

**Extension Professionals' Perceptions of Curriculum and Professional Development  
Priorities for Extension Education**

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

While previous research had identified competencies for Extension Agents including subject matter expertise and organizational knowledge, Laki et al. (2014) found that additional competencies, including emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills were important for Extension professionals. Likewise, Harder et al. (2010) found two major groups of competencies – program development processes and interpersonal skills – essential for Extension professionals' success. The results of the competencies studies have been applied to professional development for Extension professionals and college curriculum (Harder et al., 2009). The Ohio State University faculty aligned Extension Education core competencies (i.e., communications; technology; and Extension knowledge and management) with Extension Education college courses that included internships (Scheer et al., 2006). Despite these previous efforts, we have limited, current research on Extension professionals' curriculum and professional development needs. Such an understanding is important for University Departments of Agricultural and Extension Education (AEE) in setting priorities for curriculum and professional development that meets the needs of current and future Extension professionals.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The educational needs assessment framework identified by Stufflebeam et al. (1985) includes different views of needs assessments: discrepancy view, democratic view, analytic view, and diagnostic view. We took an analytic view of needs assessment whereby skilled respondents consider needs and opportunities. This view was selected to guide the study as it is the most future-focused needs assessment view and emphasizes "critical thinking about trends and problems...[and] informed judgments" (Stufflebeam, et al., 1985, p.8).

### **Methodology**

The two questions that guided this research were specific to Departments of AEE:

1. What do Extension professionals perceive as AEE curriculum priorities for preparing students for Extension careers?
2. What do Extension professionals perceive as AEE professional development priorities for current Extension professionals?

The researchers created an online questionnaire composed of six open-ended questions regarding trends affecting Extension as well as priorities for Extension Education in AEE Departments. The questionnaire advised respondents that AEE was being used to refer to departments with varied official names including Department of Agricultural Education, Technology & Innovation; Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and Technology; Department of Agricultural and Human Sciences; and Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications. The online survey was conducted over a four-week period in fall, 2020, consistent with the Total Design Method (Dillman et al., 2006). Researchers used Qualtrics Research Suite for formatting and deploying the questionnaire. The population were the 21 members of the 2020 board of the Joint Council of Extension Professionals, an advocacy group composed of the past president, president, and president-elect of the seven Extension professional associations. Of the 21 members, 10 completed the questionnaire for a 47.6% usable response rate.

**Results/Findings**

Regarding college curriculum, respondents referred to the “core qualities and competencies” needed for Extension career success (Participant 4). Specifically, Extension Education’s core curriculum priorities were described as (a) program development, inclusive of all aspects of program planning, delivery, and evaluation; and (b) teaching and learning. One respondent underscored the importance of formal coursework in program development: “For sure, for me, I took a course specifically on program development which touched on the planning, delivery and evaluation of programming and [I] strongly believe without this course I would not be nearly as effective as an Extension professional as I am” (Participant 2). Teaching and learning included understanding how people learn as well as pedagogy and andragogy. Other prioritized competencies were leadership, technology, and communication. Respondents felt that AEE Departments should prioritize practical experiences in Extension careers with the goal to lessen the timeline for a new Extension professional to understand how to effectively do their job. Respondents expressed that AEE faculty should prioritize program planning and evaluation competencies for current Extension professionals’ professional development. Additionally, respondents expressed a need for Extension credentialing to demonstrate expertise in Extension education. Participant 1 described “Extension credentials” as on par with medical professional board certification whereby doctors demonstrate their competencies as lifelong learners with specialized knowledge and skills. Furthermore, it was suggested that the credentialing be linked to the Extension professionals’ promotion. Additional professional development needs noted were leadership, communications, technology, and teaching.

**Conclusions**

The leaders of Extension’s professional associations expressed clear preferences for both AEE college curriculum and AEE efforts to provide professional development to Extension professionals. Curriculum should be responsive to the identified core competencies with more attention to hands-on, career experiences.

**Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession**

AEE Departments have an important role in developing the next generation of Extension professionals. Therefore, internships, externships, job shadowing, and other career development activities are recommended to provide students with Extension job-related experiences (consistent with Scheer et al., 2006; and Stripling & Ricketts, 2016). To bolster the competency development of college students preparing for Extension education careers, internships have been widely adopted (Angima & Gaebel, 2018; Grotta & McGrath, 2013; Johnson et al., 2019; Wilken et al., 2008). Yet, AEE Departments must also provide for the professional development needs of today’s Extension personnel. Research is recommended to provide a framework for Extension credentialing. AEE Departments should share curriculum and professional development resources, particularly in the areas of program development; teaching and learning; leadership; technology; and communication so that best practices and lessons learned may permeate to current and future Extension professionals.

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