

**Exploring the Types of Career Advancement Support Florida Early Career Extension  
Agents Receive from their Mentors**

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### **Introduction and Theoretical Framework**

Extension agents deliver research-based educational programs and consultations based on identified needs throughout the state of Florida (Seevers et al., 1997). Early career extension agents often experience a variety of challenges during their first year on the job (Benge & Beattie, 2021), whereby making the onboarding and training process crucial in determining current and future success of newly hired employees (Martin, 2011). Mentorship is a key component of onboarding of Florida extension agents. Newly hired extension agents are paired with a mentor to guide them through the first phase in their career. Mentorship can take many forms and there is little evidence or data exploring the types of support newly hired extension agents are receiving from their mentor.

A mentor can be defined as a seasoned, influential member of an organization who supports new members through advice on organizational values, norms, and accepted behaviors (Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). A mentoring relationship requires intentional investment from the mentor and set expectations from both parties (Shellhouse et al., 2021). The traditional functions of mentorship include career development, psychosocial support, and role modeling. Career development functions include sponsorship, exposure-and-visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments. Psychosocial functions include role modeling, acceptance-and-confirmation, counseling, and friendship (Kram, 1983). Role modeling can be perceived as its own function of mentorship, separate from psychosocial support (Scandura & Ragins, 1993). Role modeling refers to the action of modeling behaviors that proteges wish to replicate. Mentors form connections with their protégé through effective counseling, nurturing creativity, corrective action, fostering growth and development, sharing past experiences, and friendship (Balu, 2017). Successful mentoring relationships promote a healthy, professional environment that develops trust, defines roles and responsibilities, establishes goals, and problem-solving skills (Byington, 2010).

### **Purpose and Research Question**

This study is part of a larger study exploring the onboarding experiences of Florida early career Extension professionals. The research question guiding this study was, what type of career advancement support are Florida early career extension professionals receiving from their mentors? This study aligned with priority three of the 2016-2020 National Research Agenda - Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Roberts et al., 2016).

### **Methods**

The target population for my study were Florida extension agents who had been on the job for six months ( $N = 51$ ). The UF/IFAS Extension Business Service Office provided me with a list of new agents every month, and at the agents' six-month mark on the job I emailed them asking if they would participate in an interview. I used a phenomenological qualitative design (Moustakas,

1994) utilizing one-on-one interviews via Zoom. I created a semi-structured interview guide consisting of five questions such as (1) do you have a mentor?, (2) how often do you talk to your mentor?, and (3) can you describe what type of guidance your mentor has given you on how to advance in your career? I obtained approval from the University of Florida Institutional Review Board prior to conducting our study. Out of the 51 new agents in the target population, 24 new agents agreed and completed an interview. I conducted interviews over a twelve-month span to capture new agent experiences at their six-month of hire, with the interviews ranging from 19 to 31 minutes in length. I audio recorded and transcribed interviews verbatim, and organized, coded, and analyzed the data using the phenomenological reduction method by Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen as modified by Moustakas (1994). I used five strategies to maintain credibility of study, as Eisner (1991) stated that establishing credibility within qualitative research “allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations, and conclusions” (p. 110). These strategies included investigator triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, thick and rich descriptions, and clarifying researcher bias.

### **Findings**

The new extension agent hires shared that their mentors were providing career advancement support on the following fourteen topics: (a) advisory boards, (b) contacts list/management, (c) conducting joint programming, (d) connecting to Specialists, (e) evaluation (methods and management), (f) marketing, (g) natural disaster preparedness, (h) objectives/goals, (i) Programmatic/content specific information, (j) annual reporting, (k) scholarship opportunities, (l) supervising program assistants, (m) training and development, and (n) volunteerism management and training. One of the participants, a 4-H agent that serves a rural county, explained how their mentor helped guide them through a challenging volunteer situation:

At the beginning of the 4-H year I had recruited three new club volunteers. We are a very small county, and three new volunteers is wonderful. Well, I had to [release] 2 of my 3 volunteers already. So, that was a big to do, and I really didn't know how to handle the situation. So being able to talk to her about the situation and then looking at the options and how it should be handled, that was definitely a really big help to me. I definitely needed her help during that time because I would not have known what to do

### **Conclusions, Implication, and Recommendations**

Findings from the interviews indicated early career agents receive a variety of career development support (Kram, 1983) from their mentors, where similar results were reported by previous literature (Harder et al., 2021). Mentees are looking to their mentors for guidance on professional and programmatic tasks during the first phase of their career, and our results can be used to help both mentors and mentees facilitate discussion during one-on-one mentorship meetings. Administrators and professional development specialists can also use these results to enhance Extension onboarding processes, curriculum development, and resource guides for mentorship programs. Future research could address the gaps of mentor support in other mentorship areas to ensure mentors are providing adequate support across all functions. A similar study could address the mentor functions of Extension state specialists as their mentoring needs might differ from those of county-based Extension professionals.

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