



Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Sources of Stress

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Introduction and Background

This publication includes the findings of focus groups conducted with Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) agents and specialists in spring 2021 related to sources of stress. This area of inquiry was one of four categories included in the study of mid-career agents and specialists, between three and seven years of service, to evaluate their needs at this stage in their career. Findings associated with sources of stress address three of the four objectives of this project: 1) Identify career-related challenges experienced by VCE professionals in years three to seven in their careers, 2) Identify opportunities for change in the work environment or professional development programming that increase support and retention for Extension professionals in this time, and 3) Identify unique and shared needs for Extension agents and specialist.

An overview of the project and demographics <add link> and findings related to [competencies](#) are provided in previous publications. The remaining categories, role of needs assessment in work and mentoring and support, will be linked from this publication as they become available.

Methods

A complete methodology of the project is included in the earlier publication, Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Methodology and Demographics <Include link to demographics publication>. The framework for this section relied on sources of stress in VCE professionals identified by Donaldson and Franck (2019). Donaldson and Franck (2019) identified four categories as sources of stress preventing employees from following a healthy lifestyle. The contributing stressors were 1) over engagement with work, 2) challenging work schedules, 3) supervising others, and 4) uncertain funding. These categories were provided to focus group participants and then they were asked to identify the following: 1) times when they felt stress associated with their work, 2) what would make them feel less stressed in those situations, and 3) mechanisms they use to overcome or alleviate stress. Many respondents in the focus groups began their responses to this set of questions by emphasizing what it is that they like about their career. These responses can be useful in considering what makes Extension professionals remain in their careers and were captured and will be reported here as well.

Participant focus group and research team discussion following the focus groups were reviewed and analyzed based on emerging themes. Findings from all of these groups are included here.

Findings Overview

In general, participants in the focus groups indicated that they really liked their jobs. One agent shared the following, "I'm gonna be honest with y'all. Coming out of the public-school system and coming from an assistant principal and principal position, I love my job. Y'all I love my job. I feel so much less stress in this job. I'm working a lot more and I'm working a lot more hours, but I'm loving every minute of it because I love what I do. And I don't feel like it's stress. I have an amazing office that I work with. Everybody within our office from staff to faculty, it doesn't matter. We all just really get along. I'm going to be the oddball and say that I'm a lot less stressed and I don't feel stressed and I'm very thankful for that."

Other agents talked about the variety of programming they are able to provide from financial management to sewing and how that keeps the work from getting stale.

One specialist spoke of how he values the autonomy he has in his work. He said, "I feel like on a day to day basis, I have very little stress. I feel like the amount of autonomy I have in my job is amazing and that makes my life great. I guess I don't know if a lot of other substitutes, substitute jobs or alternative jobs I could be doing where I have this much autonomy. I guess, besides going into business for myself, which would bring out a whole nother level of stress, I suppose."

Other professionals found their jobs much more stressful. Both agents and specialists spoke of feeling stressed and anxious at work every day and all the time. One said "I think stress is constant and year-round." One specialist referred to stress as a lifestyle. He said, "I do agree with the sentiment that you know it's almost like a lifestyle. You're sort of just stressed with the obligations that you have. And maybe that's also a reflection of sort of the mid-career status. Right?" Another specialist suggested that there were times when they went from normal stress to "more stressed." An agent attributed much of her stress to COVID impacts on her home life. She said, "I'm walking around the office, talking with coworkers. COVID has compounded everything stress wise so it's - I know everybody's home dynamic is different and mine is different and it's stress added on the stress."

Sources of Stress

An agent shared that 4-H Camp and the county fair were her greatest sources of stress. She said, "The most stressful situations to me are 4-H camp or county fairs when you have a lot of things going on, and you don't have enough hands, are not enough volunteers and everybody's coming to you. Long hours. It's a very stressful situation."

Extension professionals identified additional sources of stress beyond over engagement, challenging work schedules, supervising others, and uncertain funding. Categories for these include work expectations, absence of acknowledgement, organizational systems, change, work-personal life balance, a sense of isolation, office environment, and collaboration. Findings associated with these categories are provided here.

Over engagement

Donaldson and Franck (2019) defined stress from over engagement as the sense that their work was never done and employees were constantly behind. The repeated theme leading to over engagement in this study was not having enough personnel, whether this referred to volunteers at 4-H camp or the county fair or to Extension employees. One agent shared that 4-H Camp and the county fair were her greatest sources of stress. She said, "The most stressful situations to me are 4-H camp or county fairs when you have a lot of things going on, and you don't have enough hands, are not enough volunteers and everybody's coming to you. Long hours - it's a very stressful situation."

Another time when agents experience over engagement due to a lack of personnel is when they try to cover for a vacancy in an office in order to keep programs running. An agent spoke about a very stressful time for her associated with vacant office positions. She said,

It was about 2017. I'd been here about three or four years and was getting halfway comfortable with what I was doing. I finally figured out evaluation, and I had just finished my masters, which you have to get if you don't have it when you get here. Two kids in the process as well. So, for background, in 2017 my agent was able to take the buyout and retire. So, I knew that was coming and they were the unit coordinator (UC) in both offices. Since both of our offices are small, we share a UC for both. So, I said okay. So that's coming - it's going to be dropped in my lap because I'm the other agent in the office because our FCS folks and our specialists are housed elsewhere. So it's just a 4-H agent, an agent to serve two units, so we share. So, I knew - 2017 - early that year that was coming. So that happened in the fall of that year. I lost my 17-year program assistant. So, in a year I lost my UC, my Ag agent, and my program assistant. So here, I was in the office learning to be UC, learning to make sure everything was flowing, answering questions from producers who didn't have an ag agent they could call at home or at the office anymore - running consistent annual programming that we couldn't let drop. I was also finding funding, also trying to find emergency hires to fill gaps, because the second person left right after the fair - thank goodness. But we had a lot of issues. So, in the next 12 months after that we were rehiring at least the program person. We were put on a freeze for the ag agent for a while and just luckily here in the last year that was replaced. So, since 2017 there's been those hurdles.

An agent serving as a county UC said, "And I felt probably self-inflicted pressure. Because no one ever told me that I had to do this. But I had a generalized concern that if we did not keep 4-H programming going in our school system, that they would write it out of the school system. So, we all have all of that programming going during that time, in addition to the regular programming. And I was still pretty new so I still kind of felt pretty inadequate in a lot of areas as far as being able to handle all that at this point. Now we are without an Ag agent. We hired 4-H."

Another agent spoke about how stress levels associated with vacancies differed depending on the type of vacant position. She said,

Now we are without an agent. We hired 4-H, but now we don't have Ag. And I will echo that my FCS job and the ag job combined don't create as much stress as what 4-H agents deal with. I do think that our office is better handling having that position open. The 4-H agent, and I have kind of taken some of the ag programs that are most important and we're trying to make sure that those happen so that the county doesn't lapse in services. And of course, we're able to potentially have an emergency hire, which we may be able to do.

This seasonal aspect of stress associated with over engagement affects professionals in agriculture during winter programming. An agent said,

The times, I feel most stressed with work - it's almost seasonal versus a specific instance. So for example, most of my programming - a huge chunk of my program, I'll say, is in the winter months because that's when all of my classes are, my seminars, my workshops. Most of those are when the growers can attend and when they have time to attend is when they're not in the field. So I feel like a big portion of what I do in the year is crammed into like a three month period. And so, during the first part of the year, right on top of the forest, and right on top of all of the other reporting things that we have to be doing. I'm trying to cram as much programming in as I can to get it out of the way before planting starts. Because I know that they will come. So it's mainly scheduling. I don't know a good way to get around that necessarily. Because I know that stress is also present in our specialists who often turn to you to do these programs because that's when most of the grower conferences are happening. A lot of things are going on during that time of the year so just scheduling and figuring out how to still have life for those three months is a little hard.

Another agent specified that seasonal programming for her was October through March. She said, ". . . that's when I have to get all of my programming in. So, not only am I trying to do pesticides and trying to do all my educational programs, I'm trying to do yearly reporting. I'm trying to do everything in that six five to six-month period. And so, by the time February, March comes around I am super stressed because I've just

- more than once I've had two or three programs in a week. And then I'm like - what am I doing to myself?" A specialist indicated that her over engagement with work occurs primarily during the reporting period.

Challenging work schedules

Long hours and work in the evenings and over weekends was a repeated source of stress for agents and specialists, consistent with the definition of Donaldson and Franck (2019). Professionals attribute this in part as the result of cell phones increasing constant access. A 4-H agent spoke to the challenge of people expecting an immediate response at all hours of the day and night. She said, "A lot of my teens and parents think that you need to respond immediately, even if it's at 12 o'clock at night, they expect an immediate response, and that's just not possible. So, getting away from it. Going outside. Cutting off technology, for sure, is a way to alleviate that stress." A specialist shared how this impacts her time with her family. She said, "These cell phones make it where you can be found at all hours of the day, and when they have a problem they're going to call you – it doesn't matter if it's 11 o'clock at night or if it's on a weekend and your kids soccer game. So, I'm trying to set those healthy boundaries."

A SNAP-Ed agent spoke about challenges related to travel. She said, "So, for me, I'd say probably one of the most stressful things is the large coverage area that I have. Pre-COVID, I'd say at least 60% of my time was spent traveling. We do a lot of train-the-trainers and so to be traveling hours and hours for, say, a 30 to 45-minute presentation – it's just really stressful. And then, also, not having a position for coverage and to be able to lean on them for support as well. So, I'd say that would be the biggest thing."

Agents and specialists also talked about over commitment. One agent suggested that the expectation is a 40-hour week, but that she ends up working 60 hours. A 4-H agent shared how easy it is to over commit. She said, "And if you're meeting the goals of everything that we need to be doing, you're not going to have a life - a personal life. Every single weekend can be taken. Every single evening will be taken and it's hard. It's really hard to do all that. I feel like we're not getting paid to do all that kind of stuff either. Our pay is okay, but it's definitely not that great that I'm going to spend my whole free time every evening, every weekend, every single day of my life doing work. So that is very stressful- being over engaged with my work and very challenging work schedules." A specialist emphasized the impact that COVID played on her work schedule, although she classified it as over engagement. She said, "I want to say definitely over engagement with work. And that I think it's self-inflicted. Right? The thing is that there's so much happening. And particularly in the past year [2020]. I don't know if you all are experiencing this, but when you're now at home on Zoom it's like you never leave the office right? And then also over just overcoming. Because there are so many opportunities for doing things as well, so it requires self-discipline to know when to say 'no'." One member of the research team observed, "It's hard for people to turn it off. At the end of the day, when you're in the office- Okay, it's time to go home. But if you're already at home and you lose track of that consistency, you're working halfway through the night."

Another concern expressed was the pace of the work coupled with meeting expectations in terms of number of programs and number of clientele reached. A 4-H agent said, "There's a push to do more and more and more and more and more and more and it's more focused on quantity versus quality. And so, I feel like the more numbers that I serve, the more kids that I can reach." Some of the pressure can also come from the agent trying to demonstrate their value and meet expanding expectations of the community. One agent spoke about his realization that he had to identify priorities and set boundaries in his work. He said,

As we have shared, traditional ag programs through the spring - I didn't back away from those at all. And then I had to do this fundraiser - which was pretty much. To really do it very well, it should have been the only thing I was focusing on. And it really got me so stressed, because I probably was doing too many programs, to where I could not adequately promote, advertise, put them together, evaluate them. And I couldn't get enough people at each one – right? And I had to handle this fundraiser. And it wore me down so much. And then I met this other big producer who wanted me to take on this other fundraiser. And it was a terribly stressful lesson to me, where if you try to prove a point by showing out how hard you want to work. Well - you will be worked even harder by the community. At least that's where I felt I was at that time.

A little bit earlier in my career, I had less ability than I do, maybe now to say 'no' to things. And I don't know if anyone else had that experience. But you know if someone came in and said, you need to do a program on this and I felt either I couldn't do it or I didn't feel it was important enough, I think I could say that and communicate that and explain why, and be open to the fact that maybe I was wrong and maybe that stakeholder was correct. But I think as one agent who retired had said, 'Well, I was an Extension agent and I discovered the more I did, the more people expected.' And I really found that out, you know in year three, four and five, you finish that master's degree and then you just go on the attack with programming. And then the community gets used to that, and then they continue to want you to do more and more. And that was very stressful.

And I would say just working on how to serve in the community, in figuring out what programs to prioritize - not knowing how to do that is what caused a lot of stress for me. And I used to think, 'All right, I've got all these things I want to do. I want to have this contest. I have this trial going on. And then there's these other samples I want to get. And I need to write all that up. And then you throw a few client calls in there, and then another issue comes up. And at the end of the day, of the whole 'to do list', only half of one thing was done. And I just feel terrible. And then it took me a while to work through that, and I guess, to adapt and work through that stress. I just simply realize why I can't do that, that there's not enough time for me to do that.

Similar to over engagement, there was consensus among the focus groups participants that while all program areas often experienced challenging work schedules, this was a greater stressor for 4-H agents and for FNP agents. Agriculture and FCS agents spoke of moving to their current positions to alleviate the stress of being 4-H agents. An ag agent said, "I did four years as a 4-H program educator and there's a reason that I switched to an ag agent position. It is because I saw how much stress 4-H agents are under, and most of the year. And so I will say, as an Ag agent, there is a whole lot less stress." Similarly, an FCS agent said, "I was a 4-H agent for 10 years and now I'm an FCS agent, and I will tell you, I have a lot less stress working FCS than I did as a 4-H agent. I think part of that is being older too. And so, you know priorities are a little bit different in that type of thing."

Other challenges identified as creating stress were not having an area of specialty where they could "excel" and deliver quality programming, serving multiple counties, and not having time to focus on creating new, quality programs. An FCS agent said, "I guess when I feel stressed, as you know, being an FCS agent serving several counties - I feel bad saying that because I know the FNP agents have so many more counties - but I don't have any FNP folks in my area. And then I don't have a specific focus like some agents do. So, I feel like I have to do everything for everybody in every county and so that can be stressful at times." A 4-H agent shared, "Especially as 4-H agents, I feel, and this is everyone, and this is all agents, not just 4-H. I feel like we are pulled in so many different directions. We have to do everything and we can't really excel in one thing. And just like you all said, you can't really have a quality program when you're focusing on all these things you have to meet." Another 4-H agent said, "Sometimes I feel like we're just kind of robots just kind of like I'm doing this program and this program and this program and this program. But I just wish that it was more kind of like your effort to try and start programs. Like, for example, schools are really hard to get into right now. And you know I keep getting a 'no, no, no, we're not doing it, we can't do it.' But then we're really expected to go in and do those programs. So just them- our state team- recognizing the effort that we're putting in."

Finally, another 4-H Agent talked about the challenge of not being able to see programs develop and succeed because of a myriad of ever-changing programming expectations from within the organization. The busy-ness that results in this environment prevents her from being able to develop capacity in her local volunteers. She said,

Another thing that stresses me out is being part of the worker bee, you know, and implementing all these things that are coming from the top down. And there's never any time dedicated to developing any one thing. If I could just be left alone to do the one thing and do it well, and get that to a really good place before they tell me to do 15,000 other things, I think that program wise, it would be stronger. And I would have more time to develop a volunteer force that could really do well without

me constantly looking over them. But it's like popcorn with the way they pop things off. It's like, "Oh we'll do this. Oh we'll do that. Oh yes, and now you're going to do this. and Oh, we got money for this, so now we need you to do this. Oh, we want you to get trained." And it's like oh my gosh, we keep chasing one thing after another, after another, but never giving time to fully develop the one thing. And that's what really stresses me out. Because I feel like the people who are telling us to do these things, they're so far removed from the field that they've lost touch with implementation and how difficult it is to build a program and to do these things that they keep asking us to do. And so it's just very, very frustrating.

Supervising Others

Stress associated with supervising others was identified only by agents. The primary sources of this stress were associated with the UC role and working with volunteers. One agent indicated that the five hour a week addition to their work load is inadequate for carrying out the expectations of the UC role. She said, "It's much, much more than that." A couple agents spoke about not choosing to take on this role, but having to as a result of retirements and being in offices where they were the only possible candidates because of their professional status. One agent spoke about the additional reporting required in this role and how challenging it was in her first year in that role. She said, "UCs have additional things to put into different systems, but it isn't as overwhelming as it was that first year." Another agent spoke of the stress associated with serving in this role during a time of "crisis" for the local office. She said, "But the UC stuff, especially as of late. We just learned that our unit is facing a devastating budget cut so all of the 4-H stuff that I'm paid to do - I'm not going to be able to do it for the next two months. I'm extremely stressed out. I'm trying to work out and trying to talk to friends and trying not to panic. I think this comes back to what I said about UCs - it's sort of an extra hat you're supposed to wear. But when there's a crisis, you're now expected to be a full-time, experienced, professional crisis navigator, public administrator or like, quite frankly, people will lose their jobs and that's not what I was hired to do. I'm happy to do it, but like, come on."

Stress associated with supervising volunteers was associated with volunteer management and changes in volunteer reporting systems, and volunteers pushing their personal agendas. One agent said, "Volunteer management can be very interesting - very much the dynamics and that. Coming up there's going to be a whole new volunteer management system that we will have to train all our volunteers to use. It's supposed to be a better system, but from what I've seen from the administration side of it, it's very complicated. I think more than what we were using before. So, I think [there will be] a lot of confused volunteers once we switch over. And that's very stressful day to day work."

In reference to volunteers driving the program, an agricultural agent shared the following.

Well, I, I would say, I have felt stressed, where I have maybe planned a lot of programs. put some things out there and I had some things going that I wanted to do. And a very powerful community member wanted me to work on, you know let's say X. And if I didn't do that, it was at least my impression that would not be wise for my career. And it would be communicated to the district director (DD). And I think of those sorts of scenarios. It would come about where I really wanted to do these programs. I thought they were important but it seemed to me that a few other people in the community wanted me to do this one thing. And maybe it was a precedent of maybe previous agents, or something of that nature that I had to take that on."

Uncertain Funding

Both specialists and agents spoke about stress resulting from uncertain funding. One specialist said, "Trying to secure funding, I think. A lot of my Extension program is really funded through my research program or pairing those. And I don't feel like I get a lot of support financially on the Extension side. I don't think there's a lot of equality or equity there. I know some colleagues of mine, who get operating funds and I've never seen that." Another specialist expressed concern about maintaining funding for a graduate assistantship for an existing student during COVID.

An agent spoke about infrequent stress associated with trying to avoid charging for local programming. She said, "There are definitely times where I think that funding does stress me out. If I'm trying to put on a

program and I really don't want to have to charge money for it - and I'm not sure where that money's going to come from. It might cause me stress, but I don't think that's a constant." Another agent referred to stress in trying to maintain local funding. She said, "But funding is always an issue or concern, at least in my units. My local government sees me, not me but the Extension office, as a valuable resource. And we're actually a good deal. I'm always trying to argue that, in a subliminal way, like you're only paying for a little bit of this 100% service that you have. So that's my little marketing plug for them to keep me in your budget." Another agent spoke about limitations imposed by grant funding as creating stress because they were only able to work with specific audiences.

One specialist suggested that there may be a culture of stress associated with Cooperative Extension related to funding. He said,

It feels like we're going to an organizational culture of brinkmanship. In a sense that when I first got here, we got everything. Also, oh, you know the existential issue. I've been with organizations that have existential issues - like six months of funding left before you're going to have to go out of business. So, when you frame things that way, it creates a heightened sense of stress, and especially for those of us who are in positions that heartbreak that was our tradition - when I was in traditional ag Extension work. . . community engaged research - community engaged work and programming - quite frankly, I don't - other than the funding from USDA - I don't really see a real difference between Extension work, and highly engaged public university engagement work. So, I think part of it is these things that are imposed from like a culture of Extension - that it creates stressors that make you think - "Oh my gosh, you know we're going to run out of money." I'm going to be like "oh, whatever."

Other Sources of Stress - Work Expectations

Several themes emerged related to work expectations. Supervising others as a work expectation was addressed previously. Other areas of work expectations that emerged were deadlines, performance evaluation and promotion, and professional development.

Deadlines

Annual reporting deadlines were mentioned previously as contributing to seasonal stress. However, for specialists, there is a sense that deadlines are constant. Beyond performance reporting, these also relate to grant proposals and rewards, teaching, and keeping graduate students on track. One specialist said, "We are stressed all the time. We are thinking about work all the time. Even in the many deadlines that we have to meet each week. And before we can think about the next upcoming deadlines to these constant deadlines that show up. So, it's a very stressful job. And I know my postdoc advisor told me it's not a regular eight to five job, so I was warned ahead of time." Another specialist spoke of this as a juggling act. She said, "When there are a lot of deadlines looming, and there are not enough hours in the day. So, I think that's [the greatest source of stress] it. We all juggle a lot of balls at the same time. And trying to keep track of what grants are coming due. And what ones do we need to deal with in our graduate students, Extension, and teaching. And it's just being pulled in a lot of different directions all at once. When there are a lot of deadlines looming, and there are not enough hours in the day. So I think that's what it is. And every once in a while, I drop the ball and feel really awful about it." Another specialist said, "Probably surrounded by multiple deadlines. And then that seems to be compounded when, maybe this is reflection on me, but when grad students don't meet deadlines. You know? And I was going to use that in the report. Now I've got to crank it out. . . . That's probably when I feel the most stress."

Performance Evaluation and Promotion

One specialist suggested that maybe the sense of stress from multiple directions was "a reflection of sort on the mid-career status." At this stage in their careers agents and specialists are going through major reviews related to promotion and tenure that can influence their ability to continue in their selected careers. Agents expressed frustration with the agent promotion process and the way it discourages their work ethic. One agent said,

I got my master's degree in just over two years. I filled out my promotion packet and was told, 'Oh yeah, well you'll have to wait until 2022 to get promoted.' . . . Your promotion packet's right. You are ready to be promoted now, but the system is that you cannot be promoted, because you haven't been here long enough.' And so, I questioned that.

Well, shouldn't it be based on merit and the work that agents are doing? And why did I bother working hard then? I mean, it literally incentivizes agents- they communicate- you should have worked less hard because there's no point. You ran this race faster. You got to the finish line, and you have to wait for the timeline to catch up.

And so, I questioned that all the way up. Someone mentioned it in a meeting and the response came back, 'This is the way we're going to do it. Thanks for your questioning of it.' And so, I think it's things like that, where as an agent, and especially a new agent, there have been multiple examples of things that disincentivize agents to work. And I just kind of go all right, well I'm going to do the bare minimum. Well, I can have the attitude, and I have to fight against it because that's morally what my values are. That's not how I operate. But it is encouraging [an attitude of] why work hard? You're not going to get anything more, right? You might get an excellent or an outstanding on your matrix which means nothing. Okay where's my gold star that I can put on my forehead? It doesn't mean anything.

Another agent said, "I came into this with my masters. And I questioned it [the promotion process] as well and was also told you just gotta wait. I understand there being like a probationary period, that first three years. That's fine. I get that. But don't tell me I gotta get through that three years, and then I've got to go through a practice round, and then I've got to go through this round, and then maybe you'll get it. Yes, that part is frustrating."

Specialists spoke about challenges associated with the promotion and tenure process. A specialist said, "But I do have stress in it and it comes with the promotion and tenure process. And I think that's just kind of something that's over my shoulder. And I think because there's a lot of uncertainty with that, I mean obviously there are some things I can control, but there are some things I can't control." Another specialist said, "The tenure clock wasn't helpful. For this kind of thing you feel like you've got to be like - 'go' - because the clock's ticking the background. Yeah you know you're gonna make it or break it. I will say the stop the clock policy which I guess is a COVID thing, a Virginia Tech thing, was kind of nice. Even though I think I was just lucky that I didn't have to use it. But I did put in the paperwork to get it." Yet another specialist suggested achieving tenure did not slow the pace. She said, "I don't think getting tenure helps because I'm still struggling with that and I got tenure and it's busier than ever."

A specialist defined the Extension review part of the promotion and tenure process as being useful but unnecessarily "laborious". She said, "Oh, I guess, I will say that I think that extension review was pretty helpful. I think that was something that - I don't know that the way it was implemented - it was pretty laborious for everybody involved. Like couldn't we - instead of drawing up like a whole dossier and providing and then having to call stakeholders, and all this - like we probably could have just sat down and had a good conversation about it and got the same output. But it was a helpful process. I think there's probably ways to improve upon it, but I got a lot out of that." Non-tenure track specialists expressed frustration in not having a clear direction for career development and promotion. One non-tenure track specialist shared "The concept of specialists having people tell you in evaluation, 'Oh, you're doing excellent work, but we don't know what your position is going to be in our department.' Like that's really stressful and I think that there's almost like a glibness or flippancy sometimes to how people in leadership positions, whether it's leadership, department heads, approach these topics that if I wasn't committed to doing the work I'd be constantly looking for a job.

Professional Development

Another source of stress identified by one agent was the high number of hours of professional development. The FCS SNAP-Ed agent estimated that in the previous year, she had completed "over 300 hours of professional development on top of regular work." One research team member found this surprising and in contrast to other professionals who indicated that additional professional development in specific areas would help alleviate stress for them.

Other Sources of Stress - Absence of Acknowledgement

This section included responses that indicated challenges with organizational and role clarity, office environment, interpersonal relationships or an absence of mutual respect that might occur with colleagues, across the region, the VCE organization, and the university.

The research team was struck by comments that indicated challenges with professionals understanding the purpose of Extension and their role in the organization. One specialist alluded to previous references to “the uncertainty and lack of clarity around what an Extension specialist is and does.” This also connected with challenges in the agent-specialist relationship. Another specialist expressed a need for clarity to understand how to work with agents. He said, “Everybody has a different take on the whole specialist agent relationship - what you are, what you are not supposed to do. And I don't necessarily find those frameworks useful because, in reality, agents will say ‘Oh that's not a specialist job, that's an agent job.’ And then turn right around and ask you to help with that thing again. So it's like ‘Well if that's an agent job, you do it.’ Just not specifically as a job. Why am I doing it? And then again, just the disconnect between VCE and the broader Virginia Tech landscape.” Another specialist spoke about getting drawn into work with agents beyond her role. She said, “Working with others, with agents in particular can sometimes add a lot of stress. And so, I feel like sometimes the expectations of what they think my job is versus what my job actually is can be super draining. I am one that really likes to make sure that I'm being productive and I'm getting lots of stuff out there. And that gets really draining when you start to get drawn into things that really aren't what you should have even been working on in the first place, which I think happens a lot with an Extension and a lot with PYD [Positive Youth Development], and so I think that is probably a very big portion of my stress.”

One agent spoke of stress related to not having a timely response to provide her clientele because of delayed or non-existing responses from specialists. Her response also emphasizes the value of interaction to create relationships between agents and specialists. She said,

I know some specialists that I can get in contact with easily, and I know they'll get back to me. And I've actually developed a list. I know specialists that will never get back to me. So, I do have a lot of those that I don't even bother to contact them anymore, because I know they won't reach back out. So, I really, it's interesting - you use or depend on a small number, it seems like, of people to get the answers from. And then, if they leave - a lot of the time there's not a specialist that comes in to take their spot. Or there's someone that does come in and you don't have the same working dynamic - and that's with Virginia Tech or Virginia State. Both universities, it's very hard to get answers sometimes, or the answers you get about two or three weeks after when you need them. And the way that the growers work and the commercial industry, they want the answer now. It seems like most of the time, even sometimes our plant disease clinic is too slow, for them, in some cases. So, I'm trying to answer things as much as I can onsite.

One agent shared frustration at not being able to help change the organization to make it more welcoming for new agents. He attributes the inability to do this to the organization not taking the time to reflect on what is needed and a sense that recommendations for change coming from the agent level are not acknowledged. He said,

I do care about VCE and I would like to be here for a period of time. But I think a lot of people leave VCE because there is no opportunity to communicate these sorts of things. And if there is, then it's “Okay, thanks for communicating it” and that's as far as it goes. I would like for agents to be valued enough that we can take a step back and go ‘let's think about how our system works.’ Right now, what are the things we need to change? What are the things that don't make sense from an agent's perspective? And how can we work on that? But there's no time to do that because we want you to do all these programs. So, there's no time to sit and think about the system, and if it works well. Because, hey we don't have time to do that. We've got an evaluation coming up. We need to do this. A lot of things. But I know we have a limited amount of time, but I could talk about this for a long time and it's not just because I like to complain. I'm passionate about VCE, but man, would I like to sit down and explain all the things I've experienced in three and a half years. And I can guarantee you a lot of the people that I work with would say man, I agree with that. It's like everyone agrees with it.

We're all experiencing it, but three people at the top make the decision. And so it's not going to go anywhere. And part of it is just a mentality of 'Well, that's the way it's always been. That's the way I went through it as a new agent. Just survive and hold on and then you'll figure out how to deal with it.' And man, that makes me so upset. I just feel terrible for any new agents coming in.

Another agent talked about the need for communication to help understand when things change or are delayed. She said,

It's just like last summer, when we were doing it [COVID-related change], it was every week and it'd be like, 'yeah, you can do this,' 'no you can't do this anymore,' 'this is going to happen, but this is now changing.' 'I know we said that you could do that but sorry it's actually changed this week.' There's a lot of changes from week to week, and it was just a really stressful time. It was really hard, working last summer, with the constant changes.

And also, just not communicating where things are on the pipeline. Like, we had a food pantry training in November and it's now March and we have nothing. We have nothing else from it. But they say, 'Go reach out to your partners.' And you reach out to them in November like they asked you to. Then you just look kind of incompetent, because you have nothing to follow up with them. They're [the partners] like this is a great idea. We really want to do this, and you're like, 'I'm sorry. I'm just waiting on the state office right now.' I wish that if they have communication like, 'Hey, we're getting approval from the budget' or 'we're getting approval from this,' but there's no communication on our pipeline. They'll ask you to do something and then no follow up. We did a walkability assessment and nothing's come out of it from last year. We have not talked about it at all. And I will bring this up in our one-on-one. But sometimes it feels like we're just doing pointless work.

Other Sources of Stress - Office Environment

Office environment was also identified as a source of stress because of either office design or interruptions that limited agents ability to focus on their work. Through COVID they learned they could be more productive working from home. However, this was in contrast to a renewed post-Covid appreciation of the ability to interact with colleagues and clientele which was identified as a stress reliever. One agent shared, "Our office is designed in a way, where we are all in one big room like we don't even have cubicles. It was really hard for a lot of us. We are that close. And so, with phone calls and visits, sometimes, it is just way more stressful to be there and then it would be home at my desk."

Other Sources of Stress - Collaboration

Collaboration was identified as a source of stress at the local and regional level. A nutrition agent said, "I feel very out in left field a lot with some of my agents in my area. Because there's a lot of nutrition programming going on, but I have no idea what they're doing, how they're doing it. So that's very frustrating." Apparently, this relates to a recent change in the organization where program assistants were made agents. A member of the research team explained, "The thing with the nutrition component is the program associates are the ones that were under the SNAP-Ed grants. They can't do things, but that's why they partner with an FCA agent, because we can. So, when I was working with a program associate, where she had to stop working with a group or could not do certain things with the group, I could continue the program or I could address things that she wasn't allowed to address. And so that's where that partnership comes in, between the FCE agents and the SNAP-Ed agents. They did have some limitations, but they're also very good resources for FCS agents." Other members of the research team spoke about cross-program collaborations developing organically to the benefit of the organization. A member of the research team spoke about the benefits of FCS and agricultural agents partnering with 4-H. She said, "All three of us. It's two on two, as FCS and Ag, are working with 4-H. You know we found a way so that we could partner with each other. I'm learning, they're learning, and we're increasing. You know the people that we talked to, Ag and FCS, you know they're from families, and have families too."

Other Sources of Stress - Organizational Systems

Multiple organizational systems were identified as sources of stress by agents. Administration and helping volunteers learn to use the new volunteer management system was mentioned in a previous quote as a potential source of stress. Other systems identified as sources of stress related to event registration, reporting, purchasing and p-cards, and travel. One agent said, "I will say I feel the most stress associated with work when I can't get my work done because of the limitations or restrictions that are put on me. And it goes right back to what [other focus group participants] said that the systems are broken or not working very well, or they're trying to force a system on Extension that wasn't made for Extension." An agent in a different focus group said, "When do I really get stressed and frustrated with this job? It's probably when I have to deal with this bureaucracy within VCE. And just the way that sometimes things are done - in a way that blows my mind. And I'm just like, why? Who thought about this? And my only thinking is one person thought about this 20 years ago and we're just doing it for 20 years, and it makes no sense. And I think when I get frustrated- and maybe that's more of a word that comes when you get frustrated- I think I sometimes feel powerless to do anything about it."

There were a couple of comments related to event registration in one of the focus groups. One agent said, "We're given a program to allow for registration for free programs, but then our clientele have to pay a registration fee just to register to use the system. It seems like all the things that are supposed to be helping make our lives easier system-wise from Virginia Tech and Virginia Cooperative Extension turn into roadblocks and obstacles for me that make my life - my work harder, which then stresses me out." Another agent responded,

"Our online registration program that we're using is horrible. And it costs us money to run programs through it. Well it did prior to COVID. And I just think that the fact that we, as Extension agents, number one - have trouble finding funds anyway to run programs, and then turn around and we have to pay a percentage back to Virginia Tech is really difficult. So many times, I have people that call in - they can't get the registration done for the program online because the system is not really made to fit all Extension programs. So, it just ends up being a real challenge. And I just feel we could do some things. I understand that there needs to be rules and reasons, we need to do things a certain way for accountability and finances, but I feel like there are some systems we could put into place that could make Extension programming and the things that we're trying to get accomplished for our communities done so much more smoothly."

Related to reporting, one agent said, "Report writing, or just the systems, the systems, overall., sometimes can be a little mind boggling." Another participant specified the reporting challenge for her was "going back and forth between systems." She went on to say "It just takes me long enough to learn it, and then they switch it." Another agent said, "So many times that I feel stress associated with my work - that tends to be focused a lot about systems within Virginia Cooperative Extension. I think we have - we keep getting things that are supposed to make agents' lives easier, but they make our lives harder. So, for example, Elements, EFARS reporting. That system does not work. Feedback goes back in and then fixes come down that make it even worse. I could create a spreadsheet and do something a lot better than what our current system does that would save me days of time." Another agent indicated that her challenges related to reporting were self-imposed as a result of procrastination, creating stress in the "December-January timeframe."

The financial system and use of p-cards was also identified as a source of stress. One agent said, "I mean, just for instance, I'm not allowed to go - even though I have a nonprofit status at Lowes - I cannot use my P-card there. Everything for Lowes is supposed to be done from HokieMart. And I just needed one part for a greenhouse project that we're building at the office. And I ended up having to go buy that personally and then submit reimbursement, because it's against the rules to do that with my P-card. Even though it wouldn't have been charged tax. I just don't understand these kinds of odd rules that seem to pop up from time to time. So those things are really frustrating."

Change complicated by the organizational system in moving to virtual programming was mentioned by one agent. He said, "I had a master gardener class go virtual. I was told, back in October, 'This is how this is going. This one function is going to happen.' Get to January and was told, 'Oh no, that doesn't happen that

way you should have done it this way back in October.' And then spend five weeks to try to fix something that could have been fixed ten times easier because I had to touch six different people in order to get the process resolved. So that to me is where I feel stress associated with my work.

In discussion following the focus groups, a member of the research team responded,

I was just like - that happens. Then part of it is just the actor being at the university. Right? So, finances come through the finance department. Leave comes through leave. So, all these things - now at one point in time we had a district admin who did tie a lot of those things together into one stop. Of course, we have the [VCE] intranet, which is good for extension related stuff. But as far as the broader university - and of course there's my vt.edu and One Campus and all this. There's a million I suppose. But still, to have that one-stop-shop - I think there's several one stop shops that we know - Hokie spa. But some of it is just having to be here long enough to where there's things, and some of them, unfortunately we don't do it often enough to where it's always a learning curve, getting back in." Another member emphasized the number of emails sent through VCE. He said, "There's a lot of emails that fly through this organization. And I'm just as guilty as everybody else. I don't read every email that comes through there. [I] kind of scan it and if it doesn't relate, it's on to the next one, Yes, you're right, there's a lot of this stuff being done, there's opportunities for people to participate. But you really have to pay attention and that's not just intranet emails but that's also the VT daily email. If you don't scroll to the bottom, you don't necessarily see everything that was in there. And some of it is actually relevant. And so, it's just a lot of volume and I don't know how to solve that volume issue.

Other Sources of Stress - Work-Personal Life Balance

Focus group respondents referred to challenges in work-personal life balance as sources of stress. Respondents indicated that work and personal life were primarily out of balance as a result of over engagement and challenging work schedules which were addressed previously. An agent in one focus group stated "The workload. The long hours. There's so much that we are expected to do in a day and managing that kind of calendar with work-life balance gets really, really difficult to do." Another agent said, "When I feel stress associated with my work is not being able to totally find that work life balance, even after three years, I don't ever feel like I turn it off like when I'm at home with my family but one of the first times and it was my first year, I thought I had a really good handle on work life balance. And then the dance studio called and told me I had left my kid there for an hour and were wondering if I was going to come pick them up." Also, as mentioned previously, agents in 4-H and other program areas suggested that balancing work and personal life was a greater challenge for 4-H agents. In some cases, participants indicated the imbalance was amplified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic when as one specialist stated "home life and work life really collided". A member of the research team reflected on the focus groups saying, "You see the family obligations as a source of stress. And you see family as a stress reliever. That's both, and I can see how it can be both. But I think COVID, has a lot to do with that, because of what [another research team member] said. Now all of a sudden everybody's at home. And you're trying to work and your kids you're trying to go to school. With the kids at home they're running around crazy. So, I think the overall stress thresholds are higher than it would normally be."

Other Sources of Stress - Sense of Isolation

Both agents and specialists located in the Agricultural Research and Extension Centers (AREC) talked about isolation as a source of stress. One agent said, "And then frustrations with Virginia Tech not knowing what Extension is, even though we're part of their mission, the land grant mission. So, that's a little frustrating. That they kind of don't know who we are and all the awesome stuff we do." Another response related to agents feeling like they are the program implementers, or "worker bees", carrying out programs developed at the university without the university recognizing what they might need in their location or their work.

Another agent spoke of the isolation in COVID creating stress. He said, "Actually having a program where I'm interacting with people is a way to help alleviate stress. And that's I guess, you could say in COVID, that's been something that's added stress to me. Because I don't get that personal engagement with

clientele now, or the master gardeners. Even though I am an introvert, I do need some personal interactions and that's affecting me a little bit this year.”

The primary reference to isolation from specialists was not having access to campus resources for health and wellness. A specialist said, “Because a lot of us are not on campus, we don't have the on-campus health and recreation facilities. And that was something, when I worked at another university, I taught in our faculty aerobics twice a week. And I loved it. I taught step aerobics at another university. And now, if I want to hit the gym in the middle of the day, it's not a five-minute walk from my building. It's a 30-minute drive from my office. And I tell my graduate students not to live here because we don't have the things that they have on campus. We don't have mental health facilities, you can drop into. We do not have recreational facilities. We do not have intramural sports.” She goes on to suggest that VCE might focus “on giving the external faculty more of the perks of being in academia.”

Ways used to Alleviate Stress

This section provides insight into how VCE professionals relieve stress. Responses are provided initially in response to the issues identified by Donaldson & Franck (2019) of over engagement and challenging work schedules. Additional themes identified in this area also relate to personal hobbies and practices, results, and support networks.

Over engagement

Extension professionals shared many ways they work to relieve their stress from over engagement, or the sense that their work is never done. Both agents and specialists talked about learning to say no in order to maintain their work within bounds they could manage. One specialist said, “I know when to stop, and I know when to slow down if I'm getting too stressed. I know when to say no to certain things and I'm pretty good about saying that if I cannot accommodate it. And that's something I've learned. I think the beauty of being through different positions in my career has enabled me to learn how to do that. And I know when my plate is full, I know it's full.” Another specialist referred to being able to say no is a skill. She is developing it by recognizing that if she overcommits she will not perform well. She said, “I'm working on me being able to say 'no'. That's been a struggle as well. And so slowly working on that skill of parsing things out - what I can handle and what I should handle. There are lots of things I would like to do, but recognizing that if I agree to them, I won't do them very well, I think, is good.”

An agent talked about saying no, but offering more reasonable alternatives to appease clientele requests. In addition, he sets his daily goals with realistic expectations that accommodate potential disruptions. He said,

We had a situation come up over Christmas. There was one producer that said, ‘Hey, this is an issue we need to do. We need to have a meeting. And I just said, ‘We can't. I will not have a meeting on that. But here's what I will do. And I can tell you why we won't have a meeting. Some of the people that you need at this meeting can't meet in person, and they will not do Zoom. Now I can communicate clearly how I'll work through this. But I will not, I will not do that.’ And I've learned that at least saying no on things that you think you have to say no to, maybe making a counteroffer that - that's helped reduce stress. As also has been shared I try to just boil down to two to three big things to do during the day. There'll be small things that will fill in my time - okay. Different client calls or whatever, and if I can get one or two those things done, and then I'm okay. And maybe I'll have the next day to work on the next thing.

One agent emphasized the importance of self-care by “Just taking time for yourself. Realizing you are doing your best work, and not everything is going to happen.” Another agent talked about getting away to “destress.” She said, “I go off the reservation. I go completely off reservation. And I literally have to take days away and go off the grid. And I go camping someplace that is so remote and quiet that no one can get to me, and I can't answer email, and I can't answer the phone. And since the pandemic, my alcohol consumption has increased. And that is shameful, but true. I talk to people on the phone. I tried not to do zooms as much anymore. And just have a conversation with somebody on the phone instead - is really,

really good. And then I stare at the moon and sitting outside under the moon lighting a fire are ways to that I used to destress.”

Another way that agents mentioned dealing with over engagement was to ask for help. One agent said, “Relying on others has been really helpful. And trying not to be a one man show. Realizing that I can ask for help and bring other people in. Because there are people willing. You just have to make those connections. So that’s helped.” This assistance may come from multiple sources. Another agent spoke about a collaboration with another agent that allows them both some relief from over engagement. She said, “I mean collaborating and working together. I am very lucky to have an agent in the adjoining county. And the two of us have our entire planning district, and we do a lot of programming together. And we are lucky that folks in our area will travel from one county to another for programming. So, we’re just getting ready to kick off the yearlong program we’re doing together. We can piggyback - if one can’t be there, the other can do it. And so I think that helps. And encouraging that as well. And as [another agent] said, we do need to do a better job of letting others know what we’re doing so that we do provide these opportunities to get together and work together in some things.”

Having office vacancies was identified as one source of stress contributing to over engagement. One agent talked about how the DD and agents from other counties helped to alleviate stress in that situation. She said, “We had a really good support system, our DD was a good person to work with and very supportive. That was appreciated. We also had really supporting agents. And I’m looking at one in here that helped answer questions from afar. And if we have animal questions we could call that person. If we had plant questions we could call the other person. So, we had a support system in place for those vacancies, which was helpful. And Extension is pretty good to rally around each other when those holes appear.”

Challenging work schedules

Professionals talked about taking breaks, setting boundaries, and making changes in how they schedule their work to reduce their stress associated due to over engagement.

Taking Breaks

Several agents talked about being sure to take breaks, especially lunch breaks to help them address their challenging work schedules. Breaks were described as being away from phones and technology. One agent specified the importance of taking “mindful breaks away from the computer.” Getting up and going for a walk, meditating, and going outside to play with their kids were ways agents took breaks. One agent also emphasized “trying to not check my email after five o’clock.”

Setting Boundaries

Agents and specialists talked about realizing there would always be work to be done, so they had to set boundaries between their work and personal life. One agent said that when he gets home “after a night meeting or whatever – don’t worry about work till the next morning at all. And I can do that. There have been a few times where something blew up and it did eat my lunch overnight. But for the most part, I get away from doing that today.” Similarly, another agent also talked about this separation, while acknowledging that there were sometimes when work was required beyond “normal” work hours. She said, “But some of the mechanisms I’ve used, and I’ve used this before from another job, was - made sure that I have dedicated time for work and once that’s done, I’m done. Because there’s times, where, yes, you know if I have camp and I’m working a whole week or somebody calls me or I have to send some email, I understand that comes up from time to time. But I’m not a 24-hour agent for the whole county either. And I have to put a cut off. Know I will get back to you in a reasonable time, but I’m not on call 24-7 for everybody, either. Because I can’t dedicate - I’m not paid like that and I’m not hired to be like that for everybody. So I have to do that, to manage my stress.” A specialist said that in addition to saying no, that during COVID she also is “trying to set hours of work and just stop working. Because there’s always work – right? You just sit there, and you could just keep working. You can work 24 hours. Then, there would still be work. And then on the weekends, trying to make it a weekend and not just a constant work weekend. As much as I can. So I’ve been trying to do that.” Another agent spoke of integrating personal time and reminders for time with her family in her work calendar.

Scheduling

Deadlines associated with annual reporting were identified as a source of stress by some professionals in this study. One agent spoke about this being a result of her procrastination. To reduce this stress, she has tried creating earlier deadlines for herself so she will not wait until the last minute. Another agent has found that scheduling time to work on reports throughout the year has been helpful. She said, "Everybody echoed the stress around reporting and I will tell you I'm one of those people who - I don't like to wait till the last minute. I am like a perpetual planner. So I put on my calendar one day at the end of every month, and I do my contacts and I put in as much as I can, in eFars. . . . And when it gets to November, December, I still have things to do - UCs have additional things to put into different systems, but it isn't as overwhelming as it was that first year."

Personal hobbies and practices

Collaboration, self-care, walking, taking breaks, meditation, getting away, and use of alcohol have been identified previously as ways Extension professionals use to alleviate stress. Additional methods include cursing, collaborating, exercise, and gardening as additional hobbies and practices. One agent credited COVID with helping her obtain work-life balance. She said, "As far as what I do to alleviate stress, I mean now I have a work life balance, because of COVID. What a blessing! Silver linings! And so, I feel like I will continue that when things go back to normal." Being close to family because of remote work came up several times. A specialist said, "Things like my kids and wife are good at pulling me away from the computer when it comes five o'clock too - that's helpful."

Results

Getting the job done, seeing the work of others, and seeing results were also identified as sources of stress relief. A specialist said, "I tend to just kind of get to work. I don't know if that's a good, healthy choice or not. But I feel like, if I could just get it cranked out. But getting the thing done really is the big stress reliever for me and so that's kind of what I focused on." Another specialist alleviates stress by recognizing that their experience is not unusual. He said, "But then, sometimes I actually just read academic publications. Just because it helps me understand that the wackiness isn't just the things I'm observing. Like there are people who study in this. It's like okay, great, just some comfort in knowing that the people who are putting their brain power to try to understand these issues that we're seeing. So maybe it's a little quirky. But that tends to work." An agent said, "Working with kids, seeing their excitement, and seeing the impact that we're having, that is a stress reliever. So, even though it is stressful to have to do all these things, seeing that impact is very rewarding. That helps me."

Support Networks

Family, friends, and co-workers have all been mentioned previously. Sometimes they are sources of stress. But in these responses, you can also see where they were also identified as helping to alleviate stress. Many agents identified their co-workers, DDs, and support staff as helping to reduce stress. One agent shared, "You wake up every day and go back to work and deal as much as possible. Yeah, I didn't like seek out counseling or anything. I didn't get to like that point or anything but, at least from a support standpoint, there were agents and supervisors available for assistance." Other agents said it helped just to have co-workers they could talk to and whom they could trust with their confidences. Others talked about missing the opportunity to walk around an office and talk to co-workers as a result of COVID. The large number of Zoom sessions and long times on screen have been mentioned previously as sources of stress. One agent shared, "I talk to people on the phone. I tried not to do Zooms as much anymore, and just have a conversation with somebody on the phone instead - is really, really good."

Another agent spoke about how getting involved in a program team was helpful for developing networks. Although they say they were discouraged from doing so. He said, "I decided as an early agent, 'Okay, well, I'm going to get involved in a program team.' Because the people in the program team - you need to hear from an agent's perspective - 'No, this hasn't been done, this doesn't make sense, let me tell you why.' But, no one told me that was an option. I was in fact discouraged to get involved in the program team, because of the amount of time that it would take away from what I was doing. And in my first couple of years I didn't

listen to that and I just went and did it. And it really helped me, because I was able to get a statewide perspective on how this system works.”

Opportunities for VCE to help Reduce Stress

The final question of the section of the focus groups related to stress was “What could VCE do to help you feel less stress?”. Recommendations reflected identified sources of stress and included acknowledgement, tenure and promotion support, providing additional personnel, revising policies, development and revision of resources, and strengthening support networks.

Acknowledgement

In terms of acknowledgement, agents spoke about wanting to have the opportunity to participate in system-wide evaluation that leads to change. They expressed concern that they are often asked for input but that they do not feel their responses are acknowledged. One agent talked about wanting to understand why things are as they are as part of an ongoing conversation that could result in organizational improvement. He said,

I think if we had people that we could have some feedback with to discuss ‘Hey, this is an issue, this doesn’t make sense, why is it like this?’ And I’ve done that for anyone who’s worked with me for any amount of time. I can’t just exist like, ‘Oh, this is just the way it is.’ I have to do something about it. And so, there’s been a number of times where I just question the system. And ‘Why is this this way?’ And it’s like, ‘Well, that’s just the way that it is.’ ‘Yeah, but it doesn’t work for most people. Can we have a conversation about it?’ And oftentimes it goes so far. And then it’s like, ‘Well this person has said we’re not going to change it. Thanks for your input.’ And it’s like, ‘Okay. That’s okay. Sure, but why does it have to stop there? Can we have an ongoing conversation?’

Another agent talked about a disconnect in what agents need from specialists and what is provided. She felt that specialists’ emphasis on getting grant dollars reduced the support they provided for agents and resulted in items provided by those grants not being as beneficial to local communities. She said,

They could be more methodical about their approach and implementation of the things that they’re asking us to do. They asked us to dedicate the time and to develop these things, but they don’t do that. And if they actually would give us specialists who can implement and do, and not just chase dollars to dump more on us to do, it would be really great. I don’t see why we’re being pushed to write a curriculum when we have finally - you know we have a few specialists who can do that. But that’s not actually what they’re doing. They’re just chasing money to buy stuff that they want us to use. So that ... I don’t know ... It just frustrates me because we never take the time to really just develop anything or give the agents the kind of help we need. Even when we have people there, it’s just about money. It’s just about money and getting money to buy stuff to dump on us and then make us use it, and it’s just - they just need to go a different way with it.

Agents felt that involving them in the development of systems and programming would benefit the organization. One agent said, “And what could VCE do to help you feel less stress? They get to evaluate us. I just wish we could get to evaluate them. I just feel like sometimes [program area] doesn’t take criticism very well, and it feels like maybe like they’re putting all their heart and soul into these programs. But when they don’t get input from us as agents, or even like program assistants - when we say I’m sorry, this isn’t going to work out. They just don’t take criticism very well. But if you ask us when you’re creating these programs, it would come out much better for the state. You just don’t get the output if you don’t get the input. But that’s where my stress comes in.” Another agent said, “Really listen to agents and involve agents in some of their processes and processing. . . You know we’re not getting the input that is needed in helping to develop some of those backend stuff that is supposed to be making our lives easier - what’s making our lives harder or work harder.” Simplifying the systems, or providing “Some good systems that really do help us behind the scenes, so that we’re not trying to jump through so many hoops to get things done” was also expressed.

One agent emphasized that not listening negatively impacted morale “because it’s like you asked what was going on but you’re not listening or don’t want to hear.” Another agent spoke about how the differences in locality size were not taken into consideration during evaluation. She said, “I’m from a very, I’d say poverty, very poor area, very small area, and we’re not going to be nowhere near the same. And like, we’re not gonna have the same number of kids and have all the same funding than someone from northern Virginia. So, that’s very different.” Acknowledging the differences and how this might shape expectations would be beneficial to her.

Another agent suggested that VCE puts too much emphasis on how many programs people do, rather than on whether or not programs are successful. She said, “For example, we have a shop smart - eat smart program that just is so hard to even get going. So maybe putting less stress on that program and really focusing on other programs that actually work and can be implemented in the community.”

Tenure and Promotion Support

The tenure process was identified as a source of stress for specialists previously. One specialist suggested that clearer expectations regarding the specialist role would be helpful. He said, “I really don’t feel like I get much support from VCE when it comes to their promotion and tenure process. I have annual meetings with my department and they kind of tell me things that I could be working on, things that I’m doing well. But I feel like I’ve never been told, one way or another by VCE leadership if I’m meeting their expectations. So, I think that would be something that could be improved upon.” Non-tenure track specialists definitely needed a clearer understanding of their promotion process. Earlier results from agents also spoke about how their promotion process might be more individualized to rely on individual performance rather than time in the system.

Providing Additional Personnel

The need for additional personnel came from both agents and specialists. One agent expressed concern that “There’s a lot of agents that keep leaving and that’s why we’re doing [the focus group], to try to figure out how we can keep more agents in the shop. So, I think more people, more boots on the ground, would also be helpful.” Another agent said, “As far as ways that VCE could help? Again, the support to fill positions. I just have to keep that going because, especially in the FCS area - sometimes we have positions open for literally years and when you’re the only FCS-type agent in the area, you can’t be everything to everyone, and you can’t be everywhere. So yeah definitely covering positions.” A specialist shared, “I just need another person. I have a 60% teaching position and 40% Extension. In my [department and program area], we educate, I think, maybe 60 or 70% of the students in our department. . . I’m the only tenure track faculty. We have one instructor so my position came about because she was overwhelmed. And I’m here now - we’re both overwhelmed. So, both in extension and teaching, I feel like there’s so much more we could do if we had another person. We could give a lot more to our undergraduates and we could give a lot more back to the community that needs help with [program] issues.

Revising Policies

Agents expressed interest in policies that support them modeling behaviors they preach to their clientele regarding dealing with stress. One agent said, “I mean, we teach nutrition and wellness and mindfulness. And to really make that an emphasis from the top down. That this is important and people need to take care of themselves, or we can’t do our jobs well. To really have that support from the top down on. That and it’s okay to say no.” Another agent expressed need for “reassurance to any agent that they can turn it off – that their programming will be just as successful if they stop answering emails at a certain time.”

Acknowledging differences and making allowances for customization in professional development programming also came out in the discussion. One agent said, “And I would also say something that I feel is – a lot of times during a regular year, not only are we doing all of these programs, but there’s also a lot of emphasis put on going places for training and such. Like the 4-H Symposium and Winter Conference. If you’re a 4-H agent, and I’m sure other agents deal with this, but I already lose probably a month traveling for

camp and Congress and teen weekends and stuff. And so I would like to pick and choose these professional developments that I go to. That I feel like are going to be valuable for my time. So, if I look over something that they're offering and I don't feel like it's valuable, I don't feel like it should be forced that I should be there. I feel like I should be able to go, 'This isn't gonna work for me. I will maybe look at it later.'"

Agents hoped that policy regarding telework would be revisited post-COVID. One agent said,

I would love the consideration for some sort of more flexible scheduling than what was already offered before to be an option continuing on. And I know there's arguments for both sides of the fence, of we're the face of our community. We're supposed to be there. We need to be present. "If you're not there, how do people know you're there?" But I think there are probably situations where people have taken advantage of it. But I think for people that it works for - I know I have a colleague that if the thought of having to be home would probably be more stressful. And so, I think people know what works for them. But personally, the days that I work from home now, I feel so much more clarity. Like I'm at my house right now. I think the other, to look like they might be at the houses, but I feel so much clearer. I feel like I can make a "to do" list, and I feel much more confident in it. I can still be present. I get messages from my office, I can send emails back to people, I can call people, I can be accessible. I might even go to a program on one of my telework days, if that's what I choose to schedule it for. But it would just help me feel so much better. I have time. It takes me 35 minutes to get to my office. So, that's another hour I have to build into my day - and with the two-year-old. I can just walk from my living room to my computer in two seconds. I can be way more productive, I have a lot more focused time and just recognizing that sometimes the office environment is not super conducive to getting that focus programming. And if we're wanting to work on evaluations - that educational design - sometimes you just don't need an interruption. You just need to be able to just get something to take first.

Development and Revision of Resources

One recommendation recommended by agents for systemwide support was to reduce change around the reporting system. One agent said, "Take some of the stress off of us with all of the reporting that we have to do and everything that we have to. I know that it has to be reported, but just the different switching and going back and forth between systems, it just takes me long enough to learn it, and then they switch it." Another agent concurred as she said,

One of the things that VCE could do to help us feel less stress when it comes to that annual report - I would so love for them to find a system and kind of stick with it. I think in the six years I've been here, there's been three different ways that we've had to turn things in. And it's already a stressful time and everybody's kind of on edge, making sure that - it's hard to wrap up everything you did in the year basically in one report. And you kind of always feel like you're not telling the whole story. I would love for them to find a system. And I know each year that system may have to be tweaked a little bit as needs change or technology advances. But it's hard when they constantly change how we have to report. If we could find one that worked. You know, look at what other states do. Find something that works for Extension and then have us get trained and feel competent that it will stay for a little while. That would help because that adds to the stress of the reporting season tenfold, in my opinion.

Another agent suggested the key to reducing stress around reporting might be personal planning. Another agent suggested the reporting system be spread out across the year. He said, "Find a system that will help us enter, maybe once a month. And we have a monthly deadline to enter in our data and what we've been doing for that month. Which is, I personally feel would be really handy. Evidently Texas has a wonderful system for entering their interview reports to the Internet each month. So it doesn't accumulate on you all, at one time. And you know just finding the system that works better for agents. Because I know there's a lot of frustration, I mean there was a focus group about how could evaluations be done early? But faculty reports go better at the end of the year and that, for me, is I think the most stressful point in the year."

A specialist recommended “Providing more resources for off campus faculty. Yeah, I mean some of the things like - even when you sign into a job. Like the benefits you are supposed to decide a day ahead of time, even though you're given a 30-day period. We don't really know what to sign up for until the time is nearing. So, even though we may have resources on campus. It's one of those things - approaching someone by phone and leaving a voicemail and then trying to get back in a timely manner or sending them an email is not the same as face to face. So I would encourage more of the off-campus faculty and infrastructure setup.”

Another specialist recommended a new specialist workshop to help prepare them for their Extension roles. He said,

Have something at the beginning of your career - like here's a new specialist workshop and here's how to communicate, here's where you can find development activities to make you a better communicator, or design your education strategies. Where does this impact report go and why do we care? Like, all the stuff I sort of like figured out on my own. And I think that if there was some sort of way to workshop at the beginning of your career to answer these questions. So five - six years in, seven years - and you're not still kind of wondering what is going on, you know what's this stuff? I hope that makes sense, but some kind of - I feel like the college had something for researchers to help you know 'Here's where to find help with grants', and 'here's the office of sponsored programs contact to put those grants in'. You know, that was really helpful and structured. Something like that for the Extension side of things could be really helpful too.

Another message received several times from both agents and specialists was the need to find a way to consolidate existing resources so they could be located and used more easily. During the research team discussion, several tools and resources were identified that can help people better manage their work and support their well-being. The team discussed the need to consolidate these resources into a place that is more accessible for Extension professionals. They said too many times, these tools or programs are mentioned during training but by the time they go back to look at them more deeply they can no longer find them.

Strengthening Support Networks

Another point made in a couple of the agent focus groups was to encourage teamwork. One agent said, “And then, as far as collaboration, how can VCE help is I think really stressing that to get our job done and to get it done well, we need to really work as a team. Be collaborative, versus I'm doing all of these programs and I'm not even going to really involve you or let you know what I'm doing.” Another agent suggested an agent directory to help build collaboration. He said, “Even on the agent level we mentioned that. I mentioned that with some agents I was speaking to this week about how we have a specialist directory. But it might be nice to have an agent directory. Because we're all loving to serve at each other's programs, even cross programming. Sometimes we don't know what each other [agents] and specialties are. So, even if that was just by district level. So you can have someone within driving distance to come help you out with a program, that would be helpful.” In addition, access to canned programming related to specific issues was suggested. An agent said, “Giving us some program outlines. It doesn't have to be a script per se, but like - here's a really good program that you could put on to cover this topic. And here are some potential speakers that you could contact to help meet that need for your growers, almost like in a directory or something.”

A specialist emphasized again, the need for greater understanding across agent and specialist roles to encourage teamwork. She said, “We have to probably be clear about expectations of people and make sure to continue to communicate that across, from specialist to agent. But also support our specialists when they're dealing with these situations of maybe over need from agents. And like, how do you support someone and let you know, help them let people know that it's not their job? So, I feel like sometimes helping you balance the expectations of others that might be unfair expectations.”

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2022

ALCE-290NP