

DEVELOPING A PEER MENTORING PROGRAM FOR EXTENSION EMPLOYEES

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In 2010, Tennessee Extension launched a strategic planning process to honor the past and look to the future. The strategic plan provided a roadmap to guide Extension to achieve excellence and focus attention on what matters most: advancing Extension in Tennessee. The plan resulted in five overarching goals that included strategies and action steps to achieve each goal. One of the five overarching goals was to invest in Extension's human capital to become the employer of choice to attract and retain a diverse and highly qualified workforce.

Background

Developing a statewide peer mentoring program for agents and administrative assistants was part of the goal to invest in Extension's human capital. Successful Extension programs depend on confident Extension personnel. Mentoring new employees helps them achieve early success, which promotes greater job satisfaction, increases confidence, improves morale, and prevents or reduces employee turnover. Prior to 2010, Tennessee Extension did not have an organized mentoring program for Extension employees that was consistent across the state for each region. There was also not any one person

responsible for accountability and/or maintaining a consistent mentoring program. Therefore, the mentoring initiative was deemed as a priority and Extension administration provided resources and funds to accomplish development and implementation of a new peer mentoring program for Extension employees.

Purpose and Objectives

A diverse team of Extension staff representing all regions, program areas and various positions was appointed to develop and implement a mentoring program for Extension employees, and the planning process began in August 2014.

The overall objective of the Tennessee Extension Mentoring Program is to build confidence in new employees. Specific objectives included:

- Provide resources needed for the new employee.
- Equip and train new employees to be competent in their areas of expertise.
- Increase job satisfaction.
- Introduce the new employee to the UT-TSU Extension program.

Planning and Implementation

The mentoring team spent the first few months researching current regional mentoring programs in Tennessee Extension, interviewing Extension personnel, and looking at other states' Extension mentoring and onboarding programs. As a result, a yearlong pilot mentoring program targeting Extension agents was designed and put into action beginning July 1, 2015.

Once the agent pilot mentoring program was in progress the team then focused on developing a mentoring program for administrative assistants. There was not a current mentoring program in place for administrative assistants, so the team conducted focus groups to determine the best way to meet their needs. Three focus groups were held involving Extension administrative assistants from each region and the Knoxville campus. The goal was to collect data to design a mentoring program for new administrative assistants.

After compiling and reviewing the data from the focus groups, it was clear that a mentoring program was a critical need. Based on the data collected, the team determined that the agent mentoring program design could be adapted to meet the needs of administrative assistants. Using focus group data and the agent mentoring model, the team designed and implemented a mentoring program targeting newly hired administrative assistants in early 2017.

Major Outcomes

The mentoring program consists of five components:

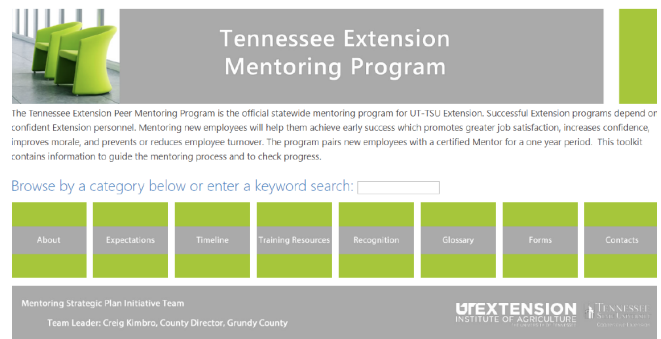
Mentor Assignment Process

All new agents and administrative assistants are assigned a mentor within their first month of employment. The mentoring relationship begins on the first day of the assignment and continues for one year. Assignments are made based on program area, geographic location, and information provided by the mentor and the protégé in an online form. Mentors are provided with a travel stipend to allow face-to-face meetings with their protégés.



Mentor Toolkit

The Mentor Toolkit contains expectations of mentors and protégés, a checklist and timeline for addressing topics with a protégé, a glossary, and other relevant information that mentors need in order to successfully complete the mentoring relationship with their protégé.



The Tennessee Extension Peer Mentoring Program is the official statewide mentoring program for UT-TSU Extension. Successful Extension programs depend on confident Extension personnel. Mentoring new employees will help them achieve early success which promotes greater job satisfaction, increases confidence, improves morale, and prevents or reduces employee turnover. The program pairs new employees with a certified Mentor for a one-year period. This toolkit contains information to guide the mentoring process and to check progress.

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Mentoring Strategic Plan Initiative Team
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Mentor Training

All employees who wish to serve as a mentor must have a minimum of three years of service with UT-TSU Extension and be approved by their county director and regional director or department head prior to being invited to a mentor training. The training covers the tools available in the Mentoring Toolkit and provides an overview of the program in order to fully equip mentors. After the training, participants may choose to complete a Mentor Agreement and biographical sketch to be considered to serve as a mentor in the future.

Evaluation

Mentors and protégés complete an online evaluation of the program after six months and after one year.



Recognition

All mentors who complete the training receive a certificate of completion designating them as a certified mentor. Mentors can be nominated for special recognition

after one full year of service as a mentor. The All Star Mentor Award is given each spring. Mentors may be nominated by their protégé, their peers, or their supervisors. A subcommittee of the Mentoring Advisory Committee selects winners. Awards are presented at professional association state meetings.

Sustainability Plan

Administrative responsibility and budget management for the mentoring program resides in the department of Extension Evaluation and Staff Development (EESD). An Extension specialist is responsible for coordinating the program and working with the mentoring advisory committee. This standing committee with rotating membership provides input on mentor matches, conducts training for mentors, and welcomes new employees.

Initiative Team (2014 - 2016)

Team Leader

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Team Members

Rob Augustin, Extension Agent, Giles County

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