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Perceptions of Scholarship Among County-Based Extension Faculty

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Abstract

As universities strive to increase their rank in lists of the best institutions, higher education administrators are encouraging faculty to increase their scholarly work. Some faculty, including non-tenure track and/or outreach faculty, may be less prepared to respond to these demands. Due to a perceived shift in productivity requirements, campus-based faculty at one Southern institution are leading a project to support county-based outreach faculty in their scholarly work. An initial survey assessed perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes toward scholarship among county-based faculty in family and consumer sciences and youth development program areas. Results suggest great variability in knowledge and attitudes among county-based faculty. Survey results will inform next steps for training and development of skill to enhance scholarly work in a small group of county-based faculty.

Keywords: scholarship in extension, extension scholarship, theory of change, professional development motivation, cooperative extension

University faculty members remain under constant pressure from peers and colleagues, department heads, deans and administrators, and their institutions to engage in scholarly work. A large focus of this pressure is obtaining grant funding to support scholarly work and publishing in refereed journal articles. In response to this increased pressure for scholarly productivity, our university's Cooperative Extension Service has challenged county-based faculty with public service and outreach appointments to engage in scholarly work. Specifically, administrators have encouraged county-based faculty to conduct program evaluation research, with a goal of producing peer-reviewed journal articles and research presentations at academic conferences. These responsibilities are a new performance expectation for county-based faculty. The purpose of this article is to describe a project designed to help county-based faculty meet these new expectations for scholarly productivity. Within this context, we will share the results of an early-stage assessment of county-based faculty members' perceptions of scholarly work. This assessment provides foundational knowledge for the development of training and resources to prepare these faculty members to be successful in traditional scholarly work.

Context of the Project

Description of the University

The University of Georgia is a land-grant, sea-grant university known as the birthplace of public higher education in America. In 2018, the University of Georgia was ranked 13th in U.S. News & World Report's listing of best public universities (University of Georgia, 2018). The university had 1,742 tenured or tenure-track faculty and 1,340 non-tenure track faculty members as of fall 2018 (University of Georgia Office of Institutional Research, 2018). All faculty positions at the University of Georgia (UGA) are allocated across a subset of four categories of professional responsibility: (1) scholarship/research/creative works, (2) teaching, (3) service, and (4) administration/other (Provost of the University of

Georgia, 2010). Expectations for faculty performance are based on the distribution of their specific appointments across these four categories. Beginning in 2014, all units at UGA were charged to review their guidelines for promotion and tenure for all faculty, both tenure track and non–tenure track, with appointments in all four categories, to ensure that they aligned with administrative priorities to increase scholarly productivity.

Because UGA is a land-grant institution, the Cooperative Extension Service is one of the largest individual units involved in the promotion of faculty. The purpose of the Cooperative Extension Service, established in 1914 with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act (Smith Lever Act, 2008), is to translate and disseminate research-based information on subjects related to agriculture, family and consumer sciences, and youth development to the people of the United States so that they can use this information to improve their business, personal development, and family life (Rasmussen, 1989). At its beginning, Cooperative Extension focused on knowledge transfer. Over time, as the interest in scholarship of engagement has increased, Cooperative Extension turned its focus toward two-way engagement: The university transfers research-based knowledge to the community, and the community provides practical information back to the university to inform ongoing research (Franz, 2019; Franz & Stovall, 2012).

Even though Cooperative Extension was created by a federal act, management of Cooperative Extension happens at the individual university level. Therefore, county- or parish-based extension professionals face varied promotion and tenure expectations depending on the organization of extension in their respective university (Olsen, 2005). Some are faculty members in tenure-track positions; others are considered professional faculty not in a tenure-granting line. At some institutions, Cooperative Extension employees are not faculty at all, but are employed as professional staff. Because of the varied promotion and tenure expectations, Cooperative Extension's view of scholarly productivity varies from state to state and from university to university.

In Georgia, each of the 159 counties has Cooperative Extension (University of Georgia Extension) professionals who are county-based faculty members with a primary responsibility of connecting communities to the university. The county faculty are assigned to one (and occasionally two) of three program areas: agricultural and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, and 4-H/youth development. County faculty are supported by subject matter specialists in the same program areas. Most state-level subject matter specialists are tenure-track faculty, except for the 4-H unit, who are all public service faculty.

Description of the University of Georgia Extension Community

Although county extension faculty are UGA faculty members, University of Georgia Extension (UGA Extension) is the community for our project because the goal is to help county-based faculty meet new expectations for traditional scholarly productivity. UGA Extension faculty traditionally have evaluated their work based on county and community impact demonstrated in a variety of ways (e.g., number of contacts; program evaluation data indicating knowledge, attitude, or behavior change; and personal testimonials). Until recently, scholarly output from county-based faculty in the traditional sense (i.e., scholarly presentations at academic conferences, peer-reviewed journal articles) has not been a primary focus of extension efforts to document community impact.

County extension faculty are a community different from campus-based faculty in three key ways that affect their ability to meet expectations of scholarly productivity. First, county extension faculty are geographically separated from UGA campuses. Second, they have faculty appointments focused solely on service/outreach, with an emphasis on identifying and meeting the specific needs of their individual community. Third, expectations for promotion for county faculty are different because their appointments are in public service positions, rather than tenure-track ones.

In the mid-1990s, University of Georgia introduced a public service classification for faculty whose primary role is "the identification, development, and rendering of service in partnership with an external organization or group" (Office of the Vice President, 2021, p. 2). These public service faculty engage in activities "that make the traditional criteria for [tenure-track teaching and research] appointment and promotion inadequate or inappropriate" (Office of the Vice President, 2021, p. 1). Public service

faculty ranks include public service assistant or representative (entry level; comparable to assistant professor), public service associate (midlevel; comparable to associate professor), and senior public service associate (top level; comparable to professor). Similar to the tenure track, various levels of productivity are expected for promotion to the next faculty rank. In fall 2018, the UGA Extension community of county-based faculty was made up of 312 professionals, including 146 county faculty in agricultural and natural resources, 50 in family and consumer sciences, and 116 in 4-H/youth (Johnson, 2018).

Needs of the University of Georgia Extension Community to Engage in Scholarship

A review of promotion guidelines for UGA Extension has resulted in increased discussion about the role of public service faculty in traditional scholarship, defined primarily in terms of peer-reviewed publications, research presentations at conferences, and grants to support scholarly work. This discussion is consistent with the discussions about scholarship happening at other universities. Some universities are now requiring their non–tenure track outreach faculty to meet research and instructional requirements similar to those for tenure-track faculty. A major tangible outcome of this requirement is the expectation that extension faculty contribute to peer-reviewed professional publications (Teuteberg et al., 2016).

Not all county extension faculty are equipped to meet changing expectations for scholarly productivity or interested in doing so. Gliem (2000) found differences among extension professionals in Ohio who chose a faculty track with research expectations or academic professional track without research expectations. These differences include age, gender, salary differences between the tracks, and program area. Professionals in both tracks noted that research requirements were very influential in their choice between tracks. At our institution, extension professionals do not have the choice of track, but scope creep has led some to feel public service faculty now face some tenure-track expectations, particularly in the areas of research and scholarship productivity. Challenges that may influence a county extension faculty member's ability to be engaged in scholarship include, but are not limited to, lack of understanding of traditional scholarship in the extension context, lack of confidence in their ability to conduct research, a need for training and education about how to conduct scholarly research and write for scholarly outlets, lack of resources to support scholarly productivity, competing pressures from other assigned duties, and lack of administrative and technical support to conduct research. Geographic distance is also an important barrier to consider (Cumbie et al., 2005; Wood, 2016). Tenure-track faculty are usually geographically close to the institution. County-based faculty who live and work far from the institution may face more challenges if they wish to actively engage in research collaborations with campus-based colleagues. Non–tenure track faculty who are immersed in the community side of the institution–community relationship may also have greater difficulty fulfilling scholarly roles in addition to their primary outreach responsibilities (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

Community attitudes toward research also play a role in the ability of county faculty to engage in scholarly activity. Existing research on barriers to increasing scholarship among extension faculty reveals that many extension faculty believe their institution's values and performance expectations/standards are not compatible with the needs of the communities they serve (Finkelstein, 2001). Communities tend to perceive institutions' work and values as disconnected from the communities' needs, creating tension for county-based faculty as they are pressed on one side by their institution to produce scholarly work and on the other side by their community to address immediate community needs.

It is also important to note that many extension faculty do not clearly understand the meaning of "scholarship" as it applies to their roles as county faculty members (Vlosky et al., 2009). This lack of understanding affects both the faculty themselves and the institution in two important ways. First, a lack of understanding on the part of the county faculty affects their own ability and motivation to produce scholarly work. Second, these county faculty members have an opportunity to broker relationships for campus-based faculty to participate in engaged scholarship. Because they may serve as gatekeepers to their local communities, county-based faculty can have negative

effects on engaged scholarship institution-wide. County-based faculty members could deemphasize or even block engaged research efforts led by campus-based faculty if they are unaware, uninterested, or not included in efforts. Conversely, county-based faculty could enhance efforts of engaged research led by campus-based faculty if they are invested in the projects and can facilitate community participation. Thus, county-based faculty members' value of scholarly work transcends their own promotion potential, and can enhance or diminish the productivity of the university at large to foster engaged scholarship.

Across the United States, universities have tested different methods to motivate, prepare, and support extension faculty in traditional scholarly productivity (Culp, 2009; Llewelyn, 2013). Some universities have expanded expectations of scholarship by bringing extension faculty into academic departments (McGrath, 2006). Others have expanded or clarified their definitions of scholarship as they relate to extension faculty (Adams et al., 2005; Archer et al., 2007, Wise et al., 2002) or redefined promotion and tenure guidelines for extension faculty to include more scholarly expectations (Nestor & Leary, 2000). Some universities have provided institutional supports for extension faculty to achieve promotion in their respective systems through self-study (O'Neill, 2008), working groups (Vines et al., 2018), or organization-wide support (Franz, 2011).

With the increased emphasis on scholarly productivity, UGA Extension made several early advances to support county faculty. One of the first steps included a keynote presentation on scholarship by the provost and a leading engaged scholarship expert and a panel discussion to highlight scholarly work in UGA Extension at a biennial conference for all extension faculty. The panel included five individuals: an administrator, two late-career and one mid-career tenured faculty members in agriculture, and one early-career tenure-track faculty member in family and consumer sciences.

A primary outcome of the panel was the impression among county faculty that peer-reviewed journal articles were the primary focus of engaged scholarship. Cooperative Extension professionals have advocated for years that their consumer-friendly publications should "count" as scholarship. These authors fully agree that these are an invaluable form of scholarship, as are many other creative works that are reviewed by peers. Although the keynote and panel discussed multiple types of scholarly work, county faculty members left the session with a perception that peer-reviewed journal articles were the currency the university sought due to their ease of comparison with non-land-grant, aspirational institutions to the University of Georgia.

After the panel, many county faculty members voiced concerns to specialists and supervisors about the new expectations for scholarly productivity. Commonly expressed concerns included changes in their job responsibilities since they were hired, lack of preparation for or interest in these new responsibilities, and frustration that the panel did not accurately represent the community-focused work of county faculty. As conversations continued among extension administrators and state faculty, it became evident that county faculty need additional support and guidance to feel comfortable with the expectation of increased scholarly work.

Project Description

The purpose of this project is to enhance the capacity for county faculty in UGA Extension to be meaningfully involved in community-engaged research and scholarship within the context of their county work, and to inform administrators what it takes to prepare these faculty members for this type of work. Our short-term goals are to understand the perceptions of needs related to scholarly engagement among our county faculty and to explore ways to meet those needs. Our long-term goal is to develop sustainable systems to prepare county extension faculty to meet scholarly expectations.

Project Details

Early Stage Assessment of Scholarship Perceptions and Readiness—County Faculty Survey

In response to the panel on scholarship, state-level faculty held discussions of the most effective ways to enhance the scholarly capability of county faculty. During these discussions, we identified a need for more information about county faculty perceptions of scholarship, including definitions, perceived abilities, and resources to engage

in scholarship at the county level. Based on this information about perceptions, we hypothesized that we would be able to identify or create training and resources to meet identified needs, with the ultimate goal of integrating this program into the organizational structure of training and development for new and existing extension faculty.

We conducted a survey of county extension faculty in family and consumer sciences and 4-H youth development in order to learn more about their feelings toward scholarly work, their perceptions of the value of engaging in scholarly work, their skills and knowledge regarding scholarly work, and their perceptions of the support available for their scholarly work. The decision to include only family and consumer science and 4-H county faculty was both practical and intentional. Practically, our two extension program areas work regularly together, and faculty from both areas were interested in the topic. In addition, county extension faculty in these program areas anecdotally shared their concerns that they would have more challenges producing research. County faculty in agriculture and natural resources were perceived to be more easily included in experimental projects led by tenured or tenure-track faculty to evaluate agricultural applications like pesticide use, animal feeds, or irrigation technology. The results of this survey will be used to frame faculty training and support components of the project.

Survey Participants

Survey participants were recruited via email sent to an organizational email list containing addresses of all employed county extension faculty with assignments in 4-H or family and consumer sciences (FACS). The inclusion criteria were employment in UGA Extension, employment classification as county extension faculty, and an assigned appointment in 4-H and/or FACS.

Survey Content

The survey consisted of 36 items divided into five categories: (1) educational and employment characteristics, (2) feelings about scholarship, (3) perceived value of scholarly work, (4) perceived support for scholarly activities, and (5) perceived skills and abilities related to scholarly work. Cronbach's alpha measures of reliability ranged from 0.72 to 0.93 for Categories 2–5.

Educational and Employment Characteristics

Participants answered eight questions about their educational background and current employment. For six of the questions (current position, appointment in 4-H and/or FACS, highest degree earned, whether a thesis or dissertation was completed as part of graduate education, and public service faculty rank), participants chose from a list of options. For the remaining two questions (years as county-based faculty and years in current position), participants chose the appropriate number from a numerical scale.

Feelings About Scholarly Work

To assess feelings about scholarship, participants were presented with a list of 14 feeling words (e.g., excitement, anxiety, indifference) and were asked to indicate the degree to which they experience each feeling when thinking about scholarship. Participants rated each term on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with choices of "none at all," "very little," "some," "a lot," and "a great deal." Responses to eight items with negative connotations (confusion, anxiety, frustration, inadequacy, boredom, indifference, overwhelmed, and anger) were reverse scored to be consistent with responses to the items with more positive connotations.

Perceived Value of Scholarly Work

To assess perceptions about the value of scholarly work, participants rated their agreement with 11 statements that completed the phrase "Engaging in scholarly activities . . ." (e.g., "helps me justify my programs," "makes me feel connected to the university"). Participants rated each statement using a 5-point Likert-type scale, with choices of "strongly disagree," "somewhat disagree," "neither agree nor disagree," "somewhat agree," and "strongly agree." Because three of the statements ("takes me away from meeting my community needs," "does not give me useful information," and "does not apply to my everyday work") were phrased negatively, the responses to these statements were reverse scored to be consistent with responses to the positively phrased statements.

Perceived Support for Scholarly Activities

To assess perceived support, participants rated the support they receive from 7 individuals/groups (e.g., extension state specialists, extension director) by answering

the question "Please rate how supportive each of the following are of your scholarly activities." Participants rated each individual or group using a 5-point Likert-type scale, with choices of "not at all supportive," "a little supportive," "generally supportive," "very supportive," and "extremely supportive." Participants also identified specific sources of support for engaging in scholarly activities in an open-ended follow-up question.

Perceived Skills and Abilities in Extension-Related Scholarly Work and Supporting Activities

Participants answered two sets of questions to assess their perceptions of their skills and abilities in various extension-related scholarly activities. The first set of questions assessed participants' skills and abilities in six domains of extension-related scholarly activities: outreach program delivery, research methods and peer-reviewed research publications, curriculum development, extension publication development, grant proposals and administration, and conference proposals. The outreach program delivery section included seven items (e.g., conducting needs assessment, delivering programs directly to clientele, conducting program evaluation). The research methods and peer-reviewed research publications section included eight items (e.g., writing peer-reviewed journal articles, collecting data, conducting research). The curriculum development section included four items (e.g., reviewing curriculum for program selection, writing curriculum). The extension publication development section included four specific items (e.g., reading extension publications, writing extension publications). The grant proposals and administration section included five items (e.g., writing grant proposals, reviewing grant proposals, administering grant programs). The conference proposals section included four items (e.g., writing conference proposals/sessions/posters, reviewing conference proposals/posters).

Participants rated their perceived level of skill and ability for each item using a 5-point Likert-type scale, with choices of "none at all," "very little," "a moderate amount," "a lot," and "a great deal." To further assess perceived skills and abilities related to scholarship, participants rated their understanding of nine research-related concepts and tools (e.g., qualitative research methods, data collection tools, program fidelity, SPSS, program evaluation) using a 5-point Likert-type scale with choices of "I'm not familiar with this term/poor," "fair," "average," "good," and "very good."

Procedure

The survey was conducted via an online software tool available to all campus and county faculty (Qualtrics, 2018, US). Potential participants received an email with an explanation of the survey and an anonymous link for survey completion. The survey link was distributed in October 2016 and was open to responses for 5 weeks. Two follow-up emails were distributed at 2 and 4 weeks to those who had not completed or only partially completed the survey, inviting them to complete the survey. All methods and procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Georgia, and all participants provided informed consent.

Data Analysis—Measuring Perceptions of Scholarship

Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, and percentages were calculated for educational and employment characteristics. Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for all Likert-type survey items. Spearman's correlations were used to explore associations between each item and years as a county faculty member. Mann–Whitney U tests were used to compare responses to survey items based on highest degree earned (bachelor's or master's), county administrator responsibilities (yes/no), and completion of a thesis or dissertation as part of graduate work (yes/no). Kruskal–Wallis tests were used to assess feelings about scholarship based on faculty rank.

Within the survey section on perceived skills and abilities, means were also calculated for each skill or ability, as well as a mean for the domain of skill and ability. For example, the domain of "research methods and peer-reviewed research publications" contained questions about skills and abilities in writing peer-reviewed journal articles, reading peer-reviewed journal articles, contributing to peer-reviewed journal articles, collecting data, analyzing data, conducting research, and being part of a research team. Means,

standard deviations, and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for each of these items. Additionally, a mean for the overall domain was calculated to summarize agent skill and ability in that domain. Cronbach's alpha for the domains ranged from 0.81 to 0.92. These means were calculated for descriptive purposes only. Relationships were explored between each individual skill/ability and faculty characteristics using Spearman correlations, Mann–Whitney U tests, and Kruskal–Wallis tests as appropriate to the data.

All data analyses were conducted with IBM SPSS Statistics (Ver. 25). Significance level was set to $p < 0.01$ due to the large number of analyses performed.

Survey Results—Creating a Baseline for the Project

Ninety-three participants completed the survey. Eleven participants were excluded from data analyses because they indicated their job title was something other than county extension faculty. An additional three participants were excluded from analyses because they identified their assigned appointment as agricultural and natural resources only. The final sample included 79 county faculty. Participants (n = 79) reported an average of 10.8 years (SD = 8.21) as county faculty. A little less than half of participants (41.8%) had a bachelor's degree, 57% had a master's degree, and 23.4% completed a thesis or dissertation as part of graduate work. A little less than half of participants (44.3%) identified themselves as county administrator with administrative duties (e.g., employee performance evaluation, county budget management, attending county departmental meetings) in addition to the regular duties of county faculty. Seventy-two percent of participants identified themselves as entry level faculty rank (public service assistant or representative), 22.8% as public service associate, and 5.1% as senior public service associate (Table 1). Therefore, more than 90% of respondents were eligible to be considered for promotion in the future, for which evidence of scholarly work would be required. There was a significant relationship between years as a county faculty member and faculty rank ($r_s = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$).

Feelings About Scholarly Work

Participants indicated a variety of feelings related to scholarly work. Table 2 displays the mean values reported for each feeling in order from highest mean score to lowest. Means ranged from 2.24 (happiness) to 4.00 (overwhelmed).

Table 1. Participant Characteristics (n = 79)

Characteristic	Mean (SD) or %[1]
Years employed as a county Extension agent	10.8 (8.21)
Administrative appointment	
County administrator	44.3%
Not a county administrator	55.7%
Highest degree achieved	
Bachelor's degree	41.8%
Master's degree	57.0%
Other	1.3%%
Thesis or dissertation completed[2]	
No	76.6%
Yes	23.4%
Faculty rank	
Public service assistant or representative (entry level)	72.2%
Public service associate	22.8%
Senior public service associate	5.1%

Note. [1]Not all percentages total 100 due to rounding.
[2]N = 77.

Table 2. Participant Feelings About Scholarly Work (n = 79)

Feeling	Mean	SD	95% CI
Overwhelmed	4.00	1.10	(3.75, 4.25)
Frustration	3.53	1.18	(3.26, 3.79)
Anxiety	3.53	1.31	(3.24, 3.82)
Inadequacy	3.32	1.22	(3.04, 3.59)
Intellectual	3.29	1.11	(3.04, 3.54)
Confusion	3.25	1.14	(3.00, 3.51)
Interested	2.91	1.05	(2.68, 3.15)
Curiosity	2.91	1.12	(2.66, 3.16)
Indifference	2.49	1.11	(2.25, 2.74)
Eagerness	2.46	1.05	(2.22, 2.70)
Boredom	2.42	1.09	(2.17, 2.66)
Excitement	2.42	1.15	(2.16, 2.68)
Anger	2.42	1.29	(2.13, 2.71)
Happiness	2.24	1.00	(2.02, 2.47)

Feelings about scholarly work varied with participants' experience as county-based faculty. Years as county-based faculty was positively correlated (r_s = 0.294, p < 0.01) with feelings of anger and negatively correlated (r_s = −0.31, p < 0.01) with feelings of happiness. Specifically, participants with more years of experience tended to report less feelings of happiness and more feelings of anger related to scholarly expectations. Feelings of happiness and feeling intellectual were significantly lower (p < 0.01) for those with an administrative appointment (happiness: 1.89, SD = 0.93; intellectual: 2.89, SD = 0.96) than for those without an administrative appointment (happiness: 2.52, SD = 0.98; intellectual: 3.61, SD = 1.13, Table 3). Those with administrative appointments reported greater indifference related to scholarly work (2.94, SD = 1.00) than those without an administrative appointment (2.14, SD = 1.07; p < 0.01). There were no significant relationships among any of the feelings assessed and highest degree achieved, completion of a thesis or dissertation, or faculty rank.

Perceived Value of Scholarly Work

Participants reported a wide range of feelings about the value of scholarly work. Table 4 displays the mean values for each of the items that assessed perceived value of scholarly work. Means ranged from 2.33 (takes me away from community needs) to 4.44 (helps me better understand my community). There were no significant correlations of perceived value of scholarly work with years as county faculty, faculty rank, highest degree, or completion of a thesis or dissertation. Participants with an administrative appointment reported lower agreement with the statement that scholarly work "helps me justify my programs"

Table 3. Relationship Between Administrative Appointment and Feelings About Scholarly Work

Feeling	County administrator (N = 35) Mean (SD)	Nonadministrator (N = 44) Mean (SD)	p <
Happiness	1.89 (0.93)	2.52 (0.98)	0.01
Intellectual	2.89 (0.96)	3.61 (1.13)	0.01
Indifference	2.94 (1.00)	2.14 (1.07)	0.01

Table 4. Perceived Value of Scholarly Work (*N* = 79)

Item[1]	Mean	SD	95% CI
Takes me away from my community[2]	2.33	1.16	(2.07, 2.59)
Elevates my status in the local community	2.70	1.30	(2.41, 2.99)
Does not apply to my everyday work[2]	3.05	1.29	(2.76, 3.34)
Makes me feel connected to the university	3.13	1.17	(2.86, 3.39)
Is good for my community	3.15	1.24	(2.87, 3.43)
Helps me better understand my impact in the community	3.22	1.33	(2.92, 3.51)
Helps me justify my programs	3.41	1.30	(3.11, 3.70)
Does not give me useful information[2]	3.44	1.16	(3.18, 3.70)
Is good for the Extension organization	3.84	1.07	(3.60, 4.07)
Elevates my status in the university community	3.94	1.09	(3.69, 4.18)
Helps me justify my programs	4.44	0.75	(4.28, 4.61)

Note. [1]Ranked on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
[2]These items are negatively worded and reverse scored.

(2.94, *SD* = 1.35) and "is good for the Extension organization" (3.49, *SD* = 1.12) than did those without an administrative appointment (justify programs: 3.77, *SD* = 1.14; is good for the organization: 4.11, *SD* = 0.95, $p < 0.01$).

Perceived Support for Scholarly Activities

Table 5 displays the mean values reported for support for scholarly activities from various sources. Means ranged from 2.45 (local school administration) to 3.95 (program-level administration). There were no significant correlations among any of the support sources with years as county extension faculty, faculty rank, completion of a thesis or dissertation, or administrative assignment. Those with a master's degree reported greater perceived support for scholarly work from extension specialists than did those with a bachelor's degree (master's: 3.71, *SD* = 1.25, *N* = 45; bachelor's: 2.94, *SD* = 1.25, $p < 0.01$, *N* = 33).

Perceived Skills and Abilities

Table 6 displays the mean summary scores for the items in each of the domains of skill and ability. Means ranged from 2.48 (grant proposal development and grant administration) to 4.17 (program delivery). For

Table 5. Perceived Support for Scholarly Activities (*N* = 79)

Source of support[1]	Mean	SD	95% CI
Local school administration	2.45	1.24	(2.17, 2.73)
Non-Extension county officials	2.51	1.18	(2.24, 2.77)
Cooperative Extension organization	3.32	1.23	(3.04, 3.60)
Extension specialists	3.41	1.31	(3.11, 3.70)
Professional association	3.67	1.13	(3.42, 3.92)
District-level administration	3.75	1.14	(3.49, 4.00)
Program-level administration	3.95	1.10	(3.70, 4.19)

Note. [1]Ranked on a scale of 1 (Not at all supportive) to 5 (Extremely supportive).

Table 6. Perceived Skill and Ability in Areas of Extension-Related Scholarly Work (*N* = 79)

Domain of skill and ability[1]	Mean	SD	95% CI
Grant proposal development and grants administration	2.48	0.86	(2.27, 2.66)
Extension publication development[2]	2.57	0.84	(2.39, 2.77)
Research methods and peer-reviewed research publications	2.60	0.80	(2.41, 2.77)
Conference proposals and presentations	2.75	0.95	(2.50, 2.92)
Outreach program curriculum development	3.39	0.90	(3.17, 3.57)
Program delivery	4.17	0.51	(4.06, 4.29)

Note. [1]Perceived skill/ability in each domain ranked on a scale of 1 (None at all) to 5 (A great deal).
[2]*N* = 78.

brevity, means for each item within these domains are not shown. All data analysis is available upon request to the authors. Of all the items assessed, participants rated their skills and abilities lowest for "writing peer-reviewed journal articles" (2.16, *SD* = 0.88) and "writing Extension publications" (2.10, *SD* = 0.80). Participants rated their skills and abilities highest in "conducting programs and events" (4.70, *SD* = 0.56) and "delivering programs directly to clientele" (4.68, *SD* = 0.57).

There were several significant ($p < 0.01$) relationships among various skills and abilities and employment/personal characteristics. Of interest, there were significant positive correlations of perceived skills and abilities in several items related to extension program delivery (i.e., conducting and contributing to needs assessment, conducting program evaluation), extension publications (i.e., contributing to and reviewing extension publications), and reviewing conference proposals with years as county extension faculty ($r_s = 0.24–0.38$, $p < 0.01$). There were significant negative correlations between perceived skill and ability in writing peer-reviewed journal articles ($r_s = -0.33$, $p < 0.01$) and analyzing data ($r_s = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and years as county extension faculty. Those with an administrative assignment reported greater perceived skill and ability to review extension publications than those without administrative appointments (with administrative appointment: 2.94, *SD* = 1.14; without an administrative appointment: 2.12, *SD* = 0.91, *U* = 438.5, $p = 0.001$).

Participants with an advanced degree (master's or higher) rated their skills and abilities in conducting research, being part of a research team, and writing conference proposals/presentations higher than those with a bachelor's degree (all $p < 0.01$). Those who completed a thesis or dissertation rated their abilities significantly higher in conducting research (*U* = 303.5, $p = 0.005$). There were no other relationships between completing a thesis or dissertation and any of the other perceived skills and abilities. Participants who were at a faculty rank above entry level rated themselves higher at delivering programs directly to clientele, designing and conducting events, and writing or contributing to conference proposals (all $p < 0.01$).

Understanding of Research Methods and Tools

Table 7 displays the mean values reported for understanding of various research methods and tools. Means ranged from 1.8 (IBM SPSS) to 3.67 (program evaluation). There were no significant correlations between years as a county Extension faculty member and perceived understanding of any of the research methods or tools. Those with master's degrees reported significantly ($p < 0.01$) greater understanding of quantitative and qualitative research methods, data collection tools, statistical analysis, program fidelity, university-supported survey software, and IBM SPSS (Table 8). Similarly, those who reported completing a thesis or dissertation as part of graduate work reported significantly greater ($p < 0.01$) understanding of quantitative and qualitative research methods, data collection tools, university-supported survey

Table 7. Self-Reported Understanding of Research Methods and Tools (*N* = 79)

Research method or tool[1]	Mean	SD	95% CI
IBM SPSS	1.80	1.20	(1.53, 2.07)
Statistical analysis	2.35	1.22	(2.08, 2.63)
Program fidelity[2]	2.40	1.32	(2.10, 2.70)
University-supported survey software	2.56	1.28	(2.27, 2.84)
Quantitative research methods	2.72	1.27	(2.44, 3.01)
Qualitative research methods	2.78	1.36	(2.38, 3.09)
Data collection tools	2.81	1.21	(2.54, 3.08)
Microsoft Excel	3.22	1.24	(2.94, 3.49)
Program evaluation	3.67	1.12	(3.42, 3.92)

Note. [1]Perceived understanding in each domain ranked on a scale of 1 (Poor or Not familiar with this term) to 5 (Very good).
[2]*N* = 77.

Table 8. Relationship of Education With Understanding of Research Methods and Tools

	Highest degree Mean (SD)			Thesis/Dissertation completion Mean (SD)		
Feeling	**Bachelor's (*N* = 33)**	**Master's (*N* = 45)**	***p* <**	**No (*N* = 59)**	**Yes (*N* = 18)**	***p* <**
Quantitative research methods	2.09 (1.07)	3.20 (1.22)	0.01	2.46 (1.18)	3.72 (1.07)	0.01
Qualitative research methods	2.06 (1.03)	3.33 (1.33)	0.01	2.51 (1.28)	3.83 (1.10)	
Statistical analysis	1.88 (1.02)	2.71 (1.25)	0.01	3.15 (1.24)	4.0 (1.14)	NS (p = 0.011)
Data collection tools	2.24 (1.00)	3.24 (1.19)	0.01	2.58 (1.13)	3.67 (1.14)	0.01
Program fidelity[1]	1.91 (1.06)	2.77 (1.40)	0.01	3.09 (1.53)	3.72 (1.64)	NS (p = 0.10)
University-supported survey software	2.06 (1.06)	2.96 (1.30)	0.01	2.36 (1.21)	3.28 (1.27)	0.01
IBM SPSS Statistics	1.27 (0.80)	2.20 (1.31)	0.01	1.44 (0.88)	3.06 (1.35)	0.01

Note. [1]Bachelor's (n = 32), master's (n = 44).

software, and IBM SPSS software (Table 8). There were no significant relationships among faculty rank and understanding of any of the research methods or tools.

Discussion—Implications and Next Steps

Our initial survey yielded interesting and informative information that will be used to guide our ongoing project to support county-based faculty in scholarly work. More than 90% of the survey respondents are eligible for promotion, for which evidence of scholarly work is a requirement. This suggests that resources to support respondents in scholarly engagement would be useful. At the same time, respondents' skills, abilities and values related to scholarly work varied greatly. In general, those with more experience in extension reported more anger toward scholarly work and more skill in the traditional roles of the county faculty, such as conducting needs assessment and delivering programs and events. This suggests that there may be some frustration with changing expectations for increased scholarly work, and a perception of lack of competency to meet these expectations, especially among those who have been employed longer. Interestingly, those with administrative appointments felt more indifference for scholarly work and reported less value for scholarly work. It is possible that those with an administrative appointment already feel "stretched thin" and thus place less value on these perceived added expectations. More research is needed to examine this topic.

Notably, having an advanced degree or completing a thesis or dissertation was related to greater perceived competence in research-specific activities, methods, and tools. In contrast, years as county extension faculty, administrative appointment, and faculty rank were not related to competence in these activities. This finding supports the recent change in requirements at our university to require a master's degree for placement in the public service faculty ranks. Since 2015, new hires without a master's degree no longer are eligible for immediate public service faculty placement (Office of the Vice President, 2021). Although a master's degree is now required for immediate placement into a public service faculty position, a thesis as part of the master's program is not required. Public service faculty members who have completed a thesis or dissertation may have more formal training for the scholarly work UGA Extension desires than those completing graduate education with a portfolio or other nonthesis option. It will be important for UGA Extension to monitor whether actual scholarly productivity among county extension faculty increases with completion of any graduate degree or only with completion of a graduate degree requiring a thesis or dissertation.

In general, participants ranked their perceived skill and ability as low in many tools and concepts that may be important for meaningful involvement in community-engaged research. This result suggests a clear need and opportunity for professional development to increase skills and abilities in these tools and concepts for community-engaged research for all county faculty, not just those without a graduate degree.

Although not specifically addressed in this survey, comprehensive training in community-engaged research should address all aspects of the research process from engagement with the community to developing research questions and priorities to design, implementation, data analysis, and communication of results in academic and nonacademic settings. The interpersonal and organizational skills needed to meaningfully engage communities in research are as important as the technical and methodological skills needed to design and implement a research project, analyze data, and produce research publications. These skills in community-engaged research will also be essential for the community-based extension professionals as they seek to maintain trusted relationships in the community that they serve.

One area with a higher perceived skill and ability was within the extension publications domain. County faculty rated their confidence in reading extension publications higher than other items within the extension publication domain (i.e., writing, reviewing, contributing to extension publications). This may indicate the historical, one-way service of extension faculty disseminating knowledge to clientele rather than two-way engagement (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008) and suggests extension faculty are not yet fully prepared for two-way, reciprocal engagement with their local communities.

The differences between new county faculty

and experienced county faculty in attitudes toward scholarship are not surprising and highlight an important cultural change in our organization. County faculty who were hired recently have come into an extension system where scholarly productivity is a clearly communicated expectation. These faculty members are more positive about the idea of engaging in scholarly work than county faculty who have been in UGA Extension for many years. Those experienced faculty were hired when county faculty were expected to focus on needs assessment and community programming, but not necessarily on traditionally defined scholarship. Not surprisingly, these more experienced county faculty members express more negative feelings about the changed expectations and are more likely to perceive these new expectations as an unwanted expansion of their job responsibilities.

These initial survey data highlight clearly the need for better communication about the value of scholarly productivity in community-based outreach work, especially for county faculty members who have been employed by UGA Extension for some time and for those with an administrative appointment. In addition, we infer that there may be value in providing training to familiarize county faculty members with some of the core concepts and tools for engaging in research, such as qualitative and quantitative research methods and program fidelity, particularly for those who may not have had the formal training through a research-focused graduate degree. In addition, training in community-engaged research that values and treats community members as equal partners in the research process may also benefit extension faculty who have a negative view of research. Lastly, similar training for and communication with community members on the value of conducting research to inform programming may benefit county faculty who indicated that scholarly work takes them away from their community.

Next Steps in Supporting Scholarship Among County Faculty

At the end of the survey, participants had the opportunity to self-identify whether they would like to participate in further discussion on these topics. Our next immediate step was to conduct focus groups to expand our understanding of these survey results. We followed the survey with four focus groups of four to six county faculty conducted in the December and January following survey implementation. Rapid and focused qualitative assessment of the focus group data was used to identify immediate next steps. From these focus groups, two primary themes emerged: (1) faculty needed and desired focused training in research methods, and (2) protected time was essential for scholarly productivity within the busy schedule of a county faculty member. Our next step in the ongoing project is to develop a pilot county faculty learning community with eight 4-H and FACS agents to enhance community-engaged research knowledge and skills. Although not the only form of scholarly productivity, this area was identified as the most "feared" aspect of scholarship and the area where county extension faculty desired immediate support.

The learning community will include a minimum of three in-person training workshops on how to conduct research (e.g., creating an IRB proposal, conducting an in-depth library search), as well as protected time and peer-to-peer support to design and implement a qualitative research project and to analyze and report qualitative research data over the course of one year. The goals of the proposed pilot learning community are to (1) provide practical support for county faculty conducting community-based research and (2) bolster faculty confidence in their ability to engage in research as a tool to strengthen their community programming.

Another key step in moving this project forward is to share an in-depth report of county faculty perceptions, based on both survey and focus group data, with university administrators responsible for county faculty performance evaluations. The goal of sharing this information is to help administrators understand and appreciate the challenges of changing scholarly expectations, in hopes that administrators will consider putting in place varied job responsibilities and performance evaluations for county faculty as a way to reduce stress during the shift of the organizational culture toward more traditional scholarly work.

In addition, it will be imperative to educate community partners, elected officials, and school administrators to recognize the value in scholarly work. County faculty members identified these groups as lowest in perceived support. Receiving direct feedback from these community partners about their

perceptions of scholarly work would also assist in the development of next steps for county faculty in their own local relationships.

Beyond the specific steps in practice at our institution, this research can also benefit other land-grant universities. The diversity of faculty and staff types for county-based extension positions deserves additional study. Our institution employs a unique public service faculty track for county-based faculty members. Other institutions include county-based extension employees in a variety of roles, including professional staff to tenure-track (Olsen, 2005). Additional research may provide insight to the influences and impacts of these varied structures.

Lessons Learned—Defining Scholarship for County Faculty

Throughout this process, it has become evident that the University of Georgia does not have a mutually agreed-upon definition of scholarship applicable to all faculty. Academic departments are expected to define scholarship for faculty based on standard practices in their field of study. Having an explicit definition of scholarship providing flexibility to encompass the diversity of disciplines and faculty roles at the University of Georgia may be beneficial. This definition must still maintain the rigor required at a top-tier research-intensive university. This change may support county faculty members by clarifying expectations and providing a framework for evaluating scholarship within the context of their county-based role. County faculty may benefit from a definition of scholarship similar to the one used at Oregon State University, which states that scholarship is original, "creative intellectual work that is validated by peers and communicated" (Weiser & Houglum, 1998).

Once UGA Extension or the University of Georgia develops an agreed-upon definition of scholarship, administrators may need to consider the appropriate place(s) of county faculty members within the scholarship production cycle, given their expertise and job responsibilities. The experiences and results of our project, including this survey and the planned pilot county faculty learning community, will better inform administrators of the time, effort, and results of preparing these individuals for scholarly work.

Conclusions

The increase in scholarly expectations for county faculty represents an organizational shift occurring across our university and across the nation. Although this study focused on our university's Cooperative Extension Service, results may provide insights for many institutions with extension or outreach faculty striving to contribute to the body of knowledge in the competitive academic world. Based on these initial survey results, resources are needed to address negative perceptions about the value of scholarly work and lack of competency in tools and methods, particularly among those who have worked in outreach for many years without the explicit expectation of scholarly productivity and who have little or no formal training in research. Proactive, supportive leaders who understand that this culture shift takes time and intentionality are necessary to make this change smoother and less stressful for county faculty. Leaders at our university have demonstrated this support for county faculty by allocating resources for a proposed pilot of a county faculty learning community aimed at developing scholarly skills. Results of these next steps will be informative for other universities considering best practices to support their own training and development needs.

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