

Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Educator Pipeline: Career Pathway Potential

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Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Extension programs rely on the expertise of qualified FCS educators to impact individuals, families, and communities through community-based educational programs. Due to a crucial shortage of FCS educators, it is challenging to hire qualified FCS extension educators to fill vacancies in some areas of the country. The purpose of this paper is to discuss findings of a study of perceptions of FCS Extension Program Leaders on future supply and demand issues of FCS extension educators. Strategies for recruitment to ensure career pathways for qualified employees are also considered.

Family and consumer sciences' (FCS) subject matter is of critical importance for the economic well-being, health, and wellness of youth, families, and communities. FCS educators, as FCS and 4-H Cooperative Extension educators or agents, are needed in formal classroom and community-based education settings to conduct programs for adults and youth across the country. A focus of concern in the profession has been the crucial lack of FCS educators in school districts that provide FCS education to teach important life skills as part of their curriculum (Miller & Meszaros, 1996; Rehm & Jackman, 1995; Werhan, 2013; Werhan & Way, 2006). However, until recently, there has been little discussion regarding the critical need to ensure qualified educators to fill community-based FCS extension educator roles as well. What strategies are needed to create effective pipelines for these community-based educators? The purpose of this article is to discuss findings from a survey of extension administrators to study the anticipated demand, subject matter content, and recruitment of FCS educators for positions within Cooperative Extension.

Background

The impact of the decline in number of FCS education graduates and loss of FCS education degree programs across the nation on current and future shortages of FCS educators has been a theme of discussion among FCS professionals for over twenty years (Miller & Meszaros, 1996; Rehm & Jackman, 1995; Werhan, 2013; Werhan & Way, 2006). FCS professionals have been encouraged to recruit and train new FCS educators to focus on the integration of praxis to practice in order to serve as change agents for family-focused education and policy in the context of current society (Rehm & Jackman, 1995). This model of educators as change agents to serve families and communities is the mission of Extension FCS programming.

FCS extension agents¹ provide outreach education to families in the areas of health and wellness, nutrition, family resource management, and many other life skills (Gutter, 2016). The

¹ Until the name of the profession was changed from home economics to FCS in the United States in 1994 (American Association of FCS, 2015), these agents were also referred to as home economics agents in some states.

work of an extension agent is multi-faceted and includes teaching life skills, answering clientele questions related to FCS subjects, empowering volunteers to be peer educators, and building community engagement for programs and projects. Kato and Elias (2015) characterize extension educators' day-to-day responsibilities as "practical and people-oriented" (p. 189).

The role of extension agents as community change agents requires subject matter expertise and a commitment to local people. The land grant system is committed to recruit and retain agents with these desired characteristics. Those agents who select and remain in this profession may do so because they, like the Texas Extension Educators studied by Chandler (2004), find their work interesting, enjoy the variety they find in their work and its related schedules, value their contributions to the community, and receive personal satisfaction through their efforts. However, concerns have been raised that turnover rates within Cooperative Extension systems may stem from time commitments and the workloads required to work in these high profile roles (Kutilek, Conklin & Gunderson, 2002).

Within the last three decades, studies have focused on ways to effectively recruit and retain extension professionals in the field. Strong and Harder (2009) pointed to the importance of maintenance and motivation factors in connection with job satisfaction. Rousan and Henderson (1996) identified low salary, long hours, demanding job responsibilities, and offers of more money in positions outside extension as reasons for agent turnover. Ezell (2003) and Mowbray (2002) found that job stress was a key factor in Kentucky and Tennessee agents' turnover rates. Safrit and Owen (2010) conducted a content analysis of peer-reviewed publications over a 15-year timeframe related to employee retention within Cooperative Extension systems. Their findings pointed to the need to "recruit authentically" in order to meet the demand for new professionals in the workforce. This indicates that communication with prospective students to understand Cooperative Extension culture and role expectations is a critical recruitment and retention step.

The importance of communication and mentoring potential FCS educators has been a theme of FCS recruitment literature as well (Eastman, Cummings, Petersen, & VanLeeuwen, 2006; Stout, Couch, & Fowler, 1998). Stout, Couch and Fowler (1998) led a focus group of 10 FCS educators, administrators, and practitioners to discuss concerns and solutions to the FCS educator shortage. The focus group participants identified key steps to recruit and retain qualified educators. The steps suggested in this research include: 1) promoting teaching as a positive experience; 2) concentrating on mentoring and networks among current FCS professionals, teacher educators, youth organizations, guidance counselors, professional organizations and others to elevate the profession; and 3) tapping potential students to choose FCS education as a career path.

FCS educators typically have a minimum bachelor of science degree and, in many states, are required to have a master of science degree or higher. A disconnect in the recruitment of qualified FCS extension educators has been a devolution in the number and scope of students' access to FCS degree options within their home states. In the past, many states had programs in at least one university offering such degrees in FCS education, home economics, or related degrees. Over the last several decades, the number of these programs has diminished or become absorbed into more focused departments such as personal/family finance, human development, or nutrition and dietetics. This has left some states without a clear pipeline or secondary education program to produce educators with a general FCS background.

To further complicate pipeline issues, the role of FCS in extension programs varies from state to state. While some states have focused on core knowledge areas such as nutrition or

health, others still provide robust programming across multiple FCS subjects. Multicounty or regional agents may also be used in some states in conjunction with or in place of county agents. Agents may work with local partners or a group of volunteers to provide peer training in core subject areas. FCS agents and their staff also provide direct education to families and consumers in their counties. The goal in most instances is behavior change for healthier or more prosperous lives: Agents engage in program evaluation in order to document this change (Gutter, 2016).

While nationally-aggregated data for total FCS agents are not available, Table 1, *Case Example of FCS Agent Positions from One Large Population State (2011-2016)*, highlights trends for FCS and total extension agent count in a highly populated state (>20 million people) since 2011. In this example, the number of FCS positions declined slightly, from 82 to 72 agents. However, because the overall number of extension positions increased, the proportion of agents who were focused on FCS decreased in this time period. The numbers presented only tell part of the story. In some instances, these positions had multiple searches without identifying suitable candidates because of a lack of qualified applicants with subject matter expertise.

Table 1

Case Example of FCS Agent Positions from One Large Population State (2011-2016)

December of	FCS Filled	FCS Vacant	Total FCS	Total Agents	% FCS
2011	77	5	82	395	20.8%
2012	76	1	77	395	19.5%
2013	70	9	79	400	19.8%
2014	66	10	76	403	18.9%
2015	63	9	72	407	17.7%
Current	61	11	72	407	17.7%

Other factors contributing to the number of FCS vacancies and the reduction in the number of some FCS-related positions include financial stress felt by local governments and organizations associated with the Great Recession that led, in some cases, to the loss of county funding for the county’s share of the FCS agent’s salary for extension positions.

Purpose of the Study

This study focused on the sufficiency of the extension pipeline as a career pathway for FCS graduates from the perspective of the FCS extension state program leaders. State program leaders were the focus of this study because these leaders play critical roles in recruiting and hiring FCS extension educators. This study was designed to: 1) determine the nature of the educator pipeline from college education to extension career path; 2) explore critical issues included post-secondary educational opportunities in FCS core content; 3) identify anticipated FCS extension job opportunities; and 4) examine the nature of the recruitment between academic programs and FCS educator positions.

Methods

A web-based survey using Qualtrics Survey Software was used to collect data for this study. The survey was developed by the researchers and reviewed by extension evaluation faculty and an extension administrator for content, clarity, scope, and purpose. The survey included four elements. The first element asked for each participant's professional title and role, institutional geographic region, and land-grant designation. The second element related to employment and recruitment that asked participants to list their current number of FCS and 4-H/FCS employees that were responsible for one county or multicounty programming, FCS employee turnover rates, and their estimate of the future FCS and FCS/4-H positions in their institution. A third element included a series of single and multi-option variable questions to discern subject matter content covered and percentage of agents from the institution engaged in the topical content. The final element included open-ended questions that asked what academic programs were acceptable when hiring FCS and 4-H/FCS extension educators and asked respondents to identify effective recruitment tools.

FCS extension administrators from 67 land-grant institutions were recruited in October 2015 to participate in this on-line survey via USDA FCS program leaders' listserv. A reminder email was sent one month after the first. Administrators from 28 land-grant institutions responded (1862 n=22; 1890 n=6). Of those administrators who responded, 18 self-identified as FCS state program leaders, four responded as FCS and 4-H state program leaders, and six completed the survey indicating they filled other administrative roles within extension.

Results

Survey responses (n= 23) indicated a strong expectation in the next five years that the demand for FCS agent positions would remain the same (52%) or increase (37%). The data revealed a similar response (n=24) for 4-H positions with FCS responsibilities, noting that more would be hired (26%) or the same number hired (61%) in the future compared to current staffing.

Subject Matter

When asked what subject matter areas that their FCS agents/educators cover, respondents (n=27) indicated that 100% of the institutions were engaged in nutrition-related programming. Other subject matter covered in order of response included: health and wellness (93%), financial education (81%), human development (78%), disaster preparedness (44%), and housing/home environment (42%). All respondents indicated that they will hire professionals who have completed any FCS-related degree. Two respondents stated they accept social work majors, and one accepts professionals with health-related degrees.

Participants responded to survey items related to educators' use of time recognizing that FCS agents' time can be split between multiple subject matter areas over the course of their workload. Respondents estimated the number of agents in their state focused their work on four subject matter areas. Table 2, *Subject Matter Focus of FCS Extension Educators*, points to nutrition, health, and wellness topics as a major area of programming for local educators.

Recruitment

Program leaders (n=27) indicated they used multiple means to recruit FCS educators into their extension institution workforce. Methods reported include recruitment through contacts with universities and colleges within-state (89%), contacts with universities and colleges out-of-state (70%), advertisements placed on *Journal of Extension* job board (37%), job announcements through National Extension Association of FCS (37%), and other recruitment strategies (59%).

Examples of their best recruitment strategies included summer internships, 4-H/FCS and FCCLA projects, and partnerships and engagement with FCS student-based college organizations.

Table 2

Subject Matter Focus of FCS Educators

FCS Educators Who Focus on This Subject	Nutrition (n=26)	Financial Education (n=26)	Health and Wellness (n=26)	Human Development (n=26)
Less than 25%	0	38%	4%	35%
About 25%	4%	23%	23%	19%
About 50%	23%	12%	27%	23%
About 75%	35%	12%	15%	8%
Almost All	38%	15%	31%	15%

Number of FCS Educators Currently Employed

Institutions varied widely in the number of FCS educators they employed and the scope of geographic areas that were covered by educators in their assignments. Table 3, *One or Multicounty Extension FCS Educator Staffing Patterns*, demonstrates that most institutions employ a blend of county and multicounty-based FCS educators.

Table 3

One or Multicounty FCS Extension Educator Staffing Patterns

Number FCS Educators Employed	Responsible For			
	One County (n=28)	Multicounty (n=28)	FCS, 4-H, and One County (n=28)	FCS, 4-H, and Multicounty (n=28)
0	21%	32%	64%	75%
1-15	32%	39%	22%	21%
15-49	32%	25%	14%	4%
More than 49	14%	4%	0%	0%

Future Trends in Hiring

Survey responses indicate that recruiting the next generation of educators will continue to evolve as a process with changing communications media and generational differences.

Reaching out to applicants through social media (e.g. LinkedIn) or on other career networking sites was considered important by program leaders who participated in the survey. Respondents

also suggested that administrators should assure that websites for job listings are easy to find and easy to navigate. In addition, survey participants indicated that administrators need to solidify relationships with degree providers and work with universities in their states to build the referral network. Also noted were the value of internships as a recruiting tool. Paid and unpaid internships can be a potentially effective means to introduce students to career opportunities through Cooperative Extension and build the career pipeline.

Conclusions and Implications

This study points to the clearly-defined need for qualified FCS educators with a broad background in FCS Body of Knowledge in extension programs nationwide. While some states have clear pipelines and pools of applicants, other states do not. Professional organizations such as the American Association of FCS and the National Extension Association for FCS could play an important role assisting states as they forge new relationships to strengthen critical educator career pathways within Cooperative Extension. Simple solutions could include the broad adoption of LinkedIn or other existing sites where millennials or other suitable candidates could be found. Administrators may also need to collaborate on share job posting announcements and creating regional educator pipelines to fill this need.

The need for FCS educators varies between states with some states focusing more on nutrition education and projects, while others are more holistic in their program scope. Thus, a universal set of job knowledge topics might be possible, but adjustments for different states would need to be made. FCS program leaders need to be in conversation with FCS academic programs to verbalize the specific subject matter needs to raise awareness for job-related content focus. Those universities who do offer holistic FCS programs could offer such general FCS training or certificate programs to broader audiences online. These could be made available by collaborative efforts such as the Great Plains Collaboration, which could be explored in other regions of the United States.

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