

8-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Brown, A. S., Gibson, J. D., & Stewart, D. L. (2008). An Assessment of Virginia Cooperative Extension's New Extension Agent Training Program. *The Journal of Extension*, 46(4), Article 9.
<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol46/iss4/9>

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An Assessment of Virginia Cooperative Extension's New Extension Agent Training Program

Abstract

The study reported here was designed to determine how new Extension agents, Extension training agents, and Extension administrators who have participated in the NEAT program assessed its importance and effectiveness. Demographic characteristics were identified for descriptive purposes in this research study. The research conducted in this study is based upon competencies utilized in the current training practices of Virginia Cooperative Extension.

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The study reported here was an assessment of the New Extension Agent Training (NEAT) program in Virginia. Participants have completed the NEAT program. They rated the importance and effectiveness of the NEAT program in facilitating new Extension agents' growth in a series of goals needed for a new agent to be proficient. Data analyzed using SPSS showed that communication was rated the most important competency, while human development was considered the least important. Effectiveness ratings demonstrated communication was the most effectively taught competency in the NEAT program, and human development is the least effectively taught.

As is true in most states, Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) employs Extension agents who hold faculty rank and academic degrees from a wide variety of disciplines. The agents' academic preparation enables them to acquire Extension positions in 4-H youth development, agriculture and natural resources, and family and consumer sciences. Although degree programs provide excellent subject matter training, they often lack opportunities for agents to obtain skills or strengths in some of the subjects that are needed to be effective Extension professionals (Bennett, 1979).

Because technical degree programs seldom provide adequate programming skill development courses, VCE involves all new Extension agents in NEAT, a program through which fieldwork expertise and educational programming competence may be developed. This provides opportunities for newly employed agent faculty to receive unit-based, hands-on orientation and training in preparation for assuming assigned roles in their field units. All new Extension faculty members are expected to participate in the NEAT program.

The key to a successful training program is to clarify in advance the roles and expectations of the training agent and new Extension agent so that they know how to achieve successful outcomes (Boyle, 1981). The development and implementation of a training plan that allows Extension agents to address their weaknesses and build upon their strengths best accomplishes this. Although the new Extension agent is ultimately responsible for the development of the plan, a collaborative effort among Extension training agents, staff development specialists, and administrative specialists is necessary.

Virginia Cooperative Extension implemented the program for all new Extension agents in January 2000. The NEAT program is an innovative way to respect the characteristics of the new employee, determine the situation in the assigned locality, and develop a training program that will enhance agents' abilities to maximize performance once they are in their assigned locations.

Participants

The participants for this study consisted of 41 new Extension agents, 21 Extension training agents, and eight Extension administrators who have participated in the NEAT program since January 1, 2000. The administrators were included in this study because of their direct supervisory involvement with the new Extension agents who participated in the NEAT program.

Methods

The research design of the study was a cross-sectional, post-program survey of participants and administrators involved in the NEAT program. The survey was completed online by each study participant. A total of 20 goals were randomly arranged in the form of questions related to each of the eight competencies as outlined by National Policy Statement on Staff Training and Development (1968).

Each of the 20 randomly itemized goals were later categorized under the following competencies:

1. Communication
2. Educational Processes
3. Effective Thinking
4. Extension Organization and Administration
5. Human Development
6. Program Planning
7. Research
8. Social Systems

The instrument used in this study was a self-administered questionnaire with a rating scale that assessed competencies appropriate to Virginia Cooperative Extension and addressed by the NEAT program. An online questionnaire was the instrument of choice for this project because of its easy access for the research population as well as its success rate when used in other studies (Gibson & Hillison, 1994; Stone, 1997; Mincemoyer & Kelsey, 1999).

The respondents rated the goal statements that came from previous research and the NEAT program content. The responses to the 20 items related to goals within the competencies and were in two categories. The first category addressed the importance of the competencies as perceived by the respondent. Administrators, new Extension agents, and training agents expressed their opinion by selecting a rating of 1 = unimportant through 6=very important.

The second category of responses addressed the assessment of effectiveness of the NEAT program for new Extension agents. Administrators, new Extension agents, and training agents expressed their opinion by selecting a rating of 1= ineffective through 6= very effective. A response of NA (not applicable) was also included for those participants who had mastered a particular skill before involvement in the NEAT program. The NA option was only included in the survey for the new Extension agents.

Results

Demographics

Seventy people were selected to participate in the survey from a database of NEAT participants currently employed by VCE. These people were selected based on their current status as VCE employees and the researcher's ability to refer information about the survey to them. This selected group consisted of 41 new Extension agents, 21 training agents, and eight administrators. Of the 70 people chosen, 47 responded to the questionnaire, which resulted in a 67% overall response rate. Twenty-six new Extension agents, 16 training agents, and four administrators responded to the questionnaire, and one respondent did not indicate any involvement category.

Most of the respondents had a master's degree (64%), were new Extension agents (55%), were female (51%), specialized in Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) (40%), and were between 40 and 49 years old (30%).

Respondents had the opportunity to comment on how they believed the NEAT program could be improved, based on their experiences. The responses were open-ended, and respondents could provide as much information as they chose. There were 25 responses in all, and several people responded with more than one suggestion. Eight responses indicated that more subjects needed to be covered in NEAT, six replies noted that they did not see the value of training outside of their home counties, and four responses indicated that training needs to be subject-specific. Two replies specified that they wanted to have training in other counties, and two replies indicated a desire to train with retired agents. Only one response indicated the need for seminars, one respondent wanted to see a set of standards for training, and one indicated that there was a need for more resources to train effectively.

Importance Ratings for the Eight Competencies

Part of the survey was based on the National Policy Statement on Staff Training and Development (1968). The ratings of the goals in each competency were combined, and then a mean rating was computed for that particular competency. Means and standard deviations for importance ratings for the eight competencies for all respondents are presented in Table 1. The rating scale provided for the respondents ranged 6= very important to 1=not important. In the importance ratings, communication was rated as the most important competency, with a mean of 5.54, followed by educational processes, with a mean 5.29.

Table 1.
Importance Ratings of the Eight Competencies

Competency	Mean	Standard Deviation
Communication	5.54	0.70
Educational Processes	5.29	0.79
Extension Organization and Administration	5.07	0.77
Social Systems	5.06	0.70
Research	4.96	0.81
Program Planning	4.78	0.68
Effective Thinking	4.69	0.86
Human Development	4.36	0.98

Note: Rating scale ranged from 6=very important to 1=not important.

Effectiveness Ratings of NEAT Program for the Eight Competencies

Next, participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of the NEAT program using the 20 goals within the eight competencies contained in the National Policy Statement (1968). Means and standard deviations for the effectiveness ratings of all respondents of the NEAT program ratings are presented in Table 2. The rating scale for the 20 goals that was provided for the respondents ranged from 6= very effective to 1=not effective. The response of NA was included and the instructions specified that this was the appropriate response for those agents who felt that they possessed a specific competency before entering the NEAT program.

Table 2.
Effectiveness Ratings of NEAT Program for the Eight Competencies

Competency	Mean	Standard Deviation
Communication	4.15	1.66
Educational Processes	3.96	1.66
Program Planning	3.80	1.48

Extension Organization and Administration	3.79	1.84
Social Systems	3.78	1.58
Research	3.67	1.71
Effective Thinking	3.67	1.53
Human Development	3.37	1.59
Note: Rating scale ranged from 6=very effective to 1=not effective.		

In the NEAT program effectiveness ratings, communication was rated as the most effectively delivered competency, with a mean of 4.15, followed by educational processes, with a mean of 3.96, and program planning, with a mean of 3.80. Extension organization and administration had a mean of 3.79, followed by social systems, with a mean of 3.78, and research and effective thinking, which both had means of 3.67. Human development was rated as the least effectively taught competency within the NEAT program, with a mean of 3.37.

It should be noted that the means and standard deviations varied greatly between the importance of the eight competencies and the effectiveness of the NEAT program in facilitating new Extension agents' growth in the eight competencies. For example, in the importance ratings, the means ranged between 4.36 and 5.54, while the effectiveness ratings ranged between 3.37 and 4.15. Also, while the standard deviations for importance ranged between 0.68 and 0.98, the standard deviations for effectiveness of the NEAT program ranged between 1.48 and 1.84.

Discussions and Implications

The NEAT program was instituted to provide effective preparation for new VCE agents. Since it began on January 1, 2000, over 60 Extension agents have completed the NEAT program (Gibson & Brown, 2002). The NEAT program was designed to provide newly hired Extension agents with information on teaching technical information to their clientele by placing them in real-world Extension experiences. Because every newly hired agent must participate in the NEAT program, an assessment of the program by its participants to determine its importance and effectiveness may convey information that can be used to enhance the effectiveness of the program. This in turn will have implications for staff development in Virginia Cooperative Extension as well as other Cooperative Extension programs worldwide by indicating effective ways to present information to new Extension agents.

The NEAT program was terminated in January 2002 due to budget cuts in VCE. However re-implementing the program in July 2003 despite continuing budget cuts in VCE showed that the NEAT program was considered to be essential in keeping VCE in the forefront in its ability to serve its clientele. Supporting this decision, the study reported here shows that VCE new Extension agents, training agents, and administrators did see the overall value of the NEAT program. Virginia Cooperative Extension has an obligation to provide new Extension agents with the tools to be proficient in those eight general competency areas as outlined by the National Policy Statement in 1968.

The results of the study provide evidence that the NEAT program is an effective program for new Extension agents. Because many other states such as Pennsylvania and Texas have also assessed the training needs of new Extensions, the implications in the study are not limited to the Commonwealth of Virginia. Perhaps other Extensions agencies may use the results of the study to access and ultimately implement programs designed to train new Extension agents to be effective community educators. Because the needs of communities constantly evolve, the Extension system as a whole must adapt to keep up with the changes to meet the needs of its clientele. Extension agents, the primary educators in the community, need an effective program to enable them to face the new challenges of ever changing communities.

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