Florida Extension Agents Perceptions of Professional Development Opportunities

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Introduction The Florida Cooperative Extension Service (CES) is a large and dynamic organization consisting of local, regional, and state educators, administrators, and support professionals. As such, its personnel needs are diverse, extensive, and changing. This is particularly true at the local level where over 360 (2004) county faculty work across multiple program areas with adults and youth. Like many other organizations, the rate of turnover in CES is a concern as an average of 25-30 new county faculty are hired each year (CES Professional Development Task Force, 1998).

The Florida CES has recognized the importance of personal and professional growth and development of its employees by including professional development as one of seven goal areas that represent the organizational structure for all Extension activities. In its recent efforts to focus Extension programming and restructure the accountability system, available professional development opportunities have become more structured.

Recognizing these constraints Florida CES earmarked funds to support Extension professional’s participation in experiences that enhance personal and organizational skills. Through a grant process, funds have awarded to creative and innovative professional development activities that are not considered a part of ‘normal’ job responsibilities. Agents used the funds to participate in a range of professional development experiences from a self-directed tour or citrus production regions in five southeastern states to developing an international travel study program for 4-H Agents and youth.

Purpose and Points to be Shared The poster will highlight the restructuring efforts of Florida CES’s accountability efforts and the impacts these efforts have on professional development. Furthermore, the poster will stress the importance and benefits of including professional development as an institutional goal while noting the constraints that a focused, accountable system of planning and reporting have on other areas of the organization.

Finally, the poster will emphasize the development of the grant process and feedback from CES Agents about this unique opportunity to participate in professional development activities they would not otherwise been able to attend.

Conclusions and Educational Importance Professional development is more important today than ever before because of rapid turnover, demand for competence, competition for qualified candidates, increased expectations for accountability from our clientele, and the rapid change in technology (ECOP, 2000). The Florida CES recognizes the importance of personal and professional growth of its employees by providing a variety of learning opportunities for all personnel. Extension faculty and staff need a variety of professional development opportunities that will maintain and strengthen professional core competencies as well as encourage innovative and creative thinking.