

Who is Supporting Early Career Extension Agents?

Peyton N. Beattie
Graduate Student
University of Florida
411 Rolfs Hall
P.O. Box 110540
Gainesville, FL 32611
pbeattie@ufl.edu

Annie F. Muscato
Graduate Student
University of Florida
408 Rolfs Hall
P.O. Box 110540
Gainesville, FL 32611
afmuscato@ufl.edu

Dr. Matt Bengé
Extension Assistant Professor
University of Florida
126B Bryant Hall
P.O. Box 112060
Gainesville, FL 32611
mattbenge@ufl.edu

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Introduction & Conceptual Framework

Early career Extension agents are the most at-risk population of Extension agents for job retention (Cloutier, Felusiak, Hill, & Pemberton-Jones, 2015; Martin, 2011). Systems of support are crucial for early career agents as all agents enter the profession with varying degrees of experience. There are competencies identified which agents entering the profession should possess and develop within the early stages of their career (Benge, Harder, & Carter, 2011). Therefore, it is crucial to support early career agents as they enter the profession and through the infancy of their career. Kutilek (2000) indicated Extension agents who left Ohio State Extension reported lack of support as a main contributing factor to them parting from their jobs as Extension agents. To aid in early career agent support, Ohio State University Extension developed a mentor program where new Extension agents were assigned a mentor in their first month on the job (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001). Ohio State Extension also initiated an agent support team which consisted of the county chair, a district subject matter expert, and district director to support the agent (Zoller & Safrit, 1999). The Ohio State University Extension agents found this program to be important and indicated this should continue to help support agents increase needed competencies (Zoller & Safrit, 1999). Thomas, Stripling, Stephens, and Stephenson (2018) found Tennessee's Extension professionals' motivation for joining professional associations as a system of support was related to the awards and recognition the agents are eligible to receive. There is a need to understand the present systems of support early career Extension agents experience to provide appropriate support and development for this group of Extension agents. The professional development model for Extension agents used to conceptually guide this study (Benge et al., 2011).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand the current systems of support Florida early career Extension agents experience. The authors specifically sought to understand the support systems provided by the following: (a) County Extension Director (CED); (b) District Extension Director (DED); (c) mentor; (d) professional association; and (e) unofficial mentors. This study 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).

Methods

Qualitative research methods and analysis were used to fulfill the purpose of this study. A phenomenological approach was used to understand the lived experiences of early career Extension agents' regarding their support systems (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013). The population for this study was the 89 Extension agents in Florida who have been in their Extension position for one to three years. The sample for this specific study included seven early career Extension agents in Florida who were purposively selected to meet Extension district, program area, and county type criteria. An interview guide was developed by the researchers and reviewed by a panel of experts for face and content validity. The panel of experts included an Extension agent, a County Extension Director, two program and staff development professionals, and two state Extension faculty. Semi-structured interviews with the seven early career agents were conducted. The interview questions that directly pertained to this study asked participants

to share their experiences with receiving support from their CEDs, DEDs, official mentors, unofficial mentors, and professional associations. The interviews were conducted over a two-month period and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Themes were then used to develop textural descriptions, describing what was experienced and structural descriptions describing how it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted prior to conducting this study.

Results

CED support. A few early career Extension agents have had beneficial experiences with their CEDs. One described her relationship with her CED as “great.” Many early career Extension agents expressed unconstructive support from CEDs (Jaqueline, Kelsey, Colby, Katrina, Natalie). Colby and Natalie experienced frequent turnover of their CEDs in the first three years as an Extension agent, leading to a lack of support.

DED support. The early career agents found aspects of their DED’s support to be beneficial in relation to coaching them through various experiences, providing support, and funding travel. Some early career agents had more unconstructive experiences (Kelsey, Annie, Natalie).

Mentor support. The early career agents had some beneficial experiences with their official mentors. One agent indicated she received two phone call check-ins from her official mentor and stated those calls “were really good for me to reinforce the direction I was headed.” However, a couple of agents indicated they were never assigned an official mentor (Colby, Katrina).

Professional association support. The early career Extension agents frequently discussed receiving no constructive support from the professional association other than help with their promotion packets in terms of awards, scholarship, and presentations (Jaqueline, Kelsey, Annie, Colby, Katrina, Natalie).

Unofficial mentor support. Early career Extension agents relied heavily on colleagues they defined as mentors to provide emotional support, help with reporting, reviewing their promotion packet, and ideas for and guidance about programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The early career Extension agents studied here indicated having varying degrees of support from CEDs, DEDs, official mentors, professional associations, and unofficial mentors. Similar to Kutilek’s (2000) findings, Extension agents reported having to reach out to their CEDs and DEDs if they need help or assistance. A support team concept such as the support team modelled by Ohio State University Extension (Zoller & Safrit, 1999) could be initiated for the DED to have a larger role of support for the early career Extension agents. Training should be provided to better develop CEDs and DEDs with the tools to provide support to early career Extension agents without them having to initiate the first communication. There were inconsistencies regarding the support received from official mentors, such as not being assigned a mentor and mentors not providing appropriate support. Florida Extension should evaluate its mentoring program to ensure the mentors are assigned, proactive, and meeting their mentor expectations. Perhaps a study could be conducted to understand the CED mentorship program to determine the areas in which the CED mentorship program could be improved to better serve their early career Extension agents. The early career Extension agents reported receiving very little support from professional associations which is consistent with Thomas et al.’s (2018) findings. The role of professional associations could be revisited to ensure early career Extension agents are being supported by their associations.

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