

A Professional Development System for Extension Career Growth

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Introduction and Purpose

In 1998, a taskforce was commissioned to evaluate Extension faculty professional development at the University of Florida. A number of issues and needs were identified through this effort involving Extension administrators along with state and county faculty. The major categories of need included: a revised new faculty orientation and training program that is learner focused; a comprehensive approach to Extension faculty professional development based upon individual needs assessment and individual development plans; greater emphasis on educational process skill development; revised procedures for identifying essential in-service programs via needs assessment; leadership and management development among Extension faculty, and; a system for monitoring and rewarding participation in professional development programs.

Methods and Program Phases

The Department of Agricultural Education and Communication has been charged with taking the lead in this area. A comprehensive organizational professional development plan has been developed within the identified needs, and implementation began in fall 2000. For new Extension faculty, there will be four components to their orientation and training program upon full implementation.

- A) A redesigned on-campus orientation and training program focused on adult learning principles and Extension faculty needs. The training is conducted over three sessions that faculty complete within their first year of employment. It consists of Cooperative Extension philosophy, educational programming, effective teaching and learning, evaluation, accountability, as well as interpersonal skill and competency development.
- B) Web-based individual learning modules focused on basic orientation and development needs of new Extension faculty. New faculty complete these self-paced modules within their first three months of employment with feedback to their immediate supervisor.
- C) A welcoming package that includes an informational packet, a resource notebook, and a video specifically geared for new Extension faculty.
- D) A structured Extension mentoring program designed to provide support throughout the first year on the job.

For current Extension faculty, a Web-based Position Analysis Tool (PAT) has been developed. This competency-based self-assessment tool is designed to guide and focus an individual's annual professional development through Individual Development Plans (IDPs).

Faculty develop their IDPs in concert with their immediate supervisor based upon their PAT results and career development goals. This tool is also designed to provide a means for aggregating faculty needs to focus statewide professional development offerings

thereby establishing a mechanism for developing and implementing the most pertinent trainings and in-services. The overarching purpose of this effort is greater career enhancement for all Extension faculty.

Results to date and Recommendations

The revised on-campus orientation and training was the first component to be implemented. Follow-up evaluations of Session 1 revealed that it was very effective for increasing knowledge, awareness, skills and aspirations among faculty regarding Cooperative Extension and educational programming. Evaluative comments included: "I now see the big picture of how Extension works." "The exercises were excellent. I am better equipped to apply the information." "I feel more confident in program planning, and I feel I can also identify target audiences." "I am better focused on determining potential contacts." "Will relate sociological models of program development to objective information." "Really enjoyed new format, well organized and presented."

Other components will be implemented throughout the upcoming months upon completing development and testing with an overall completion goal of spring 2001. Comprehensive evaluation is planned individually for each component and collectively for the system. These formative and summative evaluation results will provide focus and direction along with documentation of overall significance and accomplishment for this comprehensive model approach.

Educational Importance

University of Florida Extension is dedicated to providing highly effective professional development for its state and county faculty. The Extension professional development system represents a holistic approach that includes both staff development and professional improvement activities that lead to enhanced career growth. Through comprehensive and effective professional development, the organization has begun to realize a benefit from greater agent educational effectiveness, improved organizational attitudes and higher retention rates for Extension faculty.

References

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