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Benchmarking Professional Development Practices Across Youth-Serving Organizations: Implications for Extension

Abstract

Examining traditional and contemporary professional development practices of youth-serving organizations can inform practices across Extension, particularly in light of the barriers that have been noted for effectively developing the professional competencies of Extension educators. With professional development systems changing quickly, particularly through online education and blended learning opportunities, benchmarks need to guide new research around best practices in professional development. Although many program providers have not established benchmarks for professional development, a few cases exist. This article examines the current state of professional development practices of youth-serving organizations and offers recommendations for improving Extension professional development practices.

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Introduction

Quality Extension programs depend on properly prepared staff. Just as effective dissemination of educational content is central to the Extension model, so is the preparation of staff to accomplish their roles through access to high-quality professional development (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). Professional development opportunities change at a rapid pace, with innovative strategies that include communities of practice (CoPs), blogs, personal learning environments (PLEs), and massive open online courses (MOOCs). As noted by Bass (2012), "A growing appreciation for the porous boundaries between classroom and life experience...has created not only promising changes in learning but also disruptive moments in teaching."

In an era of increasing expectations, competing priorities, and limited resources, meeting the professional development needs of Extension professionals is paramount. Furthermore, to remain relevant, Extension professionals need to be prepared to deliver educational content to individuals and communities using contemporary methods and strategies. Examining both traditional and contemporary professional development practices of youth-serving organizations can inform practices across Extension, particularly in light of the barriers that have been noted for effectively developing the professional competencies of Extension educators (Cater, Davis, Leger, Machtmes, & Arcemont, 2013; Lakai, Jayaratne, Moore, & Kistler, 2012).

As youth-serving organizations matured over the last two decades, attention to professional development needs of youth workers has increased. One study found that youth-serving organizations need to recruit and retain good staff to influence youth, that staff need organizational support to implement professional development practices, and that specific qualifications are necessary but not sufficient to implement best practices (Weiss et al., 2005). Many of these organizations adopted a positive youth development approach to serving youth—a model that stresses assets over deficits (Larson, 2000).

As the field evolved from a focus on problem behaviors to a holistic approach emphasizing assets and healthy development, there has been an increase in professional development opportunities offered at local, regional, and national levels for youth workers (Quinn, 2002). Research supports the relationship between a properly prepared workforce and improved youth outcomes (Weiss et al., 2005). For almost 20 years youth worker professional development has focused on identifying competencies for youth workers and addressing those competencies through specific learning opportunities. These competency models provide a framework for content knowledge and skills needed across positions to properly serve youth. National organizations such as 4-H, the American Camp Association, National Collaboration for Youth, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Girl Scouts, and the National Afterschool Association have developed competencies for youth workers (Astroth, Garza, & Taylor, 2004; American Camp Association, 2013a; National Afterschool Association, 2011).

Researchers find that determining professional development needs can be challenging, particularly across large organizations with personnel across multiple sites (Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh, & Nieto, 2002). These researchers have called for professional developmental models to apply across organizations and states. Efforts have focused on establishing the relationship between professional development practices with promising programs or promising practices (Huang, 2006). This article examines the current state of knowledge about professional development practices of youth-serving organizations, addresses the need for cotemporary benchmarking of professional development, and offers recommendations for improving Extension professional development practices.

Professional Development Terms

A review of the literature reveals a variety of terms and approaches to professional growth opportunities across disciplines. For example, human resource scholars and human resource textbooks call this effort "training," "workplace learning," "employee development," and "development" (DeCenzo & Robbins, 1996; Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2000). The business literature describes professional development as "growth and learning," "training," and "executive education" (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1997).

The education professions also use a variety of terms and approaches to professional growth. Adult educators used "training" for many years as an approach to professional development, but the term has fallen out of favor, and instead this work is referred to as "continuing professional education," "higher education training," and "transformative learning" (Cranton, 1996; Cranton, 2006; Donavant, 2009; Holst, 2009; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010; King, 2005; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998; Wilson & Hayes, 2000). Teacher education uses the terms "professional development" and "professional learning" for this work (Gallucci, VanLare, Yoon, & Boatright, 2010; Guskey, 2000;

Roschelle et al., 2010; Sparks, 2002). Cooperative Extension scholars and practitioners use the term "professional development" for their approach to growth and development (Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh, & Nieto, 2002; Seevers, Conklin, & Graham, 2007; Senyurekli, Dworkin, & Dickinson, 2006). Finally, youth development educators, including out-of-school-time program providers such as camps, refer to professional growth as "professional development" and specific learning opportunities as "training" (Diem, 2009; Garst, 2012; Heck, Subramaniam, & Carlos, 2009; Stark, Vetter, Gebeke, Lardy, & Eighmy, 2012). In this article, we have chosen to use the term "professional development" when referring to educational opportunities meant to enhance the competences of youth program providers.

Professional Development Significance

As out-of-school time program providers advance implementation of evidence-based practices, more providers are offering professional development opportunities to enhance staff competence in implementing programs and services (Metz, Burkhauser, & Bowie, 2009). Research supports the multiple benefits of employee professional development, including staff retention, improved health and safety, reduced stress, leadership succession, better use of resources, improved program quality, reduced hiring and orientation costs, improved job satisfaction, and more rapid and successful organizational change (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkey, 2006; Guskey, 2000). All disciplines describe professional and personal growth as an outcome of professional development. In addition, the human resource and business literature documents increased innovation, improved work outcomes, improved ethics and professionalism, skill development, improved teamwork, increased networks, and adaptation to changing environments as impacts of employee professional development (Chang & Jacobs, 2012; DeCenzo & Robbins, 1996; Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1997; Noe et al., 2000).

Researchers have also found professional development leads to better content expertise, reduces barriers to achieving outcomes, develops particular skills in employees, transforms individual and team perceptions of the world that improves decision making, and improves practice through licensure and certification in particular competencies (Donavant, 2009; Gallucci, VanLare, Yoon, & Boatright, 2010; Halst, 2009; Kasworm et al., 2010; Seevers, Conklin, & Graham, 2007). As youth workers are exposed to promising or best practices, the growth they experience in knowledge and skills becomes incorporated at the program level and eventually benefits entire organizations as better prepared youth workers "serve as a conduit for networking and cross-agency collaboration" (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkey, 2006, p. 3).

Professional Development Delivery

Professional development and staff training opportunities vary across organizations and sectors (DeCenzo & Robbins, 1996; Diem, 2009; Guskey, 2000). The content, format, and delivery strategies of professional development may differ depending on an organization's needs, developmental stage, management structure, program characteristics, staffing model, target population, resources, or service model delivery (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006; Metz, Burkhauser, & Bowie, 2009).

Professional development takes many forms, from traditional to contemporary. Traditional forms of professional development, such as conferences, face-to-face training, in-service training, affinity group meetings, and coaching/mentoring (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006), are supported by an even wider range of innovative, non-traditional professional development approaches, including online

education, discussion boards, communities of practice, blogging, MOOCS, personal learning environments, and a variety of video chat platforms.

Online education is now commonly used as a delivery method for professional development (Donavant, 2009; Senyurekli, Dworkin, & Dickinson, 2006). From synchronous live webinars to asynchronous online course and recorded webinars (Basiel & Howarth, 2011), organizations increasingly use Web-based formats for professional development. Online education courses and course management systems (CMS) such as the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development (2014), the ACA Professional Development Center (ACA, 2013c), the Louisiana 4-H Camp Counselor Training program offered through eXtension Campus (2014), the Khan Academy (2013), eXtension Learn (2014), and even YouTube (Baughman, 2013) provide a variety of professional development opportunities.

The potential impacts of online education have been expanded through the creation of MOOCS being used by public and private colleges and universities. MOOCS are free online courses with large numbers of enrolled learners (Educause Learning Initiative, 2013). Although the use of MOOCs for Extension education has not been published, Miller (2012) proposed that MOOCS could further the land-grant mission by revitalizing general education, extending the impact of research and technology transfer, re-imaging Extension, expanding continuing education and outreach, and enhancing institutional collaboration.

Blogs are an increasingly common tool for delivering educational content. A blog is an online diary with entries in reverse chronological order so that recent entries appear at the top of the page and older entries are displayed below. Cater et al (2013) noted the popularity of blogs within higher education teacher training programs. In a study of the use of blogs for Louisiana Extension professional development by Cater et al (2013), the researchers found that the majority of Extension professionals were neither comfortable using blogs for professional development nor did they perceive them as useful in improving professional practice. One example in Extension is the Ohio State Extension EdgeU Tech blog (<http://u.osu.edu/extensionedtech/>), focusing on increasing the use of educational technology across Ohio State Extension with online and individualized support from "Ed Tech" staff.

Communities of practice (CoPs) have become a popular professional development strategy (Baughman et al., 2010; Chang & Jacobs, 2012). These groups are also referred to as "learning circles," "learning communities," "study circles," or "affinity groups." CoPs emerge around areas of common interest, are often informal, and often take place online to reduce geographic, time, financial, and other barriers to participating in professional development opportunities (Wenger, 2000). One example of professional development through CoPs is eXtension, which is comprised of faculty from land-grant universities working in communities of practice on specific topic areas. Currently 76 eXtension CoPs offer professional development for members through a combination of webinars, Moodle courses, social media, and wiki's (Baughman, 2013).

Blended learning, a set of professional development activities including both face-to-face and technology-driven activities, is another promising trend within professional development (National Youth Development Learning Network, 2005). The benefits of blended learning include: providing for the needs of youth workers while balancing their busy schedules; reducing overall travel costs

associated with professional development; and enabling learning to happen anytime, anywhere (2005). Although this approach has been used for a decade, the method has not been documented extensively in the Extension literature. Lobley and Ouellette (2013) found a combination of Web-based and face-to-face training provided greater flexibility when training afterschool providers. The *flipped classroom* approach is a blended pedagogic model in which the learning elements are reversed or flipped (Baker, 2000). A common example of a flipped classroom is short video lectures viewed by learners before face-to-face time is spent on discussion, exercises, and other applied activities (Franz, Brekke, Coates, Kress, & Hlas, 2014).

While traditional professional development activities have most often been managed by a host organization, a more innovative approach for managing professional development activities can be found in use of a *personal learning environment* (PLE). A PLE, which is conceptually based on lifelong learning, includes a Web-based hub for personal and professional development for learners to set learning goals, summarize and manage learning content, and communicate with others in the learning process (Attwell, 2007). PLEs are dynamic, open, and unique to each person. PLEs often integrate a variety of learning components, including online courses and webinars, communities of practices, blogs, and artifacts of traditional courses and trainings.

Credentialing is also evolving. A new form of professional development credentialing has emerged called *badging*. When used in a professional development context, a *badge* is a digital graphic credential that recognizes a specific accomplishment, such as completion of an online course. Badges give learners a stamp of credibility within the variety of learning activities they can now engage in online (Finkelstein, Knight, & Manning, 2013). Badges also provide a learning map of skills that matter to an individual and are easily added and shared through a person's web page, social network, or personal learning environment (Bialeschki, 2014).

Professional Development Practices

The professional development practices of youth-serving organizations can inform Extension practices. Extension professionals responsible for youth programs can benefit from understanding the types and formats of professional development opportunities other organizations offer. Benchmarking professional development and staff training practices and activities across diverse youth-serving organizations can help identify resources used, and best practices for, youth-serving organizations such as Extension. Although many youth program providers have not established benchmarks for professional development, a few cases exist.

Cooperative Extension Educators

Extension educators' credentials vary by state; however, all states require a minimum of a Bachelor's or a Master's degree. Professional development within Extension is typically conducted at the state and local levels, with additional opportunities available at professional conferences and through the [eXtension LEARN system](#).

A comprehensive inventory of Extension educators' professional development opportunities was conducted by Senyurekli, Dworkin, and Dickinson (2006). Through an online survey of 157 Extension educators across 14 states, they found the most common forms of professional development included

workshops/seminars (97.5%), traditional classroom courses (43.3%), video conferences (40.1%), online classes (24.2%), and interactive television (10.2%).

To determine the professional development needs of Extension educators nationwide, the National Association of Extension Program and Staff Development Professionals and eXtension surveyed Extension professionals to determine educator needs for professional development (Lambur, 2012). A total 1,316 educators from 69 institutions responded to the survey. This was the first national level assessment of educator professional development needs across all Extension programmatic areas. 4-H educators represented 27% of respondents and indicated their most important need was learning to evaluate and report program effectiveness. 4-H educators expressed the least need for developing effective programs. These findings give some indication of professional development topics to guide national benchmarking.

American Camp Association Day and Resident Camps

The American Camp Association (2013b) surveyed a representative sample of 1,350 day and resident ACA-Accredited and/or affiliated camps in 2012 to establish industry benchmarks around professional development practices. A total of 423 camps responded (31% response rate). Because of their ACA affiliation, these camps were likely following quality standards established by ACA. The survey indicated that 61% of responding resident camps required professional development for full-time staff, with an average of 2 hours required for full-time staff annually. ACA also found that responding camps required *specialty* seasonal frontline staff to complete an average of 12 hours of professional development each year *before arrival at camp*, with 20% of camps requiring 20 hours or more of professional development *before arrival*, and responding camps required other (non-specialty) seasonal frontline staff to complete an average of 6 hours of professional development each year *before arrival at camp*, with 22% of camps requiring 10 hours or more of professional development *before arrival*.

With regards to methods used to complete professional development for full-time staff, 46% of responding camps used off-site opportunities, 21% used on-site opportunities provided by internal staff, 19% used on-site opportunities provided by external trainers/consultants, and 12% used online education opportunities. For seasonal staff, 73% of responding camps used onsite opportunities provided by internal staff, 16% used onsite opportunities provided by external trainers/consultants, 7% used online education opportunities, and 5% used off-site opportunities. Commonly used online education systems by day and resident camp staff included the American Camp Association's [Professional Development Center](#) and an online education system called [ExpertOnlineTraining.org](#).

The American Camp Association survey also revealed incentives and/or benefits provided by camps for staff members who completed professional development, with 23% of camps indicating some type of incentive (wage/salary increase, bonus, increase in rank, or other incentive) was provided to full-time staff. This question was not asked for seasonal staff.

21st Century Community Service Learning Centers

In a 2007 study, Khashu and Dougherty examined staffing and other organizational practices that

distinguish higher quality after-school programs at twenty 21st Century Community Service Learning Centers in New York. They found across all programs, staff members reported high levels of participation in professional development activities. However, they also found that "higher-quality program staff received more training and participated in training on a wider variety of topics than staff from lower quality programs" (p. 18). Higher quality programs were more likely to purchase professional development for their staff. In fact, there was a significant difference between higher and lower quality programs in ways program administrators supported staff participation in professional development. Sixty percent of staff from higher quality programs reported administrators paid for training, 50% said administrators made staff aware of training opportunities, and 19% of staff said that administrators rewarded participation in professional development.

Improving Professional Development Practices

Although benchmarks or clearly established best practices for professional development have yet to be developed by some program providers, and the content of professional development may vary, there is evidence to support improved strategies for delivering Extension professional development opportunities. For example, a research review of out-of-school-time providers in the human services field found that effective professional development strategies are often consistent (Metz, Burkhauser, & Bowie, 2009) even though organizational missions and goals may vary.

Cooper (n.d.) summarized the research base for effective professional development. From this perspective, five elements of Extension professional development and staff training programs may facilitate effective program implementation:

- Present background information, theory, philosophy, and values of the program or practice to staff;
- Introduce and demonstrate important aspects of the new practice or skill;
- Provide opportunities to practice new skills and receive feedback;
- Provide ongoing support and follow-up training; and
- Allow sufficient time for training.

Using these elements as a guide, where are the opportunities for growth in Extension professional development? Some program providers may find that staff learn new knowledge and skills yet are not given sufficient opportunity to demonstrate or practice important skills and abilities. Other program providers may find that staff are receiving extensive pre-service professional development but are not provided with ongoing support, coaching, and follow-up training (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Still other program providers may find the amount of time allowed for professional development is insufficient for producing desired outcomes (Lobley & Ouellette, 2013). Learning preferences of staff will always be an important consideration. As noted by Cater et al., (2013), "including questions about [professional development] delivery method preferences would build a foundation for informed program delivery" (p. 10).

The previously described benchmarks established by groups like Extension, the American Camp

Association, and the 21st Century Community Service Learning Centers suggest other strategies that warrant consideration, including: purchasing professional development opportunities, rewarding completion of professional development, and expanding online education opportunities. The emerging literature about current professional development strategies suggests a transformed approach to Extension professional development. Imagine an Extension profession where individuals are connected to one or more communities of practice based on interests and expertise, in which personal learning environments allow people to both manage and share their learning activities. Blogs and webinars also provide greater engagement between learners and the public. From this perspective, when might Extension offer its first MOOC to involve and educate a wider audience? In general, these needs present an excellent opportunity for eXtension to offer additional benchmarks around Web-based professional development in the future. Further, the creation and use of professional development standards (Learning Forward, 2011) to plan, implement, and evaluate Extension professional development experiences can strengthen learning opportunities and produce more effective program providers.

Some organizations encourage staff to create *professional development plans* to guide their learning needs and opportunities (Stone, 2004). Garst (2012) outlined five dimensions of professional development planning, including: variety, intentionality, continuity, collaboration, and verification, and these dimensions can serve as a benchmarking framework for professional development planning. To what extent are professional development plans integrated within Extension educator performance expectations, and how are these plans aligned with contemporary professional development opportunities? With regard to the verification of professional development, monitoring the emergence and prevalence of *badging* will help Extension meet the contemporary credentialing needs of both Extension educators and the learners we serve.

Some dimensions of professional development need to be better understood. A paucity of data exists about the financial investment of youth-serving organizations in professional development offerings. Even the cases highlighted in this article did not report comprehensive budget information related to professional development opportunities. If organizations invest resources in areas that matter most, then data around Extension professional development investment can enlighten our understanding of the prioritization of professional development among program providers.

Conclusions

Extension program quality depends on properly prepared staff. For many educators, professional development may be the single most accessible means for developing new knowledge, skills, and practices needed to provide high-quality programs. With professional development systems changing quickly, particularly with the explosion of online education opportunities, benchmarks such as the ones explored in this article are needed to guide new research around best practices in Extension professional development.

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