Texas 4-H Agents’ Perceptions of Selected Competencies in the 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge, and Competency Model

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

The first objective of the study was to establish levels of reliability for the Organizational Systems domain of the 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge and Competency model. Five of the six scales (Professionalism, Personal Effectiveness, Organizational Effectiveness, Risk Management, and Resources Development and Management) had acceptable levels of reliability for measuring proficiency and importance. Although some of the proficiency measurements failed to reach the desired Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .80, the sample size used in this study was small \((n = 59)\). A larger sample size would be likely increase the reliability levels to the desired level.

The second objective was to describe agents’ perceived levels of proficiency for competencies in the OS domain. Agents perceived themselves to be proficient in many of the competencies. They were most proficient in Professionalism and Risk Management competencies, which included competencies such as “Demonstrates attributes of a positive role model,” and “Designs and maintains a safe, inclusive program environment for youth and adults.” Due to the nature of the 4-H program, agents often have the opportunity to practice these competencies.

4-H agents were least proficient in Personal Effectiveness competencies. Extension agents have been struggling to balance their careers with their personal lives for many years (Ensle, 2005; Fetsch & Pergola, 1991). Reasons for job burnout include night meetings, weekend events, and unexpected clientele drop-ins. More complex reasons may exist, too. Ensle suggests agents are burdened by the need to be accountable to multiple administrations (county, state, and...
national). She also cites the constant pressure to prove the educational value of extension programs as an additional source of stress. Unfortunately, most of these reasons are inherently linked with Extension work, which makes overcoming them a challenge.

The third objective was to describe the perceived importance of competencies within the OS domain. Grant writing was a competency in which the agents did perceive themselves to be proficient. Grant writing was only assigned average importance. One might speculate the lack of proficiency assigned to grant writing is related to its perceived lack of importance. The lack of importance is interesting because grant writing has been considered an integral part of subsidizing programs and salaries for at least twenty years (Wilson, 1985). Barth, Stryker, Arrington, and Syed (1999) suggested the pursuit of alternative funds became necessary because of reasons such as insufficient federal funding and the expansion of Extension programming beyond the traditional USDA/CSREES mission. Funding is predicted to continue its decline due to private sector competition and insufficient political support (Comer, Birkenholz, & Stewart, 2004). It would be a surprise if grant writing did not take on a more important role in Texas in the next several years. An increase in proficiency may become a necessity.

Personal Effectiveness competencies were perceived to be the most important. Conflict management and time management, competencies included in the Personal Effectiveness domain, were also identified as important in the Harder and Dooley (2006) study. The ascribed level of importance is particularly worth noting because agents did not perceive themselves to be proficient in Personal Effectiveness. The problem may be endemic to a culture which often equates success and respect with the amount of time dedicated to the job.

Organizational Effectiveness was the least important scale. Agents favored competencies which were more practical, such as “Listens effectively and actively,” over more abstract
concepts like “Uses mission and vision to shape programs and organizational structure.” This can likely be attributed to a difference in how frequently the competencies are used. An agent can be expected to set priorities, listen actively, and mediate conflict on a regular basis. The integration of mission and vision into program planning is most commonly associated with the creation of plans of work, an activity that traditionally occurs on an annual basis.

Finally, the study sought to determine priority training needs for Texas 4-H agents. Training is most needed to assist agents with achieving proficiency in the Personal Effectiveness competencies. The five highest MWDS scores were for Personal Effectiveness competencies. The MWDS for “Practices stress management and stress reduction” was 2.87 out of a possible 3.00 points. The need for training in this area is significant. Agents must be able to gain proficiency in Personal Effectiveness to combat the burn-out trend so commonly associated with Extension.

This study provides important data which may be used: (a) to plan training opportunities addressing Personal Effectiveness competencies, (b) as a reference for evaluating the success of training interventions, and (c) as a reference for reliability. This study is limited by the small population size and the examination of a single domain. Replicating this study on a broader scale is recommended, as it would increase the inference base for which generalizations may be made. It would also allow administrators to prioritize the training needs of agents according to domain. Future research should investigate the remaining domains so a greater understanding of the 4-H PRKC can be developed.