

Lessons Learned from the Previous Generation of Agricultural and Extension Educators

Candy Grant, Rachel Hendrix, Kirk Swortzel, and Carla B. Jagger
Mississippi State University

Lloyd Ricks Watson, Mail Stop 9745
Mississippi State, MS 39762
(662-325-7834)
crg132@msstate.edu
reh183@msstate.edu
KSwortzel@humansci.msstate.edu
cjagger@humansci.msstate.edu

Lessons Learned from the Previous Generation of Agricultural and Extension Educators

Introduction

There are currently challenges such as budget shortages, government mandates regarding teacher accountability, and retention rates in the field of agricultural and extension education (Lemons, Brashears, Burris, Meyers, & Price, 2015; Marx, Smith, Smalley, & Miller, 2017). While there is no clear-cut solution to these problems, it is beneficial to current and future agricultural and extension educators to understand how the previous generation was affected by changes in the field, and how they overcame obstacles to ultimately achieve career satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework

Herzberg's (1966) Motivation-Hygiene Theory provides a framework for understanding the motivating factors of retention and career satisfaction in the field of agricultural and extension education (Foor & Cano, 2011). Central to the theory are motivating factors such as how stimulating the vocation is, its level of accountability, personal fulfillment through awards and accomplishments, and personal development (Strong & Harder, 2009). Additionally, career satisfaction level can be determined through personal oral reflections (Lambert, Sorensen, & Elliott, 2014). This reflective action aligns with Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning (1984), which posits that humans gain knowledge and meaning after reflecting upon the learning experiences of themselves and others.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe the career experiences of retired agricultural and extension education (AEE) professionals, to provide a historical view of the evolution of AEE. The research objectives of this study were to describe retired agricultural and extension educators' retrospective of their experiences in AEE, and to describe changes to the AEE profession based on agricultural and extension educators' retrospective. A narrative approach was utilized for data collection and aligns with the suggested approach for analyzing the oral history of people, which focuses on personal reflections and events in their lives (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Four retired agricultural educators and two retired extension educators (males, $n=4$; females, $n=2$) with a range of nine to 38 years of service ($M = 25.17$ years) were interviewed to fulfill assignment requirements for a Historical Foundations of Agricultural and Extension Education course offered in the summer 2017 semester at Mississippi State University.

Student-selected interviewees were asked a series of predetermined questions, which enabled participants to tell their personal stories. The questions were designed to allow the interviewees to reach into their past experiences, explain how AEE has evolved over time, and finally provide advice for future professionals. This underscores Cronon's belief that oral stories in narrative form are essential to understanding the past through "the reality of human experience" (Cronon, 1992, p. 1369). Summaries of the interviews were analyzed for broad themes that addressed the research objectives. Each theme was then broken down into subcomponents that addressed specific, inherent topics.

Findings/Conclusions

Four themes emerged from analysis of interviews: backgrounds and career paths, observed changes in agricultural and extension education, views toward the future, and personal legacies

left upon retirement. Personal background was an important commonality between the interviewees. Most received rural upbringings, and the majority were influenced by their childhood experiences as 4-H or FFA members. All demonstrated a passion for agriculture in general, with many entering their educator positions already skilled in fields such as horticulture, forestry, and livestock management. Specific career paths were shaped largely by various societal and political influences such as segregation, gender expectations, governmental mandates, educational opportunities, and emerging needs in the agriculture industry.

Over their careers interviewees observed many changes to the agriculture industry. Most noted the increasing role of technology in agriculture, which ranged from computers in the classroom, GMOs in the lab, and mechanical equipment in the field. They also discussed changes in the focus of agriculture education, noting a distinct evolution from the farm-centered curricula of yesterday to the extensive and broad-based opportunities of today. Other related topics were the role of women and minorities in agriculture, the development of new classes and workshops, and the retention of new audiences. Less positive changes to agriculture education included governmental mandates, loss of extended contracts, increased responsibilities, decreased budgets, employee turnover, and unpleasant or ineffective supervisors.

Interviewees also expressed several ideas in common regarding the future of agriculture education. The primary call was for a greater awareness of agriculture amongst the general population. Many noted that the public often sees their work as “just farming,” and that the modernized, progressive topics are ignored or misunderstood. They also expressed a need for better relations with both the government and the business sectors, two entities upon which American agriculture heavily relies. Interviewees envisioned a more technology-based future, although they noted the importance of appreciating the ways of the past.

Finally, the interviewees were asked to reflect upon their time in AEE and describe the legacy that they hoped to leave. Overall, they stressed the importance of building positive relationships with coworkers, students, and clients, and of maintaining a habit of continuous improvement across both personal and educational fronts. Their role as educators was meant not only to help others by sharing agricultural information, but to shape lives and communities by making progress towards the future.

Impact on Profession

The findings of the study hold valuable implications for future agricultural and extension educators. First, childhood experiences in 4-H and FFA were decisive factors for entering both professions, supporting how the past shapes future career decisions. Second, the previous generation acknowledges change is inevitable due to technological advancements, but stresses the importance of future generations remembering the past and how it has molded the field of agricultural and extension education. Lastly, positive relationships with government and business sectors are crucial to the general population understanding the importance of agriculture both locally and worldwide. Consistent with the findings of previous studies, developing positive relationships is essential to professional development and progressive decisions to positively impact the community-at-large (Lamm, Sapp, & Lamm, 2017; Roberts & Ramsey, 2017).

References

- Cronon, W. (1992). A place for stories: Nature, history, and narrative. *The Journal of American History*, 78(4), 1347-1376.
- Foor, R. M., & Cano, J. (2011). Predictors of job satisfaction among selected agriculture faculty. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 52(1), 30-39. doi: 10.5032/jae.2011.01030
- Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. (2009). Introduction to educational research. In L. R. Gay, G. E. Mills, & P. Airasian (Eds.), *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and applications* (13-14). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Herzberg, F. (1966). *Work and the nature of man*. New York, NY: The World Publishing Company.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (Vol. 1). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Lambert, M. D., Sorensen, T. J., & Elliott, K. M. (2014). A comparison of analysis of preservice teachers' oral and written reflections. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 55(4), 85-99. doi: 10.5032/jae.2014.04085
- Lamm, K. W., Sapp, R., & Lamm, A. J. (2017). The mentoring experience: Leadership development program perspectives. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 58(2), 20-34.
- Lemons, L. L., Brashears, M. T., Burriss, S., Meyers, C., & Price, M. A. (2015). Factors contributing to attrition as reported by leavers of secondary agriculture programs. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 56(4), 17-30. doi: 10.5032/jae.2015.04017
- Marx, A. A., Smith, A. R., Smalley, S. W., & Miller, C. (2017). Previous experience not required: Contextualization the choice to teach school-based agricultural education. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 5(4), 126-142. doi: 10.5032/jae.2017.04126
- Roberts, R., & Ramsey, J. W. (2017). The black swans of agricultural education: A glimpse into the lived experiences that shape urban agricultural educators' meaning in work. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 58(3), 1-18.
- Strong, R., & Harder, A. (2009). Implications of maintenance and motivation factors on extension agent turnover. *Journal of Extension*, 47(1), 1-8.