

**Peer Mentoring Experiences of Early Career Extension Agents in Florida**

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### **Introduction / Need for Research**

Mentorship is an impactful way of orchestrating highly experienced individuals to help new professionals progress successfully in their careers (Byington, 2010; Eastman & Williams, 1993). Mentorship holds potential benefits for all those involved: learners receive support and skills, mentors receive recognition and assistance, and organizations receive reduced turnover and increased productivity (Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). The most effective forms of agricultural and Extension mentorship provide both career functions, advancing individuals and their organization, and psychosocial functions, providing an interpersonal relationship that enhances employees' identities and effectiveness within their professional roles (Eastman & Williams, 1993; Lamm, Sapp, & Lamm, 2017). However, the experiences of Florida early career Extension agents regarding peer mentoring have not been evaluated and are therefore unknown.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Mentoring programs have been identified as key components in retaining and training Extension agents (Strong & Harder, 2009). The keys to establishing successful Extension mentoring relationships include creating a relationship of trust, explicitly defining mentor/mentee roles and responsibilities, employing open and supportive communication, establishing goals together, and solving problems collaboratively (Byington, 2010). The UF/IFAS Extension Mentoring Program seeks to establish partnerships between early career agents and experienced Extension agents to assist in the onboarding process of new agents as they transition into the organization (Author, n.d.).

### **Purpose & Objectives**

This study is part of a larger study exploring the onboarding experiences of Florida early career Extension agents and aligns with priority three of the 2016-2020 National Research Agenda – Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). The research objective of this study was to understand the experiences of peer mentoring on Florida early career Extension agents.

### **Methods**

This research study used qualitative methodology design through a phenomenological lens and was selected based on the exploratory nature of the study (Moustakas, 1994). At the time of the study there were 367 Extension faculty in the state of Florida. Eighty-nine Extension agents were identified as having been on the job for one to three years, qualifying them as early career agents. There were 65 County Extension Directors (CEDs), of which 48 were identified as having an early career agent in their office. From these two populations, seven early career agents and eight CEDs were selected from diverse counties and programmatic areas. Using two semi-structured interview guides, one for early career agents and one for CEDs, the 15 participants were interviewed and asked questions about their peer mentor experiences. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted prior to conducting this study. Interviews were audio-recorded and

transcribed verbatim ranging from 28 to 63 minutes in length, with the average interview length being 40 minutes. The researchers analyzed the data individually and then met to discuss emergent themes together, with one researcher serving as an external check. Triangulation was achieved by attaining both CED and agent interviews. Participants were solicited for feedback on their interview transcriptions as a member check.

### **Results**

Eleven primary themes emerged from the interviews provided by participants, and these themes were divided into the categories of effective and ineffective mentorship. The themes identified with effective mentoring relationships were: (a) positively acknowledging mentees' work; (b) frequent mentor/mentee communication; (c) allowing mentees to voice their ideas and opinions; (d) providing mentees with timely and constructive feedback; (e) encouraging mentees' continual success; and (f) CED involvement in agents' mentor/mentee pairing and relationship-building. The themes identified with ineffective mentoring relationships were: (a) mentees remaining unpaired with a mentor after two to three years into their job; (b) lack of support and guidance; (c) feelings of being overwhelmed; (d) poorly matched mentors/mentees; and (e) lack of CED involvement in agents' mentor/mentee pairing and relationship-building.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, the results of this study are mixed regarding the quality of mentor experience of early career Extension agents in Florida. Lamm, Sapp, and Lamm (2017) described mentors should be providing support and helping to develop their mentee, as well as learning more about the organization. While some agents experience positive experience such as frequent and intentional meetings, reviewing plans of work, and collaborative programming, other agents expressed negative experiences such as infrequent meetings, not being assigned or having a mentor, and a lack of mentor guidance and support. The issue of some agents not having a mentor is cause for concern as Florida's mentoring program is in place with clear procedures as to how mentors should be assigned or ascertained.

### **Implications / Recommendations**

UF/IFAS Extension is encouraged to evaluate the effectiveness of its peer mentoring program to ensure the program is achieving its desired objectives and outcomes. To achieve effective peer mentoring, UF/IFAS Extension could pair mentors with geographic proximity, who share programmatic responsibilities, who frequently exchange information with one another, and who prioritize face-to-face check-ins to develop friendships and comradery (Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). Additionally, the establishment of mentoring relationships early in agents' careers is critical, using only voluntary participants rather than making mentorship a mandatory practice (Zimmer & Smith, 1992). CED involvement in the peer mentor pairing process could lead to higher levels of mentorship satisfaction from both early career agents and CEDs with early career agents in their office. From training peer mentors to maintaining mentor-mentee accountability, Extension mentorship programs could be greatly enhanced with quarterly or bi-annual CED and mentor/mentee check-ins to validate whether early career agents have benefitted from their mentoring relationships.

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