



Building Your Extension Career: Preparing for Opportunities

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Introduction

Extension offers many paths to leadership at the district and state levels. This publication is based on an online seminar with experienced Extension professionals sharing their insights, tips, and encouragement for exploring leadership opportunities in Extension. The information below is derived from that conversation and is intended to be a starting point for thinking about opportunities to stretch your leadership skills and potentially take on formal leadership roles.

Expand your Network by Building Local Programming

Extension leadership starts at the local level. Building a strong local program is foundational to expanding leadership opportunities. As you build local programming based on local needs, your network will naturally expand to include local stakeholders and colleagues doing similar work across Extension and in your community.

Demonstrating successful community partnerships is an essential element in the promotion process and in district or state-level leadership opportunities. It is important to show up, be committed, and engage in meaningful connections as you develop community partnerships and relationships.



Figure 1: AI-generated photograph of Extension professionals demonstrating the preparation of healthy foods.

Professional Networking for Extension Growth

Once you have established a strong local program, consider expanding your programmatic efforts to include district and state level priorities. In many cases, your local program priorities will align with district and state priorities, thus providing natural opportunities to expand your work by joining program teams, partnering with statewide organizations, or collaborating with specialists on programs. You may also consider stepping outside your comfort zone by expanding your programming or professional development into subjects you are

less familiar with, or networking with new people and organizations. Program pilot projects are another opportunity to build skills before stepping into larger roles or programs

Building Leadership Skills

Take opportunities to build your leadership skills by participating in your professional association, local boards, or district boards. Extension offers many opportunities to build your leadership skills in both formal and informal ways. Leverage your unique talents and expertise to present at the VCE Winter Conference, district meetings, local conferences or organizations, and national conferences. You will find many colleagues willing to partner with you on talks and presentations.

A few other ways to explore growth opportunities while building leadership skills include participating in district committees, mentoring, participating in search committees, volunteering to lead trainings, and joining state training committees such as the Winter Conference Committee. Your district director and mentor are valuable resources to help you decide how to best leverage your professional goals with your strengths.

Leadership Training

In addition to on-the-job learning, there are professional development opportunities available to help build your leadership skills. VCE offers an annual Faculty Leadership Development Program (FLDP) for Extension professionals, and VCE sponsors the Virginia Agriculture Leaders Obtaining Results (VALOR) program. A third opportunity is the Virginia Natural Resources Leadership Institute (VNRLI) at UVA that VCE helps sponsor.

Set realistic expectations for your workload. It takes time to develop strong relationships and strong programming, so don't compare yourself to more tenured agents. Your district director and mentors(s) can help you create a realistic plan of work for the first year of employment with Extension. It's expected that you will need help navigating various situations as an agent, so ask for help when you need it.

Where to learn about opportunities?

Opportunities for new positions can be found in several places. However, if you're interested in exploring district or state positions, be sure to let your network know; talk to your district director and your mentor(s) so they know you're interested in district or state positions.

Some state and district level positions are shared with the entire system via email, and others can be found on the Virginia Tech or Virginia State University job sites.

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