

Core Competencies for the Cooperative Extension System¹

Extension employees should possess the necessary competencies to anticipate and deliver quality educational programs of relevance and importance to our publics.

This statement from the Personnel and Organizational Development Committee (PODC) of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) is the basis for introducing and encouraging Cooperative Extension Systems to utilize core competencies for professional development of campus- and field-based faculty and staff.

Core competencies are defined as the basic knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors that contribute to excellence in Extension education programs. Many Extension systems identify and define specific core competencies. Wisconsin Cooperative Extension says a competency is a “sufficient quantity of knowledge, skill and ability to accomplish a particular task or purpose.” Missouri Cooperative Extension determined that each Extension professional must possess “personal strengths, capabilities as an educator, capabilities in information technology, and expertise in their academic specialty.”

Employees are the most valuable assets of the Extension System. To enhance the effectiveness of the Extension employee and to increase Extension’s professional value, we recommend development and training opportunities focus on areas relating to core competencies. In doing so, Extension will increase its capability to better serve customers by effectively working within communities to determine needs, in developing and delivering educational programs that address these needs, and in creating successful individual and group accomplishments.

During our study of Extension systems throughout the United States, PODC members located several professional development programs designed to enhance core competencies. Successful programs provided self-assessment opportunities, incorporated core competencies in professional development plans, and focused on improving the individual’s proficiency in core competencies. In most cases, appropriate core competency requirements were included in position descriptions.

After reviewing these materials, PODC members identified a set of eleven core competencies we believe appropriate for Extension professionals throughout the System. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Other competencies may be important to achieve excellence in Extension. We believe it is important to identify local issues and specific programs while supporting and encouraging individual expectations.

We recommend that Cooperative Extension integrate core competencies and strategies throughout the System as standard practices for effective Extension programming. By doing so, the Cooperative Extension System will enthusiastically support and reflect a strong commitment to life-long learning.

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Eleven Basic Core Competencies (in alphabetical order)

Adapted from North Carolina Cooperative Extension

- **Community and Social Action Processes**—the ability to identify and monitor variables and issues important to community vitality (e.g., demographics, economics, human services, environmental, etc.), and the ability to use and apply these variables to program prioritization, planning, and delivery.
- **Diversity/Pluralism/Multiculturalism**—the awareness, commitment, and ability to include one's own as well as the other's different cultural perceptions, assumptions, norms, beliefs, and values.
- **Educational Programming**—the ability to plan, design, implement, evaluate, account for, and market significant Extension education programs that improve the quality of life for Extension learners.
- **Engagement**—the ability to recognize, understand, and facilitate opportunities and to broker the necessary resources that best respond to the needs of individuals and communities.
- **Information and Education Delivery**—the mastery of communication skills (such as written and verbal), application of technology, and delivery methods for supporting educational programs and guiding behavior change among Extension learners.
- **Interpersonal Relations**—the ability to successfully interact with diverse individuals and groups to create partnerships, networks, and dynamic human systems.
- **Knowledge of Organization**—an understanding of the history, philosophy, and contemporary nature of Extension.
- **Leadership**—the ability to influence a wide range of diverse individuals and groups positively.
- **Organizational Management**—the ability to establish structure, organize processes, develop and monitor resources, and lead change to obtain educational outcomes effectively and efficiently.
- **Professionalism**—the demonstration of behaviors that reflect high levels of performance, a strong work ethic, and a commitment to continuing education and to the mission, vision, and goals of Extension.
- **Subject Matter**—the mastery of a scientific discipline, a research body of knowledge, or a technical proficiency that enhances individual and organizational effectiveness.

Strategies for Success

In reviewing those systems that effectively integrate core competencies, we identified key elements for effectiveness. First, the Extension professional must take the lead in determining areas of emphasis and in creating his or her development plan. Second, the Extension System must respect the individual's personal rights during the professional development process. The following examples describe professional development strategies successfully utilized by Cooperative Extension Systems:

- Position Descriptions accurately reflect the necessary core competencies.
- Stakeholder input assists in identifying core competencies to support the Position Description and outlined job expectations.
- Core competencies are part of the Staff Development section of the professional's Plan of Work.
- New staff orientation includes information in core competencies.
- Performance feedback is directly related to core competencies.
- Individual skill levels within core competencies are inventoried.
- Self-assessment tools identify needed core competencies.
- Self-directed, Web-based learning programs are aimed at core competencies.
- Support groups are organized around core competencies.
- Mentoring programs are aimed at core competencies.
- Professional development programs developed with other organizations improve core competencies.
- Specialist-led training enhances proficiency in core competencies.

Resources for Implementing Core Competencies²

These annotated resources provide recent articles about core competencies and share information from states that are using core competencies for professional development of Extension faculty and staff. This is not an inclusive list, but rather a list of resources to help the Cooperative Extension System introduce, implement, and support core competencies.

Journal of Extension

“Competencies Needed to be Successful County Agents and County Supervisors,” an Arkansas Extension population study reported in a “Research in Brief” that identifies and describes competencies categorized into seven employee evaluation areas. Issues include differences between agents and supervisors, agent assignments in more than one program area, the changing needs of people in the 21st Century, and the need for specialized training.

Anita W. Cooper, Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service county family and consumer sciences agent, and Donna L. Graham, associate professor for agricultural and Extension education, University of Arkansas (<http://www.joe.org/joe/2001february/rb3.html>).

“Southern Extension Leadership Development: Leadership Development for a Learning Organization,” a feature article providing an overview of the Southern Extension Leadership Development (SELD) Managerial Assessment of Proficiency (MAP), a video-driven, competency-based, computer-scored simulation. A series of workshops assesses competency levels, interprets results, and develops a learning plan to increase leadership and managerial knowledge and skills.

Howard Ladewig, professor and leader for Program Development and Evaluation, Texas A&M University, and Frederick R. Rohs, professor and Extension staff development specialist, University of Georgia (<http://www.joe.org/joe/2000june/a2.html>).

“Management Skills of County Extension Administrators: Are They Sufficient to Do the Job?” a study of 127 participants from 22 states focusing on 15 supervisory/management competencies identified as necessary for success as an Extension administrator. Those identified are oral communication, planning/organizing, leadership, decision-making/judgment, initiative, objectivity, development of co-workers, perception, sensitivity, management control, collaborativeness, written communication, behavioral flexibility, organizational sensitivity, and assertiveness. Following assessment, participants took positive steps to improve their skills in areas identified as needing development.

Bill R. Haynes, Ph.D., assistant professor and district director, The Ohio State University Extension (<http://www.joe.org/joe/2000april/rb2.html>).

“Training Needs of Area Specialized Extension Agents,” a feature article that discusses the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service utilization of specialized agents. A questionnaire focused on eight general competency areas identified by the Extension Committee on Policy as necessary for the effectiveness of Extension agents (National Policy Statement, 1968): Extension organization and administration; program planning and development; communication; research; human development; educational processes; social systems; and effective thinking.

Jerry D. Gibson, Swain County Extension director, North Carolina Cooperative Extension, and John Hillison, professor, Agricultural and Extension Education, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (<http://www.joe.org/joe/1994october/a3.html>).

² Compiled by Julie M. Fox, The Ohio State University Extension, OSU South Centers.

“Improving Extension: Views from Agricultural Deans,” shares the opinions of College of Agriculture deans at the 50 major land-grant universities. The primary points emphasize a need for more specialization and a higher level subject-matter competency within Extension, for more involvement in research by Extension personnel, and to make greater use of high technology in information transfer and the use of new computer hardware and software.

Orville E. Thompson, professor emeritus, and Douglas Gwynn, research sociologist, Department of Applied Behavioral Sciences, University of California–Davis (<http://www.joe.org/joe/1989spring/a1.html>).

“Facing Issues of Diversity: Rebirthing the Extension Service,” provides an overview of the changes in the diversity of our society. This article includes the challenges of how to attract, hire, and retain a diverse workforce; how to deliver programs that are culturally sensitive; and how to effectively include culturally diverse groups in Extension programs. It also discusses intercultural competency skills, strategic goals, and organizational change strategies and resources (<http://www.reeusda.gov/ecs/divers.htm>).

Ann C. Schaubert, diversity leader, Oregon State University Extension Service, and Kathy Castania, change agent states for diversity project manager, Cornell Cooperative Extension (<http://www.joe.org/joe/2001december/comm2.html>).

“Extension Organization of the Future: Linking Emotional Intelligence and Core Competencies,” a 1996-1997 study of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service designed to identify outstanding characteristics of Extension educators. Core competencies identified in the Texas Extension study parallel emotional intelligence competencies (e.g., personal learning/self-development, achievement motivation, and initiative).

Deliece Ayers, Extension associate, and Barbara Stone, Extension planning and performance specialist, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Texas A&M University (<http://www.joe.org/joe/1999december/iw4.html>).

“A System’s Approach to Professional Development,” describes competencies introduced in 1996 in the Texas Agricultural Extension Service as the basis for the professional development initiative. Competencies are defined as the application of knowledge, technical skills, and personal characteristics that lead to outstanding performance. When implemented, competency models can be applied to a number of human resource systems: pre-employment preparation, interviewing and selection, orientation and training, career development, performance appraisal, and succession planning. The Texas Agricultural Extension Service uses competency modeling to shift from activity-based training toward an impact-based model. Establishing a competency-based human resources system has the potential to promote continuous learning and create an infrastructure for moving the organization forward.

Barbara Boltes Stone, associate professor and Extension specialist for planning and performance, Texas A & M University (<http://www.joe.org/joe/1997april/tt2.html>).

“Competencies: A New Language for our Work,” a commentary that makes a case for linking strategic vision and competency-based human resources decisions to benefit both individuals and the Extension organization. Competency modeling can be a vehicle for moving the Extension organization forward.

Barbara Boltes Stone, associate professor and Extension specialist for planning and performance, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Texas A&M University, and Sally Bieber, 4-H home economist, Louisiana State University (<http://www.joe.org/joe/1997february/comm1.html>).

Other resources

“The Global University for the Twenty-First Century, A Strategic Plan,” a publication from the *National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges*, identifies the growing recognition among teaching, research, and Extension faculty of the need for global engagement. This publication supports global opportunities for statewide Extension personnel to ensure that educators have appreciation for, information about, and access to, the most up-to-date knowledge base and the most useful new technologies.

The publication also reports the need to assist appropriate stakeholders with the development and dissemination of information about global markets, international trade, international business opportunities, and the impact of public policy decisions in the food, agricultural, and natural resources arena (http://www.nasulgc.org/cferr/board_on_agric/iasicop/global_university_for_the_twenty.htm).

“Competence in Extension Education Evaluation—What is it? What does capacity building entail?” Extension’s ability to respond to external accountability needs and operate as a “learning organization” is driving discussion on program evaluation and the core competencies for Extension faculty and staff. This article also refers to discussion in the evaluation community.

Ellen Taylor-Powell, “Hear it From the Board,” American Evaluation Association (AEA), Extension Education Evaluation Topical Interest Group, January 2002 (http://danr.ucop.edu/eee-aea/AEA_HearItFromTheBoardJanuary2002.pdf).

State competency projects

North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Personal and Organizational Development Web site (<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/pods>), presents many resources on the organization’s Core Competencies, sub-competencies, and proficiency levels, established through a Blue Ribbon Commission on Staff Development and Training. An outline of competencies was defined and drafted for administrators/CEDs, agents, program associates/assistants, administrative assistants and secretaries, specialists, and volunteers. The Web site also includes online learning aids, training and development resources, and an “Executive Report, Sub-Competencies Study, Administrative County Leaders” (February 11, 2002) by Mitchell B. Owen, Ed.D. (http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/pods/reports/subcomp_study.htm).

The University of Florida’s Position Analysis Tool (PAT)/Skills Analysis for University of Florida County Extension Faculty provides an instrument for Extension personnel to rate each competency area (high, moderate, some, low, none) in regard to the level of training through in-service and other professional development in each competency, the amount of experience in each competency and the level of confidence in each competency (<http://cgi.ifas.ufl.edu/pat/pat3.html>). Areas include program planning and development, program implementation and public relations, program evaluation and accountability, and personal and interpersonal skills.

Michigan State University Extension’s Core Competency Initiative, outlines ten areas for assessment and professional development: professional and career development; educational and information technology (technology literacy); written and spoken communication skills; program planning and development; program implementation, applied research and evaluation; organizational knowledge, leadership and management; diversity and pluralism; marketing and public relations; and linkages with external audiences (<http://www.anrecs.msu.edu/extension/profdev/teehtml.htm>).

Texas Cooperative Extension, Texas A&M University System, Competency Model, outlines proficiencies in the understanding, application, and integration of competencies within subject matter expertise; organizational effectiveness; developing and involving others; communications; action orientation; and personal effectiveness (<http://extensionlearning.tamu.edu/yes.htm>).

The Alabama Cooperative Extension Service does not include competency information for Extension personnel on their Web site. However, the Community Resource Development program (www.aces.edu/crd/) includes a fact sheet on workforce competencies (<http://www.aces.edu/crd/workforce/publications/8-30-01-Workplace-Skills-Needed-by-Today's-Workers.pdf>). This publication outlines five workplace competencies and a three-part foundation of skills for reliable job performance: utilizing resources, working with others, using information, understanding systems, and working with technology. The foundation of skills provides an overview of basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities.

The University of California utilizes a Skills Assessment and Resource Analysis (SARA) approach to competency assessment that includes Extension personnel from 64 Cooperative Extension Offices (<http://www.ucop.edu/audit/info/acua/sara/tsld001.htm>). The process involves skills assessment (what you possess), resource analysis (what your responsibilities require), GAP identification (what you need to obtain), and alternative solutions and impacts (what you need to do).

The Colorado State University Cooperative Extension program's performance appraisal system benchmarks Core Areas of Performance (CAP). The outlined areas include diversity; fiscal resources generation and management; leadership and management; marketing; development of program plans; program implementation, evaluation and reporting; professionalism, interpersonal skills and relationships; teamwork; technical information skills; and volunteer management (<http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pasa/pbench.pdf>).

A University of Georgia August 2001 report recommends developing a new staff classification and pay plan linked to an effective, competency-based performance management, and career development system. This report validates the focus on competencies, but it does not include details (<http://www.busfin.uga.edu/classification/uga0801.pdf>).

Washington State University references a Professional Behaviors Matrix along with the Performance Appraisal and Annual Review. The program is centered around effectiveness in analyzing educational needs of individuals, groups, and communities; conducting or applying known research to solve educational problems; and the ability to conceptualize and implement appropriate programs. Behaviors include educational program development; development and use of a knowledge base; educational program delivery; program leadership; leadership development in others; recognition; speaking, writing, and communications skills; and teaching proficiency (<http://ext.wsu.edu/ce.cahe/administration/behavior3.pdf>).

Competencies for Extension Faculty and Academic Staff in Community-based Educator Roles are outlined in a University of Wisconsin publication (<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cnred/Quad2.pdf>). The necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities are grouped into four main competencies including educational fundamentals, organization and resource development, interpersonal effectiveness, and information and educational technology.