

## **Early Career Extension Agent Professional Development Experiences**

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### **Introduction & Literature Review**

Since 1956, Kansas Research and Extension has offered professional development to prepare new agents for their careers. The program has adjusted in response to informal suggestions from administrative staff (Baker & Hadley, 2014). Research conducted by Baker and Hadley (2014) examined training methods for new agents that contributed to the program's enhancement.

Kansas hires agents from diverse backgrounds, many without prior Extension experience. New agents are either in their first job, transitioning from a different career, or from a different state's Extension Service. Without a formal degree in Extension Education, the new agent training is valuable to teach essential knowledge. New agents begin their position on the first day and complete training throughout their first year. Many agents experience situations that require certain knowledge before new agent training covers that specific content. Prior studies have identified competencies needed by Extension Agents (Berven et al., 2020; Toelle et al., 2024).

Onboarding and training play a critical role in each state's Extension organization, allowing new hires to integrate effectively while maintaining high-performance standards. Stein & Christiansen (2010) claim that effective onboarding enhances retention and productivity. Onboarding enables organizations to retain value and boost productivity, helping companies accelerate the productivity of new hires and raise standards for all employees (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). Due to the decentralized organizational structure of Extension, states rely on structured onboarding programs to give new employees essential knowledge, policies, and skills. Outside of initial onboarding, continuous staff development is vital for the success of Extension's educational programs (Prawl et al., 1984).

Extension requires its professionals to be proficient in various skills to carry out their roles in local extension offices. Many studies have been conducted to identify the competencies and knowledge required for Extension professionals throughout their careers (Berven et al., 2020; Elliott-Engel et al., 2021). These studies have aimed to help shape onboarding and professional development efforts within state Extension organizations. Research identifies Extension competencies, but not when to teach the concepts. Literature establishes needed skills but fails to identify optimal timing during the first year when professionals simultaneously learn and perform. Research is needed to determine the timing that maximizes learning effectiveness while minimizing performance disruption.

### **Framework**

Research has identified competencies that Extension professionals should possess at different stages of their careers. Dalton et al. (1977) introduced the Four Stages of Professional Careers Model—Apprentice, Colleague, Counselor, and Advisor—linking high performance to stage-specific activities. Rennekamp and Nall (1993, as cited in Rennekamp & Nall, 1994) adapted this model for Extension, renaming the stages as Entry, Colleague, Counselor, and Advisor. Kutilek et

al. (2002) further refined it into the Career Stage Model by merging the Counselor and Advisor stages, offering strategies for professional growth. Benge et al. (2011) later added a Pre-entry stage. Each version of the model highlights key competencies to develop in each phase.

**Purpose & Objectives**

This study aimed to identify the essential competencies that new Extension agents must learn and when they should acquire them. The objectives for the study were 1) to identify the competencies that are needed for new Extension agents to learn during their first year of employment and 2) to identify the time frame in which essential competencies should be introduced to new agents.

**Methods**

For the study, we developed a needs assessment using the Borich Model (Borich, 1980). Six focus areas were based on Kansas’ New Staff Professional Development Logic Model. The six focus areas were: organizational knowledge; professional and interpersonal relationships; educational program delivery; program planning, evaluation, and reporting; civil rights, diversity, multiculturalism; youth development, and 4-H program management. Each focus area included 6-12 competencies. Participants rated the importance of each competency and indicated when it was needed after starting their position. A panel of professionals who conducted the onboarding program reviewed the instrument for content validity. No pilot study was conducted. The survey, created in Qualtrics, was emailed to 73 agents hired since January 2019 who completed new agent training before September 26, 2024. Two reminders were sent a week after each other, and a final reminder was sent a week after the previous reminder. Of the 73 agents, 40 started the survey, and 37 completed it, resulting in a response rate of 55%.

**Findings**

Agents rated most competency areas as critical to their success, with average scores between "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" (Table 1) though their confidence in learning these skills through the new agent program varied. While Organizational Knowledge and Support items were viewed as critical, agents felt less confident about gaining this knowledge through training. Professional and Interpersonal Relationships were also deemed critical (except professional associations) but again showed lower perceived learning gains. Educational Program Delivery skills were identified as critical except for volunteer screening, with lower learning scores but more time available since these aren't needed in the first 1-3 months (Table 2). Program Planning, Evaluation, and Reporting training currently meets critical needs except for needs assessments and evaluations, which can be addressed in the first 3–6-month timeframe. Both Civil Rights, Diversity and Multiculturalism Youth Development and 4-H Program Management sections effectively meet agents identified critical training needs.

**Table 1**

*Essential Competencies Learned in New Agent PD and How they contribute to Agent Success*

Item	Learned in New Agent PD	Critical to My Success
<i>Organizational Knowledge and Support</i>		

I know individuals who can help me with questions related to the local unit management	2.41	1.50
I can utilize the technology tools available to me	2.03	1.56
I know of resources to help me with questions related to my local unit	2.42	1.59
I understand my unit's policies, norms, & culture	2.36	1.71
I understand policies, procedures, and laws governing extension	2.12	1.82
I can access policies, procedures, and laws governing extension	2.26	1.91
I am aware of branding and communications guidelines	1.97	2.29
<i>Professional and Interpersonal Relationships</i>		
I can interact appropriately with coworkers and client groups	2.15	1.38
I possess basic conflict resolution skills and can use them in my work	2.32	1.45
I know first impressions and professionalism are essential	2.12	1.47
I can demonstrate effective listening skills	2.26	1.47
I understand the role of professional associations	2.62	2.24
<i>Educational Program Delivery</i>		
I can plan and deliver activities that support proactive learning	2.27	1.21
I can identify resources to help me develop educational programs (specialists, curriculum)	2.58	1.21
I use a variety of communication strategies to deliver information	2.15	1.36
I can design learning experiences appropriately for adult learners	2.39	1.48
I use various technology tools to create innovative program delivery	2.45	1.64
I can demonstrate basic facilitation skills	2.33	1.7
I can mitigate risks inherent in programming	2.42	1.73
I utilize basic volunteer screening and management strategies	2.73	2.03
<i>Program Planning, Evaluation, and Reporting</i>		
I establish partnerships and collaborations to accomplish the extension mission	1.97	1.24
My role in extension is to primarily be an educator and facilitator of proactive programming	1.61	1.42
I report the impact of my extension programs to local stakeholders including my extension board and county commissioners	1.97	1.55
I know the demographics and dynamics of the communities I serve	1.58	1.64
I work with my PDC and other partners to identify needs and prioritize programming	1.91	1.64
I conduct needs assessments to ensure relevant programming	2.03	1.67
I conduct evaluations of knowledge gained and skills acquired	2.42	1.91
I have a core action plan and a signature program	1.58	1.94
I can report the impact of my extension programs	2.0	1.97
I understand the roles of Program Focus Teams	2.21	2.0
I actively participate in a Program Focus Team	2.18	2.03

*Civil Rights, Diversity, and Multiculturalism*

I recognize cultures within my local communities	1.7	1.64
I can identify underserved audiences in my unit	1.58	1.7
I develop culturally appropriate programs	2.06	1.7
I can assist a client who needs accommodation to participate in an educational program	1.76	1.7
I work to reach underserved audiences	1.61	1.73
I report client contacts and program activities	1.52	1.78
I can articulate the demographics of my local unit	1.7	1.81
I understand an extension professional's responsibilities for civil rights	1.42	1.84
I can use language access resources to assist limited English-proficient individuals	1.94	2.03

*Youth Development and 4-H Program Management*

I create environments of learning and connection in my youth development programs	1.86	1.62
I implement elements necessary to ensure a high-quality youth development experience	2.0	1.72
I apply the principles of PYD	1.9	1.83
I utilize volunteers to grow and sustain youth development programming.	2.24	1.86
I utilize program management practices for successful 4-H programming	2.21	2.03
I utilize the experiential learning model	2.28	2.17

Note. Ratings are based on a 5-point scale. "Learned" and "Critical to My Success": 1 = Strongly agree to 5 = Strongly disagree.

**Table 2**

*When During their First Year Extension Agents needed Specific Skills and Knowledge*

<b>1-3 Months</b>	<b>3-6 Months</b>	<b>6-9 Months</b>
Local Support	Management Resources	PEARS Planning
Utilize Technology	KSRE Compliance	Volunteer Management
Local Unit Culture	Policy Access	Needs Assessment
Appropriate Interactions	Brand Guidelines	Program Evaluation
Effective Listening Skills	Conflict Resolution	Role of Professional Associations
First Impressions and Professionalism	Proactive Programming	Impact Reporting
	Program Resources	Program Focus Team Roles
	Culturally Appropriate Programs	Program Focus Team Participation
	Adult Education	Logic Modeling
	Tech Innovation	Accommodation Support
	Basic Facilitation	Outreach Equity

Risk Management	Language Access
Partnership Building	
Educator Role	
Stakeholder Reporting	
Community Demographics	
Needs Prioritization	
Cultural Awareness	
Audience Identification	
Communication Variety	
PEARS Reporting	
Unit Demographics	
Civil Rights	
Learning Environments	
Quality Programming	
Positive Youth Development	
Volunteer Utilization	
4-H Management	
Experiential Learning	

### **Conclusions**

Organizational Knowledge and Support should be an area to focus on as the program is revised and special attention should be taken to connect agents with individuals to help with local agent management, technology, and local policies, norms, and culture as those items were identified as critical and that they were needed in the first 3 months of employment. Related to Professional and Interpersonal relationships, special attention should be paid to training focused on interacting with coworkers and client groups, first impressions and professionalism, and effective listening skills, as those items were identified as critical and needed in the first three months. This recommendation aligns with research by Baker & Hadley (2014) and Berven et al. (2020), which demonstrated that relationship skills are essential for new agents' success. Focus on enhancing Educational Program Delivery and expanding the volunteer training section. However, there is time to teach these concepts later in the program, as they were not identified as critical in the first three months. Quality programming needs to continue in the area of Program Planning, Valuation, and Reporting and enhance the conducting of needs assessment and evaluations. This should be taught in the first 3-6 months. Civil Rights, Diversity, and Multiculturalism revisions should strive to increase knowledge gained in creating culturally appropriate educational programs. Youth Development and 4-H Program Management revisions should work to increase learning related to utilizing volunteers. Agents identified most of the items as crucial but allowed more time for the learning to happen in the first 6 months. These findings align with previous research conducted by Baker & Hadley (2014), Berven et al. (2020), and Toelle et al. (2024), which demonstrated that these core competencies are essential for the first year of employment.

This study highlights the importance of program evaluations to ensure programs are meeting their intended competencies. Further research should be conducted in other states to see if there are similarities. This study should be followed with a qualitative study to dig deeper into the needs of early career extension agents.

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