

COUNTY AGENT STAFFING
REVIEW OF LITERATURE
by Thomas Parslow^a

County agent staffing discussion first appeared in the literature in 1970. Much of the earlier efforts in changing county staffing patterns was a reaction to financial pressures. A survey of College of Agriculture deans noted that Cooperative Extension should operate on a multi-county basis. One southern dean even stated less need for an agent in every county and having regional centers for farmers to go to for help.ⁱ Multi-county positions came at a price. McIntyre in 1970, compared single county agents with area agents. He found that known Extension cooperators (clienteles) who lived in counties with single county agents were more satisfied, participated in educational programs more frequently, and adopted practices sooner than those cooperators (clienteles) who lived in counties served by area agents.ⁱⁱ

Development of county clusters and agent specialization was an effort to deal with the rapid advances in technology and the need for technical expertise at the local point of delivery. About a third of the College of Agriculture deans expressed in a 1989 survey that county agents could no longer deal with the technological and specialized nature of farm problems.¹ Another reason for agent specialization was indication that the agents had greater job satisfaction with specialization. In 1975, Warner, Young, and Cunningham found differences in job satisfaction among county agents in seven states depending on staffing patterns. They reported that county-based staff with area responsibilities (specialized agent with multi-county responsibility) had the highest job satisfaction while staff in states that used a county agent with an area specialist support were somewhat less satisfied. County agents with only state specialist support had the lowest job satisfaction. They also pointed out that job satisfaction is an indication of job performance.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1990, G. K. Hutchins found that Minnesota agents who had begun clusters with specialization in 1987 liked the following:

- 1.ability to focus in one's area of interest;
- 2.recognition for being a teacher and a resource;
- 3.better training;
- 4.quality of programs improved.

He also found that collegial support was very important. It heightened the sense of both personal and professional support that agents receive from their colleagues. However, a few found that teaching in the presence of colleagues caused a new type of peer pressure. Hutchins found that the problem with agent specialization was that it required more time and energy from agents. Minnesota agents struggled in balancing cluster concerns with local priorities.^{iv}

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In 1993, J. M. Huerta found that Ohio agents had similar likes and dislikes about agent specialization. His survey found a lack of local support for agent specialization.^v In 1992, M.S. Godke found that county extension advisory committees were willing to receive more information regarding clustering but were not likely to respond positively to the staffing pattern. The majority of Ohio's committees felt that clustered staff would negatively impact local funding sources for the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service.^{vi}

Implications for agent specialization in Wisconsin:

1. specialization needs to evolve with guidance and support from state administration;
2. agents need to see the value and sell the concept to local stakeholders;
3. increase professional development in subject matter expertise and where needed, special training to enhance agents' time management techniques;
4. strong, viable county programs will continue to be important and will lead to greater acceptance of agent specialization;
5. encourage agents to network with existing specialized agents in the same program area to share ideas on how to work effectively and efficiently across counties;
6. encourage and reward efforts to build teams of specialized agents and statewide specialists.

i. O.E. Thompson & D. Gwyn, "Assessing Extension's Strengths and Weakness," *Journal of Extension*, XXVII, Spring, 1989.

ii. W.J. McIntyre, "County Staff or Area Staff?" *Journal of Extension*, VIII (Summer, 1970) pp. 33-41.

iii. P. Warner, R. Young, and C. Cunningham, "Is Area Staffing Better?" *Journal of Extension*. XIII (May/June 1976) pp. 21-27.

iv. G. K. Hutchins, "Evaluating County Clustering, Agents' Perspectives on New Staffing Pattern." *Journal of Extension*, XXX. (Spring, 1992) pp. 12-14.

v. J. M. Huerta, "Attitudes of County Extension Agents Toward Agent Specialization in Ohio," Thesis, Ohio State University, 1993.

vi. M. S. Godke, "Attitudes of County Extension Advisory Committee Member Regarding the Clustered Staffing Pattern in Ohio," Thesis, Ohio State University, 1991.