



## Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Organizational Support and Effectiveness

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### Introduction and Background

This publication includes the findings of focus groups conducted with Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) agents and specialists in spring 2021 related to organizational support and effectiveness. This area of inquiry was one of four categories included in the study of mid-career agents and specialists, between three and seven years of service, to evaluate their needs at this stage in their career. The prompt for the findings was for professionals to share how their current positions fitted within their long-term career goals and to identify other roles in the organization in which they may hope to work.

Links to findings related to other areas of inquiry are as provided:

- Competencies (<https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/ALCE/ALCE-287/ALCE-287.html>),
- Sources of stress ([https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs\\_ext\\_vt\\_edu/en/ALCE/alce-290/alce-290.html](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/alce-290/alce-290.html)),
- Needs assessment ([https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs\\_ext\\_vt\\_edu/en/ALCE/alce-294/alce-294.html](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/alce-294/alce-294.html)),
- Onboarding and mentoring ([https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs\\_ext\\_vt\\_edu/en/ALCE/alce-293/alce-293.html](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/alce-293/alce-293.html)), and
- Professional development organizations ([https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs\\_ext\\_vt\\_edu/ALCE/alce-292/ALCE-292.pdf](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/ALCE/alce-292/ALCE-292.pdf)).

### Methods

A complete methodology of the project is included in an earlier publication, Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Methodology and Demographics ([https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs\\_ext\\_vt\\_edu/en/ALCE/ALCE-279/ALCE-279.html](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/ALCE-279/ALCE-279.html)). The premise for including this section was to identify challenges and benefits influence individuals ability to look at their current positions as fitting with their long-term career goals. These findings will be used to develop recommendations

within the focus group participants and research team to be used in strengthening the VCE organization. Recommendations will be shared widely through presentations at professional meetings and peer-reviewed publications.

## Findings Overview

Emergent and a priori themes used to analyze this data include previous careers held by VCE professionals, perspectives of VCE professionals on future in current position, consideration of alternative but similar positions in VCE, potential positions outside VCE, challenges making professionals consider alternative careers, factors making professionals see their current career as a long-term fit, and opportunities for VCE to increase employee support. Data was collected and initially analyzed separately by agent and specialist, but is combined within this report with labels to identify differences between the two groups.

## Career path perspectives

### Previous careers held by VCE professionals

Some agents were employed as school teachers prior to coming to VCE. Another agent did not specify their position, but said she,

I had a . . . regular job right before I transferred to this one. And I didn't see myself leaving that one. But there was an increase in pay to come to Extension and I did have a degree that was applicable, and so I took the jump.

### Professionals wanting to stay in current positions

**Agents** - Some agents were very positive when asked about their current jobs fitting into their long-term job aspirations One agent said,

So, does my current position fit into your long term - absolutely! I think there are a lot of things that I am gaining for my future. That they support me. You know, I got a master's degree for this position. But does staying in Extension long-term make sense, I don't know. I sure hope so.

Another agent responded,

And that kind of boils into would you like to move up I'm an hour and a half, one way from our district office and that's that would be the next level. So Senior Agent is probably where I'm going to cap and so that's probably what I'll achieve hope to achieve later. But I do hope that my community wants to keep me, and I am able to stay. It's a good job, it's a good job for the area, and I really do enjoy it and I do take it seriously. And I hope that my Community sees the value in in position and that I'm doing an okay job.

**Specialists** – Some specialists felt their roles prevented them from exploring other positions within VCE. One specialist said,

I don't really think those are in my purview right now, given what I do now. And I don't think the specialist position would track to any of those positions, and so I think for me it's really about enhancing the role I have or potentially moving to another role at Virginia Tech unless there's something changed about - maybe if Extension if VCE does - about other structures. For the current structure, the way it's set up with those leadership position, no to those, really.

### Professionals consideration of alternative positions in VCE

**Agents** - When asked about moving to different roles within the VCE organization, one agent said she would like to move to another county closer to family. She said,

As far as moving to different roles, . . . I really like being an agent. I've heard a lot of people who moved up to other roles, where they didn't interact with the public as much, telling me that that was the one thing that they really missed. And that socialness is important. That's the one thing that's been some missing this past year. And so, I don't necessarily see myself, leaving the role of an agent. But if something were to come open in an area closer to the proximity of [town name], I would definitely consider transferring. We've got one son. We just had a grandchild. They live [in that area]. It's a little bit further from here than I'd like to be . . . to be involved at that point. So, from a purely personal standpoint, that would really be the thing that I would consider. If it got me a little closer to where he was.

One agent sees the opportunities for advancement as being “flat” because of geographic restrictions but would be interested in exploring other possibilities if that could be overcome. He said,

That, and you know, echoing what others have said, that there's very limited roles and opportunities in VCE for that that movement -- one of those barriers is geographic. You know, there are some positions that I think I would be interested, but they're on campus. [I'm] not at [age] 54 moving my family to Blacksburg for that type of position. So that kind of crosses out a whole slew of possibilities there. I don't have aspirations to be a district director who is just dealing with HR minutia from day in, day out. I couldn't struggle through that type of responsibility so there's not much more opportunities that I see lateral or upward movement. I'd be curious to see how other states, do you know is that model very flat in other organizations, as it is VCE? You got agents and then you've got your support staff on campus. Is it that flat? Because, I'd be interested in possibly seeing what other roles there, there could be.

You know, for professionals I'm not interested in taking any of the program leader positions. I don't, hopefully I'm not speaking bad or ill about anybody in the group, but I don't see that as filling a critical need for Extension. I think I see it, more taking resources from the full-time staff that we need to do the work that needs to be done. I am hoping that possibly with teleworking and COVID, changes that have come in a lot of industries that maybe VCE sees that you don't necessarily have to be on campus for some positions and some of those positions might open up, and allow for you to be out more in the field, or in other geographic locations, rather than to be on campus to do that.

Many agents stated directly that they had no desire to serve as a unit coordinator. However, several agents had interest in moving to different program areas. A 4-H agent expressed interest in an FCS position. She said,

I honestly do not want to be unit coordinator. Because that's a hard job, that's a really hard job. I don't know. If I was vol-un-told, I would take it. But I'm not going to volunteer myself. . . . But as far as program area, if the FCS position ever opened up, I might consider transferring into that position. I would still have a huge focus on youth in our community and still want to do a lot of in-person programs.

A SNAP-Ed agent also expressed interest in moving into an FCS role to be “in a regularly funded” position and get away from the limitations of the SNAP-Ed grant.

Several agents expressed interest in moving into specialist roles. One agent felt this would help them reduce their work “outside normal business hours.” Another agent considered multiple roles, including specialist. She said,

I would like to move up within the organization. I'm not sure exactly within what sense. Eventually, like [another focus group participant], I would love to get a PhD. But I'm not there right now. I need kind of a break from school and that whole thing. So, whether it be a specialist role, area coordinator. I don't think that I would want to be a unit coordinator, because I saw the stress that my UC was under and I don't think work life balance was really there. So, I don't think that, but who knows?

Another agent said likes the idea of the specialist role, but not the grant-writing often associated with it. He said,

Do I want to move up to different roles within the organization? Sure. I would. I would love to be a specialist. But I don't want to be a specialist if somebody is going to tell me all I can do is chase money. I think the most effective specialists are those that are still getting work done with program delivery. They know better how to be a specialist when they better understand the changing needs of those in the field. I don't want to be a unit coordinator. I don't even necessarily want to be an administrator. I wouldn't mind being a specialist. I like working in the unit. I mean an AREC would sound really fun. But again, very few of those people in those positions look like me. And I am not a yes man or puppet to anyone. I have a mind of my own, and I don't think that there's a place for me in VCE in any role other than doing what I'm doing right now.

Other agents have administrative aspirations. One agent is gaining leadership skills to use in a future position by serving as a president of a state organization that they can use within other parts of the VCE organization. Another agent said,

Because I come from an administrative background, I could very much see myself moving into a unit coordinator, or a district director or some type of administrator specialist position. Other program areas? I like working with kids so I can see myself in the 4-H realm. ARECs? I think are awesome, but there's none close to me and I'm not trying to uproot myself, my family, or some of the other things that we have got going on. I see growth opportunities, and I don't plan on going anywhere.

**Specialists** – Many specialists expressed interest in taking a leadership role in VCE in the future. One specialist said,

But, I would like to get involved in some sort of leadership eventually to have some influence on the younger generation in regards to what I believe are important. And there are people who are doing that, but maybe I just need to do it myself to see the impact and realize the value of being a good leader. I think you just have to be in there and you will maybe appreciate leadership even more when you're in their shoes.

Another specialist is growing a program she hopes to lead in the future. Another specialist expressed interest in taking “on more international work” in the future.

One specialist expressed interest in exploring moving to a teaching and research appointment. She said,

Maybe sort of the grass is greener, but having like the teaching and research appointment I guess. I may be willing to give that a shot if the opportunity came up. Just because I think it could lend itself to a better work life balance – right? The students aren't going to be calling you after the semester ends – right? You could just avoid some of those kinds of things. And so, I don't know if that's right or wrong, just kind of where I am.

Another specialist expressed interest in seeking an administrative or agency role later in her career. She said,

Now I'd like to spend the last 10 years of my career and either administration or maybe USDA EPA regulatory. And that's partly ego, and that's partly that I think it's our role to step away from our jobs in an appropriate time and not die at our desk like so many old white men did before us. Because, why are we training all these graduate students if we're never going to get out of their way? Right? Like there's only one of us per state and there's only so many states that have the kind of agriculture that we're doing. So, I think it's our responsibility to leave to move on, at an appropriate stage in our career.

One of the specialists indicated that she may move to a different university department in the future. She said,

I might eventually shift over to a [different] department because that is kind of my passion area, if I decided to go the full academic route. Which I'm not sure. So that would mean me leaving VCE. So, it's just this kind of push and pull.

## Factors contributing to long-term career aspirations

### Agents

Factors that contributed to agents seeing their jobs as long-term careers included benefits, working with clientele, flexibility of the position, being able to meet community needs, connection with their personal interests, being able to teach, creativity in the role, being able to obtain educational degrees, and the colleagues with which they worked. In terms of benefits, respondents referred to happiness, reduced stress, health insurance, sick and annual leave, and “the 10% match . . . for our retirement plans”. One agent spoke about being happy in her work. She said,

It's just that there isn't always a lot of movement up in this career. So, there's not always a, you can't see yourself, maybe fitting into a different role because there's just not many roles to fit into. So, I think some for some people, that can be a challenge, if you're not happy to just stay and continue doing what you're happy doing. As far as factors that make me consider this long-term career - just my overall happiness on a day to day basis is really what keeps me continuing to do what I'm doing and be happy doing what I'm doing. I wake up happy every day to do it.

Several former teachers spoke about being able to interact with youth in their Extension careers, but not having to remain in the classroom all day. One agent said,

I'm very happy in what I'm doing, I taught for 10 years and I can tell you that before I got to that 10-year mark, I really felt the grind in that profession. I'm halfway through that time period here in Extension, and I do not feel that grind. Yes, you know day to day, you know, there is stress associated with any positions you're doing, but I'm still having fun. I'm enjoying what I'm doing. So, you know I do see that this is sustainable for at least another 10-12 years before my wife allows me to retire.

Another agent built on this theme while also emphasizing the opportunity to meet community needs, be creative and still work with youth. She said,

The thing that I factor in - what makes me consider this position as long term is, ultimately, I want to serve my community, and this is such a cool way. I get to be creative with how to program for my community as the need arises. I can act it to the best of my ability. After being in the classroom - I love kids - the teachers and kids sit in the classroom all day. With kids, sometimes this is overwhelming and too much. So, I always feel guilty when I walk out of a classroom after I've done a program. I know I've left that teacher and they can't get a break. I understand because of that experience of being in a classroom all day and know that sometimes that is just overwhelming. I still get to work with those kids but then I get to walk away and breathe. So, it's sort of the best of both worlds. It's a different role.

Another agent spoke about seeing the impact supporting her desire to stay in her position. She said,

Another factor that makes me want to consider staying in this job is seeing the impact that we are making. That is really the main reason I'd want to stay - is seeing that impact, seeing how much our work is affecting the people we work with. The flexibility of the job, even though there are a lot of things that are difficult, there is a lot of flexibility as well. And we do have some pretty good benefits, especially health insurance compared to other people I've seen in my locality. So, I say that is definitely a benefit of the job. And do I hope to move to different

roles? I think so. Especially with 4-H. You know, I love working with the kids. I love it so much.

Another agent spoke of opportunities to increase her salary by completing her masters, receiving a promotion, serving as a unit coordinator, and serving on the District Program Leadership Team.

Agents spoke about enjoying interacting with their clientele. One agent said,

What factors would make me consider this as a long term? It would simply be because I love the kids and I love the work that I do with Extension. And I do love the freedom and the flexibility to do what I do and to implement programs where I see there is a need. I do feel like I have established myself enough within the organization. To where if I go off in my own direction without permission, as long as I can make somebody else look good through the work that I do, they'll leave me alone, and for that I'm thankful. For what it is, I am thankful, because I do have that freedom and flexibility. That does make it hard to leave this particular job.

Another agent said,

I can't think of a lot of other careers, where you get to really design a program the way you want it. So, there are lots of days, where I say man, it would be easy if someone just gave me a lesson plan and a schedule and just check boxes. Then, there are a lot of other days going like hey I'm glad I don't have to do that. So, it's a lot of give and take, but really, I like the freedom that we have to kind of develop a program with while meeting needs. It still has our flavor put in, so I really like that. As far as moving to different roles, I can see myself, probably as unit coordinator. But really, I don't have any right now any desire to go back to school to become a specialist or anything like that. I'm really happy at the county level working with farmers and just making my impact.

Related to flexibility, agents spoke about not being micro-managed in their work, seeing this contributing to a positive work-life balance. One agent said,

I do see it as more of a long-term thing. It does have a good work life balance. I'm really good at saying no. I think when it just doesn't work, and so I do talk to others doing the same, sometimes, but you know I have priorities and with a little like somebody else had shared. So, you know I want to be there for my own family, as well as for my community. I think I'm having those two things in mind, they don't have to be one or the other, you can have both.

Another agent concurred,

So, you know, I'm 60. So, close to retirement age, and I will retire out of Extension. I do, in my situation in [VCE], I increased my pay going from the public-school system to Extension so that was a plus and then there are some opportunities. You know, of course, getting your masters and promotion. I'm on the DPLT. So, there are some opportunities to increase your salary as well. Not big amounts, but it's little bits here and there. And I do appreciate the flexibility. I'm sort of on the other end. My dad's 90, my mom's 84, and so I'm having to take time to help them do things now, and so I do appreciate the flexibility and others have said that. The good benefits to be able to do that and not feel so stressed about that.

Another agent talked about constantly learning and incorporating her new knowledge into her program. She said,

I do know personally this position, why I like it and how it fits into my personal life is the ability to constantly learn. Like right now I'm using Rosetta stone that is offered to us for free, and I am learning Italian and after that I have, like so many other languages that I'm going to try to learn. We'll see. I don't know how successful it will be. So, I love that, like the ability to continuously learn in this position, and not only learn, but I get to take exactly what I've learned

and implement it into programming and teach kids. Like when a horse passes by I could be like cavallo. And they're like what is that? And I'm like it's the Italian word for horse. I like doing that and instantly implementing it into my program with my youth. That's another reason why I know, no matter where I go- if it's staying in Extension for life, or if it's going elsewhere, I know that my passions are learning, youth, and I guess travel. That's another passion that I have. So those- and, in this position, you have the ability to do all of those things. the flexibility of the position gives you that.

## **Specialists**

Most specialists indicated their jobs fit into their long-term career goals because they were happy, loved, or were passionate about their work. In addition, several express that being in Extension was a long-term career goal for them. Others appreciated the way that Extension allowed them to apply their research. A couple of the specialists talked about the ability to meet needs as a reason they remain in their positions. Other reasons given were to be a teacher, to provide jobs for other people, to span the three missions of the land grant university, to exercise their creativity, to work with people and to practice lifelong learning. One of the specialists shared,

I'm really happy with my position here. I don't think I could not do Extension and I'm really excited that part of my job was defined as Extension. Because I feel like at other positions I was doing Extension, but it didn't quite fit in my job description. So, I like having that as part of my role at Virginia Tech, and I do what [another focus group participant] does a lot, which is combine my research with extension. So, a lot of my research is applied. So, if I don't actually have a research appointment and I love doing research, so it works out that I can do Extension - call my applied research Extension. And they're happy and I'm happy. And I'm meeting my professional goals for myself.

Another specialist shared,

I think this position fits within my long-term career goals. I really like working for Extension and yeah, I think my position can be nebulous. But at the same time, I think you work with really good people which matters to me. I don't think you get in Extension because you're power hungry and crazy. You get in there because you want to work with people so-so I find that enjoyable and that really matters to me about a career.

Finally, another specialist said,

I think what I consider is, for me, I need to still keep passionate about what I'm doing and be able to still feel like I can make a difference. And so, making sure that it's not stagnant has been very important for me within my career. And so that's kind of where I am at with trying to figure that all out.

## **Challenges making professionals consider alternative careers**

### **Agents**

The primary challenge many agents gave that prevents them from looking at VCE as a long-term career was pay. This was often associated with living in one of the more urban areas of the state where the cost of living is greater. One agent said, "What challenges, make it difficult for me to think of this as a long-term career- ultimately its financial. I am passionate about Extension and the work that we do." Another agent said, "I just don't know how financially sustainable being an Extension agent living in northern Virginia is." Both northern and southside Virginia were identified as areas where living on an Extension salary is difficult. While agents were reported commenting about the pay being a positive in the previous section and about increasing their salaries coming into VCE, in this section others talked about the pay not being enough and taking salary cuts to work for VCE. One agent said,

I think the challenges for me is number one – salary. So, I’m out of you know, my really close friends, I am certainly the one who makes the least. And not that it's a big deal, but it has hindered us making some decisions on - buy a house and things like. So, salary is something for me that's tough, I mean I’m in the northern Virginia area so that's yeah there's a lot of competing factors out there.

The second most frequently mentioned challenge was a sense of not being acknowledged or listened to throughout the organization. Agents shared that this has had a very negative impact on morale. One agent said,

This is just personally me. I kind of feel like I don't get recognized for what I do necessarily. I’m a really good employee. I think I’m a pretty valuable person when it comes to being with VCE. But I might not have as powerful programs, as somebody another agent, and that gains a lot of attention for them. And it sort of has a repeat usually. And so oftentimes I get overlooked for positions for professional growth and that's kind of hindered me in - maybe made me think about - what’s the next step?

Another agent emphasized wanting to be heard. He said,

I suppose it's less of a point and more sort of a question and I don't know if it's a rhetorical one or not. But Karen, you're the only one that I see within VCE actively working to improve the system. And now I’m not saying that there aren’t others doing that, but I don't know anyone else doing it. And it's because you've reached out with these sort of focus groups. But what it feels like, if it wasn't for you . . . and the work that you were doing it feels like no one cares above agents. No one cares at all about the system and that it needs improvement. And no one wants to listen. And there's no desire to improve it. Because they're not the ones dealing with the issues. They’re above all the issues, and so they get to just do whatever they want. It doesn't impact them. They go on with their lives. So, I would love to hear from VCE to say ‘Hey we want to hear how we can improve this system. We want to do this.’ It feels like that's your entire role, sometimes, Karen. But I’ve worked with you on many other things, and I know that's not your entire role within VCE. But man, it should be more important than what it is right now. And the answer given to it. Because that's why we have so much turnover. It is just like if anyone up in the upper echelon- if you can pass this message on up to them - if anyone is scratching their head and wondering why so many agents leave and why we can't keep anyone, give me two hours and I’ll be happy to explain and tell them. But I reiterate what [another member of the focus group] said, and I’ve said this before. I am passionately invested in improving this system for the future, and so any opportunity I can get to do that. Please reach out to me and I will help in whatever way I can.

Another agent said,

I appreciate this time, this space. Because, like he said, no one really listens to our concerns at all. And you actually do, and you're genuine. You're sincere about it. So just know that your work is not going unnoticed. This is very much appreciated and I would love to see leadership here in the future, where we can actually have this conversation. But I don't know if that will happen. But that would be something that needs to happen in the future. Because, like [another focus group participant] said, there's so much turnover and it's kind of scary to me, being still so new and seeing, like all these people leaving. But you know I love my job. I love my work, but there needs to be significant improvements. So hopefully you know, there will be. And it will come from your hard work, Karen, so thank you again.

Grant limitations and the way in which the grant was administered were identified as a source of frustration making agents question their career working with a particular program. Agents cited seeing half of their colleagues leave as a result of the challenges. Specific concerns were lack of two-way communication between state and local employees, large areas of coverage, and strict limitations on what the agents could do.



Concerns about work-life balance and being able to have time to raise a child were other factors challenging the agents view of Extension as a long-term career. One agent said,

I want to have a family, one day. And having the time to have a family and do my job really effectively at the rate that everything needs to be done at this point in my life. You know, you have to meet all these numbers, do all these things. That's gonna be really hard. So, I'm not sure how I'll be able to make that happen one day but we'll see once we get to that point in my life.

Another agent spoke about leaving Extension to eventually take a teaching job so she could have more “family time.” She said,

But you know I had two children. And I was a 4-H agent. And so, I wanted more family time so that's when I did quit, until they were school age and then went into the classroom to be on their schedules which worked well.

Night meetings and other work activities outside a traditional nine-to-five work schedule were mentioned as a specific challenge in maintaining work-life balance. One agent said, “Night programming is hard just because my children are very active in sports each play three sports. I'm very active with myself so that does become a juggle, home work life balance is definitely a challenge.”

Another agent mentioned frustrations in working through systems and travel creating burnout. Another agent suggested that the promotion system disincentivizes hard work and onboarding challenges. He said,

And so, I think it's things like that, where as an agent, and especially a new agent there have been multiple examples of things that disincentivize agents to work. And I just kind of go, ‘All right well I'm going to do the bare minimum.’ Well, I can have the attitude, and I have to fight against it because that's morally what my values are, that's not how I operate. But it is encouraging, ‘Why work hard?’ You're not going to get anything more, right? You might get an excellent or an outstanding on your matrix, which means nothing. ‘Okay, where's my gold star that I can put on my forehead?’ It doesn't mean anything. It's just, you get this column, and next year, why don't we try and get to all outstanding? Why? I don't understand it. So, I try not to think about it, and I try to just focus on what I care about in my county and, what is important.

Onboarding challenges were identified through this portion of the discussion as well. An agent said,

Several people have mentioned this. We need to redo our onboarding. With being on DPLT, it's terrible. It's too much. It's boring. You can't connect. You know you need to connect to something to be able to learn from it. It's just a go through it and check it off. So, I really think we need to work --and then the whole physical aspect of it. You know, we have all these folks coming in with great technical abilities and then the onboarding systems aren't working, and you know we can't tell you why and it's just- we really need to look at that and make it more engaging. If that's your first introduction to Extension, that's not a good one. So that's my two cents.

Another agent emphasized a need to improve onboarding and concerns that the organization was not willing to change in order to make those improvements. He said,

But man, I do care about VCE and I would like to be here for a period of time, but I think a lot of people leave VCE because there is no opportunity to communicate these sorts of things. And if there is, then it's “Okay, thanks for communicating it” and that's as far as it goes. I would like for agents to be valued enough that we can take a step back and go let's think about how our system works. Right now, ‘What are the things we need to change? What are the things that don't make sense from an agent's perspective? And how can we work on that?’ But there's no time to do that because we want you to do all these programs. So, there's no time to sit and think

about the system, and if it works well. Because, 'Hey we don't have time to do that. We've got an evaluation coming up. We need to do this.' A lot of things, but I know we have a limited amount of time, but I could talk about this for a long time and it's not just because I like to complain. I'm passionate about VCE, but man would I like to sit down and explain all the things I've experienced in three and a half years. And I can guarantee you a lot of the people that I work with would say man, I agree with that. It's like everyone agrees with it. We're all experiencing it, but three people at the top make the decision and so it's not going to go anywhere and part of it is just a mentality of well that's the way it's always been. That's the way I went through it as a new agent. Just survive and hold on and then you know you'll figure out how to deal with it. And man, that makes me so upset. I just feel terrible for any new agents coming in.

Another agent expressed a need "to be more impactful and not just be busy." She said,

I love the work that I do in Extension. I loved the work that I did in the classroom when I was in the classroom. I love working with children. I love teaching them. I love exposing them to new things. But you know, I'm in my soon to be mid-40s and I'm not going to just be someone else's worker bee forever. I still feel young, and I think I still have a lot of miles in me to go, but I want the work that I do to be more impactful and not just be busy.

Concern was also raised regarding what is seen as nepotism in the organization. An agent said,

What makes it difficult, thinking about this position as a long-term career is that I don't think that this is meant to be a long-term career for me. When I look at the upper echelon in this organization, again I don't see faces reflecting back that look like me. What I see is a lot of nepotism. And since I'm not related to anyone in the upper echelon or on campus, I'm pretty sure that I'll be the last person to make it there. And I'll probably be in my 70s, if I stay around that long, before that happens.

Finally, organizational budget issues and challenges associated with COVID were raised as concerns limiting career longevity by focus group participants. An agent said,

I would say this past year has given me some pause that I think anybody in any job during this period of time in our history where your job kind of stopped being what it was before has probably had those moments. . . . We've talked about it in the office, that this this isn't what we were hired to do. But in most organizations, right now, where you've had it, you had a transition to being home. . . . Your job is not necessarily the same as it was, and so I look forward to some of the normalcy, some of the things that I really loved about my job to come back. Like a ServSafe class I just did a couple weeks ago. We got one class in and then three out of four of the people in class got quarantined. So, this is a consistent - where like I was so looking forward to that as something that would be normal. And we couldn't even get through that. We had to cancel that - we had to postpone it. We finally got through you know, a couple of weeks later.

## **Specialists**

An issue raised several times by specialists limiting their view of their current positions as a long-term career was unclear expectations. This was expressed by tenure and non-tenure track specialists. A non-tenure track specialist said,

The challenge is definitely just not knowing necessarily, having a position that is not - You assume if I'm doing a good job, they'll keep me on. But it's not a position that they have for us. If you're in a tenure track position and you get tenure, you kind of feel secure - that kind of thing. So, the lack of knowledge of what it is that is determined to be good, what are the criteria, some benchmarks you can be measuring your performance on. I think if those were pretty clear,

you could shoot for those benchmarks and you can have confidence in them. I'm doing what I need to do.

Another specialist said,

The wonderful thing about the position, though has been one of the best things that I love so much about it, is the fact that I can just - I mean lots of freedom to go and do and create and be creative and push things forward and we hear a lot of that from the administration. When we go to a conference is always you guys are doing great we want you guys to try and fail and all and this is great rhetoric. But as a specialist you're thinking long term and your job performance. That also makes it a little scary. Because you say, 'Okay, great, I'll go out and be creative and inventive, shoot for the moon. And then, if I fail, what does that mean in terms of my promotion - so that's not clear.

Another specialist talked about the challenges of knowing how different appointments translate to expectations within an academic department. She said, not knowing "What the expectations are for like research and teaching and publication beyond. Particularly if you're 100% Extension, right? Yeah, and your department is not really big into that."

A tenure track specialist questioned opportunities for change after achieving tenure. He said,

I guess what challenges would make it difficult for a long-term career? Now that I'm a research assistant professor, so, I moved to that spot. I understand our advancement areas, which helps me know what I can do to stay in it. But then I do know like after that, I don't really know, I don't necessarily think my position's changing at all. It's just that it's making it attractive to stay in my position.

Other challenges limiting long-term vision for current positions that were mentioned by specialists in the focus groups included a grueling meeting schedule, concerns related to personal health from dealing with the stresses of the position, questions related to the longevity of Cooperative Extension, feeling consumed by the position, and other interests.

## **Opportunities for VCE to increase employee support**

Several of the agents expressed appreciation for being able to participate in the focus groups and share their thoughts about the organization. They welcome future opportunities to visit with VCE leadership but also feel this project gives them voice. Another agent appreciated the way in which the project was conducted, so they were able to connect with each other. She said,

Oh no, thank you for this opportunity to share I think it's very valuable to not only for you all to hear from us individually, but for each of us to hear from each other. We are a small group in here, but the six of us, we all have really good ideas and we've had good support, at least from our start to where we are now. I hope to see you guys, you know, in the coming years, because it's always nice to both meet people and work with them. . . . I don't know what that looks like in other careers. I've only had two jobs post-college, but it's just - I like what I do and I just hope that other people who do what we do enjoy it as much as me. And on the last question of whether you want to stay it's like I'm in my area and I'm not I'm not leaving. . . . But I definitely appreciate a study like this going on, and checking in with us mid-career folks to see how we're doing and what we need. And if the data that comes out of this is beneficial for the vast majority, then we're doing what we need to do. Thank you.

Other agents reiterated the need for changes in the VCE onboarding program. One agent spoke of the need to support new agents so they don't feel so alone. She said,

I'd like to make a comment, and I think that a lot of times we feel one and detached from each other. As far as agents, we are housed with different [program] area agents, with FCS or Ag. But, I think that especially when a new agent first comes - maybe allowing them to visit a couple of different offices and meet with a couple of agents that aren't or are mentors. Or some type of process like that. Just so they don't feel alone because, even after three years, sometimes I still feel alone. That's when I reach out to that group that sort of forms that I trust, and that I can bounce ideas off of. I think just when an agent first comes on just making them understand that they're not alone. Then [another focus group participant] brought up a really great point. I can say that - and after three years I'm still working on it - but making them understand that they can't do everything. And your community is going to have more needs than you have time today. And, although you want to be superman or superwoman you're not going to meet all of the needs. So, I don't know how you put that into some type of formal training, but I'm just sharing that with new agents, as they come on board.

Another agent said,

You have to see people doing it, sometimes. I had this conversation with somebody in education. So, when I was going through school to be a teacher - and it sounded like he had the same formal background, as I did. In education, I had to teach. You go and you watch a teacher teach. Then you do a lesson in front of that teacher and they provide you some feedback and it's a lot of that kind of hands on and just from hearing the others talk. I think some of that; like hands on. Because the first time in which to program - I had talked before. I've been in front of kids, that was great. But I was like - am I really conveying that message and did it check all the boxes? Did I tell them we're Virginia Cooperative Extension and we're in education? Did I or didn't I do that whole spiel to really convey what I was there to do? I don't know and I've now developed my own flair, so to speak. Since then, it may be nice to provide some sort of networking opportunities to "student teach" new agents.

Whenever an agent, for a day, can go to another locality and prune those trees with that agent and watch them in a workshop or do a STEM workshop, with hands on. And just see how somebody else does it versus just the lesson plan. Because sometimes we need to get our hands dirty, we need to actually get in there, and not just read it. Maybe post other times that could be an option. But being with somebody. Because I think some of the best experiences, or when you actually have some time with others watching them. I can tell you all day what I know or say, but until you actually see somebody else saying 'no' and you see them marking off and you see that it's okay. Or you see somebody prune the trees, and you know exactly what you're going to need to do, or whatever it is. You still may not feel as comfortable as you've heard it. It's gone in there somewhere in your brain but it just might not come out the right way until you're really experiencing that.

Another agent suggested having a person in each district to focus on the needs of new agents. He said,

I think the impact of having someone in each district to assist new employees would be unbelievable. I really think the impact- You know I think a lot of what we've heard here is it's a mile wide and an inch deep. I feel like that's what happens. And I feel like it's constantly like 'Oh let's hire a new person for this area, with no support'. Okay, so there are only going to be able to go to this deep. But I feel like if we had someone who knew people. That is the go-to person, and they will connect you. They know the system. They will connect you to who, what, where- the opportunities, all these different things. And that's what their role is. That's what their time is spent doing. If you think about any organization in the world that has that sort of a process. They have an onboarding system, and they have an HR that you can go to. I need help with this. We don't have that, and that blows my mind, so I really just want to go on the record and say I would love to see that. Because that is an actual tangible thing that would significantly improve Virginia Cooperative Extension- like unbelievable.

Another agent expressed need for more uniformity related to flexible scheduling. She said,

Yeah, so as far as like time management and being able to balance time, especially when things go back to normal. Something that was mentioned that I feel like if Extension looked at it, it would be positive would be having the ability to do office hours and stating that in your county ‘These are my office hours, days’ - like how they do on campus. And I know that some districts might be more open to that than others, but it feels like- And more offices in general, might be open to that than others- but it feels like if it were just a universal thing that Extension accepted that as an idea that there would be more flexibility to do that. So that's what I'm going to say.

Another agent expressed “a program assistant role or some other support position for youth programming.”

From the specialist perspective, greater understanding related to reporting and needs assessment and clarity and expanding opportunities in regards to non-tenure track roles were identified as areas for VCE support. One of the specialists wanted to know where his impact reports go. He said,

I guess one thing that I thought about with Extension and I kind of alluded to it earlier – so, I don't know what [happens] when we put in the impact statements for the reporting up the chain' And I assume the program teams have something to do with this, but I'm not really involved their program team, as much as maybe some of the others are. Where does this go and why is it important? [Another focus group participant] said that ‘I've never gotten any feedback on one of these things. You know, for the most part of like copy and pasted one from year to year on an impact statement.’ Just some sort of support. It doesn't, other than those empty words, it doesn't seem like it's actually true. So, like what this black box? When they report to the federal government - just knowing what that is. I think [that] would help me help them, and you know and better capture metrics the way that they want to capture them.

And so, some of that goes back to we need to do this needs assessment. And you need to do it. But what we're looking for that needs assessment we can't articulate for some reason. What we're looking for in an impact statement is just that you're doing wonderful things and someone else says that. But do you want actual numbers, which are pretty hard to get? It sounds like a quote is what they're looking for - somebody say you're great and then you, you know it's all good from their side so knowing what's going on. As it goes up for reporting would be really helpful for me for and again. Maybe that's that mid-career thing, like the beginning of the career thing, but since I'm still in the dark about it and have asked older, wiser Extension faculty and they can't articulate it and have some of the same questions. I feel like that could be helpful.

Another specialist called for greater clarity in career paths for non-tenure track specialists. He also said there was need to offer more non-tenure track specialist opportunities. He said,

I think if there were paths, in terms of non-tenure track. If this leads to Extension specialist roles being more well defined, I think, it will make it a lot easier. But as long term, because I have no burning desire to be in a tenure track position, except for that it is a pathway. . . . If the rest of the Extension specialists are encouraged to pursue some of the non-tenure track pathways, I think that would be fun for all.

## **Research Team Response**

The primary areas of discussion by the research team in response to the organizational support and effectiveness section of this study included supporting the integration of agents and specialists in the system, onboarding, non-tenure track expectations and promoting professional development associations to specialists. Greater insight into the research team's discussion on these topics is included here.

## Integration of Agents and Specialists in VCE

Discussion of this topic by the research team provided recommendations as simple as cross-marketing some training to both agents and specialists and making sure both groups were included in listservs to help the groups understand and support the roles of the other. Educational design was one of the areas identified where training needs to be marketed across both groups. Regarding cross marketing, another member of the team commented that system-wide marketing may also help the perceived organization overcome generational gaps. Sometimes we make assumptions about what we think one group or another might know. A member of the team said,

And several made the comments about with COVID, 'COVID caused this to me', and it might be I was able to learn something new. And some of them are younger than I am, and I would have expected them to - I was surprised, they didn't know it. That was an 'aha' moment for me that they're having to learn some of this stuff, too.

One member of the team emphasized how bringing agents and specialists together to discuss how to address issues could make VCE more effective. She said,

This is just kind of looking at the overlying thing that maybe sometimes we should get specialists and agents together in some of these working groups so that they think a little bit differently. So that they can figure out, 'Oh well, Specialist A might be able to work with Agent A on this grant' or those kinds of things, to different ways they can work together and work smarter not harder and not be competing with each other, but working thinking about the same thing or working on the same thing. Being able to work together and make it more effective and a better program of whatever it is for those folks. So, that was one of the things that I saw too.

The VCE program teams were recommended as a possible site for this interaction. One member said this is a practical place to support this discussion as the teams "sit down and do some brainstorming and SWOT analysis and stuff like that." Maybe more time to support these would be beneficial. A team member said,

Yes, and one way to tackle that might be through the program teams. Some of them have amazing specialist and specialist-agent relationships and others of them don't. It's different, they all kind of operate a little bit differently. But that might be an opportunity, to use that venue to get specialists involved and talk about needs assessments and issue identification, things like that. Yes, they don't all have a clear understanding of how that happens. They just know they have a research agenda and they've got to get tenure. So, helping it work for everybody.

They went on to say the program team is the practical place to support this discussion as the teams "sit down and do some brainstorming and SWOT analysis and stuff like that." This member recommended more time to support these discussions would be beneficial.

One challenge that may prevent specialist interaction with agents is that often work is done around district structures and meetings in which specialists are not always present. A member of the team said, "One of the challenges I've seen is sometimes we do things around district meetings and things like that. And then specialists don't necessarily know about them and don't really feel like that's something that they can easily plug into." Some of the districts do host special planning meetings where they invite specialists. Another team member said,

I know, like, for example, with our planning district meetings, we have one a year that if there's some things going on, or there's been a hot topic, we do this-usually late summer. If there's been something hot going on in the summer, we'll invite those specialists to give us a summary and we can talk about what we can do the next year. And this, that, and the other and, most of the AREC people. But, I wonder if we need to look at some of that on a different level.

Another member of the team spoke about the variability within VCE and how this makes this situation more challenging. He said,

We have specialists, like you mentioned it, at an AREC, particularly in ag areas that are very client oriented - to the grower level. But then I know other specialists that are more, I guess I'd say higher level - that work with companies or work with topics - solar energy, or something like that and maybe then they're not so many individual people on the ground at a higher level. I know when community viability was around, [a specialist] worked a lot with whole counties, that whole region regional planning district. So that's the thing with Extension. We're not a one-size-fits-all kind of organization. So there probably are specialists that don't maybe work with 107 county agents - locality agents. That's just maybe not the nature of their work. But for the ones that do want to for sure I hope we can provide this opportunity.

Both agents and specialists need to understand each other's roles, another member of the team emphasized.

Maybe it needs to come from both sides of what specialist see, maybe they can see what agents do. . . maybe merge that information together somewhere that's kind of like relevant with the new technology age. We don't know what each other does sometimes and how we can actually benefit from each other, so I'm not sure how to make that connection work.

Interactions occur, but don't always support the types of discussions that need to take place to move VCE forward. Being able to do this would "expand the horizons" of the organization. A team member said,

But how can we, as an organization, connect the agents in the specialists in. And I know we do a lot of things, but how could we do it in a manner to where we can discuss some of these. The things like the situation analysis. Usually, when we're connecting we're connecting in a field day, over special project or connecting at a 4-H function - understand what I'm saying? But how can we connect and with more than just our little net, our little group, how can we expand that I guess, for everybody. How would that? What would what would be a means to be able to do that to expand our horizons I guess.

Another agent on the team said they have a group of specialists they work with regularly. But, she asked, "How do we get outside our comfort zone and engage with other specialist? And how do we get specialist out of their comfort zone and engage with some of the agents, maybe they don't know?" Program teams provide "camaraderie" but there may be other relationships outside the program teams that could be beneficial.

A member of the team talked about a specialists fair that was held in the past as part of winter in-service. She said,

I think it's been four or five years ago. . . the departments went and set out posters, and then the agents could visit. And that was supposed to kind of help. But, there weren't a lot of agents that came to chat about what was going on in programs. But then again that might be the comfort question. But the other thing I wonder, also in that scenario your kind of setting it up where it's the agents coming to find the specialist. It really needs to be something - if we could get people coming together around a common issue. I would think we'd want it to be kind of a collaborative approach. Both specialist and agents benefit from those connections and so how do we emphasize that it's not agents need to go to specialist to gain something. It's specialist gain from the agents as well, so how do we set that environment, that structure that creates comfort and, yes, working on a project together. It's always a great way to get to know people but, but how do we do that on a wider scale? I don't think that it's a specialist directory, because it seems to me it's got to be something personal.

Another member of the team suggested a "roundtable format." He said,

I almost wonder if we could do it almost like a Roundtable format, where in advance either somebody comes through, ask each unit, or even each individual, to pick out the five topics found within your needs analysis to figure out - your situation analysis, needs assessment. What

five things do you want to explore more fully? How we can program towards that? How we can tackle this particular need? And then, so we have our topics, and from that - whatever rises to the top, set up the round tables. And then it doesn't matter who you are – agent, program assistant, specialist - if you are interested in that topic and exploring how to address that need, go to that Roundtable and then you can get to several throughout the whatever time frame. And I would say it almost needs to be lengthier, rather than like, a 10-minute roundtable. It needs to be long enough to really develop, more than just brainstorm some ideas, but to really develop some concrete - I can't say concrete plans, because you can't necessarily plan something right then and there - but to make those connections, if that makes sense to build some ideas and some connections and how can different units support each other. How can agents support specialists and specialists support agents? How can everybody work together on addressing that need?

Someone else referenced an “agent-specialist exchange” mentioned in the VCE Organizational Effectiveness plan. This program was tried previously where the Ag Program Leader would

send specialists out to shadow an agent or a couple of agents, maybe three agents, while they were still early in their career. So, they got a sense of what happened at the local level. Now in more recent time, I guess, this is talking about the organizational effectiveness plan, I think I've heard people question whether it even happened or if it was just an idea. I never really knew of it happening, but it's an idea.

Another member of the team spoke about agent sessions conducted by the ARECs. He said,

I can remember as a district director, coming to the Tidewater AREC on a regular basis. They met with all the agents and just sat down and talked about what the agents are seeing in the field. What are those specialists currently doing? What's the research direction? And what do they have going on farm? And it was just a good exchange of information and it seemed like they work really close together. But that doesn't happen. I remember it happening there and then as an agent, I can remember the planning district 14 ag agents, we would meet on a regular basis, and everybody would kind of talk about what they're doing. And what we might do together.

The agent planning district meetings continue with specialists being invited to attend.

Another issue that separates the agents and specialists is their different promotion systems and needs associated with those. A team member asked if shared understanding around these might strengthen connections between agents and specialists. She said,

Agents, have a promotion process, but then specialists have a tenure process. So, it seems to me like there's somehow needs to be greater understanding of what those two processes are. And if there were a way that we build in some mechanisms, where they were supportive of each other in that process. I think it would be positive for specialists who are looking at publications and students and sometimes things that take time away from being able to get out as much, unless they know that there's going to be a return for their promotion piece. I just bring that up because I do think that's maybe - I don't know if it's an elephant in the room, or not - but it's just something that's very, very real that I think we have to think about when we think about this. Especially mid-career because that's the point where they're making that change.

Another team member provided examples of where this is happening. She said,

I see folks that are our specialists, that are on the tenure track and some of us agents kind of crack the whip and say, 'Look you got to get this part done. Help us get this together. We'll help take this off while you're doing this, or this'. And those are the specialist where we feel



comfortable with doing that. And, there's probably some others that we can help. But we go back to what [another member of the research team] was talking about, where we need that network of getting that done. Because sometimes it could be some of us that could help them, get over that next hurdle. And I'm thinking about what I'm doing this past year and, like I said I'm speaking for myself right now but I'll look at people like [a particular specialist] at the AREC. She and I are collaborating on a couple of publications that may go multi-state. And I'm there - because they're some things that we needed. And I look at some of the things that I've done with some of the specialists - editing, updating, writing, and, stuff some publications this past year, and those extension publications. Yes, they may not take as much weight as a journal article, journal publication, those kinds of things, but they're still a factor to them that's a positive when they go up for those promotions. So, I mean, and that's just something that I'm seeing, but and a lot more specialists, are having an interest, or at least some of them that I'm networking with are having more of an interest.

## **Onboarding**

The need for a new onboarding program for VCE came out of this area of inquiry as well as the section on mentoring. In addition, the research team suggested that this needs to include specialists as well as agents. Specialists do not seem to have a sense of what they should be doing with their Extension appointments. A member of the research team said,

. . . but I thought there would be more information to [specialists] about what their Extension responsibilities are, in general, and where they get input on what they do in Extension. I know there's a departmental Extension person, but there's really nobody kind of providing any oversight to that at all, not from an Extension standpoint. So, I don't think sometimes they know exactly what their Extension role or expectations are.

Another issue with new specialists was that they are not receiving mentoring associated with their new roles.

Incorporating agents and specialists into a singular program may provide many benefits to VCE. Another member of the research team said,

And it may not have come out explicitly but it almost seems like somebody did say it'd be nice if we just did some kind of an orientation, where we had agents and specialists together. And talk about some of these things that go across the board. Why does extension even exist and, what is its purpose, and things like that. So that they can all kind of hear the same thing at the same time and when I guess in the specialist we also are the lifeline, so you don't feel like people in their department understand what Extension is and how it works. So, then that gives them some information they can go back and share or maybe we even open it up and have sessions, where we invite them to bring your department head or bring your mentor or something so that we can broaden understanding of those things.

It may also help them to understand each other's roles. A team member said,

I do think about the issue of expectations and we've talked several times about this agent-specialist kind of need for better understanding. Seeing how those roles may work together, not just for the agents and specialists but also for the people that evaluate them and those kinds of things. I don't know where - Is that something that HR helps with? I'm not sure where - I mean I do see an opportunity to include specialist in orientations programming with agents. And to bring some of that together. But what can we do? How can we learn more so that we can follow up on that?

## **Non-tenure track specialist expectations**

A research team member exclaimed,

When we talked about promotion and tenure, I was kind of stunned that none of these specialists knew the process for themselves because they weren't on a tenure track. Like that they thought there was some promotion process. And I was sort of stunned by that.

Another team member said, "I don't know the answer for sure, but if there isn't a process in place, there is one that's being developed . . . just for specialist that aren't in a tenure track." A team member responded,

Yes, the university did away with continuing appointment, so the only remnants of continued employment are Extension, which is just a handful of people and the library, at the university. And so, there's some of those people left and then there was nothing in place for the non-tenure track specialist at that. So, I know [the director] has been working on it with [HR] but I haven't seen it yet, and it should come out soon. I posted all the other promotion stuff a while back. But I don't have that one, so I don't really know what it looks like.

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