Professional Development Needs of Early-Career Extension Agents Beyond the First Year: Florida County Extension Director Perspectives

Abstract

Extension agents serve important roles in communities but often begin their careers lacking skills crucial for success. We aimed to understand the professional development needs of Florida early-career Extension agents beyond the first year as perceived by eight county Extension directors (CEDs). Through semistructured interviews, CEDs indicated that building community relationships, managing volunteers, communicating effectively, and other Extension-related skills are areas for which early-career Extension agents need professional development. These results suggest a need for additional development opportunities beyond the first year, with a professional development time model that is continually adapted as an Extension professional's skill set changes. Our findings have implications for those involved in Extension practice and research beyond Florida.

Keywords: professional development, communication, extramural funding, volunteer management

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Introduction

Extension agents serve a critical role in their local communities, yet many enter the profession without a complete skill set or understanding of Extension (Ensle, 2005; Myers, 2011). Extension professionals' entering the field without a complete skill set or with incomplete technical expertise can lead to costly premature turnover (Borr & Young, 2010; Ensle, 2005; Kutilek, 2000). Researchers have conducted a plethora of professional development and competency studies in the hopes of alleviating such agent and organizational challenges. Previous studies have identified competencies Extension agents need to be successful, such as program planning, program evaluation, and leadership skills (Cooper & Graham, 2001; Harder et al., 2010). Additionally, evaluation (Diaz et al., 2019; Franz & McCann, 2007; Lamm, 2011), evaluation and activities reporting (Diaz et al., 2019; Franz & McCann, 2007), relationship building (Harder et al., 2010), communications skills (Harder et al., 2010), and volunteer management (Seevers et al., 2005) have been consistently identified as competencies Extension agents lack.

There are 19 Extension education programs nationwide (Harder et al., 2018); this somewhat low number of such programs is a contributing factor to both new Extension hires' entering Extension without a complete skill set and an increase in Extension professional and organizational development units. Martin (2011) suggested that the most critical time for new Extension agents is the first 2 years of employment, the period in which

employees indicate the greatest intention to leave as well as the period during which organizational efforts such as mentoring and professional development can be targeted to decrease employees' intention to leave the organization. However, many state Extension systems do not provide intentional and targeted professional development for agents beyond the first year on the job.

The professional development model for Extension agents adapted by Benge et al. (2011) is a framework for the progression of professional development through an Extension agent's career stages. In the model, Extension agents begin in the preentry career stage and progress through the entry stage and colleague stage to the counselor and advisor stage. Each stage is characterized by motivators (i.e., competencies) and organizational strategies that drive the professional development of the Extension agent (Benge et al., 2011; Kutilek et al., 2002). Early-career Extension agents fall within the entry stage of the professional development model, where motivators consist of understanding the organization and its structure, obtaining job skills, and establishing linkages. Organizational strategies for helping early-career Extension agents succeed include peer mentoring, orientation, and job training.

Context of Extension Agent Professional Development in Florida

During their first year on the job, new University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension agents participate in the Extension Faculty Development Academy (EFDA), which teaches agents the foundational competencies of program development, program evaluation, teaching and learning, and communication. The program consists of two synchronous 2.5-day in-person trainings 1 month apart and involves use of a blended approach wherein participants complete prerequisite work via online modules prior to attending each in-person training. Outside of EFDA, Extension agents participate in trainings of their choice on a variety of topics through the in-service training system. Beyond EFDA, there is no intentional development provided by University of Florida Extension. Florida Extension agents are faculty of the University of Florida and are expected to reach permanent status within 7 years (T. Obreza, personal communication, 2019). To gain permanent status, Extension agents must show high standards of scholarship related to their Extension program, demonstrating both outcomes and impacts of their Extension programming. Therefore, professional development throughout the organization focuses on competencies to be successful in one's job while also reaching permanent status.

Purpose and Research Objective

The purpose of our study was to understand the training and professional development needs of Florida early-career Extension agents beyond the first year, as part of a larger research study exploring the onboarding process of Florida Extension agents. The objective of our study was to understand the training and professional development needs of early-career Extension agents beyond the first year as perceived by county Extension directors (CEDs). We obtained approval from the University of Florida Institutional Review Board Office prior to contacting potential participants in April 2019 and collected data between May and August 2019.

Methods

We used qualitative methodology applied through a phenomenological lens. The professional development needs of Florida early-career Extension agents was the phenomenon being studied. Phenomenology was the appropriate approach for the study as we sought to capture the "meaning for several individuals of their lived

experiences of a concept of phenomenon" and to move beyond description of a shared experience to what it means reflectively for individuals to "a description of universal essence" (Creswell, 2007, 56–57). Merriam (1998) explained that it is important to address potential bias within qualitative research by writing a positionality statement to address past and current experiences. At the time of our study, our lead researcher, Matt Benge, had worked within Cooperative Extension for 11 years, the first 7 years as an Extension agent and the subsequent 4 years as a state Extension specialist, all within Florida, where we conducted our study. Benge has firsthand knowledge of and experience with being an early-career Extension agent and had been through challenges similar to those that other early-career Extension agents experienced, including the permanent status and promotion process in Florida that all Extension agents undergo. Benge currently coordinates professional development for new Extension agents and CEDs. There is no existing intentional development for Florida Extension agents beyond the first year on the job, and we believed that our study could provide a detailed account of current professional development needs of Florida Extension agents beyond the first year.

At the time of data collection, the total population of University of Florida Extension faculty members was 367, of which 62 were CEDs, according to the University of Florida Extension Business Services office (T. Obreza, personal communication, 2019). The target population for the study consisted of the 48 CEDs in whose offices an Extension agent with 1–3 years of experience worked. We purposively selected for participation in the study eight CEDs who represented a cross section of University of Florida Extension's districts, program areas, and county types (Table 1). We created a semistructured interview guide that was reviewed by a six-member expert panel for face and content validity. The expert panel consisted of one Extension agent, one CED, two program and staff development (PSD) professionals, and two state Extension faculty. At the time, five members of the panel either were working or had worked for Extension as an Extension agent or a CED. The interview guide consisted of 20 questions; the study we report on here focused on the following question: "What types of training or professional development does your early-career Extension agent need?" The findings shared are from the perspectives of the CEDs only.

Table 1.
Participant Demographic Information

Participant alias	Yrs as CED	District	Program area	Gender
Alice	17	Northeast	Family and consumer sciences	Woman
Barbara	6	Southeast	Family and consumer sciences	Woman
Chris	2	Northwest	4-H youth development	Man
David	2	Central	Natural resources, agriculture, and community development	Man
Eric	6	Southwest	Community resource development	Man
Fran	4	Southeast	Agriculture	Woman
Grace	9	Southwest	4-H youth development	Woman
Howard	10	Central	Agricultural production and community development	Man

Note. CED = county Extension director.

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. We conducted the interviews over 2 months. The interviews ranged from 34 to 63 min in length, with the average interview length being 45 min. We reduced the transcripts through the seven-step phenomenological reduction method by Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen as modified by Moustakas (1994). From our individual descriptions, we converted composite textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the effects of the CED coaching and mentoring experiences on early-career Extension agents (Moustakas, 1994). The five strategies we used to maintain credibility were triangulation; peer debriefing; member checking; use of thick, rich descriptions; and clarification of researcher bias (Creswell, 2007; Eisner, 1991).

Findings

Building Community Relationships

CEDs indicated that early-career Extension agents need additional training beyond the first year to build positive relationships with clientele and community stakeholders. Though Extension agents are hired with specific subject matter expertise, some CEDs expressed that that is not enough to be successful in the job. One CED stated, "I need someone who not only has the subject matter expertise but knows how to work in communities." Additionally, diversity training and conflict management training were identified by CEDs as priority needs for better preparing early-career Extension agents for working with all members of their community.

Volunteer Management

Volunteer management was a popular training topic identified as a need for early-career Extension agents. One CED stated, "The programming is fine. They're performing very well, but that's not the hard part. The main challenge is the volunteers." Volunteers often challenge the decisions made by Extension agents, and having the skills to manage those situations is often more challenging than the programmatic work.

Communications

CEDs consistently pointed to communications skills as critically important to the success of their early-career agents. Examples included interpersonal communication skills needed for working with internal staff and having difficult conversations with clientele and technical training in marketing, press release writing, social media use, and print design. Another CED with more than 20 years of experience suggested that early-career agents need more technical print and written communication training, specifically regarding marketing and using communications software such as Adobe Photoshop. Additionally, CEDs expressed a need for increased verbal communication specific to conflict management.

Specific Extension-Related Skills

CEDs noted the need for continuing education in the agents' areas of expertise and identified an array of Extension-related functions for which skills were somewhat lacking in their early-career agents. These included program development and evaluation, annual reporting, financial management, and revenue

enhancement. One CED observed, "[Annual] reporting can make or break an agent," and another stated, "Revenue enhancement is another [skill] that throws them off. They need to understand why it's important and how to do it the right way."

Discussion and Implications for Extension

According to our findings, Florida CEDs sense that many early-career Florida Extension agents beyond the first year of employment lack the foundational Extension competencies of building community relationships, managing volunteers, and practicing effective communication. This circumstance is important to note as Harder et al. (2010) established that these competencies are crucial for Extension agents either to possess upon entering the Extension system or to enhance after doing so. Other Extension-related skills, such as program development and evaluation, annual reporting, financial management, and revenue enhancement were also cited by Florida CEDs as somewhat lacking for Extension agents beyond the first year of employment. Though not indicated as often as some of the other competencies, they are nonetheless important for Extension agent success (Harder et al., 2010). The EFDA should be either updated or enhanced to ensure that Florida Extension agents are receiving the necessary training to be successful early in their careers.

Traditional Extension onboarding and training programs typically do not extend beyond the initial year of employment. Yet more attention to onboarding and professional development beyond the first year is needed to help ensure the success of early-career Extension professionals as the results of our study indicate that Florida's early-career Extension agents are not entering the organization with the necessary competencies for Extension educator success (Benge et al., 2011; Harder et al., 2010). Coordinators of the EFDA should consider modifying the training to include these skill sets and should develop a plan for training for at least 1 year beyond the initial onboarding program as Martin (2011) has suggested that the first 2 years of employment is the most critical period for new Extension agents to focus on professional development.

Though our study focused specifically on Florida, we suggest that the professional development application and research implications cross state and regional lines. With many states' land-grant universities not offering Extension education academic programs (Harder et al., 2018), many Extension professionals are entering the field without the appropriate foundational competencies necessary for success. Extension PSD professionals need to increase their focus beyond traditional onboarding and orientation and focus additionally on long-term competency development of Extension agents during their early-career stage.

Many Extension PSD units do not have the capacity to develop all or most of the Extension foundational competencies. To combat the lack of skills among new hires and the lack of capacity of PSD units, we offer three recommendations for state Extension organizations and PSD units. First, Extension PSD units should tap into the expertise of their respective state Extension specialists to create professional development programs tailored to meet the needs of their early-career professionals. Second, Extension PSD units should engage in more collaboration across state lines to expand capacity for creating professional development programs and providing those programs to more Extension professionals. Third, Extension PSD units and state Extension systems should rethink their onboarding programs to extend those endeavors past the first year of employment for the intentional development of Extension foundational competencies.

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