

Office of Strategic Planning

DEVELOPMENT OF A TEACHING CURRICULUM FOR EXTENSION EDUCATORS

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The primary role of an Extension agent is education. Agents are responsible for planning and delivering non-formal classes to audiences of both youth and adults. Extension educators are experts in their respective disciplines, having a bachelor's degree or advanced degrees in agriculture, family and consumer sciences, education, or a closely related field. The curriculum associated with these degrees does not usually include courses related to educational design, teaching methodology and public speaking. This void in training can cause Extension educators to fall short of their potential as teachers, which may lead to a lack of confidence, job dissatisfaction and performance issues. Many early career Extension agents have expressed a need for additional training to prepare them to be effective educators.

In 2010, Tennessee Extension launched a strategic planning process to honor the past and look to the future. The process included listening sessions with employees and stakeholders across the state. During these listening sessions, a need for more professional development to enhance the teaching skills of agents emerged as a priority.

Background

The strategic plan provided a roadmap to guide Extension to achieve excellence and focus attention on advancing Extension in Tennessee. The plan resulted in five overarching goals that included strategies and action steps to achieve each goal. One strategy was to ensure effective teaching methods using contemporary equipment and software.

The original intent of this strategy was to help agents better use technology to enhance their teaching. However, upon closer examination, it became clear that there were needs beyond incorporating technology into education. Before educational technology could be fully utilized, additional training was needed in educational methodology, such as understanding teaching and learning theories and creating developmentally appropriate learning sessions for both youth and adults.

Purpose and Objectives

In 2013, a diverse team of Extension professionals was appointed and charged with developing a program that would enhance the teaching of Extension agents and specialists. The Building Exceptionally Skilled Teachers (BEST) team was charged to develop criteria for a BEST teacher, select teaching tools, and consult with internal and external experts to develop a training outline and learning modules.

Specific objectives included:

- Establish criteria to measure and assess quality in teaching.
- Develop training modules to equip Extension educators to enhance the quality of their teaching.
- Pilot test and revise the training curriculum.
- Conduct training for Extension agents and specialists.
- Create evaluation procedures and rewards aligned with the BEST skill sets and methodology.

Methodology

Initiative team members were selected to represent the diversity of Extension including all program areas, each region of the state, varying years of experience, and different job classifications. The team utilized best practices from the field of education and drew upon diverse experience and expertise to develop a comprehensive, three-part strategy to develop BEST. This three-part strategy included content addressing preparation of educational materials, presentation skills and professionalism. The team chose a blended approach, using online learning and face-to-face workshops.

The team worked with the University of Tennessee Knoxville's Tennessee Teaching and Learning Center and the College of Communication and Information on the module content and with UTIA Information Technology Services to design e-learning modules.

Once modules and in-service trainings were developed for the first two components of BEST, a pilot test was conducted with select counties. Suggestions for improvements were incorporated into BEST. BEST officially launched in 2014 with more than 150 participants enrolled. Results from a participant survey indicated that 96 percent of participants considered the modules beneficial to Extension educators, and 100 percent indicated that they would be able to practically apply the content to improve their work.

Major Outcomes

To graduate as a BEST Educator requires that all three components be completed. Likened to legs on a stool, the three components include:

1. Preparation Leg — Composed of seven online training modules that help in the preparation of educational programs.
2. Presentation Leg — Includes a series of in-service trainings to improve confidence in public speaking.
3. Professionalism Leg — Addresses a topic paramount to all of our Extension efforts through six online video modules.





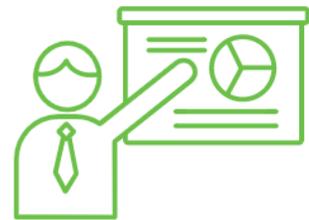
Leg 1: Preparation (Online modules)

This leg contains seven modules on topics necessary for the preparation of educational programs:

1. Introduction to Teaching and Learning.
2. Designing and Implementing and Effective Learning Session.
3. Facilitating Children and Youth Learning.
4. Facilitating Teen Learning.
5. Facilitating Adult Learning.
6. Knowing Your Audience and Preparing Educational Content.
7. Presentation Development, Marketing and Accommodation.

Leg 2: Presentation (Face-to-face training)

This face-to-face training provides participants with the opportunity to deliver a prepared presentation to be evaluated by the instructor, peers and self and to identify personal deficiencies in public speaking and teaching skills. Pre- and post- evaluation forms for instructors and self-rating forms were developed based on the learning outcomes of the training to assess the competency of participants and denote areas for continued development.



Participants are exposed to various techniques that will improve public speaking and teaching skills, such as organization, presentation methods and audience involvement. Using feedback from evaluations and knowledge gained, participants redesign and redeliver their previous presentation and are reevaluated.



Leg 3: Professionalism (Online modules)

This leg contains six videos to address the topic of professionalism. Participants are encouraged to watch the videos in group settings and then engage in a follow-up group discussion. Sessions include:

1. Professional Image.
2. Working Together.
3. Business Etiquette.
4. Telephone Etiquette.
5. How to Make a 5-Star Impression.
6. Digital Communication Skills.

Sustainability Plan

Responsibility for sustaining the BEST program resides in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication. BEST is a requirement of all newly hired Extension agents, beginning in 2014. BEST is highly encouraged for all Extension educators — new, mid-career, or seasoned — to keep improving the quality of Extension education and for their own professional development. Those completing all three legs of BEST are designated as BEST Educators. At the regional level, BEST Educators are recognized and presented with a miniature wooden BEST stool to honor the accomplishment.

Initiative Team (2013- 2015)

Team Leader

David Mercker, Extension Specialist, Department of Forestry, Wildlife and Fisheries

Team Members

Michele Atkins, Extension County Director, Henry County

Shelly Barnes, Extension Agent, Wilson County

Lori Gallimore, Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development

Andrea Ludwig, Assistant Professor, Department of Biosystems Engineering and Soil Science

Rebekah Norman, Extension Agent, Rutherford County

Neal Smith, Area 4-H Specialist, Western Region

Holly Williams, Extension Agent, Monroe County

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