

## **Identifying challenges of Early Career Agents in Virginia Cooperative Extension**

### **Introduction**

Virginia Cooperative Extension hired 100 new agents from 2011 to 2014. This study was initiated to determine the continuing professional education needs for these early career agents. The research team worked with Extension administration to develop a series of recommendations to support career longevity in a collaborative environment.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Extension educators serve an important role in providing engagement of Land Grant Universities. Extension professionals are expected to begin their careers with the knowledge and skills necessary to develop and facilitate educational programs and experiences for youth and adults in local communities (American Association for Agricultural Education, 2001). Early career extension agents have different competencies and continuing professional education needs than their more experienced counterparts (Benge, Harder & Carter, 2011; Brodeur et al., 2011; Hibberd, Blomeke, & Lillard, 2013; Smith, Hoag, & Peel, 2011).

### **Methodology**

A total of twenty-seven participants participated in four focus group sessions. To identify potential participants the research team requested that the four district directors each identify those agents in their district who had been hired within the last three years. The research team then randomly selected and invited seven potential participants from each of the four districts. As agents declined the team invited the next individuals on the randomly generated list until there were six or seven participants in each of the four focus groups. Focus group questions were developed through use of a priori investigation of existing literature and further developed through review by a panel of experts. Focus group sessions were recorded, transcribed and coded for analysis. A summary of quotes was developed for each theme and reviewed by three members of the research team to identify key areas for recommendation.

### **Findings**

Findings reported relate to career longevity, collaboration environment, work-life balance, access to extension specialists, job expectations, professional development plans, mentoring, perceived similarities/differences between early career and more experienced agents

**Career Longevity:** Issues of career longevity related to concerns agents have when they see people who were in their cohort at new agent training leave Extension.

**Collaboration Environment:** Early career agents expressed challenges in partnering with more senior agents or others outside their program areas.

**Work-life Balance:** Work-personal life balance issues related to agents meeting personal needs while working long hours. Agents expressed a lack of separation between their professional and personal lives.

**Access to Extension Specialists:** Agents expressed challenges in identifying, knowing what to expect and how to initiate interaction with specialists in developing their programs.

**Job Expectations:** Agents shared concerns about isolation in rural communities and salary levels, in addition to the number of hours and amount of travel required to do the job.

**Professional Development Plans:** There was a great deal of confusion among participants related to the expectation to have professional development plans.

**Mentoring:** Mentoring expectations were unclear to early career agents who felt that their mentors either were uncertain of how to approach mentoring or lacked the time to address it appropriately.

**Differences between early career agents and more experienced agents:** The primary differences that early career agents perceived were their interest in having a family and time to enjoy them and interest in utilizing more active teaching methods.

### Conclusions

Immediately following data analysis, the summary was shared with district directors and a program leader as basis for discussion. Their feedback was utilized by the research team in setting priorities. Recommendations were submitted to the State Extension Leadership for possible incorporation. These actions have been or are in the process of being implemented:

**Career Longevity:** The manner in which employee retention data is being collected will be improved. Exit interviews are also being emphasized to identify reasons agents leave the organization.

**Work-Life Balance:** Need for clarification of policies and expectations related to providing a supportive work environment that recognizes the need for early career agents to develop skills in successful work-personal life integration.

**Access to Specialists:** A document is being developed that will identify roles and expectations for communication and interaction between agents and specialists.

**Professional Development Plans:** A task force is being established to develop a formalized professional development program in which agents will establish goals and develop a plan to attain both non-degree and degree opportunities that connects to performance evaluation processes.

**Job Expectations:** Celebrate the experience of more tenured agents and provide online resources that market the benefits associated with an Extension career. Develop an annual calendar to assist an agent in planning their first year. Develop a “survival kit” for new agents.

**Mentoring:** A new process is being introduced which will have District Program Leadership Teams overseeing a year-long mentoring process for new agents using multiple mentors and providing mentoring training.

**Differences between early career more experienced agents:** A diversity program is currently focusing on intergenerational issues related to work environment and clientele interaction in system-wide training.

**Collaboration Environment:** The committee suggested the development of a system-wide survey to establish baseline data of agent needs for skills in collaboration and

development of collaboration strategies. This recommendation has been tabled for future consideration.

### Recommendations

This study has been instrumental in providing insight into identification of areas for organizational improvement in order to strengthen relationships and provide enhanced skills and experiences for early career agents. The responsiveness of the leadership to make changes indicates a desire to meet the needs of these agents while also highlighting the flexibility of the organization to address needs that have evolved as a result of changes in the work force. Future study will be needed to evaluate the implementation of the recommendations.

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