

Public Abstract

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Title: PERCEIVED SUPPORT AND CHALLENGES FACED BY EXTENSION SPECIALISTS AND EDUCATORS

Organizational culture plays a part in the day-to-day atmosphere encountered by educators within the Extension organization. Many factors influence the culture including perceived job satisfaction, morale, support and barriers. The initial guidance of this study was based on work by Fosters and Seevers (2003) that reviewed the barriers women face in agricultural and Extension education, as well as the lack of mentoring networks and support groups. The purpose of this research was to measure the level of perceived barriers by Extension educators and the perceived effectiveness of available support programs. The survey population consisted of 224 University of Missouri Extension specialists and educators, and used an internet-based survey questionnaire.

Respondents were somewhat satisfied with their current Extension position. However, they were neutral in the level of morale they encounter from colleagues in their current Extension position. Male and female respondents reported a greater level of support from family, local clientele and the county than from regional and state Extension. Both male and female respondents identified salary and promotion, as well as balancing work and family, as the most significant challenges in their current Extension role. Respondents did not perceive significant challenges with engagement from producers and clients based on gender, length of service or the educator's practical background. When questioned about mentoring support, respondents perceived self-sought mentoring as more effective than assigned formal mentoring. A majority of the respondents reported encouraging both male and female colleagues as well as receiving encouragement and support when faced with work related challenges. A majority of the respondents reported they had not discouraged or been discouraged by either male or female colleagues when faced with work related challenges. Data showed that the percentage of same gender mentors and protégés was similar for both male and female Extension educators.

Based on this research, studies may be conducted in each Extension program area to determine barriers specific to each category and the type of support necessary for personal and professional development. Extension administration may need to determine how to reduce the perceived disconnect between field, regional and state faculty, and how to potentially enhance employee orientation. With periodic assessments, the Extension organization can continue to be a leading institution in adult and youth education.