

Training Program Assistants

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Extension, as it employs increasing numbers of program assistants, must be concerned with training programs for these people. Boyce offers specific suggestions for pre-service and in-service training. He suggests subject-matter areas that should be included, and instructional approaches to be used. Before organizing training activities, the author suggests selection of program assistants be carefully considered, role and job description be defined, and relationship of the program assistant to professionals and community be determined.

The Cooperative Extension Service must face the truism that it no longer can rely on graduate-level personnel to fill current or new staff positions. The urgency of this problem stems from two primary factors:

1. Professional Extension staff members are finding themselves bogged down in repetitive, routine tasks that require less than professional expertise. This lack of creative challenge in the position has generated administrative problems in securing needed personnel as well as retaining new professionals.
2. Special programs designed to secure economic adequacy

and greater social participation for all persons have necessitated an expansion of Extension services. The ever-increasing demand for Extension-type workers has magnified the shortage of professional personnel to man these programs.

To release professionals from time-consuming routine chores, a new type of nonprofessional has been enlisted and trained. Recruited from the indigenous population, this nonprofessional is the target audience for this curricula discussion. In Cooperative Extension, this nonprofessional is generally called a program assistant.

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In describing the characteristics that uniquely qualify a person for the position of program assistant, Reiff and Riessman state:

The indigenous nonprofessional is poor, is from the neighborhood, and is often a member of a minority group. His family is poor. He is a peer of the client and shares a common background, language, ethnic origin, style, and group of interests which it would be impossible, and perhaps even undesirable, for most professionals to maintain.¹

These attributes alone make the program assistant more acceptable to disadvantaged target groups and are essential if he is to bridge the communications gap between the middle-class oriented Extension professional and new clientele.

The program assistant of today's Extension differs from the one employed during the manpower shortage of World War II. Then, Extension program assistants were recruited and trained and, in turn, recruited and trained farm workers, demonstrated new labor-saving equipment, sponsored boys' training camps, and provided leadership in food production and preservation.

Reiff and Riessman would call these World War II program assistants "ubiquitous" nonprofessionals, in that they customarily reflected aspects of the image of the middle-class professional.² While these workers demonstrated the potential for extending manpower resources in Extension-type work, they were unlike the new program assistants.

Thus, you may ask, "What are the specific characteristics of the new program assistants and how do you go about finding and selecting these persons?"

Selection

Although qualifications for becoming a program assistant should be simple and flexible, the person selected should have enough intelligence to make effective use of training and supervision.

The persons selected should show some interest in working with others and particularly in the development of youth. Although their knowledge of people may be limited to a single ethnic, religious, or economic group, this knowledge is necessary as a foundation on which to develop training programs. More important than formal education as the criterion for selection should be certain leadership qualities that may have been acquired in volunteer church work, neighborhood organizations, or youth organizations such as 4-H.

The Human Resource Development Center for the U.S. Employment Service for Washington, D.C., lists criteria for selecting employment aides that might be helpful in selecting program assistants. The suggested selection criteria are:

1. Brief written statement (two paragraphs) on why employment counseling (Extension activities) in the neighborhood is important to disadvantaged individuals. The statement

should be evaluated—not graded—on content rather than spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

2. An oral interview to determine interest, motivation, ability to meet and deal with disadvantaged persons, and ability to take oral directions.
3. Evaluation of educational background, work experience, and community involvement.
4. Arrest and/or criminal records should not be a significant factor and should be evaluated on individual merits. In fact, membership in an organization such as Efforts for Ex-Convicts (EFEC) should be considered a plus for community involvement.³

No shortage of recruits for the position of program assistant is evident. The immediate problem is a careful evaluation and description of the job function to confine the role within the limited skills of those being considered for employment.

Role

For full implementation of the program assistant's placement and training, there first must be large-scale studies of the activities performed by Extension agents, and particularly in the area where the program assistant is to work. These specific duties and functions for which program assistants are to be responsible must be delineated. These responsibilities, of course, will change as the program assistant advances to a more intermediate

role between his beginning duties and the duties of the professional.

According to Riessman, one of the greatest problems experienced by the nonprofessional program assistant is role ambiguity or lack of role identity. "He does not know who he is or who he is becoming."⁴ He's a new marginal man, no longer only a member of his group nor a member of the professional group.

The most common method used to overcome role ambiguity is the prepared program assistant's job description—a list of principal duties and responsibilities.

The development of a job description and the determination of the program assistant's relationship to the professional staff and community is the second step in preplanning for training programs. At this stage, the program initiators should undertake a comprehensive orientation program to acquaint the Extension staff with the role of program assistants. Other legitimizing bodies, such as Extension advisory boards and county courts, also should be apprised of the role of the program assistant.

The development of initial job descriptions, the expected team efforts, and the pre-service orientation should involve the professional Extension staff, welfare and social workers, and university subject-matter specialists.

Job Description

Job descriptions should be developed for several levels of job ex-

pectation. The first-level job—entry-level—should require minimal skill and education. Additional levels of job descriptions should be based on the experience and training received by the program assistant and should provide for his advancement.

Pointer and Fishman point out:

Job descriptions can be developed in two ways. The tasks the trainees are to perform can be determined by arbitrarily extracting from the professional's work those functions that require little education and no training—the fragmented approach. Or tasks may be based on a reorganization or realignment of all functions in a given area of service with each worker assigned to do what he can do best.⁵

The initial job descriptions should be flexible so that they can be changed as agreed on by the individual program assistant and the professional team.

For the program assistant to become a truly functional member of the Extension team, thought must be given to his future. Weisz asserts that this often is not the practice:

Generally it appears that the nonprofessional is viewed within the agency as solving immediate problems, such as meeting requirements of OEO, assisting key leaders in communities by giving them jobs, and more important, getting the immediate job done.⁶

The result is that the "ubiquitous" type program assistants rather

than the "indigenous" poor dominate the ranks of this new position.

Relationship to Professionals and Community

A major argument for the presumed benefits from the use of indigenous nonprofessionals is that it will lead to more effective use of professional personnel. Occasionally, however, persons with advanced degrees and training feel threatened by the new, less well-trained employee. It's vital that the professional staff be involved in implementing an Extension program involving program assistants.

The Extension agent must also understand the discrepant role of the program assistant due to the marginal position that the program assistant occupies. Since the assistant will be working with professional Extension staff and will be given part of their responsibility, he will be expected to be deeply involved in the objectives of the organization—and thus will come to identify with the professional.

At the same time the program assistant is a member of the client community and will identify with them. Through this dual group identity, the program assistant will obtain information from both the Extension agent group and the client group. If not properly utilized, this information can become "destructive." Erving Goffman defined "destructive" information as information about facts which, if attention is drawn to them during a perform-

ance will discredit, disrupt, or make useless the impression that the performance fosters.⁷

The agent and program assistant must be carefully prepared and trained before the initial on-the-job contact so that each will know his role, rights, and responsibilities.

Training

The training program should provide instruction in specific skills needed, as well as how to relate positively to other members of the staff and to the target audience. A feeling of "belonging" to the Extension team must be generated in the program assistant during the training process.

Pearl and Riessman described the training period as a screening process:

The training provides an opportunity to assess trainees in a work situation, to introduce corrective procedures when the program assistant fails to measure up, and, in those cases where all else fails, to eliminate trainees who perform inadequately from consideration for assignment.⁸

The training program suggested has two phases. The first phase is pre-service orientation, which may range from a few days to several weeks. The second phase is in-service, on-the-job training, which may be one-day workshops or several weeks of formal classroom instruction. The training should be a continuous process and should be job related.

Pre-Service Orientation

Pre-service training programs will vary according to the needs of the program assistants, the program of emphasis, and the experience of the Extension staff in working with program assistants. Most trainers agree, however, that pretraining should be primarily job simulation, role playing, on-the-job learning, buzz sessions, or the more active training methods. Lectures, reading, and writing assignments can be introduced as training proceeds and as the program assistant gains confidence and skills.

Suggested content areas for pre-service training are: team teaching, Extension and community relations, human growth and development, use of media, and subject matter.

Team Teaching. The Extension agent and program assistant are both involved in acquiring experience in joint planning, execution, and evaluation of educational programs. The training should give the Extension agent a chance to become personally acquainted with the program assistant as well as to learn what the assistant can do best, what his skills are, and what his experiences with youth have been.

Team teaching will provide an opportunity to establish a clear understanding of the separation of the Extension agent's professional role and of the program assistant. Cooperating Extension agents and program assistants must understand thoroughly their relationship to each other as they plan and carry out rou-

tine Extension activities.

Extension and Community Relations. The assistant should gain a knowledge of the Cooperative Extension Service—its philosophy, goals, methods, and concepts. This may be partly accomplished by introducing trainees to the use of available community resources and agencies through field trips and informal visits with community leaders. A "Program Assistant's Handbook" would be helpful.⁹ The assistant also should learn: (1) how to make referrals and disseminate information enabling clientele to help themselves, (2) how to make contacts with clientele, (3) how to make reports and keep records, and (4) how to plan and conduct formal and informal meetings.

Human Growth and Development. Through discussions, films, and talks with subject-matter specialists, the program assistant should gain a basic knowledge of human growth and development. Emphasis should be given to stages of growth and their accompanying needs. Both the program assistant and the Extension agent will have personal experiences that can be shared.

Use of Media. The program assistants should gain practical experience in the use of various media for giving instruction or for assisting the Extension agent with instruction. Utilization of media involves at least three major functions: operations, storage, and minor maintenance. The ability to develop audio and visual materials should be included in this phase of pre-training.

Subject Matter. Specific skills needed in the area of concern—such as teen-age nutrition—should be discussed in detail. The program assistant must understand the materials to be dispersed. More difficult tasks may be broken down into stages, with the assistant being required to perform only a limited part of the task until further skills have been acquired on the job.

In addition to the above content areas, remedial programs should be available to program assistants as an opportunity to improve their ability to learn. Programmed learning offers many possibilities in this area. All program assistants may not wish to advance, but the opportunity should be available for those who do.

During the pre-service orientation process and at its conclusion, information should be gathered to use in any needed curriculum modification. Program assistants should be asked to indicate which areas of the program were the most beneficial to them. The behavioral objectives that must be established to give direction to the training program also are used as tools for evaluation. These objectives should: (1) describe what the trainee does, (2) describe the conditions under which performance is to be observed, and (3) define the standards the trainee must meet.

In-Service Training

By working on the job, and at times under close supervision, the

program assistant will learn from his own experience. Opportunities should be provided for planned discussions among assistants and also with Extension agents. Riessman referred to peer group learning as the "helper principle."¹⁰ This principle has been extended into a national effort with the formulation of the National Association of New Careerists, an association that emphasizes developing upward mobility for New Careerists.

The transition from pre-service to in-service training is made through a joint effort by the trainer, Extension agent, and program assistant. Most of the immediate training needs can be met through regular conferences and short workshops or seminars and individual counseling.

In addition to the short in-service training periods, the program assistants who wish to advance should be given an opportunity to take courses for credit.

Using the example set by the Forestry Service, I've developed a proposal for a training curriculum that could be implemented in the community college systems and could be used to advance the program assistant to a program associate position. This program would be for those assistants with a high school education or those who have acquired the equivalent of a high school education through remedial self-improvement programs.

The suggested advancement training would be in sequence with pre-service training, but would be

more complex. The suggested course would be for credit, with a "Technical Diploma in Human Service" given for completion.

The proposed curriculum is listed below, with emphasis on Extension youth programs:

First Quarter

History and Philosophy of the Cooperative Extension Service

Basic Communications

Human Relations

*Elective

Second Quarter

4-H Club Work

Speech

Report Writing

*Elective

Third Quarter

On-Job Training

Fourth Quarter

Learning Theory

Community Leadership

Extension Resources

*Elective

*The student has the option of an elective that may be used for credit at the college transfer level, noncredit audit at the college transfer level, or noncredit in a developmental course.

Pre-service and in-service training should be reinforced by consultant visitations; that is, a person in the area or state should be designated to head the program assistants' training programs. The program assistants can identify with this person and discuss personal and

team problems. Visits by this individual can serve as a means of interpreting selected information needed by the assistant and also as a form of recognition.

Summary

Continuing and timely training of program assistants enhances their value to the Extension team and to the total Extension program. Suggestions for initiating the curricula have been borrowed from the experiences of others.

1. The program assistant should be screened for such personal qualities as dependability, leadership ability, and use of good judgment.
2. Program assistant job descriptions, designed to spell out specific duties and responsibilities, also should include several job levels so that the assistant perceives opportunities for advancement.
3. A clear delineation of the Extension agent's role and that of the program assistant should be established. Each should thoroughly understand his relationship to the other as they plan and carry out Extension activities. The success of a program assistant depends on a mutually cooperative relationship between him and the professional Extension staff.
4. Pre-service orientation to include both program assistants

and Extension agents with whom they will be working will help ensure a more productive working climate.

5. On-the-job training should include an in-service education program, as well as an opportunity for program assistants to get together and exchange ideas. Association membership should be encouraged.
6. Program assistants who wish to advance should be urged to take college courses in human development, psychology, and other areas having a relationship to the job.
7. Someone should be designated to have general charge of the program assistants.
8. The pre-service and in-service training programs and the total Extension program should be evaluated on a continuing basis.

Footnotes

1. Robert Reiff and Frank Riessman, *The Indigenous Nonprofessional* (New York, New York: Behavioral Publications, Inc., 1965), p. 7.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
3. Human Resources Development Center #1, *Employment Aide* [no publisher, place, or date indicated].
4. Frank Riessman, "Strategies and Suggestions for Training Non-professionals," *Community Mental Health Journal*, III (Summer, 1967), 103-10.

5. Avis Y. Pointer and Jacob R. Fishman, *New Careers: Entry-Level Training for the Human Service Aide* (Washington, D.C.: Information Clearinghouse on New Careers, 1968), p. 8.
6. Vara C. Weisz, *A Junior College's Approach to Training Auxiliary Personnel in Education* (Springfield, Virginia: Clearinghouse for Federal Scientific and Technical Information, 1968), p. 40.
7. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1959), p. 141.
8. Arthur Pearl and Frank Riessman, *New Careers for the Poor* (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 157.
9. See, for example, Janalya Rouls, *Handbook for Home Economics Program Assistants, PA-680* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), pp. 1-31.
10. Riessman, "Strategies and Suggestions," p. 105.