

6-16-2022

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Recommended Citation

Jones, K. R. (2022). Towards a More Effective Leader: Planning for the Next Extension Administrator. *The Journal of Extension*, 60(2), Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.60.02.16>

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Toward a More Effective Leader: Planning for the Next Extension Administrator

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Abstract. This study was conducted to assess the level at which state Cooperative Extension systems have strategies in place for administrative leadership changes. The data revealed that institutions have succession plans ranging from those that are very robust to very limited in nature. However, only 50% reported having individuals in key positions necessary to support continuity. In addition, 75% noted that it would take a year or more to replace the current Extension director/administrator if the person left immediately. This article provides insight on the successes and challenges associated with retaining top talent and mentoring potential leaders for advancement.

INTRODUCTION

The ever-changing administrative transitions among today's universities are viewed as a leadership crisis (Appadurai, 2009). Many are impacted by societal challenges, budget restraints, and other issues that perpetuate declining enrollments (Jaquette & Curs, 2015; Lamm & Israel, 2013). The Cooperative Extension Service has not gone unaffected. Hence, there is a need for strong leadership of state Cooperative Extension systems. There are fewer and fewer campus Extension administrators who matriculate from county and regional roles to specialists and associate deans/directors of Extension. Transition time for a predecessor to work closely with an incoming administrator to ensure continuity is limited. Moreover, additional present-day realities of limited resources, ongoing fiscal deficits, and changing political climates impact stakeholder interests (Monk et al., 2019; Page & Kern, 2018). As a result, Extension needs leaders with the capability to accept the challenges at hand (Berven et al., 2020; Godwin et al., 2011).

Literature on succession planning focuses primarily on business or corporate models, which limits concepts applicable to Extension systems (Lindner, 2001). Lindner (2001) argued that perhaps the most significant divergence between Extension and business is that while Extension's managers have been primarily internal hires or promotions, businesses rely on recruiting both internal and external professionals. Succession planning requires being aware of the major positions within an organization and setting forth action

plans to prepare individuals to fill designated roles (Lindner, 2001; Luna, 2012; Day, 2007). This process broadens the talent pool, providing access to highly skilled employees who are prepared to assume positions as they become available. Succession planning has varied definitions across business and non-profits. There's even more ambiguity among units within the academy (Gonzalez, 2010). Croteau and Wolk (2010) emphasized a need for a paradigm shift: a push for leaders to think critically and execute ways to develop talent within the rank-and-file members of an organization. The benefit to creating a pipeline of future leaders from within is that employees are encouraged and empowered to develop as leaders, which fosters a sense of value and sparks a higher level of commitment.

Succession planning requires being proactive in preparing future leadership. It is not a threat to current administration, but rather it is an opportunity to perpetuate internal strengths. It is essential to prepare for the inevitable resignations or retirements (Bradley et al., 2012; Benge et al., 2015). Despite the intentional succession planning steps taken by corporations (and at times, government agencies), universities, colleges and particularly state Cooperative Extension systems seldom adopt similar practices (Lindner, 2001; Luna 2012; Wallin, 2007). This study was designed to analyze how leaders of state Extension systems internalize succession planning and to assess what plans are in place to nurture future leadership.

The purpose of the study was to assess the succession planning strategies among state Cooperative Extension Systems. The specific objectives were to:

1. Determine whether state Cooperative Extension Systems are preparing for administrative leadership changes.
2. Identify the top personal/core and technical competencies needed by Extension leaders.
3. Describe the institutional knowledge necessary to be successful as an Extension administrator.
4. Determine challenges and best practices associated with effective succession planning.

METHODS

The study included a convenience sample (Patton, 1990) of Extension leaders who voluntarily provided feedback in response to an online survey. The survey was designed to gather feedback from Extension administrators to assess whether state Cooperative Extension systems are preparing for administrative leadership changes. Extension leadership was defined as the individual directing Extension/land-grant operations. The titles varied among institutions (e.g., Extension Director, 1890 Administrator, Assistant/Associate Dean, Dean). Administrators were identified via purposive sampling approaches by reviewing a list of Extension administrators from all 50 states, compiled to identify those from each 1862 and 1890 land-grant university. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Narrative transcriptions from participant feedback (open-ended questions), multiple choice items, and responses to Likert-scale items from the online survey were analyzed using initial coding to identify primary themes. Participant responses were examined using a constant comparative approach (Creswell, 2003; Glasner & Strauss, 1967). In October of 2019, a total of 66 Administrators from 1862 and 1890 institutions in all 50 states were emailed a link to access the survey. A follow-up email was sent to non-responders in December and again in January 2020 in order to improve the response rate.

RESULTS

A total of 31 Extension administrators (47%) responded to the survey. Two of the respondents did not identify their state or institution. Responses from 25 states were included, representing the Extension regions (some states had both 1862 & 1890 land grants responding). The number of institutions by region were: Northeast (3); North Central (4); Southern (17; this includes 5 1890s); Western (5), and; unknown (2). All who responded were Extension administrators who were in charge of or had the influence to lead succession planning

efforts. The participants were asked a series of questions about their Extension system's administrative structure and succession planning efforts. When asked "Does your state Extension system have a plan to replace talented, highly valued administrators?", 50% responded "Yes", while 39% indicated "No" and 11% were unsure. Twenty-one percent reported that their succession plans do not begin until after the current administrator has announced plans to leave or retire.

When asked, "Who has the primary responsibility for succession planning in your Extension system?", most responses referenced those in upper-level administration, including Deans, Provosts/Vice Presidents and Chancellors/Presidents. However, when asked if they feel as though these individuals have the proficiency (e.g., resources, political acumen, etc.) to successfully select the right person or next leader for future leadership positions, 21% indicated feeling less assurance that this would occur.

Participants were also asked how long it would take to place a permanent hire (non-interim) in the position if the current Extension administrator left tomorrow. Seven individuals (23%) indicated that their Extension system is poised to replace the person within six months, while the remainder reported longer time frames. Approximately 60% noted that it would take about a year and 14% expressed that it would take longer than a year.

A primary objective of the study was to determine the status of land-grant institutions in regard to succession planning preparation. When asked if Extension systems were currently preparing a specific person to become the next administrative leader, only five reported using this strategy. Figure 1 shows that of the 28 responding to the survey item, a majority of institutions were not preparing their next Extension leader or were unsure whether this practice was occurring.

A total of 71% reported that their Extension system has a written document (e. g., job description, position expectations, etc.) that outlines the skills, competencies, and experiences expected of the next administrative leader. The remaining respondents (29%) indicated that there was no such document or that they were uncertain if one existed. For those (50%) reporting that plans were intact to replace administrators who leave, the level of depth varied. The quotes regarding plans included:

- "We make sure the necessary functions are covered from existing staff either by naming an interim or dispersing the duties. We then evaluate the position relative to current and future needs and make adjustments if necessary while it is open and then proceed. If it is necessary, we name a long term (plan on 1-2 years) interim while we conduct a search. The interim is often someone we have groomed for the position and is typically an internal candidate."

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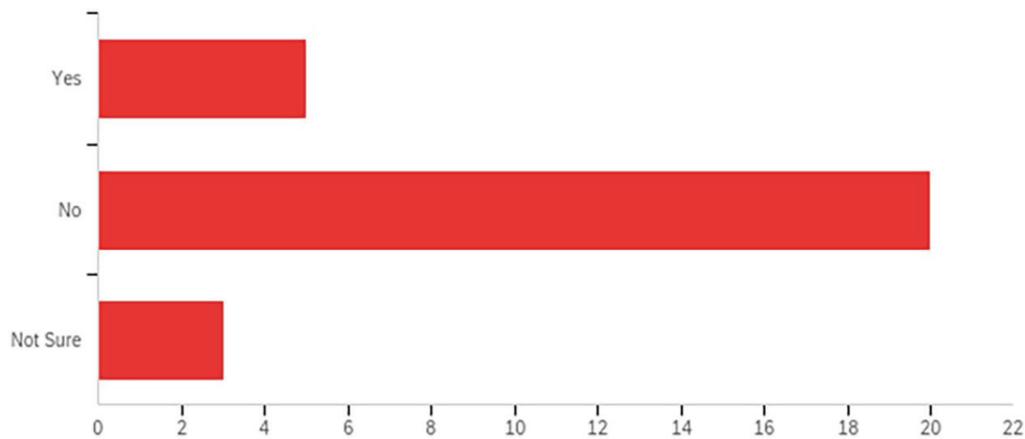


Figure 1. Institutions noting whether someone was in preparation of becoming the next administrative leader.

- “Certain individuals have been recruited and supported by administration in attending/participating in a variety of leadership opportunities and programs. Their leadership is valued and recognized by peers in state and nationally.”
- “We advertise the position.”
- “We typically pull from within our mid-management ranks (district, regional and unit leaders). Many of these individuals have been identified and have completed some advanced leadership and management training.”
- “A group of talented professionals in programmatic leadership roles are currently in positions that groom them to assume administrative leadership roles as they become vacant.”

Follow up questions asked participants to provide their perception of the competencies necessary to ensure leaders are successful. More specifically, the question was, “What top three personal/core competencies do you feel are important for an Extension Administrative Leader?” A list of competencies were provided and an additional option for “other” was included in order to give the chance to “write in” other competencies. A total of three competencies could be selected. The list of competencies provided within the survey was based on related work of several Extension scholars (Atiles, 2018; Berven et al., 2021; Scheer et al., 2011). Figure 2 reveals several competencies identified by those responding to the survey item.

Participants were also asked “What top three technical competencies do you feel are most relevant for an Extension Leader?” Up to three competencies could be selected, including an option to include “other” suggestions. Figure 3 shows the top technical competencies that were viewed as critical to Extension leaders. Note that in addition to the choices

included in the survey, participants also provided additional examples (see “other comments”) deemed as critical competencies.

Administrators were asked to respond to Likert-scale items to further assess their perceptions of succession planning within their Extension system. Table 1 summarizes those responses.

THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN ‘HITTING THE GROUND RUNNING’

It should come as no surprise that most Extension administrators either want leaders who can maintain the status quo if the current conditions are favorable (at least at the beginning) or one who has the fortitude to make transformative changes that everyone can embrace. This is the expectation: for the new leader to ‘hit the ground running’. In fact, this was evident in the findings of this study. Participants were asked to describe the institutional/organizational knowledge necessary to be successful as an Extension Leader. Responses included being knowledgeable of Extension; having the ability to lead/manage effectively, connect with staff, engage in lifelong experiential learning, and be a visionary; and having the wherewithal to step into/take on the role immediately. Given the common phrase that suggests Extension leaders must be able to hit the ground running, this study included a question to gather insight on this notion. More specifically, participants responded to a particular item: “It is often expressed that there is a need for a new administrator to *be ready now* or to *hit the ground running*. Describe what that means to you.” The themes generated from responses related to institutional knowledge in relation to the need to hit the ground running are included in Table 2.

The administrators participating in the study perceived an array of challenges associated with succession planning (Table 3). Several noted that there was a lack of interest by



Figure 2. Core competencies as perceived by Extension administrative leaders.

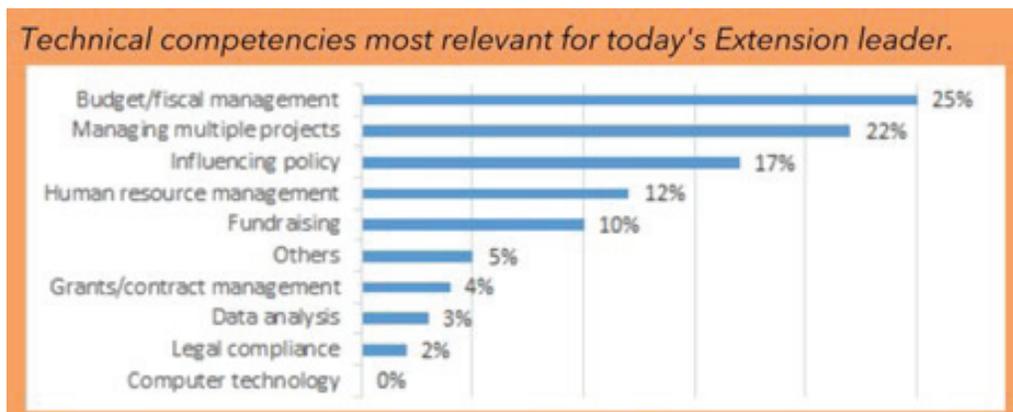


Figure 3. Technical competencies as perceived by Extension administrative leaders. “Other” comments from respondents included technical competencies such as clear communication of organizational vision, a historical perspective of Extension and program development, and an understanding of clientele needs.

Table 1. Extension Administrators' Perceptions of Succession Planning (Within Their Extension System)

#	Items	Mean	S.D.
1	I believe a new administrator must be able to hit the ground running in order to move Extension forward.	3.93	0.77
2	I believe I have a role to play in Extension's succession planning.	4.40	1.08
3	I am sought out for my opinion on strategies for succession planning.	4.13	0.72
4	I believe other administrators value my opinion on succession planning.	4.20	0.65
5	There is a high level of job satisfaction among those in position to move into administration.	3.93	0.68
6	There is a high level of engagement (serving on committees, volunteering to lead initiatives, etc.) among those in position to move into administration.	4.13	0.50
7	My Extension system is very effective in mentoring talented individuals for future administrative positions.	3.20	0.75

Note. Scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

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Table 2. Extension Administrator Perceptions of the Notion to “Hit the Ground Running”

Theme	Example Quote
Connect with staff	A new administrator needs to be “ready” to listen, learn, and engage with staff, assess strengths, weaknesses and opportunities and then begin developing a plan to move forward.
Proper Management Skills	In order to “hit the ground running” a new administrator must already have the historical knowledge, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, strategic vision, planning and management skills to do the job immediately at the next level. Many of the skills at the “next level” are typically acquired through experience at the next level. In my opinion this is why succession planning is so difficult.
	An individual needs to be prepared to take on the day to day issues with little flexibility to learn as they go. Can they pick up the baton and carry on without missing too many beats?
Visionary	Come with the passion and a vision to enhance areas that are weak and determine what should not be done again.
Flexibility for Experiential Learning	It means they’re willing to jump in, roll up their sleeves and get to work. They may not know everything, but they’re willing to make decisions, make mistakes and try.
	I think it’s an unrealistic comment. I agree that the individual needs to be ready to lead; however, you cannot fully embrace the job, until you have the job and that takes on-the-job training and support from others in the administrative team.
	I’m hesitant to subscribe to that philosophy. I think we are best served by an individual who feels challenged enough to spend time getting to know the organization from the vantage of their new position, whether they are an internal candidate or external. “Ready now” is fraught with potentially faulty assumptions and biases.

those currently in the system. Others reported that succession planning propels the belief that certain individuals are the ‘favored ones’ guaranteed to get all of the opportunities. Other reasons shared by the respondents included not having qualified individuals, human resource rules hindering the process, budget cuts, no priority on succession planning among decision makers, and a lack of opportunities/not enough positions available.

LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

This study was limited to only those who responded to the survey. Only 1862 and 1890 institutions were included in the study; therefore, 1994 land-grant institutions were not represented among the findings. There was also no comparison among regions or 1862/1890 universities, given the large number of participants among the Southern regions (which also included 1890 institutions in this study).

DISCUSSION

It is now more important than ever to institute plans for retaining valuable employees, including administrators. In some instances, we take for granted the talent that exists within our organizations or simply miss opportunities to prepare them for specific roles (Lindner, 2001). Other scenarios among Extension systems pertain to economics (Leuci,

Table 3. Reasons for Succession Planning Challenges

Question	% of Participants Responding	n
Lack of interest by current employee(s)	16%	5
Not having a qualified internal candidate	13%	4
Perceived favoritism of certain individuals within the system	16%	5
Other	45%	14

2012), thus requiring the time and effort to conduct searches for positions that could be filled by those currently among the ranks. When considering searching for talent from within, there may be the assumption that someone from the outside would be more qualified. It is often rare to find an external hire who has both the skills and institutional knowledge possessed by current employees. Another argument is that those who are already within the system are not fully prepared. If true, that is clearly a reason for succession planning. If a person has been productive in a middle management role, they should not be blamed for being unprepared to move to the next level. Perhaps they have not been given the opportunity for additional professional growth. Louder (2020) reported

that individuals may lack the capacity for leadership simply because they have not had the chance to serve in roles that help further develop their skills.

Based on the findings presented, there is a broad range in which state Extension systems are engaged in succession planning. With only 50% responding that they have what they perceive to be a plan in place, it is unclear why others are not implementing a plan. Another question asked related to the number of times Extension administrators had been replaced within the last two years. Positions were filled with external hires/candidates from 0 to 7 times; positions were filled with internal hires/candidates from 0 to 12 times. Since internal hires are made more frequently, it is important to ensure that these individuals are prepared with the skills necessary for upward mobility.

Institutional knowledge can often be drastically undervalued within academia (Duderstadt, 2007). The majority of administrators participating in this study emphasized the importance of having knowledge and expertise with land-grant systems/Extension, as well as an understanding of how to build partnerships and influence policy within higher education. It is important to note that some of the concepts described cannot be formally taught, only gained through years of experience (Seger & Hill, 2016). Arguably, succession planning can enable Extension systems to prepare individuals for leadership opportunities. It is unrealistic to expect one with few opportunities for professional growth to take on major leadership responsibilities with no challenges (Griffeth et al., 2018; Louder, 2020). Sharing knowledge through informal mentoring or documented efforts is helpful not only to new leaders, but for the organization as a whole.

When asked what administrative leaders perceived to be the most challenging issue in regard to succession planning within Extension, common themes centered on the lack of qualified individuals (see Table 1). This issue can be minimized by investing in employees to help them develop the wherewithal to lead. A few leadership programs and initiatives exist for Extension professionals, including LEAD 21 and the Food Systems Leadership Institute (FSLI). These provide intensive professional development specifically for the next generation of land-grant administrators. Another common expression that stifles considerations for succession planning is the perceived favoritism. When there is a perception among the organization that a lot of meaningful work assignments tend to go to a select few who are most visible and at times most vocal, a morale issue can emerge. Current leaders should make sure both equity and equality are considered and use discernment when identifying the most qualified and sharing options for employees to grow.

Within the Extension landscape, there are obviously prevailing threats as previously discussed, but also new opportunities. Institutions must take a serious look at succession planning as an essential element for cultivating leadership.

Current Extension leaders could build human capital from within while enhancing the organization at multiple levels by targeting aspiring administrators, such as middle managers and unit directors. This, in turn, helps to develop a group of what Wallin (2007) refers to as a core of well-informed, qualified, supportive people who understand the institution. This is indeed an effective way to foster better leadership and relationships from a systematic approach.

A few recommendations are provided below, based on the data examined for this study and from similar work that relates to succession planning. The aim is to help Extension administrators consider best practices to foster leadership development for those with the potential to be future Extension leaders (particularly those interested in campus level administration).

- Seek out a number of potential leaders and not just one or two individuals. This can minimize the perception of favoritism; namely that multiple people may be presumed worthy for advancement.
- Promote self-awareness among those who may be interested in becoming Extension administrators by exposing them to projects that require the use of their abilities. It may be best to allow them to identify their own weaknesses before others offer critiques. Be sure to use this as a coaching opportunity while taking note of their strengths. Although they may not currently be ready for certain leadership roles, continue to monitor progress in consideration for future opportunities.
- Job-shadowing can exist at all levels. Offer employees of promise a chance to join in at meetings where decisions are made. Note their comfort level and ability to offer feedback or suggestions.
- Resist the temptation to micro-manage. Effective administrators cannot sacrifice time on this (if you find yourself constantly doing so, this may be a clue that you need to move on to groom another/others). This is not to say that you should give up on those who don't immediately meet expectations. Make it your responsibility to identify talents of employees, then make assignments accordingly. Acknowledge that some people don't know their own strengths until others help identify what they bring to the table.
- Take heed to the specific core and technical competencies that have been identified by other Extension scholars as critical to today's Extension professional. Many of those same competencies are mentioned in this study. Assisting future Extension leaders in further developing their abilities in these areas could help expedite their route to an administrative position.

- Selecting, hiring, and promoting individuals are only parts of effective succession planning. Even the best hires require some mentoring. Table 1 (item #7) denotes that participants in this study had less than positive perceptions of existing mentoring practices. Reviewing recent literature for practical strategies on being an effective mentor may prove beneficial.
- Look beyond typical inner circles. Future leaders come from all genders, races and cultures. From a Cooperative Extension lens, there is also a need to be inclusive by considering individuals from all program areas. Historically, the leaders of Extension systems have been predominantly from the traditional areas of the agricultural sciences (e. g., animal, food, plant/soil, natural resources, etc.). Selecting primarily from one group of applicants is an inequitable approach. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that many of today's issues in need of Extension's attention deal abundantly with the societal ills and dysfunction among families and communities. In essence, we need leaders with expertise in the social science side of agriculture as much as we need those who understand the dynamics impacting production agriculture within our states and country. When diversity is fully embraced, not only does it help to nurture a better appreciation for those we are leading, but it helps leaders become more perceptive in addressing personal limitations (Griffeth et al., 2018). Leaders set in their comfort zones can impede vision; moving beyond that proverbial barrier can serve as a personal growth machine.

SUMMARY

Cooperative Extension could benefit from strategies that integrate leadership development into its succession planning efforts. Succession planning is not simply replacing current leaders. In addition, solely relying on institutional wisdom without proper planning is problematic. State Extension systems should create environments where staff and faculty are encouraged to pursue leadership opportunities with confidence. Succession plans should be clearly communicated as an intentional modality that is embraced by upper-level administration in charge of promotional processes at the college level and beyond. Turnover in leadership is inevitable, from resignations to retirements. The key is to prepare for replacements in a strategic manner. Future studies are needed to more closely examine how succession planning fits effectively within complex Extension systems. However, being proactive versus reactive is the initial premise.

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