**Core Competencies for County Extension Agents**

**Introduction1**

A competency is “a set of *observable* performance dimensions, including *individual* knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as *collective* team, process, and organizational capabilities, that are linked to *high performance,* and provide the organization with *sustainable competitive advantage*” (emphasis in original) (Athey & Orth, 1999, p. 216). The competency approach was popularized by psychologist David McClelland (1973). McClelland argued intelligence alone was not an accurate predictor of workplace success. The measurement of competencies was offered as a better way of assessing employee potential. McClelland’s (1998) competency approach was based on four major assumptions: (a) performance measures should be observable, (b) criteria should relate to life outcomes such as occupations and education, (c) competencies should be clearly described and defined realistically, and (d) clearly articulated information on how to develop competencies should be made public. This document is intended to provide an overview of the competencies commonly prioritized by the program and staff development (PSD) units within the SR-PLN.

**Prioritizing Competencies**

It is widely accepted that county Extension agents require knowledge and skills in their technical areas of expertise, such as agriculture, youth development, or nutrition. Complementing an agents’ technical expertise is a set of competencies associated with the processes of Extension; these competencies are sometimes called core competencies and they have often been the focus of Extension research (e.g. Fox & LaChenaye, 2015; Brodeur, Higgins, Galindo-Gonzalez, Craig, & Haile, 2011; Stone, 1997). Additionally, USDA/NIFA promotes the use of the 4-H Professional, Research, and Knowledge Competencies (4-H PRKC) framework (Swanson, Hegland, & Stark, 2017). In 2017, the PSD Committee conducted a survey of the core competencies that PSD units throughout the Southern Region used to guide the onboarding process for new agents. Commonalities across states were identified and appear in Table 1. Competencies were contributed by Clemson University, Mississippi State University, North Carolina State University, Texas A&M University, University of Arkansas, University of Florida, University of Georgia, University of Kentucky, and Virginia Tech.

Table 1

*Common Core Competency Framework: SR-PLN PSD Units*

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| --- | --- |
| Core Competency Area | Core Competency Examples1 |
| Program Planning and Development | Identify clientele needsDesign a program |
| Teaching and Learning | Use appropriate teaching methodsUse visual aids as instructional toolsDeliver effective presentationsFacilitate group processes |
| Program Evaluation | Evaluate program outcomesPrepare reports on program effectivenessAct with accountability |
| Application of Subject Matter Expertise | Solve clientele problemsEngage with academiaContribute to the scholarship of Extension |
| Extension Organization and Administration | Adhere to organizational policies and proceduresUnderstand history, philosophy, and structure of land-grant universities and Cooperative ExtensionUnderstand organizational structure of state Extension systemAcquire and manage resources |
| Information and Communication Technologies | Integrate technology with programsDevelop online learning opportunities |
| External Linkages | Able to build relationships with potential local partners, collaborators, and networks.Able to nurture relationships with existing external partnersEnsure representation of the diversity of clientele |
| Interpersonal Leadership | Manage conflict effectivelyMentor and coach othersDemonstrate a willingness to leadEffectively work in teams |
| Volunteer Development | Able to recruit volunteersAble to manage volunteers |
| Professionalism | Manage time effectivelyMaintain ethical standards consistent with the professionDemonstrate commitment to professional developmentExhibit respect for diverse audiences |
| Communication & Marketing | Prepare effective written communicationDeliver clear verbal communicationApply principles of marketing to promote programming and Cooperative Extension |

*Note*. 1Examples are common across at least three PSD units. Exact wording may vary between states.

**Summary**

Extension organizations can use the Common Core Competency Framework to guide their onboarding programs for new agents, and as a guide when assessing the qualifications of potential new hires. The consistent adoption of common core competencies across states would allow PSD units to create and use common resources, preventing the need for each state to develop its own comprehensive library of onboarding resources. Further discussion is necessary to determine how such a system would be operationalized, with consideration to such topics as providing appropriate credit for intellectual property and revenue enhancement opportunities.

**References**

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