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An Evaluation of a Cooperative Extension Internship Program

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Abstract. The purpose of this project was to evaluate the Virginia Cooperative Extension internship program from the perspective of student participants and their supervisors. Three focus groups were conducted with internship supervisors from the summer of 2019. Student survey data was used to identify concerns from the student perspective to inform the supervisor focus group questions. In addition to the questions, a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis was also used to collect qualitative data within the supervisor focus groups. Findings suggest areas of strength that can be used in marketing as well as opportunities for program improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Internships are an important part of the preservice training for students considering careers in Cooperative Extension (Benge et al., 2011). Internships, as a form of experiential learning, provide students with opportunities to connect what they have learned in the classroom to real-life scenarios (Kuh, 2009). An Extension intern can be a valuable resource, allowing agents to supplement current programming, introduce new programs, and refresh technological skills (Wilken et al., 2008). Interns work on multiple projects to expand programming capacity and reach, while working with professionals to gain relevant work experience (Muscio, 2011).

The Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) internship program provides students above junior standing with a grade point average (GPA) greater than 2.5 the opportunity to explore a career in Cooperative Extension. A majority of the positions are provided in local VCE offices, with some located on the Virginia Tech campus; at Agricultural, Research, and Education Centers; and at 4-H Centers. The program is marketed to students who are wanting to create a change in a community (Virginia Cooperative Extension). The VCE interns have the opportunity to make a difference in the 108 counties across Virginia, working alongside Extension professionals and community partners to provide such programs as pesticide training, diabetes cooking classes, and 4-H youth development programs. Internship programs provide opportunities for experiential

learning to introduce students to the roles and activities represented by the profession being explored, and the VCE internship program aims to provide these same goals. Like any Extension program, internship programs need to be evaluated to identify opportunities for improvement as well as what is working well.

According to a brief literature search through *Journal of Extension* and *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, Cooperative Extension internship programs (Muscio, 2011) have been evaluated from the perspective of interns who have completed the program, but no studies have been conducted based on the supervisor's perspective. The purpose of this project was to evaluate the VCE internship program and to identify its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats from the internship supervisor's perspective. Findings from this study form the basis of recommendations for program improvement.

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation project began as an honors student project in the fall of 2018, a survey to gain knowledge about the interns' experiences and to look for opportunities for improvement from the interns' perspective. Links to a Qualtrics survey were sent to 50 interns from the summer of 2018. Consent was implied by their completion of the survey. The research team used descriptive statistics for quantitative data analysis and categorized responses to open-ended questions by

emerging themes. The interview process and orientation were identified as areas needing improvement.

Preliminary data from the interns' perspective survey were then used to develop focus group protocol for supervisors so they could add their perspectives to the study. Areas of inquiry were the interview and orientation processes and the completion of a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis of the internship program. Hill and Westbrook (1997) have recommended performing a SWOT analysis to assess the needs and to evaluate an organization.

Focus groups were selected because they allow participants to "demonstrate consensus on the topic at hand, explore issues more deeply than is possible with a survey, uncover new issues through discussion, reflect participants' experiences and perceptions rather than researchers' ideas, and gather data more quickly than individual interviews."

An email was sent to the 42 VCE supervisors who hosted 45 summer interns in 2019, inviting them to participate in virtual focus groups to share insight from their internship supervision experience. Supervisors were asked to identify possible times they could participate through a Qualtrics® survey. They were then invited to one of three focus group sessions based on their availability. Focus group sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes. Focus groups were conducted virtually through Zoom on November 11, 14, and 15, 2019, using the evaluation process defined by Vines (2022). This approach ensured that all supervisors across the state could attend without requiring travel. The Zoom focus groups were coded by using ATLAS.ti.®. Codes for the questions related to interviews and the orientation process were emergent, while codes for the SWOT analysis were predetermined based on identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Member checks and data triangulation were used to confirm the validity and credibility of the information gathered.

The Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board provided guidance for the surveys and deemed the focus groups as "not human subjects" research.

FINDINGS

FINDINGS OVERVIEW

Demographics are provided to better define the study participants. Emergent themes were identified during the coding of the transcript questions related to interviewing and orientation. The emergent codes were internship process and administration. *Internship process* was how the supervisors were using the process recommended by state Extension staff to conduct interviews, hire interns, program the internship to gain experience, and evaluate the internship. *Administration* was the information and/or people on state staff or county staff who were assisting the internship supervisors with any questions that they may have. SWOT analysis data were analyzed by using predetermined codes based on strengths,

weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, as defined in this question during the interview. Findings are provided within these categories.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographic questions were asked at the beginning of the focus groups as warm-up questions. A total of 20 supervisors participated in the focus groups, supervising 22 of the interns. All VCE program areas were represented in the focus groups. Supervisors were primarily agents, with one 4-H Center director. The sample included 11 4-H supervisors, eight agriculture and natural resources (ANR) supervisors, and one family and consumer sciences (FCS) supervisor. This sample represented roughly half of the 42 supervisors overseeing the work of 20 of the 40 interns during the summer of 2019. Two interns reported to two supervisors. There were a total of 18 4-H, eight ANR, one FCS, and one NR single program area interns that summer. In addition, five interns worked in both 4-H and ANR, and two interns worked in 4-H and FCS. Seven interns worked across 4-H, ANR, and FCS program areas during the summer of 2019. Supervisors represented all VCE districts, providing distribution across the state. In addition, the sample represented diversity in years of service and experience in hosting internships (Table 1).

VCE INTERNSHIP PROCESS AND ADMINISTRATION

VCE state administration is divided between Virginia Tech and Virginia State University as a joint effort to supplement human resource needs for local county offices. The state administration supplies internship supervisors with resources and materials, including mock interview questions and an internship handbook. They also provide other support, including management of the employment and screening processes, payment of interns through the university payroll system, required training, and a framework for evaluating the interns. VCE also contributes at least half of the intern's salary for one intern in each location, with the remainder coming from the local community. Some communities work with other partners in providing their contribution.

Initial questions during the focus group probed the supervisors' experience with the internship program. The questions are listed within the summarized responses below.

Supervisors were asked what internship materials were useful during the interview process, orientation process, and hiring process.

Supervisors expressed that the resources provided by VCE administration were helpful. They relied heavily on the university's instructional emails and resources to navigate issues faced during the internship process. Supervisors also believed that the mock interview questions were helpful but had to be altered to fit their specific internship. The 4-H

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Table 1. Demographics of Focus Group Participants

Category	Mean (n)	Median (n)	Mode (n)	Range (n)	Total (n)
Years of supervisor service in VCE	12.8 years	9 years	4, 6, 9 years	32 years	3–35 years
Interns hosted by supervising agents	4.6 interns	3 interns	2, 3, 4 interns	11 interns	69 interns
Years that supervisors have hosted interns	6.5 years	5 years	5 years	12 years	2–14 years

Center director reported altering the questions to fit the position: “So I try to go as easy as possible and take as much guidance from VCE. I use the sample questions, cater them to the 4-H Center, and go from there.”

Supervisors were asked how they conducted the interview (i.e., face-to-face, phone, online).

During this pre-COVID pandemic time, supervisors conducted interviews face to face, over the phone, or via Zoom calls. Participants expressed concern that candidates in interviews conducted over the phone or via Zoom seemed to be less professional than those interviewed in person. One agent stated, “I don’t think there’s really been challenges other than sometimes, a bit of an unprofessional type of interview, which I’ve seen more of when we offer this interview process through technology.”

Supervisors were asked what the most important characteristics were for selecting interns, such as grades, major, university affiliation (land-grant system), and personality.

Supervisors selected interns based on such characteristics as personality, location, willingness to learn, an interest in Extension, and previous experience in a youth development background. An agent stated the importance of the student having an interest in Extension, saying:

I do look for someone that has an understanding, well what Extension is, not just applying for a summer job. I think this internship is special in that it’s an internship for a reason. It’s not a summer job. It’s an internship, and just like internships I participated in during college, it was trying to give someone hands-on experience in a relevant field of study so they can decide. They might get through the internship and say, “This is not for me.” And that’s valuable also. But if they can’t answer “What is Virginia Cooperative Extension?,” if they don’t have some basic understanding of what we do as an organization—if they don’t have an understanding, for example, if I’m looking for someone 4-H-focused and they have no concept of what that is, that’s a bit of a red flag for me. . . . If they have no relevant experience in the field,

whether that is the agriculture background that my colleagues are looking for, or they do not have some relevant experience with youth development—or can’t answer why they want to work with youth and what interests them about that, that’s also—can be a decision-maker. I’m really looking for relevant experiences, and eagerness to be engaged with VCE and learn more about it as a potential career.

Supervisors considered each applicant’s field of study but were not generally interested in GPA compared to other characteristics. Minimum GPA is screened before the applications are sent to the county offices, so supervisors look deeper than this trait. One agent stated, “You can have a student that has a great GPA and is in a great school. But how they connect with people and how they relate, and understand, and are passionate—trying to be able to bring those out is also important.”

Supervisors found personality to be very important. They looked for such personality traits as having a willingness to learn, being a self-starter, exhibiting a strong work ethic, and showing an outgoing personality while demonstrating strong interpersonal skills. One agent stated the importance of having an intern who is looking to make a difference in the community: “Definitely personality, flexibility—just to learn and really desire to help people. Do they want to make a difference, or are they looking for something to put on their résumé? Those are the things that we kind of look for.”

Locality was important because of the rural and metropolitan areas of Virginia. Supervisors were concerned about access to or cost-effectiveness of housing for interns in the communities they served. One stated, “Also, if they’re not local, do they have a good understanding of what it’s like in my locality? Because rent is so expensive. We have folks who want the internship. . . . This [cost] can be a real barrier to getting an intern.”

Supervisors were asked what types of orientation they provided and what they found to be useful or challenging.

The local offices were responsible for internship orientation, so content and approach varied by location. Agents used the orientation materials and trainings during orientation. Orientation also consisted of getting to know the other

agents within the office better. One agent stated, “The first day, you must do all the paperwork, and our UAA [unit administrative assistant] gives a general orientation to office procedures, how to work the different pieces of equipment that this person might be using, how to answer the phone, how to greet clients, how to transfer calls to agents, how to take messages, real basic stuff. I talk about kind of what our hours are, what we wear. Real basic.” Agents believed that orientation was an area where improvements might be made. One agent stated, “I do think it [orientation] is somewhere where we’re lacking, and I’d love to see a more dynamic orientation for our interns.”

Supervisors were asked whether they found the internship handbook useful.

Supervisors expressed that the VCE Internship Handbook was used during the orientation and as a reference throughout the summer, but they suggested that it be available for interns to read *before* they applied for the internship. One agent stated:

Yes. I mean, it’s certainly a nice document. I would say some of it really, it would behoove the candidates to read some of the handbook prior to even applying or interviewing, to help them know what they’re getting into. Some of it’s just general information about internships, how to apply for this, and how to conduct yourself. And all of that is good. I do have them read through it prior to them signing the internship agreement. It’s good for them to read.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND THREATS

The focus group sessions concluded by having the supervisors conduct a SWOT analysis of the VCE internship program. Strengths and weaknesses were defined as internal aspects of the program. Opportunities and threats were defined as external influences on the program.

Supervisors were asked to identify internship strengths.

Identified strengths of the internship program included its statewide aspect, student experience, and community acknowledgment. Statewide commitment provides funding, resources, supplies, and administrative support while also helping with advertising, recruitment, and the overall internship experience. One agent stated, “I think the strength is just the fact that it’s a statewide program and that there are statewide resources going to it, which make it more robust. And I say that I actually am a product of an Extension internship.” Another agent stated that administration created an easier process: “On the administrative side of it, I like how streamlined the process is and the support that the university does give us in doing this, which is very clear.”

One agent emphasized the value of a Cooperative Extension internship in giving students the opportunity to gain unique hands-on work experience in Extension education:

I think it’s a really good way to help kids, students figure out what they want to do. I think we can offer enough flexibility in the types of programs and things that we do and personalities that we work with and district and state level of exposure that I think it really helps them narrow their career path and figure out what things they do and don’t like. I think it’s a good opportunity for kids who’ve grown up in our program to see it from the other side, so they’ve been, some of them, a 4-H member up until age 18, and then they get in on the planning side, which is quite different from what they’ve been exposed to. I think it helps people who have an interest in Extension see what the real side of it is, whether they’ve romanticized the idea or not, to see what it really means to be involved in what’s probably our busiest season. And so, I participated in—I was an Extension intern 20 years ago, and when I left, I wasn’t 100% convinced, “Hey, this is what I want to do.” But when the position I’m in now came open a year later, I felt like I knew a lot more about what I was getting into, and I actually, when I applied for this full-time job, I was competing against my mentor who was my intern supervising agent the year before, and that was certainly unnerving, but it was good that I’d had that experience.

Community acknowledgment was gained when interns explained what their internship was for the summer. County Extension offices gained unexpected public relations with community members, which promoted Extension programming. One agent stated, “I think it’s very valuable in spreading the word of Extension and teaching, hopefully, future agents and roping them in. It really sheds light on what Extension is, and with the experience that interns gain, it will be an inspiration factor for students who are looking for a job like Extension.” Another agent stated, “It’s also great for building recognition in the community for Extension. Extension is not a big name in my locality, so getting other people out, talking about it, and building networks outside of Virginia Tech, I think, is really powerful long-term.” These interns help spread the word of what Extension is and the roles it plays in the community.

Supervisors were asked to identify internship weaknesses.

Supervisors identified internship weaknesses with scheduling, obtaining a university personal identification (PID) for non-university students, and recruitment in some areas. Agents found issues with summer schedules that

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included family vacations, scheduling interview times, and scheduling with outside panel members, such as county stakeholders. University PID caused issues with interns who were from universities outside Virginia Tech. One agent stated, “When it wasn’t a Virginia Tech student, it takes a little bit more time to get them into the system, and so we may have to put off their start date a little bit.” Some agents saw the need for broader advertising to other universities and to other fields of study. One said, “I think we touched on this, but maybe expanding the advertising, the field of study that you’re looking for, where you’re sending the word out to students for us. Specifically, we would like to get some hospitality event planner people, maybe not necessarily AG [agriculture]—although we love the AG, and they can help us out in certain aspects. But most of those people are probably not going to be looking at doing what we do. So maybe broadening your search a little bit would be beneficial for us.”

Supervisors were asked to identify internship opportunities.

Recommended opportunities for the internship program included increasing communication between campus and the local offices, providing greater flexibility regarding the timing of the internships, and providing support when internships did not go well. Opportunities associated with providing more consistent orientation programs advertising more broadly were previously acknowledged.

Agents believed that the university often took too long to communicate to the county offices the logistics of the internships, such as important human resource information or information about the applicants. One agent said, “It’s difficult when VCE does not let offices know when candidates are no longer in the pool. They do a good job of letting candidates know when positions are no longer open, but they don’t do a good job of letting us know who is still left in the pool.”

In some cases, agents hoped that the interns could start earlier in the summer, increasing the duration of the internship beyond the current limit of 10 weeks. Funding could potentially be improved with the addition of travel funding for interns. Similarly, because interns are hourly versus salaried employees, they are often prevented from fully participating in such events as 4-H camp, which would have them exceeding fair labor laws requiring that they work no more than 40 hours a week.

Agents found support in the university, but additional resources were needed when internships did not go smoothly. One agent experienced insubordination with an intern and could not identify resources on how to terminate an internship, or even whether it was possible to do so:

I think that we do need to have some support for agents when they are having a bad experience with an intern, and some guidance as to how to handle

that situation. I, on the first day, thought I should have told my intern to just go home. I had some red flag warnings, and I should have, but I didn’t know what I was able to do. Prior to the first day, there were some problems with onboarding and looking at attention to detail. The intern couldn’t complete the proper paperwork needed to do the background check, after multiple attempts. It was because the person couldn’t follow instructions on the email. The person, our intern, also didn’t get my name right multiple times, which is pretty hard when you get emails that have the name on it. That was frustrating. And then on the first day, they showed up an hour late because they said they didn’t realize what our office hours were, and they got confused. And there was no way they could get confused because there was never any miscommunication. The hours are always the hours—they didn’t change during any of the conversations. So, I almost, on that first day, thought I should just turn around and send them home, so I don’t have to deal with it. And I ended up doing a lot of babysitting with them over the summer. One of the office staff did say to me, “Well your role is as a mentor, so maybe you need to look at this as you need to mentor this person, make them be a better employee, and not necessarily worry about the work that you’re getting out of them.” At the end of the summer, I don’t think I was a good mentor to the person in that sense, and I didn’t get the work out. So, it would be helpful if we had some resources for that.

Another agent shared:

I had a terrible last summer. I mean, I’ll just put it out there. I had a terrible last summer. I think listening to this [focus group] was really helpful though. So, it gave me some hindsight to things that, I mean—there are things I could’ve done better for sure. But again, getting through the intern process, and I had a super-late hire, it was super-hard to recruit anybody to the program. And I’d done so well the previous two summers with interns. And they were so, so, so helpful. Even I remember calling a friend on the way home and being like, “We’re going to offer it to this person, but something just didn’t sit right with me during the interview process. But all of her answers on paper are really, really good.” And then literally the first day, when I asked, like, “Hey, your first assignment is to kind of plan some of the stuff for this CloverBud craft thing. And can you handle that?” And it was always a question of when I would ask the intern, “Can you handle this?” they would always say yes. And then they would

complain about it to my program assistant. I think the expectations of it were—I had the expectations that they should, and I think this is the expectations of their program, is for them to figure out what it's like to be an Extension agent and to do Extension agent work. And then they basically, because I need it to get work done and it wasn't being done or it was being done wrong and then when I asked—so it just got hectic as far as any time you ask was everything okay, it was yes. “Are you doing, okay? Are you working towards goals?” It was always yes. But it was disengagement with the children. So, like, they would sit in the room with the kids. But it was basically me and my program assistants still having to lead the room. And they were just kind of sitting in the room. They didn't want to—it's like they didn't want to engage. And they kept saying they weren't good at this area, they weren't good at this area, which is totally different from the interview process. So, it was probably the worst-case scenario. . . . I would love some more resources to deal with that, knowing if I'm not getting anywhere with an intern, is there a formal process that we can go through, some resources to help out in that situation? And I think honestly, it would have been better for everyone to have let that person go.

Likewise, state funding support is very important for the county offices to house an intern for the summer. Agents indicated that if funding support was not available, county offices would not be able to house an intern for the summer. Intern travel funding was also seen as a weakness. Agents who have interns traveling do not necessarily have the means to reimburse them for their travel expenses. One agent stated, “The other thing that would be nice is if there was a little bit of travel money for our interns because it's hard on us programming-wise to be able to pay any of their travel, if necessary. But it would be nice if there was a little bank of money for each intern or something for them to have a little bit of travel money.”

Supervisors were asked to identify internship threats.

Supervisors were asked what would prevent them from participating in the summer internship program in the future. Primary responses were interns' personality traits and funding. Supervisors who experienced interns who were difficult to work with, were immature, required hand-holding, or lacked willingness to learn indicated that additional experiences like these would discourage them from hosting an intern again.

The funding provided by VCE to support the internship program was cited as being one of the most important factors for many Extension offices to continue to house summer

interns. Funding is split 50/50 between the state and the local offices for an initial intern. Additional interns must be funded 100% at the local level. Some Extension offices work with other partners in providing their contribution.

When asked what would prevent them from participating in the internship program in the future, one agent responded, “I would say the very first thing that came to mind was just the funding. Just the fact that there is funding, and because I would have a difficult time coming up with the full amount. I can get funding for half of it, and half the money from the county side for this, and I couldn't do it without the funding.”

Many agents stated that the cost share was a real asset to hosting an intern for the summer. One agent stated, “I agree with the funding portion of it. In my locality, I have had to fund it one time fully by myself. That was difficult, but I mean—I don't know if I can say ‘luckily,’ but due to the early retirement, we were able to use leftover salary savings from a position that wasn't filled to pay for it. But yeah, I mean when it is like—when you're getting that half state off, it's nice.” Another agent agreed with this statement: “I can echo the previous responses of funding. If that state-level funding was pulled, I don't believe that we could swing the 100% cost of the intern.” A third agent also agreed: “I would say funding would probably be the only thing that would prevent us from trying to get an intern.”

Other agents made similar statements concerning funding. If funding was not available for the summer, supervisors would be unable to house an intern in their county offices. Agents experience benefits with the cost-share system, and many see it as a must to house an intern for the summer.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Supervisors considered themselves fortunate to house an intern for the summer. Findings show strengths with the internship as well as improvements that can be made. Recommendations include developing a statewide orientation prior to the start date, finding ways to accommodate interns working beyond 40 hours a week, finding travel funding for interns, providing additional resources for supervisors, and increasing advertising of and recruitment for the internship positions.

As a result of this study, the internship program has implemented a statewide orientation, a mid-summer check-in with interns and intern supervisors, and an end-of-summer internship reflection with interns and intern supervisors. These are conducted virtually, so interns and supervisors interact across the state. In addition, the internship coordinator offered to visit internship sites to observe interns in action. Only a small number of interns took advantage of this offer, but those who did seemed to be very pleased to have someone see their work. In addition, multiple sessions

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are provided at the beginning and ending of the internship period to accommodate different internship start and end dates. The check-ins and visits help increase networking across the organization for interns, but they also provide a place to identify potential problems before they escalate. If problems are observed, state staff can work with the affected unit to determine the best course of action. This increases internship support for interns and intern supervisors by improving communication between the state administrative staff and local county offices.

In addition, the internship handbook is currently being revised to include these changes as well as to emphasize pre-entry competencies that should be developed by interns through the internship program. This information will assist supervisors in promoting internship objectives when advertising positions and in considering how to approach the internship in a way that provides maximum educational benefit to the intern. In addition, this will provide a framework on which the intern can reflect when considering outcomes of the internship when applying for future positions.

Finally, although Cooperative Extension internship programs are not new, they are constantly evolving to meet the needs of today's communities. Therefore, it is important to continually assess them and how they are meeting the needs of supervisors and interns. Also, as different as Cooperative Extension is from state to state and county to county, so are internship programs across the country. The findings of this study may be useful as other internship programs consider evaluation and implementation of change. However, some of the findings more relevant to human nature and current generations may be directly applicable on a greater scale. Also, in Virginia, our interns and new employees come from many different states. From this perspective, strong internship programs provide benefits to Cooperative Extension everywhere.

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