

Article

Early-Career Challenges of Youth Development Extension Educators and Effective Strategies

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Abstract: The purpose of this research study was to determine the challenges faced by early-career youth development extension educators and strategies helpful in managing those challenges. This study used the modified Delphi method of three rounds with a specifically selected expert panel of 24 members to build consensus on the challenges that early-career youth development extension educators faced and managing strategies of those challenges. The expert panel of this Delphi study was selected from two south-eastern states in the U.S. based on their proven success and effectiveness in youth development extension programming in their respective counties. The three-round Delphi study led to building the consensus on 16 challenges faced by early-career youth development extension educators and 14 strategies helpful in managing those challenges. The findings of this study have implications for planning onboarding training programs for early-career youth development extension educators. Future research is needed to understand how identified strategies contribute to managing early-career challenges faced by youth development extension educators.

Keywords: 4-H youth development; extension educators; early-career challenges; strategies; onboarding training



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1. Introduction

The Cooperative Extension is the public extension service organized under the Land-Grant University system in the United States with the partnership of federal, state, and local governments. The 4-H and youth development extension is an integral part of the Cooperative Extension [1]. The symbol “4-H” stands for Head, Heart, Hands, and Health [2]. The 4-H and youth development extension program is the largest youth development educational organization in the US. This program is implemented in all 50 states and the US territories. The 4-H youth development program provides educational programs to about 6 million children by 3500 4-H professionals through the network of 500,000 volunteers [3]. The focus of the 4-H youth development program is to educate youth to reach their full potential and become productive leaders in their communities. The 4-H program provides various youth development educational opportunities in a non-formal setting to help youth gain essential life skills needed to be successful as productive citizens.

The extension educator known as the county 4-H extension agent is the key professional responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating an effective educational program with the community at the county level for the youth in the county. The success of the 4-H youth development program at the county level mainly depends on the county 4-H extension educator's ability to plan, implement, and evaluate an effective educational program for the youth in the county. The extension educator needs to have a specific

set of knowledge and skills to perform the job responsibilities properly. However, many enter in the extension educator job without due academic preparation [4–6] and have to gain the needed knowledge and skills while on the job. This situation can place them in a very challenging situation during the early-career stage. New hires of extension educator burnout during the first three years is a problem reported in the literature [7].

Previous studies have documented several concerns with retaining extension educators. One of the major concerns is hiring individuals without having the proper academic preparation for the job. This is one of the major contributing factors for early-career burnout. This problem of joining in extension without proper academic preparation can be attributed to the fact that only limited universities offer well-developed academic programs to prepare students for extension education careers [6]. The time demand for extension educators outside of the regular work hours is a common expectation that necessitates them to learn how to balance work and life [4,8]. This is a great challenge for new extension agents [9]. Long irregular hours and heavy workload have contributed to extension educators' job dissatisfaction [10] and burnout. Extension educator burnout is a major concern and is caused by (1) inadequate preparation, (2) demand for long work hours, and (3) heavy workload—both of which make work/life balance difficult and create early job dissatisfaction. Extension administrators need to understand the early-career challenges faced by new extension educators to address the issue of county extension educator burnout [11]. Extension educator burnout is costing extension organizations [12], and necessary actions should be taken to mitigate it.

Building an effective and very successful youth development extension program in a county is a challenging task for a new extension educator because the extension educator has to build relationships with the community and prove himself/herself as an effective educator. In this process, the extension educator has to understand the community needs, assets, and dynamics; build community linkages; and prove his/her effectiveness in serving the educational needs of the youth in the community. Due to various challenges in the first three years, the youth development extension educator has to go through a steep learning curve when striving to become a successful extension educator [13]. This is an especially daunting task when someone joined as an extension educator without due academic preparation for the job. Understanding the major challenges youth development extension educators face during the early-career stage and the strategies effective for managing early-career challenges is practically significant for those who are planning to become successful youth development extension educators and for those who facilitate onboarding training to early-career extension educators. The purpose of this study was to identify the major challenges faced by early-career youth development extension educators and the strategies effective in managing those early-career challenges. This knowledge is useful to help address the early-career challenges of youth development extension educators and retain the best performing extension educators [14].

The early-career challenges of extension educators have been studied by various researchers [11]. For instance, Benge and Beattie conducted a phenomenological study with a group of county extension educators and the county extension directors in Florida and identified 11 challenges early-career extension educators face [13]. These challenges are building relationships, getting acquainted with the job without proper mentoring, lack of knowledge about the extension, job ambiguity, learning to work with supervisor turnover, learning to work without proper guidance from the supervisor, learning to manage time with job responsibilities, meeting the organizational reporting expectations of program planning and accomplishments, learning to develop necessary job skills such as communication and evaluation, managing volunteers, and meeting the job expectation while adjusting to the role of the predecessor. A Delphi study conducted at West Virginia University reported 35 challenges faced by extension educators and those challenges have been separated into five categories namely training and support, funding and resources, personal issues, volunteers and community involvement, and organizational factors [11]. Managing time by balancing work and life was identified as one of the most critical chal-

lenges under the category of personal issues. The most commonly reported challenges faced by extension educators are related to job competency, balancing work and life, time management, technology, program planning, evaluation and reporting, volunteer management, building community relationships, understanding and interpretation of vague administrative guidelines and policies, and experiencing job ambiguity [4,11,13,15–22]. In addition to these challenges, a study conducted at West Virginia University reported that volunteer management, funding, and resources were considerable challenges specifically for 4-H and youth development educators compared to other extension educators such as agricultural extension educators [11] because 4-H extension educators have to manage adult and teen volunteers and work with the community for pooling needed resources.

The available literature highlights some of the potential strategies for managing early-career challenges faced by extension educators. The commonly cited strategies effective in managing the challenges faced by early-career extension educators include providing onboarding professional development training, organizational and administrative support, simplifying the progress reporting systems, peer mentoring, and training on time management for balancing work and life [13,23–26]. Additionally, providing needed training on program planning, evaluation and reporting, conflict management, developing partnerships and collaborations, building community relationships, volunteer management, and interpersonal communication skills is considered as an effective strategy for addressing early-career challenges faced by extension educators [17,27]. Creating an environment for facilitating collaboration, clarifying job expectations, and ensuring access to extension specialists are some strategies to help address the early-career challenges of extension educators [28]. Llewellyn outlined the eight best practices for first-year extension agents to be successful [29]. These best practices include conducting a formal needs assessment to identify county needs, developing a work plan, drawing a roadmap using a logic model, receiving peer mentoring, building collaborative teams, paying attention to professional development, engaging in grant writing, and getting involved in scholarly activities [29].

Most of the challenges and the strategies used to manage challenges reported in the literature are related to all extension educators not very specific to the youth development extension educators per se. The aim of this study is to fill this knowledge gap by exploring the challenges faced by early-career youth development extension educators and the strategies effective in mitigating those challenges.

2. Materials and Methods

We used the modified version of the Delphi techniques for conducting this study because it helps to build the consensus among the panel of experts about the exploring topic of interest. The Rand Corporation developed the Delphi technique in the 1950s. This technique is effective in building the consensus among the group of experts selected with a purpose [30–32]. Due to the nature of the research purpose and objectives, the Delphi technique is selected for conducting this study. The Delphi technique uses several iterations to build consensus among the expert panel dispersed in a vast geographic area without affecting each other's views using their feedback at each iteration [30]. We used three rounds of iterations to conduct this Delphi study.

The selection of the members for the expert panel is an important step of the Delphi study [33]. We selected a 24-member panel of experts comprised of county youth development extension educators from two states in the southeast of the United States. We selected the Delphi panel members based on the criteria that they have very successful and effective youth development programs in their respective counties. The criteria used to decide whether the extension educators have a successful and effective 4-H program include the number of youth enrolled in the 4-H program; the number of overall adult and teen volunteer leadership involvement in 4-H programs; the number of youth and adult active partnerships; the number of programs focused in the three mission mandates of 4-H science, civic engagement, and health; the amount of community funds invested in the 4-H program; the number of youth and volunteers recognized at various 4-H events; and the

number of positive youth outcomes reported [34,35]. State program leaders, state program specialists, and district extension directors were asked to nominate the top 5% of youth development extension educators based on the above-specified criteria and identified 24 panelists for the study. We selected this group of successful extension educators because of their effectiveness in mitigating the challenges they faced during the early career and moving into the current stage of 4-H programming. The intent of the Delphi study was to build a consensus on the challenges they faced and how they could mitigate those.

We conducted three iterations of this study online using the Qualtrics® survey development program in the fall of 2020. Before commencing the study, we filed an application for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University and received the approval to conduct this study with human subjects. After receiving the IRB approval, each of the panelists was contacted prior to the launch of the study to inform them about the study expectations, verify their consent to participate, and address any of their concerns. After that, the first-round survey was sent to get their responses. In the first-round survey, we asked two questions: (1) What were the challenges you faced in the first three years as a youth development extension educator? (2) How did you manage those challenges? The first round can be considered as a brainstorming step. Twenty-three panelists responded to the first round and listed 65 challenges and 66 challenge-management strategies. We analyzed those responses by comparing and contrasting responses for categorizing them into similar and dissimilar items. For example, when the panelists used different wording for the same challenge, we identified it as one challenge by comparing and contrasting responses. Organization and categorization of the data into concepts is an accepted method of qualitative data analysis [36] and it is based on the notion of comparing and contrasting viewpoints. The analysis of the first-round responses resulted in a unique list of 13 challenges and 15 challenge-management strategies.

We used the 13 challenges and 15 challenge management strategies identified in the first round to develop the second-round survey. In the second round, we listed these challenges and strategies and asked the panel members to rate the level of importance of each of the challenges and strategies in contributing to become a very effective youth development extension educator on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = moderately important, 4 = very important, and 5 = extremely important). In addition, respondents were asked to list any challenge or strategy not included in the list and make any changes needed to listed items as a clarification. Of the 24 panel members, 21 responded to the second-round survey comprising an 88% response rate. We defined consensus a priori as 2/3 of the panel identifying extremely important or very important regarding challenges and strategies mitigating the challenges [37]. The second-round data analysis led to building the consensus on 11 out of 13 challenges and 14 out of 15 strategies based on 2/3 of the panel members rating those as very important or extremely important. In addition to that, the expert panel also identified five new challenges in the second round.

The findings of the second round were used to develop the third and final round survey. In the third round, we listed the expert-panel-identified new five challenges with the consensus of 11 challenges and 14 strategies alphabetically and asked the panel members to rate their level of agreement with each challenge and strategy as an important item in contributing to become a very effective youth development extension educator on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, and 5 = strongly agree). Nineteen panel members responded to the third-round survey comprising a 79% response rate. We analyzed the data to identify the items that received 2/3 or more consent from the expert panel. The third-round findings led to building the consensus on 16 challenges and 14 challenge management strategies important in becoming an effective youth extension educator.

3. Results

This study led to determining the early-career challenges of youth development extension educators and challenge management strategies.

3.1. Early-Career Challenges

Table 1 indicates the 16 challenges identified by the Delphi panel members as important challenges that youth development extension educators will have to face during the first three years of their careers. Table 1 also displays the percentage of the panel members who agreed on each item as an important challenge. All panel members agreed that “getting established in the community with a good understanding of their needs and expectations” and “managing time with a busy schedule” are the most important challenges youth development extension educators face in their early careers. Ninety-five percent of the respondents identified “understanding organizational policies and procedures,” “volunteer management”, and “balancing work and life” as the next most important three challenges faced by the early-career youth development extension educators as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The challenges faced by extension educators in their early-career.

Challenges	Percentage of the Respondents Strongly Agreed or Somewhat Agreed
1. Getting established in the community with a good understanding of their needs and expectations	100%
2. Managing time with a busy schedule	100%
3. Understanding organizational policies and procedures	95%
4. Volunteer management (recruiting, training, and managing volunteers)	95%
5. Balancing work and life	95%
6. Clarifying job expectations	90%
7. Understanding program evaluation expectations	90%
8. Appropriate marketing of programs	90%
9. Conflict resolution	84%
10. Learning the job without having proper training	84%
11. Understanding extension programming	84%
12. Understanding the grounded reality of county youth development programming	79%
13. Determining research-based information on best practices	74%

Table 1. *Cont.*

	Challenges	Percentage of the Respondents Strongly Agreed or Somewhat Agreed
14.	Learning to work with county extension staff	68%
15.	Networking with other agents	68%
16.	Understanding county extension director/unit coordinator expectations	68%

3.2. Early-Career Challenge Management Strategies

Table 2 summarizes the 14 management strategies the Delphi panel agreed on as important strategies to manage the challenges that youth development extension educators have to face during their early careers. The panel unanimously agreed that “building sustainable programs using community interests, volunteers, and schools” is the best strategy to manage early-career challenges. Ninety-four percent of the panel members agreed that “getting to know the community and keeping up the programs that already were there,” “managing time using a calendar to balance work and life,” and “taking time to establish as a youth development extension educator before rushing to do programs and changes” as the second-tier management strategies to cope with early-career challenges as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. The alternatives effective in managing the early-career challenges of extension educators.

	Strategies	Percentage of the Respondents Strongly Agreed or Somewhat Agreed
1.	Building sustainable programs using community interests, volunteers, and schools	100%
2.	Getting to know the community and keeping up the programs that already were there.	94%
3.	Managing time using a calendar to balance work and life	94%
4.	Taking time to establish as a youth development extension educator before rushing to do programs and changes	94%
5.	Building a close working relationship with all Extension staff (especially the Unit Coordinator [UC] or County Extension Director [CED])	89%
6.	Building on the success of the programs started small	89%
7.	Finding seasoned agents as mentors and networking with them	89%
8.	Listening to advisory committees for understanding community needs and expectations	89%
9.	Self-motivating to learn about youth development programs	89%

Table 2. *Cont.*

	Strategies	Percentage of the Respondents Strongly Agreed or Somewhat Agreed
10.	Finding ways to recruit better volunteers	89%
11.	Participating in professional development training	89%
12.	Building relationships for seeking advice and help	83%
13.	Trying new things and receiving feedback for modifications and improvements	78%
14.	Networking with area school personnel to establish school enrichment programs	67%

4. Discussion

This Delphi study conducted with a panel of 24 very effective and successful youth development extension educators led to identify 16 challenges faced by early-career youth development extension educators and 14 strategies effective in managing those challenges. Identification of the strategies useful for addressing the challenges faced by early-career youth development extension educators is the most critical finding of this study. The findings do not align one strategy with one challenge naturally because one strategy may be effective in contributing to managing more than one challenge and managing one challenge may need more than one strategy. We have to explore how to align the identified strategies with challenges. Sharing strategies identified by successful extension educators help manage these challenges [18]. This discussion focuses on each of the challenges faced by early-career youth development extension educators and relates the identified strategies effective in managing each of the 16 challenges.

Getting established in the community with a good understanding of their needs and expectations was identified as an important challenge. Emphasizing the importance of this challenge, Llewellyn [29] recommends conducting a formal needs assessment to identify county needs during the first year of the extension educator's career for being successful. The rationale for Llewellyn's recommendation can be related to the fact that understanding the ground reality of the community needs will enable the new extension educator to plan his/her rest of the work meaningfully and realistically helping the community meets their needs. This step can prevent potential drawbacks and failures at the beginning of the career and secure community support for the 4-H program. There are four strategies identified by this study, aligning with this challenge of community needs identification. These four strategies include "listening to advisory committees for understanding community needs and expectations," "networking with area school personnel to establish school enrichment programs," "getting to know the community and keeping up the programs that already were there," and "building sustainable programs using community interests, volunteers, and schools." All four of these strategies are helpful in engaging with the community and understanding the community needs and expectations.

Managing time with a busy schedule and balancing work and life are two challenges identified by this research study that are closely related to each other and difficult to separate when finding strategies to manage those. These two challenges are directly linked to time management. Time management is commonly cited by researchers [4,10,11,16,21,26] as one of the most important challenges faced by extension educators. The extension educator job demands more than 40 h a week without additional remuneration. This demand for time can be overwhelming for a new extension educator due to a steep learning curve for understanding job expectations, procedures, and policies; building

relationships; and balancing life with the new job. The strategy “managing time using a calendar to balance work and life” can be considered as the most related management tool for managing time effectively as suggested by the Delphi panel. Similar to this finding, Bradley, Driscoll, and Bardon [17] suggest being organized, using technology, and taking time for family events and vacations as additional strategies for time management and balancing work and life. This strategy indicates that a due amount of time should be allocated to work and life obligations to find time to balance both without compromising the life obligations, leading to burnout. Helping to balance work and life is a strategy for time management of extension educators [4].

Understanding organizational policies and procedures is an important challenge for new extension educators. It is necessary to improve extension educators’ knowledge about policies [38]. There are 4 strategies out of the 14 that can be used for managing this challenge. These four strategies are “building a close working relationship with all extension staff (especially the unit coordinator or county extension director),” “finding seasoned agents as mentors and networking with them,” “participating in professional development training,” and “building relationships for seeking advice and help.” Building a close working relationship with the immediate supervisor and colleagues in the extension unit and seeking advice is helpful for learning organizational policies and procedures. Finding seasoned extension educators and networking with them also can be beneficial in this process of learning organizational policies and procedures. Informal mentoring with a good mentor is considered the best option for employee mentoring [39]. Extension educators’ quality relationships with mentors and coworkers can contribute to reducing their turnover [40].

Volunteer management is a considerable responsibility of 4-H and youth development extension educators [11,15] and it is an important challenge for early-career extension educators. Extension volunteer management includes the recruitment, training, supervision, motivation, and retention [41,42] of community members for extension volunteer work. The challenging nature of volunteer management in extension has been documented by previous research [11,13]. There are four strategies identified by this research study that is useful in mitigating this challenge of volunteer management. These four strategies are “finding ways to recruit better volunteers,” “building sustainable programs using community interests, volunteers, and schools,” “getting to know the community and keeping up the programs that already were there,” and “building relationships for seeking advice and help.” Recruitment of the best volunteers will make volunteer management easy and tend to reduce the workload of the extension educator. The best volunteers are very useful to extension educators [5]. When building sustainable programs, they should be based on the community interests that will appeal to community members to volunteer. As a result of this, the recruitment of volunteers for extension programs will become less challenging. Keeping up with the programs that were already there and engaging with the community through existing programs will enable new extension educators to learn about the community and identify committed and effective volunteers. Building relationships with the extension staff and extension advisory leaders for seeking advice and help is instrumental in identifying, recruiting, and managing effective volunteers because they have already established linkages with the community.

Clarifying job expectations or job ambiguity and understanding county extension director/unit coordinator expectations are two important challenges faced by early-career extension educators. The findings of previous studies emphasize the importance of these two early-career challenges [4,5,13]. These two challenges are closely related to each other and need a similar set of strategies to manage them. There are four strategies identified by this study that can be used to manage these two challenges. The four strategies are “building a close working relationship with all extension staff (especially the unit coordinator or county extension director),” “finding seasoned agents as mentors and networking with them,” “participating in professional development training,” and “building relationships for seeking advice and help.” Building a close working relationship with the extension staff,

especially with the county extension director, is helpful in clarifying the job ambiguity and understanding his/her expectations. However, this can be very problematic if the county extension director is changing during the early-career stage of the extension educator [13]. Finding seasoned agents as mentors and networking with them links the early-career extension educator with the source of organizational knowledge and information enabling them to clarify and understand the new responsibility. Participating in professional development training will open opportunities to meet various professionals, learning materials, and information leading early-career extension educators to clarify job ambiguities and expectations. Building relationships with extension staff is an establishment of communication links helpful in seeking the necessary advice for early-career extension educators to clarify their roles and responsibilities.

Understanding program evaluation expectations is a considerable challenge for early-career extension educators as found in this study and supported by the available literature [19,22]. Many people join the extension educator job without having adequate preparation for the job [4–6]. This situation can make meeting the program evaluation expectations a great challenge for new extension educators. Of the 14 strategies identified by the study, four are helpful in managing the challenge of understanding program evaluation reporting expectations. These four strategies are “participating in professional development training,” “finding seasoned agents as mentors and networking with them,” “building a close working relationship with all extension staff (especially the unit coordinator or county extension director),” and “building relationships for seeking advice and help.” New extension educators should take advantage of all professional development opportunities, including, but not limited to, onboarding and in-service training and professional association meetings to brace their extension skill set including the program evaluation skills. Networking with seasoned extension agents and building close working relationships with the county extension staff for seeking advice will link the new extension educator to the organizational knowledge base to gain necessary information and skills.

Marketing extension programs to the target audience is a notable challenge especially for an early-career extension agent because until the new extension educator proves him/herself as an effective educator, the community may be reluctant to participate in programs. The success of extension programs depends on marketing programs to target audiences [43]. However, marketing is a considerable challenge [20]. Seven out of fourteen strategies identified by this study can be used to manage this important early-career challenge. The seven strategies are “building sustainable programs using community interests, volunteers, and schools,” “listening to advisory committees for understanding community needs and expectations,” “getting to know the community and keeping up the programs that already were there,” “building on the success of the programs started small,” “trying new things and receiving feedback for modifications and improvements,” “networking with area school personnel to establish school enrichment programs,” and “finding seasoned agents as mentors and networking with them.” When building programs using community needs, interests, volunteers, and schools, it is easy to market programs to the community because programs are based on their needs and interests. Listening to extension advisory committees is the best strategy for understanding community needs and expectations, so that the new extension educator will be able to understand the community needs and keep up with the programs that already were there. The community is generally familiar with the programs already there. The new extension educator needs to build on the success of the programs started small so that programs can be expanded based on the results and community interests. Trying new things while expanding programs and seeking participant feedback for needed improvements will help market programs. In this process, it is important to network with the schools in the area to develop school enrichment programs and seeking the mentorship of seasoned extension agents for necessary guidance.

Conflict management is an important competency for 4-H extension educators [27] and they are expected to bring conflict resolutions to the community [44,45]. However,

conflict resolution is a challenging task for early-career extension educators because of the unfamiliar new working environment. Four strategies identified by this study can be used to manage conflict resolution challenges. These strategies are “building relationships for seeking advice and help,” “building a close working relationship with extension staff (especially the unit coordinator or county extension director),” “finding seasoned agents as mentors and networking with them,” and “participating in professional development training.” Building relationships with county extension staff and mentors is helpful for seeking advice and guidance when managing conflicts in the new job. In addition to seeking advice, participating in professional development opportunities will enable new extension educators to gain needed new skills including conflict management skills.

Understanding the job without having proper training and understanding extension programming are two important challenges of early-career extension educators. These two challenges are closely linked because extension programming is the major task of the extension educator’s job. There are six strategies identified by this study helpful in managing these two challenges. These six strategies encompass “taking time to establish as a youth development extension educator before rushing to do programs and changes,” “self-motivating to learn about youth development programs,” “participating in professional development training,” “finding seasoned agents as mentors and networking with them,” “building on the success of the programs started small,” and “trying new things and receiving feedback for modifications and improvements.” When establishing a youth development extension agent in the community, the new extension educator needs to gain access to all possible learning opportunities, including self-motivating to learn about youth programming, participating in professional development programs, and seeking advice from seasoned mentors. After learning the extension programming, the new extension educator will be able to start the program small and build on the success. During this process of improvement and building, the new extension educator will be able to try new things and seek feedback for needed program improvements. All of these steps will help the new extension educator understand the job responsibility and extension programming.

Understanding the ground reality of the county youth development programming is needed for the new extension educator to begin his/her work in the community. However, this is a challenge for early-career extension educators. Identified strategies helpful in managing this challenge include “building a close working relationship with all extension staff (especially the unit coordinator or county extension director),” “listening to advisory committees for understanding community needs and expectations,” and “building relationships for seeking advice and help.” By building a close working relationship with the county extension staff and the extension advisory committee, the new extension educator will be able to learn about the ground situation of youth development in the community and the programs already there.

Extension agents are community educators and are expected to use research-based information in educational programming [46]. However, determining research-based information on best practices is a challenge for early-career extension educators. Helpful strategies to mitigate this challenge include “finding seasoned agents as mentors and networking with them,” “self-motivating to learn about youth development programs,” and “participating in professional development training.” When networking with seasoned extension educators, early-career extension educators will be able to learn how to identify research-based information and best practices through their mentorship. When early-career extension educators are self-motivated to learn and participate in professional development programs, they will be able to identify research-based information and best practices needed to deliver sound youth development programs.

Learning to work with county extension staff and networking with other agents are necessary steps for early-career extension educators to make progress in their new job. However, these are two challenges they face early in the job and they are closely related. If the new extension educator learns how to work with the county extension staff, that strategy can be used to learn how to network with other extension educators. The four strategies

identified by this study to help manage the early-career challenges of networking are “building a close working relationship with all extension staff,” “finding seasoned agents as mentors and networking with them,” “building relationships for seeking advice and help,” and “participating in professional development training.” Getting to know the extension staff in the county and building a working relationship with them enable new extension educators to identify seasoned extension educators and use them as mentors. This step is helpful for the early-career extension educator to establish the mentor–mentee relationship for professional development. When participating in professional development training programs, early-career extension educators will get an opportunity to meet other extension educators and develop linkages with them.

5. Conclusions

This Delphi study built a consensus on 16 challenges faced by early-career youth development extension educators and 14 strategies useful in managing those challenges. The 16 identified challenges are complex and need a combination of strategies to manage each one. We focused the above discussion on how to use the identified 14 strategies in managing the 16 important challenges faced by early-career youth development extension educators. The major implication of these findings is the practical application of these challenges and strategies when planning onboarding training programs for preparing newly recruited youth development extension educators. Onboarding educational program planners need to pay attention to the major challenges faced by early-career youth development extension educators to help them manage those effectively. The identified 16 challenges can be used as the focus of onboarding training of early-career youth development extension educators. This article provides a guideline for the application of identified strategies in helping early-career extension educators manage those challenges. These guidelines can be used to develop mentoring and training programs to address early-career challenges of youth development extension educators.

Future studies are needed to explore how the identified strategies contribute to managing the early-career challenges of youth development extension educators.

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