is area staffing better?*

Paul Warner

Richard Young

Clarence Cunningham

Staffing on a county basis has been the traditional organizational pattern of Extension. Recently, many states, in efforts to respond more effectively to clientele needs, have been providing services on an area basis. As a result, more Extension personnel now have multicounty responsibilities. In 1964, states reported 407 professionals assigned on an area basis. By 1972, this number had increased to 1,703—more than a four-fold increase.[1]

Even though many states are moving to area staffing, a lot of questions remain to be answered. Does a change in the staffing arrangement increase the effectiveness of the Extension organization in serving clientele? How do these changes affect the individual worker within the organization? Are employees more satisfied with these new staffing arrangements? Does the organization become more complex? Does more conflict result? Is the level of job satisfaction of the individual related to the degree of complexity of the organizational structure?

The Study   To try and provide answers to these many questions, ES-USDA sponsored a study to assess the advantages and disadvantages of area agent staffing compared to county staffing.

In a comprehensive inventory of all states, Moore found three staffing patterns to be the most common.[2] These patterns were: (1) county staff with area responsibilities, (2) county and area staff, and (3) county staff only. These three most common patterns were used as the basis of comparison in our study. Seven states were selected to represent the three staffing arrangements—Indiana, New Jersey, Minnesota, Idaho, Ohio, Tennessee, and New Mexico.

Paul Warner: Assistant Professor and Rural Sociologist, Agricultural Science Center-North, University of Kentucky—Lexington. *Richard Young*: Leader, Studies and Evaluation, Cooperative Extension Service, Ohio State University—Columbus. *Clarence Cunningham*: Assistant Director, Staff Development and Program Development and Professor, Agricultural Education, Cooperative Extension Service, Ohio State University—Columbus.

A visit to each state was made to interview the Extension administrative staff. The interviews were informal and gave us an opportunity to probe the many facets of a state's staffing pattern.

A mailed questionnaire was the primary source of information. It was sent to 753 out of a total of 2,346 professional workers in the 7 states—a stratified random sample by job group and state. Of those sampled, 675 responded.

This article summarizes the answers to questions about organizational effectiveness, structural complexity, employee job satisfaction, and role conflict.

Organizational Effectiveness

Organizational effectiveness can be measured by how well an organization is "doing its job"—the degree to which its goals are being realized. The important question was whether one type of staffing is more effective than another in meeting Extension's goals. Respondents appraised the effectiveness of their state organizations by indicating the extent to which they felt each of 35 national purposes defined by ES-USDA was being achieved in their state.

The measure of effectiveness had a possible range of response scores from 35 (least effectiveness) to 175 (greatest effectiveness), with a midpoint of 105. The mean score for all staff sampled was 114.67, slightly above the midpoint of the scale (see Table 1).

No significant differences existed in effectiveness among the three staffing arrangements.[3] All three were seen as relatively effective. This finding supports the statement made by an administrator in one state that "almost any staffing pattern can be effective if the workers want to make it work." However, though not statistically significant, respondents in the two area staffing patterns rated their organizations as more effective than did respondents in the county pattern.

Remember, effectiveness was indicated by the perception of the Extension staff. For a more complete assessment of overall effectiveness, clientele would have to be polled.

Organizational Structure

Structure is a fact of any organization and is of particular concern when considering staffing arrangements. An organization's structure is analyzed to indicate the effect structure has on the behavior of the organization and its members. The question asked was whether differences existed in the complexity of the organizational structure in the three different staffing patterns of Extension.

Sub-Dimensions

In past studies, the complexity of an organization's structure has generally been characterized by numerous sub-dimensions.[4] Those used in this study were: (1) the distribution of authority, (2) the amount of rules and regulations, (3) the degree of routinization of behavior, and (4) the

Table 1. Perceived organizational effectiveness, organizational complexity, and job satisfaction by staffing pattern.

	Mean effectiveness score	Mean complexity score	Mean job satisfaction score
	Range 35-175 Midpoint 105	Range 15-75 Midpoint 45	Range 14-70 Midpoint 42
County staff with area responsibilities	115.02	31.71	61.65
County and area staff	115.21	32.22	60.49
County staff	113.49	33.81	59.69
Overall means	114.67	32.53	60.55

impersonality among workers. These four components reflected the Extension worker's feeling about the distribution of power within the organization.

The possible range of scores on the 15-item organizational complexity scale was from 15 (least complexity) to 75 (greatest complexity), with a midpoint of 45. The mean score reported by all Extension staff sampled, and shown in Table 1, was 32.53. This is well below the midpoint of the scale. Therefore, Extension employees, at least in the seven states surveyed, viewed their organization as having a low level of complexity.

Authority Distribution Perceptions

There was a statistically significant difference among the complexity scores reported by the three staffing patterns. The workers in states using area programming perceived their organizations as less complex than did those in the county pattern. This low complexity score among workers in area staffing indicates they feel they're more involved in the decision-making process. Those in county patterns, on the other hand, expressed more of a feeling of isolation from the sources of power. The staffing arrangement, therefore, is a structural dimension that seemed to be related to a staff member's perception of how authority is distributed within the Extension organization.

Area staffing could be viewed as a method of decentralizing authority among the different levels of the organization. With area staff located closer to county staff, the area staff can be seen as a link in the communication chain that reduces the feeling of isolation at the county level. With the presence of area workers, county staff may feel they now have the necessary expertise at their disposal and no longer need to

choose between "going it alone" or "calling on the specialist" who may be relatively inaccessible.

Staff working in the area pattern in which county staff also have area responsibilities to neighboring counties showed the lowest complexity score. This could be because both the county and area roles are embodied in the same individual, thus decreasing the possibility of problems in communication and coordination while at the same time increasing the confidence placed in the worker by clientele.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is an indication of how gratifying a work role is for an individual. For the individual employee it's important because of its suggested effect on performance, and, as a result, the overall effectiveness of the organization.[5] As Barnett and Louderback point out, administrators are interested both in meeting clientele needs and in maintaining a high level of morale among their employees. Any innovation that decreases net satisfaction among employees, even though it may increase organizational effectiveness, will be viewed with contempt by the workers.[6]

An adaptation of the Brayfield-Rothe index of general job satisfaction was used in this study.[7] The scale consisted of 14 items with a range of possible scores from 14 (least satisfaction) to 70 (greatest satisfaction), with a midpoint of 42. The mean score for all respondents was 60.55. Generally speaking, Extension workers were highly satisfied with their jobs. However, significant differences were found among workers of the three methods of staffing. States using county staff who also have area responsibilities demonstrated the highest level of job satisfaction, the pattern with area and county staff had a slightly lower level of satisfaction, and the county pattern had the lowest. Extension staff employed in both area staffing patterns reported higher levels of job satisfaction than did those in the county pattern.

It has generally been assumed that a move to area staffing would increase the effectiveness of the Extension organization. The results of this study show that this assumption may not, in fact, be true.

Higher levels of satisfaction could be anticipated in area staffing arrangements because of increased opportunity for specialization among area agents and the complementary support provided county and state specialist staff. It also has been suggested that the satisfaction of area staff increases as the result of more confidence being placed in them by clientele groups.[8] This needs to be tested.

Table 1 shows that an inverse relationship existed between the perceived complexity of the organization and the satisfac-

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tion of the worker. Workers in the pattern of county staff with area responsibilities indicated the highest level of job satisfaction and viewed the organization as least complex. Workers in the county pattern registered a high level of complexity and low satisfaction. Staff who viewed the organization as complex indicated a low level of job satisfaction, and conversely, those who felt the organizational structure wasn't complex exhibited a higher level of satisfaction in their work role.

Role Conflict

The perception of organizational members on what an individual's behavior within the group should, or shouldn't, be is role expectation. When the expectations about a specific role differ, conflict results. Disagreement among workers within Extension on the tasks that should be associated with different roles within the organization is an indication of this conflict.

Role perception is important because, as Kahn and others conclude, "Organizations consist ultimately of the patterned and concerted activity of their members."[9] An analysis of role expectations and conflict within the organization is concerned with the impact of an organization and its members on the individual, and as a result, the effect of the individual performer and his behavior on the organization's effectiveness. Extension staff members were asked to indicate the level of priority they'd associate with specific tasks included in program planning, implementation, and evaluation for the roles of county agents, area agents, and state specialists.

When a new role such as the area agent in Extension is introduced into an existing organization, some disagreement about the expectations of the new position could be expected until the members of the organization adjust to the presence of this new role. The results of this study showed that no significant level of role conflict was identified in any of the three staffing patterns. More disagreement (but not enough to be statistically significant) existed with respect to the tasks assigned to the area position.

Summary

A change to area staffing may not result in greater organizational effectiveness. It has generally been assumed that a move to area staffing would increase the effectiveness of the Extension organization. The results of this study show that this assumption may not, in fact, be true. Extension administrators contemplating a change to area staffing shouldn't expect an immediate improvement in organizational performance, at least as perceived by members of the organization.

Area staffing patterns were seen as less complex than county patterns. It was expected that because area staffing introduces a new position and/or level into an existing organization that area staffing arrangements would seem more complex to staff members. However, the opposite was true.

Area staffing could have the potential for distributing power among the different levels of the organization, allowing workers at all levels a greater feeling of involvement in the decision-making process. Area staffing increased communication among agents of different counties and for locating specialists closer to county staff, both of which serve to decrease the county agent's feeling of isolation.

Extension workers in area patterns were more satisfied with their jobs than were workers in county patterns. This finding was anticipated to result from the increased opportunity for specialization and the additional support provided county staff in area patterns. This higher level of job satisfaction for people in area patterns, however, was an indication of general satisfaction and doesn't explain the causes of this satisfaction (or dissatisfaction). The employee's level of job satisfaction was inversely related to his perception of the organization's complexity. If the worker felt he played a part in making organizational decisions, he was more satisfied. Therefore, area staffing can provide an opportunity for increased employee satisfaction.

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No difference in role conflict was found among staffing patterns. Unless roles are clearly defined and accepted, there can be disagreement about exactly what the expectations are for a new position. More role conflict was expected in area staffing arrangements. However, area staffing didn't report significantly higher levels of conflict than did the county pattern. In fact, neither area nor county patterns reported a significant level of disagreement about task assignments.

Changes in staffing arrangements in Extension seem to be related more closely to concerns of the individual staff member and his role than to the overall performance of the organization. This conclusion implies that Extension administrators must be concerned primarily with the worker and his attitudes and feelings toward his job. It should follow then that increased employee satisfaction would be reflected in improved organizational performance.

Remember, we studied only the organizational considerations of staffing patterns and the source of information was organizational members. We didn't try to deal with clientele appraisal and acceptance, financial and geographical limitations, the organizational philosophy of state administrators, or specialized circumstances of individual states.

Footnotes

1. Extension Management Information System (Washington, D.C.: Extension Service, United States Department of Agriculture, 1964 and 1972).
2. Philip B. Moore, "Staffing Patterns in the Cooperative Extension Service with Regard to Functions and Selected Characteristics of Area and County Extension Agents" (Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, 1972).
3. The hypotheses dealing with effectiveness, complexity, and job satisfaction were tested by using one-way analysis of variance at the .05 level and were followed by a post hoc Scheffe test. In analyzing role conflict, both analysis of variance and Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance were used.
4. Richard H. Hall, "An Empirical Study of Bureaucratic Dimensions and Their Relation to Other Organizational Characteristics" (Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, 1961).
5. Rensis Likert, *New Patterns of Management* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1961).
6. Randall Barnett and Logan Louderback, "When Organizations Change . . ." *Journal of Extension*, IX (Summer, 1971), 9-15.
7. Arthur H. Brayfield and Harold F. Rothe, "An Index of Job Satisfaction," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, XXXV (October, 1951), 307-11.
8. Buel Lampher and others, "Area Agent Study: A Report of the Review of Multi-County Area Agents Operations in Thirteen States" (Washington, D.C.: Federal Extension Service, United States Department of Agriculture, 1965), pp. 31-32.
9. Robert L. Kahn and others, *Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiquity* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964), p. 34.