

Extension Education

The Role of Mentoring in Increasing New Extension Faculty Success Rates

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Abstract

Mentoring is a key element in the success and retention of Extension faculty, but one that has not often been explored in the literature and in practice. This paper uses a semi-structured interview process to obtain feedback from early career Extension faculty about their experiences with mentoring, how mentoring could be improved to make them more successful, and specific challenges for which mentoring would be especially helpful early in their careers. While a great deal of variation existed among participants concerning formal mentoring programs within their departments, almost all indicated they used and valued mentors as part of their professional development. Departmental mentoring programs seemed to be largely focused on helping faculty members navigate the promotion and tenure process. Interviews revealed several areas where mentoring would be especially valuable to new Extension faculty as they developed their Extension programs. These areas included evaluating Extension programs, obtaining grants and program funding, building stakeholder networks, balancing appointments, feeling valued, incorporating ongoing personal development, and improving time management. Almost all interview participants indicated a willingness to serve as mentors for new faculty as they progress in their careers.

1 Introduction

As a wave of Extension economists across the United States retire (Broder, White, and Taylor 1991), land-grant universities face the challenge of filling vital Extension positions. Although applicant pools are typically large for these heavily sought-after positions, identifying and hiring applicants with a background and interest in Extension can be challenging. Further, recruiting and retaining individuals capable of such demanding roles has been a long-standing concern (Sorcinelli 1994; Place and Bailey 2001; Taylor and Zhang 2019).

Today's Extension personnel have complex roles with an ever-evolving clientele base, often requiring at least a basic knowledge of multiple disciplines. They are expected to stay relevant and timely (Place and Jacob 2001) and communicate their knowledge effectively across various media to broad audiences. Furthermore, Extension faculty in the role of state or area specialists are increasingly asked to take on research, teaching, and administrative roles at their institutions. Such position splits require creativity and dedicated time, which can hamper the effort truly allocated to Extension activities. Similarly, departments must develop and review Extension positions that will attract individuals who will be qualified to hold such diverse and complicated positions.

With the ever-changing environment in academia overall, it is becoming more difficult for newly hired individuals to receive invested support and guidance during the early stages of their careers (Carmel and Paul 2015). Given these challenges, the profession must recruit and continue to support qualified, engaged individuals working in Extension as they build their careers and as Extension continues to evolve and change at local, state, regional, and national levels.

The goal of mentoring is to aid and inspire graduate students and early career professionals as they enter new roles and establish their careers. As such, mentoring can be described as a relationship for growth (Rolfe 2006). Descriptors of mentors range from taskmaster, coach, confidant, teacher, counselor, and ultimately, friend (Perry 1996). During the start of a new job, new hires must first unpack and understand the administrative structure at their new institutions, as well as the expectations and responsibilities in their newly appointed positions. In a “sink-or-swim” pre-tenure setting, this time can be stressful and may lead to frustration or less than favorable job performance. Mentoring provides an opportunity to take some, but likely not all, of the frustration out of that transition. However, for mentoring to be a success, a commitment is required on the part of both mentors and mentees, along with an understanding of what the mentee is truly looking for in the mentoring relationship.

Previous work has suggested that mentees achieve greater job satisfaction when they can spend more time with their mentors (Perry 1996). By utilizing a formal mentor program, mentees have an opportunity to identify resources available in their state and at their university, understand the foundational aspects of Extension and the land-grant mission, and gain knowledge from one or more experienced and successful Extension professionals (Saunders and Reese, 2011). Such a program increases the probability of an easier transition into an Extension career and accelerates the productivity of the new hire on their way to tenure. In a 2017 study by Schroeter and Anders, 18 percent of respondents listed mentors as the top factor in successfully attaining tenure. In the same study, 49 percent listed colleagues as the top factor, implying that informal mentoring may also be a contributor to achieving tenure.

Targeted mentoring programs and professional development for new Extension hires can also improve the new hire’s likelihood of success, as well as the department’s ability to retain faculty and receive a return on their investment. Safrit and Owen (2010) discovered that by providing new faculty with the basic tools and expectations of their roles, universities are more likely to see confidence and success in their new hires. The mentors also benefit from more structured mentoring and advising as it allows them to review and reflect on their performance and skill sets.

Although not the focus of this paper, it is also likely that developing mentor programs during graduate education can provide the foundation for any Extension position and allow graduate students to develop skills they can use in various Extension settings. One way departments can prepare individuals for Extension careers is by incorporating more field-based Extension training into graduate programs. With such experience and training, the transition between graduate school and a tenure-track position that includes Extension may become smoother for the recent graduate. As Barge and Shockley-Zalabak (2008) discuss, there is a vast difference between studying what one should be doing and successfully carrying out and implementing those responsibilities. Similar to teaching or research assistantships, support for Extension assistantships may bridge the gap in experience for newly hired Extension faculty.

Although the benefits for mentors, mentees, and universities appear to be mutual and extensive, what does a formal mentoring program look like for an agricultural economics¹ department and affiliated Extension faculty? Most university-level mentoring programs have focused on teaching faculty, but few have delved specifically into the needs of Extension faculty. The purpose of this paper is to explore the experiences of early-career Extension faculty using semi-structured interviews to capture perceptions and experiences related to mentoring. There is no “one-size-fits-all” Extension mentoring program, but by developing mentoring programs for early-career professionals, tenured faculty have an opportunity to pass on knowledge and experience that enables young professionals to thrive in their predecessors’ roles.

This study is intended to serve as a conversation starter in individual state Extension programs

¹ Throughout this paper, “agricultural economics” will be used in reference to departments composed of agricultural and applied economics faculty in colleges of agriculture and/or natural resources at land-grant universities. We recognize the diversity of departments across the country that are reflected in departmental names but chose “agricultural economics” for ease of reference.

and individual academic departments regarding the use of mentoring or other targeted training programs to enhance the recruitment and retention of new Extension faculty. The findings of this work will serve as a resource for agricultural economics departments and Extension directors as they consider developing or modifying Extension faculty mentoring programs. The authors also hope that tenured Extension faculty will be motivated to work with early-career Extension faculty to improve professional development and retention. Mentoring programs offer Extension faculty and departments the opportunity to experience significant short- and long-term benefits across faculty members.

2 Study Methodology

To understand and evaluate the influence that mentoring may have on developing Extension competencies for early-career faculty in agricultural economics departments, the authors developed the following research framework. First, the study population was defined as early career, tenure-track faculty with Extension appointments, who had less than 10 years of professional experience, post terminal degree, in an agricultural economics department. Second, it was determined that a small sample of respondents subject to a directed line of questioning would be most appropriate for gaining deeper insight into the presence and effectiveness of mentoring programs for Extension faculty. To capture this sample and to ensure representation from different geographic regions and Extension program types, purposive sampling (Hibberts, Burke Johnson, and Hudson 2012) was used to develop a list of 20 early career Extension faculty from land-grant universities across the United States. Potential respondents were then recruited using personal communication via email or telephone.

Third, the authors developed an interview questionnaire with five sections. Each section contained primary questions to be posed to each respondent, followed by secondary prompts where the interviewer could expand on the topic where needed. A semi-structured interview process with a combination of closed- and open-ended questions was selected to allow the interviewer to probe into topics revealed during the interview (Adams 2015). The sections were designed to gain an understanding of the respondent's appointment, academic department, field responsibilities, and professional support received from within and outside the university. The specific sections included: (1) respondent's job characteristics, including Extension responsibilities; (2) description of the Extension program in the respondent's state and its relationship to the respondent's academic department, as well as any mentoring programs for Extension faculty; (3) description of the respondent's job satisfaction, challenges, and the role of mentoring in supporting the respondent's Extension appointment; (4) evaluation of how the respondent's skills in key Extension roles had changed from first starting in their position, to-date; and (5) considerations about future professional development and the potential role of mentoring. The study framework was subject to and approved by the Oklahoma State University Internal Review Board with the appropriate disclosures and consent in place.

Before beginning each remotely administered interview using the questionnaire, the interviewer obtained consent to conduct the interview, as well as consent to record it via Zoom. The recorded interviews were captured for the interviewer's reference purposes only and were not published. Each interviewer also collected notes while administering the questionnaire.

3 Analysis

The results of these interviews were analyzed using descriptive statistics for those variables with numeric values (demographic information and changes in respondents' job skills over time). Open-ended questions were categorized and themed based on content analysis (Patton 2015; Leavey 2017). This method allowed the authors to delineate recurring themes across all interviews, based on descriptively coded notes that were then linked to respondent or institutional characteristics.

The respondent's length of service in their current role, number of years in Extension, and percentage of their position split across Extension, research, teaching, and service/administration were

collected as continuous variables (see Table 1). Information on having Extension as a career goal, the existence of a formal mentoring program at the respondent's institution, and perspectives on seeking out future mentors or becoming a mentor were designed and analyzed as categorical variables. Assessment of participant proficiency over time was based on Likert-scale variables for six specific program areas, with a rating for their proficiency when hired and their proficiency at the time of the survey, to ascertain how their skill levels may have changed.

Last, themes were derived from the open-ended questions by grouping and coding common responses to questions about the strengths and weaknesses of their current position and the role that mentoring did play, or could have played, in building successes and addressing challenges. Several subthemes were derived from other variables, including the uniqueness of the respondent's role and description of their university's mentoring program. Individual comments made by respondents and recorded at the end of the interview reinforced the importance of these subthemes.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Interview Participants

	Mean	Maximum	Minimum
Number of Years in Extension	4.36	10.0	1.5
Number of Years in Current Position	2.96	5.0	1.5
Extension Appointment (DOE)	73.4%	100%	35%
Research Appointment (DOE)	18.75%	50%	0%
Teaching Appointment (DOE)	9.8%	30%	0%
Service Appointment (DOE)	1.5%	10%	0%

A total of 14 early career Extension professionals participated in the semi-structured interviews in December 2021. To keep participants' identities undisclosed, the institutions at which they were employed were not recorded. However, an effort was made to reach a broad and diverse group of Extension faculty from across the United States. On average, participants had been in their current roles for just under 3 years but had been in previous Extension positions such that the average time in Extension was 4.4 years. Interestingly, 36 percent of participants indicated that an Extension career was not their goal from the start. One participant suggested that Extension should be part of any faculty position regardless of the appointment.

Concerning appointments, the average distribution of effort (DOE) for Extension was 73 percent. It was clear from the interviews that Extension appointments can differ greatly across institutions. While 79 percent of participants were in what could be considered majority Extension appointments, few were exclusively Extension such that 79 percent also held split appointments beyond Extension. The average research, teaching, and service DOE was 19 percent, 10 percent, and 1.5 percent, respectively. While there were participants with 100 percent Extension DOEs, the minimum Extension DOE in the study group was 35 percent. Descriptive statistics for the study group can be seen in Table 1.

4 Results

Overall, participants responded openly to the questionnaire and the parts of their roles that were enjoyable as well as the challenges they encountered. Most expressed satisfaction in making a difference in the lives of their stakeholders and clients. They enjoyed the networks developed and the trust established with stakeholders and colleagues. However, challenges were also present in their roles. Five major challenges were identified by the study group: evaluating Extension programs; obtaining grants and funding; building stakeholder networks; balancing academic appointments and feeling valued; and improving time management and incorporating ongoing professional development. Some of the above themes surfaced in the open-ended questions and were reinforced by comparative proficiency ranking

questions. Participants were asked to rank their proficiency in key areas on the first day of their Extension position, and those results were compared to their assessment of proficiency on the day of the interview. The six proficiency skill areas—research and scholarship, program development and delivery, program marketing, program funding, program evaluation, and developing Extension materials—were ranked on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “knew little about it” and 5 being “very proficient.” The two greatest increases in proficiency among early career professionals were in program evaluation and grants and funding, which will be discussed in detail first.

4.1 Evaluation of Extension Programs

An area identified as a clear challenge for Extension professionals was the evaluation of Extension programs. As can be seen in Table 2, when asked to evaluate their proficiency in this area, participants rated their proficiency as a 1.5 on the 5-point Likert scale when they began their careers. Of the areas participants were asked to evaluate, it was noteworthy that evaluation was the area that participants ranked lowest initially. When asked to evaluate their proficiency at present, the average rating was 3.4. This 129 percent increase was the largest gain among the proficiencies evaluated; however, along with program marketing, this was the lowest-rated category based on *current* proficiency. Further, 14 percent of participants specifically referenced program evaluation when asked about additional training areas that would be useful as their careers advanced. These results suggest that this is an area where mentoring has the potential to be of benefit to new Extension professionals but may also be of benefit to mid-career Extension professionals.

Table 2. Participant Proficiency in Key Areas, when Hired and Currently (5-point Likert Scale, with 5 being the highest)

Skills/Competency	When Hired	Currently
Research and Scholarship	2.79	3.96
Extension Program Development and Delivery	2.29	4.00
Extension Program Marketing	1.93	3.43
Extension Program Evaluation	1.50	3.43
Extension Program Funding	2.14	4.29
Developing Educational Materials	2.43	3.89

Program evaluation is a way to communicate the quality and effectiveness of Extension programs, but it is complicated by the array of audiences, colleagues, stakeholders, and funding sources that are engaged in programs (Braverman and Engle 2009). Mentoring is one avenue to provide case-by-case advice on program evaluation design and implementation. Thus, it was insightful to look at the formal mentoring programs discussed in the interviews and how they operated. While 64 percent of participants said their institution had a formal mentoring program, none indicated that there was a formal evaluation component to the mentoring program. This is not to say that formal evaluation is the only way to provide solid feedback and guidance to early-career professionals, but this may speak to a general challenge being encountered by participants. Structured evaluation may be a challenge faced at multiple points along the Extension system—at the macro-level through the crucial input given to early-career professionals and at more of a micro-level as one attempts to evaluate individual Extension programs.

In addition to respondents indicating that structured mentoring programs were largely informal, they also suggested that they primarily use their mentors to understand and gauge their progress toward promotion and tenure. Certainly, this is an important role for a mentoring committee, but it is also important to note that more than one respondent stated that “there is often a disconnect between what is perceived as necessary to become tenured and what is most needed by Extension clientele.” This speaks

to the need for mentors who can provide constructive feedback for tenure and promotion, but also develop quality Extension programs that benefit the clientele. Part of developing and delivering good Extension programming is having a mechanism by which to evaluate and modify those programs. While this is an extremely challenging task in any regard, it is impossible without a suitable evaluation mechanism. This is related to the second-highest proficiency increase reported by survey respondents—program funding.

4.2 Grants and Funding

Across the proficiencies analyzed, the greatest magnitude increase in on-the-job growth reported was in program funding. Participants had a slightly higher initial grasp on this proficiency as compared to program evaluation. At the start of their time as an Extension economist, the average proficiency ranking for program funding was 2.14, although individually, some reported their program funding proficiency was as high as 4. When asked to rate their current program funding proficiency, most reported 4 and 5 with an average of 4.28. This high current rating indicates that young Extension professionals had to actively participate in program funding and become proficient in it quickly. In fact, 30 percent of the participants went on to list specific aspects of grant writing and grant management among the other skills Extension faculty need to have when starting their new roles. A few very clearly outlined expectations their leadership has on pursuing grants to fund their programs or expressed concern about budgets.

Others indicated the value of grants went beyond the direct support of a program. Grants also aided in developing applied research and building relationships across disciplines or with specialists in their area. Regional or multi-institutional grants enhance networking and collaboration. One interviewee said, “I am concerned that we are duplicating a lot of work across universities when we should be leveraging each other, given fewer specialists are being hired in Extension. When we get a call to report on something, we need to get it into the hands of the right people who are working on that topic. Collaboration happens organically when you are aware of similar programs in other universities, being aware of topics that people are working on.”

Further, many listed “how to communicate the value of Extension” as a critical training area or challenge going forward, and “putting a value on Extension work” was listed several times when asked about program evaluation. Extension faculty are often the ones who develop key relationships with stakeholders in the state and have the greatest potential to link applied research with real application—something that funding agencies highly value. Most participants listed their favorite aspects of the job as some variation on developing relationships: having a real impact on clients and stakeholders; communicating with people and listening to their needs; and linking those needs to applied research. Yet, there was a struggle to express or quantify the value of those relationships to departmental or university leadership and funding agencies, which can stand in the way of successful funding. Stakeholder network development, while reported as important and satisfying, was also listed as one of the participants’ major challenges.

4.3 Building Stakeholder Networks

When asked about their primary clientele, respondents noted a broad and diverse set of stakeholders. Responses included producers, Extension agents/educators, government organizations, commodity groups, lenders, agribusinesses, and so on. The number of individuals and organizations that an Extension professional can serve is daunting in size. To develop a solid and long-lasting Extension program, it is necessary for the Extension professional to create a diverse and broad network of relationships. When participants were asked about other skills needed to be successful, 29 percent specifically mentioned skills such as relationship-building, networking, and interpersonal interaction. These skills are necessary to develop those crucial stakeholder networks. Without a strong network of stakeholders and the ability to place a value on an Extension program in a state, it becomes much easier

for Extension positions to be eliminated, or converted into other types of positions when someone leaves an institution. By creating a well-rounded Extension program supported by various stakeholders, it is easier to maintain the program beyond the retirement or departure of the program creator.

When participants were asked how they planned to build their professional networks, most responses gravitated toward opportunities within the agricultural economics profession. A couple of respondents mentioned in-state stakeholder or commodity groups, but most responses referenced organizations like the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (AAEA) and the Southern Agricultural Economics Association (SAEA), or gatherings such as meetings, conferences, and committees. AAEA has an Extension section that can be used for networking; the Western Agricultural Economics Association (WAEA) has a track at the annual meeting specifically for Extension education. Further, these networks can be engaged while those considering Extension careers are still graduate students, either through participation in presentations or participation in competitions.

While these professional networks are extremely valuable, they are unlikely to be fruitful in developing in-state stakeholder networks organically. It would be necessary for the individual to purposely seek advice from Extension professionals in similar positions at other institutions as to how they went about building their networks, as was suggested by one study participant. Given the importance of building these networks, this would seem another logical area for which mentoring could provide valuable guidance.

4.4 Balancing Appointments and Feeling Valued

While participants felt a great deal of satisfaction in the difference they were making, one of the most daunting challenges was in balancing the many priorities associated with split appointments while feeling valued in their departments and the profession at large. Among participants with a split appointment, the percentage of Extension ranged from 35 percent to 87.5 percent and was complemented by responsibilities in research, teaching, and/or administration/service. The most common split cited included two responsibility areas (43 percent of participants), followed by those having 3 responsibility areas (29 percent of participants). In addition to having a diverse set of responsibilities in their faculty appointments, many reported having diversity inherent to their Extension work. This was reported either in terms of the types of work they did (travel, presentation, applied research, engagement with stakeholders, writing Extension publications, interdisciplinary work with other departments) or the types of stakeholders they supported as agricultural economists as previously mentioned. It is also important to note that, although this paper is directed toward the mentorship of early-career Extension faculty, it can be considered vital that agricultural economics programs are providing all graduate students and new hires with guidance on handling split positions and the demands of their new roles.

Participants often cited the complicated institutional structures within which they worked, as their appointments differed and they faced varying degrees of integration of Extension within their home departments. In addition, respondents also noted that budget cuts and the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their ability to work successfully in Extension. They cited their Extension roles as being demanding, and formal mentoring through their departments was more frequently targeted at the promotion and tenure (P&T) path rather than helping them meet the demands of developing a career in Extension.

Several respondents noted that being a faculty member with an Extension appointment entailed a different role compared to their departmental counterparts and that this role is often not well-understood within their academic department. As previously noted, participants expressed concern over a disconnect between the work required for tenure and what was most helpful to their Extension clients. Ideally, one would integrate the Extension, research, and teaching elements of their programs to the extent possible. However, this is not always practical due to the nature of Extension demands or the needed turnaround time on Extension programming. Further, the many hours spent responding to

stakeholder requests for information do not seem to hold significant weight in tenure review. Several felt pulled in multiple directions, which seems to be a natural consequence of the respondents' institutional structure and external demands from an array of client groups.

Interesting, the external stressors seem to be a result of that which respondents found most interesting about their work. They reported enjoying teaching, traveling, finding solutions to real-world problems involving their clients, and knowing that their work has resulted in something tangible and impactful. In addition, they reported making gains in the diverse roles they are called upon to fill through their appointments. Returning to the proficiency scale, respondents reported growth of 42 percent or more across all skill areas, with the greatest gains in the two areas previously discussed, program evaluation (an increase of 129 percent), followed by program funding (an increase of 100 percent).

Several respondents mentioned that mentoring through their department's P&T process did help with working toward balance in their appointments, but most frequently that P&T supported them in making sound longer-term career decisions based on the goal of achieving tenure. Informal mentorships, established by the respondents themselves outside of the P&T process, appear to have played a greater role in advising them on developing a career in Extension. In these cases, respondents sought out one or more mentors to support them in the areas *the respondents* identified as most important to their Extension roles. In fact, 14 out of 15 respondents reported having some form of an informal mentoring relationship, either through other faculty at their home institutions or through another university. Five respondents mentioned participating in early career mentoring through AAEA, but not all felt it was designed to support the Extension component of their appointments. This challenge associated with developing leadership skills and seeking Extension-relevant training leads to the final challenging theme for participants: personal development and time management.

4.5 Personal Development and Time Management

Participants expressed a desire for further personal development in areas such as confidence in their new roles or properly delegating their time. A portion found it difficult to sift through the priorities that deliver the most impact in their programs, not only for their clients and stakeholders but also for their long-term careers. This links back to previous comments on the difficulty of valuing their Extension impact and quantifying the impacts of their work in the tenure process. Many respondents also felt it difficult to know when or how to say no to the continuous requests that may come from producers or commodity groups, or within their respective departments and administration. For new hires, a mentor program with seasoned faculty from the department can be vital to the early career professional's success and avoiding burnout. Mentors can provide advice about how they handle or balance their roles' requirements and requests.

As previously stated, mentoring can be described as a relationship for growth (Rolfe 2006). Although formal mentor programs are utilized across some departments for new hires, the lack of focus on assisting new hires to navigate and build confidence in their new Extension roles resulted in mixed feelings about mentoring for development as an Extension professional. In addition, there was a feeling that graduate programs did not always prepare new faculty for Extension roles. Participants in the survey wished that graduate programs assisted in understanding the basic components of Extension and the differences inherent to working with academic versus Extension audiences. Understanding these differences would benefit those whose aim is to work in Extension, as well as others working alongside Extension faculty in teaching, research, and administration/service roles.

For early-career Extension professionals, providing mentorship that helps new hires understand the expectations and responsibilities in their newly appointed positions can help ease the transition from graduate student to a professional career. Respondents who participated in formal mentor programs felt the program had some benefits but did not specifically support growth for Extension professionals. Some respondents were participants in the early career mentoring through AAEA. Although participants may have felt the program was helpful regarding research, most believed there was a lack of resources or

advice for those with an Extension appointment. Wearing many hats and juggling a significant amount of subject matter or covering large geographic areas were considered struggles and overwhelming for some respondents. A mentorship program that provides guidance and support during these moments may be a critical asset for a new hire, especially for those with split appointments. Helping new Extension faculty learn how to navigate the waters of Extension in their respective states, regardless of their specialty, can lead to new hires being more effective, confident, and long-term employees for the university.

5 A New Path Forward for Mentoring Extension Professionals

This study asked early career professionals to highlight mentoring, but the themes that were revealed show a broader set of needs than most formalized mentoring relationships typically address. Most formal mentoring programs were reported to focus on tenure and promotion or internal, departmental issues. The participants did feel that mentors serve a purpose and are important. However, the formal mentor programs they experienced did not necessarily address the unique challenges Extension specialists face as described in this article. Rather, informal mentoring was used to address challenges as they arose for a specific position, in a specific Extension system. With the collection of these results, now may be the time for departments to think outside of the formal mentoring box for Extension.

Extension programs often have a long history, and specialists may be juggling a combination of new and continuing programs. Several survey respondents focused on the possible role of recent retirees in mentoring and passing on valuable institutional knowledge and contacts. Many participants described some aspect of network-building, working with clients, or stakeholder communication in either their challenges or future training needs. By working with predecessors, new Extension hires may have a higher likelihood of developing those necessary networks and contacts to build a successful Extension program. However, it may not always be feasible to integrate retired faculty and specialists in mentoring programs, and program directions change over time and with evolving client needs. Whether interactions are regular or infrequent, a concerted effort to engage multiple generations of faculty may facilitate passing critical background information to new hires.

Another option may be developing networks to shadow individuals that hold similar sorts of positions in other geographic areas. For example, new hires could attend meetings held by colleagues to observe their communication and presentation styles, and how they market and evaluate their programs. While a great deal of advice and information can be shared through phone and email, observation through shadowing Extension colleagues at meetings can be a powerful tool. However, it was recognized that this also requires that universities and departments provide support for such mentoring, both in terms of time and travel funds to do so.

Departments may also need to consider supporting additional, optional training for those who wish to take advantage of it. Specific training desires from respondents included communications and media training, grants and contracts management, leadership training, and program planning and evaluation. Many of these training options may be available through broader university career services and could be recommended as appropriate by leaders and mentors.

Furthermore, Extension mentoring may need to start well before the first day on the job. Few graduate programs have Extension education or Extension skills development as a part of their formal education, and those that do may rely heavily on experiential learning alongside an existing Extension specialist. Many described the frustration of not knowing what they should be doing with their Extension role and how beneficial it would be if graduate programs could help with “the basics” of Extension. Some examples include presenting to an Extension audience versus academic audiences and speaking with the media. Without knowledge of basic Extension programming or skills to handle the requirements of a diverse job, it is easy for new Extension hires to lack confidence. By developing programs for graduate students that target not only understanding Extension but also personal development as a new professional, departments can help students understand their strengths and areas for growth before beginning their careers.

Personal development and growth are ultimately up to the individual; however, graduate programs that provide opportunities for students to learn about Extension and how experienced career Extension economists balance and process information also help early career professionals feel more confident in their roles and prepare them for an Extension career. Graduate student engagement provides students with the basic tools for working in an Extension role and managing the demands of such a role. With this tool set, graduate programs are producing new hires ready and more confident for their new roles, and the probability of retaining them in Extension positions increases. These experiences could be enhanced by providing students with a broader understanding of the differences in Extension across the country. As one participant said, “the bigger problem to me is what happens when the places training Extension economists are only training a certain type of Extension economist, and don’t give students they are training any sort of flexibility in terms of understanding how to develop institutional knowledge in the program they are going to.”

6 Conclusion

As a source of reliable and unbiased information, Extension serves a critical role in land-grant universities across the United States. This study interviewed a group of early career Extension specialists on their experiences since becoming a part of the Extension system. The study group clearly expressed the value they see in what they do for their clients and university, even when they weren’t convinced their universities saw the value. Several participants described the need for leadership training and development in the future. They expressed their responsibility to mentor others in their field, indicating a willingness and desire to become future leaders in the land-grant system. Extension is a challenging role to play in any state, balancing many needs and challenges while keeping up with fast-paced changes in local, regional, and national economies. Extension faculty have gained skills that make them a valuable resource for the university and the communities in which they work. Department heads, deans, and Extension directors can encourage a new path forward for mentoring and training incoming Extension faculty, by leveraging those skills to develop strong leaders in our profession.

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