Increasing Extension Visibility by Involving Undergraduates in Research

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Abstract

With baby boomer Extension professionals at or nearing retirement, recruitment strategies for future hires are important. Reaching out to undergraduate students is not uncommon; however, involving them in research may be an untapped tool for exposing them to a profession in Extension. Using community-based research that involves undergraduate research assistants is a positive way to increase awareness about professions in Extension.

Keywords: Extension, profession, undergraduates, research

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Introduction

Members of the post–World War II generation, often referred to as baby boomers, were eligible to retire at the age of 65 years, starting in 2011 (Colby & Ortman, 2014). Concerns about an increase in retirement candidates among Extension employees were addressed by a study conducted in North Dakota (Borr & Young, 2014). Borr and Young (2014) found that 42.33% of the state's Extension employees were eligible to retire within 10 years and further found that an additional 23% anticipated leaving their positions during that time frame regardless of age. The localized example of North Dakota Cooperative Extension highlights the need for a recruitment strategy to attract future Extension professionals. One promising way to recruit future Extension professionals is by increasing student awareness of and excitement about Extension employment.

The range of employment opportunities within Extension is diverse, from youth development (4-H) to adult financial education, and Extension's nontraditional educational and learning activities are situated in communities (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d.). This community-based approach should entice students entering the job market as today's students show enthusiasm for interacting with community members (Braverman et al., 2014). However, the visibility of Extension to undergraduate students is challenging as on-campus students rarely encounter county-based staff/faculty. Attempts to expose undergraduate students to Extension have involved blended projects (Loizzo & Lillard, 2015), summer Extension courses (Braverman et al., 2014), and service learning (Barlow, 2012). Our study used another tool to expose undergraduate students to

Extension, involving them as investigators in a needs assessment research project. The effort involved the students in a focus group study that one member of our team was conducting to inform the development of nutrition and food safety programming in 2015.

Undergraduate Role as a Research Investigator

The undergraduate students, the other two members of our author team, were engaged in the research project from the beginning. They were involved with a key project element that involved six focus group sessions, held in the northern part of Maryland (Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Carroll County, and Harford County), from April to August 2015. They assisted with (a) welcoming focus group participants, (b) taking notes, (c) transcribing three focus group conversations, (d) analyzing an assigned data set, (e) compiling a one-page report, and (f) assisting with a manuscript for peer-review.

Suggestions for Implementation

On the basis of our experience with the project, we can make several suggestions to Extension agents interested in recruiting dependable and competent undergraduates to assist in community-based research.

Planning and Recruitment of Undergraduates

- Enlist the campus Extension specialist in helping identify undergraduates who would be reliable research assistants for the particular study.

- Establish a timeline for the study before contacting students so that they will have the information they need to make an informed decision about committing to assist in the research project.

- Identify and address potential logistical challenges that may face undergraduate students, such as transportation or traffic.

- Secure funding to provide students with time compensation and mileage reimbursement.

Involvement of Undergraduates in Community-Based Research

- Meet with the potential undergraduate student researchers, individually or as a group, over the phone, in-person, or by some other means. When you meet,

  - provide background about your research interest(s),

  - identify the goals of the study, and

  - ask what goals the students expect to achieve by participating in the project.

- After the meeting with undergraduates, create a memorandum of understanding.

- Provide students with access to literature, including methodology and general subject articles, on the study's topic.

- Expect each student to successfully complete training for human subject research before you include him or her as an investigator when applying for institutional review board approval.

- Train the students in the study protocol before they interact with the study participants.

- Keep in contact with the students while they engage in the data analysis, report write-up, and manuscript development processes.

- Encourage the students throughout the process, particularly if this is their first time conducting human subject research and/or working with Extension.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our goal was to include undergraduate students in research, specifically as part of a needs assessment related to prioritizing programs in a large cluster of multiple communities. The two undergraduate students were immersed in the study as investigators, with the levels of faculty-to-student ratio and interaction both being high. The ratio was purposeful and allowed the students to feel ownership of the study rather than become disinterested and disengaged. The quality of the undergraduate experience evolved into a valuable mentoring process that helped the undergraduate students move on; one found employment in a community health field, and the other went to graduate school.

Though the number of students working with the county-based Extension educator on our team was small, the undergraduate experience evolved into a valuable mentoring process. In summarizing the experience, the student who went on to work in community health made the following comment:

> Working closely with an Extension educator gave me research experience I would not otherwise have gotten. Directly after graduation I was employed by an Extension specialist, working on a health care program. Working so closely with Extension and being exposed so closely to the research process allowed me to feel prepared for this kind of work.

The undergraduate who went on to graduate school said this:

> Although I left the nutrition field after graduation, I could not have asked for a more enriching experience than working with Extension. Through close mentoring I was able to learn more about Extension work as a career and as a resource. I use Extension services all the time now, and I recommend them to my friends, colleagues, and family as well. I participate in a career-guidance discussion online, and I've recommended Extension careers to some people based on my experiences.

Though it is too early to tell whether these two students will go into a permanent career in Extension, they are now aware of Extension and its research-based programming. More opportunities for undergraduate research with Extension faculty could provide a pipeline to successful employment and a recruitment pool to sustain Extension.

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