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NATIONAL TRENDS IN PROGRAMMING, PREPARATION AND STAFFING OF COUNTY LEVEL COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE OFFICES AS IDENTIFIED BY STATE EXTENSION DIRECTORS

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A variety of technical, economical, and social changes are rapidly altering the lives of people served by the Cooperative Extension Service (CES). At the same time Extension has been undergoing the difficult task of evaluating its effectiveness in addressing the needs of society. Reorganizing Extension programs to address the changing clientele directly affects the jobs of field-based faculty in the CES. As Extension responds to the Futures Task Force Report (COP, 1987) and moves to issues programming, a high degree of change will be required. "As we approach the year 2000, Extension is caught in the rapids of change" (Geasier, 1989). For Extension to experience change is a positive sign (Johnsrud and Rauschkolb, 1989). Boyle (1989) reminded us that change starts with changing ourselves and that we as individuals and as an institution must value change.

A major theme of the Futures Task Force Report was the need for a more adaptive and flexible Extension staff (ECOP, 1987). Helping current faculty adjust to changes and preparing future Extension faculty will be more complex. County level staff will be required to undergo substantial retooling (Tompkins, 1989). Some states are already experiencing the effect of reorganization. Morse (1987) reported that changes associated with reorganization within the Minnesota CES were stressful to extension faculty. Henry (1986) found that the lack of clarity in work objectives was a key concern of those who decided to leave the CES. Igodan (1984) found that 4-H youth agents in Ohio were already experiencing a higher rate of burnout than other agents within the CES because of increased pressures and changing expectations.

A key component of any educational program, institution or agency is the people who develop and implement the program at the local level. Staffing variations and flexibility will be necessary if issues are to truly drive the system (Geasier, 1989). Preparing future agents, and up-dating those already working in the field to implement effective programs is critical if the CES is to change to respond on the needs of society. Staff preparation is also associated with the means by which the program is delivered. Geasier (1989) pointed to the need for more information about the effectiveness of alternatives and the staff's knowledge and skills in the use of alternative methods. Decker, Noble, and Call (1989) identified the training of Extension professionals in new program delivery methods as an area which needed to be addressed.

Previous research has provided insights into the preservice and inservice training needs of extension faculty. Wells (1985) investigated the preservice training needs of future extension faculty by surveying experienced extension agents. In Illinois, Law (1985) studied the inservice training needs of extension faculty. Sendeu (1982) investigated the weaknesses of new extension employees as perceived by directors of CES and CEAA presidents across the United States. Certainly the preparation and inservice training of agents will continue to be important in this time of rapid change.

The purpose was to examine the trends in delivery of Extension programs and the staffing of field-based positions throughout the United States. With a better understanding of the trends in programming and staffing of field offices, a more effective preservice or inservice education program can be developed to address the needs.

Purpose and Objectives

Many teacher education programs in agricultural education have an Extension education component or option for their majors. Some teacher education programs have staff members with Extension experience, some of whom have joint appointments with Extension and responsibility for teaching or providing inservice activities. It is likely teacher education programs will continue to provide preservice and inservice educational opportunities to field-based faculty, and to undergraduate and graduate students who are seeking careers in the CES. Changes in program delivery, hiring criteria for field-based faculty, preservice and inservice educational requirements, and the factors associated

with job mobility are important to those educators and administrative personnel who are planning extension education programs or providing inservice to Extension faculty. Therefore, the purposes of this study were to 1) identify selected trends/changes in staffing and programming at the local level, and 2) profile selected characteristics of field-based faculty related to employability and job mobility. Specifically, the objectives of this study were to:

1. Determine the perceived trends in the CES associated with modes of program delivery.
2. Identify the educational preferences or requirements for selected types of field-based faculty.
3. Determine trends in staffing patterns for urban and rural extension offices.
4. Identify the importance of selected criteria used in hiring field-based faculty.
5. Identify trends associated with employment turnover of field-based faculty.

Procedures

A cover letter signed by the researchers and director of Extension in Nebraska, a survey instrument, and a return envelope were sent to the Director of the Cooperative Extension Service in each state (N = 50). The survey instrument was developed by the researchers and validated by a panel of state level Extension evaluation and research specialists. The instrument was field tested with local Extension personnel. The Director of Extension in each state, or a qualified designee, responded to the survey. Thirty-seven (74%) of the returned survey instruments provided usable information. A follow-up letter was sent to all state directors who had not responded four weeks following the first letter. There was no follow-up of non-respondents. Instrument reliability was not determined, since much of the instrument consisted of open ended questions and did not lend itself to reliability analysis. Data analysis included the use of descriptive statistics which provided percentages, frequencies, means, and standard deviations.

Findings

Objective 1: Determine the perceived trends in the CES associated with modes of program delivery. The most common mode of program delivery, as agreed upon by 86 percent of those responding, was through county level agents/offices. The second highest mode (66%) of program delivery was through state specialists. Fifty-two percent indicated the third most common mode of program delivery was through district specialists. Telecommunications was forth as a mode of program delivery.

When asked if the current mode of delivery would be changing in the next five years, 89 percent expected some changes in the delivery approaches. When asked to identify the types of changes expected, the two most commonly mentioned changes related to electronic communications and instructional devices, and the shift from the single county office to multi-county agents or offices. The electronic changes were in the form of increased use of telecommunications as a mode of delivery, access to electronic data sources, interactive instructional video and increased use of computer technology.

Fifty-seven percent of those responding reported a decrease in the number of county or multi-county faculty from 1984 and 1987. Thirty-five percent of those responding reported size of county office staff unchanged. Only two states reported an increase in size of county or multi-county units. Two states did not respond to the question.

Objective 2: Identify the educational preference or requirements for selected types of field-based faculty. For county level faculty, the most frequently attained level of education was a Master of Science Degree. Some state directors reported provisions for faculty to acquire advanced degrees through sabbaticals, staff development leaves, winter schools, or through limited time off. Most state specialists were expected to have a doctorate in a specific technical area. Area or district specialists were preferred to have a doctorate, but many had a Master of Science Degree. Some directors reported the required level of education or degree for county level faculty varied based on the type of position.

The subject matter area in which a degree was held varied greatly within and across county level

faculty titles. The most common degrees, in order of most frequently occurring, held by county level agriculture agents were in animal science and agronomy. Agricultural education was a close third. The most common degrees held by home economics agents were general home economics and home economics education. For 4-H or youth agents, the most common degrees were in general home economics and agricultural education. Most horticultural agents or specialists had degrees in horticulture. Community resources specialists had degrees in a wide variety of areas including economics, adult education, and rural sociology.

Objective 3: Determine trends in staffing patterns for urban and rural extension offices. Every state reported offices in areas classified as rural or urban. The number of faculty reported in rural offices/programs ranged from 1 to 12 (mean = 2.97 county faculty). Urban programs, as expected, were larger. The range of faculty reported in urban programs ranged from 3 to 19 (mean = 6.2). The most frequent number of faculty in urban programs was five, followed by four and three.

In rural extension offices, the faculty of a typical county level office (in order of frequency) were agricultural, home economics, and the 4-H youth agents. Crop, horticultural, and livestock specialists were occasionally cited as being a faculty position in some rural offices. The urban offices had fewer agriculture agents or general production agriculture (animal and plant science) related specialists. The urban office had a slightly higher frequency of 4-H youth agents and horticultural agents than did rural offices. Home economics agents were evenly dispersed among both rural and urban county extension offices.

Objective 4: Identify the importance of selected criteria used in hiring field-based faculty. External controls or restrictions on hiring, the extent to which selected affirmative action criteria were used to recruit faculty, and the specific criteria used to evaluate the candidates for field-based faculty positions were the three major questions related to this objective. The freedom to hire field-based faculty in some states was affected by a variety of external forces. Some states reported a hiring freeze during the years from 1984 to 1987. Only 23 percent who responded to this question reported a hiring freeze in 1984. In 1985 the number rose to 39 percent, to 71 percent in 1986 and then decreased to 53 percent in 1987. The main reason cited for the hiring freeze related to a shortage of state, federal and sometimes local funds. Several states, not reporting a hiring freeze, did indicate delays in filling vacant positions due to funding shortages.

The Extension Service is an equal opportunity employer. Therefore, gender, race, age, and other factors are commonly considered when hiring faculty. For this study, only three criteria were selected (gender, race, and age) to be measured. For each of these criteria, respondents were asked to indicate whether they actively recruit to meet the affirmative action policies when hiring field-based faculty. The frequency in which these criteria were used varied widely. Respondents indicated race and gender were more often considered than age. Table 1 contains a summary of responses related to the impact of affirmative action when hiring field-based staff.

Table 1
Frequency and Mean for the Hiring Criteria Gender, Race and Age

Criteria	Often	Occasionally	Never	Mean*	SD	(N)
Race	18	14	4	1.6	.69	(36)
Gender	12	10	12	2.0	.85	(34)
Age	2	6	26	2.7	.58	(34)

Note. *Means were calculated using 1 = Often, 2 = Occasionally, and 3 = Never.

Fourteen factors or criteria were identified as commonly used in hiring field-based faculty. These 14 factors were identified by a panel of Extension personnel and listed on the instrument. Respondents were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 the importance of each of the 14 factors, including type of degree and the affirmative action criteria. A 1 indicated no importance and 5 indicated very important. The five most important hiring criteria, in order of importance, were: level of degree held, human relations skills, subject matter expertise, area of degree, and personal references. A summary of hiring criteria ratings is provided in Table 2.

Table 2
Importance of Selected Hiring Criteria for Field-Based Faculty

Hiring Criteria	Mean*	N	SD	Rank
Level of degree earned	4.5	36	.69	1
Human relations skills	4.3	36	.72	2
Demonstrated subject matter expertise	4.0	36	.86	3
Area in which degree is earned	4.0	36	.77	4
Personal references	3.8	35	1.08	5
Scholastic or academic achievement	3.7	36	.72	6
Affirmative action	3.5	35	1.23	7
Program planning abilities	3.4	36	.77	8
Experience in making presentations	3.2	35	.72	9
Physical appearance/dress	2.9	36	1.03	10
Experience in industry related areas	2.6	35	1.08	11
Employment test	1.4	22	1.08	12
Open-ended sentence test	1.3	21	.98	13
Language test	1.2	20	.81	14

Note. *1 = no importance and 5 = very important.

Objective 5: Identify the trends associated with employment turnover of field-based faculty. The problem of employment turnover or early leavers is a concern for Extension. The reasons faculty leave a position is considered important since a preservice or inservice education program might be able to address the reason for leaving. Ten reasons why field-based faculty leave the profession were identified by the panel of Extension personnel and listed on the instrument. The respondents were asked to rank, with "1" being the most common, the five major reasons field-based faculty leave their positions. Table 3 summarizes these responses.

Knowing why employees leave and where they go upon leaving could provide insight into counseling and designing future inservice programs. The respondents were asked to rank in order of importance, with 1 being the most important, where the field-based faculty went upon leaving a position. Even though the most common career choice after leaving was employment in industry, the second and fourth alternatives were to transfer or to move up within the Extension system.

Table 3
Reasons Field Based Faculty Leave

Reason	Mean*	N	SD	Rank
Retirement	2.1	33	1.38	1
Better job opportunities	2.5	36	1.34	2
Reduced staffing	2.9	14	1.69	3
Budget cuts	3.0	11	1.61	4
Lateral transfer	3.1	21	1.22	5
Low salary	3.2	20	1.77	6
Poor evaluations	3.4	20	1.27	8
Communications problems	2.5	14	1.40	7
Inability to teach	4.0	6	1.10	9
Lack of technical knowledge	4.2	6	2.14	10

Note. *Means were based on the ranking of one to five, with one being the first choice.

Of equal importance to why faculty leave, is where faculty go after leaving Extension. Eight probable alternatives were identified by the Extension personnel and listed on the instrument. Respondents were asked to rank the top five alternatives for employment in Extension, with "1" being the most

important. Table 4 lists the alternative choices leavers make upon leaving a position and the frequencies with which those choices occur. Fifty-one percent reported 4-H youth agents were most likely to leave. Home economics agents were the next most likely to leave the Extension Service.

Table 4
Where CES Faculty Go Upon Leaving a Position

Choice	Mean*	N	SD	Rank
Employment in industry	2.0	28	1.23	1
Lateral transfer	2.5	26	1.75	2
Pusue personl interests	2.6	33	1.32	3
Promotion within extension	2.9	20	1.73	4
Back to school	3.3	27	1.20	5
Employment in education	3.6	22	1.56	6
Administrative positions	4.9	15	2.17	7
To farm or ranch	5.0	8	2.14	8

Note. *Means were based on the ranking of one to five, with one being the first choice.

Conclusions and Discussions

A strong majority of state directors expect changes in the mode of program delivery over the next five years. The traditional "county office/agent" mode of delivery will be challenged by the "multi-county office." Telecommunications as a mode of delivering information will continue to increase in importance as the related technologies are established and made available to county, district or area offices.

Future changes in multi-county delivery will impact both the number of offices and agents in most states. The expected trend is toward fewer centralized state specialists and more area or district specialists who serve closer to the need. Some respondents expect county agents to specialize in one or more areas and others will assist with areas they are lacking. Some respondents also expected a move toward hiring temporary personnel for specific issue related, short-term programs/projects, to increase flexibility in staffing.

No clear explanation existed for why size of county offices decreased between 1984 to 1987. However, most respondents did report a hiring freeze from 1984 to 1987 due to lack of funds. This brings about the question of whether changes in county-level programming are due to decreased funding or for a more practical or philosophical reason.

Although the Master of Science Degree was preferred for field-based faculty, requirements varied greatly based on the title of the position. The most common degrees held among agricultural agents are animal science and agronomy with agricultural education following a close third. Home economics agents are likely to have a degree in general home economics or home economics education. Four-H agents are likely to have a degree in general home economics or agricultural education. Community resource specialists had the most diverse educational preparation. Extension Specialists most often had a degree in their area of specialty and were preferred to have a doctorate. The five most important criteria used to evaluate field-based faculty for employment, in order of importance, are level of degree, human relations skills, knowledge of subject matter, area in which degree as earned and personal references.

The five top reasons field-based faculty leave are retirement, better job opportunities, reduced staffing, budget cuts, and lateral transfers. Leavers are most likely to enter industry, transfer within the CES, pursue personal interests, move up in the CES, or go back to school.

Even though the most common career choice after leaving was employment in industry, the second and fourth alternatives were to remain in the CES and transfer or to move up within the system. It should be noted, since the fifth choice of leavers was returning to school, some of these individuals might return to Extension at a later time. Since the reason(s) a faculty might leave a position may be clouded, respondents may not have the accurate reason people leave or why they choose a certain

career alternative. Four-H agents had the highest employment turnover of all the field-based faculty. This is consistent with findings from Van Tilburg (1985) and Igodan (1984).

The staff number in urban programs are generally larger and more diverse than rural programs. Agricultural agents are slightly less common in urban programs, while 4-H, horticultural, and community resource agents are more likely to be found in urban offices. Home Economics agents are found in equal proportion in both urban and rural offices.

Recommendations

Preservice education programs should promote the development of human relations skills, as well as, technical skills for field-based faculty. Activities should be consistent with trends in programming, such as team or multi-discipline and multi-county planning and administration, high-tech communications and information delivery systems, and quality programming with limited resources.

Since the most common reason faculty leave the a position, excluding retirement, is for business/industry, Extension administration and staff development personnel should carefully consider career counseling as well as pre-employment and inservice activities which help individuals attain personal as well as institutional goals. The question of whether those who leave the CES represent a loss to the university and should be retained may need to be the focus of further research. If leavers represent a loss, consideration should be given on how to provide appropriate encouragement for them to stay.

Field-based faculty should have preservice and inservice education activities which include high-tech educational methodologies, program planning and delivery for youth and adults, and program administration and evaluation. Since respondents indicated Extension staff frequently use staff development leaves or sabbaticals, Extension administration could encourage use of these opportunities to update faculty in needed areas.

Alternative program delivery approaches involving variations in staff size, educational background and technical experience should be studied to determine their economic benefit and effectiveness in meeting CES programs goals.

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