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This paper reports on a three-year initiative to enhance the undergraduate Extension Education minor at a state land-grant university. Specific initiatives to improve the undergraduate Extension Education minor curriculum involved (a) revising the Extension Education minor due to varied curriculum and faculty changes and (b) aligning eight Extension Education courses' units of study with Extension professional competency domains. The described processes helped understand the Extension Education curriculum by mapping competency domains and showing which domains were and were not taught in the eight courses. A key recommendation is to incorporate the alignment of Extension Education curriculum and Extension professional competencies into the Extension summer internship program, among other uses. Furthermore, it is recommended that faculty engage in a similar effort to map college curricula to professional competencies to ensure that academic minors have a clear purpose in preparing students for careers.

Keywords: undergraduates, Extension Education minor, Extension professional competency domains

Introduction

An academic minor provides several benefits to undergraduate students and college/university academic departments. Namely, the minor can support undergraduate students' development of professional interests while also helping academic departments enhance the visibility of the program and/or increase student enrollment in the related courses (Keefe, 2006). An Extension Education academic minor is important for preparing students for the varied work experiences characterized by Extension, which includes recruiting, educating, and utilizing volunteers; needs assessment, program planning, and evaluation; and direct teaching to youth and adults (Gutter & Stephenson, 2016; Russell et al., 2018). North Carolina State University (NC State) offers a minor in Extension Education, open to all undergraduate students. The minor's course catalog description includes

“...especially appropriate for students enrolled in agricultural, natural resource, and nutrition majors and/or those students who are interested in careers with the Cooperative Extension Service or other nonformal educational/community outreach organizations. Students completing a minor in Extension Education will become familiar with the organization, structure, and mission of Cooperative Extension; the planning and delivery of nonformal educational programs; the management and leadership of volunteers; communication media and technology; and leadership theory, principles, and skills” (North Carolina State University, n.d.).

Harder et al. (2021) recommended college/university academic departments evaluate their curriculum so that students develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to obtain and advance in their careers. Curriculum planning scholars and practitioners emphasize starting with the identification of competencies and outcomes for students’ achievement (Newcomb et al., 2004; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). Commensurate with this curriculum planning recommendation, instructors for college Extension Education courses may ask, “What are the Extension professional competencies students need for a successful Extension career?”

Research has determined a number of Extension education competencies are needed in formal coursework. While many competencies may be developed and refined in actual job experiences, research has shown that Florida Extension Agents perceive self-management, program development, communication, interpersonal, technical/subject matter expertise, and teaching as pre-entry Extension professional competencies most needed (Benge et al., 2011). In addition, the Ohio State University faculty mapped Extension Education core competencies – such as technology, marketing and public relations; diversity; risk management; and theories of human development and learning – with their Extension Education courses (Scheer et al., 2006).

Extension professional competency domains, and the instruction for students to develop these competencies, are important for the 19 land-grant universities offering Extension Education minors, majors, and advanced degree specializations (Narine et al., 2018). Donaldson and Vaughan (2022) conducted a scoping study to summarize the Extension professional competency domains that research identified as essential for Extension professionals in the United States. This scoping study identified 15 Extension professional competency domains from 37 studies of United States Extension professionals: communication; diversity and cultural competence; flexibility; interpersonal relations; knowledge of Extension; leadership; professionalism; program planning and evaluation; resource management; subject matter competence; teaching methodology and delivery; technology; thinking and problem-solving; understanding community needs, and volunteer management. The Extension professional competency domains and descriptions from Donaldson and Vaughan (2022) provided the framework that undergirded this curriculum alignment initiative (see Table 1).

Table 1. Extension Professional Competency Definitions (Donaldson & Vaughan, 2022)

Competency	Definition
Communication	Communicating openly in both verbal (written and oral) and non-verbal ways with Extension personnel, volunteers, clients, and the community in a variety of situations
Diversity and Cultural Competence	Creating appropriate materials and participating in appropriate practices to promote and show respect to diverse audiences and cultures
Flexibility	Demonstrating adaptability in behavior and methods to accommodate various circumstances
Interpersonal Relations	Working effectively with others and demonstrating positive human relations, open exchange of ideas, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence
Knowledge of Extension	Understanding the organizational system, mission, values, policies, procedures, and partners of the Cooperative Extension system
Leadership	Facilitating organizational and personal development using leadership principles and skills
Professionalism	Operating in a timely and ethical manner through self-directed efforts; delivering effectual customer service
Program Planning and Evaluation	Preparing and organizing the design, methods, goals, and evaluation of programs based on the needs of the clientele
Resource Management	Acquiring and allocating resources for all job duties
Subject Matter Competence	Having and using knowledge of a particular subject matter to apply to real-life situations and in conducting programs
Teaching Methodology and Delivery	Using the appropriate styles and resources in educational programming to instruct a variety of ages appropriately
Technology	Continuing to incorporate technology into programs appropriately and effectively
Thinking and Problem Solving	Applying critical and creative techniques to thinking in order to understand and solve problems
Understanding Community Needs	Evaluating the behavior and changes of society which will influence program development and needs
Volunteer Management	Selection, recruitment, development, management, engagement, and recognition of volunteers

This paper reports on a three-year initiative to enhance the undergraduate Extension Education minor at NC State. Our efforts to improve the undergraduate Extension Education minor curriculum involved (a) revising the Extension Education minor due to varied curriculum and faculty changes and (b) aligning the Extension Education courses' units of study with Extension

professional competency domains. Furthermore, we describe how this process helped us evaluate the Extension Education curriculum by understanding the extent to which competencies were (and were not) taught across the courses, thereby identifying gaps to be addressed.

Changes to the Extension Education Minor

In fall 2019, NC State faculty in the Agricultural and Extension Education undergraduate program introduced changes to the Extension Education minor. Three issues precipitated the need to update the Extension Education minor. First, a number of courses had not been offered in several semesters, with no plans to teach the courses in the future. Those courses were youth leadership development and general courses in leadership.

Second, the Extension Education minor requirements included some general computer applications and communications courses that students were already taking as part of their majors. Yet, Extension professional competencies (Donaldson & Vaughan, 2022) were not a substantial portion of the course content for these courses as they were taught to a vast array of academic majors with little tie-in or context for Extension Education. We removed five courses from the Extension Education minor, which focused on either broad computer applications or leadership development.

Third, we desired to enhance students' professional Extension and industry work experiences. Agricultural and Extension Education faculty and Extension professionals have prioritized practical experiences among college students as paramount for developing future Extension professionals (Donaldson et al., 2022). A Delphi study of one university's Extension education faculty viewed county Extension experience via internships and job shadowing as rudimentary to an Extension Education degree program (Harder et al., 2021). Additionally, in a study of 30 Extension interns in North Carolina, the percentage of interns who were very or extremely interested in pursuing a career in Extension increased from 36% before the internship to 68% after the internship (Donaldson et al., 2020). In the revised Extension Education minor curriculum, we recognized academic credit for practicums taking place in Extension County Centers, Research and Education Centers, government agencies, and other organizations. Recognition and enhancement of practical work experiences were important for developing well-rounded Extension professionals.

It is noteworthy that the faculty were familiar with all of the courses taught due to the NC State University faculty peer review. As faculty appraise the curriculum and teaching of fellow faculty, they subsequently develop a greater understanding of the curricula within and beyond their departments. The faculty was comfortable selecting courses to remove, keep, or add to the Extension Education minor. Previously, the Extension Education minor listed 14 courses, and students completed three required courses and three elective courses for 18 credit hours. The revised minor had nine courses listed with two required courses, and students selected either an

internship or three elective courses for 15 credit hours. The 2019-2020 academic year was the inaugural year for the revised Extension Education minor requirements.

Alignment of Extension Professional Competency Domains with Course Curricula

Of the five faculty teaching the revised Extension Education minor, one taught three courses, one taught two courses, and the remainder taught one course each in the revised minor. The five faculty also had extensive Extension Education experience. In fact, of the five faculty, three currently serve as Extension specialists, three have county-based Extension professional experience, and all have mentored graduate student studies in Extension Education. The faculty aligned Extension professional competency domains with course curricula through three major collaborative tasks: (a) review the Extension professional competency domains and descriptions from Donaldson and Vaughan (2022), (b) review course outcomes, course units of study, and curricula, and (c) discuss how to align courses with Extension professional competency domains.

The faculty agreed that individual instructors would appraise their own course units of study (course topics) using the Extension professional competency domains and definitions. As an illustration, the AEE 230, Introduction to Cooperative Extension course has 11 units of study that the instructor aligned with five Extension professional competency domains.

- The Knowledge of Extension competency domain was addressed by all 11 units of study: Land-Grant and Extension Historical Overview; The Scope of Cooperative Extension; Origins of Extension Work; Organization, Structure, and Administration; Programs Areas in Extension; Extension Educational Programming; Teaching and Learning in Extension; Evaluating Extension Programs; Management of Volunteer Programs; Extension Advisory Councils; and Extension Experiences Around the World.
- The Program Planning and Evaluation competency domain aligned with two units of study: Evaluating Extension Programs and Extension Advisory Councils.
- Five units of study addressed the Understanding Community Needs competency domain: Programs Areas in Extension, Extension Educational Programming; Teaching and Learning in Extension; Evaluating Extension Programs; and Extension Advisory Councils.
- The Volunteer Management competency domain aligned with the unit of study of the same name.

The faculty created two matrices – one matrix aligns Extension professional competency domains with the required courses (Table 2), and another matrix has the elective courses (Table 3). The numbers in each matrix cell denote the number of units of study in the course that support the Extension professional competency domain. The goal of the matrices was to inform faculty in curriculum planning and to support students in understanding the coursework.

Table 2. Alignment of Major Extension Competencies and Undergraduate Extension Education Required Courses

Required Courses and Description (Credit Hours)	Extension Professional Competency Domains														
	Communication	Diversity and Cultural Competence	Flexibility	Interpersonal Relations	Knowledge of Extension	Leadership	Professionalism	Program Planning and Evaluation	Resource Management	Subject Matter Competence	Teaching Methodology and Delivery	Technology	Thinking and Problem-Solving	Understanding Community Needs	Volunteer Management
AEE 230, Introduction to Cooperative Extension (3) provides an introduction to the Cooperative Extension mission, philosophy, history, organization, structure, administration, program areas, program development, extension teaching and delivery methods, and volunteer management.	0	1	0	0	11	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	5	1
AEE 325, Planning and Delivering Nonformal Education (3) encompasses adult learning theory and practice, preparing and managing budgets, planning programs, methods of instructional delivery, effective use of instructional technology, marketing educational programs, teaching, and outcome evaluation – all in the context of nonformal education.	4	0	0	3	0	2	4	8	4	0	9	1	3	3	2

Note. The numbers in each cell denote the number of units of study in the course that align with the Extension professional competency domain. Shading indicates limited representation of Extension professional competency domains in the curriculum.

Table 3. Alignment of Major Extension Competencies and Undergraduate Extension Education Elective Courses

Elective Courses and Description (Credit Hours)	Extension Professional Competency Domains														
	Communication	Diversity and Cultural Competence	Flexibility	Interpersonal Relations	Knowledge of Extension	Leadership	Professionalism	Program Planning and Evaluation	Resource Management	Subject Matter Competence	Teaching Methodology and Delivery	Technology	Thinking and Problem-Solving	Understanding Community Needs	Volunteer Management
AEE 206, Introduction to Teaching Agriculture (3) introduces teaching agricultural education in middle and secondary schools and collaborative efforts for teaching agricultural education to adults as rural community situations dictate.	5	0	0	2	0	2	2	5	0	3	5	1	2	2	0
AEE 323, Leadership in Agriculture and Life Sciences (3) covers leadership theory to understand leadership potential, the potential of others, and the impact great leadership can have on people, organizations, and society.	14	7	7	13	0	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	0	0
AEE 433, Volunteer Management (3) prepares students to be effective managers of volunteer programs, and topics include volunteer theories, recruitment, training, evaluation, and reward.	5	4	1	4	3	3	2	4	1	0	1	1	2	1	12
AEE 435, Professional Presentations in Agricultural Organizations (3) teaches effective listening strategies, communication strategies, interpersonal skills, and presentation strategies essential for food, agricultural, natural resources, and other professions.	9	3	3	1	2	3	2	0	2	4	4	4	5	2	0

Elective Courses and Description (Credit Hours)	Extension Professional Competency Domains														
	Communication	Diversity and Cultural Competence	Flexibility	Interpersonal Relations	Knowledge of Extension	Leadership	Professionalism	Program Planning and Evaluation	Resource Management	Subject Matter Competence	Teaching Methodology and Delivery	Technology	Thinking and Problem-Solving	Understanding Community Needs	Volunteer Management
AEE 460, Leadership in Organizations (3) focuses on the impact of effective leadership in organizations in both theory and practice, and topics include decision-making, management of organizations, and ethical leadership.	2	7	2	1	0	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0
AEE 478, Advanced Issues in Extension Education (3) examines complex issues and trends contributing to the administration, organization, and structure of Extension Education in a changing world.	1	2	0	1	4	5	5	3	0	0	2	0	3	4	1

Note. The numbers in each cell denote the number of units of study in the course that align with the Extension professional competency domain. Shading indicates a potential lack of representation of Extension professional competency domains in the curriculum.

On the matrices, we did not include AEE 423, Practicum in Agricultural Extension/Organization (8 credit hours), nor AEE 491, Seminar in Agricultural and Extension Education (1 credit hour). These courses are co-requisites, completed through work experiences in Extension County Centers, Research and Education Centers, government agencies, and other organizations. As a practicum experience, these courses provide pragmatic, actual job experiences emphasizing all of the Extension professional competencies. In the AEE 491 seminar course, undergraduates present seminars to describe their practicum experiences, including work experiences, lessons learned, career development, and professional networking.

The matrices showed that the required and elective courses were complementary. The required courses lacked coverage in diversity and cultural competence, flexibility, and leadership, and the elective courses provided multiple units of study in these competency domains. Correspondingly, the elective courses lacked coverage in knowledge of Extension, resource management, and understanding community needs – competencies covered in the required courses. Across the required and elective courses, the matrices showed few units of study supporting the Extension professional competencies in subject matter competence and technology.

Discussion, Recommendations, and Implications

An Extension Education minor is an important complement for numerous undergraduate majors. The changes to the minor described here, and efforts to align course content with Extension professional competencies have been effective tools for increasing enrollment. In 2018, three undergraduates were enrolled in the Extension Education minor; in 2022, 23 undergraduates were enrolled in the minor, an 87% increase over three years.

An important NC State frame of reference is necessary to understand and implement a similar initiative at other institutions fully. First, the faculty were familiar with all of the courses taught as NC State has substantial faculty peer review policies whereby faculty appraise the curriculum and teaching of fellow faculty. Consequently, the faculty was comfortable discerning those courses to remove, keep, or add to the Extension Education minor. Second, the faculty had extensive Extension experience, including serving as county Extension agents and state specialists and mentoring graduate students in Extension Education studies. This first-hand experience was valuable for making curriculum decisions. Future alignment initiatives may seek this experience and the involvement of county Extension professionals to offer additional insights.

As shown by the matrices, we lack coverage across our Extension Education required courses for the diversity and cultural competence domain. However, we do have coverage for this domain in the elective courses. Moreover, it is important to consider the overall curriculum requirements. NC State undergraduates are required to complete one course to meet the University's United States Diversity requirement. The requirement engages students in understanding how issues of privilege, oppression, power, and responsibility influence diverse individuals and communities

(North Carolina State Office of Undergraduate Courses, Curricula, and Academic Standards, 2021). This effort to consider Extension professional competency domains and curricula has encouraged us to explore re-designing one or more courses to meet the United States Diversity requirement while building Extension professional competencies. Currently, our department offers a course on teaching diverse learners in agricultural education. Faculty are reviewing course content to see if this or a similar course should be an Extension Education minor elective. The teaching diverse learners in agricultural education course utilizes service learning to provide students the opportunity to engage with individuals with varying abilities and enhance their teaching and outreach skills. The university also offers a certificate program for students entitled Developing Cultural Competence (DCC). The DCC program uses facilitated workshops and virtual international student exchanges to improve cultural competence and cross-cultural awareness while promoting and implementing strategies for increased cultural awareness in personal and professional settings. This program could be a professional development experience that is required or highly encouraged as part of the Extension Education minor.

Furthermore, as shown by the matrices, we lack coverage across our Extension Education courses for the Extension professional competency domain of technology and resource management. However, it must be reiterated that the mapping only occurred between course topics and Extension professional competencies. A next step could be reviewing course assignments to determine how technology competencies are embedded. For example, assignments might require students to demonstrate proficiency in a variety of software for creating fact sheets, preparing budget proposals, developing and disseminating presentations, teaching online, and designing data visualizations to communicate Extension program impact. Additionally, students could document their use of technology during Extension internships.

The instructor for the practicum (AEE 423) and seminar (AEE 491) courses also provides professional development to the state's County Extension Directors supervising Extension interns. In the future, this professional development will emphasize to County Extension Directors the competencies that students have developed through successful course completion as well as those competencies that receive limited attention (specifically, technology and resource management) in formal coursework. In turn, we expect County Extension Directors supervising interns to be intentional about work assignments to develop and apply their Extension professional competencies. Additionally, knowledge of the competencies embedded in the minor allows for a common language between university faculty and Extension professionals when discussing students' strengths and/or weaknesses for an internship or professional position. Likewise, the alignments between Extension professional competencies and college coursework should prove useful to Extension staff development professionals and middle managers who provide substantial professional development so that Extension's frontline professionals stay on the cutting edge.

We suggest additional research for understanding the role of competencies and course alignment in the students' professional development. For example, it would be helpful to compare NC State Extension Summer Internship Program applicant resumes – before and after this Extension Education course change – to determine if students are listing education in these competency domains on their resumes. With this added knowledge, course instructors can also intentionally bring attention to the competencies introduced and reinforced through class content and assignments. Furthermore, we suggest additional research with Extension professionals to assess the worthiness of our Extension Education minor for succeeding as an Extension professional. Research is warranted to fully understand Extension internships and what competencies are emphasized in Extension internship experiences.

Anecdotally, this three-year initiative has spurred an ongoing discussion among our faculty regarding how we can best equip students to succeed as Extension professionals. Questions we are considering: How does research define flexibility in the workplace, and how will we intentionally teach flexibility? Is flexibility a professional competency domain best learned in the classroom, in on-the-job experiences, via onboarding and other University professional learning activities, and/or in Extension professional associations? We suggest that a similar project among departmental faculty may be useful for stimulating these and other important questions and catalyzing student success in the Extension professional competency domains. Yet, this initiative emphasizes important considerations for college faculty in all disciplines offering academic minors. Namely, it is important that academic minors have a clear purpose in the overall college curriculum, especially in preparing students for careers. Faculty should collaborate on instructional planning and similar matrices to ensure quality curricula.

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