



## Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Professional Development Organizations

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### Introduction and Background

This publication includes the findings of focus groups conducted with Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) agents and specialists in spring 2021 related to professional development organizations. This area of inquiry was a part of one of four categories included in the study of mid-career agents and specialists, between three and seven years of service, to evaluate their needs at this stage in their career. An Epsilon Sigma Phi (ESP) professional development grant supported this project. Extension professionals in Virginia are eligible to join ESP with three years of service. ESP is a national Extension professional development organization open to all Extension professionals, supporting membership across all program areas and levels within the organizational hierarchy.

The prompt for these findings was for the participants to describe their involvement in professional development organizations and associations and share how ESP could support them in their professional development outside their program area.

An overview of the project and demographics

([https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs\\_ext\\_vt\\_edu/en/ALCE/ALCE-279/ALCE-279.html](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/ALCE-279/ALCE-279.html)) and findings related to competencies (<https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/ALCE/ALCE-287/ALCE-287.html>), sources of stress ([https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs\\_ext\\_vt\\_edu/en/ALCE/alce-290/alce-290.html](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/alce-290/alce-290.html)), needs assessment <add link>, and mentoring <add link> are provided in previous publications. Findings from the remaining category, organizational support and effectiveness, will be linked from this publication as they become available.

### Methods

A complete methodology of the project is included in an earlier publication, Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Methodology and Demographics

([https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs\\_ext\\_vt\\_edu/en/ALCE/ALCE-279/ALCE-279.html](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/ALCE-279/ALCE-279.html)). The premise for including this section was a recognition by the research team that professional development organizations often play a role in mentoring and supporting Extension professionals. The project was sponsored, in part, by a grant provided by National Epsilon Sigma Phi and was developed through a partnership with Virginia Epsilon Sigma Phi. Epsilon Sigma Phi has often been called “the Extension veterans’ organization.” Epsilon Sigma Phi works across program areas, topics, and administrative and professional ranks to provide networking and professional development opportunities in many of the areas discussed previously not related to subject matter expertise

(communication, educational design, leadership, professionalism, emerging topics, etc.). Participant focus group and research team discussions following the focus groups were reviewed and analyzed based on emerging themes. Findings from all of these groups are included here.

These findings will be used to develop recommendations within the focus group participants and research team to strengthen Virginia Cooperative Extension and our professional development organizations. Recommendations will be shared widely through presentations at professional meetings and peer-reviewed publications.

## Findings Overview

This paper begins with findings related to agents and specialists participation or non-participation in professional development organizations. This is followed by a section that summarizes the benefits agents receive through participation in these organizations. The paper ends by providing participant perspectives related to opportunities for ESP to support their professional development outside their subject matter areas.

## Participation in Professional Development Organizations

Both agents and specialists reported being involved in professional development organizations associated with Cooperative Extension. Extension organizations that were identified included National Association for County Agricultural Agents, the Virginia and National Extension Associations for Family and Consumer Sciences, “all the 4-H related ones” with state and national organizations identified by name, “all of the professional organizations, except ESP”, “the national SNAP Ed association”, and ESP. Many people also referred to their program teams as professional development organizations. An agent said, “I also joined program team to try to help push that tie to professional development.” Another agent shared,

I think the program teams, I have found very helpful. I’m part of those commercial horticulture consumer horticulture, and the emerging pesticide program. So, I’m on two or three program teams. I think that's been a lot more helpful than the actual professional organizations.

The respondents were also members of organizations external to Extension. External organizations that were identified included: “coalitions”, the Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior, the State Young Farmers Farm Bureau Board, the University Economic Development Association, and the Virginia Economic Development Association.

Several professionals indicated they were not involved or had very limited involvement. One agent said,

I see agents in my area that are part of like literally like 40,000 different associations, whatever they’re in. And I see burnout. I see it really bad with some of the agents. So, I’m like I don't want to get to that point because I’ve been there before in previous roles. And I don't want to get to that point, so I’m kind of like what [another focus group member] said, like not doing the bare minimum, but doing enough.

Another agent said they were involved “just because it was expected for promotion”. Another agent expressed frustration saying that their professional development was not recognized in evaluation. She said,

And then also something that was frustrating and kind of going off as being a part of a million things is what [another focus group member] said. We had to do like so much professional development, last year. And in my evaluation, it wasn't recognized at all. Not even a little bit. So that was super frustrating, and I really had to hold back in my evaluation because it was like we're doing so much work, but it's not getting recognized at all.

Similarly, another agent talked about the time commitments and limited return. She characterized her involvement in this way.

Minimal, super minimal, as minimal as I can make it because I see no return on investment. You know as minimal as I can do it, so that I can check my box for my professional development, so that I can get promoted one day. I don't see much of a benefit for me, being a part of those things because that's just more time. And there's no return on investment personally. From an evaluation standpoint, I didn't think it's something that is prioritized because, again, it's not programming and numbers. So, it's just okay well, great that you did that.

Other agents said they were actually discouraged from participating in professional development organizations. Some specialists said they were told that the Extension professional development organizations were for agents, while others are actively involved in these.

Another respondent shared that initially she did not feel the professional organization she visited needed her. She said,

I know when I started you get your first-year dues paid and I went to one of the meetings that happened during the VCE Conference. But kind of after that I got overwhelmed [and] wasn't really sure how I, as a brand-new agent can really fit in. Because it was like a well-oiled machine at that point and I didn't really know what I could contribute. So, I kind of let it [membership] die and haven't been active since. So, I rejoined when dues were up this past fall, and I feel like now I'm at a point where I would like to be more involved.

Another agent does not participate because of the size of the organizations. She said,

I am much better in small groups or one on one. So as far as joining any organization where it's going to be - we're all meeting in one large room - we're going to talk about things. I, personally, have anxiety and I don't, well I don't know, I've never been diagnosed, but like that gives me anxiety on the inside. And I don't necessarily want to be in a large group of people talking about things, so I choose not to do those professional organizations. Like the biggest that I want to get is like my district meeting with 4-H agents and that's where I'm good.

## **Benefits of membership in professional development organizations**

Many respondents talked about leadership roles they hold in professional development organizations from membership on committees to elected roles. The roles they are filling are at both state and national levels. In addition, focus group participants identified other benefits to their participation in professional development organizations. One agent spoke of the educational aspects. He said, “[I] have been to one in person national meeting, and it was great. I learned a lot of different aspects of Extension, and it was definitely worth the time.” Another agent spoke of the wealth of knowledge presented at national meetings. She said,

Professional associations? I joined the 4-H association early on at the state level. I haven't had much involvement nationally. I have attended some national conferences, but have not been a speaker or presenter. But I do enjoy those. They're very helpful. Sometimes it's a lot information. I've been to several conferences, where you just can't absorb everything you signed up for. You can't even attend, like after two days, you can't even walk into a workshop, because . . . it's a lot. Which is good, it's great. I'd love having all this information and bringing it home and if you got an extra week . . . [to] digest when you get back and be like will this be relevant, 'How do I tweak this to my local program?' is a good idea. How do I have this conversation with someone else to partner with but definitely getting involved with professional associations for the peer involvement, the discussion, the PD it's very, very helpful.

Another agent spoke about mini-grants provided through professional development organizations that support local programming as her only benefit. She said,

And so, I don't see any reason that a professional association in Extension is worth it. Except for you get the grant money -you know these mini grants, where I can actually invest in creating a program that will fit the needs of my organization, and that's really good, but you don't get anything for it. I mean it's not like I'm going to get a raise for it. It doesn't really mean anything outside of my community and to me personally. To have those mini grants, I mean I love watching the happiness and the success locally, and that is a personal thing.

Another agent spoke about how their FCS program provided them with networks and resources that allowed them to work with the community in areas beyond their subject matter expertise. He said,

But now I have gotten involved with [VEAFCS and NEAFCS] and at first, I felt very much like someone else had said - that I felt like food safety, because I was so specialized really didn't fall and I felt kind of isolated when I went to the FCS meetings, because they were covering so many things that didn't really have anything to do with what my target area was. But what I'm realizing now is that with a shortage of FCS agents, I'm wearing a lot more hats than just food safety because there's no one else to help folks with what they need. So, being in these organizations has really helped me and given me more resources, opened me up to be able to see a lot of other programming in other areas that's happening that maybe if I can't deliver it, maybe I can find somebody that can help me get it delivered for my communities. So, I think it's been a big help to be involved in those associations.

Building on the benefit associated with expanding networks, another agent saw the professional association as “a good way to network and bounce ideas off of each other.” One of the specialists spoke about the national connections she has developed through her interaction with NEA4HYDP.

### **Research Team Response**

Members of the research team felt mentors within VCE should promote participation in the professional associations. They acknowledged this approach may not reach specialists because of the sense that they were not receiving mentoring, and not always active in Extension professional development organizations. However, one member of the team shared how she secured support from administration and then made a personal ask of specialists, resulting in their long-term involvement in the professional association. She said,

You have to ask people. Because with the FCS conferences, I told my specialists. ‘I need you there. They're having a meeting for you all; we need you there.’ And I sent a letter to [the VCE Director] to make sure that it was okay, for them to go and they've been going ever since. Which helps us as an organization. Because they see some other good options that are out there that can help us grow in Virginia. But it's also - I'm like okay well they saw it is valuable so they're going. But you get what you put into it and yes, I have to spend a little bit of money, but it's like ‘okay I've got to spend some money to go to this conference. If I do A, B, and C, I can qualify for some funds from Extension to pay for some of that or from my association.’

### **Opportunities for ESP Support**

Focus group participants were asked how ESP might support them in their professional development outside their subject matter area. Participant responses were grouped into four different groups: contributing to a new vision for Cooperative Extension and its work, professional development around specific topics, personnel to support agents, and questions related to the value of ESP.

#### **Contributing to a new vision for Cooperative Extension and its work**

One of the agents in the focus groups suggested that within Virginia, ESP might provide for agents serving in the unit coordinator roles, since those cut across all program areas. Two other agents suggested using ESP to identify states that are doing things well to share knowledge and best practices. One agent said,

Because that's a national organization, if they can look into what state Extension programs have- systems that are working really well, and then help the ones that don't have good systems in place. I would just encourage the communications between the different land grant universities and Extension agencies, so that you know if somebody's got something that's working really well, we might get it shared across the nation and be able to make everybody in Extension work better together and not duplicate efforts.

Another agent suggested this could be done through trainings and webinars.

### **Professional development around specific topics**

Twelve topics were identified as areas in which ESP might provide professional development support. These are networking, leadership, communications, foreign language development, technology, grant writing, marketing, mentoring, inner-office relationships, professionalism, partnership development, and facilitation. One of the specialists talked about the opportunities ESP provides for networking at the national level. She said,

So definitely, because people like me, we need to have that kind of professional 'Here's how your career is supposed to progress' and the other thing I think potentially ESP association is – it's taken me five or six years to get to, because Extension is so national. Right? It's really national and you have colleagues nationally and we look towards other Extension services to see who's producing a really good curriculum that I love to bring to my state, and for this issue that we know we have. Those kinds of things are really important, but it takes a long time to establish those relationships. So, if we could have a way that there were Extension specialists or agents who've been around for a long time, who can really begin making connections for people in other states, new people coming on to say hey here's your program leader, for instance. I'm not even sure I still even know who our program leaders are right now. We have state programs but you've got these regional program meetings. And the leaders then go to those regional program meetings, and you can then meet the other state program leaders, for your areas of FCS state program leader in Georgia and Florida. And these are important people to know as we begin to try to do not just Extension work in our state, but we want to link into what else is happening nationally in my area. That's also important and we should also be all kind of working together so Extension can have a collective impact with our programming. So, I think that having that kind of mentorship where newly hired agents, but in particular specialists, get linked up with other seasoned specialists in other states that can say hey you need to be connected with this Extension group. And here's a person over here who's working in your same areas of interest you need to be connected with. I think that would be very helpful making those links and connections and what are the priorities happening in Extension nationally and then also, what are the meetings you ought to be going to and so to that end.

An agent talked about the opportunity to increase her leadership through ESP. She said, "I would like to grow leadership-wise, but those spots are already taken, and they will forever be taken. So, there's... I guess more national networking. I can grow other places - I just can't really grow a whole lot in Virginia."

Another agent suggested multiple topics including a resource for foreign language development. She said,

As far as how ESP could help support, again, echoing grant writing. Marketing. Even things with technology. A lot now with trying to do virtual experiences and that sort of thing and something else I wanted to throw in because I wasn't sure where else to put this in here, but even with foreign language development. So, we work with a lot of diverse audiences. And it is way more difficult than I think it should be to have materials translated and that sort of thing, and so, whether there was someone in each district, or something that we could have as a resource for that.

This agent emphasized need for professional development related to technology. She said,

Continue to offer professional development . . . Everybody has had to upend all of their programming and change it, and I don't know if it will all go back to the way it was before, or if we will find kind of a new area. You know, certainly the moving things online. That forced a lot of people out of their comfort zone. I think anything that they can do to support professional development and helping people to become - you know the younger generation tends to be more tech savvy and it comes easier. But a lot of us that are these mid-level career Extension, people are not so young. And so, sometimes even though you're pretty comfortable with technology, some of the new things that come on kind of happen faster than we can keep up with.

### **Personnel to support agents**

A unique response that came from an agent focused on providing personnel to support agents, whether that be specialists or students. Also interesting in this response is the agent's perspective on professional development. The agent said,

How might ESP support you and your professional development outside of your subject area? I do not know - folks have suggested more trainings and more professional development. [I] don't really think there's a lack of that. If anything, there's so much of it but I don't know. . . In Extension we sometimes have this problem where we're expected to be masters of everything. You should be a fundraiser expert. You should be a grant writing pro. You should know everybody in every part of your community and also be a great teacher and also be a great advocate and social media person and an amazing teammate. No person can be good at all those things, so you can train and train and train and train but you're still one person and you can't be expected to be good at all of those things so. Coming to another conclusion another strategy, other than trying to make Extension agents everything. Maybe that's more people. Maybe that's a specialist who will do your social media for you or help with needs assessment or give you a bunch of students who can do that. Yeah, reasonable expectations - we can't try to make our Extension agents superheroes. We're superheroes in our own worlds, but we need extra help.

### **Questions related to the value of ESP**

Finally, many respondents questioned the value of ESP. One agent said, "I don't feel like I personally would find value in it just because it's a larger organization and group." Another agent responded,

How might ESP support you? I don't know. I mean, for me, it's just another thing that's asking for my time, and I don't see the value. I'm sure it's great, and there are good things about it, but all of these professional organizations and associations nationally and statewide- I struggle to see how it benefits me in my role. And so, I tend not to do it unless someone tells me you really have to do this. I'm not just trying to be negative and say that they're pointless. In my three-and-a-half years I've learned the system, have learned where to invest my time, and I just haven't found that these areas are particularly helpful.

Another agent suggested that ESP might do more to help Extension professionals understand the value of membership in this and other professional development organizations. He said, "Helping to promote the value of these organizations. I think that would be helpful, especially for new agents understanding why should you be a member of these organizations."

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