Five-Year Review of the Foundations Onboarding Program for the UGA Cooperative Extension

Virginia Brown

Kristi Farner

Five-Year Review of the Foundations Onboarding Program for the UGA Cooperative Extension

Virginia Brown
Kristi Farner
University of Georgia

This paper examines the successes and opportunities for improvement of a comprehensive professional development program at a state land-grant university. The Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) recognizes turnover and retention as a systemic issue further compounded by heavy workloads and low salaries. According to the Motivation-Hygiene Theory, job satisfaction can increase when motivating factors, such as personal development opportunities, are implemented. Created over two decades ago, the University of Georgia's Foundations program has been part of its onboarding process that provides agents and educators with the knowledge and skill development for success in their roles. Since 2016, it has largely targeted the same content for each new cohort of educators. While immediate post-evaluations have been conducted, no longitudinal effort existed to look at how well the program worked in preparing agents for their roles. A 5-year retrospective study was developed to examine the perceived success, as well as determine any potential areas that need knowledge and skill development. This article discusses both the agent's and administrator's perspectives on how well it prepared them for success. Additional trainings to address emergent issues are explored, and recommendations on how Extension can better prepare agents for success are made.

Keywords: onboarding, competencies, training

Introduction

In today's workplaces, employee retention is a primary concern of employers (Carucci, 2018), especially as unemployment rates approach 50-year lows (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). As revealed in a recent Gallup roundtable discussion, competition for talent was the top concern of the world's largest organizations, compounded by a shift in successful approaches to attracting and retaining talent due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Barry, 2022).

Another persistent concern specific to the educational outreach mission of Cooperative Extension is a gap in community services due to employee turnover, which often leads to added workloads and stress for the remaining staff (Baysinger & Mobley, 1982). The Leadership Advisory Council of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges'

Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) recognized Extension agent retention as a systemic and critical challenge, attributable in part to low salaries and increased workload (ECOP, 2005). Since increasing salaries is not always an option due to budget restraints, attention to onboarding training and practices could help reduce turnover (Brodeur et al., 2011), which has been found to be the highest among new employees (Allen, 2006). Specifically, it is important to examine standardized onboarding practices when studying and addressing employee turnover and retention (Carucci, 2018).

This study examined the formal organization-wide onboarding program for the University of Georgia (UGA) Cooperative Extension. We focused on training sessions required for all Extension agents (county-based faculty) and educators (county-based professional staff). Most new Extension agents are also new employees to the organization; however, in our study, there was a small subset of existing employees who were changing roles within the organization. The number of new agent and educator hires entering the onboarding process ranged from 18 to 35 people annually from 2017 to 2021.

Onboarding Training and Development Linkages to Turnover and Retention

Turnover and retention have been studied around onboarding training and development. One explanation for employee satisfaction/dissatisfaction level is supported by the Motivation-Hygiene Theory, which focuses on motivating factors (Herzberg, 1968). This theory has been used in the context of Extension when exploring burnout (Benge et al., 2015; Windon, 2019) and retention (Benge & Beattie, 2021; Feldhues & Tanner, 2017). Motivation-Hygiene Theory suggests while job satisfaction increases due to motivating factors (e.g., personal growth opportunities, accomplishment, appreciation, characteristics of work, and career progression), job dissatisfaction levels decrease independently due to hygiene factors (e.g., salary, policies, employee relations).

One motivating factor used often in Cooperative Extension is personal and professional growth opportunities for faculty and staff. For example, Texas Extension has attributed its relatively low turnover rate to its comprehensive staff training program as well as professional development opportunities that provide employees with tools for high performance (University of Texas, 1999). Onboarding professional development utilizes competencies and learning objectives to support agents' and educators' ability to contribute to the community. In fact, Chandler (2004) found that contribution to the community was one of the most important retention factors for county agents. Benge et al. (2015) found that agents attributed a revised onboarding process to reduced turnover. Robertson (2022) found that 4-H agents in the southern region of the United States perceived organizational support as being connected to turnover intention, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Likewise, Jayaratne et al. (2021) found that 89% of early-career 4-H educators either *strongly agreed* or *somewhat agreed* that participating in professional development training was an effective strategy for addressing the challenges they were facing.

Previous research has highlighted the consequences of employees leaving an organization, including loss of productivity and an inequitable reallocation of work (Byerly, 2012; Pinkovitz et al., 1997). Effective onboarding has been shown to have significant impacts on retention and employee engagement (Jiwanlai, 2014; Palmer-Roberts, 2020). The current study focused on the influence of Cooperative Extension employees' perceptions of the formal onboarding process on retention in the organization. Retention is one aspect of employee engagement, defined as a state in which employees are wholehearted about their performance, feel proud to be associated with the organization, and therefore make intentional efforts to contribute to its success (Bakhru & Sharma, 2022; Jiwanlai, 2014). Additionally, engagement has been connected to higher retention and lower rates of missed work (Bakhru & Sharma, 2022; Bakker et al., 2005; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Other state Cooperative Extension systems have examined aspects of onboarding, such as needs assessments for creating onboarding plans and cost-benefit analyses of programs. For instance, Virginia Cooperative Extension conducted a 2020 study to inform the development of an organizational effectiveness plan that included developing an onboarding program (Vines et al., 2021). Researchers with Florida Cooperative Extension created a formula for calculating the return on investment (ROI) to determine if the cost of professional development programs is indeed a sound investment (Harder et al., 2017). A study of the Oregon Cooperative Extension found that training opportunities were limited from the perspective of field faculty (Knight, 2020). In addition, Extension program leaders in the western United States created an online resource for recruitment and onboarding in an attempt to increase recruitment and retention for their organizations (Angima & Carroll, 2019).

The current study adds to the body of knowledge related to onboarding processes by examining the perspectives of district administrators in conjunction with field faculty/educators who experienced a formal onboarding program between 2017 and 2021. The study also contributes insights into the timing of content delivery and experiences within the program.

UGA Extension's Formal Onboarding Program

According to the UGA Cooperative Extension (2022) website, "We translate science of everyday living for farmers, families and communities to foster a healthy and prosperous Georgia" (para. 3). UGA Extension serves all 159 counties in Georgia in the areas of agricultural and environmental sciences, 4-H youth development, and family and consumer sciences.

At UGA, those whose primary role is to deliver community-based education are divided into two categories: agents and educators. Agents are required to have a minimum of a master's degree and to develop, lead, and evaluate programs. Educators are required to hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree and to teach in the community, and they are supervised by agents. Administrators include program development coordinators (PDCs), program leaders, deans, and

district directors; these positions are tasked with overseeing field personnel and ensuring that they meet the Extension-related educational needs of Georgians.

At the time of this study, UGA Extension onboarding consisted of multiple components based on the role of the new Extension employee, including welcome packets on their desk for their first day of employment, introductory email to the district or state, assigned mentor(s), and university required trainings. The most substantial part of the onboarding experience was the Extension-specific sessions referred to as the Foundations Training Program (Foundations). Based on internal records, the onboarding training for UGA Cooperative Extension agents was established in 2001, with onboarding for educators added in 2019. The program's training sessions and delivery methods have evolved over the years. The first year of the program included one multi-day, in-person training session; however, over time, as the standardization of technical expertise and foundational knowledge of organizational policies, procedures, and protocols became more complex, the program grew into a robust strategic collection of onboarding orientation trainings comprised of several synchronous and asynchronous components at the state and district levels. Based on current research (Knight, 2020) as well as informal personal discussions at regional and national meetings, UGA Extension's onboarding program has the most training sessions, including face-to-face sessions, compared with other states.

The Foundations onboarding program included synchronous and asynchronous trainings situated within a competency-based model adhering to practices in the field. The hope is that a strong onboarding experience leads to increased retention of employees performing quality work and having a positive impact within the communities they serve.

Between 2017 and 2022, the Foundations Training Program encompassed a combination of asynchronous and synchronous training sessions delivered virtually and in person. Each agent or educator completed a core group of mandatory state-level trainings in addition to district- and county-level trainings and checklists (i.e., task lists for new employees to complete). Of the nine statewide sessions, four were asynchronous, online trainings (Youth and Risk Management; Introduction to Extension; Policies, Procedures, and Protocols; and County Funds Policies), and four were synchronous, in-person experiences (Foundations I; Foundations II; Foundations of Communications; and Basics of Youth Development), excepting the transition to full online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators typically did not take the second part of Foundations I, Foundations II, or program-area trainings. Figure 1 illustrates a roadmap of the sessions offered in the Foundations Training Program.

Figure 1. Foundations Training Program Roadmap (Agent Onboarding)
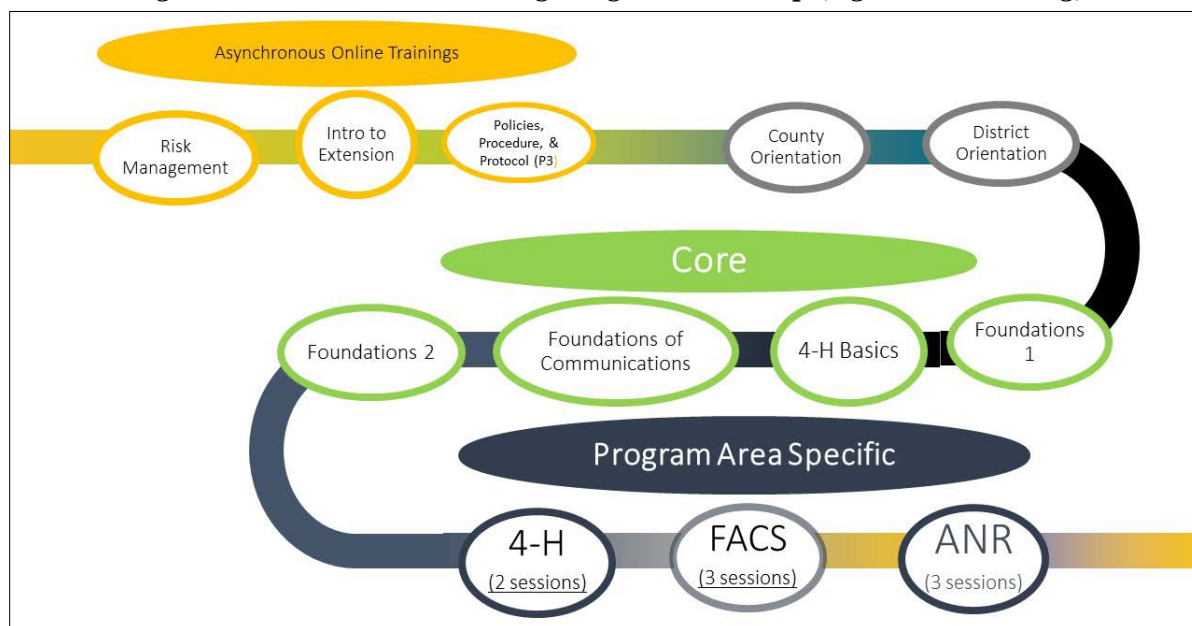
The exact sequence of statewide synchronous onboarding training sessions was determined by the employee's start date in this role and program area. Ideally, the sequence would begin with Foundations I, Basics of Youth Development, Foundations of Communications, and Foundations II, with programmatic trainings spread across these core sessions. If too many trainings occurred in the same month, the programmatic training became the priority.

In 2017, the new program and staff development specialist and Extension Southern Region Program Leaders Network (PLN) committee on program and staff development reviewed the main synchronous sessions of the onboarding process and identified core competencies (Program & Staff Development Committee, 2018). This review led to the creation of a detailed roadmap of sessions and facilitator notes, including competencies for each core session for UGA Extension. The roadmap offered greater transparency to instructors regarding the strategic planning and sequencing of sessions for the purposes of sustainability and maintaining rigor. Ten competencies informed the construction of content for the sessions: (1) program planning and development; (2) teaching and learning; (3) program evaluation; (4) application of subject-matter expertise; (5) developing a professional reputation (agent only); (6) Extension organization and administration; (7) external linkages; (8) volunteer development; (9) professionalism; and (10) communication and marketing.

Competencies

Russ-Eft (1995) defined *competencies* as "core elements in a periodic table of human behavior" (p. 329). McClelland (1973) noted that using competencies in the workplace was originally an alternative to relying on intelligence assessments for predicting job success. In Cooperative Extension training and development, competencies have been utilized in a variety of ways. Atiles

(2019) explained that "across the nation, various state-level Cooperative Extension Services have worked toward instituting competency-based education for their Extension educators, administrators, volunteers, and facilitators, among others" (p. 109). Dostilio (2017) also applied competencies related to knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions to community engagement professionals who work with Cooperative Extension systems. Atiles (2019) built on this work to include competencies such as "knowledge of the relevance of diversity of partnering communities," "ab[ility] to cultivate collaborative activities between faculty, staff, students with Cooperative Extension," and "understand[ing] the power structures behind the diversity and implicit bias issues present in the community and Extension system" (p. 155) to broaden the scope of competency trainings. Table 1 shows how each asynchronous core training session connected with competencies, and Table 2 demonstrates how each synchronous core training session is connected with the same competencies.

Table 1. Asynchronous Core Training Sessions and Competencies

Competency	Training Session			
	Youth & Risk Management	Policies, Procedures, & Protocols	County Funds Policy	Intro to Extension
1: Program Planning and Development				
2: Teaching and Learning				
3: Program Evaluation				
4: Application of Subject-Matter Expertise				
5: Developing a Professional Reputation (agent only)	x	x	x	x
6: Extension Organization and Administration		x		x
7: External Linkages	x		x	
8: Volunteer Development				
9: Professionalism	x	x	x	x
10: Communication and Marketing				x

Table 2. Synchronous Core Training Sessions and Competencies

Competency	Training Session			
	Foundations I	**Basics of Youth Development**	**Foundations of Communications**	**Foundations II**
1: Program Planning and Development		x	x	x
2: Teaching and Learning	x	x	x	x
3: Program Evaluation				x
4: Application of Subject Matter Expertise				
5: Developing a Professional Reputation (agent only)	x		x	
6: Extension Organization and Administration	x			
7: External Linkages		x	x	x
8: Volunteer Development				
9: Professionalism	x		x	
10: Communication and Marketing	x		x	

The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of the timing and content of trainings within the onboarding program by new employees and administrators. There were three overarching objectives of the study. They were to:

1. gather feedback from the field on how well the Foundations program prepared them to develop programs that meet community needs;
2. explore administrator perceptions of its ability to develop and/or enhance professional competencies needed for success in the organization; and,
3. determine how the program can be enhanced to meet the emerging needs of our communities.

Methods

Creation of the Survey

The Foundations Training Program seeks to prepare agents and educators to be effective in their jobs by helping them meet learning objectives. This study examined the impact of the UGA Foundations courses at the agent/educator and administrator levels. As the findings revealed, both agent/educators and administrators held different viewpoints on the success of the program in preparing field personnel for success.

To disseminate the survey, a letter was drafted describing the survey's intent. For the group comprising agents and educators, the letter was sent (by the appropriate District Director) to those who had started in 2016 or later. For the administrator group, the Dean of Cooperative Extension sent the letter asking for administrators' feedback.

The first section of the survey detailed the survey's purpose and how the gathered information would be used. Depending upon the individual's position in the organization, they were asked different questions. Figure 2 shows the survey path logic.

Figure 2. Survey Path Logic
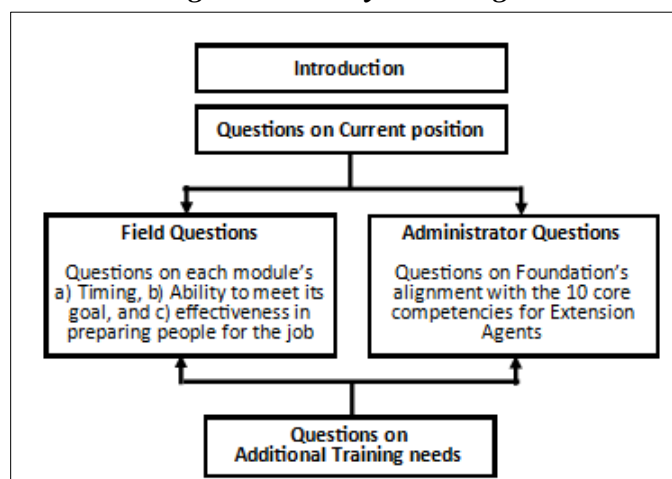
This was followed by a section in which respondents provided their start date and current position within the organization; based on their responses, they were directed to answer questions related to that specific position. Agents and educators were asked to provide the month and year they had started their position. The survey also sought additional information about each individual's preferred learning style.

After completing the first part of the survey, agents and educators were shown the visual Foundations Roadmap, followed by questions about each course in the order the respondent would have completed them. The goals and objectives of each course were listed. Respondents were then asked to rate the Foundations course on three metrics: (a) whether the course met its stated goals and objectives, (b) whether the course was offered during the appropriate timeframe, and (c) how effective the course was in preparing them for their role. The first question used a dichotomous form of yes or no. If no was selected, a follow-up question was provided, asking the respondent to explain why and how this could be addressed. The second question used a 3-point Likert scale of 1 = *no, too early;* 2 = *yes on time;* and 3 = *no, too late.* If the response was either a 1 or a 3, a follow-up question was triggered to solicit feedback on preferred timing. The effectiveness question used a five-point scale, ranging from 1 = *not effective at all* to 5 = *extremely effective.* A follow-up question was triggered if the respondent selected either *not effective at all* or *slightly effective* to solicit feedback about the respondent's reasoning.

If the respondent indicated that the program was offered at the wrong time or was ineffective, they were asked a follow-up question to expand on their response.

Administrators were asked about the efficacy of the Foundations program from an organizational perspective. As noted earlier, each Foundations course was created to align with professional competencies for Extension professionals. Administrators were asked to rate how well each Foundations course prepared field personnel to perform their jobs after the trainings. The 5-point Likert rating scale ranged from 1 = *not at all prepared* to 5 = *extremely prepared*. A follow-up, free-response question was triggered if the respondent selected either *not at all prepared* or *somewhat unprepared* to solicit feedback about the respondent's reasoning.

Both groups of respondents were asked to reflect on additional training needs for the organization. The content-related questions ended with an open-ended question that allowed respondents to provide any additional information or comments not previously supplied. Basic demographic information (i.e., gender, race, and ethnicity) was collected, as well as data related to the respondent's program area, time with Extension, and district served.

The survey was administered in June 2021. Reminder emails were sent twice to each group. Data were analyzed using SPSS. (The Institutional Review Board deemed that the survey's purpose was related to program improvement and was thus exempt.) The limitation of this method is that survey completion was voluntary, resulting in different field response rates statewide. An 80% threshold of positive responses indicating a program was effective (scores ranging from moderately to extremely effective), offered on time, or met its stated goals was adopted for labeling a program as working.

Results

A total of 143 people completed the survey. Of these, the majority were agents (88 or 62%), followed by educators (28 or 20%), program development coordinators (17 or 12%), district directors (4 or 3%), and program leaders or directors (6 or 4%). Thirty-three percent were from 4-H, 40.6% were from ANR, 22.6% were from FACS, and the remainder had split appointments. Finally, 22.8% were from the Northeast District, 32.7% were from the Northwest, 24.8% were from the Southeast, and 19.8% were from the Southwest. Between January 2017 and May 2022, the retention rate for agents was 74%.

Agents and Educators

Survey responses show that 28% of agents and educators indicated that they had started in 2019, followed by 2016 or 2018 (21% each), 2020 (18%), 2017 (13%), and 2021 (4%). Regarding start month, many indicated they had started during one of two time periods: the winter months of December and January or late summer/early fall of August–October.

To inform future training efforts, respondents were asked to indicate their preferred learning style, including in-person training, online training via Zoom, online recorded training, and hybrid training consisting of online and face-to-face instruction. The majority of participants (53%) rated in-person training as their preferred method, followed by hybrid training (39%), recorded training (6%), and online training via Zoom (2%).

Table 3 shows each Foundations course and respondents' perceptions regarding (a) their ability to meet each stated goal, (b) the timing of the course, and (c) the course's effectiveness in preparing them to do their jobs. For three courses—Foundations II, Basics of Youth Development, and Foundations of Communications—participants indicated they had not yet completed the curriculum; in those cases, rankings were adjusted to reflect only those who had taken the course.

For all courses, the majority of participants indicated that they had met their stated goals and objectives. However, ratings decreased when participants were asked about the timeliness and effectiveness of the course. For only one course—Basics of Youth Development (91%)—did 80% or more of participants state that it was offered on time. This was followed by Youth and Managing Risk (84%), Policies, Procedures, & Protocols (83%), Foundations I (83%), Introduction to Extension (81%), and Foundations II (77%). The lowest-rated course was Communications (63%). Regarding effectiveness rates, 85% of participants indicated that two courses were at least moderately effective: Foundations II (82%) and Communications (80%).

For those who indicated that a course was not offered in time, a follow-up survey question was triggered to determine what timeframe the respondent felt would have been appropriate. The majority of participants would have preferred Foundations I be held within the first month of hire. For Communications and Foundations II, participants would have preferred that the courses be offered within the first three months of hire. Asynchronous courses were not included in the analysis because they were available on demand.

Finally, people who stated the program was not effective were asked to explain why and what could be done to improve it. The responses centered around four issues. The first three were (a) lack of organized structure, (b) too many theoretical concepts without time to apply them, and (c) too much information covered in the time allotted. The fourth issue centered around different viewpoints between program areas. People with a 4-H appointment believed youth-centered training(s) needed to have everyone involved, with the same information covered for everyone, while those without a 4-H appointment felt the courses were not necessary for all program areas.

Table 3. Participants' Perceptions of Foundations Courses

Course	Met Goal			Offered on Time				Effectiveness		
	Yes	*No*	*Have not done*	*Too early*	*On time*	*Too Late*	*Not at all*	*Slightly*	*Moderately*	*Very**
Introduction	101 (99%)	1 (1%)	0	3 (3%)	83 (81%)	16 (16%)	0	12 (12%)	47 (46%)	43 (42%)
Policies, Procedures, & Protocols	98 (100%)	0	0	6 (4%)	81 (83%)	11 (11%)	0	4 (4%)	42 (43%)	52 (53%)
Youth and Managing Risk	104 (97%)	3 (3%)	0	8 (8%)	88 (84%)	9 (8%)	2 (2%)	5 (5%)	51 (49%)	47 (45%)
Foundations I	85 (90%)	9 (10%)	0	2 (2%)	78 (83%)	14 (15%)	1 (1%)	12 (13%)	32 (34%)	49 (52%)
Communications	70 (73%)	9 (9%)	17 (18%)	2 (3%)	50 (63%)	27 (34%)	5 (6%)	11 (14%)	24 (30%)	39 (50%)
Basics of Youth Development	83 (88%)	6 (6%)	5 (5%)	1 (1%)	80 (91%)	7 (8%)	2 (2%)	10 (11%)	25 (28%)	51 (58%)
Foundations II	67 (93%)	2 (3%)	3 (4%)	3 (4%)	53 (77%)	13 (19%)	2 (3%)	10 (15%)	20 (29%)	37 (54%)

Note. * Very effective includes both *very effective* and *extremely effective* responses.

Administrators

Administrators were asked to rate how well the Foundations series prepared agents and educators to succeed in their jobs. As shown in Table 4, the majority of respondents were neutral to positive about how well the Foundations program had prepared field faculty and staff to do their jobs effectively.

Table 4. Administrator Perceptions of Foundations' Effectiveness Regarding Professional Competencies

Competency	*Not at all prepared*	*Somewhat unprepared*	*Neutral*	*Somewhat prepared*	*Extremely prepared*
1: Program Planning and Development	0	5 (21%)	0	19 (79%)	0
2: Teaching and Learning	0	3 (13.5%)	5 (23%)	11 (50%)	3 (13.5%)
3: Program Evaluation	1 (5%)	5 (24%)	3 (14%)	11 (53%)	1 (5%)
4: Application of Subject Matter Expertise	0	1 (5%)	3 (14%)	15 (71%)	2 (10%)
5: Developing a Professional Reputation (agent only)	0	4 (20%)	4 (20%)	11 (55%)	1 (5%)
6: Extension Organization and Administration	0	2 (10%)	1 (5%)	8 (38%)	10 (48%)
7: External Linkages	0	2 (10%)	3 (14%)	14 (67%)	2 (10%)
8: Volunteer Development	1 (5%)	6 (29%)	4 (19%)	8 (38%)	2 (10%)
9: Professionalism	0	0	2 (10%)	11 (52%)	8 (38%)
10: Communication and Marketing	0	1 (5%)	5 (24%)	12 (57%)	3 (14%)

A closer examination of responses reveals that ratings of four of the 10 competencies fell below the benchmark of at or below 80%: Competency 1 (79%), Competency 3 (71%), Competency 5 (80%), and Competency 8 (66%). When asked to explain their lower ratings, participants' responses fell largely into three overarching categories:

- The basics are taught, but time is needed to integrate them into practice. Example comments included the following:
  - "Staff seems to be requiring more information and some of this comes with time. They do have good general information." (Competency 3)
  - "The agents haven't had enough experience to grasp what needs to be evaluated. They are still at the Program Development stage of their career. This is a process. They are exposed, but some are not fully comprehending the concepts or relevancy." (Competency 3)

- o "I teach plans of work at our new agent training and conduct at least four new agent visits during the first year of our new hires. I see an awareness of needs and that program should be planned. I still have to explain plans of work in detail at new agent training even after they take Foundations II. I also have several conversations about marketing, identifying target audiences, and translating ideas to programming." (Competency 1)
- There is not enough time to teach the topics. Example comments included:
  - o "This … takes time and experience." (Competency 8)
  - o "Having to go over it with new agents." (Competency 1)
- It may not be part of the job description. Comments included:
  - o "FACS agents do not learn how to recruit, train, and manage volunteers as an on-going part of their program. There is not a volunteer program they clearly identify with."

Competency 5 (Gaining a Professional Reputation) was an outlier. Participants' comments indicated that while Foundations does lay the groundwork for gaining a professional reputation, additional support is needed, including time to put learning into practice, issues at the county level, and working with mentors and/or PDCs to make this happen. As one respondent commented:

> I haven't seen this as a result of Foundations. If it's happening, I have(n't) been made aware. I hear agents attribute what they learn about developing a professional reputation mostly through interacting with their mentor or PDC.

Joint Issues and Questions Related to Additional Training Needs

The last section of the survey focused on training needs for agents and educators around three topics: teaching and facilitating, marketing to diverse audiences, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Administrators were asked if they believed each topic area represented a need, while agents and educators were asked if they felt they needed additional training in each area. Table 5 summarizes the responses.

Table 5. Perceptions of Additional Training Needs by Administrators and Agents and Educators

Topic Area	Respondent	No	Maybe	Yes
Teaching and Facilitating	Agents and educators	8 (9%)	34 (37%)	49 (54%)
	Administrators	2 (10%)	4 (19%)	15 (71%)
Marketing to Diverse Audiences	Agents and educators	20 (22%)	22 (24%)	49 (54%)
	Administrators	1 (5%)	7 (33%)	13 (62%)
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Agents and educators	48 (53%)	15 (17%)	28 (31%)
	Administrators	2 (10%)	8 (38%)	11 (52%)

Teaching and Facilitating

The perceived need for training around teaching and facilitation was somewhat aligned between the two groups. Nearly equal percentages of both groups (9% and 10%, respectively) indicated that such training was not needed. However, administrators were more likely to indicate that it was needed (71% vs. 54%), while agents and educators were more likely to be unsure about the need (37% vs. 19%).

Marketing to Diverse Audiences

There was a moderate difference in perceptions of the need for marketing to diverse audiences between the two groups. Sixty-two percent of administrators felt this was a need compared with 54% of agents and educators. Conversely, 22% of agents and educators stated it was not a need compared with 5% of administrators. For those who were unsure, 33% of administrators responded *maybe* compared with 24% of agents and educators.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

There was a vast difference in perception of the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion between the two groups. The majority of agents and educators indicated this was not a need (53%), while the majority of administrators stated it was a need (52%). Additionally, administrators were more likely to be unsure about the training need (38%) than agents and educators (17%).

Additional Training Needs

The last part of the survey requested feedback from respondents on additional training needs not addressed previously in the survey. Administrators focused primarily on people skills, teaching, and outreach, while agents and educators shared concerns about content, technical skills, and people skills essential to navigating their counties. There were some areas of overlap within and between groups, including:

- building relationships with stakeholders;
- how to deal with difficult clients and resolve conflict;
- office dynamics;
- communications with clientele and partners;
- technology skills (e.g., video production and editing); and,
- optional re-training.

What We Learned

When examining the results, three global lessons emerged from these data: (1) The Foundations Program's Ability to Meet Stated Needs and Competencies, (2) Targeted Courses Are Needed to

Enhance Extension's Impact, and (3) Practice and Operations Courses Are Needed to Address Everyday Needs.

This study provided one way of exploring Herzberg's (1966) Motivation-Hygiene Theory as a framework connecting motivation factors to job satisfaction through onboarding trainings. The results of this study indicated that the Foundations trainings were on the right track and could benefit from some minor adjustments to increase effectiveness further. This study design could be transferable to other state Extension systems to inform onboarding. Hygiene factors were outside the scope of this study.

The Foundations Program's Ability to Meet Stated Needs and Competencies

Results from the field show the stated goals were met and helped them prepare for success. A high benchmark of 80% was set for success across the three parameters, with even the lowest ranked course (Communications) having 80% stating it was effective.

From the administrators' perspective, it was felt that the majority (6 of 10) of competencies identified for Extension professionals were met. For the ones not met, the reasons given largely reflect the intent of Foundations and the unique needs of each field. For example, most 4-H agents and educators routinely interact with and manage volunteers, and some ANR agents have Master Gardener volunteers. Therefore, Competency 8 (volunteer development) is not valid for all field personnel. Of the three categories of reasons why competency is not met, only one (lack of time) is directly related to the content and training format of the program.

Targeted Courses Are Needed to Enhance Extension's Impact

At the University of Georgia and within the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, an increased focus on enhancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion has emerged. This effort is particularly vital for Extension as the mission is to serve all residents through its services. This has led to an increased demand for programs and services to be accessible community-wide.

To assist in these efforts, there has been discussion about offering additional trainings on how to reach diverse audiences. However, the perceived need for these trainings was not aligned between the field and administrators. The greatest alignment was seen in how to market to diverse audiences (54% agents/educators and 62% administrators said yes), while training on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) had the greatest disparity (53% vs. 10% said no). This may be a result of the perceived roles each position fulfills. For example, to be successful, agents and educators need to reach and teach throughout the community. This means that marketing is vital for success. However, efforts to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion are perceived as administrator roles in that standards of operation and practices need to be updated to reflect this value. Once explicitly integrated, the field will likely perceive system-wide training as needed.

Another factor in the contradictory viewpoints may be that administrators have gone through DEI training and discussions prior to taking this survey that were not offered to new agents.

Practice and Operations Courses Are Needed to Address Everyday Needs

The Foundations training course currently focuses on the technical skills and concepts needed to develop and execute a teaching plan successfully. It is necessary to focus on everyday needs to be successful as a coworker and the face of UGA Extension. This may be of particular importance as Extension is found in all 159 counties statewide, serving diverse groups of people. Establishing a consistent standard operation was seen as a need by the identification of people skills. This may include training on building relationships and navigating difficult personalities. Additional technical skills around emergent technology and re-training related to Foundations topics were cited, as well as soft and technical skills for team members.

What This Means for Foundations

The Foundations Program Works

Perhaps the most significant finding from the study is that most participating agents and educators found that the Foundations Training Program (a) met its stated goals, (b) was timely, and (c) was at least moderately effective. As the survey data revealed, 80% or more of the participants indicated that the stated goals had been met for all courses. This was also consistent with the evaluations distributed immediately following each course. This suggests alignment between the immediate and recall feedback about the courses.

Likewise, the administrators' feedback was largely positive. The six competencies with an 80% or higher rating relate primarily to skill-based or knowledge-based applications. In many instances, this is an explicit part of the job description with immediate orientation from the first day of employment. This indicates that the day-to-day operations of agents and educators are being filled using the knowledge and skills gained from the Foundations program.

Scheduling Is a Factor

When looking at the courses that respondents indicated were either not offered on time or not effective, two trends emerged. First, the course may have been asynchronous in that it had been recorded and housed online. Lack of timeliness and effectiveness in these cases could be attributed to administrators not inviting participants quickly enough or new employees not completing the course(s) when the invitation was sent. Second, regarding the "live" courses (i.e., synchronous), lower ratings of effectiveness and timeliness occurred mainly when either (a) the participant started their position during the month or the month following when the course was being taught (therefore, they may have been on the job for up to five months before receiving the training) or (b) during times when a training session was being revamped or when there was

turnover among those teaching the course. For the latter, participants' feedback was more positive when the course was consistent.

Course Intent Needs to Be Remembered

Regarding the four competencies on which less than 80% of respondents indicated that personnel were trained effectively, the majority of respondents indicated that the lower rating was due to the nature of the course. Each Foundations course is designed to provide a solid grounding in concepts, but, as respondents noted, full integration into practice is a time-consuming process. The second reason centered on agents not being trained in each Foundations course. For example, most FACS agents are not trained in volunteer development; thus, they are not able to achieve all competencies. The reason with the greatest implications for practice related to there not being enough time allotted to teach all concepts, meaning that concept-related work must continue after the course, even if that was not the intent.

As mentioned earlier, feedback related to Competency 5 (Gaining a Professional Reputation) varied for two main reasons. First, only agents are required or expected to produce scholarship. Second, the focus on scholarship and professional reputation is meant only to raise awareness of the expectation, not to address knowledge or practice around these concepts. Thus, follow-up and mentorship are central to the full realization of this competency; therefore, this competency might not be a good fit for Foundations and better suited after onboarding.

Additional Training Courses Are Still Needed

When asked about additional training needs, participants' feedback seemed to align with the focus of each position. Both administrators and field faculty felt that training in teaching and facilitation, as well as marketing to diverse audiences, represented a need; however, they had opposing viewpoints on training around diversity, equity, and inclusion. This divide was further evident in the open-response section. Similarly, administrators focused on people skills, teaching, and outreach, while field faculty were primarily concerned with content, technical skills, and people skills. This could be due to several factors, including the viewpoint required of each position, the community in which agents are situated, and individuals' experiences.

Moving Forward

Based on survey respondents' feedback, several next steps have already been set in motion. Moving forward, the post-class evaluations are being updated to gather more real-time information on the effectiveness of each course. The above survey is a retrospective view of the overall training course. This adjustment will ensure the training courses are responsive to emerging concerns.

Second, participants suggested that hybrid learning is a preferred approach to training. To address the finding that some courses were not offered in a timely manner, the authors and course instructors are exploring the feasibility of offering basic concepts asynchronously to provide agents and educators with immediate tools while using the in-person component of the training to examine topics more deeply.

The authors and course instructors team will conduct a training review every 5–8 years. This review will occur after the adoption of a new Extension Strategic Plan, ensuring that Foundations concepts align with the stated goals of the organization. Additionally, as new technology becomes available, the digital delivery specialist will work with the administration team to determine which platforms UGA Extension will support and for which it will provide training.

In response to study participants wanting the option to retake courses after completion, the staff, organizational development specialist, and team are exploring a refresher course for seasoned agents. Such refreshers might be more necessary for certain competencies (e.g., Communications) as new technology and practice methods are adopted and others are de-emphasized. A model similar to the University of Georgia's Human Subjects Training for Research is being considered as an approach to developing these refresher courses.

Additionally, Extension has had difficulty quantifying the return on investment to the system. Harder et al.'s (2017) model provides a means of determining ROI for onboarding training programs based on competency development by the participant. The authors plan to use this model to determine the value of the Foundations Training Program for UGA Extension.

Since the completion of this study, the organization has moved forward with implementing a few of the suggestions. As part of the revamp, two new sections were added to the Foundations of Communications session to address DEI-related topics. In 2022, a DEI track of educational breakout sessions was included in the biannual internal Extension Conference for agents and specialists as a source of ongoing professional development. For the 2024 Extension Conference, a new track is being added to enhance the supervisory skills of agents, as this is currently only offered in the training sessions for County Extension Coordinators. Finally, after this study was completed, a new facilitation program has been piloted as ongoing professional development. It is offered to any agent to apply after they have completed their Foundations trainings.

As the study findings highlight, UGA Extension's Foundations Training Program provides a proven model for the successful onboarding of field faculty. Though other programs have been described in the literature, none appear to be as comprehensive as the UGA Foundations program. The study results show that this approach to onboarding is successful and could inform other state Extensions as they develop their own programs. Lessons learned from this study and the curriculum developed for Foundations comprise a template for other systems seeking to address their unique onboarding needs.

References

Allen, D. G. (2006). Do organizational socialization tactics influence newcomer embeddedness and turnover? *Journal of Management*, *32*(2), 237–256. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206305280103

Angima, S., & Carroll, J. B. (2019). Recruitment and onboarding resources for Extension in the West. *Journal of Extension*, *57*(2), Article 7. https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol57/iss2/7

Atiles, J. H. (2019). Cooperative Extension competencies for the community engagement professional. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, *23*(1), 107–127. http://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/index.php/jheoe

Bakhru, K. M., & Sharma, A. (2022). Unlocking drivers for employee engagement through human resource analytics. In K. M. Bakhru & A. Sharma (Ed.), *Research anthology on human resource practices for the modern workforce* (pp. 471–490). IGI Global.

Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., & Euwema, M. C. (2005). Job resources buffer the impact of job demands on burnout. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *10*(2), 170–180. https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.10.2.170

Barry, K. (2022, April 18). Warning: Even your committed employees are being recruited. *Gallup*. https://www.gallup.com/workplace/391622/warning-even-committed-employees-recruited.aspx?version=print

Baysinger, B. D., & Mobley, W. H. (1982). *Employee turnover: Individual and organizational analyses*. Texas A & M University.

Benge, M., & Beattie, P. (2021). Challenges of early career Extension agents in Florida. *Advancements in Agricultural Development*, *2*(1), 42–55. https://doi.org/10.37433/aad.v2i1.87

Benge, M., Harder, A., & Goodwin, J. (2015). Solutions to burnout and retention as perceived by county Extension agents of the Colorado State University Extension System. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, *3*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.54718/NSXN7559

Brodeur, C. W., Higgins, C., Galindo-Gonzalez, S., Craig, D. D., & Haile, T. (2011). Designing a competency-based new county Extension personnel training program: A novel approach. *Journal of Extension*, *49*(3), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.49.03.02

Byerly, B. (2012). Measuring the impact of employee loss. *Performance Improvement*, *51*(5), 40–47. https://doi.org/10.1002/pfi.21268

Carucci, R. (2018, December 3). To retain new hires, spend more time onboarding them. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2018/12/to-retain-new-hires-spend-more-time-onboarding-them

Chandler, G. D. (2004). *Organizational and individual factors related to retention of county Extension agents employed by Texas Cooperative Extension*. Texas A&M University.

Dostilio, L. D. (2017). Planning a path forward. In L. D. Dostilio (Ed.), *The community engagement professional in higher education: A competency model for an emerging field* (pp. 27–55). Campus Compact.

Extension Committee on Organization and Policy Leadership Advisory Council. (2005). *2005 report*. National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

Feldhues, K., & Tanner, T. (2017). Show me the money: Impact of county funding on retention rates for Extension educators. *The Journal of Extension*, *55*(2), Article 11. https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.55.02.11

Harder, A., Hodges, A., & Zelaya, P. (2017). What is professional development worth? Calculating the value of onboarding programs in Extension. *The Journal of Extension*, *55*(1), Article 9. https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.55.01.09

Herzberg, F. (1966). *Work and the nature of man*. Crosby.

Jayaratne, K. S., Collins, D. P., & McCollum, S. B. (2021). Early-career challenges of youth development Extension educators and effective strategies. *Sustainability*, *13*(16), 9017. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13169017

Jiwanlai, R. (2014). The importance of employee onboarding. *CropLife*, *177*(9), 38–40. https://www.croplife.com/management/employees/the-importance-of-employee-on-boarding/

Knight, K. (2020). *An evaluation of onboarding and train198ing procedures of Oregon State University County Extension faculty*. Oregon State University.

McClelland, D. C. (1973). Testing for competence rather than for "intelligence." *American Psychologist*, *28*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0034092

Palmer-Roberts, C. O. (2020). *Utilization of onboarding activities by leaders on employee engagement, performance, and retention: A qualitative Delphi study* [Doctoral dissertation, Northcentral University]. https://www.proquest.com/openview/6d58e1657d481a50eb79cd4c28ca52cd/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Pinkovitz, W. H., Moskal, J., & Green, G. (1997). How much does your employee turnover cost? *Small Business Forum*, *14*(3), 70–71.

Program & Staff Development Committee. (2018). *Core competencies for county Extension agents* [Unpublished white paper]. Southern Region Program Leadership Network for the Cooperative Extension System.

Robertson, L. B. (2022). *County level 4-H agents' perceived organizational support: A predictive correlational study* [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Memphis]. https://www.proquest.com/openview/39695c5b6cdcb746a0a66247b05dcd43/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Russ-Eft, D. (1995). Defining competencies: A critique. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, *6*(4), 329–335. https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.3920060402

Schaufeli, W. B., & Bakker, A. B. (2004). Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: A multi-sample study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *25*(3), 293–315. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.248

University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. (2022). *About*. https://extension.uga.edu/about.html

University of Texas. (1999). *Survey of organizational excellence*.

U.S. Department of Labor. (2022, May 6). *The employment situation April 2022* [News release].
      https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/economicdata/empsit_05062022.pdf

Vines, K., Johnson, L., Bishop, H., Paulette, M., Pearson, J., Spencer, J., & Thompson, J. (2021).
      Virginia Cooperative Extension onboarding 2021 survey findings.
      https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/ALCE-278/ALCE-
      278.html

Windon, S. R. (2019). Predictors of job satisfaction among Extension program assistants.
      Journal of Agricultural Education, *60*(3), 232–245.

Virginia Brown is the Extension Evaluation Specialist in the Office of Learning and Organizational Development for the University of Georgia Extension. Please direct correspondence about this article to Virginia Brown at virginia.brown@uga.edu.

Kristi Farner is the Extension Program and Staff Development Specialist in the Office of Learning and Organizational Development for the University of Georgia Extension.