

**Identifying Needs of Early Career Extension Agents Beyond the First Year: Perspectives  
from County Extension Directors in Florida**

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### **Introduction & Conceptual Framework**

Training and development of employees has been linked to employee satisfaction (Boltes, Lippke, & Gregory, 1995) as well as increased employee retention (Martin, 2011). Previous studies cite the competencies needed by Extension agents to be successful, such as program planning, program evaluation, and leadership skills (Cooper & Graham, 2001; Harder, Place, & Scheer, 2010). Additionally, evaluation (Diaz, Chaudhary, Jayaratne, & Warner, 2011; Franz & McCann, 2007; Lamm, 2011), reporting (Diaz et al., 2011; Franz & McCann, 2007), and volunteer management (Seevers, Baca, & Van Leeuwen, 2005) have been identified as recurring competencies Extension agents lack. A gap in the literature exists in understanding the training and development needs of early career Extension agents beyond the first year on the job from the perspective of the County Extension Director (CED). The professional development model for Extension agents developed by Bengue, Harder, and Carter (2011) was used as a conceptual lens for this study.

### **Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to understand the training and professional development needs of Florida early career Extension agents beyond the first year. The objective of this study was to understand the training and professional development needs of early career Extension agents beyond the first year as perceived by County Extension Directors. 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**

A qualitative research approach was used to fulfill the research objective and is part of a larger study that used a descriptive research design. The population for this specific study included 48 CEDs in Florida who had an early career Extension agent (i.e., one to three years on the job) in their office at the time of data collection. Eight CEDs were purposively selected to participate in this study based on qualifying characteristics, including representation of different Extension districts, program areas, and county type. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the CEDs. A researcher-developed interview guide was reviewed by a panel of experts including one Extension agent, one County Extension Director, two program and staff development professionals, and two state Extension faculty for face and content validity. The question from the interview guide which was in direct relation to this study asked CEDs which training and development did they feel their early career Extension agents need. The interviews were conducted over two months and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researchers were able to analyze the data for emergent themes based on the CEDs' answers to the beforementioned question. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted prior to conducting this study.

### **Findings**

The data were categorized into three distinct themes: (a) working with community and volunteers; (b) communications; and (c) Extension related professional skills.

The findings indicated a need for training to better prepare and equip agents to build positive relationships and work with clientele and community stakeholders. Extension agents are required to have professional expertise, however, CEDs feel expertise cannot be fully utilized unless their agents know how to work with people. One CED stated, "I need someone who not only has the subject matter expertise but knows how to work in communities." Clientele often includes volunteers, and CEDs indicated a need for their agents to receive additional volunteer management training. Consequently, an identified need for continued mandatory diversity and conflict management education was also addressed.

County Extension Directors consistently pointed to communications skills as critically important to the success of an early career agent. Examples included interpersonal communication skills to work with internal staff, having difficult conversations with clientele, and technical training in marketing, writing press releases, social media, and print design. Cathy, a CED with more than twenty years' experience explained, "We're expected to do our own marketing, but it's been a long time since I've had any sort of Adobe Photoshop training, for example."

An array of general professional skills important to new agent success were identified by the CEDs, including: continuing education in their area of expertise, program evaluation, support with their annual packet, educational training, financial management, and revenue enhancement. One CED observed, "Reporting can make or break an agent." In addition to not receiving sufficient training in these areas, some CEDs feel their agents do not understand the need for certain skills. A CED expressed, "revenue enhancement is another thing that throws them off. They need to understand why it's important and how to do it the right way."

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Communication and Extension related professional skills are both competencies of an early career Extension agent outlined in the professional development model for Extension agents (Benge et al., 2011). Volunteer management was a finding that was not included in the professional development model for Extension agents (Benge et al., 2011). The finding of this study in regards to volunteers supports the work of Seevers et al. (2005), whereas evaluation and reporting were areas considered as Extension related professional skills and echoed by the findings of Diaz et al. (2011), Franz & McCann (2007), and Lamm (2011). Florida Extension could expand the professional development opportunities for early career agents to include volunteer management, evaluation, and reporting in addition to increasing the time allocated for training and development of these core competences. Further, continuous training for agents throughout their time in the job would benefit agents as they enter their mid and late Extension careers.

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