Summary of Clemson Extension Operations Survey Responses (n=107)

In October 2014, the Clemson Extension Strategic Planning team surveyed Clemson Extension employees about issues related to Extension advocacy, staffing, and management. This is a summary of what we heard.

Choose which best fits your role with Clemson Extension:

- Regional Lead Agent: 11 (10%)
- County Coordinator: 17 (16%)
- Agent: 43 (40%)
- Specialist: 8 (7%)
- Program Assistant: 8 (7%)
- Administrative Assistant/Regional Business Center Employee: 20 (19%)

How satisfied are you with the timeliness and efficiency of work completed by your Regional Business Center (RBC)?

1: 2 (2%)
2: 2 (2%)
3: 4 (4%)
4: 5 (5%)
5: 5 (5%)
6: 2 (2%)
7: 10 (9%)
8: 14 (13%)
9: 23 (21%)
10: 40 (37%)

How convenient is it to use your RBC?

1: 3 (3%)
2: 3 (3%)
3: 4 (4%)
4: 3 (3%)
5: 10 (9%)
6: 1 (1%)
7: 9 (8%)
8: 21 (20%)
9: 25 (24%)
10: 27 (25%)
How satisfied are you with the manner in which your RBC resolves problems/disputes?

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If you had a choice between increasing the number of agents/county staff OR increasing the agent/county operating budget (copies, technology, travel, etc.), how would you make the allocation?

- All staff: 25 (23%)
- All operating: 11 (10%)
- Some of each: 62 (56%)
- Other: 9 (8%)

How important is it to you that there is a full time administrative assistant or program assistant in each county office?

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Describe up to 3 strategies to strengthen Extension advocacy efforts at the local level.

- Strengthen Extension advisory councils and program action committees.
- Explore the possibility of regional advisory councils.
- Improve internal and external communications via newsletters, press, etc.
- Maintain up-to-date advocacy listings.
- Advocacy personnel should attend county programs.
- Strengthen and maintain working relations with county councils, trade associations, and volunteer organizations.
- Improve public relations and branding of Extension.
- Staff all offices with administrative/program assistants.
- Improve advocacy training for employees.
- Strengthen 4-H programs in each county.
- Increase urban Extension programming.
- Only use advocates when actually needed (i.e. don’t overuse our supporters).
- Host open forums to educate the community about Extension and to listen to their needs.
- Develop best management practices (BMPs) for advocacy.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of a Regional Lead Agent (RLA) and/or County Coordinator (CC) in providing local/regional administrative leadership while also conducting programmatic duties.

Strengths
- Having programmatic responsibilities makes them more effective administrators because they understand how to run successful programs.
- Programming allows administrator to have a pulse on community/clientele needs.
- Works well when the right person (leader) is selected for the job.
- Reduces the administrative footprint of the organization (i.e. reduced administrative costs).
- Local/regional management is more effective than from campus-level.
- CC role is important for maintaining local contact.
- Provides career ladder/leadership opportunities for agents.
- Connections to regional and state issues.

Weaknesses
- There is a lack of management/leadership training for RLAs and CCs.
- The overall Extension management structure (i.e. chain of command) is not clearly understood.
- There is no mechanism for employees to evaluate their superiors.
- Programming can distract from administrative duties and vice-versa. Dilution of focus.
- Programs may become less effective.
- Workload and time management is a consistent concern.
- Inconsistent leadership proficiency across the state.
- Loss of talented agents to administrative roles.
- Evaluating programmatic peers.
- CC has no authority over local staff.
- Poor communication in some instances.
- Increased work stress.
- Positions are appointed, not applied for.
Bottomline - The RLA/CC model of management is considered functional by most, but there are enough perceived weaknesses to justify changes.

[For RLAs and CCs only] Would reducing or eliminating programmatic obligations improve your administrative effectiveness locally and/or regionally? If so, please explain.

- Responses were fairly evenly split.
- Seventeen said yes, reducing programming would improve their effectiveness.
  - This seems to be a bigger concern for RLAs than CCs.
  - They could better manage personnel, mentor new agents, develop partnerships, and focus on advocacy.
  - Some said that they often have to neglect one responsibility to address the other.
  - Many were concerned about programming voids if they gave up their programmatic obligations.
  - Some indicated that they would rather give up their administrative duties to focus on programming.
- Fourteen said no, reducing programming would not improve effectiveness.
  - In general, responses indicate that administrative duties in the CC role are not overly burdensome and that a CC can be effective programmatically.
  - Reducing programming responsibility was seen as a step back by some; to an earlier management system.
  - Some thought that the dual roles made for more effective administrators.

What are specific challenges associated with the current employee evaluation process and promotion structure within Extension?

- Administrative assistants do not have an adequate promotion ladder or performance-based incentives.
- Extension associates do not have a promotion ladder or documentable performance-based incentives.
- Agents do not have documentable performance-based incentives.
- EPMS and CUMIS are cumbersome and duplicative.
- Continuing education and in-service training opportunities are not incentivized.
- Evaluators are too often disconnected from work performed.
- Too much emphasis on self-evaluation.
- RLAs do not have enough say on evaluations/promotions.
- Credit for work accomplished on secondary program teams not weighted equally to primary team work.
- Added administrative duties decrease programmatic effectiveness of best agents.
- There are too many salary disparities.
- Inadequate process transparency and communication of expectations.

How can we improve the overall evaluation and promotion process at all levels of Extension and incentivize moving up the career ladder?

- Develop promotion ladders for administrative assistants and Extension associates.
- Develop documentable performance-based incentives across all positions.
• Increase agent promotion ladder pay values.
• Create performance incentives for part-time employees.
• Better communicate promotion opportunities.
• Develop consequences for non-performance.
• Create more non-administrative career ladder opportunities.
• Improve mentoring.
• Encourage goal-setting and career development planning for achievement.
• Integrate EPMS and CUMIS to streamline reporting and evaluation processes.
• Develop a real-time program/impact reporting system.
• Better incentivize continuing education and in-service training participation, and advanced degree and certificate attainment.
• Train employees how to properly prepare evaluation and promotion documents.
• Clearly explain expectations to all employees and improve process transparency.
• Evaluators should observe agent programs.
• Make sure past performance evaluations are tied to promotions.
• Reward innovation, cooperation and teamwork.
• Recognize work conducted across multiple program teams in evaluation and promotion processes.
• Enhance non-monetary performance rewards (accolades, awards, etc.) to increase morale and pride in the workplace.

Does the current RLA/CC management structure effectively handle county and regional personnel issues (office staffing, conflict resolution, budgeting, advocacy, etc.)?
• Fifty-three (53) responded “yes”, 26 responded “no”, 23 responded “sometimes” or “maybe”, and five were undecided.
• Recurring positive comments included that RLAs and CCs are effective because they still conduct programming and that the system functions when everyone works together.
• Recurring negative comments included that programmatic activities interfere with RLAs’ administrative responsibilities and some concerns with individual management styles.
• Another concern is that employees do not have a method to evaluate their RLAs and CCs and provide feedback on their performance.
• Consistent concerns revolved around communication issues including:
  o Lack of RLA involvement in their counties.
  o Inadequate attention to office staffing by CCs.
  o Lack of RLA/CC authority.
  o Ineffective advocacy.
  o Budget process and accounts issues.
• Better communication is needed to clarify roles of RLAs and CCs.
• Workload is a challenge for both RLAs and CCs.
• The overall impression given by these responses is that the RLA/CC model is mostly effective, but improvements could be made.

Please describe the strengths and weaknesses of Clemson Extension’s current management structure and provide constructive comments and suggestions for its improvement.

Strengths
• General appreciation for the opportunity to provide input (via this survey).
• Extension has been able to remain productive and efficient despite resource limitations.
• The program team model works.
• General fondness for Dr. Dobbins and optimism about the future of Extension.

Weaknesses
• Internal and external communication is poor.
• Workload is excessive for most, but especially for RLAs.
• There are too few administrative assistants.
• Opportunities for promotion and advancement are limited.
• There is too little transparency relating to promotions, budgeting, and policies.
• Training and mentorship is lacking.
• Program teams do not work together enough.

Suggestions for Improvement
• Administrative assistants in every county.
• Better communication and transparency.
• Increase opportunities for advancement at all levels of Extension.
• Increase collaboration between program teams.
• Reduce RLA workload.
• Hire more agents.
• Reward employees via competitive pay, accolades and encouragement.
• Make all program assistants full time.
• Have fewer RLAs with less programmatic responsibility.
• Have more RLAs with fewer counties to administrate.
• Do away with RLAs and give CCs those responsibilities (county-based management).
• Make regional business center operations more consistent.
• Use new technologies (social media) to improve internal communications.
• Revise/update policy and administrative manuals and make more user-friendly.
• Increase travel funds.
• Increase program funds.
• Better define roles and responsibilities.
• Do a better job of engaging communities, advisory committees, and other stakeholders.