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County Agents and University Tenure and Promotion Systems

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County Agents and University Tenure and Promotion Systems

Abstract

This article presents the results of an email survey on the personnel status, tenure eligibility, and promotion system titles of county agents at different land-grant universities. The survey was sent to the president of the agricultural agent association at each university. The survey results are applicable to all county agents: Agriculture, 4-H, and FCS. County agents are considered faculty at 58% of the universities and are eligible for tenure at 50% of the universities. The most common titles used in promotion systems for county agents are assistant, associate, and full agent. These titles are used at 42% of the universities.

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Introduction

At Utah State University, the Provost's Office and the Faculty Senate have been debating the faculty status of county agents, their eligibility for inclusion in the tenure process, and their use of professorial titles. Discussion of these topics is not new. In the early 1900s, Rasmussen (1989) indicates there was considerable debate about the best way to develop and administer expanded educational programs to reach farmers. Kenyon L. Butterfield, president of Rhode Island State College, speaking in 1904, called for:

A vast enlargement of extension work among farmers. . . . This work will not only be dignified by a standing in the [agricultural] college coordinate with research and the teaching of students, but it will rank as a distinct department with a faculty . . . whose chief business is to teach people who cannot come to college.

Under agreements to implement the 1914 Smith-Lever Act for Extension, agents appointed for Cooperative Extension work were to be employees of the agricultural colleges. Placement of county agents at colleges/universities gave them access to new research and technology to help local clientele. However, this decision also led to many debates over the years regarding the role and structure of Extension within the universities.

Survey and Results

In order to form a broader framework for the discussion about faculty status and tenure of county agents at Utah State University, an email survey was initiated in September of 2002 to gather information on these issues from other land-grant universities. A short questionnaire was sent to the president of the agricultural agent association or its equivalent in each state. The email survey had a response rate of 78%. A telephone contact was made to those who did not respond to the email questionnaire. Responses to the questionnaire are applicable to all county agents: Agriculture, 4-H, FCS, and other program areas. The three main questions of the survey were:

1. In your university personnel system, are county agents classified as faculty, professional, or other status?
2. Are county agents eligible for tenure or something similar?

3. What titles or ranks are used in the county agent promotion system?

Results of the survey are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1.
County Agent Personnel and Tenure Status

University	Personnel Status	Tenure Eligible
Auburn University (AL)	Faculty	Continuing Appointment
University of Alaska	Parallel with academic staff	Yes
University of Arizona	Faculty	Continuing Appointment
University of Arkansas	Professional	No
University of California	Non-faculty academic	No
Colorado State University	Professional	No
University of Connecticut	Parallel with academic staff	Yes
University of Delaware	Professional	No
University of Florida	Faculty	Yes
University of Georgia	Faculty	No
University of Hawaii	Faculty	Yes
University of Idaho	Faculty	Yes
University of Illinois	Professional	No
Purdue University (IN)	Professional	No
Iowa State University	Professional	No
Kansas State University	Faculty	No
University of Kentucky	Professional	Continuing Appointment
Louisiana State University	Faculty	Yes
University of Maine	Faculty	Yes
University of Maryland	Equivalent to academic staff	Yes

University of Massachusetts	Professional	No
Michigan State University	Professional	Continuing Appointment
University of Minnesota	Academic staff	No
Mississippi State University	Professional	No
University of Missouri	Professional	No
Montana State University	Faculty	Yes
University of Nebraska	Faculty	No
University of Nevada	Equal with academic staff	Yes
University of New Hampshire	Faculty	Yes
Rutgers University (NJ)	Faculty	Yes
New Mexico State University	Faculty	Yes
Cornell University (NY)	County Resource Educator	No
North Carolina State University	Parallel with faculty when rank of Associate is reached	No
North Dakota State University	Faculty	No
Ohio State University	Faculty	Yes
Oklahoma State University	(In process of evaluating career ladder track)	No
Oregon State University	Faculty	Yes
Pennsylvania State University	Professional	Continuing Appointment
University of Rhode Island	Professional	No
Clemson University (SC)	Staff	No

South Dakota State University	Non-faculty exempt	No
University of Tennessee	Professional	No
Texas A & M	Faculty	Career Ladder
Utah State University	Faculty	Yes
University of Vermont	Faculty	No
Virginia Tech	Professional faculty	No
Washington State University	Faculty	Yes
West Virginia University	Faculty	Yes
University of Wisconsin	Faculty	Yes
University of Wyoming	Professional	Yes, extended term

Table 2.
County Agent Promotion System

University	Titles in Promotion System
Auburn University (AL)	Extension Agent 1-4
University of Alaska	Assistant, Associate, Full Professor
University of Arizona	Assistant, Associate, Full Agent
University of Arkansas	County Agent I - II - III
University of California	Assistant 1-6, Associate 1-5, Full 1-9 Advisor
Colorado State University	Extension Agent, Levels 1-4
University of Connecticut	Assistant, Associate, Full, Senior Extension Educator
University of Delaware	Associate, Agent, Specialist, Ranks 1- 4
University of Florida	Extension Agent, Levels 1-4

University of Georgia	Public Service Assistant, Associate, Senior Associate
University of Hawaii	Assistant, Associate, Full County Extension Agent
University of Idaho	Assistant, Associate, Full Extension Professor
University of Illinois	Extension Educator, Ranks 1-3
Purdue University (IN)	Extension Educator, Ranks E3 - E6
Iowa State University	County Extension Education Director, Levels 1-3
Kansas State University	No promotion system, use title - County Extension Agent
University of Kentucky	County Extension Agent - Program Area
Louisiana State University	Assistant, Associate, Full Agent
University of Maine	Extension Assistant, Associate, Full Professor
University of Maryland	Agent, Senior Agent, Principle Agent (equivalent of full Professor)
University of Massachusetts	Extension Educator, Ranks 1-4
Michigan State University	Program Associate and Agent
University of Minnesota	Assistant, Associate, Full Professor
Mississippi State University	Extension Agent, Levels 1-4
University of Missouri	Regional Extension Specialist, County Program Director
Montana State University	Assistant, Associate, Full Professor
University of Nebraska	Assistant, Associate, Full Extension Educator
University of Nevada	Assistant, Associate, Full Professor
University of New Hampshire	Assistant, Associate, Full Extension Educator

Rutgers University (NJ)	Assistant, Associate, Full Professor
New Mexico State University	Assistant, Associate, Full Professor
Cornell University (NY)	Extension Community Educator, Extension Resource Educator, Senior Extension Educator
North Carolina State University	Assistant, Associate, Full Agent
North Dakota State University	No promotion system, use title - Extension Agent
Ohio State University	Assistant, Associate, Full Professor - Agents may also choose a non-tenure Administrative and Professional track
Oklahoma State University	Extension Educators, Administrative Professionals
Oregon State University	Assistant, Associate, Full Professor
Pennsylvania State University	Assistant, Associate, Senior Extension Agent
University of Rhode Island	Extension Educator 1-3
Clemson University (SC)	Assistant, Associate, Senior County Extension Agent
South Dakota State University	Extension Educators, Rank 6-8
University of Tennessee	Extension Agent, Levels 1-3; Area Specialist, Level 1-3
Texas A & M	Extension Agent, Levels 1-4
Utah State University	Assistant, Associate, Full Extension Professor
University of Vermont	Assistant, Associate, Full Professor
Virginia Tech	Associate, Extension, and Senior Extension Agent
Washington State University	Extension Agent, Levels E2-E4 (equivalent of full professor)
West Virginia University	Extension Assistant, Associate, Full Professor
University of Wisconsin	Assistant, Associate, Full Professor

University of Wyoming	Assistant, Associate, Senior Extension Educator

Discussion

University Personnel Status

In this survey, county agents are classified as faculty or parallel to faculty at 58% of the universities. The term "parallel to faculty" is often used to indicate that review for promotion is done within Extension and not university wide or that tenure is not granted. Agents are classified as professional in 30% of the universities, and miscellaneous titles appear in the remaining 12% of universities. In one university, county agents are classified as "professional faculty," which illustrates the dilemma of how to classify Extension and outreach work. Having faculty status probably gives county agents more prestige and opportunities within the university. However, Schauber et al. (1998) indicate that while professorial academic rank gives certain privileges, "it also requires scholarly work that is recognized in college departments." They discuss ways to satisfy the demands of university promotion and tenure by doing a better job of documenting the impact of ongoing educational programs and communicating program successes to peers and administrators.

Astroth (2003) indicates that "There is a misguided and pernicious belief that 4-H faculty certainly are not scholarly and should be accorded neither academic rank nor tenure." Astroth goes on to indicate that he disagrees with this statement and that "increasing the scholarly status of 4-H professionals will only serve to enhance the engaged university's standing in the public eye." He promotes better definition and articulation of youth development scholarship and developing examples that fit within the four categories of scholarship described by Boyer (1990). These four categories are: discovery, integration, application, and teaching.

While faculty status provides certain privileges, it also brings increased expectations. Nichols (2004) conducted a survey of both state and field-based Extension educators in West Virginia. The survey found that 22% of respondents would do fewer evaluations if they did not have faculty status and that 78% of respondents would do fewer research projects without faculty status. Nichols concluded that "field-based Extension educators are comfortable with evaluation expectations, but not with research expectations." According to Nichols, field-based faculty need quality evaluation studies to successfully go through the tenure and promotion process.

It is not necessary to have faculty status to be an effective county agent. However, faculty status can provide important benefits such as prestige, higher salary, perhaps an edge in grant writing, and more stature in addressing controversial issues. Astroth (2003) feels that a connection to faculty status and scholarship distinguishes 4-H professionals from other youth development organizations such as Scouts and Boys and Girls Clubs.

Tenure

In this survey, county agents are eligible for tenure or equivalent (continuing appointment or extended term) in 50% of the universities. They are not eligible for tenure at 48% of the universities, and one university (2%) has a career ladder system.

Many respondents to the survey indicated that Extension had a different set of criteria for promotion that focused on Extension and outreach objectives rather than the same criteria as teaching and research colleagues. Also, Extension usually had their own promotion committee structure composed of Extension staff at the same or higher rank. At USU, the Provost's Office has indicated that "in the evaluations [for tenure and promotion], weighting and judgments should reflect the emphases and priorities listed in the faculty member's role statement" (Morse, 1992). This focus on individual role statements with specific Extension objectives has resolved many previous concerns.

Weiser (1996) feels that:

A university's values are most clearly described by its promotion and tenure policies and by the criteria used to evaluate faculty performance tenure and promotion decisions are typically based on evidence of significant scholarly contributions and effective performance of original duties ♦ not on outstanding service [Extension].

Weiser and Hougum (1998) present an expanded definition of scholarship as "creative intellectual work that is validated by peers and communicated." They also emphasize that a faculty position description should serve as the basis for annual evaluations and the promotion and tenure process. Weiser (1996) concludes that "a university, and its faculty, performs essential and valuable activities that are not scholarship."

Krieg (1995) discusses a common concern of Extension agents of how to get through the

promotion and tenure system. He says:

Extension is rarely considered as important as research and classroom teaching by our colleagues in those professions, or by University administrators. Very few of those folks understand the [Extension] work we do and often view it as superfluous to the 'real work' of the institution.

Tenure is often viewed as an important thing to have when working with controversial public policy issues. It seems that county agents are involved more and more with issues such as water rights, public land grazing, pesticide use, and other controversial topics where tenure could be helpful. Does a lack of tenure hinder county agents from getting involved in important, current topics?

Promotion System Titles

In this survey, titles for county agents vary greatly. Many agents use a working title such as Extension Agent-Agriculture and also use an academic title in the university promotion system such as Extension Associate Professor. The most common title in this survey was some variation of Assistant, Associate, and Full Agent in 42% of the universities. In 28% of the universities, agents used the academic titles of Assistant, Associate, and Full Professor. Some universities added the word "Extension" to the title--for example, Associate Extension Professor. The title Extension Educator was used by 22% of the universities, and miscellaneous other titles were used by the remaining 8%.

The term "county agent" evolved from the title "Special Agent for the Promotion of Agriculture in the South," which was given to Seaman A. Knapp in the early 1900s while he was working to control cotton boll weevil. The first agents employed by Knapp worked in districts that covered 10 to 20 counties. The boll weevil damage became so severe that local businessmen offered to pay most of the expenses for an agent to work full time with farmers in one county. This led to the use of the term "county agent." Knapp felt that there should be an agent, preferably one in each county, to work directly with farmers (Rasmussen, 1989).

The title "county agent" is still used today for many field Extension staff and is the title of the official publication of the National Association of County Agricultural Agents (Title page, 2002). Over the years, a variety of other titles have been used for county agents, such as Extension Educator, Extension Agent, and Farm Advisor.

The title "county agent" is no longer used in several states because they have gone to regional or statewide offices due to funding problems or organizational structures that cover several counties. For example, the University of Minnesota Extension Service recently announced that it would shrink from 87 county offices to 18 regional offices (Smetanka, 2003).

Conclusion

The university personnel status, eligibility for tenure, and titles used for county agents in promotion systems vary greatly across the country. This is no surprise because Extension was set up to be a de-centralized system with an emphasis on local clientele input and local control. The effectiveness of different systems to integrate Extension personnel into the university system is subject to on-going review and discussion.

County agents should become involved in university discussions about faculty status, tenure, and promotion. For example, agents in Utah were given faculty status in 1996 but were not allowed on faculty senate until 2001, when a united group of agents requested representation. County agents should develop flagship programs that can be rigorously evaluated to show scholarly impact. Extension administration should recognize that county agents conduct many programs and activities that are valuable to local clientele and the university and yet do not qualify as scholarly work.

The results of this survey raise some questions for further examination. Do faculty status and academic rank for county agents influence working relationships with core faculty and Extension specialists? Do titles and promotion systems affect the ability of county agents to be recognized and compensated adequately? For example, in some universities, agents receive the same salary increase for promotion as teaching and research faculty, while in other universities, they receive a certain percentage less. Do professorial titles enhance the stature of county agents as they initiate collaborative efforts with non-traditional organizations or clientele?

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