



Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Onboarding and Mentoring

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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 mentoring and professional development organizations. This area of inquiry was part of 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. The prompt for the findings provided here was for the participants to describe their mentoring experience since joining VCE. Many participants included insight into VCE onboarding programs, so a separate section is provided related to those responses.

An overview of the project and demographics

(https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/ALCE-279/ALCE-279.html) and findings related to competencies (<https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/ALCE/ALCE-287/ALCE-287.html>), sources of stress (https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/alce-290/alce-290.html), needs assessment <add link>, and professional development associations <add link here> are provided in previous publications. Findings from the remaining category, organizational support and effectiveness, will be linked from this publication as they become available.

Methods

A complete methodology of the project is included in an earlier publication, Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Methodology and Demographics

(https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/ALCE-279/ALCE-279.html). The premise for including this section was organizational interest in strengthening mentoring in VCE. Participant focus group and research team discussions following the focus groups were reviewed and analyzed based on emerging themes. Findings from all of these groups are included here.

These findings will be used to develop recommendations within the focus group participants and research team to strengthen Virginia Cooperative Extension onboarding and mentoring programs. Recommendations will be shared widely through presentations at professional meetings and peer-reviewed publications.

Findings Overview

The research team recognized a strong connection between onboarding and mentoring experiences as they reflected on the focus group sessions. Therefore, this section begins with an overview of the research team's thoughts on onboarding. This is followed by findings from the Extension professionals related to the mentoring experiences, recommendations, and opportunities for follow-up.

Onboarding Experiences

Agents

Agents expressed a strong connection between their mentoring and their onboarding experiences. Agents said that VCE's onboarding program needs to be improved. One agent said, "The onboarding process for new agents is just not great." Another agent said,

The onboarding really should be cleaned up. I was given keys, and I opened the office by myself. I sat in an empty office for four months by myself. I had nobody else, and as a new agent that was really hard. And so, like I sat on my first day with nobody. Like no computer, nothing. Just an empty office by myself for literally my entire first day. So, I really wish- like that's why I want the new agents that come into [program area] to never have to deal with anything like that.

This agent made recommendations for a new onboarding program. She said,

But what I wish, my whole goal for VCE - would be one person per district - when somebody gets onboarded they're just with them. And they can walk them through every single process. You have no idea what you're doing when you first start. Like even just going through old files, like taking you somewhere, meeting up. I don't know. Just one person in every district that can take them through the onboarding and go through the entire process for at least a month and a half or something. Because, well, it was a hard three months being completely by myself. It was really, really difficult. I will say my new district is completely different. I know who my DPLT [District Program Leadership Team] is. I know who the leaders in the FCS world are. So, it's completely different in this district. So, my heart goes out to the people in that district, because you don't know -like no one's told you anything.

Other agents suggested informational packets would be nice. One agent made the following statement and another agent in the group agreed. She said,

It would be nice to have one of those little packets like you get when like I moved into my house. And they like put a basket on my doorstep. And they're like here's some local restaurants, like somebody in the neighborhood did.

Research Team

There was a great deal of discussion about onboarding during the research team's discussion of this section of the focus groups. One member of the team said,

We had a lot of talk in our group about the onboarding process and a lot of discouragement with the onboarding process – feeling like you're given a set of keys you're told 'welcome', and then you're left to yourself. And there's not any real 'well, what do I do now', no hand-holding . . . And I almost wonder, and I don't know the answer to this, but I think in terms of actionable items, we need to do something within that onboarding process, where you've got your structural stuff like you belong to Tech, here's your keys, here's how to fill out leave. Here's how you do this, here's how you do that. But then we need some sort of programming onboarding that takes place immediately, as opposed to six months to a year after they've been

hired. And I don't know how to make that happen, because nobody has time. Nobody can drop everything to work with a new agent. In terms of how to determine a need, how to do this, I mean if there's existing programming, they can step into and kind of work from it. [It] makes it a little bit easier, but that's not always the case in areas where we've had positions vacant for so long. So, I guess what I'm trying to say is, I don't know how to do it, but I think we need to look at some sort of process where you've immediately got someone. And it can't be the existing mentoring process – because that's not it – but some way to immediately bring in a new hire into some sort of, I don't want to say hand-holding, but working through something together and showing programming steps.

Another member of the team suggested onboarding needs to provide basic understanding of Cooperative Extension and the Land Grant System, as well as setting the stage for the type of outcomes the professional will want to achieve through their work. She said,

I don't really know how to fix it either, but just a thought in here is that it needs to go beyond – to make sure that there's at the very outset an understanding of Extension, the mission, how it all ties together with community, with the land grant, with the - like the first line agents educators, whatever the role is. The technicians, the program assistants and specialists working together to get that mission across, to get it through. Because I think in some conversations, and I don't think it really came out in the focus group that I was part of, but I've heard it just in casual conversation, I think there is sometimes a disconnect between doing a program just to say I did a program - this is what happened versus doing a program to meet a need to address an issue to help further the community. And I think there's a disconnect there that needs to be built into this process that we're talking about as well.

Another team member highlighted the need for onboarding training and possibly an onboarding liaison to work specifically with Extension specialists. She said,

I think some of this actually might be . . . in the organizational effectiveness plan. But to me that was just a whole lot of work that needs to be done. Particularly with new specialists, but even some of the specialists who have been around for a while in terms of helping, orientation, but like an Extension orientation for new specialists. And some more training and maybe even some kind of liaison with somebody on the administrative team who's like a specialist [so new specialists] know “Oh, I can go ask this person a question.” Because it's one of things I heard was their department head rarely knows the answer, a lot of times.

The research team provided specific recommendations for a new onboarding program. One recommendation centered around providing new agents opportunities for “partnering with more experienced agents, and working on something together as a group, some larger program.” Another team member emphasized the role of more seasoned agents in being empowered to provide onboarding, especially when filling vacant positions. She said,

When you say that, some of the things that immediately come to my mind, right now, on the ag side is things like working with someone on a pesticide private certification. Working on a commercial certification. Things I see about camp - helping somebody understand 4-H Camp, maybe some specialty camps. Even looking at some of the leadership development. Helping in FCS - I'll look at some of the household well water testing programs we can get people involved in. And something as simple as some of the food safety – testing the gauges on the canner lids. I mean those are things that just popped into my mind when you were saying getting people involved. Because I know, sometimes we've tried to do that here. And now I'm thinking – . . . when we start back some of these programs [post-COVID], I'm not going to have this person and this person and this person to fall back on because they're gone. They've retired, changed jobs, or something. And it's like – ‘Oh, I know these folks don't want to hear me that often.’ But yeah, I think those were the things that immediately came to mind and maybe . . . what we need to do is some kind of professional development on how can you help onboard

new agents as a senior agent passing on your knowledge. And that's what hit me when you were talking.

Someone else spoke about the loss of an onboarding coordinator and access for new Extension agents to the District Program Leadership Teams (DPLTs). DPLTs have been assigned the mentoring role in some VCE districts. Someone on the research team suggested this might be done on a more systematic basis. A member of the research team said,

My comment was, as far as within the organization of course. . . I don't know who's doing the new thing – I know I still get portfolium pathways [online onboarding reports] from [retired onboarding coordinator] these days. I don't know who's doing the new agent thing. But the DPLTs, they're kind of all-time mentors, if you will. And I don't know how many hours that could be and that kind of thing. But I know I use the folks in our DPLT quite a bit when I come up with something, even these many years later. But do the new agents know that they're there as a resource? I hope so. That's a matter I guess should be communicated.

Another member of the team commented that often new agents don't even realize they could contact someone on a DPLT or in the next county, so this needs to be communicated as well.

Research team members generally see onboarding as part of a greater professional development program within VCE. A member of the research team said,

Yes, I'm thinking, . . . we're focused right now on mid-career. But if we started as early career - kind of building some cohorts. And we could make sure, and we have agents and specialists involved in that so that there's kind of building and strengthening those relationships, too. What happens then? Is there a way that we kind of start modeling across subject lines or something or even making them aware that the Intranet is a place, a searchable place that they can go to look for some of those resources? Does that help to strengthen that communication if you start being really intentional and not chunking it up, but making sure that your keeping it in front of them regularly in the beginning, and then wean them off. But then they become more comfortable, as they get into their mid-career status. I always felt like when I first started in a new role, that was the time I had more time than ever. Because you still kind of haven't over committed yourself yet. And so, you still have to go meet the people you need to know, and more time, you have to do some different things, and so can we start using that time to help create some good habits that could continue. I don't know. Yes, it took me a while to figure out the Intranet was there too.

Another team member asked questions about how that might work. She said,

Yes, one of the things I'm wondering about now, . . . But, if you develop a training program for new agents, that maybe they're meeting not in a series of all week together, but instead you're spreading that out over the course of the year. You have people coming in at different times. But . . . if I come in, in June, I might miss the section on X that was covered in January. But I'm wondering, if you had some kind of backup- that was kind of basics online - if that might be a way that that person coming in June, because at least have a resource, they could look at. Knowing that when January rolls around again that they'll have a chance to dig into it a little deeper. Do you understand what I'm saying? Because I know that's one of the challenges. It's always been, . . . we have people coming into the organization all the time and how do you make sure that you don't have somebody sitting waiting 11 months to figure something out. How do you support them for those 11 months before they get to that training?

The research team suggested two approaches to covering “basic information” within an onboarding context. One suggestion was to have mentors assigned initially to cover this information, followed by topical information days. For the topical information days, more experienced professionals could share their experiences through

presentations or posters to facilitate discussion, networking, and development of new ideas. Professional associations may be active in supporting these. The other idea provided for the basics through a cohort series that included mentors. Mentors would then follow-up on the implementation and in more programmatic areas. The team member suggested,

And so, I'm thinking [for] both agents and specialists when they're new, let's just develop a cohort. Let's take them through some of these basics and not necessarily expect their mentor to take them through the basics. But the mentor then can follow up. And maybe there's a track for mentors where we're letting them know what the what's going on with the new agents, so that they can be supportive without having to start from the beginning. And then everybody's kind of starting from the same page, but you also have that cohort. You'd have the opportunity to have people pair up and work together and then you also can build this external mentor relationship that comes into partner so that they have lots of support as they're doing these things.

The need for mentor training was mentioned specifically by research team members as well. This was addressed in the previous content by including a mentor track with onboarding. In this way the mentors could learn where resources were and know more about how to be effective mentors and where to direct the mentees. Another point made several times was to follow-up with mentors and mentees to be sure the mentoring relationships were working.

Another recommendation was to provide “refreshers” that professionals could access throughout their career. She said,

I think some of the different training and I wish I'd understood this . . . I think a lot of that is already built into the training that exists. But how when you're reading something for the first time or you're doing a training for the first time, you don't pick up on everything. You get some of the pieces. But then, if you go back through it again, more jumps out. It's not going to jump out at the start, at the first, because you don't understand enough to make it relevant. So, I don't know action-item wise - it's almost like we need to do refresher courses. Or like we were talking about last time doing a group project type thing where you're working with a mixture of new and middle and seasoned agents and specialists. Because I'm not sure, in some cases, things are lacking, but in some cases I don't think they're lacking. I think they're there but it's something you don't pick up on the first go around.

Another team member responded, “I think you're right. We did kind of touch on that – where we have the training, but it's just so much information at one time that having the refresher or making, like you said, some group training available throughout, as part of a planned schedule would help with that. I think we brought that out when we're talking about mentors.

Other comments by the research team centered on helping new professionals develop their networks. A member of the research team said, “But we got to talking a lot about creating those networks, whether it's through the professional association on a national level or just through our VCE family.” Connecting agents with others in similar work was one suggestion. Another suggestion was creating cohorts of agents and specialists to cover basic Extension training so they can begin developing relationships early. Within those cohorts, small teams could be developed to accomplish some tasks that may be under the direction of a mentor. A member of the research team commented that COVID had erased many of the geographic barriers within the state, allowing for strong cross state collaboration. A simple recommendation was to resume sending out announcements when new people join the organization. A member of the team said,

But I miss getting the welcome announcements across the system about Jane Smith was added to . . . is the new FCS agent ABC county, or whoever is the new ag agent, whoever's a new specialist, etcetera? Because, in years past I've made a concerted effort to try to call those folks here, regardless of district, to welcome them. Especially on the ag side - if they were my district yeah, I would probably call some of the folks and say ‘Welcome to the district. I know I'm an

agent but' ... But if it was an agent, I would call them and say 'hey I'm who I am where I'm from what I've done,' and 'hey, this is something you need to know.'

Professional development associated with a career progression, beginning with onboarding of new professionals and ending with more advanced training and leadership opportunities for more senior professionals was also mentioned. A research team member suggested,

I just saw [another team members'] comment about revamping agent onboarding orientation and mentoring. And I do think it's a picture of everything and now we've put it together. So, putting on my professional development hat, it's kind of – I've been thinking a little bit about what it looks like and how it works. And I do think . . . there's a piece of it, that is not only thinking about how we onboard new agents consistently. But also, about how do we train mentors consistently so that they understand what the expectations are? And that they start to see themselves as leaders of the organization and valued for the role they play. I do think that, looking at this early-, mid-, and late-career piece gives us an opportunity to think about where people should be and what kind of things they should be doing that are a little bit different. We shouldn't be doing the same things in year 20 that we could have in year one, or else, many of us wouldn't have stayed because it gets a little boring. But yeah but what should the career progression be and how do we prepare people to follow that career progression and feel like they're growing and developing as well. So, I agree. I heard that in the sessions, and I do appreciate the ideas that you're sharing too. Because I think we can we have it - we're kind of on the edge of an opportunity to really make a difference [with the professional development programming].

Mentoring Experiences

The definition and role of the mentor seem to vary by individual and context. A member of the research team said, "I've been involved in mentorship in professional organizations and other groups. And, that's [mentorship is] very dependent on the individuals involved, sometimes as much as anything else." The DPLT's role in mentorship seems to be compounded by differences in how DPLTs are implemented across districts.

Mentoring Experiences

Agents – The agent experience with mentoring is variable with some having good, some bad, and some having a mixture of both experiences. A summary of comments related to both good and bad experiences is included in Table 1. In addition, several agents reported not having any mentoring experience. Two of these talked about their experience and how it has shaped their mentoring now that they are being placed in that role. Reasons given for not having a mentor include possibly the location, prior career experience, and being in a new type of Extension position. The agent that was further along in her career said,

I don't know if it's across the state or just in our district, but it seems to be very loosely done as far as mentoring. So, I wasn't ever really assigned a mentor. And for me, when I joined Extension, I was definitely far along in my career. I'd been working for quite a while, so at least I had some experience on my side. I didn't mind reaching out to other people and I had some really good folks to work with that would help answer my questions or push me in the right direction. So, other agents were definitely helpful - they weren't really my mentor. I think that it's interesting because I'm on the DPLT for our district. This is something that's just come up as one of our priorities this year is to try to be more diligent as a DPLT to make sure that new agents are mentored and that they get the support that they need. Because there are so many things that you just don't know when you get thrown in that everybody's already mentioned that you just have no idea what you're doing or if you're doing it right.

Similar to this agent, the agent in the "unique" role also did a lot of "reaching out" across the organization to both agents and specialists. He also speaks about doing some things he wasn't sure he needed to do as part of his self-

defined approach. Earlier he emphasized the need for improvement in the onboarding program. When talking about mentoring, he said,

My mentoring experience, I would say, was pretty informal. And I had to be very proactive about just kicking down doors and asking people to help me. There was very little guidance given to that. Again I, have a pretty unique position and was given a completely empty filing cabinet and a completely empty laptop when I started. So, I had to figure it out and not many people were in my position. So, I just had to send out emails to the agents around me. And ‘I’m going to start going to 4-H meetings’ and I’m going to get like random things that I wasn’t supposed to do, because I needed to figure out mentoring. And I would look to specialists who sort of worked in my subject matter expertise and they became mentors for me. But I had to go and figure that out. So yeah, I would say, it was informal and it could be much better.

Table 1. Overview of characteristics of good and bad mentoring experiences as shared by agents in the focus groups.

Good	Bad
Mentor and mentee cover similar subject matter	Mentors not knowing expectations
Shared location, office mates	Mentor nearing retirement
Mentors are people respected in Extension organizations	Mentor is hands-off
Mentor provides direct information on what to do and how	Mentee drives the process
Mentor and mentee go through mentoring handbook together	Starts strong, but mentor backs away
Mentor and mentee have similar past work experiences or past relationship	Sole emphasis is on the mentoring handbook
Mentor is a good teacher	Mentor not able to communicate with new agents

A third agent that reported not having a mentor felt that the mentoring program had recently been restructured and was better. She is now serving as a mentor and paying attention to sharing lessons she wished she had learned early in her position. She said,

I feel like the process has changed significantly even in just three years’ time, like some of the things that they were saying I didn’t do three years ago. I think they restructured the process a little bit and I don’t know why that was changed. I don’t know the reasoning behind it, but I feel like it’s a good process in place, but it can sometimes feel overwhelming when there’s just so many ins and outs and not all of them come up at once. I started in June and I, honestly, no one ever said specifically collect contacts - like no one ever told me. Like that was never mentioned. I think it was like ‘Here’s something on the Intranet’, and ‘This is where you’re gonna have to keep up with this’, but nobody ever really said, when you go do anything keep track of this. So, it wasn’t until like January . . . and I had kept trying to sign in sheets for different things, but really, truly, I didn’t know it kept contact [data]. During those six months, and so, then when it was time to report I thought, ‘How?’ So, when I started because of my own lived experience I shared that with the person I was mentoring, because I thought of this opportunity, but I wouldn’t if I hadn’t experienced that myself. That’s not always something you’re going to tell somebody.

With agents who had mixed experiences, the differences between the good and the bad that they shared related to being placed with a more active member in a similar subject matter area and identifying informal mentors that were more effective than the assigned mentor. Another agent had two assigned mentors with one making up for deficiencies in the mentoring ability of the other. An agent who joined Extension later in her career shared the following regarding her formal and informal mentoring experiences.

My mentoring experience is kind of maybe two-fold or three-fold. So, when I started, I was assigned a formal mentor. I was told where to find the mentor-mentee handbook and kind of told to work through it. I felt like it was my responsibility in that relationship to work through mentorship. And again, . . . I came to Extension later on in my career so it's not like some of those skills necessarily needed to be built in me because you have already had some employability skills from before coming to Extension. So, that formal process didn't really work for me.

I had two kind of informal processes. One I was lucky enough to be housed in a unit that had another Extension agent with the same subject matter, and so, while she was not my formal mentor. She was a huge informal mentor in helping me out. That was probably the person that I relied more on was that informal mentor in the office. Then I went - because you know this wasn't my first job - I went and sought my own informal mentors. Not necessarily for my first year, but in the other beginning years of my career in Extension, I looked to see who I really looked up to, or who people looked up to in Extension, and I tried to develop a relationship with them to learn from them also to try to give back to them to help them so that it wasn't just a one-way relationship. But I tried to use that informal mentorship model also.

Agents reported having bad mentoring experiences for varying reasons as reported in table one. One challenge identified by multiple agents was that perhaps the mentors did not know what they were supposed to do in their mentor role. One of the agents said, "My mentor agent has been good, very supportive with kinds of the tools she has been given. Because I don't think that she's been given the right tools from our state team". The Mentoring Handbook was identified as a resource in both good and bad experiences. It is referred to as contributing to a positive mentoring experience when the mentor and mentee worked through it together. However, the Mentoring Handbook appears to replace the mentor in negative mentoring experiences.

Agents spoke of having both formal and informal mentors and both contributed to positive mentoring experiences. Agents also spoke of having multiple mentors from different roles. Agents identified mentors that were in similar subject matter area or had similar backgrounds, that were office mates or in neighboring counties, and in specialist roles. Agent comments which described ways mentors helped are as follows:

Answer questions

Collaborate, work on joint programming, share a program

Define tasks associated with the job and describe a "typical day"

Develop long term relationships, friendships

Encourage office visits

Provide guidance and advice

Provide physical and content resources

Provide shadowing opportunities

Provide support, someone to "be in your corner"

Work on projects together

A member of the research team provided some insight into the mentoring process for agents. She also suggested this might be an area for future work. She said,

As far as I know, there's no real formal process. It was district directors asking agents who had some experience, who I guess they felt were comfortable, or had had the skills to guide somebody. So, somebody was asked. It wasn't that you went through a formal training. There is a document that you go by and check off. But I didn't have to submit that back to anybody. And that's maybe how some people either fell through the cracks initially, or maybe they didn't even know the document existed . . . [The document said] when you're mentoring someone, these are the topics you should cover. So that going back, if the process is revamped, we can probably address some of the issues that we're seeing now.

Specialist – Only one of the specialists in the study reported receiving a mentor, and that resulted in a negative experience. The specialist said,

My mentor experiences, . . . [within] VCE was actually very negative. I was assigned a mentor, and I'm doing my first meeting with that person. That person spent the entire time basically trying to assure me that she didn't understand why I was actually hired by VCE and didn't think that there was really a role for me and didn't think that it was a good fit for somebody for what I do. So, needless to say, that was a very interesting engagement.

Another specialist said,

I don't want to sound harsh on this one. I don't know if I have ever been assigned a mentor or if even I've had anyone in VCE mentoring me. I think I come in with a little different background, because I was an Extension specialist in another state before I came in. And I think that might be why I never really got that mentoring. About six months on the job I became somebody else's mentor that had been with VCE longer than I have, so I have never gotten that.

One specialist said she was supposed to be assigned a mentor. Another was asked if she wanted one as she was completing the promotion and tenure process but declined because of the time commitment. Another specialist said she was encouraged to find her own mentor. Another specialist suggested that self-selection may be more effective than having “department heads playing matchmaker.” A specialist said she has a mentor,

But my mentor doesn't have an extension appointment. And so, I get professional development and tenure and teaching info and research from her. But I don't have an Extension mentor and I do think that's the part that was really lacking for me.

Another specialist spoke of mentoring she receives from a national working group. She said,

And so, the specialists that I'm working with on that subgroup all have very similar jobs, to me. So, we spend a lot of time-sharing resources with each other, sharing ideas and like kind of mentoring each other. So, I really have stepped out and found that mentoring other places. I've also been in the Extension system long enough that when I'm looking for something, I know who I can go to . . . It's been self-directed and self-guided.

One of the non-tenure track specialists with a 100% Extension appointment saw tenure track specialists receive mentoring she did not receive. She said,

I got hired with two other assistant professors who were tenure track. Both of them had committees that kind of brought them along. At three years, they were submitting their application for promotion and tenure. They got people reviewing them and gave them feedback so that they can work on it. So that in five years, they can be applying. And I never had any of

that. I could have just stayed in the shadows and I don't think anybody would have ever asked me about it. So, it's put me in a bad spot.

One of the challenges identified by another non-tenure track specialist was not knowing what Extension is and not having access to Extension resources. She said,

Because I didn't know that there was a glitch in the system and I wasn't on a listserv. I never reported contacts. I didn't know that was a thing that I had to do, and so, until a year ago. I didn't have access to the Intranet. Just things like that, where I was like oh there's a big part of being in Extension that I didn't really know was there for years. So now I'm trying to be on top of those things. I think that having, like everybody else, [having] an Extension mentor who's somewhat in a similar position because, like I also don't know what advancement looks like, for my position. Maybe that's just a common non-tenure track thing, where we don't really know how. I'm assuming I'll figure it out in a few years.

Mentors that specialists adopted included people they met through the recruitment process, a predecessor who had recently retired, program directors, and people in the same academic department. In addition, a specialist working off-campus was mentored by someone on campus.

The benefits that the specialists associated with having a mentor were related to increased understanding of:

- Access to Extension resources
- Accountability – timeline and expectations for promotion related to papers and publications
- Advancement for the non-tenure track specialist
- Extension
- Managing or navigating the system
- Professional development opportunities
- Research
- Teaching
- Tenure
- The trajectory of my position
- What Extension is

Specialists also spoke of mentors sharing resources with them.

The research team was surprised to learn that there was such great need for mentoring in the specialist group. One team member observed,

I was a little bit surprised. Some of them have been assigned mentors but didn't have a great experience. And the rest of them didn't have any sort of formal mentoring. Some of them have found less-formal mentors. But somehow, I guess, I picture specialists in departments as being in places where mentoring is more common, but it didn't seem that was the case.

Another member of the team remarked at the lack of any sort of process. He said,

I was in a specialist [focus] group, and there is really no formal process for mentors. I know we [agents] have a mentoring process, and it probably needs some work, but at least we do have a formal kind of process. But they didn't even have a process and some were just kind of thrown out there. Others found their own kind of mentor, just built a relationship with someone who kind of became their quasi-mentor. But there wasn't anything planned.

Mentoring Recommendations

The research team noted two lingering questions for future study related to mentoring. The first was better understanding of how the mentoring process works and how relationships evolve from mentoring to teams. A member of the team said,

One of the things that I would like to find out a little bit more about is the dynamics. Folks were assigned a mentor early in their career, and some of them still keep in regular contact with those mentors. And then others, their mentor didn't do quite as much for them. Or as [another research team member] alluded to, sometimes we just take it for granted. We've done it so long, and then they started creating their own – and I'll call it a peer group of folks – that they can work together with. They each have strengths, and they can work as a team on a myriad of things, whether it was for 4-H or ag or whatever. I would like to find out how they subtly transition into those situations, whether it was still with their mentor or with other groups. That kind of thing - how that evolves. I thought that was very interesting when they got to talking about the working groups- I guess it's a good way to put it- of their peers. To see how that has evolved from just the regular mentor program. And because a lot of them seem to be learning, they learn some things from their mentors, but they've also learned a lot from their other coworkers. Through various programming efforts, that was, I think [another research team member], the one [focus group] you and I did, that was kind of talked about in them in a couple of different situations.

The other question relates to why Extension professionals who are “floundering” are not asking for assistance. The research team member said, “If they felt that they didn't receive any help and they're floundering, why aren't they asking for assistance? Within Extension, I think sometimes they feel that it's just their district, and they can't move outside.”

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