

Mentoring: Assisting New Agriculture Teachers in Utah

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

As global population growth and socio-cultural issues continue to add pressure to agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR) stakeholders, the need for an adequate supply of highly trained AFNR educators in secondary schools has never been greater. As a result, efforts to retain and support AFNR teachers, especially those in their first year, are of utmost importance in accomplishing this goal. Yet, first year agriculture teachers often experience many challenges (e.g., Joerger & Boettcher, 2000; Mundt & Connors, 1999). Studies have shown that mentors can help beginning teachers overcome some of the challenges experienced during the first year, and help them improve overall effectiveness and socialization to the school and professional culture (Greiman, 2002; Peiter et al., 2005; Villani, 2002). Furthermore, research suggests when mentors and beginning teachers share similar values, attitudes, working styles, teaching philosophies, and personality type, the likelihood of a positive mentoring experience and greater satisfaction is increased (Burriss et al., 2006; Lambert et al., 2010).

In 2005, Utah began a state-funded teacher induction program focused on providing mentorship and professional development for first year AFNR teachers in the state. As part of this program, beginning teachers select a formal mentor who is encouraged to provide support for the young teacher. No training is provided to mentors and beginning teachers are encouraged to make the initial contact. The key to a successful mentoring program is to have a well-established mentor-mentee relationship (Gray & Gray, 1985). Yet, since the beginning of the program in 2005, little is known about the mentor-mentee relationship in Utah. This study aimed to describe the relationship between first-year teachers and their mentors and to identify the perceived benefits and challenges of this relationship.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research was approached through the lens of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Fundamental tenets of this theory suggest that a learning group is a community of practice if three characteristics are present. First, there must be a shared domain of interest. Second, the members must participate in activities and discussions to assist in learning and sharing of information, which may take place in person or electronically. Third, the community contains practitioners who share resources, ideas and their experiences. The key to a community of practice is the members must share a practice, not merely an interest. Mentor teachers along with their new teacher mentees, create a community of practice which provides opportunities for teachers to participate in a community where they share their experiences, expand their knowledge and enhance their craft.

### **Methodology**

Beginning in 2005 and continuing through the current year, data were collected at the annual Utah New Agriculture Teacher Workshop through paper surveys, which included open-ended questions and a series of other categorical or dichotomous response type items regarding the mentor-mentee relationship. Surveys were distributed to all of the first-year teachers ( $n = 8$ ) and completed anonymously. Researchers entered data from the paper surveys into the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software and also transcriptions were made for the open-ended responses. Open-ended data were analyzed for thematic content using methods outlined by (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). The research objectives for this descriptive study were: 1) Describe the interactions between first-year teachers and their assigned mentors; and 2) Describe the perceived benefits and challenges of assigned mentors for first-year teachers.

### **Results/Findings**

The results of this research showed that while all respondents met with their mentor teachers, the frequency of meetings and the value of the mentoring varied greatly among participants. Mentor-mentee partners met between zero and more than six times over the course of an average month. The average number of meetings per month was one to two times. Perceptions of the benefits of the mentoring partnership varied across participants. Most beginning teachers reported the mentoring relationship to be “quite beneficial” followed by “somewhat beneficial” and “not sure, haven’t had enough interactions.” The most common challenge indicated by the beginning teachers was the inability to connect in person with their mentor. Participants indicated that while beneficial, meeting exclusively through electronic means was a challenge and more in person interaction would have improved the experience. Common themes that emerged from the open ended portion of the survey included, 1) new teachers desire to acquire new resources; 2) new teachers find it important to have another person to talk to about issues related to the practice of teaching; 3) new teachers want an open relationship of sharing resources; and 4) new teachers want to have open discussions about their experiences in teaching.

### **Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession**

Because of the low numbers of participants in this study, findings are only applicable for this population. Despite the low numbers, the findings are a starting point for stakeholders in Utah to evaluate the effectiveness of the formal mentorship program. Overall, beginning teachers who participated in this research felt the mentoring program was beneficial despite experiencing some challenges. Findings from this study suggest beginning teachers would benefit greatly from a more comprehensive community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), especially in the third tenet where practitioners are more open about sharing resources, ideas, and their experiences. Recommendations for mentor programing in Utah includes providing opportunities for more face-to-face collaboration where resources can be shared more openly.

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