

# Identification of Competencies and Instructional Methods For Quality Pre-Service Agricultural Extension Advisor Internships

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College students with active interests in agricultural extension careers strongly need training and experience to accommodate the diverse requirements and demands of the extension advisor's occupation. Agricultural extension internships have become vital components in collegiate agriculture education programs<sup>1</sup>. The role of extension advisor has become more complex and requires pre-service training for students.

The extension advisor must be prepared for traditional problem-solving tasks in the field. In addition he must be a competent program planner, public relations expert, and communications specialist<sup>2</sup>. Organized internships in agricultural extension provide students with opportunities to acquire skills and develop advisor-level competencies. However, internship participants — both students and the cooperating advisors — must have knowledge of the competencies and the appropriate instructional methods that are essential to quality and optimal pre-service experiences.

A recent survey identified specific competencies and instructional methods for quality pre-service internships. The survey was conducted with questionnaires mailed to 148 Illinois Cooperative Extension Service agricultural advisors, assistant advisors, and horticultural advisors. On the Internship Information section of the questionnaire respondents provided data which specified the essential advisor competencies and instructional methods for a quality internship. Other selected variables were drawn from data provided in the Personal Profile section of the questionnaire.

The Personal Profile section of the questionnaire enabled the researcher to classify the 104 respondents into three distinct categories: former extension intern, first year advisor, and master advisor (10 years or more extension experience). These classifications provided a basis for analysis of differences among responses. Final analysis was based on data submitted by 82 of the 104 respondents since those respondents fit the three selected categories.

Two other groupings were established: age and previous internship experience. Seventy-seven respondents of the selected 82 indicated their age as being in the ranges of 20-45 years, 46-55 years, and 56 years and above. Internship experience was classified as "previous" or "none."

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Data gathered from the Internship Information section included rank orderings of eight selected advisor competencies, as specified by Coffindaffer<sup>3</sup>. Rankings were derived from the mean based on each respondent's ranking of the competencies on the questionnaire. Table 1 illustrates the mean rankings of advisor competencies and the number of first place rankings each advisor competency received.

**Table 1. Mean Rankings of Advisor Competencies by Illinois Extension Advisors Surveyed April 1981 N = 81\***

Competency	Mean Ranking	No. of first place Rankings
Communication	5.98	20
Agent responsibilities and functions	5.40	32
Extension teaching methods	5.02	6
Public relations	4.74	8
Leadership development	4.73	6
Program planning	4.28	7
Group organization	3.80	1
Office management	2.14	1

\* one first place ranking not submitted.

Advisor competency rankings were compared to age classifications to determine the extent to which competency rankings differed among advisor age groups. Table 2 illustrates the ranking patterns for each age group, and the coefficients derived from correlational analysis.

**Table 2. Ranking of Advisor Competencies by Mean Scores Relative to Age of Illinois Extension Advisors Surveyed April 1981**

Competency	Age 20-45 (N=29)	Age 46-55 (N=28)	Age 56+ (N=20)
Communication	1	2	1
Agent responsibilities and functions	2	1	4
Extension teaching methods	3	3	5
Public relations	4	5	3
Program planning	5	6	6
Leadership Development	6	4	2
Group organization	7	7	7
Office management	8	8	8

Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficients (.738+ at .05 level)		
	Middle-age	Senior (56+)
Young (20-45)	.91	.69
Middle-age (46-55)		.74

There was a significant difference (.69) between the rankings of Young and Senior advisors. Comparisons between competency rankings and advisor internship experience showed no significant differences.

With regard to appropriate instructional methods, advisors ranked 5 methods for use by interns. Table 3 illustrates mean rankings for each method and the number of first place rankings.

**Table 3. Mean Rankings of Instructional Methods by Illinois Extension Advisors surveyed April 1981 N = 82**

Method	Mean Ranking	No. of First Place Rankings
Agents' on-the-job instruction	4.67	66
Conferences and special meetings	3.05	6
Classroom instruction	2.67	9
Intern handbooks and study guides	2.62	1
Audio-visual methods	2.01	0

Age and previous internship experience comparisons with these rankings yielded no significant differences.

Additional competencies recommended for development during internship included Time management. Computer instruction was an additional instructional method recommended for inclusion in internship experiences. These two recommendations were common among all age groups and experience classifications.

All respondents preferred a 12-16 week internship. No significant differences were found among preferred length of internships when compared to age and previous internship experience. The respondents also felt that primary instructional responsibilities rested with the cooperating advisor.

The results of the survey suggested the following conclusions regarding competencies and instruction for quality collegiate level agricultural extension internship programs:

1. Advisors felt that communication skills, advisor role and function, and extension teaching methods should receive greatest emphasis during internship experiences.
2. The extension advisors felt they should be the primary source of instruction for the intern, using on-the-job instruction to demonstrate the essential competencies.

Based on these conclusions the following recommendations were made:

1. Internship responsibilities and functions of the advisor should be clearly specified before training of interns, with specialized advisor training to be provided by sponsor of internship program.
2. Advisors should have access to and receive updated instruction in efficient use of on-the-job instructional methods.
3. Communication skills, role and function of advisor, and use of extension teaching methods should be given major emphasis during an internship.
4. Time management skills should be highlighted during an internship experience.

5. The primary mode of instruction should be the "on-the-job" format, with some use of computerized instruction to assist in training interns.
6. Internships should last from 12 to 16 weeks.

#### Footnotes

1. Milton E. Larson. 1972. **An Internship Program for the Training, Exchange, and Transition of Vocational Education and Business, Industry, Agricultural, and Government Personnel.** Ft. Collins: Colorado State University.
2. Paul A. Miller. 1973. **The Cooperative Extension Service: Paradoxical Servant.** New York: Syracuse University.
3. Billy Lee Coffindaffer. 1961. **Experiences of Beginning Cooperative Extension Agents and Their Implications for an Induction Training Program.** Doctoral Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

## Students at the Interface Between College and Community

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Universities and colleges have often been categorized as "ivory towers" - unique settings isolated from the "real world" and occupied by professors and students who blissfully ignore the problems that confront surrounding communities.

Realizing that undesired isolation of community from university life can and sometimes does occur, I would like to present an approach to teaching that would minimize the separation between community and student life.

My approach involves establishing an interface between university and community, identifying a common ground where students act as a link between two somewhat separate territories. Through undergraduate students, projects of mutual benefit to both universities and communities can be embraced.

Undergraduate students, with fresh and eager minds and immense energies, are one of America's great untapped resources. They are, however, often overlooked as a resource, and have long been placed in a passive role within our universities. Teachers traditionally take the active role, gathering and compiling information, asking questions, and providing answers. Advanced learning, of an active and ongoing kind, can be stimulated by allowing and encouraging students to, first, ask important questions, and second, set about exploring new territories by finding their own answers.

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