Research Poster

And the List Goes on: A Synthesis of Extension Agent Job Competencies

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Introduction and Review of Literature

Today's county Extension agent, or educator, is tasked with many responsibilities some of which include needs-assessments, creating and delivering programs, overseeing volunteers, managing funds, communicating with the public, staying informed on new research, completing reports, and general office responsibilities (Cooper & Graham, 2001). Past Extension scholars have identified numerous competencies needed for a successful career as an Extension agent; one study identified over 300 competencies (National 4-H, 2017). Yet in Oregon, little information is available on how agents are trained or how professional development meets the needs of identified agent competencies. To more effectively train and prepare Oregon State University Extension (OSUE) agents for their roles, more information about Extension competencies was needed. Therefore, we sought to review the literature and explore Extension agent competencies to have a more thorough understanding of Extension skills and make informed decisions about future agent training.

Competencies are defined as "the basic knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors that contribute to excellence in Extension education programs" (Maddy, Niemann, Lindquist, & Bateman, 2002, pg. 1). Stone and Bieber (1997) explained competencies as a link for individual and organizational performance and should be highly considered for the implementation of professional development. Many state Extension scholars have researched agent competencies, such as Arkansas (Cooper & Graham, 2001), Florida (Harder, Place, & Scheer, 2010), North Carolina (Lakai, Jayaratne, Moore, & Kistler, 2014), and Ohio (Cochran, 2009). With each additional research project, the list of competencies continued to expand creating a plethora or technical and interpersonal skills that are important for a county agent to obtain. The literature revealed an increasing number of competencies, therefore, we sought to inquire what the most common competencies were among the studies. Using a document analysis approach, we addressed the following research objective: To examine published works about agent competencies and identified salient agent competencies.

Methodology

We employed a document analysis to investigate competencies identified in published and public works. To collect the documents, we searched the phrase "competencies" in the Journal of Extension (JOE), Journal of Agricultural Education (JAE), and state Extension websites. First, we "skimmed" (Brown, 2009) the journals and websites looking for relevant documents and found 24 works related to our study. We only focused on research that was conducted in the United States, projects that only identified *agent* competencies, and studies written between 1999 to 2019. The criteria for our literature review resulted in 16 articles.

We proceeded with reading and aggregating data from the selected documents (Bowen, 2009). We created a Microsoft Excel document to record methods, population, sample, demographics, results, and any competencies listed from each study. Our initial list revealed 587 competencies. The 587 were alphabetized and we proceeded with three rounds of narrowing and combining like terms (Bowen, 2009). While we were narrowing the competencies, we did not

change any language, we simply combined identical competencies. We found that many studies included very specific competencies that could not be combined into similar areas without weakening other researchers work. After three rounds of consolidating competencies, we were left with 503 competencies needed to serve as an Extension agent.

Results

From the 16 examined works, a total of 503 competencies were identified. From the 16 documents, three were nationwide studies and 13 were state-specific, including Arkansas, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. This document analysis revealed 11 competencies that were most frequently identified in the 16 studies. *Programming* and *subject matter expertise* were mentioned in 11studies. *Communication* was recognized in ten studies. *Applied research skills* was identified in eight studies. *Leadership, teaching skills,* and *Extension knowledge* were mentioned in seven works. *Organizational effectiveness* and *evaluation* were recognized in six studies. Lastly, *interpersonal skills* and *professionalism and ethics* were identified in five studies. While we cannot include all 503 competencies in this abstract, we bring attention that 468 (93%) of competencies were mentioned in one study only. Examples of these single-cited competencies includes the ability to say "I don't know" (Cooper & Graham, 2001), being a life-long, self-directed learner (Cochran, 2009), understand office know-hows, (Brodeur, Higgins, Galindo-Gonzalez, Craig, & Haile (2011), and understanding social systems (Brown, Gibson, & Stewart, 2008).

Discussion and Recommendations

The objective of this research was to identify salient Extension competencies to better inform training decisions in Oregon. Through this document analysis, we discovered a wide range of competencies and number of discrepancies among the papers. First, there were inconsistencies in the number of competencies identified by scholars, the fewest identified competencies was four (Stone & Coppernoll, 2004) and the largest being 383 (National 4-H, 2017). Second, we found many variations in the methods, population, and purpose of the studies. Five studies did not identify their methods and four did not mention their population. Last, we want to bring attention that none of the competencies were agreed upon by all 16 research teams. The most frequently identified competency was only mentioned in 11 studies.

In Oregon, we recommend the conducting a needs assessment to evaluate if and how OSUE is training agents on the most frequently identified Extension competencies. A needs assessment helps set priorities and provides an opportunity to make informed programmatic improvements (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). We suggest that Extension nation-wide consider if agents are expected to be proficient in this exhaustive list, or, are they to have a basic understanding of the attitudes, skills, and behavior as Maddy et al. (2002) suggests? State professionals should reflect on how competencies are communicated with agents, how they measure these competencies, how they can support growth in these areas.

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