



Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings- Methodology and Demographics

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Introduction and Background

Extension professionals often leave for industry and other similar organizations between their third and seventh work anniversary. This is also the time when Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) faculty go through their initial promotion within the organization and are first eligible to become members of Epsilon Sigma Phi. There is a significant cost in getting an agent to this point in his or her career. It has often been expressed that Extension trains these agents, and then they move on to greener pastures. However, we have not thoroughly explored why they leave. This study allows us to identify challenges and develop possible interventions that may encourage these agents to stay in the organization.

This study looked at mid-career agents and specialists between three and seven years of service to evaluate their needs at this stage in their career. Through a series of focus groups, the research team identified the challenges and needed support for these agents. The purpose of the project was to identify professional development opportunities, and possible changes that might encourage mid-career VCE professionals to remain in the Extension organization. Objectives for the project were to 1) Identify career-related challenges experienced by VCE professionals in years three to seven in their careers, 2) Identify opportunities for change in the work environment or professional development programming that increase support and retention for Extension professionals in this time, 3) Identify unique and shared needs for Extension agents and specialist, and 4) Increase visibility, membership, and activity for the Alpha Gamma Chapter of Epsilon Sigma Phi (ESP) within VCE. The VCE Continuing Professional Development Specialist served as the lead researcher on this project. To better achieve these goals, other members of the research team included the leadership of the Alpha Gamma Chapter of ESP, and the VCE Associate Director for Field Operations and Administration.

This project was supported by a national ESP professional development grant. ESP is often referred to as the professional development organization for Extension veterans. There are chapters across the country. This is an honorary fraternity and Extension professionals are invited to join, generally in the mid-career stage, dependent on the bylaws of the state chapter. In Virginia, Extension professionals are eligible to join ESP after their third year in the organization. Roles of individuals eligible to join ESP are also determined by the state organization. In Virginia, membership is open to all agents, specialists, and administrators within VCE.

This project was divided into four categories. These are 1) competency areas, 2) sources of stress, 3) role of needs assessment in work, and 4) mentoring and support. Warm-up questions provided demographic data for the project. This project was deemed “not human subjects research” by the Virginia Tech Institutional Resource Board. This publication provides the background, methodology, and demographics for this project. Specific reports are provided for each category.

Methods

A list of all VCE agents and specialists between years three and seven of service was obtained from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences on November 3, 2020 (N=131). This list was divided into agents (n=95) and specialists (n=36). Each of these groups were divided again based on whether the agents had been promoted or the specialists were considered either tenure-track or non-tenure track. From each of these individuals, eight were randomly selected using the random number generator in Excel from the two specialist groups and sixteen from each agent group to receive an invitation to participate in a focus group. The invitation included a link to a Doodle poll where the invitee could indicate their availability. If someone declined, the next potential participant on the appropriate list was invited to join and given the option to participate in the Doodle poll. Focus group sessions were assigned for the appropriate groups based on availability based on the responses to the Doodle poll to achieve six to eight participants in each of the six focus group sessions.

The focus group script was developed by the research team to achieve the intended objectives guided by prior work on the topic. The script is included as the Appendix of this document. Two members of the research team presided over each focus group, one conducting the focus group and the second serving as an observer, note-taker, providing synopsis and asking clarifying questions when needed. Sessions were conducted via Zoom with a recording and transcript provided for each session.

The lead researcher did a rough edit on the transcript following the session. Then the other member of the research team associated with that session reviewed and revised the transcript. The transcripts were provided to focus group participants for further cleaning in a Google drive for a week. Final transcripts were loaded into Atlas.ti© and coded by question using emerging codes.

At the conclusion of the focus group sessions, the research team met to discuss their observations from their focus group. Each of the four sessions focused on one of the categories. An overview of the demographics was developed by the research lead and reviewed in the first of the research teams discussions. Research team discussions were conducted, recorded, and transcribed via Zoom. The lead researcher cleaned the transcripts and provided them to the research team for their further review and revision. Final transcripts were loaded into Atlas.ti© and coded again by question and using emerging codes attributed to the research team.

Demographics

The six focus group sessions were conducted between February 25 and March 12, 2021. A total of 32 Extension professionals participated in the session. Of these, 24 participants were agents, and eight participants were specialists.

The average years of service in VCE across the focus group participants was 5.22 years and median of 5 years. The range of years reported was from two to nine years. Two individuals did not indicate their years of service. Another individual exceeded the inclusion criteria at nine years of service. This was not identified until the focus group was underway so they participated and are included in the responses. Another reported being at 7.5 years which was probably due to the delay between receiving the list and

conducting the focus groups. This person was also included in the focus group and responses. Similarly, two individuals reporting 2 and 2.5 years were included.

Areas of specialization identified by agents were 4-H (33%), Agriculture & Natural Resources (21%), Family and Consumer Sciences (17%), Horticulture (12%), SNAP-Ed (13%), and Food Safety (4%). In addition, agents defined their expertise in agricultural tourism, animal science, commercial horticulture, education, food safety, horticulture, leadership development, life skills, local foods, nutrition, physical activity, public speaking, and STEM. Areas of specialization identified by the specialists were Applied Animal Behavior, Economic Development, Financial and Economic Well-being, Food Microbiology and Produce Safety, Research and Evaluation, Row Crop Entomology and Weed Science. Specialists also defined their expertise in curriculum development; dogs; entomology related to corn, soybeans, small grains, and peanuts; foodborne pathogens; food and nutrition programs; horses; household finances and economic well-being; program development; small fruits; and weed management.

Of the agents, fourteen reported that they were promoted, eleven reported that they were not promoted yet. Another agent was unclear on the promotion process and two others did not disclose their promotion status. Of the specialists, one was promoted, one was pre-tenure, and four were in the process of pursuing either promotion or tenure. Two non-tenure track specialists expressed concern that there is not a promotion process for their positions.

Agents reported taking different paths to their current positions. One was a county paid program educator for four years prior to becoming an agent. Another began work as a 4-H/Youth Development agent and then shifted to family and consumer sciences. One took time off between stints as an agent to raise a family. Two others indicated that they are in their second career as agents, having worked previously as school teachers. One specialist shared that they were an agent prior to pursuing a PhD, returning to the organization as a specialist.

Appendix – Focus Group Script

Professional Development Needs of VCE Mid-Career Extension Professionals Focus Group Script

This project was deemed “not human subject research” by Virginia Tech IRB

Script

The focus group moderator will follow a standard protocol for each session that includes:

- Welcome and opening remarks ● Informed consent form review
- Establish guidelines
- Questions and answers period
- Wrap-Up

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS

Welcome, and thank you all for being here today to share with us your thoughts and opinions regarding your professional development needs as mid-career Extension faculty.

I am Karen Vines, and I will facilitate our discussion group. We are going to focus our discussion today on your professional development and needs to enhance your career success. My task is to keep our conversation going, and to keep us on time.

I also want to introduce <insert name here> who is also here as a facilitator, representing the leadership team of Epsilon Sigma Phi. <Insert pronoun here> will be taking notes to help ensure we don't miss any details, and may, at times, be asked to summarize the group's comments to ensure we are effectively capturing your comments.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- As we ask questions, they will appear in the chat, so please open your chat window to follow along.
- We want an atmosphere of respect for everyone's opinions, and where everyone has a chance to speak. Let's talk one at a time, and speak loud and clear.
- We would like to spend no more than 90 minutes in this focus group meeting. We have a series of pre-formed questions, but also will leave time for your suggestions. This may cause me to occasionally interrupt you to keep the discussion focused and on track.
- Please do not use your name or names of others during our conversations. You can, however, go by your initials.
- We ask you to please be as honest with us as you can when answering questions.
- There are no right or wrong responses to the questions; we just want your thoughts and opinions.
- If you have a question about the process at any time, please do not hesitate to stop and ask questions.
- Please silence or turn off all electronic devices. We sincerely appreciate your attention to this focus group.
- We request that everyone respect the group by not repeating what is said during this focus group outside of this experience.
- This discussion will be recorded on Zoom and with a digital audio recording device to ensure we capture all of your thoughts and suggestions. We will not link your identity to any of your comments.
- Lastly, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to and you can stop your participation at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

Focus Group Questions

Warm-Up

1. Let's quickly go around and share a few facts so that you all can understand the make-up of our group:
 - a. What is your title?
 - b. What is your area of expertise?
 - c. How long have you worked in Virginia Cooperative Extension?
 - d. Where are you in terms of the promotion or tenure process?

Meeting Needs of VCE mid-career Extension faculty related to competency areas – Berven et al. (2020) identified five critical competency areas for Extension faculty. They include communication, educational design, leadership, professionalism, and subject matter knowledge. We would like to explore these areas. We will give you time to think about these briefly before we discuss your responses.

1. In which of these areas do you feel most competent? (communication, educational design, leadership, professionalism, subject matter knowledge)
 - a. How have you developed your competency in this area?
 - b. Do you see areas for your further growth in this area?
 - c. What do you see as sources of support for achieving further growth in this area?
2. In which of these areas do you feel least competent? (communication, educational design, leadership, professionalism, subject matter knowledge)
 - a. Why do you feel least competent in this area?
 - b. What sources of support have you had in this area?
 - c. What are some challenges you have faced in this area?
 - d. What could VCE do to help you increase your competence in this area?
3. What other competencies do you need support to help develop?

Sources of stress - A 2019 study of Extension educators by Donaldson & Franck identified four categories as sources of stress. They are 1) over engagement with work, 2) challenging work schedules, 3) supervising others, and 4) uncertain funding.

1. Talk about times when you feel stress associated with your work?
2. What mechanisms do you use to overcome or alleviate stress?
3. What could VCE do to help you feel less stress?

Role of needs assessment – Powers et al. (2017) found that thorough community needs assessment helped Extension professionals focus their efforts in priority in areas and achieve better work-life balance. (Community can be place-based or geographically-defined or defined around a common interest.)

1. What methods do you use to assess the needs of your community?
2. What are the benefits and/or challenges associated with the methods you use for needs assessment?
3. How do your needs assessment findings connect with your unit or departmental Extension priorities?
4. What could VCE provide to assist you with needs assessment?

Mentoring & Support – This project is sponsored by a grant provided by National Epsilon Sigma Phi and has been developed through a partnership with Virginia Epsilon Sigma Phi. Epsilon Sigma Phi has often been referred to as “the Extension veterans’ organization.” Epsilon Sigma Phi works across program areas, topics, and across administrative and professional ranks to provide opportunities for networking and professional development in many of the areas discussed previously not related to subject matter expertise (communication, educational design, leadership, professionalism, emerging topics, etc.).

1. Please describe your mentoring experience since joining VCE.
2. Please describe your involvement in professional organizations or associations.
3. How might ESP support you in your professional development outside your subject matter area?

Describe Mid-Career Agents’ Perceptions of Organizational Support and Effectiveness

1. How does your current position fit into your long-term career goals?
 - a. What challenges sometimes make it difficult for you to think of this position as a longterm career?
 - b. What factors make you consider this position as a long-term career?
2. Do you hope to move to different roles within the organization? (other units, district director, administrator, specialist, unit coordinator, other program areas, AREC)

Wrap-Up

We are now at the end of the focus group questions. We want to sincerely thank you for your time and input. If you have any questions or final comments, please feel free to share them now.

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