Introduction

Cooperative Extension 4-H agents must be competent in many areas, including youth and volunteer development, public relations, and programming (Cooper & Graham, 2001). Some 4-H agents may be overwhelmed by the diverse skills required for effective job performance. One method for helping agents understand the skills needed for excelling in their roles is achieved by using competency models. According to Stone and Bieber (1997), competencies are “the application of knowledge, technical skills and personal characteristics leading to outstanding performance” (¶2). Competency models clarify what is expected of effective employees and can be used to ensure employees are adequately prepared for their professional roles (Stone, 1997).

Historically, Cooperative Extension has used competencies to assess employees’ training needs. Keita and Luft (1987) investigated agricultural agents’ training needs by measuring their perceptions of the importance of selected competencies. A similar approach was taken to determine the competencies needed by Extension workers to effectively teach farmers (Martin & Bin Sajilan, 1988). Extension research has focused on employees’ perceived competence in areas such as volunteer administration (King & Safrit, 1998), human resource management (Haynes, 2000; Lindner, 2001), and public issues education (Singletary, Smith, Hill & Corcoran, 2004).