Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings- Competencies

Authored by Karen A. Vines, Assistant Professor and Extension Continuing Professional Education Specialist, Agricultural, Leadership, & Community Education, Virginia Tech; Sarah Baughman, Research Associate Professor, Virginia Cooperative Extension; Neil Clark, Southampton County Extension Agent, Virginia Cooperative Extension; Cynthia Gregg, Brunswick County Extension Agent, Virginia Cooperative Extension; Jane Henderson, Amelia County Extension Agent, Virginia Cooperative Extension; Lonnie Johnson, Associate Director for Field Operations and Administration, Virginia Cooperative Extension; Ruth Wallace, Buckingham County Extension Agent, Virginia Cooperative Extension

Introduction and Background

This publication includes findings of focus groups conducted with Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) agents and specialists in spring 2021 related to competencies. This area of inquiry was one of four categories included in the study of mid-career agents and specialists, between three and seven years of service, to evaluate their needs at this stage in their career. Findings associated with competencies address three of the four objectives of this project: 1) Identify career-related challenges experienced by VCE professionals in years three to seven in their careers, 2) Identify opportunities for change in the work environment or professional development programming that increase support and retention for Extension professionals in this time, and 3) Identify unique and shared needs for Extension agents and specialists.

An overview of the project and demographics of the study are included in an earlier publication, Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Methodology and Demographics (Include link to demographics publication). The remaining categories, 1) Sources of stress; 2) Role of needs assessment in work; and 3) Mentoring and support, will be linked from this publication as they become available.

Methods

Data collected from the focus groups related to five critical competencies for Extension faculty identified by Berven et al. (2020). These are communication, educational design, leadership, professionalism, and subject matter knowledge. These competencies were used to assist focus group participants in identifying areas in which they felt most competent, methods used to attain that competency, and areas where they felt least competent and needed support to achieve greater competence. Participants provided recommendations on how VCE could support their growth in these areas. Additionally, participants were asked to identify other competencies they felt were important.

A complete methodology of the project is included in the earlier publication, Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Methodology and Demographics (Include link to demographics publication).

Findings

Overall, and when considered by their roles as agents or specialists, participants in the focus groups reported feeling least competent in educational design and most competent in subject matter knowledge (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of agent and specialist responses related to areas in which they feel least and most competent.

Competency	Least Competent		Most Competent	
	Agents	Specialists	Agents	Specialists
Educational Design	15	4	5	2
Communication	5	3	8	1
Subject Matter Knowledge	5	0	10	8
Leadership	2	1	4	0
Professionalism	1	2	1	0

The following sections highlight the participants' responses related to the competencies of communication, educational design, leadership, professionalism, and subject matter knowledge. A general definition is provided for each of these. Challenges and opportunities for VCE support associated with the competency are also offered. Similarities and differences between the responses from the agents and specialists are also presented. In addition, reactions of research team members are included as they reflected on what was presented by the focus group participants.

Educational Design

Educational design was the area where both agents and specialists felt they were least competent. This can be a very broad area encompassing program development and evaluation. It may also include curriculum development. Educational design also relates to competencies of communication and professionalism in terms of presentation skills and making sure that the program being delivered is appropriate to the audience.

Agents identified challenges in developing educational programming that connects to their "broad audience across multiple discipline areas". Connecting youth curriculum with school standardized testing criteria was a challenge for some youth agents in marketing programming for inclusion as school enrichment. Another area of challenge was in the area of evaluation, both in terms of the agent's performance evaluation as well as in program outcomes. One agent shared that the concept of backward planning, developing educational activities based on intended outcomes, was challenging. Program tradition is yet another challenge in regards to use of emerging technologies. One agent said she was unable to explore the use of different educational methods because "4-H is still very much tied to the traditional way of doing things and so any aberration from that is seen as a little bit strange, and, at times, not as valued." Another agent spoke about not getting experience in educational design because they were primarily adapting canned programs that had been used previously. One agent shared they were not comfortable with program implementation as a result of not having enough training experiences due to the pandemic.

Specialists spoke about balancing time for educational design and a sense that being skilled in this area was not valued in tenure reviews. Others spoke of challenges in changing delivery methods to virtual environments as a result of COVID. One specialist said "So, I guess I've never really received that type of training, but I haven't necessarily sought it out, either." Another specialist shared that educational design was not part of his formal training but that he had done a lot of professional development in the area. Other specialists talked about using presentation tools, such as clickers, as a way in which they like to interact with their audiences. However, they did not find these tools readily available for their use with Extension audiences.

Agents would like to take audiences beyond basic knowledge levels. They want to do more than just providing information. Agents would also like to increase their skillset to reach different types of learners and new

audiences. One agent said, "being one of the older mid-career folks, I think I really need to work on developing

my use of technology with the programs I conduct." Specialists also expressed interest in keeping abreast of changes in educational design. Agents receive support in educational program design from prior work experiences as high school teachers, adult educators in GED and hospital programs. Many also learn from other agents, specialists, or administrators and by trial and error. Another agent had an education major, which covered not only educational design, but also communications. One specialist focused on educational design throughout her Ph.D. program. One of the agents has a group of "teacher friends" that provide support in this area. VCE in-service training and self-study were also identified as sources of educational design support.

Agents felt there were many opportunities they might use to improve their educational design competencies. Several expressed interest in basic training. One agent said, "I think anything that they can do that would kind of start from the beginning, and then we all grow from there would be great." Others suggested more in-service offerings. One agent suggested, "a longer more focused educational series on strengthening educational design, so perhaps like a four-week course or even longer than that maybe where we're almost thinking, like the College level course in developing educational design." Agents expressed a need for training that was more practical in nature and began at a more basic level to help with evaluation. Another agent suggested more programming similar to the well water clinics which they described as being well established and defined. Professional development associations, networking, and shadowing other agents were also identified as opportunities for growth. Another agent suggested that special programming for new agents might be helpful, especially related to standards of learning (SOLs) for Virginia schools. Refresher courses on educational design were also recommended. Agents also expressed interest in written materials they might read on their own during their work time.

A specialist suggested the materials related to educational design , be placed online or on Canvas sites to be accessible while on the road and in the field. They also expressed interest in in-service training and short courses. Another specialist shared,

> I think, on the front-end orientations of new folks to the system, [they] could actually make it pretty clear about what is the role of educational design, what is the role of pedagogy in Cooperative Extension. I mean you know the term, you're Extension educators, but there's never, like, what that actually means. And particularly for folks that may have an interface - like before I interfaced with Extension, you know I did not think of Extension as an education source. It serves as a resource, so technical assistance. I never thought of Extension as education. Just because my own background and thinking about the education piece as the more formalized and so the whole non-formal-informal thing is something that I think VCE could do to help increase awareness. And then specifically offer non-credit workshops and things like that. Extension education is designed to help people who don't have that exposure formally into, maybe how to incorporate reflections and practice-based learning, too, as a way to help people learn how to speed up there, because you know we've all been doing this in some way in our careers. But I think being able to have a formal process for capturing and understanding what we know how to do. It is taking some of those innate educational design experiences that we've had, and it's a real learning.

The research team emphasized the different levels at which educational programming must be delivered to meet the wide range of audiences that Cooperative Extension serves. They commented that focus group participants were surprised at the amount of time required to provide a successful educational program, going from identifying community needs through program evaluation. One research team member commented that after being around for a while, they had forgotten what it was like to learn to plan programs. Several commented on the changes in technology that they use in educational programming. Yet another member of the team spoke about how their teaching had changed from a more teacher- to a more student-centered approach over the course of their career.

Based on the discussion with the agents and specialists, the research team agreed that initial educational design needs to be provided originally that is basic in nature. Additional training can then be provided to build on the basic training. There was a lot of discussion about how to provide a practical application component to the training, whether it be through a cohort of students, colleagues, mentors, or partnering agents or specialists. Members of the team found interactions across program areas and Extension regions were beneficial for them in

learning to try new approaches and reach new audiences. There was also interest in providing modular content that trainees might access for follow-up after the course. The research team also suggested that all training should be widely publicized so that faculty might participate in it to receive a refresher.

Communication

Some agents and specialists identified communication as the area in which they were least competent. Communication was expressed as an outgrowth of relationships both inside and outside VCE. Agents spoke about challenges in keeping up with changes in delivery methods. One agent said, "You know, our traditional way of reaching people with newsletters and things like that – we don't do much anymore. So, having to change – that is a little hard." Another agent spoke about challenges in shifting audiences and talking to different age groups from six to 80 years old. She said "It's just that's been my struggle recently, is how to communicate with a very diverse group of ages and communication preferences in a way that has been effective." One special group that was singled out was elected officials and how to best communicate with them at the local, state, and federal levels. One specialist identified communication as the area where she had the least exposure and training.

An area of challenge associated with communication repeated by several agents was the ability to communicate for fundraising and grant-writing. One agent said, "Being an Extension agent is a lot like running your own business as a sole proprietor and you are truly, you know, building the business – you're marketing it, you're funding it, and you're doing all those things, and it can be a real challenge and be overwhelming because the funding isn't always readily available for a lot of agents." Another spoke of challenges associated with moving to virtual programming as a result of COVID and being able to reach some of the older clients. The agent said, "Just this push for technology and push for virtual meetings has been really hard on them. I feel like I've kind of pivoted and targeted towards it very easily, but reaching them and having them have some kind of buy-in has been really hard. So, trying to get information out to that group has been really difficult."

The challenge of communicating across different stakeholder groups and using the proper methods for the appropriate audience was echoed in the specialist focus groups. One specialist stated,

> But I also just think there's so many different levels of communication that you have to know how to communicate with stakeholders. You have to know how to communicate effectively with staff at different levels, you have to know how to do this with funders so there's just so many different types of communication that it can feel overwhelming........Like I took courses on pedagogy in school as well, not a lot of them, but I don't think I took anything beyond public health speaking, you know or just public speaking, or whatever it is you take when you're a freshman. I do think it's harder to learn how to send effective emails and get responses or when it's not appropriate to email, and when you have to call and who doesn't want phone calls and who wants a text message. And who doesn't like a text message and wants you to call them? It's just, it's things you have to learn on the job, I think that it can be, it can be a little overwhelming.

One specialist pointed out that they must also be conscious of the differences in presenting content in a refereed scientific journal versus talking to growers. Another specialist echoed the challenge in keeping up with communication technology, especially as they age. They said, "The challenge for me in the realm of communication is the ever-changing technology of communication. So, keeping up with that, and you know as you get older it gets harder to learn new things. I mean I don't want to be stereotypical but you get set in your ways. You've learned this and to have to learn something else, now that kind of thing that's challenging just keeping up with the pace of change, and particularly in this realm."

Colleagues in the office, from office assistants to other agents, were credited as providing support for agents learning how to communicate more effectively using social media and or developing videos or virtual programming. Past experience, in the classroom, in degree programs, and on the job were credited with increasing presentation skills in both agents and specialists. Leadership in-service, participating in VALOR, and practice were identified as supports in tailoring delivery and messaging to improve interpersonal communication for

agents. Specialists credited senior Extension specialists and agents giving them opportunities to practice presentation skills with different audiences, increasing their confidence, and providing feedback. Training provided during winter in-service was also noted as beneficial to the specialists.

The communication areas identified by the agents where they need support were grant-writing, marketing, and virtual programming. One agent suggested possibly having a marketing or grant-writing expert in each Extension district. Others suggested any kind of hands-on training so people could implement what they are learning and learn from each other. One specialist explained how she has her graduate students and technicians evaluate her presentation skills using her "um factor." Support through communications experts that can be on hand to answer questions and through the winter in-service conference was seen as beneficial.

Subject Matter Knowledge

Subject matter knowledge was an area in which both groups of professionals identified as feeling most competent, although some agents also found it to be an area where they were least competent. The reasons agents shared for feeling least competent in this area were the breadth of their fields and roles and shifting programmatic focus from life skills to STEM education. Agents spoke of having to turn down community requests or being unable to provide strong responses to random questions during school presentations due to not feeling as competent in this area. They also expressed challenges in identifying the best people to assist them in a timely manner.

Agents and specialists emphasized gaining competence in their subject matter through formal education. Agents responded that they received ongoing support in this area through in-service training. One agent noted the need for on-demand reading or other professional development that she might use on her own in the office. Similarly, another agent keeps current in his subject matter through a review of scholarly literature. Other agents emphasized the role of peers in providing subject matter support. Supervisors, specialists, and community partners also assisted in this way. Finally, one educator expressed interest in being able to continue taking courses after achieving her master's degree.

Agents and specialists both see an opportunity for growth in this area. One agent said "One of the things that has helped me in this job is that I always get an opportunity to learn something new." Another agent said "If you have subject matter knowledge, you soon realize how much there is you don't know so it's constantly running on that treadmill of trying to catch up to the latest information." Agents see professional development and in-service training as well as networking with Extension specialists and community sources of expertise as opportunities to continue their growth. Specialists also used self-study and conferences, and reading popular press to identify issues in the commonwealth and country.

One of the specialists also spoke about the need for continual growth and looking for mentors or collaborators to aid in continual growth. She said, "I've been learning the same crops and talking about them for the last eight or ten years now. What surprises me is there's so much more to learn in the area of subject matter knowledge. I have developed competency in this area working with people who have similar interests and learning from them. Seeking mentorship, inviting people who are sort of open and willing to work in the subject area of my work and collaborating with them so that's been really helpful...just keeping an open sourcing system of working." Both agents and specialists spoke about how COVID-19 has also driven subject matter growth in new areas to address related challenges faced by clientele.

Specialists identified grants and fees as resources that could help support their continued growth through conferences and workshops. Startup funds helped do this early in their careers. One specialist was completing a PhD, which he expected to contribute in this regard. Online courses, VCE, and outside conferences were also emphasized as supports in continued subject matter growth.

Leadership

One member of the research team remarked that "There wasn't a specialist that felt competent in leadership." One agent who felt least competent in leadership felt there were barriers that prevented her growth in this area. She

said, "And I really feel like working in Extension and seeing the way things are done that there's nowhere to go once you come in as an agent. You can get to a senior agent. And that's it. I feel like any levels above that – there are gatekeepers, and they don't give you enough information to get to that next level." Another agent expressed frustration in obtaining a leadership position. She said,

> And unless you are part of the insider trading team, you don't even really have a voice to talk that way about what's coming. And if you bring it up, they slam you with a process that is never really, truly made clear, which kind of stalls out your ability to lead in any one direction. And that's very frustrating.

> I have a leadership position with an organization within Extension, but what I have learned is when I apply skills and knowledge from other areas outside of Extension for leadership here, I realized that that's not the way they want you to function. They just want you to be either a puppet or a yes man and not to ruffle the feathers of the people who pull the strings. And that's it, and it's almost like a ceremonial thing and not an actual thing, and that part is very frustrating.

> Being in a position to lead, having the knowledge to lead, but those missing pieces that are part of Extension, I feel like they only give you enough to train somebody else but not enough to be really effective. And that's unfortunate because it's hard to lead when you don't have all of the knowledge and understanding and it's almost like they hoard that and give you just enough to get you to where they want you to be, but not as far as you could be and that handicaps you for being as effective as a leader as you can be. And so, it's really frustrating to have to go around to so many different people to learn to find out the bits and pieces that you really need to know in order to be as successful as you could be.

A specialist expressed that she would like to develop leadership skills to better bring outside organizations together when "there are a lot of personalities and emotions that run high" to share resources and better meet community needs.

Agents spoke of developing this competency through different types of training. The Faculty Leadership Development Program was identified as well as county programs and work with specialists. Experience in leadership roles also contributed, as did work in professional associations.

Sources of support contributing to future growth in this competency are coworkers from multiple disciplines in shadowing experiences, virtual and in-person training, and pursuing advancing responsibility through administrative roles in the VCE organization. Professional associations were seen as a way to develop leadership and see what is being done outside Virginia. One agent highlighted the need to diversify representation in leadership positions within VCE to help other diverse individuals recognize their ability to move into higher roles. One agent spoke about opportunities for individuals in leadership roles to delegate in order to help others develop. She said,

> People who are in a leadership position get that opportunity, but I feel like there's limited opportunities and I often see the same people in the same roles across lots of different things..........I feel like I have the ability to be a leader, even though I'm only in year three, . . like every office only has one unit coordinator (UC). Does the UC have to do all the roles of the UC, or can that be delegated so that there are opportunities for other people to step up? Because I would be willing to. I've just never been asked and I don't know what opportunities there are.

Another agent spoke about there being a need for clarification of roles. She observed "A lot of confusion about the jobs and the roles of some of these leadership positions within the state and even within the district. There's so much crossover. It's like, which middle manager do I go to for this event?"

Professionalism

The research team defined professionalism in terms of dress, communication, and community connection. Appropriate attire was described as being appropriate to the situation, whether being at a conference, working

cattle, or teaching archery. They talked about the level of confidence that connected to being dressed professionally for the situation. Professionalism in communication is related to identifying the appropriate mode of contact for the client or clientele group, whether it be in person, by telephone, email, or text. Often this is determined by simply asking how people wish to be addressed. Community connection means being out in the community, interacting with the community in general, and understanding the assets and needs of that community.

One of the specialists talked about the challenge of interpretation with professionalism. She said,

> I think professionalism is one of those that you put an asterisk by. Because it means different things to different people and so having worked in several different Cooperative Extension systems, I feel like professionalism is defined differently. Just depending who your Extension director is, your bosses, like who's in charge, and so I feel like sometimes it's just super murky. So, I don't know how to feel like I'm competent in it, because I'm not really sure what it means all the time. And I think that's the challenge and I think there's also a generational challenge of what professionalism means. So, what do you do when you know you have an older generation, maybe more in charge, but then younger generations coming up – like, this is what professional means.

One agent spoke of gaining competency in professionalism through her work and observations in different professional settings. Another agent expressed a need for more support in this area, especially for new Extension professionals. She said,

> I was gonna say professionalism. Professionalism is an area that could really be developed, especially being that so many of us come in from so many different areas, fields, backgrounds. Some have no work experience and are working in a professional setting. Coming in straight out of college and they just don't know, and so things come up a lot of times and they don't know how to deliver critiques. They don't know the proper way to address a person of a certain age bracket or generation. And then there's a certain decorum that we need to maintain across social media platforms. That is also a part of being professional and having a complete and total professional appearance across all of these different media things where people know we work for Extension. I think we do need a good degree of that.

However, a specialist expressed the need to develop clear expectations for professionalism. She said, VCE should "have clear expectations that can be as clear as possible that are not able to be misinterpreted, which is super hard when it comes to professionalism, but also holding those standards and continuing to provide professional development around professionalism, because it is important in our system and so making sure, a lot of times I think it's a backburner topic, and it really should be front and center topic because it's how we come off to our stakeholders and communities."

Other Competencies

Other competencies that were identified by the focus group participants included: budget and fiscal management, collaboration, communicating with elected officials, fundraising, grant writing, inclusion and equity, marketing, performance evaluation reporting, solving issues across disciplines, time management, and work-life balance.

References

Berven, B. C., Franck, K. L., & Hastings, S. W. (2020). Investing in Extension's Workforce: Assessing and Developing Critical Competencies of New Agents. *Journal of Extension, 58*(2). https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol58/iss2/28/

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