



Early Career Extension Professional Development Needs Assessment Report

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Introduction and Background

Virginia Cooperative Extension hired 100 new agents from 2011 to 2014. This study was initiated to determine professional development needs for these early career agents, many of whom were also members of the millennial generation. The hope was that by developing professional development programs to specifically meet the needs of these new agents we would contribute to their career longevity and success. The study consisted of a series of focus groups in which a representative sample of agents hired in the past three years provided information. What has evolved is a series of recommendations to support career longevity in a collaborative environment, taking into consideration the work-life integration and professional development needs of Extension professionals within Virginia Cooperative Extension. This document is a modified version of the original report provided to the VCE Leadership team in January 2016 and contains a summary of findings and recommendations of the study. A follow-up article (Vines et al., 2018) published by the team highlights some of the changes that were observed in the years immediately following the study.

Methods

During the summer of 2014, each of the four VCE District Directors were asked to submit a list of 12 agents from their district that were employed in the previous three years. Individuals were randomly selected from the list of 12 to provide seven participants in each district focus group. One agent failed to attend, so there was a total of 27 participants spread across four focus groups. Focus groups were conducted in-person during August and September 2014, with one session held in each Extension district.

Focus group questions were developed through use of *a priori* investigation of existing literature related to professional needs of early career and, specifically, millennial employees and further developed through review by a panel of experts within the organization (Appendix A). Areas included: (a) agent attitudes toward continuing professional education opportunities; (b) agent perceptions of organizational support and effectiveness of continuing professional education opportunities; (c) the context in which agents work and apply continuing professional education; (d) attitudes of early-career agents toward extension as a career; and (e) perceived differences between early-career agents and more experienced agents. Focus group sessions were recorded, transcribed and coded using ATLAS.ti for analysis. A total of 152 codes were identified. From these, the top 10 were identified based on number of times mentioned. A summary of quotes for each of these, including similar or overlapping codes, was developed. Each summary was reviewed by three members of the research team to identify emerging themes.

A summary of themes was shared with district directors and an associate director as basis for discussion. In the discussion the district directors were asked to share reactions and possible solutions. Notes were taken to capture the discussion. The research team and the district directors ranked the items based on perceived importance. Final recommendations were developed over the course of eight months and reflected discussion between the research team, district directors, and the Extension Leadership team. A final report was compiled by the research team and submitted to State Extension Leadership for possible action.

The study found some efforts already underway to address the professional development and organizational support needs for early career agents. An action plan for further implementation was developed. The original intent was to conduct follow-up focus groups sessions with a subset of the participants in the initial study in spring 2016 to assess their perceptions on how the recommendations and related actions were meeting identified needs and to identify areas of continuing need. Instead, district directors evaluated progress through nonformal interaction with their Extension faculty.

Key Findings and Recommendations by Themes:

The top themes identified through analysis of the data obtained by the agents and then prioritized by the research team and District Directors are as follows: career longevity, collaboration environment, work-life balance, access to specialists, job satisfaction, special situations, professional development plans, professional development associations, job expectations, professional development training preferences and mentoring. In addition, the perspectives of the differences early career agents saw between themselves and more experienced agents were included to explore possible intergenerational challenges. Findings and recommendations are provided for each of these themes.

Career Longevity

This category focused on the concerns related to the longevity of the organization, as well as the need to define a potential career path that individuals within the organization might follow. There was much discussion regarding retention rates of Extension agents. Based on data reported by District Directors the retention rate is high, although early career agents report seeing many of their contemporaries exiting the system.

The research team recommended that agent retention data be collected to identify stages at which agents may be leaving the organization. It was suggested that exit interviews be initiated to determine why people leave. In addition, there was interest in focusing on why people stay within the organization. A roundtable discussion at winter in-service of agents sharing what keeps people in their jobs and what they find most important in their work was recommended to help early career agents identify the benefits of maintaining a career in Extension. In addition, it was recommended that agents review the existing “Words of Wisdom” document to encourage them in identifying key members of the community to serve in an advisory capacity, set the expectations for office harmony, and encourage teamwork. Recommendations here also support the job satisfaction theme.

Collaboration Environment

Some agents reported feeling that partnering with agents outside their program area was discouraged. Some also found difficulty in partnering with more experienced agents because they felt the more experienced agent could not understand their perspective as a new agent. Therefore, the early career agents tended to collaborate with other new agents. However, they acknowledged that they benefit from working with more experienced agents. The early career agents wanted to play a meaningful role in program delivery when collaborating with more experienced agents. They were discouraged when given only the easy assignments in a collaborative effort. In some cases, need for greater intra-office collaboration was expressed. Although many agents indicated success in collaborating within the office and with other counties in the same program areas.

This was an area of emphasis within the Extension organization, although the study suggested that there may be a need for a clear definition of the types of collaboration that are desired. The research team suggested a survey may be beneficial to help understand where differences exist between what agents define as collaboration and the types of collaboration the organization hopes to achieve. The survey could provide a baseline for evaluation of the educational efforts in this area that are being implemented. It was also found there was an effort among the District Directors to utilize a common matrix for agent evaluation, which would include collaboration. There was a sense that data obtained from this might be useful in addressing this theme.

Work-Life Balance

Several issues were identified in this theme. Agents expressed that they often worked outside normal business hours and felt there was a lack of consistency in the way they could compensate for this in order to attend to personal business. The agents saw challenges in meeting the needs of their job, family, and, in some cases, also working to complete their master's degree. In addition, agents needed coping skills – they felt they must be everything to everybody and must be on the job 24 hours a day, seven days a week with no separation between personal and work time. Phone calls received at all hours of the day and public interactions that turned into business requests were cited as some of the major challenges.

The research team felt the real challenge in this area is helping agents develop skills that provide them with more successful integration of their professional and personal lives. There was some need for clarification of policies and expectations, especially as relates to development of a supportive work environment and professional scheduling. Administration needed to model successful work–personal life integration. The “Words of Wisdom” document which was previously developed for new agents around this topic could be reviewed and revised. In addition, this would be a good topic to include in in-service training as either a part of a role-playing exercise or more experienced agents providing their advice in a roundtable discussion.

Access to Specialists

New agents reported not knowing what to expect from specialists or what role they could play in specialists' programming. They were uncertain on how to find specialists and identify their areas of expertise, especially when looking outside their normal program area. They were also concerned about “bothering” specialists because of the heavy workloads and split appointments of the specialists. Some agents were discouraged by having specialists not respond to emails or phone calls in a timely manner. More opportunities for agents and specialists to interact were suggested to establish and build these relationships. Agents were also concerned about how to address issues in areas where VCE does not have specialists.

The team recommended completion of a document being developed to identify the roles and appropriate expectations for communication and interaction between agents and specialists.

Job Satisfaction

Agents were concerned that some of their peers might not see their position as a long-term career. The agents cited losing members of their cohort to other jobs. Concern was expressed that the position had lost some of its previous prestige, possibly because it was no longer a federal appointment. In some counties, where the new agent was the only agent or part of a small staff, they reported experiencing feelings of isolation and missed the direction that might be provided by having a more experienced agent in the office. Agents were concerned with how to handle questions when they did not know the answer. In addition, agents voiced frustration with finding things on the VCE intranet. There was some concern about whether or not the salaries were competitive with other positions requiring a master's degree. Agents in rural counties found it difficult to meet and interact with other people in their own age group. Finally, as mentioned previously in the section on work-life balance, agents felt a loss of personal space, as they saw every public encounter potentially being a business encounter, and felt a need to be accessible at all times.

There was overlap with this theme and recommendations to work to strengthen mentoring relationships between early career agents and other members of the organization. In addition, the research team suggested celebrating the experience of more tenured agents and providing online resources that marketed the benefits associated with an Extension career. Experienced agents could develop sample annual calendars for different program areas that a new agent might use for planning. Usability testing for the intranet was recommended to determine how to better position critical information for access by agents. Finally, a “survival kit” should be developed as was presented in the past to new agents. Professional Extension associations may play a role in this activity. Greater emphasis may be placed on the “Words of Wisdom” document mentioned previously.

Special Situations

This category became a catch-all for situations that may occur on a limited basis within the organization and provide challenge for the new agent, such as persistent turnover, long vacancies, following ineffective predecessors, or serving as a multi-county agent. Agents entering positions that have experienced a lot of turnover have experienced animosity from the county toward the Extension program, loss of faith in Extension from volunteer leadership, decreased morale among remaining more experienced agents. They have difficulty getting back into schools, building relationships with stakeholders, communicating the role and purpose of the position and organization to the county and overall, a difficulty in establishing their reputation and building a program. They feel that county funding for the position is more threatened as a result of the turnover. Agents in multi-county situations report finding challenges in providing equal coverage and feeling successful. Agents express concern that these situations may be bad for the agent as well as for the Extension organization.

Because of the specialized nature of these situations, it was felt that these items would be most effectively addressed by the program team, District Director, mentor, and Extension Leadership Council in situations where they occur. They were likely to require greater allocation of resources, including time and energy from all involved. Leadership training and providing agents with opportunities for role playing may provide agents with skills to improve their success in handling these situations.

Professional Development Plans

Confusion was evident regarding continuing professional education through use of a professional development plan. Most agents equated professional development primarily with academic degrees. There appeared to be no planning for professional development training at the agent level. Agents expressed interest in having someone who could guide them through this process, possibly as part of their annual evaluations. Agents wanted more structure associated with professional development in the form of certificates, continuing education units, and a process outlined for achieving these. They suggested that clear pathways should be developed for people wishing to achieve degrees beyond the master’s level. Agents needed support while learning, including a clear understanding from the local level of the value of professional development to the county and organization. There was also a need for improved communication of educational opportunities that exist and funding sources. Agents would also like to see more training provided for local unit administrative assistants (UAAs). Questions existed around policies related to completing professional development during office hours.

The committee recommended that a task force be developed to address issues raised in this area and provide leadership in instituting professional development plans within the organization. The electronic portfolio system that will be part of the new University CMS (Canvas) might be utilized to provide access and accountability for completion of orientation processes aimed at improving competencies of early career agents. Professional development plans should include both non-degree and degree opportunities. Mentors may be helpful in guiding new employees through the process.

Professional Development Associations

Agents expressed confusion on the roles of professional associations. Some expressed negative impressions created by feeling forced to join or encountering meetings where there appeared to be a lot of disagreement and miscommunication. In general, agents did not appear to be aware of the benefits of joining professional associations.

The committee recommended that findings in this area be shared with the professional organizations within VCE for their use.

Job Expectations

Challenges were presented related to needing clearer understanding of the number of hours associated with the job. Some agents felt the time commitment was underestimated during the hiring process. Also, agents report encountering conflicting mandates around work hours from VCE and local government and difficulty in knowing how to handle these.

It was suggested that concerns raised in this area be incorporated into Extension in-service training through role-playing exercises or be incorporated into a roundtable discussion. In addition, it was recommended that recommendations for dealing with problematic relationships with elected officials be incorporated into the “Words of Wisdom” document.

Professional Development Training Preferences

Agents expressed preference for hands-on, interactive training with discussion in a face-to-face environment. However, they recognized that time and travel constraints often required more materials and trainings be provided in an online environment. When travel was required, agents wanted the information presented to be essential and to be presented in a prompt manner. If on campus, they would like to see campus resources and facilities utilized. Many suggested that the intranet needs to be reorganized to improve usability. Agents would like to see webinars catalogued in a location where they can access them as needed. Some agents like video-conferencing because it encourages them to work as groups, but see the travel to reach a system as a downside. Agents see disparity in available program funds across districts and program areas and are not always aware of funds that might be available and how to access those funds.

The development of a professional development calendar easily accessible within Outlook was recommended to coordinate training opportunities throughout the system. It was suggested that RFPs for winter in-service encourage submitters to use appropriate teaching methods for the content being delivered. Faculty who were exploring new teaching methods were encouraged to provide presentations that showcase their experience with the teaching method. It was also suggested that a small group might be developed to provide guidelines on appropriate teaching methods.

Mentoring

Agents felt there was need for more training of mentor agents. In addition, time needed to be allocated for new agents to work with the mentors. Agents felt mentor agents should be just one step ahead of the entering agent in the transition process --- rather than being paired with a 15-year veteran agent — so mentors remembered what it was like to be a new agent, had a more similar experience as a new agent, and, therefore, could provide more relevant and effective guidance to the new agent.

Many options were discussed related to improving the mentoring process for early career agents. A new process was introduced in 2014 where District Program Leadership Teams (DPLT) monitor the mentoring process and train mentors. The consensus of the team was that multiple mentors are preferred over a single

mentor. The team also recommended considering mentoring training, mentoring agreements, and mentoring awards to emphasize the importance and potential value mentoring contributes to the organization.

Early Career Agents versus More Experienced Agents

The primary ways in which the early career agents saw themselves as different than more experienced agents were in their interest in having a family, work hours, and preference for a more active teaching approach. The agents felt more experienced agents may have given up kids, spouses, and pets for their careers and they did not want to do that. The agents valued the experience and knowledge the more experienced agents have of Extension and clientele. However, they were concerned that more experienced agents might need to evaluate and revise program activities from year to year, paying attention to clientele needs and learning preferences.

Much of this was addressed by the research team when dealing with the work-personal life integration. This was the focus of the Diversity Fellows. They have provided training across the state for all agent faculty and UAAs.

References

Vines, K. A., Cletzer, D. A., Westfall-Rudd, D., Lambur, M., Hunnings, J., & Vines, N. T. (2018). Identifying Needs and Implementing Organizational Change to Improve Retention of Early-Career Agents. *Journal of Extension*, 56(1). <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol56/iss1/23/>

Appendix A - Extension Professional Development Needs Assessment Focus Group Protocol (IRB #14-661)

The focus group moderator will follow a standard protocol for each session that includes:

- Welcome and opening remarks
- Informed consent form review
- Establish guidelines
- Questions and answers period
- Wrap-Up

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS

Welcome, and thank you all for being here today to share with us your thoughts and opinions regarding your continuing professional education as an early-career Extension agent.

I am _____, and I will facilitate our discussion group this evening. We are going to focus our discussion today on your experiences with professional education, which includes: participation, opportunities available, relevance, delivery methods, etc. My task is to keep our conversation going, and to keep us on time. I also want to introduce _____ and _____, who are here as note takers. She/he will be taking notes to help ensure we don't miss any details, and may, at times, be asked to summarize the group's comments to ensure we are effectively capturing your comments.

CONSENT FORM REVIEW

[Hand each person an informed consent form] Remind group members that they received the consent form in the email inviting them to participate in the focus group. Ask them to take a moment to review. Solicit questions and comments, and address any concerns. *[Collect consent forms; provide a blank copy for their records if requested.]*

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- We want an atmosphere of respect for everyone's opinions, and where everyone has a chance to speak. Let's talk one at a time, and speak loud and clear.
- We would like to spend no more than 90 minutes in this focus group meeting. We have a series of pre-formed questions, but also will leave time for your suggestions. This may cause me to occasionally interrupt you to keep the discussion focused and on track.
- Please do not use your name or names of others during our conversations. You can, however, go by your initials.
- We ask you to please be as honest with us as you can when answering questions.
- There are no right or wrong responses to the questions; we just want your thoughts and opinions.
- If you have a question about the process at any time, please do not hesitate to stop and ask questions.
- If you need to go to the restroom, please feel free to do so, but we would appreciate if you go one at a time. *[State where the facility is located]*
- Please silence or turn off all electronic devices. We sincerely appreciate your attention to this focus group.
- We request that everyone respect the group by not repeating what is said during this focus group outside of this experience.

- This discussion will be recorded with a digital audio recording device to ensure we capture all of your thoughts and suggestions. We will not link your identity to any of your comments.
- Lastly, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to and you can stop your participation at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

Focus Group Questions

Warm-Up (15 Minutes)

Let's quickly go around the circle and share a few facts so that you all can understand the make-up of our group:

How long have you worked in Virginia Cooperative Extension?

What is your discipline (Agriculture, 4-H, Horticulture, Family & Consumer Science, etc.)?

I-Assess the Attitudes of Early-Career Agents Toward Continuing Professional Education Opportunities

1. What continuing professional education topics or areas would you like to participate in, either through in-service training or graduate courses? (i.e. Achieving work/life balance, Conducting Evaluations, Managing Stress, Developing Survey Instruments, Using Technology)
2. What are your preferred methods of participating in continuing professional education?
 - a. What experiences have you had with these methods that make you prefer/avoid certain methods?
3. What barriers do you feel prevent you from participating in continuing professional education in-service trainings, or taking graduate courses? (i.e. time away from work, time away from home, travel, support, content)

II-Describe Early-Career Agents' Perceptions of Organizational Support and Effectiveness of Continuing Professional Education Opportunities

1. How do you feel you are supported by the Extension system in your new role as agent?
 - a. In what areas do you feel less supported/more supported?
2. What are areas in which you have received support/training and resources?
3. Have you begun thinking about your continuing professional education plan?
 - a. Have you identified someone to help with this plan?
 - i. What role do they play in the organization?
 - ii. Was this person formally or informally identified?
 - b. What role have your respective professional associations played in providing continuing professional education?
 - i. Are you aware of professional development organizations in the state? Are you encouraged to join?
4. How do continuing professional education opportunities contribute to your experience in your position?

III-Describe the Context in Which Agents Work and Apply Continuing Professional Education

1. Do any of you work in a context in which there have been significant cuts to personnel in recent years and are now in a time of rebuilding?
 - a. Please describe your situation?
 - b. How does this influence your view of your career, work, your program, the organization, etc.?

- c. Do you feel that the turnover in personnel has affected you? If so, how?
 - d. What do you see as the long-term effects of turnover on the Extension program?
 - e. What effect can continuing professional education have on the issue of turnover?
- 2. Are any of you collaborating with other agents in your area on project?
 - a. Please describe activities, challenges, benefits of this collaboration?
 - b. What continuing professional education topics are needed to support agents in this area?
 - c. What technologies do you use in collaborating with others? (ex. File sharing, web conferencing, etc.)
 - d. What technologies would be useful in collaborating with others?

IV-Assess the Attitudes of Early-Career Agents' Toward Extension as a Career

- 1. How does your current position fit into your long-term career goals?
 - a. What challenges sometimes make it difficult for you to think of this position as a long-term career?
 - b. What factors would make you consider this position as a long-term career?
- 2. Do you hope to move to different roles within the organization? (other counties, district director, administrator, specialist, unit coordinator, other program areas)

V-Assess Perceived Differences Between Early-Career Agents and Experienced Agents

- 1. In what ways do you see yourself different than more experienced agents? (i.e. communication methods, office hours, commitment to family/work, preferred work space, use of technology, social media. etc.)
- 2. In what ways do you see yourself as being similar to more experienced agents?

Wrap-Up

We are now at the end of the focus group questions. We want to sincerely thank you for your time and input. If you have any questions or final comments, please feel to state them now.

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