

Training Needs of the County Extension Coordinator

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The need for administration at the local level was recognized early in the Cooperative Extension Service. By 1929, the county extension agent (agriculture) was responsible for office management and maintenance in conjunction with program responsibilities (Moseley, 1972).

As early as 1957, a national task force identified the needs of county extension agents for inservice education (McCormick, 1959). Today, management of the Cooperative Extension Service has become increasingly important as the size and scope of operations have grown to keep pace with the fast changing world (Bost, 1970). County extension agents deal with an array of problems. They must contribute to an effective work environment, handle many administrative tasks, and be knowledgeable of technical subjects.

Continuing education of county extension agents is recognized as a critical factor in the effectiveness of the Extension Service. Minimum qualifications for county extension agents have included possession of advanced degrees; yet for county extension coordinators, there are no specific educational requirements for formal study or preparation in administration.

County extension coordinators are frequently appointed because they have performed well as county extension agents; however, that is not the only prerequisite to being an effective county extension coordinator. County staffs have increased substantially in size and the resources required to support a county program have grown significantly. Managing extension resources and personnel to achieve maximum efficiency and effectiveness is perhaps the greatest challenge affecting the future vitality of extension (Bachtel and Whiteside, 1987).

In many states, including Mississippi, there has been a movement away from centralization of administration in the Cooperative Extension

Service. County extension coordinators are responsible for managing the total program. Many states are looking for more effective ways to identify and prepare potential county extension leaders, chairs, directors, or coordinators.

Purpose

The purpose of the research was to describe the importance, expectations, behaviors, and training needs for the administrative role of the county extension coordinator in the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service as perceived by the following groups: 1) county extension coordinators; 2) district and state administrators; and 3) other county extension professional staff members. The research sought to describe the relationships between the perceptions of the importance, expectations, behavior and training needs and the following variables: 1) age; 2) race; 3) gender; 4) educational level; 5) population of county; 6) years of tenure in extension; 7) staff size; 8) district; 9) position in extension; and 10) major field of study for highest degree (Lyles, 1990).

Procedures

Population

The accessible population was the 232 professional employees of the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service on February 1, 1989. Names and addresses were obtained from the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service. The population included county extension coordinators (n=77), district and state administrators (n=23) and other county extension professional staff members (n=132). The entire population was included in the study.

Data Collection

Data regarding the district in which personnel worked and position held were collected from the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service personnel records. County population data were collected from the 1980 census. Data regarding other demographic variables and the perceived importance, expectations, and behaviors for the administrative role of the county extension coordinator were collected by mail questionnaire.

The total number of respondents was 214, for a response rate of 92 percent. Data from all 214 respondents were usable. Generalizability of the results from the respondents was investigated by comparing early respondents with late respondents on the demographic variables (Miller and Smith, 1983). No statistically significant ($\alpha=.05$) differences were found. It was concluded that the results obtained from respondents were applicable to the population of Cooperative Extension professionals in Mississippi.

Instrumentation

In addition to items regarding demographic variables, the instrument developed by the researcher included 45 statements about the administrative tasks of the county extension coordinator. The 45 statements pertained to four administrative roles -- personnel management, program administration, financial management, and office management. The statements about the administrative tasks were developed from the job description for the Mississippi county extension coordinator and from a review of research and related literature. The content validity of the instrument was evaluated by a panel of experts. The instrument was field tested for content and face

validity with 25 retired Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service professionals.

The instrument was pilot tested with graduate students in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at Mississippi State University who were currently holding or had held county extension appointments. Internal consistency analysis calculated from the pilot test produced Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the administrative roles ranging from .77 to .97. Training needs' scores were calculated using the following formula: $T=I(E-B)$; where T=training needs, I=mean importance rating, E=expectation rating, and B=behavior rating (Borich, 1980).

Findings

Also four of the administrative roles of the county extension coordinator were perceived as important by each of the respondent groups. The three groups (county extension coordinators, district and state administrators, and county professional staff members) differed on perceptions of expectations and behavior for the administrative roles.

The importance of personnel management, program administration, financial management, and office management for county coordinators were rated high by administrators. Mean ratings were between 4.25 and 4.73, with 5.0 being the highest possible rating. County coordinators' mean importance ratings were the second highest of the three groups, with mean ratings ranging from 4.06 to 4.57. County staff members rated the importance of the roles of county coordinators lowest, with mean ratings ranging from 3.51 to 4.45 (Table 1).

Table 1. Ratings for Perceptions of Importance of Administrative Roles^a

Administrative Role	Administrators (n=22)		County Coordinator (n=77)		County Staff (n=115)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Personnel Management (12 items)	4.25	.60	4.06	.62	3.51	.82
Program Administration (13 items)	4.25	.36	4.35	.67	4.09	.66
Financial Management (8 items)	4.73	.32	4.57	.52	4.45	.61
office Management (12 items)	4.50	.53	4.36	.52	4.17	.72

^aImportance was rated on a scale where 5 = high importance and 1 = low importance

Table 2. Ratings for Perceptions of Expectations for Administrative Roles^a

Administrative Role	Administrators (n=22)		County Coordinator (n=77)		County Staff (n=115)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Personnel Management (12 items)	3.50	.65	3.92	.63	3.43	.81
Program Administration (13 items)	4.15	.43	4.23	.51	4.00	.66
Financial Management (8 items)	4.67	.38	4.50	.55	4.36	.63
Office Management (12 items)	4.48	.56	4.25	.62	4.07	.70

^aExpectation items were rated on a scale where 5 = always expected to perform and 1 = never expected to perform.

The expectations held for the performance of the four administrative roles for the county coordinators (Table 2) were rated relatively high by each of the three groups: administrators, county coordinators, and county staff members. All three groups rated expectations on a five-point scale where 5.0 is "always expected to perform" and 1.0 is "never expected to perform." The administrators' ratings of expectations for performance for the four administrative roles were between 3.50 and 4.67. The county coordinators rated expected performance for the four administrative roles between 3.92 and 4.50. County staff members rated expected performance for the administrative role between 3.43 and 4.36.

The behavior of the county coordinators for the four administrative roles was rated slightly above midpoint by administrators, county coordinators and county staff members. All three groups rated the behavior on a five-point scale where 5.0 is "always perform" and 1.0 is "never perform." The administrators' ratings for behavior were the lowest of the three groups. The ratings were between 2.50 and 3.38. The county coordinators' ratings were the highest of the three groups. The county coordinators' ratings were between 2.95 and 3.94. The county staff members' ratings were between 2.83 and 3.47 (Table 3).

Perceived Training Needs

The mean training need scores for each respondent for each administrative role item were determined by calculating the difference between the expectation rating and the behavior rating multiplied by the mean perceived importance of that

administrative role item for each group of respondents -- administrators, county coordinators, or county staff members (Borich, 1980). The four administrative role categories of personnel management, program administration, financial management, and office management were rank-ordered using the mean training needs score. Administrative role items and categories with the highest positive mean scores had the highest priority for training.

There was wide variability among the mean training need scores calculated from the perceptions of administrators, county coordinators, and county staff. For all four administrative roles of personnel management, program administration, financial management, and office management, administrators indicated higher mean training need scores for the county coordinator than either the county coordinator or county staff member. County coordinators' mean training need scores were lowest in each of the four administrative roles except personnel management, where county staff members had the lowest mean training score (Table 4).

The administrative role category with the highest training needed for county coordinators by both administrators and county staff members was financial management. The highest county coordinator administrative need score perceived by county coordinators was personnel management. The personnel management administrative role was rated the lowest training need by both administrators and county staff members. The county coordinators rated office management as the administrative role with the least need for training, except personnel management, where county staff members had the lowest mean training need score.

Table 3. Ratings for Perceptions of Behavior for Administrative Roles^a

Administrative Role	Administrators (n=22)		County Coordinator (n=77)		County Staff (n=115)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Personnel Management (12 items)	2.50	.46	2.95	.77	2.83	.83
Program Administration (13 items)	2.86	.66	3.50	.70	3.10	.87
Financial Management (8 items)	3.38	.62	3.94	.80	3.47	.99
Office Management (12 items)	3.32	.61	3.81	.76	3.41	.91

^aBehavior items were rated on a scale where 5 = always perform and 1 = never perform.

Table 4. Mean Training Needs Scores for Administrative Roles

Administrative Role	Administrators (n=22)		County Coordinator (n=77)		County Staff (n=115)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Personnel Management (12 items)	3.60	2.68	3.86	4.00	2.12	2.96
Program Administration (13 items)	3.48	2.88	3.18	2.98	3.70	3.64
Financial Management (8 items)	6.11	2.61	2.56	3.53	3.97	4.58
Office Management (12 items)	5.18	3.22	1.90	2.95	2.77	3.56

Figure 1. Rank Order of Training Needs by Respondent Group

Administrators	County Coordinators	County Staff
1. Financial management	1. Personnel management	1. Financial management
2. Office management	2. Program administration	2. Program administration
3. Personnel management	3. Financial management	3. Office management
4. Program administration	4. Office management	4. Personnel management

Above is presented a rank order from highest training need to lowest for county coordinators of the four administrative roles calculated from responses of administrators, county coordinators and county staff members. The rank order of the four administrative roles indicating training needs of county coordinators by the three groups are revealed in Figure 1.

Relationship Between Selected Demographic Variables and Importance, Expectation, Behavior and Training Needs of the Administrative Role of the County Extension Coordinator

Generally there was little relationship between perceptions of importance, expectation, behavior, and training need and the set of independent variables. The R² values, although some were statistically significant, varied from .02 to .13, indicating that the proportion of variance in

the dependent variables explained by the set of demographic variables is relatively low. There is little “consistency” among the dependent variables (importance, expectation, behavior, and training need) or among the four administrative role categories (personnel management, program administration, financial management, and office management) in which demographic variables are important.

The demographic variables were not good predictors of the variance in ratings of importance, expectation, behavior and training needs for the administrative role of county extension coordinator. The variance in training needs cannot be explained by race, gender, age, educational level, population of county, tenure, size of staff, district, position in extension, or major field of study for highest degree. Consequently, there are no substantial relationships between the demographic variables and the ratings of

importance, expectation, behavior and training needs.

Conclusions

The county extension coordinator's role is critical to the goal attainment of the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service. The county extension coordinator serves as a vital link between administrators and county level professionals of the Extension Service. This study serves as a basis for better understanding the inservice education needs of the county extension coordinator.

Administrators, county coordinators and county staff members perceive the administrative roles performed by county coordinators as important. Each of the three groups rated the administrative roles higher in importance than they rated expectations for role performance or actual behavior indicating performance. The mean training needs' scores indicate all four of the administrative roles as priorities for developing inservice educational programs. The variance in ratings of importance, expectation, behavior and training needs for the administrative role of County Extension Coordinator cannot be explained by the demographic variables. Consequently, there are no substantial relationships between the demographic variables and the ratings of importance, expectation, behavior and training needs.

Recommendations

The findings of the study indicated that administrators, county coordinators and county staff rated the administrative roles as important, but held different levels of expectations and perceptions of behavior for the performance of the administrative role by county extension coordinators. The Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service administrative staff should develop inservice training that clarifies the expectation and behavior held for county extension coordinators' performance of the administrative role. Inservice educational programs should be developed to help Mississippi extension employees develop clear expectations of the administrative role of the County Extension Coordinator.

Since there was little agreement among administrators, county coordinators and county staff members regarding the administrative role with the highest training need, inservice training

programs should be developed that address all four administrative roles; personnel management, program administration, financial management and office management. Items that should be addressed first for inservice training within each administrative role should be those identified in this study that were ranked at the median or above by the respondents.

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