

10-1-2005

## Meeting the Educational Needs of Professional Crop Advisers Using Extended Workshops

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### Recommended Citation

Oldham, J. (2005). Meeting the Educational Needs of Professional Crop Advisers Using Extended Workshops. *The Journal of Extension*, 43(5), Article 28. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol43/iss5/28>

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## Meeting the Educational Needs of Professional Crop Advisers Using Extended Workshops

### Abstract

The International Certified Crop Adviser program has created a demand for continuing agronomic education for professional practitioners. An annual short course at Mississippi State University provides quality instruction in quantities sufficient for CCA registrants to maintain their professional registration. Faculty from the universities, industry, government, and concerned stakeholder entities provide diverse, up-to-the minute instruction for participants. Participants in the workshops indicate they appreciate the content, coordination, diversity, and logistics of the programming. This and similar workshops are becoming more widespread as the CCA program matures and local Extension Services refine their relationship with it.

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## Introduction

The Certified Crop Adviser (CCA) program is a voluntary program initiated in the early 1990's by and developed for agronomic practitioners to recognize professional training, experience, and knowledge through certification. It is administered through the American Society of Agronomy and 37 local state/regional/provincial boards throughout the United States and Canada. In early 2005, there were 14,356 registrants in the program.

The certification process has four components:

1. Applicant Demonstrates professional proficiency through subject matter testing at the international and regional/local levels. All applicants sit for an "International Examination" and for a local, regional, or provincial prepared board examination. The examinations cover four subject areas: Pest Management, Crop Management, Soil and Water Management, and Nutrient Management.
2. After notice of successful completion of the examinations, applicant submits academic credentials, work experience, and references for review by state/regional/provincial board Standards and Ethics subcommittees.
3. With a favorable review, the registrant signs and thereafter adheres to a Code of Ethics regarding professional judgment and conduct.
4. Registrant improves knowledge, skills, and abilities above standard through completion of 20 hours minimum continuing education per year, or 40 hours in 2-year program cycles. Five hours minimum are required in each of the four subject areas involved in the examinations.

The 40-hour minimum entails one "work week" over 2 years to improving professional capabilities. Professional improvement can include training in non-agronomic subjects beneficial to professionalism, such as time management, errors and omissions insurance, and budget management (American Society of Agronomy, 2005).

## Role of Extension in CCA Program

The CCA program suggests that state and regional boards include state university Extension representatives. University Extension programs have developed different interaction strategies with the localized CCA programs beyond service on regional or state boards. Some university Extension programs have provided support above board service, including allowing personnel to serve as local agents. Other states have more distant relationships with the program; however, university Extension programs are recognized as an important provider of research-based instruction by agronomy professionals (Schmitt, Durgan, & Iverson, 2000).

## **Continuing Education Statistics**

For the minimal 20 credit units per calendar year, the current 14,356 registrants would require 287,120 Continuing Education Units in 2004. According to International Certified Crop Adviser records, 8,285 courses offered almost 24,000 units in 2004. This was comprised of 3,869 units in Nutrient Management, 3,460 units in Soil and Water Management, 8,682 units in Pest Management, and 5,477 units in Crop Management. Additionally, 2,305 units were offered in the non-required Professional Improvement category (M. Lovejoy, personal communication). The actual number of CEU's earned by CCA's is not available. The minimum credit per course is 0.5 units; maximum credit offered depends on the parameters of the individual courses. Total CEU's earned depends on number of registrants enrolled and successfully completing the course.

## **Meeting the Continuing Education Demand**

The Continuing Education requirement has engendered numerous strategies for serving the education demand. Mechanisms include commercial workshops (training for fee); in-house sessions for employees of a single company; Extension programs such as state-wide workshops, field days, area, and local meetings; and delivery mechanisms such as specialized CD-ROM's and on-line and distance courses.

Mississippi State University has presented an educational workshop designed to provide the annual entire requirement of Continuing Education in the four subject matter areas. These workshops, using faculty from several disciplines and organizations as instructors, have been held on the campus of Mississippi State University since 1998.

The Mississippi State University Extension Service coordinates this workshop and garners sponsorship and support from the Mississippi Agricultural Industry Council (the crop production and protection trade association), the state Department of Agriculture and Commerce, and the local Certified Crop Adviser Board. However, attendees are not required to be Certified Crop Advisers. Other agronomy-related organizations also meet in conjunction with the workshop, pesticide applicator certification credits are provided, and in-service training credit is provided for Extension personnel.

This program attracts a multi-faceted, diverse audience for which planners have utilized speakers and topics beyond traditional agronomic instruction. Speakers have included the state commissioner of agriculture, as well as representatives of state and federal technical and regulatory agencies, non-governmental environmental groups, and agricultural stakeholder organizations.

The Mississippi Crop College (February, 2005 workshop) utilized 31 speakers from four different state Extension Services, industry organizations, and the USDA Agriculture Research Service. There were 176 individuals attending all or part of the 3-day event, with a daily average of 134. Most instructors were Mississippi State University Extension Service and Experiment Station personnel.

Evaluations, reviews, and anecdotal feedback from the 6-year experience of the Mississippi workshops show that clients appreciate:

1. Obtaining the required training in one cost-effective setting.
2. Coordination among the different sponsoring groups.
3. Providing up-to-the-minute information from on-going research.
4. Effort by the planners to provide the best faculty for 'hot' topics.
5. Diversity of viewpoints offered through the special speakers.
6. Dependability of a regularly scheduled workshop at a stable location.

These workshops are not unique to Mississippi; at least eighteen local/regional/provincial CCA boards are involved in similar events. Extension Service involvement in these efforts varies just as it does with the local management of the CCA program. In Mississippi, these workshops will continue as a component of the Agronomic Crops programming area.

## **Conclusions**

The Certified Crop Adviser professional certification program has over 14,000 registrants in the United States and Canada that require continuing education to maintain and expand core competency levels. In Mississippi, an annual workshop coordinated by Extension, with several core partners, has been successful in providing cost-effective, up-to-the-minute agronomic instruction. This model can be utilized to better serve other stakeholder groups.

## References

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