Recruitment and Onboarding Resources for Extension in the West

Sam Angima
Oregon State University

Jan B. Carroll
Colorado State University

Recruitment and Onboarding Resources for Extension in the West

Abstract

Recruitment and retention of competent Extension professionals is a priority for ensuring that Extension remains relevant in communities. Extension program leaders in the West have developed an online resource to support recruiting and onboarding of new Extension professionals. Components of the resource include summaries and short videos featuring Extension professionals from throughout the region discussing Extension work, Extension's history, community relationships, professional expectations, and program assessment. These elements are intended to support each state's recruiting and mentoring programs and to foster a more cohesive approach across Extension for recruitment, onboarding, retention, and program assessment.

Keywords: orientation, onboarding, new employees, retention, recruitment

Sam Angima
Assistant Dean,
Outreach and
Engagement
College of Agricultural
Sciences
Oregon State
University
Corvallis, Oregon
sam.angima@oregons
tate.edu
@sangima

Jan B. Carroll
Director, Civic and
Federal Engagement
Colorado State
University
Fort Collins, Colorado
jan.Carroll@colostate.
edu
@Jan7Colorado

Introduction

The Western Region Program Leadership Committee (WRPLC) is appointed by the Western Extension Directors Association (Western Extension Directors Association, 2017). WRPLC, of which we are members, consists of Extension program representatives from each of the Western Region states and U.S.-affiliated territories: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Micronesia, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Republic of Palau, Territory of American Samoa, and Territory of Guam. These leaders identify opportunities and provide leadership for advancing multistate programs and operational and organizational issues of importance to Extension in the West.

In 2005, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy and the Leadership Advisory Council of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities identified faculty retention as a major challenge facing Cooperative Extension nationally (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 2005). Likewise, the

main reason among seven identified by Branham (2005) for why employees decide to leave a job is too little coaching and lack of feedback. Ensle (2005) observed that it has become increasingly difficult to recruit new, specialized Extension educators. Attracting highly qualified prospective educators in an increasingly competitive marketplace requires a diverse set of tools for improving recruitment, onboarding, and retention. Implementing innovative recruiting strategies can improve the overall quality of agents, educational services, and programs offered by Extension (Arnold & Place, 2010).

Recognized recruitment strategies in Extension include interpersonal one-on-one interaction (including personal invitations) by other Extension educators, Extension specialists, college advisors, peers, clientele, administrators, friends, and candidate advisors (Arnold & Place, 2010). Contributions by a wide array of those associated with the Extension profession inspire potential job seekers to understand that Extension careers are centered on advising, helping communities, and engaging in practical work to address contemporary challenges. Extension needs to deploy a systematic approach to ensure that initial inquiries by prospective candidates are addressed with accurate, appropriate, and comprehensive information. We all will benefit from a workforce of members who feel connected to Extension as a system and have a more complete understanding of our approach to community engagement.

Due to the wide geographic area of member institutions, the WRPLC set a goal to provide a uniform and consistent digital information platform focused on delivering education regarding work expectations for Extension professionals. Referring newly hired employees and those aspiring to work in Extension to resources on the platform addresses Extension's aspirations to recruit and retain well-qualified personnel, including individuals from diverse backgrounds whose differences will enrich us, expand us, and provide us with a competitive edge toward our mission (Grogan & Eshelman, 1998). Processes for attaining workforce goals vary from state to state, but collectively, the Western Extension Directors Association and WRPLC recognize that a web-based platform can be used to attract and support new employees and showcase successful Extension programs in a way that will expand our reach and impact in diverse communities.

Online Resources

Extension work and success relies on strong local relationships, partnerships, and engagement with communities. Therefore, attracting (recruiting), training (onboarding), and accommodating (retaining) those new to Extension must involve providing more structured mentoring that helps them understand core Extension values and nurtures them over their Extension careers.

WRPLC has developed brief, structured online resources for recruitment and training of new employees. Member institutions are using these resources as part of job advertisements to educate potential applicants on job expectations and as components of onboarding training to complement existing mentoring resources in each state. Training is among seven themes developed by Safrit and Owen (2017) as important for encouraging retention of Extension employees. These authors characterized training as the provision of "moral support and material resources for the continuous professional education . . . of the newly hired employee so s/he may meet and exceed basic professional competencies (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations) needed to ensure professional success" ("Findings," Table 1). Additionally, the online resources we developed cater to Extension's nontraditional employees (e.g., millennial educators) who generally are digital savvy. The digital content is readily viewed on mobile devices.

The resources are online at http://extension.wsu.edu/wrpl/. They cover many topics central to Extension

work, including

- history of Extension and the land-grant university system,

- accountability to community and funders,

- needs assessment for program development and delivery,

- program assessment and evaluation,

- documentation and sharing of impacts, and

- adult education and Extension scholarship.

WRPLC continues to develop new online resources in response to feedback collected from users and through needs assessments conducted in the Western Region states. Overall, the resources include elements that are common to Extension work across the West and complement each state's efforts to provide a strategic orientation for new (and even seasoned) Extension educators.

The online content centers on short videos highlighting Extension educators sharing their experiences and explaining how they personally view the impact of their work in their communities. Each video is accompanied by a short summary of other resources that enhance the video content. WRPLC urges users to follow up with colleagues, mentors, regional directors, department heads, program leaders, and Extension directors to relate these trainings to their particular assignments in their institutions. To continually improve the content offered, WRPLC seeks input and feedback via a link to an online form prominently displayed on each module (see http://extension.wsu.edu/wrpl/module-evaluation/).

Outcomes

Since inception of the platform in mid-2017, over 2,000 visitors have accessed the resources. Notable observations are the number of individual visitors accessing the pages (unique pageviews) and average time spent (in seconds) reviewing or listening to content (avg. time on page). These data are presented in Figure 1; see the figure note for an explanation of terms. Five prominent modules where visitors have spent comparatively more time are (in order of visitor time spent on the module page) accountability, program assessment, history of Extension, scholarship of engagement, and program evaluation. User data help inform WRPLC on what is trending with regard to those accessing the resources. Armed with this information, states can put more emphasis on relevant topics in job advertisements and employee trainings. Likewise, feedback received via the embedded module evaluations helps WRPLC improve the content on an ongoing basis to better accommodate needs of potential and new employees.

Figure 1.

Web Data Showing How 2,000 Visitors Chose to Spend Their Time Learning About Extension
on the Recruitment and Onboarding Website
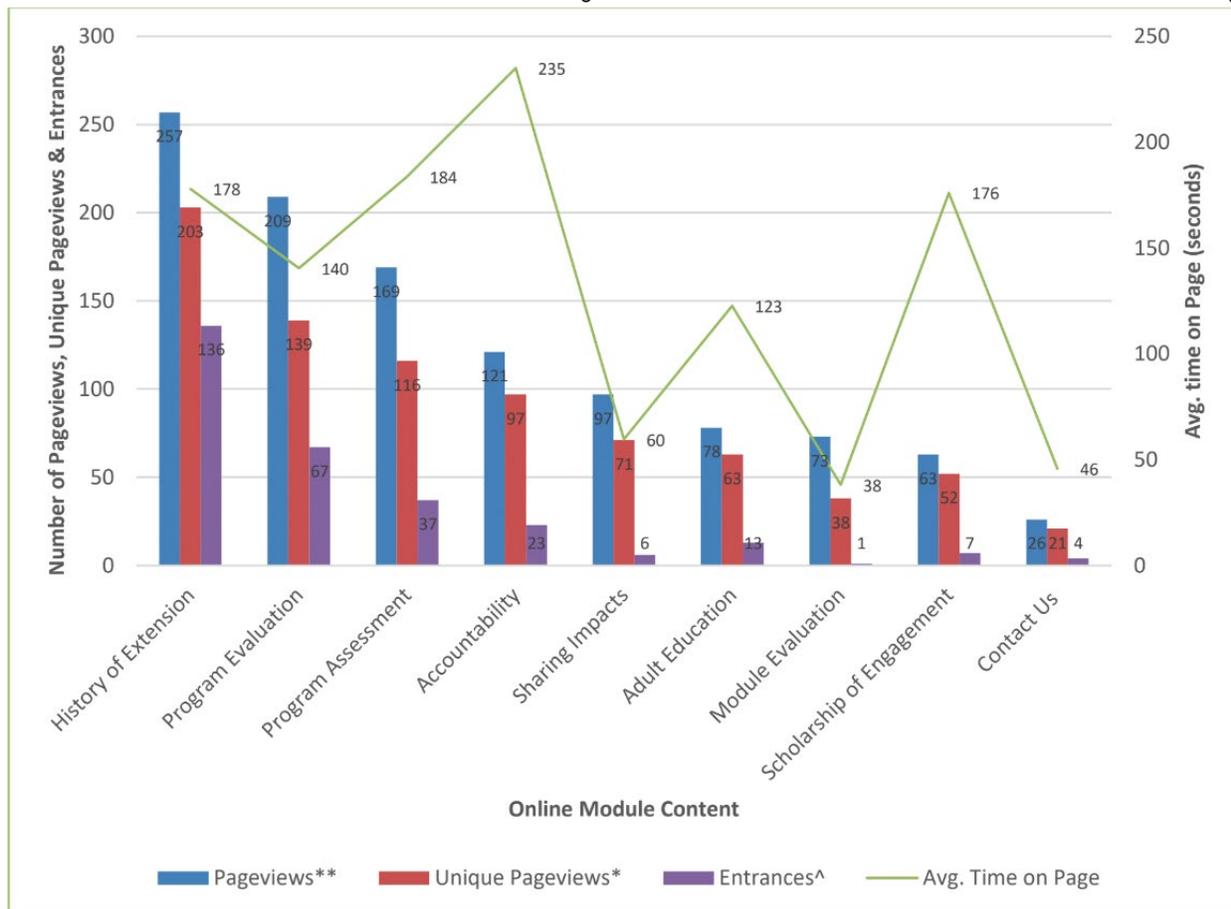
*Unique pageviews refers to counts of individual users. For example, if 3 users each visited the website 10 times, the total unique pageviews would be 3. **Pageviews refers to the total number of times specific content is accessed by users. For example, total pageviews for 3 users who visited a topic 10 times each would be 30. ^Entrances refers to the number of visits to a page that were a user's first entrance to the website. For example, if a user enters page A, clicks to page B, and then leaves the site, page A would record an entrance and page B would not because the user entered on a different page and then navigated to page B.

Implications for Extension

The resources described here are additional core training tools for Extension. For current Extension educators, they offer opportunities for professional development. For prospective and new employees, they offer fundamental grounding on core Extension values that shape successful Extension careers. At the organizational level, they enhance retention across our institutions. Helping train and retain competent Extension educators is a collective effort of all institutions, and these resources contribute to that effort.

Acknowledgments

All WRPLC members created and contributed content to the platform described herein. Therefore, we collectively thank our colleagues on the committee: Jeff Bader, Montana State University; Kelly Crane, University of Wyoming; Roxie Dinstel, University of Alaska; Jeff Goodwin, University of Hawaii; Chris Greer, University of California; Doreen Hauser-Lindstrom, Washington State University; Bruce Hinrichs, New Mexico State University; Kevin Kesler, Utah State University; Eric Killian, University of Nevada; Jim Lindstrom,

University of Idaho; and Cody Stone, Montana State University.

References

Arnold, S., & Place, N. (2010). What influences agents to pursue a career in Extension? *Journal of Extension*, *48*(1), Article 1RIB1. Available at: https://joe.org/joe/2010february/rb1.php

Branham, L. (2005). *The 7 hidden reasons employees leave*. New York, NY: AMACOM.

Ensle, K. M. (2005). Burnout: How does Extension balance job and family? *Journal of Extension*, *43*(3), Article 3FEA5. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2005june/a5.shtml

Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. (2005). 2005 report. Washington, DC: Leadership Advisory Council, National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

Grogan, S., & Eshelman, B. (1998). Staffing strategies for a more diverse workforce: Case examples in Cornell Cooperative Extension. *Journal of Extension*, *36*(1), Article 1FEA1. Available at: https://joe.org/joe/1998february/a1.php

Safrit, D. R., & Owen, B. M. (2017). A conceptual model for retaining county Extension program professionals. *Journal of Extension*, *48*(2), Article 2FEA2. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/2010april/a2.php

Western Extension Directors Association. (2017). The Western Extension Directors Association committees. Retrieved from http://extension.oregonstate.edu/weda/weda-committees