schools include elective classes focused on helping adolescents understand how to build healthy relationships.³⁷ Florida is the only state to mandate education for high school students on building healthy relationships and marriages. Beginning fall 2005, Utah high school students will have the option to take a year-long course with content on financial literacy and building healthy relationships. However, there is little data yet on whether this kind of early

education will translate into future healthy marriages and reduced divorce rates. One study of a high-school relationships curriculum suggested that students learned healthier attitudes and ways of relating that bode well for their future marriages.³⁸ But the study did not follow students long enough to determine if the education actually helped them form and sustain healthy marriages.

Not all premarital education is formal, of course. Many individuals and couples approaching their weddings seek out self-help books, Web-based information or programs, or consult privately with friends and family members. However, there has been no research evaluating this kind of informal marriage preparation. In contrast, there has been substantial research on the effectiveness of formal marriage preparation programs. We will review those studies shortly.

Some may wonder why premarital education even is necessary. Many Utahns (and others in the United States) likely believe that marriage is something that we can only learn as we go along, or that it comes naturally. Arguably, a generation or two ago, marriage involved more prescribed roles and responsibilities, lower expectations for personal fulfillment, stronger support systems, stronger beliefs in permanence, and higher barriers to ending a relationship. In these circumstances, perhaps a “learn-as-you-go” approach to marriage made more sense. Or if this “learn-as-you-go” approach was not particularly effective, at least the risk of marital breakdown was relatively low. Today, however, marital roles for most are negotiated rather than prescribed, marriage carries extremely high expectations for personal fulfillment (some would say impossibly high), marriage is a more private institution with fewer social and cultural supports, the belief in marital permanence has eroded, and barriers to ending a

marriage are much lower than in the past due to unilateral, no-fault divorce and women's greater economic independence.³⁹ Accordingly, there is an increasing need for greater knowledge, wisdom, and relationship skills for contemporary marriages to succeed. And because the highest risk years for divorce are the first five years,⁴⁰ preventative premarital education makes increasing sense.

In addition, there is a new version of the "learn-as-you-go" approach to marriage.

Scientific evidence shows that cohabitation is a substantial risk factor for later divorce.

Nearly five million individuals are cohabiting in the United States. And most young people today (66 percent) believe that living together before marriage is a good way

to increase the chances of a successful marriage.⁴¹ Utah young adults are half as likely to agree with this, but still, more than a third of Utahns ages 19–24 believe that cohabitation will improve their chances of a successful marriage.⁴² In short, many youth approaching marriage may dismiss the need for premarital education because they believe that cohabitation is the best way to prepare effectively for a good marriage. However, scientific evidence shows that cohabitation is a substantial risk factor for later divorce unless you cohabit with only one person whom you eventually marry, which is not the norm.⁴³ (The odds of divorce range from 50 percent to more than 150 percent greater, depending on sexual and cohabitation histories.) Recent research suggests that brief cohabitation after getting engaged appears not to have a negative effect on marital success.⁴⁴ But no research suggests that cohabitation is an effective means for enhancing marital success. In other words, the dramatic rise of cohabitation probably has not decreased the need for marriage education in our society.

Q3: How many Utah couples have formal premarital education before marrying? Do they think marriage preparation is a good idea?

If premarital education makes increasing sense in our modern world, are Utahns seeking it out? According to a recent USU survey, only 27 percent of currently married Utahns have participated in some kind of formal marriage preparation.⁴⁵

(Because this question was not asked of divorced respondents, the proportion of ever-married Utahns who have participated in formal premarital education may be even lower.) A slightly higher

Only 27% of currently married Utahns have participated in some kind of formal marriage preparation. 75% of unmarried Utahns said they would be interested in participating in some kind of formal marriage education.

proportion of married Utahns (30 percent) in first marriages have had formal premarital education. And nearly four in ten Utahns who have married more recently (since 1995) have had formal premarital education of some kind, suggesting that there is a trend towards increasing participation. Of those who participated in formal education, two-thirds did so in religious settings. They reported that this education involved, on average, a total of 10 hours. Utahns' participation in formal premarital education is lower than what researchers have found in several other states where data on this question are available (CA, FL, OK, NY, TX).⁴⁶ It should be noted that many survey respondents' definitions of formal premarital education would include activities that might not meet the legislative definition of premarital education defined earlier, either in terms of content or time investment. Of course, it is possible that those who did not participate in formal premarital education nevertheless engaged in significant, personal marriage preparation activities.

Although Utahns apparently do not participate in formal premarital education as frequently as individuals in some other states do, it is not because they think it is unimportant or because they are not interested. In the USU survey, Utahns were asked if it were important “to prepare for marriage through educational classes, workshops, or counseling designed to get them off to a good start.” More than 90 percent of Utahns believed this was important (50 percent said it was very important).⁴⁷ In addition, 75 percent of unmarried Utahns said they would be interested in participating in some kind of formal marriage education. Of note, an even higher proportion of lower-income Utahns (81 percent) said they would be interested. Responding to a related question, 87 percent said that a statewide initiative to promote healthy marriages and reduce the number of divorces in the state was a good idea (39 percent a very good idea). Utahns’ responses to these questions are generally similar to those in other states with similar data. Accordingly, these data suggest that an overwhelming proportion of Utahns believe in the importance of formal premarital education and may be supportive of public policy efforts to encourage it.

Question #4: Is there evidence that marriage preparation can promote healthy marriages and reduce divorces?

Marriage preparation may make sense, and Utahns may believe it is a good idea for themselves and everyone else. But can formal premarital education achieve its goal of helping couples form and sustain healthy marriages? And does it have the ability to reduce divorce? The evidence on this question is not yet definitive. But an increasing body of recent research provides evidence that the answer to these questions is yes.

A formal synthesis of studies evaluating the effectiveness of formal marriage preparation programs by scholars from Brigham Young University and the University of Minnesota found evidence supporting the effectiveness of these programs.⁴⁸ Of the 13 most rigorous studies, 12 found that couples who participated in premarital education programs had significantly higher relationship skills and marital quality after the program compared to couples who did not participate. The researchers found that the average person who participated in a premarital prevention program was better off after the program than 79 percent of the control-group couples (who did not receive a similar educational experience). Similarly, premarital program participants had a 69 percent chance of improving their relationship quality compared to only a 31 percent chance of improvement for non-participants. In the seven studies that included follow-up evaluations six months to three years after the end of these premarital programs, program participants generally maintained the relationship skills they were taught, including effective conflict negotiation, positive communication, empathy, and self-disclosure. The researchers did note, however, that these studies were almost uniformly done with white, middle-class samples. More research is needed to assess the effectiveness of premarital education for more disadvantaged populations. Two large-scale research projects funded by the federal government are underway that will be able to investigate this question.⁴⁹

The average person who participated in a premarital prevention program was better off after the program than 79 percent of couples who did not receive a similar educational experience.

In another recent study, researchers following newlywed couples in Louisiana

In one study, couples who sought out premarital education had a substantially lower rate of separation and divorce in the early years of marriage. In another study, premarital education was associated with a 31% decline in the odds of divorce.

for five years found that couples who sought out premarital education had a substantially lower rate of separation and divorce in the early years of marriage, even controlling for a host of other factors that could influence the likelihood of

divorce.⁵⁰ Another bit of accumulating evidence for the value of formal premarital education comes from a recent study by three Utah researchers of Community Marriage Policies (CMPs) in the United States. In CMP communities, religious leaders have banded together to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce. There are more than 200 communities in the United States that have signed CMPs. The primary feature of these community coalitions is that the religious organizations agree to require couples seeking a religious wedding to undergo extensive premarital education before getting married. Three Utah researchers took on the significant challenge to assess the effectiveness of CMPs in reducing local divorce rates. They found that CMP communities reduced their divorce rates 2 percent more than comparable communities.⁵¹ (They believe this was a conservative estimate because there was wide variation in how well these communities implemented the CMP, and they were unable to control for that variation in their study.) Although the additional 2 percent decline in divorce may not seem impressive, they estimated that on a national level, these policies had reduced the number

of divorces by more than 30,000 since they were implemented. If Utah had CMPs in place statewide in 2001, its 9,735 divorces that year perhaps would have been reduced by about 200, with 200 fewer children experiencing their parents' divorce, and with a cost savings to the state of more than \$2.5 million dollars. Thus, even small decreases in the divorce rate can yield substantial benefits. (There are no CMPs in Utah at this time.)

Closer to home, some questions on the Utah State University survey provide some support for the notion that premarital education can make a positive difference in marital quality.

Eighty-four percent of Utahns who said they participated in formal premarital education reported that they were "very happy" in their

84% of Utahns who said they participated in formal premarital education reported that they were "very happy" in their marriages compared to 71% who did not participate in formal premarital education.

marriages compared to 71 percent who did not participate in formal premarital education.⁵² Those who participated in formal premarital education also reported higher scores on talking to each other as friends, lower negative interaction scores, and lower divorce proneness scores. (It should be noted that with this kind of one-time, survey research, the differences on these questions may stem from other sources other than participation in marriage preparation activities.) Similar surveys of representative samples of adults in other states found that large majorities of those who participated in formal marriage preparation said it positively affected their relationship (CA [75 percent]; FL [77 percent]; NY [80 percent], TX [83 percent]).⁵³

A recent study of Oklahoma adults also found that those who participated in

premarital education had higher marital satisfaction and commitment than those who did not participate.⁵⁴ Similarly, those who participated in premarital education also reported less marital conflict. Marital conflict decreased as time in premarital education (up to 10 hours) increased; marital satisfaction increased as time in premarital education (up to 20 hours) increased. Researchers found no adverse effects of participation in premarital education. Finally, premarital education was associated with a 31 percent decline in the odds of divorce. For individuals who were not involved in premarital education, the probability of divorce within the first five years of marriage was significantly higher than for those who had been involved in premarital education, although this finding applied primarily to individuals with higher levels of education. Again, in this kind of one-time, survey research, there are other differences between those who participated in premarital education and those who did not that could account for the differences in divorce rates, but these researchers attempted to control statistically for many of these possible differences.

In summary, there is mounting evidence that participation in premarital education makes a positive difference in marital quality. Although more research is needed, there also is some evidence that participation in premarital education reduces the risk of divorce. Larger and more sophisticated research projects are underway to assess the effectiveness of marital preparation programs on more diverse socioeconomic and ethnic populations. In the meantime, there is reason for optimism about the ability of premarital education to help promote healthy marriages and reduce divorce.

Questions #5: How does premarital education work to promote healthy marriages and reduce divorce?

Although it is important to know that participation in formal premarital education improves the chances for marital success, we believe it is also important to understand how this process occurs. Perhaps the preeminent scholar on premarital education, Dr. Scott Stanley of the University of Denver, has suggested three ways that premarital education works to promote healthy marriage and reduce divorce.⁵⁵ First, Stanley argues that formal premarital education fosters greater deliberation by slowing couples down in their starry-eyed flight to the altar. That is, couples who seek formal marriage preparation avail themselves of opportunities to remove their rose-colored glasses and gain a more realistic perspective on their relationship and what it takes to build a successful, healthy marriage. Research documents that couples with short engagement periods have significantly higher divorce rates.⁵⁶ And Stanley cites some evidence that perhaps 10 to 15 percent of couples involved in premarital education decide not to marry, perhaps because they saw problems in their relationships that convinced them that divorce was a likely outcome if they married. It is uncertain whether the decision not to marry for some engaged couples was a result of what they learned in the course of their premarital education or whether it was simply a result of a slower march to the wedding day that allowed more time for problems to surface. Regardless, Stanley believes that the greater deliberateness and intentionality of seeking formal education is one mechanism that improves the chances of marital success. This greater deliberateness may be especially important for Utah couples who marry much younger than average and live in a culture that idealizes marriage.

A second way that premarital education improves the chances of marital success, according to Stanley, is that it reinforces the idea that marriage is important, worthy of commitment, and depends primarily on knowledge and skills rather than romance and luck. All formal premarital curricula that we know of send strong messages that marriage is important both personally and socially, that it is not to be rushed into or taken lightly, and that complete commitment is needed for a healthy, lasting relationship. Some may wonder if such messages aren't "preaching to the choir." After all, the couple has made a choice to marry in a society where marriage is considered optional; of course they consider marriage an important step. But the dominant cultural belief about marriage, one consistently portrayed in the entertainment media, is that individuals search and finally find their one-and-only soul mate, fall deeply and effortlessly in love, and marriage is simply the public avowal of that love.⁵⁷ Relatively few cultural messages reinforce the reality that marriage takes knowledge, skills, and commitment to make it work. Thus, premarital education is an important way that engaged couples are given a reality check and invited to learn skills that will help them build a truer soul-mate relationship. In the process they are likely to understand that the quality and success of a marriage depends largely on attitudes and action rather than love and luck.

A third way, according to Stanley, that premarital education improves the chances of marital success is that couples who participate in premarital education may be more likely to seek help (e.g., marital therapy) for marital problems down the road, and seek help earlier, if they already have had experience with interventions to strengthen marriages. They also may be more likely to seek out marital enrichment

education or activities to keep their relationship strong, especially if they had a positive experience with premarital education, which most do. Some support for this hypothesis comes from the USU marriage survey which found that nearly 90 percent of Utahns who had some formal premarital education said they would be interested in further relationship enrichment classes compared to 68 percent of Utahns who did not participate.⁵⁸ An Oklahoma survey found nearly identical figures.⁵⁹ In short, Stanley thinks that premarital education can help couples begin a pattern of intentional and formal efforts to keep relationships strong or solve problems.

We add a final thought to Stanley's list of ways that premarital education may work to promote healthy marriage and prevent divorces. We believe that public policy to encourage marriage

education is, in itself, a strong message that a healthy, stable marriage matters not only to individuals but also to the broader communities that depend on those marriages to build and sustain a strong society. Legislation that involves personal and social matters is not taken lightly by Utah legislators. When the legislature "speaks" on these issues, they do so after substantial deliberation and justifiable caution. They pass legislation on personal and social issues only when they believe a crucial public

Formal premarital education works by fostering greater deliberation by slowing couples down in their starry-eyed flight to the altar, by reinforcing the idea that marriage is worthy of commitment, and depends primarily on knowledge and skills rather than romance and luck, and by motivating couples to seek marriage enhancement education once married, or seek marital therapy if problems arise down the road.

interest is at stake. When the legislature decides to speak on issues like marriage preparation, it has considerable power to reinforce an important message: take the decision to marry seriously and prepare for marriage effectively.

Question #6: Does Utah have the capacity to support a large increase in premarital education in the state?

If Utah passed legislation to encourage formal premarital education, it is possible that there would be a significant increase in the number of Utah couples who would seek out this education. There is anecdotal evidence from Minnesota that the number of couples seeking premarital education increased substantially in the three years

There are few other states as well prepared as Utah to increase their capacity to offer premarital education; its capacity seems substantially underused.

since the legislature passed premarital education legislation. Would Utah have the capacity to support a substantial increase? We believe it does. In fact, we suspect that there are few other states as well prepared to increase their capacity to offer premarital education; its

capacity seems substantially underused. Following, we detail resources already in place in Utah to support formal premarital education.

- *Utah State Cooperative Extension Service:* Utah has family life educators in every county in the state functioning under the direction of the USU Cooperative Extension Service. These educators are regularly trained in curricula and programs to meet current educational needs of Utah citizens. USU educators have recently initiated a training program with a new curriculum

focused on strengthening marital relationships. USU also has developed a Web-based course on preparing for marriage, available to the general public (see www.utahmarriage.org).

- *Certified Family Life Educators:* Utah has more than 50 family life educators certified by the National Council on Family Relations as trained to conduct educational interventions and with in-depth knowledge related to a wide variety of family topics, including building healthy marriages. Four universities in Utah (BYU, USU, UU, WSU) have curriculum programs to prepare students to become lay or professional family life educators. CFLEs are trained as educators, not therapists, although some CFLEs also are therapists.

- *Trained PREP[®] Instructors:* Utah has about 90 marriage educators trained in one of the premier premarital education programs, PREP (Preventative Relationship Enhancement Program). This is the most thoroughly researched and validated program available to premarital couples. These PREP educators are located throughout the state.

- *Marriage and Family Therapists:* Utah has nearly 350 licensed marriage and family therapists (MFTs). MFTs receive specific training to work with couples on improving their relationships. Utah has two well-regarded training programs for MFTs at Brigham Young University and Utah State University. BYU's program is one of the largest in the United States. Many Utah MFTs have a strong focus in their practices on providing premarital counseling and education.

- *College Curriculum:* Five colleges or universities in Utah currently offer popular courses focused on preparing for

marriage (BYU, SUU, USU, UU, UVSC, WSU). Because Utahns tend to marry during the college years (the average age is 21 for women and 23 for men), and because Utahns are more likely to get some college education compared to the nation,⁶⁰ college-based curricula play an important role in making premarital education available to the public.

- *RELATE*[®] *Premarital Inventory*: Many premarital education programs have couples fill out a premarital inventory—a lengthy questionnaire of information about themselves and their relationship—to explore strengths and areas of needed improvement. These inventories spark and guide conversations about important issues that are related to future marital quality and success. The most thoroughly researched and validated (and inexpensive) premarital inventory is RELATE, which is produced by a team of researchers led by scholars at Brigham Young University.⁶¹ RELATE is now a Web-based service to facilitate easy access, quick feedback, and lower costs. RELATE can be used in conjunction with a formal premarital education program, with a premarital counselor, or just by a couple with self-guided materials. There is a Spanish-language version of RELATE, as well. Researchers also are developing a special version of RELATE for couples beginning a second marriage. This version will be ready fall 2005.

- *Community Healthy Marriage Initiatives*: Hundreds of communities in the United States have organized community leaders in public efforts to strengthen marriages and reduce divorce. Encouraging premarital education is often a centerpiece of these Community Healthy Marriage Initiatives.⁶²

Currently, Utah has two community-wide efforts to strengthen marriages and reduce divorce. The Utah County Hispanic Marriage Initiative (UCHMI) was formed in 2004 by a group of BYU marriage scholars and Utah County Hispanic community activists. The UCHMI is a collaboration among agencies and faith groups to promote prevention, education, and remediation programs for strengthening marriage as the first bond of society. They have a specific focus on promoting culturally sensitive educational resources to the burgeoning Spanish-speaking, immigrant population in Utah County. A second CHMI, the "Washington County Coalition for Healthy Marriage and Family," was recently organized to provide resources to promote strong and healthy marriages and families in Southern Utah. Although both these community-based efforts are in the formative stage, they soon will be significant resources to inform community members how to get access to premarital education services.

- *Faith-based Resources*: Religious organizations provide the majority of premarital education in the United States. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the largest denomination in Utah, offers several educational opportunities to premarital couples. The LDS Church's Institute of Religion program offers a substantial course on effective preparation for marriage that incorporates both spiritual and secular wisdom. In addition, the LDS Church's Sunday School organization regularly offers to its members an eight-session course on sustaining healthy marriages. Roman Catholics are the second largest denomination in Utah. The Catholic Church has been a leader in providing

premarital education. Couples seeking a religious wedding in the Catholic Church must attend a lengthy educational seminar (called Pre-Cana) that generally incorporates both religious and research-based wisdom on forming and sustaining a healthy marriage. Other religious groups in Utah also offer formal premarital education.

As stated previously, only about four in ten recently married Utah couples reported participating in some kind of formal premarital education. Given the resources Utah already has in place, we are confident that Utah has the capacity to support a significant increase in the number of couples seeking premarital education. The Utah Commission on Marriage is dedicated to facilitating and coordinating this capacity.

Questions #7: Are there other public policy alternatives for encouraging premarital education?

Six other states have passed legislation to encourage premarital education. Utah's proposed legislation was similar to the legislation in other states that specified a reduction in marriage license fees for couples who complete some formal premarital education, and set a minimum amount of time and a minimal curriculum of topics to be covered. The six states with premarital education legislation have only minor differences in terms of fee reductions, time, and curriculum specifications. No state has passed legislation mandating premarital education.

One legislative option passed by three states (AZ, AR, LA) and considered by more than 20 others goes beyond encouraging premarital education to promote a fuller package of requirements designed to promote healthy marriages and reduce divorces. This legislation is called

“Covenant Marriage.” Covenant Marriage is an alternate set of rules couples may choose to govern their entrance into and any exit from marriage. Essentially, it requires more to begin a marriage and to end it. Couples who choose to marry under Covenant Marriage rules must participate in some kind of premarital education (either secular or religious) before marrying. (The content and length has not been specified in detail in the legislation.) Also, they must affirm that they have disclosed anything that could reasonably affect their partner's decision to marry (e.g., financial debt, prior children). They also legally bind themselves before they marry to seek marital counseling (either secular or religious) if they encounter problems that threaten the marriage (i.e., they cannot proceed with a divorce until they have sought counseling). Finally, they legally limit their grounds for divorce to the “hard reasons” (e.g., abuse, infidelity, addiction, imprisonment, abandonment) or a 24-month legal separation (18 months if no children are involved). Married couples can convert their standard marriage to a Covenant Marriage.

Research on the effectiveness of Covenant Marriage is just coming to fruition. One problem is that only a minority of couples is aware of Covenant Marriage in their states,⁶³ and only a small proportion selects it. Just this year, Governor Huckabee of Arkansas became the first high-level public official to make a concerted effort to inform citizens of the option of Covenant Marriage and encourage them to consider it seriously. Early research shows that couples who choose Covenant Marriage already have a low-risk profile for divorce⁶⁴: they are better communicators; they use more constructive problem-solving methods; they are more religious; they have less complicated relationship and sexual histories; and they have many other factors that predict healthy, stable marriages.

Researchers are just beginning to explore whether Covenant Marriage may help to reduce divorces even among this low-risk group.⁶⁵ However, until more couples select it, Covenant Marriage will have little power to lower state divorce rates.

Utah considered Covenant Marriage legislation in 2003 (H.B. 213 sponsored by Rep. Doug Agard). It passed nearly unanimously in the House but ran out of time for discussion in an 11th-hour Senate debate, falling three votes shy of passing. The legislation was not reintroduced in 2004 or 2005.

Covenant Marriage and legislation to promote premarital education are not mutually exclusive. Arizona has passed both pieces of legislation. If the policy goal is to promote premarital education, however, then a bill that focuses only on that makes sense. Premarital education appears to be an effective way to prevent divorce in the early years of marriage. Covenant Marriage requires premarital education, but it also requires several other things, and so far, few are choosing it. The additional elements to Covenant Marriage may discourage some couples from choosing it, and thus they may not seek formal premarital education. Covenant Marriage is also a bigger political target because it treads on the sensitive area of divorce reform. Various groups, including feminists and lawyers, have been skeptical or hostile towards Covenant Marriage, and they have opposed its passage in numerous states. Legislation to encourage premarital education has no clear political enemies. Some oppose the legislation because they do not believe government should be involved in such personal matters (although when marriages fail, government must become deeply involved). And some legislators will not see this effort as a priority legislative action, especially if there is a short-term fiscal cost to it. Still, encouraging premarital

education to reduce the need for divorce is an easier sell politically. Perhaps a sequential strategy makes the most sense: that is, legislators may want to lead with legislation to encourage premarital preparation. As more couples participate, and if research documents that increased participation in premarital education is helping to reduce divorce, then there would be more political capital to invest in further measures, such as Covenant Marriage.

Question #8: Should Utah vigorously pursue passage of legislation to encourage couples to participate in premarital education?

The Utah Commission on Marriage believes the answer to this question is: “Yes.” Utah’s divorce rate is slightly above the national average; estimates are that 40-50 percent of first marriages in Utah may end in divorce. In 2001, there were nearly 10,000 divorces in Utah at a public cost (conservatively estimated) of more than \$125 million to Utah taxpayers (and nearly \$175 million to federal taxpayers). Less than four in ten recently married Utah couples participated in formal premarital education despite ample lay and professional capacity for this service. Yet more than 90 percent of Utah adults believe it would be a good idea to do so, and almost 90 percent think a statewide initiative to strengthen marriages and reduce divorce is a good idea. Mounting scientific evidence testifies that premarital education can improve marital quality and reduce the chances of divorce in the early, high-risk years of marriage. Legislation to encourage couples to participate in premarital education would send a strong signal that Utah couples should take the decision to marry seriously and gain the knowledge and skills that maximize their chances of marital success.

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Marriage is the first bond of society, Cicero said, and it is the most fundamental element of a strong

of cake. It takes knowledge, relationship skills, and commitment to succeed. Premarital education can help couples gain the knowledge and skills needed to form and sustain a healthy marriage.

society.⁶⁶ But modern marriage is no piece

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