Professional Activities and Needs of Extension Educators as Perceived by Extension Educators in Academic Departments

Emmalou Van Tilburg
Leader, Evaluation, Ohio Cooperative Extension Service and
Assistant Professor, Agricultural Education

Richard L. Poling, Graduate Research Associate
Agricultural Education
The Ohio State University

Accepted for Publication April 1988

Professional development activities are important in a faculty member's growth (Ducharme, 1981; Schrer & Barr, 1979; Scott, 1980). A significant part of this professional growth component is participation in professional organizations, attending conferences, making presentations at these conferences, and publishing research results in refereed professional journals (Scher & Barr, 1979). These activities not only give the faculty member recognition and prestige (Anderson, 1982; Centra, 1983), but also give the individual an identity within the profession (Raths, 1985).

There are certain academic and professional fields in which faculty members can relate to specific professional organizations, and the professional identity of the individual is unquestionably linked with those organizations. However, for some professionals, there are no specific professional organizations that meet the need for professional development and identity. Without that identity, faculty members cannot develop a feeling of belonging to a unified body of professionals who speak with unity about their field (Brittingham, 1986).

Many studies have been conducted relating to the scholarly and professional activities of academic faculty members (Ducharme, 1982; Elder, 1984; Scher & Barr, 1979). In addition, many authors have addressed this topic in a philosophical manner.

Robert Scott (1980), in a study of the professional associations of collegiate middle-managers, suggested that professional associations meet the demand for information, guidance, and training, as well as the desire for recognition and the status that comes from being a part of a recognized group. Elder (1984) reported an effort by Donohoe to validate the importance of participation in a professional association for women in education administration. Fifty-five percent of the respondents reported that such participation had been important to relations with other institutions and to the contacts made for both the individual and the institute.

In a study of teacher educators' scholarly activities, Raths (1985) found that the teacher educators identified strongly with the organizations associated with the subeject matter areas they taught, not the general field of teacher education. One of Raths' suggestions to improve this situation was to organize a professional association to meet the specific needs of teacher educators. The results of the Raths study could be related to the situation in extension education where many extension specialists housed in academic departments to teach extension and conduct extension research are often strongly affiliated with subject matter organizations, such as animal science, agronomy, evaluation, personnel development, or home economics organizations.

Journal of the American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture
Volume 29, Number 4, pp.17-23
DOI: 10.5032/jaatea.1988.04017

Brittingham (1986), in a summary of faculty development in teacher education, said:

> In some academic and professional fields, faculty members can relate to one principal professional association. The situation in teacher education is more confused, leaving many faculty members isolated and ill-informed about the structure of the professional associations in teacher education and the current discussion of the issues facing the profession. Although individual faculty members may have memberships in several of the associations and although journals may be available in the library and the department, the fact remains that there is not one clear voice speaking to teacher educators. And without that one clear voice in frequent communication with its members, faculty members do not develop a clear sense of themselves as a unified body of professionals who speak with reasonable unity about their place within the institution. (p. 3)

Extension educators in academic departments face this same dilemma. Extension professional organizations tend to be designed for the practitioner in the field. Extension educators who seek professional associations often join associations that deal with technical subject matter or have extension subgroups (e.g., American Evaluation Association, American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture). Opportunities for discussion and interaction with peers on extension issues are somewhat limited in these settings. The fragmentation of extension educators into these various subject matter organizations also precludes the development of a unified professional identity for these individuals.

Because professional development has been identified as a major benefit to both the individual and the profession, importance lies in recognizing what needs members of a profession have and what opportunities are available to them. Extension educators, as a professional group, have not been studied to determine opportunities for professional growth or the needs for such opportunities. Extension educators housed in academic units in universities may very well be one group that has no specific professional identity.

No research of extension professionals was found which studied the perceived importance of professional organizations or the outlets for collegial activities which contribute to professional identity. Thus, this study provided valuable baseline data to help the extension profession determine issues for future consideration.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study was to describe the current status of extension educators' activities and perceived needs related to professional identity. Specific research objectives were:

1. To determine where extension educators held membership in professional organizations, participated in professional organization programs, presented results of extension research to others in the profession, and published extension research results;

2. To determine what extension educators' perceptions were as to the importance, availability, and need of various components of professionalism;

3. To determine what extension educators felt was their professional identity; and

4. To determine who extension educators identified as their professional peers.

The study examined the following characteristics of extension professionals: (a) membership in professional organizations; (b) attendance at professional meetings; (c) presentations given at professional meetings; (d) published research; (e) importance and availability of professional activities (collegial activities, conducting research, and sharing research); (f) job title, self-description of position; (g) perceptions of identity of professional peers; and (h) demographic information related to position.

Procedures

Design

The research design of the study was descriptive, allowing the researchers to describe the nature of the characteristics studied. Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize data.

Population

The target population was extension educators in academic departments of agricultural education and adult and continuing education with the accessible population being 118 extension educators identified by polling extension directors and agricultural education department chairs at land-grant institutes (R. A. Martin, personal communication, June 2, 1987). All of these educators were included in the study.

The procedure used to identify the population for this study could have resulted in the exclusion of individuals whose directors or department chairs did not respond to the poll. The absence of these individuals from the study represents a limitation of the generalizability of the results.

Data Collection

Data were collected in Autumn 1987 using a mail questionnaire. The total number of usable responses was 79, for a data sample of 67%. Data collected by telephone from a 10% sample of non-respondents were compared using t-tests (alpha = .05). No significant differences were found; therefore, results were generalized to the accessible population used in the study (Miller & Smith, 1983).

Instrumentation and Data Analysis

The instrument was developed by the researchers and contained three sections. Part I included items relating to membership and participation in professional organizations, presentations at meetings, and publications. Part II included 12 items relating to the importance and availability of professional activities. Responses to these items were scaled on four-point, Likert-type scales, not important/not available (1) to very important/very available (4). Part III had items on job title and description, tenure, percentage of official appointment, self-description of job position, and the identity of professional peers.

Content validity of the instrument was determined using a panel of experts. The instrument was pilot-tested for reliability using a

test-retest procedure with a sample similar to the respondents (doctoral students preparing to be extension educators). Percents of agreement were calculated and items below 70% were revised. Cronbach's alphas for the summated scales ranged from .54 to .82. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, measures of central tendency and variability) were used to organize and summarize the data. T-tests were used to compare groups.

Results

Objective One

Data for organizations, meeting attendance, presentations, and publications were reported for the years of 1984-1987 and were collapsed into three categories: extension, agriculture (non-extension), and general (Table 1). Forty-three percent of the respondents held membership in an extension organization compared to 75% belonging to at least one agricultural organization and 73% reporting membership in a general organization. Six percent of the respondents reported no membership in professional organizations. The mean members of organizational memberships for individual respondents were: extension, .68 (sd = .91); agriculture, 2.08 (sd = 1.89); and general, 2.01 (sd = 1.90).

Attendance at extension meetings was reported by 33% of the respondents; 75% attended agricultural meetings and 77% went to general meetings. Nine percent reported attending no professional meetings. Of the 612 total meetings attended by respondents, 80 (13%) were extension meetings, 293 (48%) were agricultural meetings, and 239 (39%) were general meetings.

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Respondents Indicating Professional Membership, Meeting Attendance, Paper Presentations and Publications by Type, 1984-1987

Type of Organization, Meetings, or Periodical	Respondents			
	Holding Membership in Professional Organizations	Attending Professional Meetings	Presenting Papers at Professional Meetings	With Articles Published in Periodicals
Extension	34 (43%)	26 (33%)	14 (18%)	12 (15%)
Agriculture	59 (75%)	59 (75%)	24 (30%)	19 (24%)
General	58 (73%)	61 (77%)	25 (32%)	8 (10%)
None	5 (6%)	7 (9%)	37 (47%)	50 (63%)

Note. Columns do not sum to 100% because individual respondents may be represented in more than one type of organization, meeting or periodical.

Paper presentations at extension meetings were reported by 18% of the respondents, 30% presented at agricultural meetings, and 32% presented papers at general meetings. Forty-seven percent reported no paper presentations. There were 151 presentations reported by those responding, of which 24 (16%) were at extension meetings, 50 (33%) were at agricultural meetings, and 77 (51%) were at general meetings.

Extension-related periodicals contained publications by 15% of the respondents, 24% published in agricultural journals, and 10% had published in general outlets. Sixty-three percent reported having no publications. Of the 77 total articles published by 39 individuals, 21 (27%) were published in extension periodicals, 45 (58%) were in agricultural periodicals, and 11 (14%) were in general periodicals.

Objective 2

When asked about the importance and availability (ultimately indicating a need) of professional activities, respondents used a three-domain framework: collegial activities, conducting research and sharing research. A need was calculated by subtracting the mean availability score of the items related to each of the three domains from the mean importance score (both on a 4-point Likert-type scale). The higher the need score, the stronger the perceived need. A mean need score of .90 was identified for collegial activities. Research activities had a mean need of 1.31, and the mean need for sharing research was 1.17 (Table 2).

Table 2

Mean Importance, Availability and Perceived Need of Professional Components of Extension Education

	Importance	Availability	Perceived Need[a]
Collegial Activities			
Mean	3.29	2.38	.90
sd	.44	.60	.79
Conducting Research			
Mean	3.26	1.97	1.31
sd	.67	.60	1.00
Sharing Research			
Mean	3.40	2.25	1.17
sd	.59	.57	.89

[a]Mean perceived need = Mean Importance - Availability using a 4-point scale; a positive score indicates need.

Objective 3

The average tenure in the position was six years. Respondents were asked for the percentages of their official position in the areas of extension, research, resident instruction, and other duties. The average percentage of extension appointments was 41%. The average research

appointment was 9% and mean resident instruction percent appointment was 40%. Other duties averaged 7% of the appointment and generally included administrative duties.

Official titles were categorized by Resident Faculty, Department Administration, Extension Specialist, and Extension Administration. Percents were 32% resident faculty, 22% department administration, 30% extension specialist, and 16% extension administration (Table 3). When asked to describe their positions, the percentages were 55% resident faculty, 9% department administration, 31% extension specialist, and 5% extension administration (Table 3).

Table 3

Freqencies and Percentages of Official Titles in Perceived Job Descriptions and Perceived Professional Peers of Extension Educators

	Official Title		Job Description		Professional Peers	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Resident Faculty	25	32	43	55	44	57
Department Administration	17	22	7	9	7	9
Extension Specialist	24	30	24	31	17	22
Extension Administration	13	16	4	5	6	8
Other	--	--	--	--	3	4
Total	79	100	78[a]	100	77[b]	100

[a]One non-response. [b]Two non-responses.

Objective 4

When asked to identify professional peers, percentages were slightly different than self-descriptions or job titles: 57% reported resident faculty, 9% department administration, 22% extension specialist, 8% extension administration, and 4% others (mostly private sector technical experts) (Table 3).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Extension educators held membership in twice as many non-extension professional organizations as in extension organizations. Extension educators participated in non-extension organizations, through attendance and presentations at professional meetings, at a much greater frequency than in extension organizations.

Extension educators published research articles more frequently in agricultural periodicals than in extension periodicals, but published less frequently in general periodicals. Extension educators perceived a need for more collegial activities, research opportunities, and sharing of research in extension education. Extension educators perceived differences in their professional identities as they described their official title, their work, and their professional peers.

Even though non-respondents did not differ significantly from respondents, the frame used to determine the population may not have been representative of all extension educators.

The following recommendations are based on the findings and conclusions of this study. Professional organizations, either extension or containing extension components, should examine whether they are adequately meeting the professional needs of extension educators. If not, the organizations should develop a plan to meet these needs.

Extension educators in academic units should determine if a professional organization exists that can meet their needs. Extension educators should voice concerns relating to professional identity to administrators and peers.

A follow-up study should be conducted, based on this study, using an all-inclusive frame of extension educators in academic departments. An in-depth investigation using qualitative methodology should be conducted of the needs of extension educators in academic departments to determine why these needs exist and how to better satisfy them.

References

Anderson, K. (1982, November). The interaction between professional organizations and research. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Louisville, KY.

Brittingham, B. (1986). Faculty development in teacher education: An agenda. Journal of Teacher Education, 37(5), 2-5.

Centra, J. A. (1983). Research productivity and teaching effectiveness. Research in Higher Education, 18(2), 379-389.

Ducharme, E. R. (1981). Faculty development in schools, colleges, and departments of education. Journal of Teacher Education, 32(5), 30-34.

Elder, P. (1984). The importance of professional involvement. Journal of the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators and Counselors, 48(1), 13-19.

Miller, L. E., & Smith, K. L. (1983). Handling nonresponse issues. Journal of Extension, 21, 45-50.

Raths, J. (1985, April). Scholarly activities of teacher educators. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.

Scher, M., & Barr, M. J. (1979). Beyond graduate school: Strategies for survival. Journal of College Student Personnel, 20(6), 529-533.

Scott, R. A. (1980). Professional associations: The off-campus organizations of collegiate middle-managers. College and University, 55(2), 125-134.