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Revisiting State 4-H Mentoring Programs for County 4-H Professionals

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Revisiting State 4-H Mentoring Programs for County 4-H Professionals

Abstract

This article describes major aspects of mentoring programs being conducted currently by state Extension systems to support county 4-H Youth Development professionals. NAE4-HA Mentoring Task Force members developed a quantitative research methodology using a Web-based survey and census of State 4-H Leaders as of September 1, 2003, to collect data. Thirty-four respondents reported having some type of county 4-H mentoring program, including 12 reporting a formal program and 22 an informal program. However, a consistent, Web-based national 4-H professional development mentoring curriculum would better benefit county 4-H professionals and state 4-H programs in the U.S. and globally.

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Introduction

The contemporary concept of "mentoring" has its origins in Homer's (1962) ancient Greek epic, *The Odyssey*. In the classic saga, before the hero Odysseus leaves Greece to battle the Trojans, he assigned the management of his household as well as his son Telemachus' education to his dear friend and colleague, Mentor.

During the twentieth century, mentoring evolved in the for-profit sector as an organizational human resource development intervention through which an experienced employee who is recognized as successful within the organization is assigned to serve as an "advisor, sponsor, tutor, advocate, coach, protector, role model and guide" to an inexperienced employee (Hadden, 1997, p. 17). Numerous authors have described models and approaches to mentoring programs through the years (Burke, McKeen, & McKenna, 1983; Kram, 1983, 1985; Leah & Leibowitz, 1983; Phillips-Jones, 1982; Roche, 1979; Wilbur, 1987; Zey, 1984). The concept has recently experienced somewhat of a renaissance in the organizational development literature (Brounstein, 2000; Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Cunningham & Eberle, 1993; Freher & Ash, 1990; Hadden, 1997; Stromi, 2001).

While Merriam (1983) compiled a thorough review of the literature regarding the concepts of both "mentor" and "protégé," a universal definition of "mentoring" continues to evolve even today. Zimmer and Smith (1992) observed that "Mentoring has been defined most often by focusing on behaviors mentors perform: teaching, guiding, advising, counseling, sponsoring, role modeling, validating, motivating, protecting, and communicating" (p. 2). Mincemoyer and Thomson (1998) suggested that "Mentors have been defined in the literature as higher ranking, influential senior organization members with advance experience and knowledge, who are committed to providing upward mobility and support to a protégé's professional career" (p. 1).

Brounstein (2000) proposed that "Mentors in the business world are often seen as those wise senior-level managers who provide the support and assistance that help advance your career" (p. 115), and concluded that "mentoring" and "tutoring" are often used interchangeably, with both also a part of professional "coaching." Stromei (2000) defined a mentor as "A person at a higher level of responsibility in the organization, who agrees to act as a wise or trusted counselor, leader, and role model to a person who seeks to grow and develop professionally" and "mentoring" as "A

complex, interactive process in which two individuals of differing levels of experience and expertise are paired for the agreed-upon goal of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies" (p. 3). Kutilek, Gunderson, and Conklin (2002) defined a mentor as an employee's peer who serves as "a trusted adviser, friend, and teacher . . . who is a non-evaluator" (p. 4).

Whatever the definition, mentoring as a human resource development intervention usually involves four major components. An inexperienced employee (protégé) is paired with a successful experienced employee (mentor). Together, they build a professional and personal relationship based upon mutual respect and trust, for the purposes of better ensuring the protégé's competencies and success in her/his professional responsibilities. However, the mentoring experience also contributes to the personal and professional development of the mentor as well.

Mentoring in Extension

The concept of mentoring as applied to the United States Cooperative Extension Systems is not a contemporary phenomenon. Almost 20 years ago, Smith and Beckley (1985) first reported positive results from having experienced Ohio Cooperative Extension agents mentoring inexperienced agents through a 1983 pilot informal mentoring system. Zimmer and Smith (1992) later studied 60 mentors and their 60 protégés in the same Ohio mentoring program and recommended that the mentoring experience should be established early in the protégé's employment and that mentors should receive formal guidelines and training in their role.

Mincemoyer and Thomson (1998) utilized a qualitative methodology to explore mentoring relationships in Pennsylvania State Cooperative Extension. The authors concluded that within a mentoring program, established guidelines should:

. . . outline the roles of the mentor and what his/her responsibilities will be. These guidelines should include: (a) the goals of the mentoring program; (b) the Extension mentoring philosophy; (c) the perceived benefits of mentoring to the protégé, the mentor, and the organization; (d) information about positive mentoring behaviors (i.e., active listening, envisioning outcomes, productive confrontation); and (e) information about the roles of the mentor. (p. 5)

Kutilek and Earnest (2001) investigated peer mentoring and peer coaching in Ohio State University Extension and the OSU College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences. Using a quasi-experimental research design, the authors identified physical distance and schedule conflicts (time) as barriers to a successful mentoring relationship. Most recently, Kutilek, Gunderson, and Conklin (2002) discussed mentoring as one component in a larger holistic Ohio State University Extension human resource development system. Distance between mentor and protégé and time constraints were again suggested as barriers to an effective mentoring relationship, while the authors concluded that "peer teaching, mentoring, dialogue, sharing, and coaching [all] contribute to the growth of others while at the same time encouraging personal growth" (p. 11).

Purpose and Methodology

The single objective of the descriptive study reported here was to investigate existing county 4-H professional mentoring programs being conducted currently by state Extension organizations. The Professional Development Committee of the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents (NAE4-HA) authorized the study at the committee's business meeting during the 2003 Extension Galaxy Conference held in September in Salt Lake City, Utah. Eight Committee members volunteered to serve on a newly appointed Mentoring Task Force that was chaired by the author.

For the purposes of the research, the Task Force members utilized recent literature to define operationally a "mentoring program" as "an organizationally supported and guided series of formal and/or informal developmental activities for new paid 4-H staff designed to orient them to the 4-H program and support their personal and professional success by creating for them a one-to-one professional relationship with a more experienced professional peer." A "formal mentoring program" was defined operationally as "an organized series of trainings and interactions, based upon a standard curriculum, coordinated from a central location." An "informal mentoring program" was defined as one "that connects a new county 4-H professional with an informal mentor and does not involve a formal curriculum or series of organized meetings coordinated from a central location."

Task Force members developed a quantitative research methodology using a Web-based survey (Dillman, 2000) and census of State 4-H Leaders as of September 1, 2003, to collect data. The survey consisted of 23 items involving closed-ended nominal response categories. Two items collected data on respondents (state of reporting and professional title), 11 items collected data on formal mentoring programs, and 10 items on informal mentoring programs (based upon research objective 2). The final two open-ended items collected qualitative data involving respondents' comments regarding (1) mentoring programs for new county 4-H professionals and (2) the survey itself. The eight Task Force members served as a panel of experts to establish the instrument's face validity.

The National Program Leader for 4-H Professional Development collaborated with the Task Force in conducting the study. National 4-H Headquarters at CSREES/USDA contracted with the Zoomerang.com Web-based survey company to launch the survey, and hosted the survey on its server. The survey was posted on May 14, 2003, and the Program Leader utilized a CSREES/USDA list serve to send an email to all current State 4-H Leaders as of that date in the 50 states and the District of Columbia announcing the study, posting a link to the Web-based survey, and encouraging them (or their designees) to participate.

As of the initial response deadline of June 1, 2003, only 23 State 4-H Leaders (45%) had responded. On July 19, 2004, the Program Leader contracted with Zoomerang.com to extend the posting of the Web-based survey, and sent a second email to State 4-H Leaders on July 19 reminding them of the study and again, posting a link to the survey and encouraging them (or their designee) to participate. As of the final response deadline of July 30, 2004, members from 36 of the potential 51 state Extension organizations had responded, resulting in a 71% final response rate. The Task Force did not follow-up with the 15 states not responding.

Findings

Response by Extension regions is reported in Table 1. Thirty-four respondents (94.5%) reported having some type of county 4-H mentoring program in their state mentoring program, including 12 (35%) reporting having a formal program and 22 (65%) an informal program. Six (17.5%) reported having both formal and informal programs. Only two responding states (5.5%) had neither type of mentoring program. The North Central CES Region had the largest response rate (11 of 12 states for 92%), while the West Region had the lowest (8 of 13 states for 62%). However, while 17% had operated for 10 or more years, an equal percentage (17%) had operated for less than one year. 4-H professionals in another county serve as mentors in an overwhelming majority of formal programs reported (77%) for one year or longer (83%).

Table 1.

Formal and Informal County 4-H Professional Mentoring Programs by Cooperative Extension Region (N = 36)

CES Region	States Reporting a Mentoring Program			States Reporting No Mentoring Program	No. States Responding of Total States in Reg. (%)
	Formal Program	Informal Program	Both		
West	Oregon Washington	Arizona California Oregon Utah Washington Wyoming	Oregon Washington		8 of 13 (62%)
North Central	Indiana Kansas Nebraska Wisconsin	Illinois Kansas Missouri Nebraska Ohio Wisconsin	Kansas Nebraska Wisconsin	Minnesota	11 of 12 (92%)
Northeast	Delaware District of Columbia Pennsylvania West Virginia	Connecticut Maryland Massachusetts New Hampshire Vermont			9 of 12 (75%)
Southern	Louisiana Texas	Arkansas Florida Louisiana Oklahoma North Carolina	Louisiana	Alabama	8 of 12 (67%)
Totals	12 (35%)	22 (65%)	6 of 34	2 (5.5%)	36 of 51

		(17.5%)		(71%)
	34 (94.5%)			

Selected aspects of both formal and informal mentoring programs are reported in Table 2. For the majority of formal mentoring programs reported, a State 4-H Specialist (25%), State 4-H Task Force/Committee member (25%), or State Extension Staff member (17%) coordinated the program. Forty-two percent of the formal programs had been in operation for five or more years.

Table 2.

Selected Aspects of Formal and Informal County 4-H Mentoring Programs (N = 34)

Mentoring Program Aspect	States with Formal Mentoring Programs (valid % & no.)*	States with Informal Mentoring Programs (valid % & no.)*
Who coordinates the mentoring program?		
* State 4-H Leader	8 (1)	9 (2)
* State 4-H Specialist	25 (3)	14 (3)
* State 4-H Support Staff Member	-- (0)	-- (0)
* State 4-H Task Force/Committee Member(s)	25 (3)	4.5 (1)
* State Extension Specialist	-- (0)	4.5 (1)
* State Extension Staff Member	17 (2)	9 (2)
* State Ext. Task Force/Committee Member(s)	8 (1)	-- (0)
* District Extension Administrator	8 (1)	22.5 (5)
* District 4-H Staff	8 (1)	4.5 (1)
* District Extension Staff	-- (0)	9 (2)
* County Extension Administrator	-- (0)	-- (0)
* County 4-H Staff	-- (0)	4.5 (1)
* State 4-H Professionals' Association	-- (0)	9 (2)
* Other	-- (0)	9 (2)
For how long has the program operated?		

* ≥ 10 years	17 (2)	45 (10)
* 10 years > x ≥ 5 years	25 (3)	18 (4)
* 5 years > x ≥ 3 years	25 (3)	27 (6)
* 3 years > x ≥ 1 years	17 (2)	4.5 (1)
* < 1 year	17 (2)	4.5 (1)
Who serves as mentors?		
* Fellow In-county Extension Professional	-- (0)	9 (2)
* 4-H Professional in Another County	77 (10)	82 (18)
* District 4-H Staff	-- (0)	-- (0)
* State 4-H Specialist	15 (2)	-- (0)
* State 4-H Staff	8 (1)	4.5 (1)
* Other	-- (0)	4.5 (1)
For how long do they mentor?		
* ≥ 1 year	83 (10)	68.5 (15)
* 1 year > x ≥ 6 months	8 (1)	18 (4)
* 6 months > x ≥ 3 months	8 (1)	4.5 (1)
* 3 months > x ≥ 1 month	-- (0)	4.5 (1)
* Other	-- (0)	4.5 (1)
Do mentors receive formal training?		
* Yes	50 (6)	13.5 (3)
* No	42 (5)	82 (18)
* Not certain	8 (1)	4.5 (1)
Who matches the mentor with the new county 4-H professional?		

* State 4-H Leader	25 (3)	13.5 (3)
* State 4-H Specialist	-- (0)	4.5 (1)
* State 4-H Staff	-- (0)	-- (0)
* State Extension Staff	-- (0)	4.5 (1)
* District Extension Administrator	33 (4)	36 (8)
* District 4-H Staff	17 (2)	4.5 (1)
* District Extension Staff	-- (0)	9 (2)
* County Extension Administrator	-- (0)	-- (0)
* County 4-H Staff	-- (0)	13.5 (3)
* Other	25 (3)	13.5 (3)
Do mentors receive financial support in their role as a mentor?		
* Yes	-- (0)	4.5 (1)
* No	100 (12)	95.5 (21)
If so, what type of financial support?		
* Supplemental salary stipend	(NA)	-- (0)
* Supplemental travel funds		100 (4)
* Supplemental professional development funds		-- (0)
Does the formal mentoring program utilize a written mentoring curriculum?		
* Yes	-- (0)	(NA)
* No	75 (9)	
* Not certain	8 (1)	
* Other	17 (2)	
In your opinion, how effective is the program?		

* Excellent! Would Change Nothing	-- (0)	-- (0)
* Very Good, but could use slight changes	75 (9)	27 (6)
* Good, but needs major changes	17 (2)	27 (6)
* Poor, needs substantial changes	-- (0)	27 (6)
* Not certain	8 (1)	18 (4)
* NOTE: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding		

According to respondents, mentors were matched with protégés in formal programs by State Extension Staff (33%), the State 4-H Program Leader (25%), or District 4-H Staff (17%). Other individuals reported to match mentors with protégés included the Director of Extension or the Extension Human Resource Director. Half of the formal mentors (50%) received formal training, yet none of the reported programs utilized a formal curriculum, and none of the mentors receive supplemental financial support in their roles. No respondents considered the current formal mentoring program "excellent! would change nothing," while 75% rated the program as "very good, but could use slight changes"; 17% as "good, but needs major changes"; and 8% "uncertain."

For the majority of informal mentoring programs reported, a District Extension Administrator (22.5%) or State 4-H Specialist (14%) coordinated the program. Sixty-three percent of the informal programs had been in operation for 5 or more years. However, while 45% had operated for 10 or more years, a similar percentage (36%) had operated for less than 3 years. Again, 4-H professionals in another county serve as mentors in an overwhelming majority of formal programs reported (82%) for 1 year or longer (68.5%). (One respondent indicated that "all of the above" [response categories] served as mentors, and another indicated that mentors work with protégés "as long as necessary.")

Mentors were matched with protégés in informal programs by a District Extension Administrator (36%), the State 4-H Program Leader (13.5%), or County 4-H Staff (13.5%). Other individuals/groups reported to match mentors with protégés included the Associate Extension Director of Programs, the Department Head of Extension, or the program administrator who supervises the employee. Only 13.5% of the informal mentors received formal training, yet 95.5% of the mentors receive supplemental financial support in their roles in the form of supplemental travel funds (100%). Again, no respondents considered the current formal mentoring program "excellent! would change nothing," while 27% rated the program as "very good, but could use slight changes"; 27% as "good, but needs major changes"; 27% as "poor; needs substantial changes"; and 18% "uncertain."

With regard to the open-ended question inviting input about 4-H mentoring programs, 13 respondents (36%) contributed comments that focused upon: the need for mentoring programs for county 4-H professionals (N = 7); specifics regarding their state's mentoring program structure/operations (N = 3); and the benefits of having a mentoring program (N = 4). Regarding the open-ended question inviting input about the actual survey, eight respondents (22%) contributed comments that focused upon: the structure of the Web based survey (N = 4) and appreciation for the Task Force's work in conducting the study (N = 3).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The most significant conclusion that may be inferred from the study is the critical importance of, and need for, some type of mentoring program for county 4-H Youth Development professionals. Turnover in Extension 4-H positions continues to be a major challenge for many state Extension systems. The large majority (94.5%) of respondents reported that their state 4-H programs had some type of county 4-H professional mentoring program, and 17.5% of those states had both formal and informal programs. The majority of these programs have been in operation for more than 3 years, with 17% of formal and 45% of informal having operated for 10 years or longer.

However, almost 100% of respondents indicated that the existing mentoring programs needed "slight," "major," or "substantial changes." Seventy-five percent of respondents from states with formal mentoring programs indicated that the program did not use a written curriculum, and 100% indicated that mentors received no financial support in their roles. Respondents from states with informal mentoring programs indicated that 95.5% of those programs did not receive

supplemental financial support.

While county 4-H professionals in another county from protégés serve as mentors for an overwhelming majority of existing programs (77% of formal, 82% of informal) for a year or longer (83% for formal, 68.5% for informal), substantial differences exist among states with formal and informal mentoring programs with regard to who coordinates the program and who matches mentors and protégés. While such differences are expected in a national system as diverse as Extension with regard to the administration of specific state programs, they may contribute to challenges faced by individual state 4-H programs regarding human and material resources required to effectively and efficiently operate a county 4-H professional mentoring program.

The author and other NAE4-HA Mentoring Task Force members suggest the following recommendations based upon the study findings and conclusions.

1. Additional research would be beneficial to explore in greater depth commonalities and differences between existing county 4-H mentoring programs, as well as to follow-up with state 4-H programs not represented in the current study.
2. A consistent, national 4-H mentoring curriculum would benefit state 4-H programs and county 4-H professionals. The curriculum should focus upon fundamental knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by mentors in order to serve protégés effectively, rather than a potential mentoring program implementation system that would be implemented consistently nationwide.
3. The 2004-2005 NAE4-HA Professional Development Task Force (including the Mentoring Task Force's current members); the National Program Leader for 4-H Professional Development at CSREES/USDA; and appropriate staff at National 4-H Council should collaborate in the immediate future to pursue the development of a consistent, national 4-H mentoring curriculum.
4. Rather than producing a national 4-H mentoring curriculum in print format, the collaborators should explore a Web-based curriculum that would be easily accessible to 4-H professionals from both the U.S. and other countries, as well as easily updated, adapted, and modified. Such a Web-based curriculum should employ fundamental concepts of effective experiential learning, distance education, and adult education similar to the new Web-based Teens Reaching Youth through Innovative Teams! (TRY-IT!) curriculum that has been developed collaboratively by NC 4-H Youth Development and National 4-H Council (Safrit, Edwards, & Flood, 2004).

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