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Extension Mentors: What They Do and What They Need

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Cover Page Footnote

This study was conducted while Amy Harder was employed by the University of Florida.

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Extension Mentors: What They Do and What They Need

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Abstract. Extension mentors are charged with guiding early-career agents in many states, but little is known about what they do and how it compares to best practices. The purpose of our study was to identify the behaviors and needs of UF/IFAS Extension agents serving as mentors. We used an online survey of active mentors to collect data about their self-perceptions of their mentor functions, communication with their protégés, and the types of desired support. Mentors felt they were performing role modeling and career development functions more than psychosocial support functions. More comprehensive professional development is recommended to improve mentoring quality.

INTRODUCTION

Experienced agents are often asked to mentor individuals beginning their careers. Mentors provide early-career agents with professional support and serve as an accessible resource for questions and concerns (Byington, 2010). Without sufficient support, early-career agents may struggle with common workplace challenges that could lead to increased turnover (Vines et al., 2018). Mentors play a role in the retention of new hires through coaching, career planning, and offering professional advice (Safrit & Owen, 2010). Although mentors are charged with providing support to early-career agents, they, too, require support and professional development to function effectively in their roles.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kram (1983) espoused a theory that the value of mentor relationships varies based on two main mentoring functions: career development and psychosocial support. Career development functions were defined as "those aspects of the relationship that primarily enhanced career advancement" (p. 614). Career development functions include "mentee support through sponsorship, coaching, protection, exposure-and-visibility, and challenging work assignments" (p. 613). Psychosocial support was defined by Kram (1983) as "those aspects of the relationship that primarily enhance sense of competence, clarity, and effectiveness in the managerial role" (p. 614), such as acting as a role model, providing counsel, and being a friend. Scandura and Ragins (1993) identified a third critical mentoring factor: role modeling, used to describe a protégé's reflection of their mentor's "effective work behaviors" (p. 258). We applied Scandura and Ragins's (1993) model to examine career development, psychosocial support, and role modeling in our study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mentoring has been widely studied in organizational development research. Mentoring functions, frequency of contact in a mentoring relationship, and types of support desired by mentors are discussed in the following text. We and others (e.g., Denny, 2016; Mueller, 2020) have noted that Extension-specific mentor research is limited and have supplemented that information with studies from outside the field.

MENTORING FUNCTIONS

Effectively executed mentoring functions result in positive outcomes for mentors and mentees. For example, mentors who provided high levels of career development guidance to their protégés later reported positive impacts on their own jobs, as did their protégés (Wanberg et al., 2006). A meta-analysis of mentoring studies found that career-related mentoring was positively associated with mentors having higher performances at work and better perceptions of career success (Ghosh & Reio, 2013).

Psychosocial support has been found to be associated with increased organizational commitment and reduced

turnover intentions for mentors (Ghosh & Reio, 2013) and protégés (Craig et al., 2012). Arora and Rangnekar (2014) argued that psychosocial support is more impactful than career development and that mentors should provide psychosocial support through feedback, positive reinforcements, and reducing their protégés' fear of failure. Within the Extension context, Harder et al. (2021) found that early-career agents in Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi did not tend to believe that their mentors provided psychosocial support. Instead, early-career agents had the most positive perceptions of their mentors as role models.

Role modeling has been described as individuals (e.g., coaches, mentors) displaying a positive disposition toward their work and promoting open communication, collaboration, and creativity among others (Benge et al., 2020; Rich, 1997). Some disagreement exists regarding whether all mentors are also role models, but when they are perceived as role models, then protégés are likely to benefit from the satisfaction of interacting with individuals who share similarities, improved self-efficacy, and insight into their own self-concept (Gibson, 2003). Safrit and Owen (2010) recommended that Extension mentors share the positive aspects of their profession and model how to balance work and life issues. Rich (1997) called for future research to focus on specific dimensions of role modeling to better understand the different ways it may be demonstrated effectively.

COMMUNICATION IN MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Many factors influence the quality of a mentor-protégé pairing, but Perry and Parikh (2018) concluded that regularly scheduled meetings that prioritized quality time together rather than quantity were the most valuable tool for improving the relationship.

Harder et al. (2021) found that early-career agents were significantly more likely to be satisfied with their mentoring relationships when meetings occurred at least two or three times per month. Mentors have been advised to use that time effectively by cultivating a natural relationship with their protégés, maintaining open communication for meaningful conversations to occur, and responding to any requests in a timely fashion (Benge et al., 2020; Mullen, 2008; Perry & Parikh, 2018).

No one-size-fits-all approach dictates how often mentors and protégés should meet or which types of contacts carry the greatest value (Harder et al., 2021; Ruth et al., 2020). However, a study of county Extension directors and early-career agents focused on mentoring conducted by Benge et al. (2020) found that both groups believed that scheduling and conducting face-to-face meetings was "critical" (p. 27) during a new employee's first months. Mueller's (2020) study of Nebraska's formal Extension mentoring program found that geographic distance between mentors and protégés influenced how quickly a mentoring relationship was built, "especially if there [were] in-person interactions." Research in contexts beyond Extension found that virtual mentoring can be effective and offer similar benefits as face-to-face meetings when measured with students (Bagley & Shaffer, 2015) and preservice teachers (Reese, 2016).

TYPES OF SUPPORT DESIRED BY MENTORS

Research from the private sector found that mentoring has the most positive outcomes when it occurs within an environment where mentors and protégés perceive there to be managerial support of the process (Eby et al., 2006). Eby et al. (2006) suggested that "top management is encouraged to publicly communicate the company's commitment to developmental work relationships and encourage managers to role model effective mentoring behaviors" (p. 286).

Little to no research has been published regarding how Extension mentors want to be supported by their organizations, a gap in the literature that we hope to address with our research.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of our study was to identify the behaviors and needs of University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension agents serving as mentors by doing the following:

1. Describe respondents' perceptions of their mentor-function behaviors.
2. Describe respondents' most common form of contact and frequency of interaction with their protégés.
3. Describe the types of support most frequently requested by respondents.

METHODS

We used a nonexperimental survey to identify the behaviors and needs of UF/IFAS Extension mentors. The target population was all UF/IFAS Extension agents formally serving as mentors for early-career agents. The actual population included all Extension mentors ($N = 127$) listed in the mentor database, which is maintained by the Program and Staff Development (PSD) Unit of UF/IFAS Extension. Agents are supposed to submit a formal mentoring agreement, outlining responsibilities and the university's mentoring regulation and signed by the protégé and mentor, to the PSD Unit when they begin mentoring someone new, but not all do. The middle managers are contacted a few times a year to help update the database, as they are responsible for arranging mentors

for their new agents; however, it is possible that not all mentors are included in the database, despite these efforts.

The instrument was based on the Mentoring Functions Questionnaire (MFQ-9) by Castro et al. (2004). The MFQ-9 is a well-researched and established instrument used across disciplines outside Extension (Hu et al., 2011; Pellegrini & Ross, 2018; Scandura, 2005). The MFQ-9 assesses mentors' performance functions related to career support, psychosocial support, and role modeling from the protégés' perspective. This instrument is capable of measuring factors connected to positive employee and organizational outcomes (Castro et al., 2004).

Modifying the MFQ-9 was necessary to have mentors use it as a self-assessment tool. The career support and psychosocial function items were not difficult to convert to self-assessment, but converting the role-modeling items would have required the mentors to speculate about how their protégés viewed them. For example, one role-modeling item in the MFQ-9 is "I try to model my behavior after my mentor." Therefore, only one MFQ-9 role-modeling item was modified and retained for use in the self-assessment, while three items were added from Rich's (1997) study of role-modeling behavior in managers.

The first question asked respondents to verify that they were currently mentoring an early-career colleague; those who were not were automatically skipped ahead to the final question. Respondents were then asked to use a Likert scale to express the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the 10 mentor-function items. Response options were coded as 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*. The options were interpreted as 1.00–1.49 = *strongly disagree*, 1.50–2.49 = *disagree*, 2.50–3.49 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 3.50–4.49 = *agree*, 4.50–5.00 = *strongly agree*. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for individual items, while means and standard deviations were calculated for the constructs of career support, psychosocial support, and role modeling.

The instrument also asked about the form of contact most frequently used by the respondents with their newest protégé (in case a mentor had more than one protégé). Response options for forms of contact were face-to-face contact, phone call, text message, email, virtual conference (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom), and social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Messenger). Then, respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they had contacted their protégé in February 2022. Response options for frequency of contact were *daily*, *2–3 times a week*, about once a week, 2–3 times a month, *fewer than 2–3 times a month*, and *not applicable* (due to not having a protégé in February 2022). Frequencies and percentages were calculated for these items.

The final survey section assessed how many months respondents had served as a mentor and the length of time respondents had been mentoring their newest protégé. Then, respondents were asked an open-ended question about the perceived support needs of their protégé. The final question was also open-ended and asked respondents to describe the types of information or support that they would like provided to them to be successful as mentors. Only the last question was relevant to the purpose of our study, while the others were used for program planning. For the last question, the responses were coded by the lead researcher into thematic categories by using Excel, and then frequencies were calculated for each category.

Potential participants were invited to complete the survey in March 2022. They received personalized emails sent by using the Qualtrics email function. Three reminders were emailed at 1-week intervals. Fifty-two participants completed the survey. Seven of the participants indicated they were no longer serving as mentors, so they and their responses were removed from the study, reducing the sample population from 127 to 120 and the usable responses to 45 (37.50%).

The MFQ-9 has documented validity and reliability (Castro et al., 2004; Hu, 2008). The survey instrument developed and tested by Rich (1997) also has reliable constructs. However, because the MFQ-9 was modified to add three items from Rich (1997), we conducted a pilot test of the instrument with a convenience sample of participants (n = 35) in 2021, using Qualtrics for data collection. Participants were active mentors for UF/IFAS Extension and were voluntary participants in a mentor in-service training. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess reliability for the three constructs in the pilot test, and results were as follows: career support = .81, psychosocial support = .80, and role modeling = .93.

Additionally, we analyzed the reliability of the three constructs *ex post facto* and found the following: career support = .77, psychosocial support = .74, and role modeling = .93. The alpha levels were acceptable for the three constructs, but we noted that eliminating an item from career support and an item from psychosocial support resulted in higher alpha levels (.85 and .84, respectively). We opted to keep the greater number of items for analysis, given the exploratory nature of adapting the MFQ-9 in our study and the modest number of respondents.

A potential limitation of the study was the modification of the original MFQ-9. The reliability levels of the new instrument were acceptable, but it is unknown how they would have compared to the unaltered instrument. Additionally, the response rate was lower than desirable and lower than typically obtained from agents in Florida. Agents have been asked to complete surveys at an unusually high rate since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, so survey fatigue was likely a factor.

FINDINGS

The first objective of our study was to describe respondents' perceptions of their mentor-function behaviors (see Table 1). Respondents tended to agree that they performed role-modeling functions (M = 4.48, SD = .58), career-development functions (M = 4.47, SD = .56), and psychosocial functions (M = 3.75, SD = .76). The highest percentage of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I take a personal interest in my protégé's career." Conversely, the highest percentage of respondents to disagree or strongly disagree was observed for the statement "My protégé exchanges confidences with me."

The second objective was to describe respondents' frequency of contact with their protégés (see Figure 1) and most common form of contact (see Figure 2). In February 2022, the month before the survey, 35.6% (n = 16) of respondents contacted their protégé two to three times a month. Few respondents (13.3%, n = 6) contacted their protégé two to three times a week. Respondents were most likely (44.4%, n = 20) to have a virtual conference with their protégé. They were least likely (8.9%, n = 4) to make a phone call.

The third objective was to describe the types of support most frequently requested by respondents. Four thematic categories were developed from the open-ended responses: (a) provide informational resources, including checklists, calendars, and policies; (b) continue monthly mentor emails; (c) offer support for building relationships; and (d) host in-service trainings. In-service trainings were mentioned most frequently by respondents (see Table 2).

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mentors surveyed in our study reported that they were performing the three mentor functions. Mentors expressed the strongest level of agreement for items associated with role modeling and career development. In comparison, mentors were less likely to agree with the psychosocial support items, a finding influenced by the larger degree of variance in item responses. Mentors' perceptions of their functions were consistent with how early-career agents viewed their mentors in Harder et al.'s (2021) study, suggesting that mentors tend to exhibit role-modeling behaviors but need more professional

Table 1. Respondents' Perceptions of Their Mentor-Function Behaviors

Function	Item	*SD* *n* %	*D* *n* %	*N* *n* %	*A* *n* %	*SA* *n* %
Career support	I take a personal interest in my protégé's career.	0 0.0	0 0.0	1 2.2	13 28.9	31 68.9
	I help my protégé coordinate professional goals.	0 0.0	1 2.2	3 6.7	19 42.2	22 48.9
	I devote special time and consideration to my protégé's career.	1 2.2	0 0.0	2 4.4	21 46.7	21 46.7
Psychosocial support	My protégé shares personal problems with me.	2 4.4	3 6.7	10 22.2	21 46.7	9 20.0
	My protégé exchanges confidences with me.	2 4.4	7 15.6	5 11.1	24 53.3	7 15.6
	I consider my protégé to be a friend.	0 0.0	1 2.2	8 17.8	29 64.4	7 15.6
Role modeling	I model positive behavior for my protégé.	0 0.0	0 0.0	3 6.7	18 40.0	24 53.3
	I lead by example.	0 0.0	1 2.2	2 4.4	18 40.0	24 53.3
	I set a positive example for others to follow.	0 0.0	0 0.0	3 6.7	15 33.3	27 60.0
	I exhibit the kind of work ethic that my protégé should imitate.	0 0.0	0 0.0	3 6.7	17 37.8	25 55.6

Note. *SD* = Strongly Disagree, *D* = Disagree, *N* = Neither Agree nor Disagree, *A* = Agree, *SA* = Strongly Agree.

Table 2. Thematic Categories and Examples for Most Frequently Requested Types of Mentor Support

Thematic category	*f*	Example responses
Offer in-service trainings	11	Perhaps a training on reporting outcomes, impacts and how to write a great success story for 2022
		Conflict resolution and how to best support a mentee training
		Maybe a half day training on just general mentoring strategies
Provide informational resources, including checklists, calendars, and policies	10	Bulleted list of expectations for mentee by career stage so we can ensure they are making progress and developing programs aligned with [University's] goals
		A copy of the agenda of what is being taught at new faculty training would help since I'm unsure what they've been told vs. what they need to know.
		Not sure there is any specific information missing but there are times differences in [middle manager] requirements and expectations are an issue. This is not something easily fixed but perhaps if mentoring across district lines, some information about differences between [middle managers].
Continue monthly mentor emails	6	I really like the monthly mentoring tips because you get tips that other mentors have shared.
		I like the mentor emails sent regularly with ideas for topics and actions to share with a protégé.
Support building relationships	4	Knowing how to be there and supportive, without overwhelming
		A mentor/protégé only social event at [statewide Extension conference]

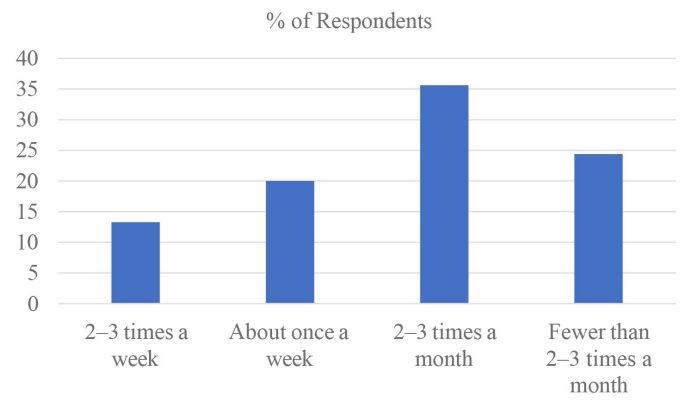

Figure 1. Frequency of contact, February 2022.

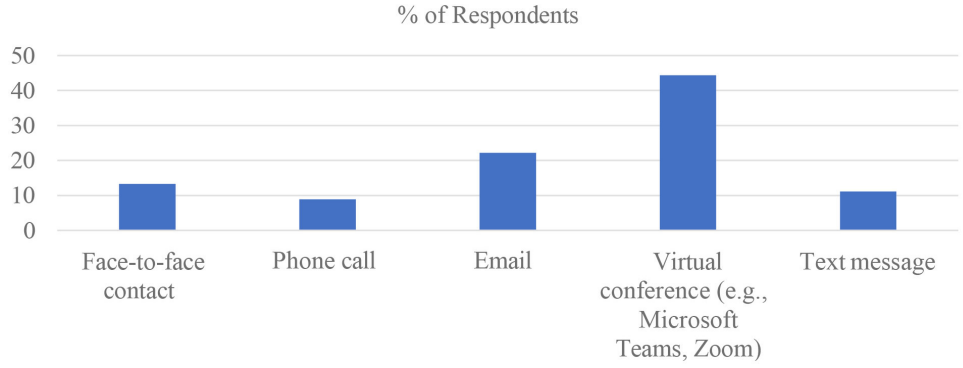

Figure 2. Most common form of contact.

development to execute the psychosocial support function effectively. Improved organizational commitment (Craig et al., 2012) and resilience, problem-solving, and coping behaviors (Dawson et al., 2015) are desirable outcomes for Extension and are associated with positive psychosocial support.

Arora and Rangnekar (2014) suggested that improved psychosocial support happens when mentors focus on providing feedback, giving positive reinforcements, and reducing their mentees' fear of failure. Although most mentors (80%) considered their protégé to be a friend, fewer reported that their protégé exchanged confidences with them (68.9%) or shared personal problems with them (66.7%), suggesting that some relationships lacked trust. Mentors should reflect upon how they provide feedback to determine whether they are unintentionally discouraging their protégé from sharing confidential information with them or whether their actions are leading their protégé to believe that they would be looked down upon for discussing a problem. Confounding factors that may influence protégés' willingness to be vulnerable with their mentors include the potential for a protégé to fear that a mentor will report what they hear to the protégé's administrators and the pressure of being a new agent in a promotion and permanent-status state (which means that their performance will be judged by their peers). A qualitative study with early-career agents should be conducted to explore factors affecting psychosocial support in mentoring relationships.

Frequency of contact has been found to be related to early-career agents' satisfaction with their mentors (Harder et al., 2021). Approximately 75% of the mentors in our study reported contacting their protégés at least two to three times a month or more often, which meets or surpasses the threshold found to be significant by Harder et al. (2021). That finding is encouraging, but the mentors also reported that most contacts occurred via virtual conference rather than in person, as recommended by Benge et al. (2020). Concerns about COVID-19 might have influenced people's willingness to hold in-person meetings. Also, mentors in the state have previously reported a lack of funding to support mentoring-related travel. Limited funds were made available beginning in 2018 through the Dean of Extension's budget to support one in-person visit, but fewer than 15 people accessed them. It is unclear whether funding was truly a barrier to in-person visits.

Mentoring is a skill set that can be developed; that sentiment was expressed by the mentors in our study, based on their desire to have more in-service trainings offered to them. They recognized the potential to improve as mentors by participating in professional development. A comparison of two studies of undergraduate students serving as youth mentors found that increasing training and support beyond preservice training led to improved youth and mentor outcomes (McQuillen et al., 2015). Currently, our mentors must complete a preservice online asynchronous training course, are enrolled in a monthly mentor tips LISTSERV, and can attend periodic in-service trainings. Offering a more structured schedule of in-service trainings may result in similar benefits for UF/IFAS Extension. More specifically, mentor trainings should focus on increasing mentors' awareness of and preparedness to perform their function as a role model due to role modeling's relationship with positive mentoring outcomes (Dickson et al., 2014).

Our mentors also wanted to have more informational resources provided to help keep their protégés on track (e.g., career-progress checklists) and to keep them aware of what was being taught to their protégés in other programs (e.g., the Extension Faculty Development Academy for first-year faculty). The monthly mentor tips emails could be used to share informational resources. Plans for supporting mentors moving forward will include a balance of skill development and the provision of informational resources. Developing a more comprehensive mentor professional-development program should help Extension mentors improve their mentor functions, increasing the likelihood that mentors, early-career agents, and the Extension organization will fully realize the benefits of well-executed mentoring relationships.

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