

Roles and Responsibilities of the Florida Extension Specialist¹

Matt Benge, Karlibeth Leitheiser, Saqib Mukhtar, Karla P. Shelnut, LaToya O’Neal, Maia McGuire, Shannon J. Horrillo, and Peyton N. Beattie²

Introduction

Extension professionals provide research-based educational programs and teach people to identify problems, analyze information, decide among alternative courses of action for dealing with those problems, and locate the resources to accomplish the preferred course of action (Rasmussen, 1989; SeEVERS & Graham, 2012). For this to happen, Extension professionals need to understand their role and responsibilities. This Ask IFAS publication was created to help Florida Extension specialists and their mentors in understanding their roles and responsibilities and the way their expertise fits within the Florida Cooperative Extension Service (FCES).

Who is a Florida Extension specialist?

A Florida Extension specialist is a state faculty member at the University of Florida or Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University who has a dedicated Extension appointment. Extension specialists are one of the primary unbiased sources of information for county Extension agents (Radhakrishna & Thomson, 1996; Shih & Evans,

1991) and represent the most highly specialized subject-matter experts in the Extension system (Baker & Villalobos, 1997). Examples of subject-matter experts include a horticultural Extension specialist with a 60% Extension appointment, or a livestock Extension specialist with a 35% Extension appointment. Boyle (1996) argued that Extension specialists play a crucial role in the Extension system as they serve as “the linkage between Extension specialists and county agents” and “the bridge between people’s needs and the knowledge base of the [land and grant] university” (as cited in Radhakrishna, 2001, paragraph 1).

It is important to recognize that Extension agents help specialists understand local needs and are experts in the practical application of knowledge. The campus-county continuum is the hallmark of the Cooperative Extension Service in Florida and nationally.

Duties and Responsibilities of the State Extension Specialist

Woeste and Stephens (1996) identified three major responsibilities of the Extension specialist (Radhakrishna, 2001):

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2. Matt Benge, associate professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; Karlibeth Leitheiser, master’s student, Extension education, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; Saqib Mukhtar, associate dean and assistant director for Extension, and program leader, agricultural and natural resources; Karla P. Shelnut, associate professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; LaToya O’Neal, associate professor and Extension specialist, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; Maia McGuire, associate director for Extension and education, Florida Sea Grant; Shannon J. Horrillo, associate dean for Extension, families, youth, and communities; and Peyton N. Beattie, Extension assistant professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

1. **Synthesis of translation of research:** Synthesize, evaluate, integrate, and apply research information and expertise from within the land-grant university system as an integral component of the educational programming activities of the Extension system.
2. **Leadership:** Collaborate with county faculty, state faculty, and other partners in the development, implementation, and evaluation of county, statewide, regional, national, and international Extension education programs relevant to their specific subject-matter area of expertise.
3. **Programming and scholarship:** Participate in the scholarship of Extension. This includes drawing heavily on existing knowledge and contributing substantially to the knowledge base. Extension specialists generate new knowledge through research, transmit new knowledge through educational and professional programs, and materially add to our knowledge base through outputs such as in-service trainings (ISTs), creative works (e.g., curricula) and Extension publications.
6. Synthesizes, integrates, evaluates, and applies research information and expertise into educational programming materials (fact sheets, apps, blogs, Ask IFAS publications, videos, etc.) to support the specialist's Extension program.
7. Provides technical subject-matter assistance to county and state faculty to effectively conduct Extension programs.
8. Develops and conducts county faculty professional development in formal (in-service trainings) and informal settings.
9. In partnership with county and other state faculty as appropriate, identifies funding sources and acquires funds to develop outputs for Extension programs.
10. Team teaches with county faculty in support of county Extension programs and conducts educational programs (workshops, short courses, demonstrations, etc.) at the regional and state level to address clientele needs.

In Florida, the Extension specialist might complete a myriad of activities to fulfill their responsibilities. An Extension specialist is not expected to carry out all of the activities below, but rather to participate in and conduct the activities that make sense in their specialist role. The Extension specialist:

1. Is expected to provide interdisciplinary program leadership for collaborative Extension education efforts, such as Initiative Teams, Priority Work Groups, and Action Teams, working with county agents. Specific information can be found on the [Program Development and Evaluation Center's website](#).
2. As a member of Extension teams, identifies, plans, and develops materials to support Extension programs and provides leadership to program evaluation efforts.
3. Stays up to date with the latest research and technologies within and associated with the field of expertise.
4. Maintains an understanding of the problems and concerns of clientele and the opportunities for applying expertise, relevant research information, and emerging technologies to those needs and concerns.
5. Creates awareness among county and statewide faculty of opportunities for new programmatic efforts and provides leadership for the development, implementation, and evaluation of new programmatic efforts.
11. Provides feedback to departmental faculty and program leaders on materials and expertise needed to address the problems of clientele and/or to achieve new levels of personal and group accomplishment.
12. Articulates Extension mission-specific commitments and accomplishments in their area of expertise to clientele, stakeholders, and others at the state, regional, and national levels.
13. Encourages the involvement and participation of other university faculty and community and industry experts in the development and delivery of educational programs serving Florida's residents and visitors. Participates in disciplinary and professional activities and is active in state and national professional societies.
14. Contributes to national and international Extension programs and informs Florida clientele of emerging relevant international trends and development. If the specialist conducts international Extension work, they must be able to articulate how the program/activities benefit Florida.

Program Development Methods of the Florida Extension Specialist

Extension programming is situational, meaning that each Extension faculty's program is developed, implemented, and evaluated based on a unique situation (Israel et al.,

2021). The Extension specialist serves a wider clientele base than county Extension agents, so their methods for programming need to be multifaceted. In Florida, the Extension specialist can carry out their Extension programming in five different ways (Figure 1). The Extension Specialist Program Development Methods Model is a working model that we continue to enhance and improve.

- **Top-down approach:** The specialist develops a curriculum, and agents use the curriculum at the local level. The Extension specialist is an expert on a particular subject and creates the curriculum and other educational materials for county Extension agents to use and implement.
- **Team approach:** The Extension specialist actively partners with county Extension agents to create a curriculum and other educational resources for agents' use.
- **Supportive approach:** The Extension specialist reacts to the needs and requests of county Extension agents and creates a curriculum and other educational resources as needed or requested.
- **Grant to education approach: Involving county agents:** The Extension specialist receives grants and involves county agents as part of the education to consumer process.
- **Grant to education approach: Bypassing county agents:** The specialist receives grants and bypasses county agents and implements programming directly to consumers (e.g., online programs).

In general, it is important to note that the program development methods that best leverage the hallmark of the FCES are the **team approach**, **supportive approach**, or **grant to education approach: involving county agents**.

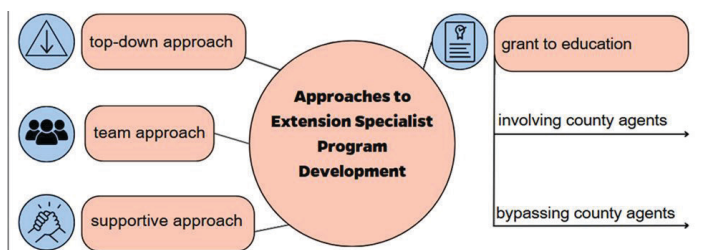


Figure 1. Extension Specialist Program Development Methods Model. Credits: Matt Bengé and Karlibeth Leitheiser

Conclusion

The Extension specialist plays a critical role within the FCES. The Extension specialist benefits the FCES and the state of Florida by synthesizing research, providing leadership for their subject-matter expertise area, and contributing to the Extension body of knowledge through scholarly efforts. Specialists as well as their mentors and supervisors

can use this information during the onboarding process to increase specialists' understanding of how to integrate their subject-matter expertise to benefit the FCES and the state of Florida.

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