

**GUIDELINES
FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
IN EXTENSION**

Preface

The history of this document goes back to 1968 when the ECOP Subcommittee on Personnel Training and Development developed a national policy statement related to professional development and training. The policy statement was reviewed in 1976 by the ECOP Subcommittee on Personnel Training and Development. As a result of this effort, the Subcommittee developed national guidelines, which could be used by each state in reviewing the current status of professional development efforts recognizing that the responsibilities of professional development do, in fact, move beyond staff training and include many aspects of personnel management. The ECOP Personnel and Organizational Development Committee (PODC) has reviewed these guidelines in 2000 and attempted to provide an update that represents the contemporary situation in Extension. It is the hope of the committee that the guidelines will focus upon the role of professional development personnel, as well as focus upon the important dimensions of a well-balanced professional development program. These guidelines should be helpful not only to persons assuming responsibility for professional development and training, but, more importantly, to administrators. Administrators have an important part in providing adequate visibility to professional development and training in providing encouragement through the allocation of resources needed to aggressively continue to further strengthen these efforts.

ECOP Personnel and Organizational Development Committee, October 2000

INTRODUCTION

Professional Development is more important today than ever before because of rapid turnover, increased demand for competence, the difficulty in developing strong applicant pools, the increased competition for qualified candidates, the increased expectations for accountability from our clientele, and the rapid change in technology. The changing nature of society requires virtually all people to gain new skills and intellectual development throughout their lives. The obsolescence of knowledge, the rapid growth of new knowledge and technology, the shift in state and national priorities, the multiplicity and complexity of social programs and concerns, and the close relationship between the application of knowledge and societal progress all lead to the conclusion that lifelong learning is not only desirable but necessary.

In today's society continuing education is a necessity as well as a privilege. Most organizations and individuals recognize the importance of continuous study for development of employees by providing a variety of learning opportunities for all personnel.

The effectiveness of Extension educational programs depends upon the abilities and skills of faculty and staff. Well-qualified personnel with the capacity to grow and mature on the job and the ability to adjust to changing demands are imperative if Cooperative Extension is to continue as a vital force in meeting the needs of people. The atmosphere for continuing professional development must pervade the entire organization.

Cooperative Extension faculty and staff are diversified in their professional preparation and level of job responsibilities and in the methods they use to reach clientele. Employee and clientele diversity creates the compelling need for continuous professional development opportunities.

Continuous professional improvement is equally desirable for both the employee and the employer. To the employee, understanding, knowledge, and more highly developed skills are assets, which will always remain with the individual and contribute to a secure and satisfying professional career. To the employer, increased knowledge and skills should result in a higher quality of work, greater satisfaction, increased efficiency and higher morale on the part of the employee – all of which lead to fulfillment of organizational and societal goals.

ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITMENT TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Historically, Cooperative Extension has been the outreach arm of the land grant university system and is a classic example of the cornerstone of an engaged university. Extension exemplifies a commitment to the value of continued learning – practical learning for the improvement of quality of life for millions of people.

Today's challenge for Extension is an expanded educational effort to effectively relate the total expertise and resources of institutions of higher education to the solution of complex problems of individuals and society in general. This challenge creates the continuous need for professional development programs for Extension personnel. They must be well informed in relevant areas of technology and process skills and have access to the knowledge base necessary to maintain their

competencies. **Extension administrators must be committed to and must create an environment conducive to professional development.** Further, administrators must be advocates of lifelong learning as a prerequisite to effective performance.

Conditions Necessary to Foster Professional Development

If professional development efforts are to be effective, Extension administrators in each state should designate one or more individuals to be responsible for coordination of professional development programs. Professional development personnel should direct their efforts to the organization, administration, and coordination of professional development programs for Extension personnel. They should provide leadership to professional development programs that may be designed to prepare staff for assuming certain program responsibilities. A direct relationship between professional development and personnel management exists in many Extension organizations. Individuals responsible for professional development are, or should be, involved in decisions related to recruitment, performance appraisal, and career ladder development.

Other conditions within the organization that foster a favorable environment for an effective professional development program are as follows:

- Administrative support which creates an organizational climate in which staff members are motivated to develop their job through continued learning
- A budgetary commitment providing resources so that professional development personnel can be creative and develop challenging programs to meet the development needs of the staff
- An organizational staffing pattern which assures that persons assigned the professional development responsibility are involved in major program decisions in order to design professional development activities commensurate with program emphases
- A recognition of the importance of well planned professional development activities prior to the implementation of new programs
- A clear definition of and communication of the professional development personnel responsibilities and assignment of titles commensurate with these responsibilities
- Establishment of effective procedures for planning, implementing, and evaluating professional development programs
- A recognition of the significance and interrelationship of orientation, in-service education, graduate study, and other professional development opportunities as major components of a total program of professional development
- An awareness of the importance of a total professional development program which includes a balance between technical subject matter and Extension methods
- A recognition of the need for professional development opportunities in leadership, organizational maintenance and administrative operational areas
- Emphasis on the staff's responsibility for designing/recognizing their own professional development needs

RESPONSIBILITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Because of rapid turnover, increased demand for competence, the difficulty in developing strong applicant pools, the increased competition for qualified candidates, the increased expectations for accountability from our clientele, and the rapid change in technology; Professional Development is more important today than ever.

Extension should identify at least one person to give primary leadership to professional development, implementation, and maintenance of effective professional development programs even though it is clearly recognized that these functions are shared among the individuals who may need training, supervisors, specialists, and administrators.

Supervisors should help each employee assess professional development needs annually. This assistance should be given in light of potential interest and desire of the individual to prepare for advancement and greater job responsibilities, regardless of position within the organization.

The overall responsibility of professional development personnel should include the following:

- To confer with and advise administrative personnel and others on objectives, policies, and procedures for professional development in Extension
- To promote understanding and appreciation of the differences (diversity in its broadest sense) in our staff and clientele
- To provide leadership in initiating, planning, coordinating, implementing, assessing and evaluating professional development for Extension personnel
- To engage in scholarly enquiry to identify the most effective means for professional development
- To develop processes for informing staff of professional improvement opportunities and for counseling with individual staff members in developing professional improvement plans
- To serve as problem-solving consultants to management of the Extension organization
- To serve as learning specialists for instruction, curriculum building, teaching methods, and development of materials

With greater demands for professional development, the increased specialization of professional development, and the increased educational needs of personnel in the Extension organization, the above functions are extremely important. It is also essential that professional development personnel be innovative, creative, and aware of the responsibilities of others in the organization to develop effective and meaningful professional development programs.

**A COMPREHENSIVE PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM**

A comprehensive professional development program in Cooperative Extension embraces the educational and development needs of all faculty and staff categories in the organization. These needs provide the basis for the creation of a professional development program.

From an organizational perspective, the over-riding purpose of professional development is to help the organization more effectively and efficiently achieve its goal through developing staff competencies.

Specific reasons for the organization to conduct and/or for employees to participate in development programs include the following:

- Orientation to new or re-assigned job responsibilities
- To improve performance and develop skills
- To learn new technology
- Because of change in mission or program thrust
- To adapt to change
- To serve apprenticeship – pre-service or in-service
- For upward mobility (including promotion and transfer training)
- For leadership development
- For management/supervisory development
- To develop skills for future staffing needs
- For pre-retirement education

Staff Categories

Traditionally, when thinking of professional development needs in Cooperative Extension, there has been a tendency to focus on field staff. While admitting this to be an extremely important recipient group for training, Extension should consider professional development for all employee categories. These include:

- Administrators
- State Program Leaders
- District or Area Supervisors
- State Specialists
- Area Faculty or Specialists
- County Extension Faculty
- Secretarial and Support Staff
- Paraprofessionals

Each category of staff has its unique development needs as well as some needs, which are shared with other categories. The challenge to the organization is to design procedures, which will identify common and unique needs and to design and conduct professional development programs to improve competencies.

Types of Professional Development

Professional development needs of different categories of staff will vary according to tenure on the job.

Orientation

New employees, regardless of previous training, education, and experience, need an appropriate introduction to the job. Learning experiences for new personnel, generally referred to as orientation, begin the first day on the job and frequently continue through the first year of employment. The objectives of an orientation program are to enable beginning Extension employees to accept their responsibilities with confidence, to understand what is expected of them, and to feel secure in their work environment. The exact content and nature of the experiences must be individualized to the background of the individual and the requirements of the particular position assignment. Several states use personal assessment tools to evaluate competence levels of new employees leading to customize professional development programs. It is recommended that core competencies for each position be examined, and individualized training programs developed.

The value of an orientation program is based on the belief that rapid adjustment procedures and responsibilities are mutually advantageous to the new employee and to the organization. More specific benefits from an orientation program include:

- The new employee becomes an effective, productive individual more rapidly
- The new employee learns more quickly to measure up to standards of job performance and expectations, thus increasing the employee's value to the organization and satisfying human needs for personal growth on the job

Specific needs of employees will differ. However, new personnel will likely have educational needs in the following core areas:

- Extension philosophy, organization, policies, and internal procedures
- The methods and procedures essential for planning, implementing, assessing, evaluating, and reporting Extension programs
- Written and oral communication skills
- Philosophy and procedures related to specific work involved in the new position
- Technical subject matter knowledge
- Overall professional and career development opportunities available for future growth and development
- Linkages with the total university, related agencies and external audiences
- Educational and information technology
- Diversity and pluralism
- Marketing and public relations
- Professional ethics

The aforementioned needs may be met through learning experiences organized on an individual and/or group basis. In all aspects of orientation, the new employee's immediate supervisor is responsible for seeing that needed learning opportunities are identified, provided and utilized. It is recommended that mentors be assigned as well to guide the orientation process. Professional development personnel should provide leadership in developing policies and appropriate supervision. The various experiences provided in the first year should be coordinated to provide sequence, continuity, and integration for the new employee to get the task done effectively and efficiently.

Another facet, just as important as orientation for new personnel, is orientation for experienced employees who have been promoted or reassigned to new job responsibilities. Programs designed to ease the transition should be planned.

Mentor Programs – Mentoring is an interactive process that occurs between two or more individuals of different levels of experience designed to foster the development of core competencies and increase professional success. The specific purposes/benefits of a mentoring program include:

1. Increasing the level of professional competence and productivity needed by the system
2. Elevating morale
3. Reducing attrition
4. Accelerating the learning process
5. Developing organizational knowledge
6. Discovery of latent talent/potential.

Continuing In-Service Education

Effective orientation programs are part of a strong professional development program. Such programs initiate the staff member's career and help identify the types of development necessary. The orientation program, however, must be coupled with a strong program of continuing in-service education.

New situations necessitate new programs, new methods, and new and increased abilities for staff members. Expanded knowledge and linking with diversified programs and clientele demands continuous adjustment of Extension personnel. Flexibility in an in-service education program and the ability to adapt to varied situations are imperatives in an effective development program.

Experienced staff members need in-service education experiences to assist them with the following:

- To further develop technical subject matter competencies to keep abreast of and, if possible, ahead of change
- To understand new technology and how it can be used for teaching and program management
- To explore educational and technological content and processes in varying depths to extend personal competencies (may include organizational development, program coordination, program development, program analysis, program interpretation, accountability, etc.)
- To take a broader view and yet focus more sharply on particular Extension role responsibilities and update approaches to carrying out responsibilities in working with diverse audiences
- To develop a continuing sensitivity to social, economic, and political changes, and to acquire the capacity to deal with these situations
- To continue the development of core competencies

Obviously, no one learning situation can meet the above needs. Extension must be innovative in developing and using technology to devise efficient and effective learning opportunities. Professional development programs can be used as a laboratory for devising, perfecting, and demonstrating educational technology, which can be adapted to Extension programs. In addition

to group-learning opportunities, experienced staff often need individual counseling to identify specific needs and to find ways to meet these needs. The many opportunities available should be organized into a personalized, coordinated, and integrated program for self-development.

In exploring group and individual opportunities for continued learning, both non-traditional and traditional approaches should be considered. In this regard, such things as assessment of experiential learning, contractual learning, self-instruction techniques, and web-based education are but a few approaches that warrant consideration. Professional development leaders should maintain communications with other professional educators involved in adult and continuing education in order to be knowledgeable about innovative approaches, which might be adopted for use in Extension.

Graduate Education

It is generally assumed that an advanced degree increases the competence of an Extension worker and signifies professional growth. Studies tend to substantiate this assumption. Therefore, a state Cooperative Extension system that is moving toward a more comprehensive professional development program should develop an administrative climate which encourages staff members to engage in continuing education through graduate study.

In developing policies and procedures designed to foster graduate study, states may want to consider, among others, 1) part-time (credit hours allowable per term or semester; financial support available, if any, etc.); 2) short-term study leave (one to three weeks; financial support, etc.); 3) a semester study plan away from the job; and 4) sabbatical leave.

Pre-retirement Education

In recent years, organizations have been giving increased attention to meeting the needs of the employee throughout the entire work-life span. Indicative of this, several state Extension Systems across the nation have conducted pre-retirement training sessions. Through these sessions, staff members nearing retirement are provided information, which helps them make satisfactory personal, societal, and employment adjustment following their scheduled separation from the organization. States designing a comprehensive professional development program should include this type of educational experience.

Employee Responsibility

The Extension organization must foster within staff members, at all levels of the organization, the desire to continue their intellectual growth and professional development as a personal as well as an organizational responsibility. Extension staff members must recognize that lifelong learning is a prerequisite to effective performance on their jobs. While the organization has the responsibility of setting the climate for professional improvement, the ultimate responsibility is upon the individual employee.

The Extension organization should provide, as a minimum, a system that fosters development of professional improvement plans. The system should include provisions for 1) a three- to five-year projections of development activities; 2) an annual review and updating; 3) counseling and guidance regarding development opportunities available; and 4) review and approval by

supervision (if the organization is to provide support). Progress with professional development plans should be closely linked to annual performance reviews.

Some organizations may desire to utilize career development plans. However, this requires an open administrative climate and career ladder opportunities. Career development plans allow the individual to specify career objectives and to engage in development activities to improve competencies to achieve these objectives.

Extension workers may engage in a variety of development activities designed to improve professional competence whether a system that encourages development of professional improvement plans does or does not exist. These include formal credit courses (either degree or non-degree oriented); informal non-credit activities (including workshops, seminars, conference, etc.); and other professional improvement activities (including professional reading programs and membership in and attendance at professional and/or society meetings).

The majority of professional improvement activities in which an Extension employee engages should be either directly job-related or related in a general way to current or future organizational responsibilities. Extension organizations should develop policies designed to appropriately foster and support professional improvement. Such policies might pertain to short-term study leave, sabbatical leave, faculty development leave, etc.

SUMMARY

Extension faculty and staff need a variety of professional development opportunities that will maintain and strengthen professional core competencies. Professional development personnel should work closely with administrators in identifying priority needs, recommending policies, and helping to supply alternative means to meet needs. Innovative approaches to adult education should be explored continually. Although the means used to meet these needs will be diverse, adequate resources must be available to insure that priority requirements are identified and met. Professional development personnel should concern themselves with the utilization of appropriate resources. Planning and scheduling professional development opportunities should be a major part of their role responsibility.

The impact of the Extension education program depends on the total effectiveness of each staff member. Well-planned professional development programs for Extension staff members are essential for the success of Extension educational programs and for the well being of citizens whom they are designed to serve.