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Sharing Resources: A Bistate Extension Specialist Position

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Sharing Resources: A Bistate Extension Specialist Position

Abstract

As Extension budgets across the United States continue to tighten, sharing a specialist between states could become an increasingly effective way to provide high-quality programming at a lower total cost. This article describes the working modalities, benefits, challenges, and outputs of an existing two-state Extension consumer food safety specialist position. Overall, this bistate position has been beneficial to both states involved. The model could be implemented in other states, and the descriptions of aspects of the position provided in this article may be instructive for states considering such an option.

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Background on the Bistate Position

Since 2002, neither Kansas State University (KSU) nor the University of Missouri (MU) has had a state Extension consumer food safety specialist. Although food safety was identified as a key issue for both states, budgetary restrictions prevented either state from hiring for the consumer food safety specialist position. It was recognized that consumer food safety needs were similar in the two states and that resources could be maximized if one person were hired to work in both states. The first person hired in this joint Extension consumer food safety specialist position started in July 2013.

The offices for the bistate consumer food safety specialist position are in Olathe, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri. The partnership between Kansas and Missouri makes particular sense because the Kansas City metropolitan area already straddles the state line, so the two states are accustomed to working together in other areas as well. The main campus of KSU is located 2 hr west of Kansas City, and the main campus of MU is located 2 hr east of the Kansas City area, so the offices for the position are equidistant from those of the two supervisors for the position, which are located in Manhattan, Kansas, and Columbia, Missouri (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Map of Kansas and Missouri



Working Modalities of the Position

The memorandum of agreement between the two states to establish the consumer food safety specialist position was based on a similar agreement between the University of Minnesota and North Dakota State University, which have a bistate position in Extension human nutrition. Like Kansas and Missouri, these two states have a strong history of bistate Extension collaboration and share a large metropolitan area, namely, Moorhead, Minnesota/Fargo, North Dakota (Khan, 2004).

As shown in Table 1, the bistate consumer food safety specialist generally spends time in the office in each state every week. The time spent in each office depends on the tasks to be completed and any meetings that need to be held at one office or the other. The specialist is permitted to work in either office on the other state's tasks.

Table 1.
Key Details of the Bistate Consumer Food Safety Specialist Position

Detail of position	Kansas State University	University of Missouri
Job title	Assistant professor, Extension consumer food safety specialist	Assistant professor, Extension consumer food safety specialist
Primary faculty status	FCS Extension	HES Extension
Supervisor	Assistant director of FCS Extension	Associate dean of HES Extension
Office location	KSU–Olathe campus (western side of Kansas City, KS, metro area)	Western Jackson County Extension office, Kansas City, MO
Human resources status	Full-time employee that receives 50% of salary, fringe, and expenses from a "grant" with MU; specialist payroll through KSU	Courtesy faculty appointment; MU sends 50% of position salary, fringe, and expenses to KSU
Eligibility for promotion	KSU nontenure track faculty promotion requirements	Work done for MU also considered in KSU promotion requirements; no promotion through MU
Mechanism by	Graduate faculty status through	Graduate faculty status through

which advising graduate students is possible	faculty membership in interdepartmental Food Science Institute	courtesy appointment in Food Science Department (in process)
Responsibility for program support	Computer owned and overall maintenance provided by KSU; KSU Extension associate updates KSU food safety website	MU ensures that all MU-related computer applications operate properly on computer; HES Extension updates MU website

Note. FCS = Family and Consumer Sciences. HES = Human and Environmental Sciences. KSU = Kansas State University. MU = University of Missouri.

The job description for the position states that the person is expected to develop an Extension program emphasizing consumer issues in food safety, serve as state specialist for training field staff throughout Kansas and Missouri, and provide leadership in designing research-based educational programs, materials, and curricula. The person reports equally to the KSU and MU supervisors (Table 1), and these three people meet together annually for the specialist's performance evaluation. Evaluation is based on the specialist's listing of all work outputs (in both states). There are no specific requirements for carrying out a certain number of programs in each state, but rather each state considers whether the total value the state is receiving from the specialist is meeting the state's expectations. As much as possible, the specialist tries to work on Extension programming that is applicable in both states. If funding were to be available to hire employees under the position, any additional employee would be housed at and would have payroll support through whichever university would be warranted by the project activities and funding.

A key component to making this arrangement work has been the strong support of the position by the supervisors, Extension and university administrators, and colleagues in both states. It is essential for both sides to understand that the person in the two-state position faces unique challenges and does not work 100% for either state, but essentially works 100% for both states. The supervisors from the two states recognize that it is not an effective use of the specialist's time to track the number of hours spent each week working for each state. Rather, they have oral understandings that the specialist should provide nearly equal value to each state over a longer time period, such as a year.

Benefits and Challenges of the Position

Many benefits to this two-state position have been identified, some of which are as follows:

- having the ability to easily do multistate programming and draw on resources—including grant funding opportunities—in two states,
- being able to use many resources in both states because consumer food safety and related issues are similar in neighboring states,
- being able to introduce best practices and information gained in one state to the other state,
- having contacts in one state that may be helpful in the other state, and

- being able to more efficiently use available funding in both states.

In addition, as with any new idea and any new position, there are also challenges associated with the bistate consumer food safety specialist position. Examples of such challenges are as follows:

- learning about the systems, people, and cultures of two different universities and Extension systems;
- learning about the needs and cultures of consumers in two different states;
- balancing outputs in and expectations of each state;
- addressing confusion from some people regarding the role and the geographic distance from both main campuses; and
- addressing university logistics, such as those involved in obtaining a joint nametag or joint letterhead.

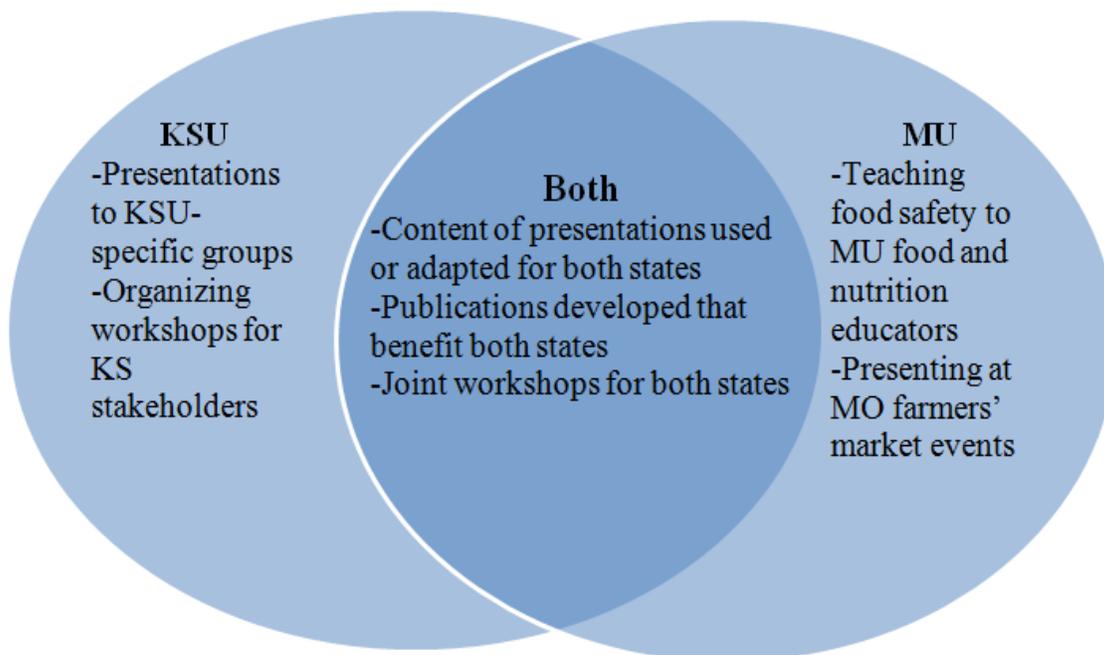
These challenges are continuously being addressed through open communications among and understanding from all parties involved. The specialist strives to keep both supervisors informed of relevant aspects of the job and as appropriate, emails both supervisors on an issue at the same time. It has been essential for the supervisors to work well together and for the expectations for the position, as well as the expectations of both universities, to be clearly spelled out in the memorandum of understanding. Other states considering such a shared position should try to clarify expectations and challenges upfront to make the position as successful as possible.

Outputs and Outcomes of the Position

Whereas some outputs of the bistate position benefit only one state or the other, most outputs either directly or indirectly benefit both states (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Examples of Outputs of the Bistate Position for Kansas State University (KSU), University of Missouri (MU), and Both Universities



In addition to improving consumer food safety in both states through the efforts of one person, other key outcomes from this joint position have been identified. For example, numerous other areas for collaboration between the two states have been noted, including the opportunity to share another Extension specialist to lead a "Stay Strong, Stay Healthy" program in both states. Additionally, best practices and other information on numerous topics gained in one state can be introduced in the other state.

Summary

With many Extension programs across the United States facing budget cuts and increased scrutiny of their spending and outcomes, this bistate model could help provide better services to clients and to Extension organizations as a whole, at a reduced cost. This is particularly true with programs such as food safety, where program needs in different states are closely related and interconnected (Chenoweth, 1993). Other states also have found value in working across state lines on specific projects (Cantrell, Lubben, & Reese, 2013), but the idea of having a position shared between two states is something that we feel has great merit for Extension in the future.

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