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Exploring Organizational Learning of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service: A Qualitative Study Involving Parish Chairs of Less Than Three Years Experience.

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**EXPLORING ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING OF
THE LOUISIANA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY INVOLVING PARISH CHAIRS OF
LESS THAN THREE YEARS EXPERIENCE**

A Dissertation

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

in

The School of Human Resource Education and Workforce Development

by

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B.A., University of Texas at Austin, 1978
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May 2001**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
ABSTRACT.....	vii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Focus of the Study.....	1
Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service.....	1
Significance of the Study.....	3
Purpose of the Study.....	6
Limitations of the Research.....	7
CHAPTER 2: LEARNING ORGANIZATION LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
Learning Within the Learning Organization.....	8
Transformation Theory of Adult Learning.....	12
Articulation.....	13
The Role of Learning and Action Research in Extension.....	15
CHAPTER 3: ACTION RESEARCH LITERATURE REVIEW AND APPLICATION TO RESEARCH STUDY.....	21
Research Orientation: Assumptions of Interpretive Research, Specifically Those of Participatory Action Research.....	21
Research Processes Relating to the Study.....	31
Role of the Researcher.....	42
Data Analysis.....	44
Issues of Rigor in Action Research.....	45
Ethics of the Study.....	48
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	50
Nature of the Study.....	50
Results.....	52
Connie's Story: The Need for Better Preparatory Training or "Just Stepping Into the Job".....	54
Motivating Factors to Seek or Accept the Position of Parish Chair.....	68
Parish Chair Selection Process.....	73
Influence on Agents of Former Parish Chairs.....	76
Tanner's Story: Authority vs. Responsibility or "Lots to Do, But Hands Are Tied".....	78
Unrealistic Expectations: Compensation.....	94
Unrealistic Expectations: Balancing Administrative Role with Area Specialization.....	96
Unrealistic Expectations: Maintaining Relationships with Local Authorities.....	100
Unrealistic Expectations: Performance Evaluations.....	104

Sharon's Story: Knowledge Sharing or "To Accept Parish Chair One Must Be Willing to Reinvent Oneself"	109
Risking Moving Out of the Comfort Zone: Reflection in Action.....	124
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS.....	133
Summary.....	133
Contextualization.....	141
Conclusions/Implications for LCES.....	156
Recommendations for Future Research.....	159
REFERENCES.....	161
APPENDIX A: LOUISIANA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE.....	167
APPENDIX B: MAP OF SELECTED PARISHES.....	168
APPENDIX C: DR. BAGENT'S LETTER TO PARISH CHAIRS.....	169
APPENDIX D: LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS INCLUDING RESEARCH PURPOSE.....	171
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROCEDURE.....	173
APPENDIX F: LETTER TO PARISH CHAIRS WITH TRANSCRIPT.....	174
APPENDIX G: QUESTIONS FOR 2ND FOCUS GROUP.....	175
APPENDIX H: PARISH CHAIR JOB DESCRIPTION.....	176
APPENDIX I: PARISH CHAIR PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL.....	180
VITA.....	191

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Number of Parish Chairs by Area of Specialization	32
Table 2. Number of Parish Chairs by Age and Years of Service Prior to Appointment as Parish Chair.....	32
Table 3. Joint Account: Focus Group Results for All Focus Group Sessions.....	127
Table 4. Number of Parish Chairs by Area of Specialization	137
Table 5. Number of Parish Chairs by Age and Years of Service Prior to Appointment as Parish Chair.....	137

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was designed to facilitate the description, analysis and utilization of continual learning within the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service (LCES). The research linked exploration of a learning culture within an organization with the reflective practice of participatory action research methodology. Learning organizations promote knowledge sharing that allows for individual learning to make the transition into collective organizational learning. In order for transformative learning to occur, individuals must reflect on their actions to make sense of an experience. Explaining and thinking about what one is doing makes tacit knowledge explicit, therefore able to be shared and used for change. In Louisiana, each parish (county) Extension office hosts a mid-level management position of Parish Chair who provides leadership and administrative support for the overall parish Extension office. This study focused on agents newly appointed to the position of Parish Chair. The primary purpose of the study was to describe and interpret the experiences of the Parish Chairs in learning their jobs. Parish Chairs statewide participated in collaborative professional development that built on their skills as reflective practitioners. Through individual interviews and focus group meetings, action research methodology enabled the Parish Chairs to systematically examine their learning through a cyclical process of examining their planning, actions, evaluation of those actions and making recommendations for further action. The findings suggested that in the LCES, management concepts and practices are essentially learned “on the job.” Through the lens of the learning organization, Parish Chairs saw themselves as continual learners (knowledge producers) and identified situations of single and double loop learning. The

results document examples of personal and organizational policies and practices that promoted or impeded a learning culture within the LCES, outlines implications of current organizational policies and offers recommendations for improved organizational learning.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Focus of the Study

This qualitative study using participatory action research methodology was designed to facilitate the ongoing description, analysis, and utilization of continual learning within the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service (LCES). The participants in this action research study were mid-level managers newly appointed as supervisors, called Parish Chairs, of certain parishes (counties) in the LCES. The individual appointed to the position of Parish Chair (PC) is responsible for providing leadership and administrative support for the overall planning, development, implementation, reporting, and evaluation of the parish extension program, for administration and management of the parish extension office, and for conducting need-based educational programs (see Appendix A). The Parish Chairs continue their educational responsibilities within their technical specialization while assuming additional administrative responsibilities. A common practice of many organizations is to promote employees to positions of progressively increasing authority and responsibility in which specific preparation for those positions has not been provided by the organization (Garratt, 1990). Through individual interviews and coming together in focus groups, the newly appointed Parish Chairs explored how they learned their job and the ways in which the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service promoted or impeded that learning.

Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service

Cooperative Extension in the United States is a publicly supported nationwide educational system, offering informal education programs. The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service is a part of this vast federal-state-local extension system created by

the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. The history and formation of Cooperative Extension dates back to three significant laws signed by President Lincoln in 1862: the act authorizing establishment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA); the Homestead Act, encouraging settlement of public domain lands; and the Morrill Act, establishing land grant colleges in every state to provide instruction in agriculture and the mechanical arts in American higher education. Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College (LSU), the locus of this research, is one of the land grant colleges established by the Morrill Act. The Hatch Act of 1887 established a cooperative bond between the USDA and the nation's land grant colleges by providing funding for agricultural experiment stations in all states. The second Morrill Act of 1890 provided land-grant status to several all black colleges (Rasmussen, 1989).

The Cooperative Extension Service provides the educational link between the land-grant institutions, agricultural research stations, and the general public. The mission of the Cooperative Extension Service is "to help people improve their lives and communities through an educational process that uses scientific knowledge focused on issues critical to the economic, agricultural, societal, health/safety, and environmental progress of all Americans" (Cooperative Extension Service, 1996).

In Louisiana, the Cooperative Extension Service provides service to its clientele in three major areas: Agriculture, Family and Consumer Sciences, and 4-H Youth Development. Agricultural agents are responsible for planning, conducting and evaluating educational programs with the adults in agriculture production, processing, management, and marketing of crops and livestock. The Family and Consumer Sciences agent is responsible for planning, conducting and evaluating home economics educational programs for families and consumers primarily in the areas of financial

management, food safety, nutrition, diet and health, parenting and childcare, work force preparation and leadership. Finally, the 4-H Youth Development agent combines the two above-mentioned areas of agriculture and family and consumer sciences into non-formal youth leadership development education and community service learning. The LCES consists of specialists, county agents, area agents and administrators. Support for personnel and programming comes from special groups such as the state specialists, project leaders, division leaders, communications department, computer services, and material and supplies department. There is an extension office in every parish (county) and each office hosts an administrative, mid-level management position, the Parish Chair (Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, 1993). The cooperative nature of the Cooperative Extension Service comes from the shared financial responsibility of the local communities, with the state funding, to support the educational programming offered by the LCES. Local funding is approved primarily through the Police Jury (parish administrative council) and the parish school board.

Significance of the Study

Common to many organizations is the practice of promoting employees to positions of progressively increasing authority and responsibility in which specific preparation for those positions has not been provided by the organization (Garratt, 1990). This research project focused on leadership at the middle-management level of Parish Chair as it relates to organizational leadership of the LCES. Typically, Parish Chairs have academic backgrounds and receive in-service training in technological disciplines, but may have little opportunity for training and development as managers. Therefore, management concepts and practices are essentially learned “on the job.”

In earlier graduate research, the researcher had studied the role of the Parish Chair as a mid-level manager in the organization. Results of that research convinced the researcher that Parish Chairs occupy a pivotal position in the complex functioning of an organization that simultaneously operates vertically and horizontally, working as a traditional-hierarchical organization while giving field (parish) personnel much freedom in personal judgement and decision-making. In this position as parish administrator, where top-down directives meet community-based needs, Parish Chairs require both technical and administrative competence. The job of Parish Chair entails a link between “local governing bodies, parish and community leaders, and representatives of state and U.S. government agencies” (Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, 1992a) in an organization that describes itself as a “future-oriented, self-renewing, national educational network providing excellence in programs that focus on contemporary issues and needs of people” (Cooperative Extension Service, 1996).

This research also views the LCES through the lens of a “learning organization.” The learning organization is one that learns continuously and transforms itself, operating not only as a production organization, but a knowledge-producing organization as well (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Or, as Senge (1990) writes, “A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it” (p. 13).

Today’s complex, interdependent, and unstable systems, what Peter Vaill (1996) describes as “organizational permanent whitewater,” require continual imaginative and creative initiatives by those living and working in them--especially those leading and managing them (Senge, 1990; Vaill, 1996; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). The assumption which underlies this research is that the “continual imaginative

and creative initiatives required for decision making are, in fact, examples of *continual learning* [italics in original]; in other words, continual learning is what we are seeing as we observe people acting in complex situations” (Vaill, p. 5). LCES Parish Chairs are in a position of needing to continually learn as they negotiate an organizational environment of “permanent whitewater.”

All of life provides learning experiences. However, we do not necessarily learn from those experiences. Only through awareness, reflection, and review of such encounters are we able to move beyond simply asking ourselves whether and how a task can be done better to a qualitatively more valuable question of how can we *learn* in a better way. The dynamic organization of the 21st century will be one in which this continual learning takes place and is encouraged by the organization.

Thomas Patterson (1991), in a discussion of the Cooperative Extension Service as an organization in transition, speaks of the organizations of the 21st century as ones that are designed to lead and manage change. He argues that in order for the extension educator of the future to be effective in leading the organization in change, he or she must be a continuous, autonomous learner who has a thorough understanding of the learning process enabling quick response to organizational and clientele needs. Again, Parish Chairs are in a unique position to provide a crucial role in ensuring LCES lives up to the promises of its mission. While there are many paths to approach a greater understanding of what makes up a learning organization, this study focused on the personal learning experiences of LCES Parish Chairs and how they have learned their job.

Participatory action research (PAR) methodology was chosen for this research in that it was the most appropriate method to incorporate a qualitative, collaborative, and

critically reflective systematic investigation of the specific historical, biographical, and situated context of the participants; in this case, of newly appointed Parish Chairs of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service. Naturalistic inquiry, the rubric under which participatory action research belongs, was ideally suited to this study in that the research assumptions and procedures were most appropriate to gain deeper insight and understanding of the Parish Chairs' learning experiences within the context of the participants' daily work. Integral to this study was the participatory nature of the research design. The Parish Chairs reflection on and articulation of their learning experiences and leadership style helped the Parish Chairs develop their own theory, in real time, and in their workplace (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989, Kiely & Ellis, 1999). The Parish Chairs brought what they are learning into conscious awareness; they made tacit knowledge explicit. Through a process of questioning, reflection, and feedback from others, the Parish Chairs deepened their understanding of the role of their learning in everyday activities. Ensuring that the Parish Chairs were active in the research process centered around the tenet of PAR that the participants developing a deeper level of knowledge and understanding of their own situation are most likely prepared to take action in the form of change. Fundamentally, this research is grounded on the action research perspective of knowledge production, that one learns from people rather than studies them.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to describe and interpret the experiences of new Parish Chairs in learning their jobs.

Specific objectives of the study were:

1. In collaboration with participants, identify themes and significant features in the Parish Chairs' experience of learning their job.
2. In collaboration with participants, identify the features of Parish Chairs' experience that promote and impede the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of new knowledge about their job as Parish Chair.
3. In collaboration with participants, explore an agenda for making action plans based on the identified features to improve the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of new knowledge about the job of Parish Chair.

Limitations of the Research

The research participants represent a purposefully selected and limited sample, Parish Chairs of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service appointed to the position within the last three years (July of 1997). Thus there is no way of knowing the extent to which the findings of this study can be applied to other contexts. Also, no way exists of knowing the extent the participants reflect the overall makeup of Parish Chairs within the state of Louisiana or other states. Given the dynamic nature of the content of the research, over time the situation or issues may change.

CHAPTER 2

LEARNING ORGANIZATION LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review is designed to explore the theoretical assumptions that connect reflective practice and continuous individual learning, and how such learning is believed to be essential to an effective learning organization. The review begins with a brief overview of the emergence of the concept of the learning organization as well as certain assumptions underlying a discussion of learning organizations. The emphasis then shifts to how autonomous individual learning must be intentional and continuous in order for innovation to take place. By critically reflecting on their practice, professional educators become learners themselves, enabling them to become change agents. Much of the literature reviewed involves theories of transformational learning, the kind of learning that takes place by challenging and articulating assumptions about life, work, and practice that guide one's actions. A discussion of the new knowledge constructed through transformational learning brings us back full circle to the needs of the learning organization to be able to create, share, and utilize new knowledge. Finally, the literature found within Cooperative Extension is reviewed identifying the need for the organization to provide professional development using new paradigms of learning and leading that involve collaborative inquiry among extension faculty, and between faculty and extension clientele.

Learning Within the Learning Organization

Organizational learning has emerged as a field of organizational studies attracting considerable recent attention (Dodgson, 1993). Various writers (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Garratt, 1990; Pedler, Burgoyne, & Boydell 1991; Senge, 1994) speak of

organizational learning as a contemporary set of ideas and prescriptions of how organizations should be managed. These ideas apply the psychological metaphor of learning to organizations and argue that fostering learning in individuals can be transformed into more general improvements that will lead to success and prosperity for organizations.

Organizations “learn” as the collective patterns of behavior among its members change and adapt to their environment. Individuals act as learning agents for the organization by detecting and correcting errors in behavioral patterns which in turn become embedded in the “culture” of the organization (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Organizational learning is seen to have occurred when organizations perform in improved and better ways, usually as a result of requirements to adapt and improve efficiency in times of change (Dodgson, 1993). Nevis, DiBella and Gould (1996) from the Organizational Learning Center of the MIT Sloan School of Management, define organizational learning as the capacity or the processes within an organization to maintain or improve performance based on experience. They posit that an organization's ability to survive and grow is based on advantages that stem from core competencies that represent collective learning (p. 2).

In what has been regarded as a seminal text in the development of the concept of the learning organization, Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective, Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1978) state that the crux of effective organizational learning is that it cannot take place without individual learning.

According to Argyris and Schön, an organization’s collective learning is based on individual learning taking place throughout the organization. The generation of new knowledge that is shared with others allows for individual learning to make the

transition into collective organizational learning which becomes part of the organizational memory and culture. However, they point out that individual learning alone may not be enough to enable the organization to learn. They differentiate between two kinds of learning, dividing the learning categories into single and double loop learning. Single loop learning, in their opinion, is a reactive approach to learning. Organizations with individuals practicing single loop learning will respond to organizational changes internally or externally by learning how to respond in ways that maintain organizational norms and values. Double loop learning, on the other hand, is that form of organizational learning which occurs when the response to either external or internal problems leads to a shift in the organizational norms, strategies, and assumptions. It is this type of learning that actually moves organizations forward by requiring managers and others to rethink their current mind sets (Cook, Staniforth, & Stewart, 1997). Double loop learning does not take place in a single occurrence, rather, learning is an on-going process called “second-order learning” (p. 5). Second-order learning is about learning to learn and often about new strategies of learning.

Bob Garratt (1990) contributed to the learning organization field with his focus on ways in which upper management learns to lead. He considers two skills as key elements for effective senior management: (a) learn continuously and (b) be direction-givers. He argues that as people move up in organizations they are not given the tools to carry out the next level of their job. As a result, they often regress to the area of specialization where they are most comfortable, rather than improve on generic management skills. His conclusion is that there needs to be clarification of the role of top management so there is encouragement for a climate and system of learning in organizations. He stresses that the organization’s structure must have learning at its

core. By his analysis, there has to be a dynamic in organizations which allows for feedback throughout the organization but particularly to the top which leads to strategic re-adjustments.

Kotter (1995) discusses ways in which organizations create a culture of learned leadership. His premise is that much of on-the-job experiences actually undermine the development of attributes needed for leadership. He identifies recruitment of people with leadership characteristics as simply the first step in an organization that is attempting to create a culture of leadership development among their employees. Kotter posits that certain career experiences are crucial for employees to develop into leaders in their careers. Among those experiences he lists the need for opportunities for people in their 20s and 30s to “try to lead, to take a risk, and to learn from both triumphs and failures” (p. 122). Kotter also lists as important broadening experiences throughout their career, experiences that provide the opportunity to grow beyond their narrow base of a specific field. These experiences need to happen before the employee is promoted to higher level management jobs. Evaluating current managers on whether or not they are nurturing leaders creates a corporate culture where people value strong leadership and leadership is learned.

Karen Watkins and Virginia Marsick (1993) propose that all organizations are learning systems and that continual learning takes place in individuals, teams, the organization, and even within the community with which the organization interacts. Furthermore, learning is integrated with work and enhances organizational capacity for innovation and growth. Only through learning, they contend, can there be changes in knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors. Learning is highly social; people learn as they work together toward the achievement of clear goals that they help to create. Watkins and

Marsick hold that the promise of continuous learning is innovation, quoting from A. P. Carnevale (1991), "Innovation results from learning by doing and learning by using at work. It is generally pursued by following one's nose inductively and comes gradually, with great knowledge and long experience" (p. 221). However, continuous learning is not automatically successful. "To maximize the benefits of much workplace learning, people need to bring what they are learning into conscious awareness. They learn more effectively through a process of questioning, reflection, and feedback from others that permits deeper understanding to emerge from otherwise everyday activities" (Watkins & Marsick, 1993, p. 26).

Learning, according to cognitive psychology, is not so much about behavioral responses, but rather about what learners know and how they acquire it (Jonassen, 1992). Patricia Cranton (1996) begins her book with the statement, "Educators are learners" (p. 1). This important and perhaps obvious assumption is one rationale for this study. An educator's development and growth involves a process of becoming more autonomous and independent in one's learning. Once an educator masters the technical skills required of his/her area of expertise and goes on to develop philosophies of practice, chances are he/she will develop an interest in the broader context of educational practice. Self-directed learning about one's practice, critical reflection on one's work and on one's own transformative development enable educators to take action as change agents (Cranton, 1996).

Transformation Theory of Adult Learning

Transformative learning occurs when an individual has reflected on assumptions or expectations about what will occur, has found these assumptions to be faulty, and has revised them (Cranton 1994; Mezirow, 1991). Much adult learning and professional

development literature holds critical reflection as the crucial factor in learning from experience (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Boud & Walker, 1991; Brookfield, 1987; Mezirow, 1987, 1991; Senge, 1990; Tennant, 1986). According to Mezirow (1991),

To make meaning means to make sense of an experience; we make an interpretation of it. When we subsequently use this interpretation to guide decision making or action, then making meaning becomes learning... Reflection enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem solving. Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built (p. 1).

Mezirow (1998) discusses the “critical” component of critical reflection of assumptions as central to understanding how adults learn to think for themselves rather than act on the concepts, values, and feelings of others. He argues that “reflection does not necessarily imply making an assessment of what is being reflected upon, a distinction that differentiates it from critical reflection” (p. 186). Instead, he states, critical reflection explicitly brings the process of choice into awareness to examine and assess the reasons for making a choice. As adults, we can become critically reflective of our own assumptions as well as those of others. Furthermore, he adds, “critical *self-reflection* [italics in original] of an assumption involves *critique of a premise upon which the learner has defined a problem* [italics in original] (e.g., ‘a woman’s place is in the home,’ so I must deny myself a career that I would love). Significant personal and social transformations may result from this kind of reflection” (p. 186).

Articulation

Carl Rhodes (1996) offers a way of researching organizational learning through a storytelling approach. Building on Hazen’s (1993) concept of a “polyphonic organization” or an organization made up of socially constructed verbal systems of

stories, discourses and texts, Rhodes posits that organizational stories are a viable source of information on which to base an inquiry into organizational learning. In order to do research which identifies and gives volume to each organizational member's voice, organizational stories, defined as "an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted or challenged" (Boje, 1991, p.8) provide insight into the nature of an individual's reality (Stephens & Eizen, 1984). Telling stories is viewed as less threatening than asking people to discuss directly their attitudes and beliefs, although the stories embody those belief systems (Rhodes, 1996). Stories are a "narrative sense-making form that relate a sequence of events" (Brown, 1986, p. 75). Besides exposing individual meaning, storytelling is a symbolic form through which organizational groups and members construct the shared meaning of an "organizational reality" (Boyce, 1995).

Stories provide opportunities to learn and grow, both individually and as an organization "Stories engage us more wholly and completely than a linear presentation of facts. Stories breathe life into our learning; they require us to bring our spirits, our souls, our emotions, our imagination, our reasoning, our analysis, our creative juices" (Cory & Underwood, 1995, p. 130). The use of story allows for time-released learning in that the storyteller releases the possibility slowly when learning is needed, regardless of whether or not the storyteller believes himself or herself to be ready. Within an organizational context, stories lead to articulation of common, shared understanding often describing a coherent, organizational culture. Cory and Underwood state that this story may or may not be shared. "If it's shared, then the people in that organization probably understand what is expected of them a little better. If the corporate story also

talks about where everyone is going together—a vision statement—then they probably work toward that goal more effectively” (p.131)

Individuals telling their stories within the organizational context create a learning opportunity, a space in which learning can occur. Cory and Underwood believe that working with people telling their experiences through story allows for the mental dialogue that must take place for thinking to be coordinated and integrated. The most logical way to use story in organizations is to weave story, logic, and understanding together (p. 132).

Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) discuss the important role that articulation of knowledge plays in learning. They point out that forcing oneself to explain and think about what one is doing makes tacit knowledge explicit. The explicit knowledge becomes more available because it is part of a set of interconnected ideas. In what they refer to as “cognitive apprenticeship,” they highlight the centrality of activity in learning and knowledge by making evident the inherently context-dependent, situated, and enculturated nature of learning. Cognitive apprenticeship attempts to promote learning within the nexus of activity, one’s practice. “Learning advances through collaborative social interaction and the social construction of knowledge. Within a culture, ideas are exchanged and modified and belief systems developed and appropriated through conversation and narratives” (p. 40).

The Role of Learning and Action Research In Extension

Thomas Patterson’s (1991) work in cooperative extension reflects the impact of both the descriptions given earlier to new concepts of learning organizations as well as his agreement with the importance of the learning employee within the innovative organization. Patterson states that to staff organizations of the future dedicated to

change, employees need to rely less on a specific, technical, subject-matter base. Instead, the extension educator of the future will be prepared to manage change with a combination of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that come together under three themes: (a) autonomous learning, (b) effective communication, and (c) systems thinking.

Parish Chairs are change agents. They work with learners, their clientele to foster their growth and development. They are models and mentors in their workplaces. They promote change within the profession. They are often active in their communities and in the larger society in which they live. On many levels, change and reform are their responsibility as they perform their dual roles as administrators and adult educators.

As administrators, educators, and learners, Parish Chairs are in the unique position of needing to span the bridge between Extension's mission of improving the quality of the lives of their clientele through research-based knowledge (i. e., educational role) and applying new knowledge gained as reflective practitioners (i. e., learners and researchers) to their administrative demands.

Ronald Jimmerson (1989) calls for a re-examination of the current values about knowledge and knowledge creation within Extension. He questions whether or not Extension has recognized the value-laden dimensions of information as educators have attempted to be the information providers to those in need. Within an agricultural context, Jimmerson contrasts a dominant social paradigm with that of an alternative environmental paradigm in problem solving. His argument is that the dominant social paradigm views knowledge as "out-there," to be discovered, while the alternative environmental paradigm recognizes the importance of helping people discover their own reality.

These differences in perspective, he believes, are critical in all educational enterprises, but especially within an information society. By uncritically accepting the dominant paradigm, information coming from outside traditional boundaries is not valued or even accepted, relegating Extension personnel to roles of information providers and technical experts rather than educators working with people to promote personal, community, and societal change. He concludes that Extension needs to refine certain skills required of its personnel, including the skill of action research. Once personnel become more adept at futuring, analyzing values and beliefs, interpreting information through the awareness of bias, and balancing science and ideology, they need to be able to help clientele generate and communicate knowledge about themselves so that they can gain influence and power in an information era. Using action research methodologies in problem-solving, extension educators can help clients become critically aware of all forms of information they receive and learn to process information to make it their own.

Don Dillman (1986) echoes the call for a new vision of the extension educator as he looks to Extension's role in the 21st century. Dillman suggests that with the increase in importance of information, extension educators need to be well versed in learning with clientele rather than being their teacher. If extension educators are to gain the trust to help clientele interpret information for local use, they must improve their ability to understand the sources of information and critically analyze information provided to enable clients to make their own decisions. The role becomes one of developing the clientele's skills to solve their own problems rather than one of an expert with knowledge for solutions.

All these skills mentioned are building on the professional development of extension faculty to be autonomous, continual learners, who can model critical thinking and problem solving methods to their clientele. Patterson (1993) discusses the inadequacies of the program planning model for problem resolution frequently used by Extension. He posits that Extension makes a mistake by assuming that problems and objectives can be identified in rational, measurable ways and solved using appropriate expertise by a knowledgeable outside consultant. Instead, he argues, problems and solutions are constructs of the mind; there are no reductionistic problems, only holistic problem situations. Problems require ideas generated by humans to solve their self-defined situation. Improvements to the problem situation are made through discussion and debate by the parties involved in the problem situation. Therefore, extension faculty need to have the skills to enable all stakeholders to learn together. The extension educator/analyst/investigator uses “action research to learn along with the impacted parties in formulating improvements” (p.2) to complex problem situations.

Warner, Hinrichs, Schneyer and Joyce (1998) summarize many changes within Extension that attest to the new paradigm shift from knowledge extended to knowledge creation. In an effort to address complex challenges that do not lend themselves neatly to traditional disciplinary boundaries of university research, Extension has taken its role as educator and facilitator to a new level of partnership between university research and local knowledge. Using participatory action research, Extension is attempting to bring communities and researchers into a closer and more effective partnership. By engaging diverse stakeholder groups into critical reflection about their collective knowledge, the participants felt community ownership over the research process and its results.

These authors have taken the successes of action research methods within the community and questioned whether or not similar results could be gained from collaborative inquiry between two university researchers and two Extension agents. Extension agents were brought in as full partners, co-authors, in the research process. This co-learning through dialogue involved critical review and analysis of all parties, closing the gap between traditional researchers and agents. They write,

Research collaborations such as the one described here, allow Extension agents to engage and challenge theory. Time for reflection on one's professional work is a luxury which field based practitioners rarely can justify. Nonetheless, there is a benefit to reflecting on Extension practice through a research lens. Using theory to understand different outcomes across time or place helps agents get beyond the particularities of a situation to discern broader patterns which may offer clues about designing and planning future work (p.4).

The issues they raise ironically encapsulate the gap between calling for new ways of doing and being and appropriately preparing extension personnel to make these paradigm shifts. Extension advocates using collaborative inquiry, action research methodologies and community-based research with the clientele they serve, rarely providing the professional development within Extension that would enable extension educators to confidently work with these new forms of partnership .

Warner, Hinrichs, Schneyer and Joyce (1998) also concede the risks of incorporating new research designs and methodology. They state that "reality complicates theory, and theory, by definition, attempts to simplify reality" (p. 4). They view the erosion of research distance that inevitably happens with collaborative research processes as a challenge and promise of participatory action research. The benefits of seeing one's experience through a researcher's lens can provide new insights

for future practice. However, collaborative inquiry can make Extension faculty more vulnerable to political risks within the community. The authors express concern that while Participatory Action Research (PAR) may lead more quickly to community action based on research findings it may also suppress critical inquiry if the political costs to participants are too high. The issue of vulnerability would need to be confronted when using the more open nature of participatory action research in professional development within the organization.

CHAPTER 3

ACTION RESEARCH LITERATURE REVIEW AND APPLICATION TO RESEARCH STUDY

Research Orientation: Assumptions of Interpretive Research, Specifically Those of Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) is both a useful and valid form of human inquiry. Falling under the rubric of qualitative research, PAR offers strengths associated with interpretive methods. One such strength in organizational research is the depth of the data generated and the complexity of organizational issues described by interpretive methods that give insights into organizational life (Pancanowsky, 1988). Interpretive research is ethnographic, designed to describe more fully the symbolic structures members create about their organization and the communication behavior they perform to develop and maintain these collective symbolic structures. Interpretive research is phenomenologically based, in that it strives to understand the organization from the perspective of the organization member (Fish, 1990; Fish & Dorris, 1975). Interpretive research with organization members is a way to provide data to help organization decision makers clearly see the internal state of the organization from the point of view of its membership, as well as understand the perspectives of members regarding the environment, thereby promoting increased organizational reflexivity (Kreps, 1989). Increased reflexivity enables organization members to recognize important gaps between expectations and outcomes, in both personal and organizational performance outcomes. Interpretive research is useful to provide information about both environmental changes and constraints as well as internal organizational conditions (p. 9). Insight into these organizational processes provides the necessary feedback to organizational members enabling them to design adaptive strategies for innovation. The

introspective data gathered by interpretive research increases understanding of organizational phenomena and can be used to direct organizational activities to better accomplish both individual and organizational goals (Kreps, Herndon & Arneson, 1993). The qualitative, ethnographic nature of interpretive research provides richly textured “thick descriptions” of organizational phenomena that enable the researcher to describe many of the complexities of organizations’ issues (Geertz, 1973; Pancanowsky, 1988; Weick & Browning, 1986; Wilkins, 1984, 1983).

In addition to examining performance gaps, interpretive research can also assist organizations as they “learn to learn.” Morgan (1986) defines “double-loop learning” as the self-questioning ability “to detect and correct errors in operating norms and thus influence the standards that guide their detailed operation” (p. 87). The use of such research to generate information about organizational activities can help organizations become increasingly proactive, helping them recognize and solve problems and make needed fundamental changes.

Qualitative research has attempted to provide new ways to interpret and understand the interactional complexity of social life. However, explanations of a social or cultural context do not necessarily provide a means for change (Stringer, 1996). Action research , or as the researcher will use here interchangeably, participatory action research (PAR) or community-based action research, consists of a family of research methodologies which pursue action and research outcomes at the same time.

Kurt Lewin, an American psychologist, is generally attributed with originating action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, Masters, 1995, McKernan, 1991). Lewin (1948, 1951), in the mid 1940s constructed a theory of action research which described action research as proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of

planning, action, and the evaluation of the result of action. Lewin posited that in order to “understand and change certain social practices, social scientists have to include practitioners from the real social world in all phases of inquiry” (1948, p. 217). This construction of action research theory by Lewin made action research a method of acceptable inquiry (McKernan, 1991).

Calhoun's (1993) recent definition of action research is "disciplined inquiry which seeks focused efforts to improve the quality of people's organizational, community and family lives" (p. 62). It therefore has some components which resemble consultancy or change agency and some which resemble field research. Community-based action research attempts to assist "people in their understanding of their situation and thus resolve problems that confront them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) state,

Action research offers an opportunity to create forums in which people can join one another as co-participants in the struggle to remake the practices in which they interact--forums in which rationality and democracy can be pursued together, without an artificial separation ultimately hostile to both. At its best, it is a collaborative social process of learning, realized by groups of people who join together in changing the practices through which they interact in a shared world--a shared social world in which, for better or worse, we live with the consequences of one another's actions (p.23).

Action research currently used in organizational studies visualizes a "research-action process in which some of the members of the organization under study participate in the process from project design through data gathering, analysis and report writing, on to the implementation of conclusions emerging from the research" (Whyte, 1991, p. 273). Action research has also been defined as a “systemic inquiry

that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry" (McCutcheon & Jung, 1990, p. 148).

Action research attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice by assisting in the development of knowledge and understanding as part of practice. It is suited to situations where the goal is to bring about action in the form of change, and at the same time develop an understanding which is an addition to what is known (Dick, 1995). Action research is most appropriate when the research situation demands responsiveness to complex and changing situations. The participative component of action research methodology generates internal commitment to the results of the inquiry. Because the roles of researcher and participant become interchangeable, participatory action research creates a sense of immediacy and personal identification with the discovery enterprise, inducing all to apply what they have learned.

Stringer (1996) places action research within an explicit set of social values.

Action research is a "process of inquiry that has the following characteristics:

1. It is democratic, enabling the participation of all people.
2. It is equitable, acknowledging people's equality of worth.
3. It is liberating, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions.
4. It is life enhancing, enabling the expression of people's full human potential" (p. 10).

Action research is democratic, or participatory, as many term it, in that all stakeholders, clients or informants are involved in the research process. Different action researcher practitioners and theorists draw differing lines as to how much participation on the part of stakeholders is mandatory to fall into the category of participatory action research. However, all theorists espousing the democratic value of

action research stress the importance that those whose lives are affected have input into the change process. Ideal models of action research have participants active in data collection, analysis, and theorizing. "In addition to resulting in a poor source of information, research which has alienated, or at best treated respondents as sources of primitive information, has little likelihood of creating the active and supportive environment essential for change" (Hall, 1975).

Action research attempts to lessen the status differential between the researcher and the researched through collaborative exploration. The role of the researcher becomes less that of the expert and more one of a facilitator. Indigenous or subjective knowledge and experience are valued as together, researcher and researched, create new meanings to produce new knowledge. The PAR process is based on the assumption that knowledge inherent in people's everyday, taken-for-granted lives has as much validity and utility as knowledge linked to the concepts and theories of the academic disciplines or bureaucratic policies and procedures. The intent is to concede the limitations of expert knowledge and to "acknowledge the skill and know-how, the experience and understanding, the compassion and wisdom of ordinary people, particularly as they are brought to bear on problems and needs in [their] lives" (Shephard, 1996, p. 13).

Interpretive research seeks to reveal and represent people's everyday experience, to provide accounts that enable others to understand the ways issues and events sit in their everyday lives. In the process we provide information that enables those responsible for making policy, managing programs and delivering services to make more informed judgments about their activities, thus increasing the possibility that their policies, programs and services might be more appropriate and effective for the people

they serve. Participatory action research therefore seeks to “give voice” to people who have previously been silent research subjects (Stringer, 1996).

Participatory action research differs significantly from the objective, generalizable experimental and survey research that is still the prevailing inquiry approach in the human and behavioral sciences. The following interpretive assumptions are implicit in participatory based approaches to inquiry (Stringer, 1999):

1. Studies are usually limited in context, engaging processes of inquiry that focus on a specific issue or problem in a particular context.
2. Researchers seek to empower principal stakeholders by engaging them as active participants in all phases of the research project, including planning and implementing processes. It has been described as research of, by, and for the people.
3. The principal purpose of the research is to extend people’s understanding of an issue by providing detailed, richly described accounts that reveal the problematic, lived experience of stakeholders and their interpretations of the issue investigated.
4. Stakeholder joint accounts, derived from creative processes of negotiation, provide the basis for therapeutic action that works toward resolution of the issue or problem investigated. These processes ensure tangible outcomes of direct benefit to the principal stakeholders.
5. Stakeholder perspectives are placed alongside viewpoints found within the academic and bureaucratic literature.

Stringer (1999) states that the ultimate purpose of the research is to make the experience and perspectives of ordinary people directly available to policy makers, professionals, managers, and administrators, so that more appropriate, effective programs and services can be formulated.

Through consensual and participatory procedures people learn to investigate issues and problems systematically, formulate powerful new meanings of their situations, and develop a plan of action to deal with the problems or issues (Stringer, 1996).

An important component of action research, according to Stringer, is that action research seeks to change the social and personal dynamics of the research situation so that it is non-competitive and non-exploitative and enhances the lives of all those who participate. Although political awareness and conflict have frequently been associated with action research, it is "fundamentally a consensual approach to inquiry seeking to link groups together who have the potential for conflict in order that together, viable and effective solutions can be negotiated through dialogue" (Stringer, p. 19).

In conjunction with certain values, action research follows a certain "principles of practice" or procedures of the process. Action research is cyclic or spiral in nature in which similar steps or routines tend to recur in a similar sequence (Dick, 1995; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Stringer, 1996). Bob Dick speaks of a process which alternates between action and critical reflection. His idea is reflected by the series: action-reflection-action-reflection. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) describe what's known as the Deakin model: first planning, then action, then observation, then reflection; then back to planning and the beginning of the next cycle. Stringer's model offers a simplified "look, think, act" process in which he creates an interacting spiral. Participants work through each of the major stages, continually placing under scrutiny all that they have done, evaluate, and plan anew according to their observations.

Common to all the above is the crucial role of critical reflection upon the process and outcomes of the research/action. The researchers and stakeholders

regularly and systematically critique what they are doing. They refine the questions they are asking and the methods they are using (Dick, 1995). Stringer (1996) compares the “look” component of the action research routine with initial data gathering. Participants are building a picture and describing the situation. The “think” component of his model would correlate with traditional research terms of “explore” and “analyze.” Participants of the research process are asking themselves, “What is happening here?” They are creating hypotheses even as they attempt to interpret and explain (theorize) how or why things are the way they are (p. 16). These interpretive accounts provide the basis for problem-solving actions (the Deakin model “plan”). The “act” component for Stringer incorporates planning, reporting, implementing, and evaluating. Although appearing linear, the action research routine is a continuous recycling set of activities requiring a constant process of observation, reflection, and action (p.19).

The influence of critical theory becomes apparent when Stringer speaks of the purpose of this “think” stage or the point in the process of interpreting and explaining the observations (data gathering). He quotes Denzin (1989) as he explains that the purpose of interpretation of the problematic experiences is to identify different definitions of the situation, the assumptions held by various interested parties, and appropriate points of intervention. He says,

Research of this order can produce meaningful description and interpretations of social process. It can offer explanations of how certain conditions came into existence and persist. Interpretive...research can also furnish the basis for realistic proposals concerning the improvement or removal of certain events, or problems (Denzin, p. 23).

Stringer posits that the task of the researcher is to provide the opportunity for participants to understand their own experiences in terms that make sense to them. The use of language, therefore, is a crucial component in action research. In most instances the use of qualitative information increases inclusion by all participants in that it does not require a specialized language which would limit access to some in analyzing observations and formulating new plans of action. Action research makes it possible to work in everyday speech about everyday events blurring barriers between researcher and researched.

These interpretive activities expose the conceptual structures and pragmatic working theories that people use to explain their conduct. Guba and Lincoln (1989) speak to the need for the researcher to assist participants in revealing taken-for-granted meanings and reformulating constructions of meanings that are "improved, matured, expanded, and elaborated" (p. 24) and that enhance their conscious experiencing of the world. Dick (1995) points to another important role of interpretation during the change process. He states,

It is in trying to change the system that one often uncovers data and meanings which are not usually apparent...It is in doing critical research that one develops the understanding to develop better plans for change. For example, disconfirming evidence, or ambiguous or contradictory evidence, can often lead participants into a better understanding. This, in turn, allows the change program to be better anchored in reality rather than fantasy (personal communication, July 30, 1996).

Dick (1995) discusses another spiral that captures the unavoidable uncertainty of change programs. In this model, the process begins with broad and general questions, using general (or "fuzzy") methods. Although these beginning fuzzy questions lead to fuzzy answers, with each loop of the spiral, more precision is gained leading to greater

understanding of the situation. The next loop of the spiral would have tightened the concentric circles of the process with more focused questions leading to more relevant answers for action.

To achieve action, action research is responsive. It has to be able to respond to the emerging needs of the situation. Action research methodology is flexible in ways that more traditional research methods cannot be. It is the cyclic nature of action research that allows for responsiveness. Early cycles are used to help decide how to conduct the later cycles. In the later cycles, the interpretations developed in the early cycles can be tested and challenged and refined. Dick writes that "good action research is empirical: responsive to the evidence...and that the evidence is used critically." The quality of evidence is increased by the use of multiple sources of evidence within all or most cycles. Differences between data sources can then lead the researchers and the participants towards a deeper and more accurate understanding (p.5).

Rigor, he further proposes, is enhanced by the multiple cycles of planning, action, and critical analysis following action, use of multiple data sources within each cycle, and attention to disconfirming evidence of interpretations arising from earlier cycles (p. 5).

The essential elements of action research revolve around the cyclical, participatory, qualitative, and critically reflective nature of the process. These models all enable systematic investigation and resolution of problems experienced by researchers and stakeholders. Each iteration allows for the repeated examination of events, experiences, and the accompanying feelings within the context of often complex and confused field settings, and to take methodical action to resolve those problems.

Research Processes Relating to the Study

Research Process: Look

This research project employed methods of participatory action research based on interpretive research processes suggested by Denzin (1989, 1997), Dick (1995), Patton (1990), and Stringer, (1996). This study utilized individual and focus group interviews to obtain qualitative data from Louisiana Cooperative Extension Parish Chairs. Participants were selected through purposeful, homogeneous sampling procedures (Patton, 1990). Parish Chairs appointed since July of 1997 were selected to make up the participant/co-researcher population. A total of 20 Parish Chairs representing 19 parishes (see Appendix B) qualified (two participants served as co-chairs in one parish). In response to a request from the researcher, Jack Bagent, LCES Director and Louisiana State University Agricultural Center Vice Chancellor, wrote a letter by e-mail (see Appendix C) introducing the study and inviting all the eligible agents to participate in professional development and organizational improvement by building on their skills as reflective practitioners. At the time of the initial letter, only 14 PCs were listed as eligible, however, before initial interviewing concluded, 6 more were added to the study. All eligible Parish Chairs agreed to participate in the study. Each of the state's five regional districts were represented. Of the participants, three served two parishes in their educator role. All subject matter program areas were represented by the Parish Chair participants of the study. Five Parish Chairs served in the area of 4-H youth development, 7 served as adult County Agents, 8 served as adult Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Agents , and 1 served as a Family and Consumer Sciences agent for both adult and 4-H youth development programs (see Table 1).

Table 1
Number of Parish Chairs by Area of Specialization

Technical Area of Specialization	No. of Parish Chairs
County Agents (Agriculture)	7
Family and Consumer Sciences (Extension Agent)	8
Family and Consumer Sciences 4-H Youth Development	2
Agricultural 4-H Youth Development	3

The age division of the Parish Chairs was as follows: 6 participants were between 30 – 40 years, 6 agents were between 41 – 50 years, and 8 agents were over 50 years. With regard to number of years the participants had served the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service before being appointed Parish Chair the breakdown was as follows: 5 – 10 years, 7 agents; 11 – 25 years 9 agents; 26 – 45 years, 4 agents. One newly appointed Parish Chair had served as a Parish Chair previously (see Table 2).

Table 2
Number of Parish Chairs by Age
and Years of Service Prior to Appointment as Parish Chair

Age	No. of Parish Chairs	No. of years of service prior to appointment as Parish Chair	No. of Parish Chairs
30 – 40	6	5 – 10 years	7
41 – 50	6	11 – 25 years	9
51 – 65	8	26 – 45 years	4

This participatory, reflective research approach sought to improve practice through the application of personal wisdom and experience of the participants, (i.e.

learning to reflect on their own learning). New knowledge was generated through a systematic, reflective learning process, which was then given back to them for analysis and used to explore an agenda for actions to be implemented to improve personal, and ultimately, organizational learning. The reflection, analysis, documentation, recommendations for action process allowed for sharing of the lessons learned.

Using a collaborative research model, the participants/co-researchers were highly involved in specific aspects of the research process. Although the researcher initiated the research, designed the research procedure, and made initial contacts, Parish Chairs identified the essential features of their experience, member checked the initial accounts, together chose the most important issues from their identified features, met in a focus group to analyze their own words for deeper insight and creation of a joint account, met again to choose the categories for which they explored an agenda for action plans and, through networking among themselves, prepared a presentation of the findings and recommendations for the organization at state-wide leadership workshops. Traveling distance inhibited the Parish Chairs from coming together for the summary of the findings and conclusions. The researcher wrote the findings and conclusions of the research from more than 1,200 pages of transcripts and over 200 e-mail communications with the Parish Chairs. The Parish Chairs were e-mailed copies of the findings and conclusions for feedback. Collaboration, always voluntary, was sought at all levels throughout the research. Member checking, the process by which the researcher allows for the participants to review the material, was provided at each step of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The first step in this process of researching organizational learning was to collect the stories or accounts of individual Parish Chairs. The objective of this stage of

the process was for the researcher to assist the Parish Chairs in describing their situation clearly and comprehensively. Beginning with a combination of Patton's (1990) informal conversational interview and interview guide approach, initial individual accounts were developed in which work experiences and perceived issues are defined in their own terms. Dick (1995) describes this method as "convergent interviewing" in which the participants are asked one question and encouraged to continue talking. This initial form of interviewing gives the participants the chance from the beginning to contribute their perceptions unshaped by more detailed questions. The open-ended, unstructured interviewing format is designed to enhance the use of the interviewee's language and to minimize the interviewer's influence on the initial description of the work context. Spradley (1979), calls these opening, content neutral questions "grand tour" questions that enable participants to describe the situation in their own terms. The idea is to provide focus or boundaries of the research without suggesting form, content or language of the answers desired. Of interest in this study were the agendas and priorities of the Parish Chairs that drive their organizational lives. Given the assumptions that continual learning must take place for organizations to transform themselves, the researcher was particularly interested in what part learning plays in the Parish Chairs' work. The individual accounts revealed the Parish Chairs' experiences of learning on the job as well as how they described and interpreted their situations.

Initial data were gathered through individual interviews with each of the Parish Chair participants. These interviews, lasting approximately 1 to 2 hours, took place in the parish office where each Parish Chair served, with the exception of three agents who met me at a mutually agreed upon site. The initial interviews and four focus groups took place throughout the state entailing 3979 miles of travel by the researcher. In an effort

to minimize driving distances for Parish Chairs as well as adhere to the most effective discussion size, the researcher divided the state into two regions for the focus group meetings. Each regional focus group had 10 Parish Chair participants. Parish Chairs in Districts 1, 2, and 4 met 2 times in the Breaux Bridge Extension Parish Office, and those in Districts 3 and 5 met twice in the Bienville Extension Parish Office. Over 200 hundred communication exchanges between the researcher and the participants/co-researchers took place over the length of the study, almost exclusively by e-mail.

All participants were asked the same “opening question” (Krueger, 1998) before beginning the “grand tour” (Spradley, 1979) of the current perceptions of their situations. The opening question was, “Would you please state your name, when and where you were born, parent’s occupations, and briefly, how you came to be Parish Chair?” The sequence of the questions was very deliberate in the initial interviews. Sequence of the questions went from general to specific, broad to narrow and abstract to specific. For example, following the opening demographic question (which is specific), the general to specific sequence began. The first grand tour question was, “Tell me about your work.” This grand tour question was followed by other global questions, or “typical” (Stringer, 1999, p. 69) questions that enabled respondents to talk of the ways events usually occurred in their situations, “Describe the events of a typical day in your office.” Grand tour questions placed in context the major features of the places, actors, and activities of the Parish Chairs’ work situations (Spradley, 1979, p. 78). Spradley states that the grand tour questions that shift to “mini tour” (p. 79) questions allow participants to further define places, sequence of events, the major people involved, the activities that people do, the single actions by individuals, the things people are trying to accomplish and the emotions felt and expressed about what they’ve described. The mini

tour questions also allow one to focus on much smaller units of experience. Specific information was elicited by asking, for example, “Describe a specific event in which you learned something about your job.” At this point “probe questions” (Dick, 1995), “guided tour or task questions” (Spradley, 1979), or any of the 6 kinds of questions Patton (1990) suggests (experience, behavior, knowledge, background, opinion/values, and pre-suppositional), were asked in order to clarify, specify, and fulfill needed information gathering for initiating Denzin’s temporal mapping activity later in the initial interview. All of the following questions were asked of all the Parish Chairs (however, any question could be followed by probe questions that answer who’s involved, where actions take place, emotions connected with specific actions, etc.).

- Tell me about your job.
- If I followed you through a typical day, what would I see you doing?
- What do you know now about your job as Parish Chair that you wish you’d known when you first began?
- Are you doing anything differently now than when you first began as a Parish Chair?
- When you were first appointed as Parish Chair, how was your job explained to you?
- Some people have suggested an effective organization is one in which participants are engaged in continual learning as part of their organizational life. Think back to a specific event in which you learned something about yourself or your work.
- What assumptions did you have about the PC job that you’ve discovered are incorrect?
- Thinking back over your work prior to becoming a Parish Chair, can you tell me what training, experiences or knowledge have most helped you to feel prepared in this new position?

- Thinking back over your work since becoming a Parish Chair, can you identify specific training or experiences that has most helped you to feel effective in your position?
- How would you go about finding out what you needed to know to accomplish a goal for your work?
- Can you tell me about how you know that you are accomplishing what you set out to accomplish?
- What resources within the organization do you value the most?
- Think back to an experience since becoming Parish Chair that you found most problematic.
- When you encounter situations that seem beyond the scope of your ability to deal with, how or where do you go for help?
- Can you think of an instance in which you thought, "I'll never do that again."
- Do you feel that you have the freedom to make mistakes?
- What most energizes you as a Parish Chair?
- What "words of wisdom" might you give to a person beginning his or her tenure as Parish Chair?
- What, in your opinion, are the most important things that we have talked about today?

Patton (1990) points out that a weakness in less structured interviews is that important and salient topics may be inadvertently omitted. The researcher was interested in the learning that is taking place in the organization, hence the mini tour questions were directed towards requesting that Parish Chairs reflect on experiences that might indicate learning or knowledge sharing. However, by asking Parish Chairs open-ended questions, allowing them to be the ones to describe and interpret their organizational lives on this guided tour, it was not known before the interviews where the tour would go, or, indeed, where we might end up in this participatory research

endeavor. The researcher could only ensure that the insights gleaned from the Parish Chairs would be made available to those who are in a position to make policy decisions that directly affect professional development of extension personnel.

These initial interviews (see Appendix E) were conducted to identify issues of importance to the parish chairs. Each interview was recorded on cassette tape. The individual accounts made up the “Look” stage, or “building the picture” (Stringer, 1999, p. 67) stage used by the Stringer action research routine. “This exploration reveals taken-for-granted visions and versions of reality that make up people’s day-to-day life-worlds, bringing their unquestioned assumptions, views, and beliefs out in the open and displaying them for inspection” (Stringer, p. 59). This step was the beginning of the cyclic or spiral nature of action and formed the basis of the reflective and critical cycle.

This collection of individual accounts was the beginning of the process by which Extension Parish Chairs began the “construction” of the accounts that were used in the focus group settings for analysis and action plans. Using Norman Denzin’s (1989) method of “temporal mapping,” during the initial interview the Parish Chair created an account based on his/her description of the issue and its context and then was given an opportunity to further “bracket” the information. According to Denzin, to bracket information is to “unpack” the participant’s description and context of the account looking for key elements and essential meanings. Our process of bracketing involved the creation of descriptions of situations and the context of the Parish Chairs’ experiences, locating key phrases and statements within these descriptions, collaboratively interpreting the meanings of these statements with the Parish Chairs, and identifying essential features of the situation.

Stringer (1996) proposes a method for using Denzin's temporal mapping in developing initial accounts:

- Describe the situation and the context within which it is held.
- Locate key phrases and statements within that description.
- Interpret the meaning of these phrases and statements; that is, ensure that the meanings participants give to those phrases and statements are clearly articulated.
- Identify essential or recurring features of the situation.
- Use this information to formulate a tentative statement that provides a sequential description of events and delineates who does what, with whom, how, when, and where (p. 76).

Each individual interview or account was transcribed and presented to the particular Parish Chair for feedback; a second opportunity to locate key phrases and identify essential or recurring features of their situation. Each Parish Chair saw only the transcription of his/her personal interview (see Appendix F). At this point each Parish Chair could member check, or confirm the account as well as revise the thoughts, analysis or perspective he/she believed had been expressed. The individual Parish Chair was requested to highlight what, in his/her perspective, were the most important things discussed, make any suggestions, corrections, or additions and return the document to the researcher. This review also served the purpose of providing an additional moment to reflect on their experiences, part of the "continued scrutiny" of action research methodology.

Following the completion and receipt of the highlighted, member checked, revisions of the transcriptions, these initial accounts were used to categorize the essential features into themes and salient features with supporting observations. Although the themes stemmed from what the Parish Chairs deemed as most important and reflected

the experiences that they described, all identifying characteristics were removed before being provided to the participating Parish Chairs in preparation for the second cycle of the action research study, the focus groups. Within the Look stage, or building the picture of the Parish Chairs' organizational lives, the participatory, collaborative nature of this study was emphasized.

Research Process: Think

Following the completion of the initial interviews and member checking of the accounts, all participants were asked to meet together in focus groups twice during the study. The focus groups were tape and video recorded. The use of focus groups was chosen because their primary purpose is to enable people to listen to and learn from one another (Morgan, 1997). The gatherings were designed to deepen the participants' understanding of learning within the organizational context built on reflection, documentation, and systematic analysis of the experiences and knowledge of individuals and the group. Active participation was encouraged as it was stressed to the group that the action research process hinged on the participation of the Parish Chairs in the data gathering, analysis, and conclusions emerging from the research.

The first focus group activities began with a summary of the individual descriptive accounts. Following any needed verification or clarification, the next activities were designed to shift from individual descriptive accounts to developing a joint interpretive account. According to Spradley (1979) the focus group analysis of the issues raised by the initial accounts offer a systematic examination of the issues raised by the Parish Chairs to determine patterns of events experienced.

Parish Chairs worked collectively to organize the information in the charted summaries into sets of categories. The purpose was to identify "converging perspectives" (i.e., those ideas, concepts, or elements common to all or most of them in

the group) and “diverging perspectives” (i. e., those ideas, concepts, or elements found in the accounts of only one or a few of the participants) (Stringer, 1995, p. 84).

Because a number of the Parish Chairs had been recently trained in the “nominal group technique” of facilitating focus group meetings as part of a state-wide LCES strategic planning effort, a modified version of the nominal group technique was used to begin the discussion of the categories and observations bracketed from the initial interviews. The nominal group technique was helpful in that it ensured each member of the focus group active participation, enabled issues important to the individuals in the group to be chosen, and gave the group an opportunity to discuss all issues raised. Following the discussion, each focus group member was given voting stickers for determining what things discussed were most important to him/her. Each Parish Chair was given ten stickers with instructions to use six stickers to identify the top six issues, and use the remaining four stickers to indicate the importance of the six issues chosen. Table 3 (included in Chapter 4, Results) shows the numerical breakdown of the vote taken following the discussion of the categories of issues in terms of their relevance to their experiences and perceived importance.

The focus group to create a joint interpretive account was designed to provide the means by which “people can formulate clear, sophisticated, useful explanations and interpretations of their situations. The specific ideas and concepts contained within these interpretive frameworks provide the basis for planning concrete actions to remediate the problems upon which the research has focused” (Stringer, 1996, p. 96).

The transcripts and videos of the first focus group meetings were used to create a summary of the discussion as well as a set of questions (see Appendix G) for the

Parish Chairs to continue to consider in preparation for the second and final focus group meetings. The summary and questions were sent to all Parish Chairs.

Research Process: Act

The previous activities enabled the Parish Chairs to describe and analyze their situations in order to understand the ways in which issues of work, learning, and research are embedded in everyday practice. The “act” process was designed to explore action plans based on their recommendations to provide practical solutions to problematic issues Parish Chairs were asked to:

- Review previous joint account and questions raised by joint account.
- List issues, concerns, implications contained in the account.
- Organize the issues or concerns in order of priority.
- Restate issues and concerns as a set of recommendations.
- Explore an agenda to develop action plans from their recommendations.

From these concrete lists and ratings, the Parish Chairs developed a list of recommendations by category that would form the basis of future action plans.

The insights and understandings achieved by the action research process of the parish chairs “looking,” “thinking,” and “acting” were shared with all participants as well as those in policy and decision-making positions within LCES.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in initiating this study is one of research facilitator or resource researcher. Stringer (1996) describes the development of the role of the research facilitator as having three elements: agenda, stance, and position (p.45). Explanation of the researcher’s presence to the participants/co-researchers conveyed

that this research stemmed from doctoral studies at Louisiana State University. The researcher asked for voluntary participants for her doctoral dissertation research project that was, hopefully, of benefit to the researcher, those individuals who participated, and the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service. The researcher established that the researcher's purpose (agenda) was to act as a facilitator of the action research process to assist those involved in the study rather than to prescribe their actions. The researcher's goal was to present herself (stance) in a transparent manner; she brought to the project skills and resources that she employed to enable successful collaborative inquiry. The researcher stated that although she was interested in the individual and professional development of the participants, she had no vested interest in a particular outcome (position).

The researcher developed the context in which the individuals, singly, and as a group, were able to bring divergent perceptions and interpretations and together formulate a construction of their situation that "made sense" to them all--a joint construction (Stringer, 1996). Throughout the interview and focus group sessions, the researcher attempted to enable participants to produce meaningful descriptions and interpretations of their own learning experiences in terms that make sense to them (i.e., identify conceptual frameworks in operation as they learn and work within the LCES). From this new construction they used these consensual/divergent views to build an agenda for negotiating actions to be taken. The various sessions, whether individual interviews or focus group settings, were designed to enable people to develop their own analysis of their learning, consider their findings, plan how to keep what they want and to change what is not effective. Once the participants jointly documented and analyzed

learning experiences and the organization's facilitating factors, lessons learned from the research findings were provided to those in policy making positions within the LCES.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis techniques were used. Data in this action research study were in the form of audio and video tapes, transcripts of audio tapes of all interviews and focus groups, member checked transcripts and researcher reflections/notes following all interactions with Parish Chairs. Important to the collaborative aspect of this study was the participation of the Parish Chairs in describing their situations clearly and comprehensively, identifying the issues most important to them in their experiences as well as analyzing the implications of their experiences and observations.

Using the grounded, participative, narrative accounts generated by the individual and group sessions, together, the Parish Chairs and the researcher first identified categories that reflected the essential features of their experiences of learning the job of Parish Chair. The focus group discussions explored the interpretations the Parish Chairs gave to their experiences and led to recommendations forming the basis for action plans. Based on their interpretations of their experiences, they documented formal and informal processes, policies and structures that promote and impede the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of new knowledge within the LCES.

Document analysis was minimal in this study. Relevant documents were the job description of the Parish Chairs (see Appendix H) and the form used for annual performance appraisal of the Parish Chairs (see Appendix I).

Issues of Rigor in Action Research

Much of the justification for using participatory action research methodology in this research project has been based on assumptions that hold true for all of naturalistic inquiry, namely the desire to gain insight into and understanding of complex social situations. Also inherent in naturalistic inquiry is the constructivist assumption that knowledge is a social construction; meanings and values which constitute knowledge are inseparable from the knower. Meanings and causes rest in human interpretations rather than being inherent in particular events. Given this assumption, methods of naturalistic inquiry are used because in collaborative inquiry, researchers cannot control all the variables or claim cause and effect relationships. Erik Erickson (1986) recognized the difficulty in attempting to control complex human interactions since the causes of human change are grounded in human meaning, and meaning is not inherent in particular traits, factors or experimental treatments (Erickson, 1986).

Having stated that quality control is difficult, the researcher has ensured the integrity of data through adherence to qualitative methods of trustworthiness put forth by Guba and Lincoln (1985). Guba and Lincoln offer four criteria of “credibility,” “transferability,” “dependability,” and “confirmability” to evaluate the trustworthiness of the process and findings of naturalistic inquiry.

The credibility of the data and its interpretation has been established through in-depth interviewing and follow up focus groups, prolonged engagement with the participants, member checking of the data throughout the research, accurate and complete transcriptions of the data from which analysis and interpretations were drawn. The researcher’s biases have been probed, meanings explored, and the basis for interpretations clarified (Guba and Lincoln, 1985, p. 308). The researcher preferred to

err on the side of including too many words of the Parish Chairs to more accurately capture their perspectives, rather than use fewer words that supported researcher claims. Several different kinds of data collection were used to “triangulate” the data attempting to verify or disconfirm data throughout the research process. Triangulation of the data took place through individual interviews, member checking of those interviews, the essential features of the individual experiences re-visited by groups in four separate focus group sessions, e-mail correspondence for added verification, and document analysis.

The findings of this research are transferable in that the “thick descriptions” given by the data allow sufficient context for the reader to decide if the similarity between the Parish Chairs and their experiences, interpretations, and conclusions fit the context of another situation.

The study is dependable in that the accurate recording of the data has left a clear audit trail as to how the analysis, interpretation,s and conclusions have been determined from the data. Recorded, transcribed, and video taped, the paper trail is clear.

Objectivity is not the goal of qualitative research. Rather, the researcher’s position and voice also play a role in interactions with participants. Throughout the process the researcher appreciated the reciprocal influence of personal meanings and contextual constraints as together, the researcher and participants clarified the interpretations of the Parish Chairs experiences.

Participatory action research as was used in this research study is practitioner research designed to improve practice, generating research findings in the same settings in which they will be utilized. Therefore, the trustworthiness of the findings sought to include the criterion of integrity of the research findings of practitioner research as well.

Replicability of findings is not necessarily a goal, but replicability of procedures is; on this basis it is subject to review and critique by others in the tradition. The search was not for generalizable truths or generation of theory that can be applied across multiple settings, but for generating knowledge for practical action in immediate contexts.

Wayne Jacobson (1998) argues that “practitioner research is based on the assumption that a social practice such as teaching is best understood and researched by the practitioners directly involved in it: the teachers” (p.125). The researcher has used the same argument for the professional development of Parish Chairs within LCES. As much as Jacobson proposes that practitioner research is uniquely appropriate for exploring the outcomes of educational actions and contexts for learning in particular ways, he expresses concern that no standard exists for evaluating the quality of practitioner research efforts and outcomes. Furthermore, he claims that neither conventional nor constructivist paradigms, as described by Guba and Lincoln (1989), are ideally suited for practitioner research. Instead, he states, one should evaluate practitioner research using criteria uniquely suited to its purposes and procedures, rather than formulating criteria as counterparts to those already established within other paradigms. “The quality of practitioner research, therefore, must be described in terms of its relation to practice” (Jacobson, 1998, p. 134). The quality of practitioner research is not in the conclusiveness of the findings, but in the integrity of the actions to which they lead. Jacobson writes,

Criteria for the integrity of practitioner research, therefore, must rest on the quality of action which emerges from it, and the quality of data on which the action is based. The data itself must faithfully represent actions in their contexts, collected through procedures which make it possible to distinguish what is actually happening from what I want to see happening.

Furthermore, data need to be thorough, based on a variety of sources, and probing for meanings associated with actions (p. 135).

Jacobson draws clear distinctions by which to compare assumptions, values, and quality among conventional, constructivist, and practitioner research.

Of import to this study, Jacobson insists that practitioner research must provide data that is practical, leading to improved practice in immediate contexts. In addition to the trustworthiness of the data as proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1985), the researcher holds the findings of the research to pass Jacobson's criterion of usefulness to the practitioner researchers, the Parish Chairs. The Parish Chairs identified the features within their organizational lives that they would like to enhance or change. As participants of this research, they explored an agenda for creating action plans to enable that change. Furthermore, one criterion purported by Bradbury and Reason (2001) for action research is the question, "Are the participants willing to act on what has been learned in the course of their research?" (p. 450). Following the completion of the research, the Parish Chairs have been given an opportunity and voluntarily chosen to present their findings to the organization in a state-wide series of leadership workshops. In collaboration with the researcher, the Parish Chairs have presented their findings and recommendations to the LCES.

Ethics of the Study

The researcher acknowledges that the initial invitation to voluntarily participate in the study came from the director of the organization for whom the participants work. Therefore, although the Director's letter clearly stated that participation in the research was voluntary, it is possible that the Parish Chairs did not feel as if they had a choice as to whether or not to participate. The researcher attempted to abide by the previously

stated values of participatory action research by creating a research design as democratic, equitable, liberating, and life enhancing as possible for the participants throughout the study. The researcher obtained written consent from all participants of their willingness to be involved in the research. The researcher attended to the well-being of the participants throughout the study. Participants were informed from the beginning the purpose of the study, what would be asked of them, and how their information would be used. Member checking took place at each step of the research, ensuring that the Parish Chairs were aware of how their information was used as well as given an opportunity for feedback, corrections, or any expression of concern.

The researcher respected the greatest concern of the participants, that of maintaining confidentiality of identity as it related to the information given. The ways in which the researcher respected their wishes were to (a) guarantee that the transcripts, cassettes, and videos were kept safe and not available to others; (b) any identifying characteristics were removed from the quotes used or situations described; (c) any questionable quote, in terms of a potentially identifying characteristic, was member checked with the specific participant for approval before use in the final document; and (d) any request to remove information was honored.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

Nature of the Study

In this qualitative study using participatory action research methodology we sought to increase understanding and insight into the experiences of newly appointed Parish Chairs as they learned their job. Throughout the initial interviews and later focus groups, participants as co-researchers collaborated to produce meaningful descriptions and interpretations of their own learning experiences in terms that made sense to them. These descriptions allowed us to explore the first of the study's objectives, to identify themes and significant features of the Parish Chairs experiences as newly appointed parish administrators.

Underlying this study was an interest in learning and knowledge production within Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service. Whether or not Parish Chairs thought of themselves as such when the research began, throughout the study their role as important knowledge producers within the organization was stressed and explored. Adding together the years of service of the participants of the study, we have several hundred years of accumulated experiences and knowledge of Extension represented by the Parish Chairs. The participatory action research methodology used allowed us to tap into those experiences and knowledge that are invaluable to the organization. Hence, the research methodology chosen capitalized on a central qualitative research tenet: we learn from people rather than study them.

The second objective of the study was to identify features of the Parish Chairs' experiences that promoted or impeded the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of new knowledge about their job as Parish Chair. The exploration and articulation of the

Parish Chairs' learning experiences allowed implicit information to be transformed into explicit information in the form of individual and joint accounts. Making the implicit knowledge gained by the Parish Chairs explicit now gives those in roles of decision and policy making decisions within Cooperative Extension a glimpse of what is the current experience of new Parish Chairs. The reflection and interpretation of the varied Parish Chair experiences generated in the creation of these accounts led to recommendations that Parish Chairs, as "reflective practitioners," have offered the organization. With documented current perceptions of their experiences as well as recommendations offered that stemmed from the collaborative interpretation of those experiences, this information is accessible to share with others and the administration, and, hopefully, it will be used in important ways to make needed changes.

Placing this study in a broader organizational development context, we also looked at the Parish Chair experiences through a lens of learning organizations and organizational learning. Within the very specific context of newly appointed mid-level management, how was knowledge networked, shared and used within Extension? If, as the organizational development literature states, effective organizations are ones that provide structures and policies that encourage individual learning and allow sharing and utilization of that learning, some of the recommendations offered by the Parish Chairs provide a means as to how Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service might more effectively enhance organizational learning.

And finally, the participatory action research methodology used by the Parish Chairs encouraged them to be more intentional about learning and knowledge production for themselves. Results of the study challenged them to be more aware of

how they shared new knowledge with others and how they might use new knowledge for change.

Results

Throughout the initial interviews and focus groups, the 20 Parish Chairs seemed open and honest in their attempt to describe their jobs and their experiences associated with learning the new position. They appeared quite candid about what both frustrated and energized them in their work as Parish Chairs. At the end of each interview agents were asked what, in their view, was the most important issue we had discussed together. Because one agent so eloquently summarized several issues mentioned by virtually all the Parish Chairs, I begin with her quote:

Making our administration aware that they need to define to Parish Chairmen and the entire organization, the role of the Parish Chair. I also think they need to consider the election of Parish Chair. It does not need to be based on years of experience. It needs to be based on that individual's knowledge and comfort of working in that capacity, and then training and working with the individual they select, so they can do a good job.

The results of the hours of interviews and focus group conversations reflect the emerging theme of how Parish Chairs attempted to define their role to themselves and to those with whom they work. Through the lens of the Parish Chairs' perceptions and the words they chose to articulate those perceptions, the following sections and stories depict the PCs' struggle with their role as well as the role of the organization to train and support them as they strive to be effective Parish Chairs.

The Results chapter is a narrative account inviting the reader to experience some of the highlights, and perhaps, at times, the low points of the newly appointed Parish Chair experiences through the perceptions and words of those who have lived these

stories. All names, and frequently gender, have been changed throughout the chapter to protect the confidentiality of the Parish Chair participants/co-researchers. The Results section includes three stories that attempt to provide for the reader a window into what was thought and expressed in a particular time and place for specific experiences. In Connie's story, the quotes connected to Connie do, indeed, reflect the thoughts expressed by one person, although her experience was chosen because it reflected the experiences of many Parish Chairs. The stories of Tanner and Sharon are composite characters telling one story from multiple voices.

Because all of life's experiences reflect simultaneous influences at any given moment, each section of the narrative "Results" chapter might portray overlapping features identified and separately categorized in the joint account. The joint account is summarized in Table 3 at the end of the chapter. The table is intentionally placed at the end of chapter because it reflects a skeletal portrait of the full-bodied experiences voiced by the Parish Chairs and the intention of this chapter is to reflect the lived experiences of the Parish Chairs through their powerful voices. Having stated above that life is never as simple as a linear depiction might portray, the researcher does attempt in the following sub-sections and stories to highlight separately the issues raised and in the order of importance voiced by the Parish Chairs.

"Connie's Story," begins the exploration of the issue ranked most important from the Parish Chairs' joint account: the need for better preparatory training. She also recounts experiences that incorporate her perceptions of the Parish Chair selection process, characteristics of an effective Parish Chair, energizing aspects of the job, expectations and role stereotypes.

Following Connie's Story that depicts some of the pitfalls of her experience, three sections use the Parish Chairs' analysis of certain features of LCES that help the reader to understand how Connie found herself in the Parish Chair position feeling as if she'd just "stepped into the job." The sections, "Motivating Factors," "Parish Chair Selection Process," and "Influence of Former Parish Chairs" are three themes that give insights into the "how" and "why" questions of the highs and lows of the various Parish Chairs' experiences. "Tanner's Story" captures various difficult features of the second most important issue of the joint account, the balance between a Parish Chair's responsibility and authority. "Unrealistic Expectations," voted next in importance by the Parish Chairs, covers three subsections and incorporates five of the 10 categories ranked in importance in the joint account. Finally, Sharon's story is a tribute to the active, creative pockets of knowledge sharing that is currently happening within the LCES.

Connie's Story: The Need for Better Preparatory Training or "Just Stepping Into the Job"

Connie has been in the position of Parish Chair for about two years. She is an experienced agent with over 20 years with LCES. Like many of her colleagues, Connie never "set out" to be a Parish Chair with Cooperative Extension. In response to a specific office situation, she was appointed as Acting Parish Chair to fill out the previous person's assignment. She stated that to avoid potential office conflict, she applied for the 3-year Parish Chair assignment following the interim appointment. She described the Parish Chair position as "interesting, educational, and frustrating" explaining that she just "stepped into the job." Connie is one of several Parish Chairs who commented that they had never actually seen a job description and that no one sat

down and explained the job to them before they assumed the position. Connie's words reveal an organizational assumption that all the agents in the office are aware of the Parish Chair's responsibilities. She states:

No one actually sat down with me to go over the various job responsibilities. And I don't know, because I've been in Extension now like (numerous years), and maybe they assumed that if you've been in Extension that long, that you know what a Parish Chair does. But you really do not until you get in and get your feet wet...

Inadequate Preparation

Connie's early experiences were frustrating when she first encountered administrative duties she felt ill-prepared to perform. The frustration with lack of training and experience is evident as she expressed:

It was just the fact that I've had so many things to contend with that I really was not prepared for. Because one of the first major things that I was confronted with was interviewing a potential county agent for a position that had been vacated. And had really not been trained on the interview process. We did receive that training in January, like January the 20th of this year we had training for interviewing. But that was a little bit late. And I was so inexperienced that I would have liked to have bucked administration, but did not feel like I had the experience to do it.

Apart from feeling inexperienced, several areas stood out for Connie as the most difficult to pull off from the beginning of her term as Parish Chair. In particular, Connie felt that she could have used more training in the interview and selection process for new employees. Several of the Parish Chairs mentioned very specific administrative skills necessary from the beginning of their tenure as PCs that they felt they did not have. Some of those skills would be offered in training within the first year or so, however, all mentioned the need for training on specific tasks on a more timely

basis. She perceived that those who requested that she apply for the position assumed she already had certain skills, or perhaps, she thought that the lack of clarity about the position contributes to the confusion of what was expected. She said,

I feel like the Parish Chair takes maybe more responsibility than Administration thinks. But I think maybe that's because we had no training prior to -- or I had no training prior to becoming Parish Chair... I really didn't have any concept of how much time would be involved. I just really didn't.

Although she had attended administrative staff conferences, she felt the presentations and discussions were aimed at general leadership issues and Extension information rather than specific training that could be used to help them be more effective as Parish Chairs. Experienced and newly appointed Parish Chairs always meet together at the administrative staff meetings, but she doesn't feel as if there is any intentional effort by the organization to have the experienced Parish Chairs share knowledge with the less experienced PCs. Connie thinks that she would have benefited from an orientation session that would have brought experienced Parish Chairs together with the newly appointed Parish Chairs specifically to talk about the job. She commented,

I really think it would be great if we could have more like a sit down meeting with brand new Parish Chairs, to go over everything that's going to be required of us to do... But I really think probably one of the best things that they could do for new Parish Chairs would be to sit down, if it's not one-on-one, or three or four, even if each parish situation might be a little bit different. But I feel like the (specific parish office) situations; maybe I'm the only one in the state that didn't know... I just really didn't know. That hadn't really been a major concern. But that's something I really should have known. And you know, just basic things. The dealing with the Police Jury as far as funding. That type of thing. I really hope as a result of your study and my experience, that administration will sit down with

them and go over some of the basics prior to them getting into something cold turkey. Like basically 'Here, here's the things that you're going to have to do,' along with whatever....So that you would definitely go in feeling a little more confident and all than you do now. Now it's 'Hey, you're Parish Chairman, July 1. Go for it.'

In the past several quotes, Connie neatly identifies certain features in her Parish Chair job experience that she felt that she was not prepared to handle well, basic skills concerning personnel management, information having to do with office property management, community relations, and budget. She speaks apologetically about not knowing, claiming that she should have known certain things after so long in Extension. However, her words confirm the assumptions that upper management makes in presuming that knowledge is being shared throughout the organization and certain skills are developed simply through number of years of service.

In a focus group meeting, another Parish Chair spoke of his discomfort when confronted with what he viewed were pretty basic tasks that he'd been unaware came with the Parish Chair job. He, too, spoke apologetically that perhaps he should have known more. He stated,

We didn't go over any kind of training process. We didn't—I wasn't sent to a two day orientation. I was just expected to know what went on. It was assumed that I knew all about the budget. It was assumed that I knew what was in the permanent policy book as it relates to compensatory leave time and all those kinds of things. Now, maybe the rest of you guys knew that, but I didn't. I worked in an environment where, 'You do your job and I'll take care of the rest of this stuff.' I worked in an environment where nobody had an input...

True to her problem-solver character, Connie offers a remedy for Extension to help other prospective Parish Chairs avoid the difficulties she's encountered. Connie

proposes orientation sessions, if not one on one, at least with a few prospective Parish Chairs to “go over the basics” and specific skill training sessions in a more timely fashion.

Parish Chair Energizers

Not all of Connie’s experiences were negative. When asked what energized her about the position, she expressed an excitement about the opportunity to learn new things after working in the same job for so many years. She’s enjoyed the chance to be in a position that broadens her perspective of what part she plays in the whole organization. She responded,

Actually it’s a different role for me, because I had really never been in an administrative type position, and actually it is a learning position to be, I guess, better able to lead groups, make decisions. I feel that you need additional people (when you are) in the role of Parish Chairman, that you probably would not need and get to know otherwise. You do more or less get first hand information coming down from the ladder... some of things come directly to Parish Chairs and then you have to relate that information on to them (field staff). A little more insight on some of the workings of the Extension service....So it’s, it’s a constant learning process just about the basics that go on within the office. It’s just an educational experience that I would not have had otherwise.

Connie seems to be enjoying the “constant learning process” that being Parish Chair entails. Gaining a “bigger picture” of Extension as an organization and a better understanding how field staff fit into that picture does seem to play an important role in why Connie feels that her job is important. She later mentions her satisfaction as she has gained confidence in her ability to be a better administrator and leader. She’s gratified that she’s been given the opportunity of learning new things after so many years of working in the same field. Her remark about “needing people” she didn’t need when she

worked strictly in her area of specialization and getting to know more people is insightful as it relates to the shift in relationships within the office as well as within the local community. Parish Chairs, in their role of program coordinators of the office, suddenly find themselves needing to integrate the needs of all the agents with each other's programming.

Similar to Connie's remarks and common to all the PCs was the expressed feeling that they are doing a good job and receive personal satisfaction if, through their effective administration, they enable other agents to do their job a little better, easier and more effectively. Several mentioned that agents had come to them with specific issues and that the PCs felt that they had been able to help the agents with their problems. As one Parish Chair described it,

What I like about it [PC job] is helping the other agents do their job better. It's a lot of detail, and like I said, that's the part of the job I really don't like, but somebody has to take care of those things to make the office run. But, where you actually counsel the other agents and the secretaries, try and help them see what's important, try to build teamwork, those types of things. I enjoy that a bit more.

In a focus group discussion the Parish Chairs elaborated on how they viewed their role of helping the other agents in the parish office be more effective in their work.

Nate: I mean, if I buy something, or get something to work so that an agent does less of the mechanics so that they can do more of the actual educational opportunity, that's part of the PC job. As far as structure, that's something, I think, that's tangible.

Ellis: Make sure that the projectors have bulbs, ...it's...I mean, you can line up a meeting room or something like that, that takes time.

Gilda: We need to work as a family and I think our organization does not work as a unit or family.

When they [staff] have accomplishments and they feel good about themselves, that gives you a good feeling. You should work with them and help build them up, not work against them. I think sometimes we're so competitive that we don't work as a unit or a team or an organization.

Common to many of the Parish Chairs, Connie's personal evaluation criteria was that her administrative abilities created an atmosphere where people wanted to work together, support each other and each other's programs, and see themselves as a total team. When PCs felt that this happened in the office, they felt as if they were doing a good job. The attempts to smoothly administer the office, to enable others to succeed and promote team building require increased administrative competence and involvement with all of the Parish Chairs' work. These activities, perceived as an important component of their job, also require increased time of the Parish Chairs.

Balancing Competing Demands

A similar increase in time demands is required to promote and maintain relationships within the local community. Connie's observations were positive as she talked about getting to work with and meet people as Parish Chair she might not have had a chance to meet while working within her area of specialization. She couched her broadened circle of outreach in terms such as "needing" and "getting to know" a wider range of people because of her role as Parish Chair and expressed personal gratification from the widening contacts. However, inherent within these new responsibilities of Parish Chair lies a tension between balancing the competing demands of this positive perspective of an opportunity for new relationships, and the negative consequences due to an increased percentage of one's time involved in others' programs and maintaining community relationships.

But I am flexible. If something comes up, just like this afternoon...like today. I came back today. It's the flexibility probably that is so difficult for everybody, because there are so many things that could be done. They want us to teach, educate people. And me, I am spread thin. There are many things to do, to look after. Being in that office (pointing to her former office) and then you become Parish Chairman, you have already established your parish programs that you're working with... You have established your groups. You have established your contacts. You know who is on the Commission of Police Jury, as it's called in some areas, who is on the School Board—you know, the stake holders, the movers and the shakers. You know, keeping programs that were ongoing, as well as reaching out to other people. At the same time learn what it's all about being Parish Chairman.

Connie has described a juggling act, one that energizes but nonetheless she confesses she is having difficulty pulling off. She wants to keep the channels open with the “movers and the shakers” of the community, making sure that all the staff's Extension programs continue to enjoy the support of the local authorities. At the same time she still lists “to educate, to teach” as her top priority and wants to maintain the expectations that the community has of her current programs within her area of specialization. In addition, Connie is trying “to learn what it's all about being Parish Chairman.” The temptation to try for it all seems evident by her remarks concerning flexibility. That very flexibility seemed to tantalize her with the potential to succeed in covering all the bases.

Similar to remarks made by other Parish Chairs, Connie's access to organizational information comes across as a significant energizing aspect of her new job. However, some of the news “coming down the line” creates high frustration for her as well. Top administration in Extension depends on the Parish Chair to translate and enact directives to the field staff for organizational functioning. Connie's experience

provides an example of how that information channel can break down. She states that in the Extension Service everyone is asked to plan in advance. In order for the parish office programming to work effectively, she maintains that she has to have event and activity dates planned well in advance, especially any requested demands on her colleagues' time. LCES higher administration, in her mind, doesn't follow the same rules of advance planning that they ask of their personnel. She concludes,

And ever since I've been in Extension, regardless [of my job assignment]...they've always told us to plan. Plan, plan, plan. Like we make a program plan of work for a year in advance. It's so many activities we put on our calendar. Two months, three months, 6 months, some of them even a year in advance. And then all of the sudden administration sends us e-mail, or else we get a letter. 'You've got so and so to attend.' I got an e-mail this morning for a meeting for April 3 [in 5 days]. Everybody that can go, go. Well, I'm not even encouraging my staff to attend it because we had staff conference scheduled here, I've got a meeting that day and I know my other staff members have things planned... It's an hour, a little better, to get there... And, you know had we been told a month ago, we might have made arrangements... The short notice of things...to me that's one of the most frustrating things in all that I find that we have to deal with. It's like Administration, top Administration, don't have to plan.

Her remarks convey her feeling that top administration does not really understand or even perhaps respect the time constraints placed upon the Parish Chairs as well as field staff. The effective linking of administration and field staff is mentioned in the Parish Chair job description as an important aspect of the position of Parish Chair. Connie seems to feel as if Administration should ensure that information sharing and continuing education through called meetings are offered when they would be most supported and attended by the most staff.

Questioning the Traditional

Within the context of called meetings and her access to information about the organization, Connie mentions what she calls a “pet peeve,”

But I guess one of the things, too, and I don't know if it's a gripe, but it's probably characteristic of all Parish Chair meetings, District Parish Chair meetings, everything's Ag related. You know, they might mention a little bit of 4-H, but everything is agricultural related. I wonder what it would do if they had a whole room of female Parish Chairs? What would a staff meeting be like? A district Parish Chair meeting be like?

Fully one half of the newly appointed Parish Chairs participating in the study were women, all of whom worked in 4-H Youth Development or Adult Family and Consumer Sciences. This is quite a change from the traditional LCES Parish Chair appointment of the white, male agricultural agent as the “County Agent” or Parish Chair. For numerous years Extension’s appointment of women as Parish Chairs has been gradual. However, within the last three years the increase in the number of women appointments is dramatic. Similar to other female Parish Chairs, Connie did not perceive the female appointments as especially problematic, yet she did mention some expectations from the office staff and community that had to be overcome. She states,

I guess the word would be “stereotype.” That used to, I never heard of a female Parish Chair. The concept was that the County Agent was Parish Chair. It was almost like just a set thing. If you're the County Agent doing adult agricultural work, then that person was the Parish Chair. That is one thing that I kind of had some problems with, because the new man that was here, and I don't know whether he led people to believe that he was, or people have assumed that he was Parish Chair. I know the secretary over here, she's told me on several occasions that somebody will comment to her about him being her boss. And she tells me, she says, ‘I inform them that no, he's not my boss. That he's just the County Agent.’ So...there's just an expectation there. I think some of his

clients in agriculture have assumed that he's Parish Chair. And I really don't know that he has made the effort to tell them otherwise. Some of the Police Jury members, I know, had thought that he was Parish Chair after he came here.

The Parish Chairs' analysis of the implications of this organizational shift away from exclusively male, agriculturally based area of specialization remains unclear. However, several of Connie's quotes demonstrate that questions are being asked as agents perceive the change. Throughout the focus groups we continued to explore how these shifts in PC appointments to include 4-H agents and Family and Consumer Sciences agents, many of whom are younger and still have children living at home, have increased the difficulty of balancing time constraints and administrative duties. One male 4-H Parish Chair commented,

Well, my wife who hadn't spoken to me for a week, finally opened up to me until three o'clock in the morning about how I love and care more for my job than wife and family. My daughter's (important family event) and I missed it because I was out of town doing Parish Chair stuff... So yeah, that big time affects your family life.

And as one focus group discussed,

Nate: The Extension Service is a very family oriented service, and they want us to worry more about our families than our jobs.

Shim: That's the rhetoric.

Dan: That's it exactly.

Shim: It doesn't matter, Cathy, whether you have a family that resides in your home or not, you do not have an 'after life,' after Extension life, ...because you have a lot of other things in your evening that you might would do that you can't do, or on weekends or whatever. Too often I can't do something I really had planned to do, because 'this' has come up and I have to take care of it.

Joe: And you don't really want to complain because you really want to stay in it long enough to... show that you're capable of doing a good job as an administrator. So you don't complain about how it's affecting various parts of your life... some things you just don't throw up on the table because they'll say, 'Maybe you just need to be devoting all of your time to 4-H and we'll just get somebody else to be Parish Chairman.'

Nate: Exactly.

Shim: So, I'm not sure what you guys are doing, but I find myself going there [office] earlier to get things done.

Joe: I do, too.

Shiml: And I find myself staying there later to get things done, or making sure before you leave out of town, you've got to know that time sheets have been done, that the... all that kind of stuff is taken care of before you can leave. A lot of extra little things.

Connie's story addresses the perception that finding oneself as Parish Chair without adequate preparation is more probable than possible. Her experiences highlighted frustrations, but also the energizers she found within the new position of Parish Chair. She and others discussed some experiences that they felt could have been avoided with some preparation and training. Throughout the story were some reflections of what could be done to help Parish Chairs feel better prepared and effectively administer the parish office. Following is a summary of the recommendations from Connie's story.

Recommendations

Parish Chairs agreed that an official orientation or retreat before the Parish Chair appointment would be really helpful to clarify the expectations of the job. Included in

the retreat would be an opportunity to talk with experienced Parish Chairs and have them share some of their experiences and, perhaps, how they negotiated certain situations. As one Parish Chair suggested,

I really feel that there should be some kind of, orientation or whatever you'd call it. It might be good for us to go out and have a retreat, a weekend retreat or something, a training session, just PCs. Specific needs of PCs. Go over the "Dos" and the "Don'ts" Bring in some old PCs and let them share their experiences. Biggest thing is that it should be a formal, I don't want to call it formal, but some kind of training program as standard procedure. You could make people get into tough situations some kind of way, role playing or something like that. [Laughing] It would have to be pretty heavy duty to mimic real life experiences, that's what I see could be done.

Although not unanimous, many felt a mentor would be helpful the first year. Similar to Extension's current policy with new agents, the mentor would be responsible for checking in on new Parish Chairs and who is the one newly appointed Parish Chairs are supposed to be able to call upon when they are unsure about procedures, policy or situations.

Also included in the orientation would be some of the training currently offered by the Human Resource Department, but the critical difference noted by the Parish Chairs is that this training would be before they had to encounter the situations rather than a year or so into their job. Recommended content included personnel management, conflict resolution, legal issues with interviewing and hiring procedures, evaluation, budget, guidelines for community liaison responsibilities, and appropriate communication channels within Extension.

Although the Parish Chairs acknowledged the difficulty under certain circumstance of providing this preparatory training, many suggested that the most

powerful preparation would be to spend time “picking the brain” or working extensively with the Parish Chair he/she would be replacing. In connection with this tapping into the wisdom of those who have gone before, they thought a training book or policy manual specifically for Parish Chairs would be really helpful. Some suggested that each Parish have one that would be tailored to the needs of that specific parish, others thought a standardized manual would be best.

Another think I think Extension ought to do is prepare... a book for your replacement. The Parish Chair ought to keep something like that so he can pass it on to the new person. And then we have uh, [reaching on the shelf lifting a manual] this is [laughing] our Bible, policy letters, policy statement. This is a good training tool. If you don't know it, and you can find it. It has a whole section in here telling what the Parish Chairman does. That kind of stuff....any thing that helps you run an office or has to do with programs...A policy manual.. this is the Bible. So, be sure the [former] Parish Chair goes through this with you.

Many Parish Chairs contributed to what they thought might be included in the policy manual. One of the most popular suggestions offered within a focus group was an annual calendar of events, meetings, training, but especially, deadlines on special reports, forms or information that the Parish Chair is responsible for submitting to the state office. Some suggested that guidelines be given for how one might fulfill the outline of Parish Chair job description. An example would be how various parishes or districts maintained communication or improved relationships with the local authorities or how a specific parish went about increasing visibility within the community.

A popular idea among the Parish Chairs was that on-going training or PC support, problem resolution, and state-wide information sharing could be much more effectively handled in the quarterly district meetings with all Parish Chairs. When

appropriate, time could be given to newly appointed Parish Chairs and their specific needs.

Within the context of describing some of the negative experiences, Parish Chairs identified certain features of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service that contributed to newly appointed Parish Chairs moments of frustration as well as energizing aspects of the Parish Chair job. The following three sections reveal Parish Chairs' reflections from the interviews and focus groups that point to some insightful analysis of the motivation, vulnerability, and influences on newly appointed PCs.

Motivating Factors to Seek or Accept the Position of Parish Chair

Most agents were clear about what motivated them to either apply for the Parish Chair position or accept the added responsibilities when specifically asked to assume the PC job. Many agents indicated that the motivation for applying for Parish Chair stemmed more from a belief that "someone has to do it," rather than a personal or professional goal. Statements frequently reflected office situations where "there was no one else who wanted it," or "no one else was qualified for the PC position," or even, "We all take turns, I guess my time was up. " When asked how they found themselves in a management position few admitted to wanting, one common response reflected the importance many agents placed on maintaining Extension's positive image within the local community. As one agent described it,

Well, when I interviewed for the PC position. I told them I felt that the PC position was the most important position in the entire extension service because I can either make the staff look really good, and build morale, build camaraderie, flaunt what we've got, or I can either make it look bad. You know, there's a lot of power and I think a lot of PCs don't even realize the power they have...And, that was my whole thing about being PC. I didn't want someone in this position who could hurt us, I

wanted someone in this position that could help us... To me, when _____ Parish is doing a lot with the media, when we are all over the TV and newspaper, to me that makes everybody in the state, especially in this section look good. They know who the Extension Service is. I like the attitude that I have right now, about my role as PC. Uhm, promoting, succeeding, I like it.

As one agent described some of the difficulties encountered with the job, he was asked whether or not he would accept a second term. His response, again, showed a concern about Extension's public image,

There needs to be a consistency in the office and with the local people that we have to deal with... I think with a consistency with the Parish Chair, over time, you're gaining respect of the people, not simply as an individual, but as a service, an Extension Service, an organization. Instead of, 'Well, they can't keep anybody in charge up there,' they've got one person who's carrying the flag. I don't think anybody else here would take it anyway.

One agent spoke of the PC position giving him the opportunity to provide a vision for the community. He saw his role as being a good liaison between Extension and various agencies to keep the doors open and influence the movers and shakers of the community to make dreams come true.

A second high motivator for agents to take the Parish Chair position named not only the responsibility of making Extension known within the community, but also taking responsibility for making sure Extension's own field staff "know who Extension is." One Parish Chair eloquently expresses her interpreter role as Parish Chair,

To me, my biggest role as Parish Chair is, because I go to these Parish Chair meetings or administrative meetings, is to come back to my staff and tell them, 'This is what our organization is doing.' Because previously I didn't feel like I had that knowledge. It wasn't coming back to me. And I think that's so important, because if field people do not understand the goals or the mission of our administration in this organization, how can they work towards it? I think so

many different people have different ideas of where our organization's heading or what we're doing.

Another agent discussed the shift as an agent with an area of specialization to the broader role performed for the parish staff and the organization. She viewed her “mission” as follows:

And so I see my job, first of all, as an Extension agent. I take it very, very seriously as far as reaching the needs of the people and helping people to lead productive, satisfying lives, and to be an asset to their communities. And, to me, it's almost like missionary work. And most Extension agents feel fine that you talk to that—that have a zealotness for the job. That's kind of how they attack it. So assuming chairmanship of the parish, you have to be certain that each agent there—my job is still teaching, but it's rolled over now to teaching the agents the concept of what extension work is all about. And it's a very complicated thing to me to get across to a person. A lot of it comes from the heart, but first of all you have to understand how it all works. And it's so intricate. I mean, there's so many parts of it, like you have seen. And each parish is so very different that the program is so very different in each parish.

During a focus group discussion one other agent mentioned organizational “secrecy” as a barrier to getting important knowledge to the field staff. One of the motivations behind this agent's taking the PC position was her perception that Parish Chairs were part of the group who had knowledge within the organization.

Linda: I've got one more thing to say. I feel like there's this big secrecy in Extension...and I thought maybe Parish Chairs knew what was going on, because as an agent or non-PC or whatever, I felt this secrecy. And something is going on and nobody ever tells what's going on, but all these little plans are going on. And I still feel like that...I thought maybe—I think somebody knows.

(Cathy): One of you said in your interviews, "The most important thing about the role of a Parish Chair is to connect field staff with administration and to bring that big picture back of where staff fits in to the overall workings of the organization." And that person felt that if that translation could take place effectively, then the responsibility of Parish Chair had been well done and...

Linda: I still feel that way, I mean, I still think that should be one of the major roles of a Parish Chair. It is to translate knowledge, or transform I guess I should say. But I still don't feel that way.

(Cathy): But you don't feel what way?

Linda: I get no knowledge.

James: What she's telling you is it seems like we're on a "need-to-know" basis.

Perceiving themselves as an important link between higher administration and field staff in the organization, these agents expressed frustration that they were unable to effectively provide that link without sufficient knowledge being shared with them.

Several agents remarked that Extension places people in the Parish Chair position who never really wanted the added responsibility nor were prepared for it. The potential negative consequences of these kinds of appointments were expressed well during certain initial interviews and focus groups. Linda commented,

I think that's something our organization does, and not only in my case. They tend to put people in with responsibility that maybe it's not their goal or their wish to be put in those responsibilities. Or somebody wants to be Parish Chair because they think it's something that it's not....A lot of people figure this job as a power, authority, control... So they think, 'I'm the boss.'

This Parish Chair went on to state the belief that effective Parish Chairs really shouldn't have an ego issue or even think of themselves as "the Boss." By contrast, she

felt that the best Parish Chairs are the ones who are good as team leaders and working with coworkers. Linda goes on to express an important insight between the Parish Chair as parish team coordinator and the PC role as effective connection to the higher levels of the organization. In her words,

I think another thing that's real important is that a Parish Chair not have the ego that they're the boss of the office, that they need to be a team leader and work with their co-workers. I find our organization –I've noticed a lot of competition among agents or program areas. Instead of working together, they worried about either Ag getting ahead, or 4-H getting ahead, or Home Ec getting ahead. They're not working a total organization. And I think the first step is you have to work with them at their parish level. Because if they don't work as a team at their parish level, then how are they going to carry that through to their district and therefore to the state?

The "ego" motivation seems to have been held in low regard by several of the Parish Chairs. The leadership style appears to be the clue as to whether or not agents and colleague Parish Chairs suspect that a Parish Chair has accepted the position for the "wrong" reasons. As one other PC commented,

There's some people that like to be bosses and like to be leaders, and they very much want the job of Parish Chair. It's a feeding of ego to them. They like to be in control... To me, your true Parish Chairs really don't care if they're Parish Chair or not. They're just doing the job of Parish Chair because they know that's what needed to get the job done and they want it done right. And your better Parish Chair are not the ones that see it as a power position or ego position. They see it as, "I'm working for Extension and I want it -- I want our program in our parish to succeed, so I'm going to do what it takes to get there." And I think the ones that -- I really believe the ones that don't see it as "Hey, I'm the Parish Chair," that's your better ones. Now I may be wrong, but from what I've seen, some people like to toot their own horns and the ones who toot it are usually not the ones who are the most effective. I don't see them being highly effective. I see them having more problems in their parishes because of

that. The ones where, "I'm working with you in and out, day in and day out," that's the ones who are most effective. They're one of you, but they're not trying to boss you, but they want to see things go good.

There appears to be a disdain for those Parish Chairs who seem to set themselves or their position before the needs of the organization. The values revealed by these two previous quotes reveal that the respected Parish Chairs are those who place importance on integrated support of local programming and staff while ensuring the wellbeing of Extension's outreach into the community. These qualities are valued by the Parish Chairs more than a title "boss" or position of Parish Chair. These "ideal" characteristics of a good Parish Chair are expressed in different ways in the following section on the Parish Chair Selection Process.

Parish Chair Selection Process

Rather than specific management skills or proven leadership ability, the number of years an agent has served Extension was quoted as the most important factor of an agent's eligibility for the Parish Chair position. The following series of quotes and excerpted discussion reveals some of the assumptions the appointed PCs are making about why they might have been appointed. As one agent comments during a focus group discussion on the Parish Chair selection process,

If you've served in Extension the right number of years, anybody can be [Parish Chair], I mean, if the right person doesn't apply, anybody can be.

While speaking with another Parish Chair about his appointment as a relatively young person for Parish Chair he responds,

As far as district office or Baton Rouge, I don't know that age is really a concern with them as long as they can find someone willing to do the job. It is a lot of extra work for very little recognition.

One agent highlights the tension of how her appointment countered the traditional criterion of choosing the agent in the office with the most years of service with Extension. She describes her experience,

It was tough, it was tough. I knew I was going to go for the position, not really because I wanted it, but because I was the person who needed to be in the position. We had some other folks in the office who were there much, much longer than me. All of us applied for the job. It was a very high stress, tense situation. And I really didn't think I would get the position, because I had only been there a short time... And, you know, as it usually goes, the person with the most seniority is the one who moves up in that spot. But my work record was so much better, and my ability to pull people together in team work...and attitude...and we had kind of a bad situation in the office, so I applied for the position.

In her case, the office situation and her work performance in her specialty area overrode the tradition of choosing the most experienced agent as PC. Although several agents mentioned that their appointments had been in direct response to specific office or parish circumstances, most agents do not perceive Extension's thoughtful consideration in PC appointments. During one of the focus groups, again agents alluded to the "natural selection process" which did not guarantee that the best person would end up in the position. The context of the following excerpt of a discussion is about what Extension is looking for when appointing Parish Chairs and the importance of the Parish Chair fitting the specific parish or office situation. The conversation reveals unease about the process,

Dennis: I don't know what they look for.

Gill: I don't know what they look for either.

Dennis: It's just the person that has the most experience in the parish, it seems.

Linda: Or years of service.

Tom: Yeah, I think years of service. I think the quality of their personal program, which of course wasn't managerial, it was subject area. So they take... maybe taking somebody who's good in their field, and then allowing them to do something in addition to that, which we've already discussed means less quality in both areas.

Linda: Most often, the person that wants the job is not the right person for the job, because they want it for the wrong reasons. And the right people don't want the job because they don't have any agendas. They're generally the ones that would be right for the job.

Dennis: I agree with that.

Linda: Or a stepping stone to go to somewhere else. Which really, when you're a PC, I believe we need continuity. The only people I can think of that want to do it that I think are for the wrong reasons.

Tom: And they do a really bad job.

Dennis: Or they really want to do it because they've seen a bad job maybe...

When challenged as to whether or not they really thought "a lot of" PCs were in it for the wrong reasons or doing a bad job, one agent seemed to speak for the others when he said,

Maybe they're [Parish Chairs] getting the job done.
Maybe they're [LCES administration] picking the right people. If you look around, most of them are pretty good PCs. Most of them are pretty good.

These agents are questioning whether or not Extension's policy of choosing the agent with the most years in Extension, the best record in subject area programming, or

the highest personal agenda is the best policy. Their comments reflect a perception that the Parish Chair selection process is on the one hand, unknown, and on the other hand, haphazard.

Influence on Agents of Former Parish Chairs

The seemingly haphazard way in which LCES agents move into a management position within the organization points to what some agents referred to as a lack of leadership development within the organization. This lack of organizational intentionality in the Parish Chair appointments doesn't appear to take into account the potential influence for "generations" of each PC appointment. All the Parish Chairs mentioned the influence of their predecessors. Several agents said that, without any other model provided, they modeled their PC behavior on what they had experienced working under Parish Chairs throughout their years with Extension. Tanner:

But I brought in that thought of trust, allowing the trust to be given to the individuals, because that's how I was treated. Probably 90 percent of what I do in this PC job is a result of what I know from how I was treated from my PC. It's basically almost a total emulation.

Others said that they had worked with several PCs and chose aspects of leadership style they wanted to emulate.

It's according to what kind of Parish Chair you had before you. I've been in—I've been all the way around the state. I've had them from, 'You don't say one word to me,' or 'You don't do anything I tell you not to do,' to 'I'm Parish Chair, but so what.'

Still others said they had learned from their previous Parish Chairs exactly what they didn't want to do. As one PC who had worked with several PCs shared,

I think it was helpful, because I think that all of them had good qualities that I learned from, but also, as an

employee and as a co-worker, I recognize things that other employees did not appreciate being treated, you know, from my Parish Chair, as an employee. Having those four individuals to learn from, I tried to put all their good qualities together in my management style.

When I asked one agent if he'd had the opportunity to work with the previous Parish Chair in any type of apprenticeship he replied,

Not in the sense of administrative duties, no. Only in that all Parish Chairmen are required to hold monthly staff meetings...so you can observe the way other Parish Chairmen do that. So ...each agent can observe that and learn a lot... You see how they handle and give reports before your local government bodies...so if you've been a part of those kinds of things, although it's not like in the form of an apprentice or anything, you just observe and kind of emulate those things....and if on the other hand, if it was something negative and you observed that and you said, 'Well, I don't think I'd like to do it that way,' you can learn both ways from things about your predecessor.

This answer of "observation" being the apprenticeship program of management preparation was common to many of the agents interviewed. However, most PCs referred to the practice of "doing their own job," rather than really taking note of the responsibilities encountered by previous PCs.

Moving into unknown territory is often disconcerting. Frequently agents mentioned that they accepted the job with trepidation. Although the hesitancy described came from a number of sources such as personal gratification teaching in one's content area, unclear what the PC job entails, lack of management preparation, unwanted administrative responsibilities, time constraints, and changes in relationships with colleagues, the following story reveals one of the most commonly mentioned factors: a lot of additional responsibility without clear authority to perform the job well.

Tanner's Story: Authority vs. Responsibility or "Lots to Do, But Hands Are Tied"

Throughout the individual interviews and focus groups, numerous significant features emerged as participants attempted to define the role of Parish Chair to themselves and others. The desire for more preparatory training, discussed in detail through Connie's perspective, was voted by the Parish Chairs to be the most important feature raised during the construction of the joint account. Second to that issue, the Parish Chairs perceived as especially problematic the challenges that arose from increased responsibility that came with the PC appointment without clear authority to effectively carry out that additional responsibility. The Parish Chairs expressed their discomfort with the unclear role definition of PC in various administrative areas as well as their nebulous lines of authority. Two examples PCs gave demonstrated that their confusion stemmed from juggling difficult choices, such as knowing how to set priorities between higher administrative demands and local program tasks or unclear recourses from within LCES for specific parish problems. As one PC stated,

I mean, you talk to every one of these agents here and you'll get a different list of what all the Parish Chairman's supposed to do. So that's why I'm saying I'm from the fix-it man, the bottom of the ladder, to doing things all the way to the top to representing our parish at some legislative meeting. You know, it's a wide range of jobs. It's a lot of responsibility from the top to the bottom, very little authority. But my main job, I feel like being Parish Chairman, is to promote teamwork. If I can get everybody working together and helping each other, and not trying to stab each other in the back over something, then I feel like I've accomplished something.

However, PCs concurred that the most stressful situations centered on issues of authority and responsibility in which they had to manage conflicts involving office personnel.

Tanner's story represents the experience of a Parish Chair who found himself with high level office conflict and personnel problems, perhaps more than many of the Parish Chairs. However, his story captures the Parish Chairs' unanimous agreement that the responsibility to supervise the parish office did not come with sufficient authority or recourses for effective conflict management.

Conflict Management

Tanner, an experienced County Agent, spoke of the difficulty he experienced when he shifted from being solely responsible for his area of specialization to that of the entire parish office. As he talked about networking with other Parish Chairs to help work through difficult situations he mentioned,

The one thing that I think we all have in common is, from what I hear, is that we're unsure at times how to handle conflict with employees. And we need the training on that, but more importantly, we need something, some policy or some type of—I don't really know what it would take, but we need something to where these employees know that, 'Hey, this is the one in charge.'

His frustration centered on what he called "conflict management." When asked about what he knows now as Parish Chair that he wished he'd known about the job before he was appointed, he replied,

I wish I had known what was involved as far as conflict management. I worked with a PC (for many years) who basically made it look easy. But we also had a staff that had been together (for many years). So it was a very working, I mean, very dedicated support staff. This is a totally different staff. This is one like I've never experienced before. The conflicts, the ability to be able to work with a situation to accomplish change; I'm unable to do that and that's extremely frustrating, extremely.

Tanner had limited supervisory experience before becoming Parish Chair. He had experienced primarily one style of management with the Parish Chair prior to his

appointment that led him to form expectations for himself as PC as well as certain expectations for his staff. Encountering conflict and feeling as if he had neither the authority nor resources to deal with staff conflict took him by surprise. Common to what many Parish Chairs stated as their philosophy of supervision of the parish office, Tanner took the PC assignment with the assumption that all of the agents in the parish office were professionals, having similar backgrounds in training and experience, and would comport themselves in a professional way without specific supervisory directives. As he stated,

I'm from the philosophy that everyone knows what they need to be doing. I think we're all mature adults and we need to treat one another that way and I don't really think my job responsibility is to tell them what to do. They should be able to know what their job responsibilities are. And I know what my job responsibilities are and I need to be doing them. So whenever I have to deal with a personnel problem, I'm not real comfortable with that, because I don't feel like I'm any smarter, better, more qualified than any of the other agents here.

This is echoed by another PC saying,

We don't even use the term, "Boss." Most of the people that are in the office, we've been working together for years, so as a result, it's a matter of, 'Come on, guys. Lets keep rolling like the wind rolls. You know what you're supposed to do. You know what I'm supposed to do. It's my job to keep the lights on, keep the water bill paid, and then do all the reports...when something goes wrong, get it fixed, staff meetings, keep the staff informed as to what's going on in Baton Rouge, approve travels and annual leaves...and listen, serve as a sounding board for irate parents, farmers...Because let's face it, there's no a Parish Chairman in the state that's in a position that has the authority to fire anybody. I can't even—I couldn't make somebody come to work if they didn't want to. I couldn't make them leave the office if they didn't want to. There's no virtual "power" in the position. It's their responsibility. So as a result, you depend on people to be professionals that they were hired to be.

If, as was expressed in “Connie’s Story,” an energizing aspect of the Parish Chair position includes promoting teamwork among the parish staff and enabling the parish field staff to do their job most effectively by handling administrative details, it stands to reason that, by contrast, one of the most difficult aspects of the job for the Parish Chairs is when personnel problems impede a smoothly running office. The above quote expresses sentiments that coincide with Tanner’s philosophy that Parish Chairs assume all staff are professionals and should simply do their job, but even this agent quickly points to the lack of personal PC authority if conflict arose. But most Parish Chairs did, indeed, find themselves in the often uncomfortable situation of having to resolve conflicts, either between the parish office staff or directly between themselves and another Extension employee within the office. Given the “we’re all adults” philosophy, when the supervisory role entailed confronting parish staff with problems, Tanner found the situation uncomfortable. Tanner:

The worst part of my job is to have to go out and point out someone else’s mistakes to them... You know, there have been situations where I would have a complaint or I would see things or hear things or whatever, and I would confront them. Not in a way like, ‘You’re a bad person,’ but ‘How can we change this?’ How can we make this better. I don’t like it, but I think it’s of major importance. To me, being a supervisor involves counseling, involves lending the ear, or even taking the initiative to confront. You know, you can watch and see things, but you’re responsible if you’re not trying to help straighten out or fix a situation.

Rick, another Parish Chair who expressed similar concerns revealed,

A Parish Chairman is basically a manager of personalities. You’ve got all these different personalities that have their agenda that they want taken care of, either in public life, like police or school boards or staff wise...personal staff. You know I’m lucky enough to

have a pretty good staff here, but there's still always, even among family, arguing and hurt feelings at times, and I'm the one that gets to listen to all that. Not a whole lot I can do about it but listen.

Rick did not have the level of interoffice conflict that Tanner has encountered. Still, he alluded to the inability to do much about tension in the office. Regardless of the level of conflict or felt need to call on one's authority in the position of Parish Chair, common to all the PCs was the lack of clear understanding of their role when personnel problems arose. This lack of clarity was in distinct opposition to the clearly expressed understanding that a primary tenet of an effective PC is to provide support to the entire parish staff. Parish Chairs stated that they felt on secure ground as long as their administrative role dealt with signing forms, ordering supplies or attending meetings with local authorities. However, establishing credibility as a supervisor was a much more difficult. Parish Chairs lamented that no standardized, written policy clarified authority or boundaries for PCs as they attempted to resolve conflict. Tanner:

Until the employees know that (we're in charge), and feel that and understand it, we're nothing more than paper pushers, because that's what we're doing. We handle the budget, we make the decisions as far as 'Yes, we need this printer, or we don't.' We do all the School Board and Parish Council meetings at night and things like that. We've got all the responsibility to do all of this, but we don't have any authority. You're given the responsibility to go back into your parish and conduct, but as soon as there is a question on one of them (responsibilities, staff), you have no authority to even answer that question.

Community-Agent Negotiations

Tanner spoke of the frustration of being responsible for all the programming in the office, yet having no clear guidelines or policies as to his role or even the appropriate response to agent-community problems. As the parish Extension employee

most responsible for promoting positive public relations role in the community, Tanner also found himself in the uncomfortable position of first, hearing the complaints about other Extension staff from local authorities, but also responsible to defend or account for actions of his staff. He felt a bit at a loss to explain to a particular Police Jury member how his hands were tied in terms of authority to provide repercussions of another staff person's work. In relaying to me an experience he had recently with a local authority he stated,

As for those of us who are interested in having a productive office, who are interested in maintaining the integrity of that office and of the Ag Center in public view, it's an extremely frustrating and difficult experience every day. And especially when we're having to rely on local support for continuing our presence in these parishes. It's not a great situation to be in because I have officials that are saying, 'Why is he there? What are you all doing?' ... It has to some degree, eroded respect from the officials here, because they don't see me in a supervisory position. They see me as a weak individual... I could line up every public official in the parish and tell them, 'I can't do nothing because of this reason,' and it wouldn't mean a thing to them. All they know is action... I told him, 'My hands are tied,' and he said, 'Bullshit.'

Tanner's frustration reflects both his concern for public support of the Extension program, which he considers his responsibility to maintain, as well as his discomfort with the community perception that he is a weak administrator. He spoke of how different office dynamics could be if one problematic employee were accountable for his actions. Tanner felt that the administrative time he spends would also be quite a bit less if he had the authority to truly "deal" with personnel in ways that could resolve issues. He struggles with supervising a staff he neither hired nor can fire. He stated,

Whereas here, I've got people working here that I would not have hired, that would not work for me if I owned this

business, personally. I mean, that's the way it is, but I can't fire them because the simple reason is I didn't hire them and they work for the ag center. I'm an administrator, but I have no authority. And that's one of the problems I have with this job. I've got responsibilities out the gazoo. I've got very little authority. Working with some of the diverse personalities that we have here in the office.... I thought they were one way, and then after I started working with them, I found out that they were—it was a little different deal there to work with them... Especially when I became Parish Chairman and I became their boss. You evaluate them, but that's mostly between them and the district agent. You can have your input in there, but it's just one of those positions where you've got all responsibility and not much authority. I'm not saying I'd go around firing everybody, but I'm just saying that I'd have something that I could hold over their head as far as I needed it.

Changing Relationships

Trying to walk the tightrope between colleague and boss had caused numerous of the Parish Chairs to identify the changing relationships and expectations as the most stressful part of the job, especially as it relates to evaluation of the performance of their staff. Many of the Parish Chairs who, before their appointment, worked side by side with other agents in the office in their area of specialization, suddenly find themselves evaluating their co-workers' programs and performance. Tanner found it difficult the first time he was faced with staff evaluations. Although each district is slightly different in the balance of input between District Agent and the Parish Chair in staff evaluations, all Parish Chairs are involved in the performance evaluation of the parish staff to some degree or another. Tanner found the first time really uncomfortable

I thought it was very difficult.. I think...I don't know. I think I'm harder on myself than I am on other people. So, I thought it was very hard to evaluate those individuals. Because I've worked with those individuals as a co-worker, rather than as a supervisor, so it was definitely

putting on a different hat to see them in a different way than what I had before. I did not enjoy evaluation.

Parish Chairs voiced concern with regard to the tension arising from unclear authority or policy concerning their role in evaluation. Several factors contributed to the concern. First, Parish Chairs faced time constraints in their attempts to be sufficiently involved in parish staff's programming to adequately evaluate the work. Also, lack of timely training in personnel evaluation and inconsistent evaluation policies between districts throughout the state were two frequently mentioned issues. Parish Chairs had doubts as to the validity and appropriate use of their input on the evaluations. Finally, some Parish Chairs felt they faced additional tension within the office stemming from their role in staff performance appraisals. One Parish Chair attributed the tension to confusion due to lack of organizational education as to the new role of Parish Chair as staff evaluator.

Well, I think the problem is... everyone has a different conception of what a Parish Chairperson is. I always looked at the Parish Chairperson as my co-worker and the office manager, because when I initially came into extension, the Parish Chairpersons did not evaluate us. But it [administration] never has come out with a new responsibility list for Parish Chairman so everyone's educated to it. So I think there's a lot of perceptions of what a Parish Chairperson is.

As was discussed in Connie's Story, one gratifying aspect of the Parish Chair job was feeling that they were able to resolve problems and enable other staff to be better agents. Therefore, when tension arose between staff or between Parish Chair and staff, not knowing what recourse was available or appropriate, or even if administration would back certain recourses was listed as one of the highest stressors for many of the Parish Chairs. When conflict arose, PCs frequently felt that there was no guarantee that

the organization would back up their decisions or recommendations. Tanner contrasts the desire to support staff with the felt responsibility to hold staff accountable for their work. He said,

But being able to sit there and say, "You're on Administrative Leave" or whatever, and you're not looking to punish anybody. You don't want to punish. You want to be able to help someone to be their best, to help them be productive. But there's times when you -- If it comes about that you have to have some type of administrative action, you've got to be able to do it without wondering, are you going to have the back-up, or do you ... In other words, I'm still asking to this day -- What is my authority? What is not my authority? What can I do? What can I not do? What rights do I have versus what I don't have. And I still don't know to this day. In situations that come up, with my instincts as far as it involves management and supervision, I can't react on because I don't know if I'm able to do that or not.

Tanner and other PCs discussed the ineffective time delay when making phonecalls for backup or guidance in personnel problems. Having one's hands tied in terms of appropriate responses seemed to be the most frustrating aspect of Tanner's working through recourses when all was not harmonious within the office or between the community and Extension staff.

Susan, another Parish Chair, gave a specific example of her insecurity about the higher administration's backup in personnel disputes within the parish office. Susan:

Depending on the situation, that determines whether the organization will back you up and support you. I know one of the previous Chairpersons in my office tried to reprimand an individual for tardiness or taking inappropriate leave, and the Parish Chair was reprimanded—to me, in trying to mold a better employee. And that's because as Parish Chair we don't know our boundaries.

Operating from the previously mentioned supervisory philosophy that “we’re all professionals”, Tanner was taken by surprise by the tension arising due to his shift from colleague to supervisor. He confessed,

I did not anticipate the change in relationship. I did not anticipate that. And that has been the most stressful part of it, out of everything. I assumed that working with the parish people would be most difficult thing, and I’m finding that that’s really the easiest thing....It was tough. It was tough. And my biggest obstacle was moving from co-worker, just one of the guys, to boss. That was the biggest thing.

Parish Chairs seemed in agreement that the PC appointment from within the office had many advantages such as knowledge of the parish, established relationships with the local authorities, familiarity with the existing parish programs, etc. Several stressed that the knowledge of Extension, how Extension works and specifically, how things happen in the parish, is crucial to effective administration of a parish Extension office. However, some PCs acknowledged that knowing each other so well and having established co-worker relationships and friendships had its disadvantages when shifts occurred in personnel. Karen, a Family and Consumer Sciences Parish Chair, comments about the unexpected change in a colleague’s relationship when she was appointed PC,

And our relationship has changed and it’s been very, very stressful on her and myself... before we worked together as colleagues and now she sees me as her supervisor so it’s really put a strain—that’s how I feel personally—on our relationship. It’s changed completely and I’m having a really hard time getting across to her what I want. I have very high expectations of what I want, just because of the way I see my job...and I see this parish program. At times, I think she doesn’t really understand the whole focus, the whole picture of Extension work and how it all works together. It’s a very, very hard thing to deal with.

Complicating the role adjustment from colleague to supervisor was new knowledge perceived as both energizing and problematic. Paradoxically, Parish Chairs conveyed enjoyment with gaining new knowledge that gave them a broader picture of Extension and their role in it, while confessing that this new understanding sometimes brought with it a challenge. How could they convey that new picture to the office staff in ways that were not perceived as threatening?

[It affected] interrelationships in the office itself. And this reflects everything as far as how your program is going to be effective. It has to be the working interrelationships. Everybody has to understand the total parish program before you go out and are able to be effective with all these other groups we need to work with. So to me that's the most important thing... Before I assumed Parish Chair responsibility and went to these administrative meetings, I didn't understand our budget, the Extension Service budget, and that's real important to understand. So I went back to the office and I said, 'You all need to be aware of this, this is how we understand why we don't have any more expense accounts.'

The Parish Chair role of providing the link between the state-wide organization and the parish office contributed to some of the change in relationships. Karen's new insight into how all Extension works together has apparently influenced her perceptions of the direction in which parish programming might best be headed. Between encouraging parish staff in directions that she thought were important and one of the staff resenting the new supervisory capacity of her former colleague, tension emerged between two people who had previously shared both a good working relationship and friendship.

Another PC spoke of knowing that changes needed to be made, but feeling as if in the last 20 years or so, previous Parish Chairs as well as District Agents had been unsuccessful in making those changes. If others had failed this agent questioned why

he should go through the stress of trying to achieve success where others had not.

Clayton said,

To get a person to change is very difficult. You either accept it and just like an ostrich, say, 'I'll turn my head and ignore it, you've not done it for the last 18 years, so how am I going to make you do it for this year? And if two other people couldn't have made you, and a District Agent can't, why should I try?' And that's how I came into the job. I said, 'I will not do this with that person.' ...I have to work with this person five days a week. I want to be friends, because anything I do is not going to change, except our relationship.

Authority, What Authority?

In one of the focus group meetings, Tanner chose to highlight the responsibility vs. authority issue with the other PCs present. The following animated discussion demonstrates how charged the issue seemed to be for many of the Parish Chairs:

Tanner: I think we need more of a balance between authority and responsibility. It's very overloaded on responsibility versus the amount of authority we have.

Sally: Authority, what authority?

Clay: You don't have any authority, but you've got a ton of responsibility, so we need a little bit more authority or a little less responsibility. We need to balance this thing. I can't hire and I can't fire.

Gill: That's right. And I don't see it as a...by no means a power thing, because you don't have any power. We have very little.

Dan : The statement up there (pointing to focus group flip chart) 'A better balance between the two,' I don't think a better balance is the right statement, because there is absolutely no balance to it right now at all. I personally think the number one, or key thing, that needs to be done if they want to keep Parish Chairs in each parish performing these responsibilities, is back up and look at what

they're doing and give them some authority to do some things....As it is right now, we're nothing more than the person that when things are going wrong in the parish, gets chewed out because we're not conducting our responsibilities because we don't have the authority to be able to conduct those responsibilities.

In a separate focus group meeting, the PCs discussed that authority vs. responsibility is even more unclear in working with area agents. The following discussion shows general consensus that area agents have no clear accountability with the local parish or Parish Chair.

Sarah: I think the biggest conflict I see with those positions is this move for area agents. I know I lost two area agents in our office.

(Cathy):When you say "biggest conflict" with those two positions, what do you mean, the two positions?

Sarah: Parish Chair and District Agent, is we're both supposed to be supervising, but only one of us has authority.

Connie: Yeah, we're really not supervisors.

Joe: Right. In other words, ____'s saying we don't sign off on their expense accounts, or leaves.

Connie: Yes. And our own District Agent doesn't see... the Area Agents on a daily basis.

Tom: I evaluate _____. He's an Area Agent.

Sarah: Do you really?

Tom: Because, I guess, he's got 60 percent of his time supposedly in my parish, I do his evaluation, but I don't...I don't do his expense account, his leaves, I don't approve any -- really anything that he has to do, but I do his evaluation. In fact, (*chuckling*), when I first took over Parish Chairman, something came up and I said, "If I don't have to sign off, I guess it's okay with me." I said, 'Do I evaluate you?' He said, 'Oh, no.' When it came time for

the evaluation, 'Here are the sheets. Evaluate [Area Agent].'

Sarah: How did you do that? What accountability?

Joe: I don't know how to do it, because...

Tom: I have no idea what he's doing in the other parishes, so I just evaluate him on what I see.

Joe: I don't think the District Agent, with their job responsibilities, have the time to do that efficiently.

Sarah: They want us to give them input, but we can't correct the situation as it occurs with the Area Agent. We can attempt to, but we're right there.

Connie: I guess, I think the biggest problem, because we share agents [area agents], is accountability. It's when they're supposed to be in this parish this day, and that parish that day and then you call both parishes and they're no where to be found. And then the District Agent doesn't require an itinerary, so who knows where that person is? Who's going to do something about it?

Joe: Well, someone should have an itinerary.

Sarah: I agree. [laughing]

Tom: I require an itinerary, you know, the big items. But, I know what ____ is saying, you know like Area Agents, if he decides to take leave in the middle of the day, up and gone. You don't sign off on him, you don't do nothing for him. He tells the secretary, 'I'm going.' I'm going leave, poof, he's finished with that. He don't even have to clear it with the Parish Chairman. It doesn't matter what's going on.

The thrust of the previous discussion was not to accuse the area agents of improper conduct or shirking their jobs. Rather, it was mutual recognition of yet another area in which they felt confused as to the boundaries of their authority and responsibility.

Recommendations

As in all the issues raised, the Parish Chairs offered some solutions for their identified concerns. Parish Chairs felt that organization-wide education throughout the state was needed to clarify the role of Parish Chair, particularly to spell out the level of authority their position carried within the local office. Standardization and clarification of the District Agent's role vs. that of the Parish Chair in all situations of personnel management, but especially in the performance appraisal process, including clear, written policies was viewed as a critical area. Parish Chairs requested better understanding of how their input in the evaluation process was used, including how or if their input was used to determine merit raises. When Parish Chairs request help or backup from higher administration, more timely response is needed. When Parish Chairs should use appropriate measures to manage personnel conflict, higher administration would back up the position of Parish Chair as supervisor of the parish office. Other administrative areas, especially in personnel management, were viewed as too arbitrary between parishes and presented potential mine fields for Parish Chairs. As one Parish Chair stated,

Well, just a consistent policy from parish to parish on that instead of leaving that type of decision up to the PC. Because it can cause... I've seen conflicts within... we've been lucky here so far that it hasn't, but if one parish agent's PC didn't give them any comp time or a short amount, and another gave excessive amount, the agent could get a bad attitude towards their PC. From what I can find, there's no actual policy about what to do and each PC just chooses, which is great if it stayed within the staff only, but it doesn't... so having a consistent policy would make it easier on the PCs not being the "bad guy" or the "good guy"

Many Parish Chairs mentioned that the number one area in which they would like additional training is in conflict management. With increased clarification of roles and better conflict management skills, the Parish Chairs felt that much of the current personnel management problems would be alleviated, even as positions and titles change within the local office. Sarah:

The other thing I would like a little training on is mediation between employees. I really try to stress, and it's been stressed to us in our organization, is to go to the individual that you have the problem with and then come to me as your Parish Chair, and I'll work with you with that individual. If you-all can't solve the problem -- if we can't solve it on that level, then we'll bring in our District Agent. That's really hard in our office because we also have friendships. And I think that's probably in every Extension office, we establish friendships. So that makes it really difficult sometimes.

A final recommendation given by one Parish Chair could apply to issues raised in both Connie's Story and that of Tanner's:

Cathy: What pearls of wisdom would you have for the Parish Chair who will follow you?

Joe: Don't take it unless there has been some training involved and unless there's a clear cut, absolute policy as far as 'dos & don'ts' as far as Parish Chairman. I mean, that would be the bottom line as far as if I had a recommendation to somebody.

Connie's story dealt extensively with the number one concern raised by the Parish Chairs in their joint account, preparatory training (see Table 3.). Her story also characterizes elements of other problematic features of the Parish Chairs' experiences as well, such as time constraints and stereotypes that come with the role of the Parish Chair. And, on a heartening note, her story gave us insight into many of the energizing aspects of the Parish Chair job.

In Tanner's story, we encountered the in-depth exploration of the second most problematic feature of the Parish Chair's joint account, authority vs. responsibility (See Table 3.), although his experience also highlights the areas of concern listed in Table 3 under the Role of Parish Chair and Performance Appraisal. In the following four sections all beginning with the title "Unrealistic Expectations," several of the Parish Chairs' concerns from the Joint Account are explored through the perceptions voiced by the Parish Chair participants. Within these sections highlighting unrealistic expectations that come with the PC job, issues of compensation, performance appraisal, the role of District Agent, characteristics of an effective Parish Chair, and relationships with local authorities are further developed.

Unrealistic Expectations: Compensation

The Parish Chairs were unanimous in their censure of inadequate monetary compensation for the amount of work, hours or responsibility required for the job of Parish Chair. All focus groups at one point or another discussed the issue that the PC compensation was not commensurate with what was being asked of the Parish Chairs. Frequently the Parish Chairs compared the LCES reward system with private business and found the LCES logic flawed. Some felt as if the lack of monetary compensation reflected Extension administration's lack of understanding as well as lack of respect. Several Parish Chairs linked problems with PC selection process and leadership development with the compensation system of the organization. Following are excerpts from several focus group discussions highlighting their perceptions on compensation:

Dan: But actually the compensation is not worth the increased responsibility and time. You do it for whatever reason other than money. You don't do it for money.

Joe: That's for sure. You don't see the head of a bank or the head of anybody else making less than the rest of the employees. It seems like if you're going to run the office, run the staff, you should get what the rest of the staff is making.

Shim: You have to do it for your own, I'll say "selfish" reasons.

Joe: Your selfish satisfaction.

Dan: Which is in a good way. Like the last one (the category, 'What energizes'), 'Ability to influence new directions within the community,' if you have that as an opportunity.'

Tom: I mean, I don't mind it. Money has never been an Extension issue to begin with, but they're making me give up what I was an Extension agent for, to do these things that are—what I see as kind of menial.

Sarah: I think if they are going to increase your responsibility, they should pay you for it.

Shim: The amount you get is not worth the headaches.

Tom: Well, I'm going to say compensation's important. I don't think it's the reason people take the job. I think it's a way to recognize both respect for the position, not for the person, but for the position, because they do it elsewhere through Extension.

Joe: I'll tell you what, if it costs you money, maybe you'll take better care of it next time. I just think top down needs a little bit more information and I think respect...

Tom: It would be nice to have adequate compensation, but we all read the paper and know what's going on, and we know it's not going to happen. Even if it went \$3,000, at least for me, I'll say that's still not adequate compensation, monetarily speaking.

Sarah: Not for the hours.

Shim: That 30 percent PC, a lot of times is weekend work and staying late.

Cathy: Is it true your hours are longer since the PC appointment?

Shim: Oh, yes.

Cathy: Everybody would agree your hours are longer since being appointed to PC?

PCs: [general agreement]

One Parish Chair's comment above mentions that Extension does seem to recognize an increase of responsibility with an increase in pay. Dissatisfaction with the current interpretation of the District Agent and the Parish Chair model might reflect the differential in pay moving from one administrative level to another. As one Parish Chair commented,

Should compensation more realistically reflect responsibilities to Parish Chairs? The way I look at Parish Chair and District Agent, we have as much responsibility and we have as much time commitment on a local level as District Agent has on a regional level. When you become District Agent, it's oh, give or take, pretty much a \$15,000 to \$20,000 increase in salary. PC used to be nothing, now it varies...whether you have up to five people or more on your staff. If you're a good PC it makes no difference. No, let me rephrase that. I think it does because I have more than five. Let me tell you, it's that many more problems.

Unrealistic Expectations: Balancing Administrative Role with Area Specialization

All agents expressed surprise at the unexpected amount of time required to fulfill the duties of Parish Chair. All of them also stated that they were led to believe that only about 20% of their time would be involved in administrative tasks. Agents felt a more accurate estimate of the time spent in Parish Chair duties was 35 to 50%. During a focus group discussion one agent cited the combined challenges of time constraints

and constant organizational downsizing as crucial factors in what was termed
“Unrealistic Expectations.”

Unrealistic expectations. We were led to believe that the job of Parish Chair takes less time than it actually does. And... due to downsizing, and many of us have dual roles, it's getting harder and harder to get everything done.

Another PC recognized that if one actually spent only 20% of the time in PC duties, the parish program would suffer. This agent states,

Gill: When I began I was told that the Parish Chair position would take about 20% of my time...that's not true. In some cases it's over 50%, I would say most of the time it's over 50%.

Cathy: If you gave it 20% of your time, would you be effective?

Gill: No, and that's why I don't feel comfortable not doing what needs to be done, you know, giving it 20%, because...if you've got an office that doesn't have an effective parish chair, you're going to have some serious support problems when it comes to budget time. That's the problem I have, I want to do what needs to be done, but I don't have time to do it...[Laughing].

Several PCs mentioned the time spent in performing the tasks necessary for a Parish Chair which took them away from the job they were hired to do and loved doing. One agent, while discussing with me the important issues for Parish Chairs that needed to be addressed by the organization commented,

You should ask more about how Parish Chairmen balance their discipline work with their administrative work. That really is tough. Some people love administrative work and when they become Parish Chairman, that's almost all they do. But for me, that's been one of the drawbacks, besides having to take care of all the details, which I hate and always have, even when I didn't have all these details

to take care of. I miss working with the people. I miss teaching as much as I used to.

As one PC put it, the PC job and the technical job “didn’t blend.” Rather than complementing each other, the two roles compete. As this agent described it,

So it’s hard to do...the PC job and the 4-H job don’t blend together. They are two completely separate jobs and I have to give up on the 4-H side sometimes in order to do the PC side. About a year and a half ago we lost one of our 4-H agents. In order to hire a new one, I had to come up with \$15,000 from our Police Jury and school board before we would be allowed to hire a new one. That took some getting out there and doing some PR with our School Board and Police Jury members in order to get it, which really took away from the 4-H side. We were already one 4-H agent short and I was having to be busy doing that. . Biggest problem is that it [PC job]has to take priority over the 4-H side... because without keeping these relationships between the community and the staff we wouldn’t have an office to deal with. Because they pay for everything.

One agent sandwiched our interview between three meetings he had on his agenda for the day. The day we spoke he was juggling attendance between the 4-H quarterly meeting, helping host a district family and consumer sciences meeting, and providing support staff for a farm service agency training meeting. His description of a typical day included these words,

Yeah. We are hosting today the quarterly 4-H meetings. And that's where I just came from, that meeting to meet you....Actually I'm going to be going back to (a nearby community within his parish). We also have farm service agency training classes going on over there, so my staff is over. So I was over there first thing this morning. Taught one class, left there to go to the quarterly 4-H meeting, and then here with you now, and then I'll go back to the 4-H training this afternoon. So that's my schedule for the day.

As an extension agent only responsible for his area of specialization, he said he'd normally only be attending one of the meetings that day. He viewed his attendance at the second meeting as an important public relations role of PC as the host parish for the district. He also felt his presence at both meetings was important in order to visibly and physically support his staff's programming. His meeting with me was specifically due to his position as Parish Chair of course, and he had graciously agreed to meet with me at an obviously inconvenient time because I was in his part of the state only that day. In response to my questions about his specialization area, he not only articulated his clients' needs, but discussed why running from meeting to meeting as Parish Chair complicates his ability to effectively meet the needs of those clients.

You really have to plan better. You know, a lot of it just comes up. Right now, taking on extra duties... I have to put down things on a schedule, follow a calendar. And you cannot plan all of your time. You have to -- I can still only plan about 40 percent of my time. Probably 50, 60 percent you have to leave open, and if you don't, you've got so many needs from the clientele that's going to come up, and you make yourself unavailable and that gets to be a problem.

But even those agents committed to planning ahead, following a calendar and leaving unscheduled time get caught by the unexpected demands that are the norm rather than the exception. As this Parish Chair remarked,

I tend to be a very organized person. I have my calendar. But since I've assumed my role of Parish Chair, I can almost throw that out the window, because the minute I walk in the office, there's always something that comes up with the parish government, or there's an employee conflict, or I have a call from a client, and that almost takes priority in my eyes, because if that is not tended to, then our Extension Service has a poor image in the community.

Both of these agents allude to the potential damage to the organizational image when what they view as their first priority, their clientele within their area of specialization, are not given appropriate time or attention.

Unrealistic Expectations: Maintaining Relationships with Local Authorities

Several of the agents spoke about the increased importance of the Parish Chair in building and maintaining relationships within the local community. Many PCs alluded to the understanding that the increased importance in community relations is directly linked to the increased dependency on local funding given the current budget crisis in Louisiana. The Parish Chairs felt a considerable, and at times, heavy responsibility to manage relationships with local authorities that preserved the overall health of the parish Extension programs, increased local financial support for staff and facilities, and improved the ability to influence decision making within the community. Numerous agents mentioned the large amount of time needed to be really good at maintaining these relationships.

Cathy: What percentage of your time would you guess you spend on Parish Chair responsibilities?

Nate: Yeah, that's a good question. I often think about that sometimes. And some weeks I'm more than others, but on an average I would say anywhere from 30 to 40 percent

Cathy: Were you expecting that much?

Nate: No, not really. And that is really if you are interested in doing it and staying up with what's going on. You're really expected to go to more meetings. I find myself being more involved with Police Jury meetings and School Board meetings because you really need to know what's going on more in the parish as Parish Chairman. You need to be aware of more people and they need to know who you are, so a relationship -- You have to

spend time building that relationship. And you can't do that by just ignoring those entities, so you got to kind of involve yourself with them.

One agent remarked that the demands on PCs have increased, especially in the area of fundraising. She remarked that this is a change since she began with Extension.

I agree. The focus of our organization has changed with us having to involve more support from local governing bodies that entails a lot more time of the Parish Chair person. And even work with our state and federal legislation has become more demanding. So I think the role of Parish Chairman has evolved. The ____ years I've been in Extension, I've seen the difference.

These crucial relationship-building activities are uniquely integrated for a PC in that he/she is simultaneously attempting to strengthen Extension's viability in the community, provide the knowledge sharing link between top administration and field staff, and remain actively aware of and support the programming of all staff. All the while the PC is expected to maintain established relationships and programming within his/her area of specialization.

Another agent observed that although the increased community needs within his area of specialization were obvious, he felt unable to expand the programming to address those needs due to Parish Chair responsibilities. As an example he alluded to the new information coming out of the Fall 1999 statewide Louisiana Community Futures Forums sponsored by Extension Service. These forums were designed to gather together community people who might or might not be traditional Extension clientele and through discussion moderated by trained Extension personnel, attempt to discern areas of need within the community. The goal as he understood it was how Extension might be able to address some of the issues raised by those forums, and in the process

promote Extension's visibility and viability among new clientele. However, with Extension downsizing and feeling overextended at current levels of responsibility, the agent said a close friend in the audience approached him after the meetings saying,

'Now, if I were one of those people in that audience, called your office tomorrow and requested training, or program or presentation, who's going to do it? Your staff is so short now and you guys are stretched so thin, you're going to have to say no. And your credibility is going to go right out the window.' And boy, that hit me, just dead in the face.

This PC commented that he didn't mind the involvement in special activities requested by administration, however, everything pulled time and energy away from the technical programming.

Although one agent was simply attempting to help the researcher understand the challenge to effectively use his time to integrate roles, this PC's words conveyed how complex are these interconnected responsibilities among the various entities or stakeholders. He says,

So that involves a lot of meetings with Police Jury, with your School Board members and with other agencies in the parish, as well as your district administrators and your other administrators, where you have to go to training meetings and informational meetings and then bring that information back to share with your staff and so on. And so it's a lot of extra duties, because as you become Parish Chairman, your duties that you had before don't stop. You just take on the extra responsibilities.

One Parish Chair learned the hard way the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of these relationships and his role as PC in successfully integrating these myriad levels of connections. He spoke of his discomfort when feeling ill-prepared at his first Police Jury meeting as PC:

Yes, my very first budget meeting I attended at the Police Jury. I was under the impression I just needed to go in with what we needed for the coming year. I was inundated with questions about, 'What's this, what about this, what's going on here?' I learned that I needed to know exactly what every staff member is doing in their programming, in detail. A lot of times detailed questions came up with these folks that are holding the strings of the money, and, if I don't know the answers, that looks bad on us. So, I'm trying to be more involved in what our staff is doing and knowing what they're doing.

Most of the agents expressed their frustration with the unrealistic expectations not in terms of so much work to do, rather, how these time constraints impact the effectiveness of their programming. During one focus group the researcher mentioned demographic data in which 4 of the 20 PC participants have dual assignments, either they serve in two technical areas or are serving two parishes. These dual assignments are in addition to the job of Parish Chair. This comment launched an energetic rejoinder.

Trish: Specialization or not, we get so much other stuff added on to us with these meetings we facilitate. Now some of us are on these strategic planning committees, going from parish to parish. And this dual parish role, those type of things add up to the point where you can't do your actual job that you're hired for. So there needs to be either, 'Look, we'll let you be 4-H agent 100% of the time, or we'll let you do this other part 100% of your time,' because it affects the job you do on both sides.

James: I really feel the organization needs to assign people Parish Chair responsibilities without any technical responsibilities. I don't think it's fair to Extension. I don't think it's fair to the individual.

Rick: And what's going ultimately to happen when you end up start doing that, you, as PC, have to answer to the Police Jury and the School Board.

Kim: Big time. Well, I was actually given some expectations of what to do. But it's impossible to do what's expected of me. So I don't know how well....

Linda: It's an impossible situation, period.

The concerns are evident that the agents fear the "cooperation" component of Cooperative Extension Service will be lost within the community financially supporting staff salaries and programming if community leaders perceive they are not getting full value for their funding.

Unrealistic Expectations: Performance Evaluations

Both focus groups also struggled with the potential for criticism because of their self-described "inferior work," due to time and energy constraints. They expressed concern that the criticism isn't limited to people outside the organization who might not understand the opposing demands of area of specialization programming commitments and administrative responsibilities. Included in the feelings of vulnerability is the fear that this inability to adequately perform in both the area of specialization and as parish administrator is a negative reflection on their total performance. In response to how they attempt to juggle the demands one focus group confessed that they hadn't really figured all out. They said,

Tom: I just do what has to be done as it comes. I don't know if that's the best way to do it, but that's...

Gill: You do a halfway job for both areas. Neither gets 100 percent.

Pat: I end up days doing technical, and then administrative work done evening hours or on Saturdays.

Sally: I'm usually opposite. I do my stuff after hours and do the PC stuff during the day.

Tom: You almost have to because, people in governing bodies, business people, and then, that's when you see your agents and secretaries.

The above discussion continues as it relates to the number of "man hours" or program hours expected of agents in their technical areas. In theory, top administration recognizes the additional time needed for Parish Chair responsibilities by lowering the expected "man hours" required of Parish Chairs within their area of specialization. Parish Chairs felt that this boiled down to rhetoric vs. actual accountability during the performance evaluation of their program areas. One Parish Chair clearly struggles with the frustration of being pulled away from what he felt he was hired to do originally, enjoys doing, and feels he does well. In wrestling with how he determines his priorities between his area specialization and higher administrative directives, he commented,

My program is still being evaluated as if I were not Parish Chair and well, that takes priority, that's what I was originally hired to do. Well, it should take priority. But when LSU says you have to have a strategic planning program, that's priority. Your specialty—your subject matter suffers as a result. Or you add more hours.

The following focus group discussion centered around the tension felt between these unrealistic expectations and their annual performance evaluation.

Clay: They told us as a PC, we're supposed to have 145 hours about maximum, because of everything else is going to be administrative, etc. But you are going to be held accountable for your work, and that's going to knock your days down that you're going to be able to do programming in your parish, so how are you going to answer that question?

Sally: And that's in our plan. It's just that in submitting [plan of program hours], the PC's show 125, but

no more than 135 hours, mandated, compared to the rest of the agents.

Gill: It's not just restricted to PCs. It's everybody. It's not like they don't know [higher administration] what's happening. So all we can do on our end-- we just have so many people, it's finite, and it's getting smaller... They're all good programs, which ones are you going to eliminate?

Sally: That's what they tell us, that we can eliminate programs, but they don't back us up when we make the decision to do that.

Rick: They're still evaluating us on the content of our program --

James: That's right. Okay, reduce by 25 percent in man hours required of PCs, because we recognize that it's difficult. But they're really not allowing for what we do with the content area to be reduced. How do you reduce your programming and then have your evaluation on that?

Rick: And they really don't reduce it. They just reduce it on paper and then continue to fit it all in.

Sally You got it.

James: But, that's just showing there's no recognition to the fact of what's going on, not even just the PC side of it, but in other areas... they stress out these people... that's the problem I have. There needs to be recognition of the fact of how much time goes into it and what it really does do to your programs that you're conducting. I want to do what needs to be done, but I don't have the time to do it. [laughing]... yeah, put number 1 'recognition.'

In a different focus group discussion, the Parish Chairs discuss the evaluation for their work as parish administrators. Their discussion conveys none of the worry they voiced in regard to appraisal of their area of specialization, rather, that they commented that the PC evaluation doesn't reflect what they do or offer much guidance. Some of the remarks echo the concerns voiced about their evaluation of their parish staff. They

question the current use of the evaluations as any kind of meaningful tool. As with their staff evaluations, they voice regret that administration seems to be losing an opportunity to use the evaluation as a training tool for more effective administration. They commented,

Ellis: Under selection process for PC [looking at the issues for discussion]-- I don't know that there is a selection process for PC's. In my experience it's been the agent who wants it in the parish. And that kind of overlaps to me this other one on compensation for Parish Chair. If the compensation was right, more people would apply probably. And so to me there isn't...

Nate: Sometimes it's just done to keep the things moving along.

Trish: That's right.

Ellis: Like if there's no great incentive.

Nate: There's no great incentive to do it.

Linda: Unless you got some ego to be somebody's -- the boss over somebody, it's no great incentive at all. Most people don't get selected for that reason. I think most of us would accept the position because for the good of the organization to keep things moving along.

Ellis: The exact breakdown I can't give you, but for the work that I do, I'm given an extra 1,500 a year. So, even at 20% of the job, that's not... [laughing] you got to do it because you know it's something that needs to be done, and in order to do your other job it's tough. Without dealing with the personalities on the local level, you're not going to have an office, you're not going to have electricity, you know, all that. I don't know that there's anybody out there kicking in the doors to do it for the money. And the money's not, to me the most important part of it. You know, tell me from time to time, hey I'm doing good, or tell me, 'You're not.' One way or the other, so I know what direction I'm going...

Nate: You know, the performance appraisal doesn't go into detail as to what you should be doing and how well you did it. It's real vague. It should, but it doesn't. If it was a little more detail, we could use that as a job description basically. It's not specific enough about what's going on. I think one of the statements, I don't have one here that I can grab right off, one of the statements is, 'Maintains a good working relationship with school board, and police jury, and local governing agencies.' Well, how do I do that, you know?

Trish: I think the evaluation of Parish Chair could -- I truly believe in merit increases. Or, merit decreases. I mean, if you're the business world, if you produce, you go places. If you don't, you're lucky if you stay. You could actually get demoted. I think the evaluation -- What does Administration want from the Chair? And depending on which parish, may define that differently. If it means that what we want to make that this one particular person at this particular level of government get contacted, and they know exactly what Extension is, how many times did you contact? You know, put some criteria there, like you say, selection processes. Or in the evaluation process, how many times have you contacted the head of the Appropriations Committee, or the House Ways and Means Committee? Well, zero. Well, then why should you get anything?

In summary, many issues raised as problematic about their current job situation could fall within the category of "unrealistic expectations." Parish Chairs tied inadequate compensation with administration's lack of understanding and respect for the position. They viewed selection process for Parish Chairs and leadership development crucially linked to this lack of understanding. Time constraints were linked to performance appraisals in both specialized areas and administrative work as Parish Chairs expressed their concern of maintaining the quality of their technical programming and fulfilling their role as liaisons with the community and state

governments. They all seemed to desire more recognition of the demands of their job and acknowledgement that for most of them, the motivation behind their continued efforts to perform effectively was concern for the continued viability of Extension. Most seemed willing to attempt to fulfill the perceived unrealistic expectations, if perhaps a little more guidance was offered to help them accomplish the “impossible.”

Sharon’s Story: Knowledge Sharing or “To Accept Parish Chair One Must Be Willing to Reinvent Oneself”

Unlike the stories of Connie and Tanner, Sharon’s story portrays a Parish Chair preparation and appointment experience that includes many of the “longed-for” features voiced by Parish Chairs in their wish list of organization-wide PC policies. Throughout her years of LCES service, Sharon’s former PC included her in many aspects of the parish office management and decision making. She felt “groomed” and mentored in her preparation and enjoyed the support and active nurture of her District Agent in the early days. During her first year, the former Parish Chair continued to be a much needed and helpful resource to her. In her appreciation and understanding of the importance of what she’d experienced transitioning from agent to Parish Chair, she felt her leadership style had been based on her access to knowledge as well as innovatively incorporating knowledge sharing ideas of her own.

Sharon is a Family and Consumer Sciences Agent who has worked for Extension for almost 20 years. As has been mentioned by other Parish Chairs, she never actively sought the PC appointment and was content with the shared leadership she enjoyed in the office.

My previous Parish Chair had been “coaching” me for years, just in the workings of the Extension Service, everything from reporting...All the monthly, quarterly reports and the plan of work that I have been working on

all through the years, he reviewed everything that I did and offered his comments on them. I mean, even letters and fax sheets and calendars. All of that. Also, we have monthly staff conference, so I had his model to follow. I think anybody who is career oriented ought to be thinking that this could happen to you. I wasn't really interested in becoming Parish Chairman, but when the opportunity came up and the District Agent came to me and asked me to accept the position, I had to do some soul searching, so to speak.

Those Parish Chairs who had close working relationships with their former Parish Chairs as they came into the appointment had a distinct advantage over those who did not. Rather than couch their responses in remarks such as being "blind sided," the opportunity to work closely with former PCs gave the newly appointed Parish Chairs a feeling of familiarity with what the job entailed. Although rarely expressing that they actively sought Parish Chair training, some agents remained open to the opportunities for professional development. As a colleague of Sharon's said,

I watched my boss before she retired. She and I were really close and we worked together a lot. Because she was Home Economist and I was 4-H Home Economist, we did a lot of programs together. So I followed her around a lot and I saw the things she did. And she talked to me a lot about them....it wasn't conscious on either one of our parts, but the things she was going through [as Parish Chair], she just naturally talked to me about. Having to meet the Director, worrying about the budget. And she often asked me my opinion on things. So, I know what she was faced with...whereas some of the other people in the office really didn't care to hear about it.

Sharon's former PC consciously coached her while Sharon's colleague was fortunate enough to have served the support and confidant role of her PC. Both examples demonstrate knowledge being shared. For Sharon, the strategic development of her administrative skills by her former Parish Chair enabled her to have a good idea

of the paperwork involved as well as a lot of public relations communications. For her colleague, shared program planning, shadowing, and discussions with the former Parish Chair helped to demystify of the role of Parish Chair. However, no organizational imperatives encouraged this kind of mentoring within the office. As one Parish Chair commented,

But do I think we need more training, more opportunities? Probably so, because it is -- You take on a big job when you take on Parish Chairmanship, and many times when you first start, if you're not the type of person who will really kind of observe things and you have some idea already, it's overwhelming. And it's different, I'm sure, for different people. Personally I had already anticipated what this job was about. I've had some supervisory training [outside of Extension]...that experience was also helpful to me.

Open to the Possible

This same Parish Chair did think the organization was responding to the need for more systematic training of all the Parish Chairs. He stated,

I think the training opportunities that they are attempting now to do more so than ever. At one time I don't think that that was offered, but I think our organization has become aware that there is indeed a need, that now Human Resource Management has scheduled a lot more training opportunities. And I think it's up to Parish Chairmen to open themselves up, avail themselves of those opportunities. So that's--I think that's one of the more important issues, because if you just attempt to do you job based upon what you already know, you don't -- you still may not be doing it the best way that you could do it. And so I think that's one of the more important issues.

Throughout their service in the LCES, Sharon and her colleagues' comments demonstrated their openness to the possibility of upward movement within the organization. They viewed it as a natural part of their responsibility as good agents.

Echoing some of the statements that Connie made as to what energized her the most about the Parish Chair job, in the case of Sharon and her colleagues, remaining open to new learning is a theme that crossed over pre- and post-PC appointment lines. In contrast to some Parish Chairs who had remained somewhat isolated within their respective disciplines, from the time they were originally hired by LCES, these Parish Chairs shared an assumption that new learning was part of the job. Sharon stresses her belief in the importance that on-going learning is crucial to an effective Parish Chair. She commented,

And if you accept the position to be a Parish Chairman, you got to be willing to reinvent yourself if you haven't been interested in those things. So you have to be able to open yourself up and say that -- If you're not going to do it, you really ought to not stay in the position. You might have accepted it, but ought not stay in it.

Good Use of the Resources Available

After her appointment, Sharon continued to remain open to resources available to her to observe ways that other people approached their administrative tasks. She elaborated about the important role her Parish Chair colleagues play in her network system. She said,

You have your administrative leaves, you kind of observe and had an opportunity to observe what other Parish Chairmen have done before you. Other experience will include people that you know who are Parish Chairmen, people who maybe worked in the ranks in other parishes and they are now Parish Chairmen, and they may have been there a lot longer than you, so we can communicate with each other. If there is questions, now it is easier than ever with the computer system, and we are all set up so that we can send an e-mail back and forth. We can share experiences and borrow from each other's experiences. I've done that.. And so observation of other people, communication with other Parish Chairmen, having the District Agents, you know, at your disposal to call on

them. And we have regular Parish Chairman meetings. That helps a lot because it brings you up to speed on things you need to know.

Sharon mentions several resources she has used to help her effectively do her job. Other Parish Chairs and the communication with them offered by e-mail, the quarterly district PC meetings and the District Agent all serve as resources that she has used. Sharon spoke of her early conversations with the District Agent about the possible appointment,

Our district agent went over responsibilities. I asked him what was it going to entail for me to be it, because he really wanted me to do it. And I told him the reasons why I didn't need to -- and I proceeded to tell him the reasons why I didn't think I needed to do it [laughs]. And then he explained the reasons why he thought I needed to do it. I'm pretty familiar with what needs to be done. I was familiar before.

Once appointed Parish Chair, the District Agent had much to do with how confident Sharon felt in her PC role. Sharon spent much time with her District Agent going over what was needed and expected of her as Parish Chair. Her District Agent used the evaluation instrument to go over the job with her, offering suggestions as to how some parishes handled certain issues as well. The first time that she was faced with staff evaluations, the District Agent sat in with her and offered guidance. Common to almost all the Parish Chairs, when a personnel problem emerged that she wasn't comfortable handling, she called her District Agent first.

Yeah, right. Your informal way is to network with your co-workers in different parishes. Parish Chairmen who have some experience or/and your District Agent. He's a resource. Anything really that you don't know, he's your first contact. You might contact another Parish Chairman in another parish, but your District Agent is your first contact. It's his responsibility. And usually they have an administrative secretary at the district agent's, the district office. They are very resourceful.

Sharon identified what she perceived as an informal vs. formal resource network for Parish Chairs. First she spoke of the informal networking between Parish Chairs used to some degree or another by all the Parish Chairs, as well as the knowledge available through an experienced administrative secretary. However, Sharon clearly sees the formal network as the next up in the chain of command, her District Agent. In times of need, she has no qualms with turning first to her District Agent, firmly believing that part of the District Agent's job is enabling her to do her job better, "It's his responsibility." Sharon:

The District Agent's job, that's part of his job, too. Not only do they have administrative staff in the LSU system at Efferson Hall and at the Ag Center, but the District Agent job also gets that information and makes sure the agents are aware of when the certain day reports are due. Our job as Parish Chairman is to help the agents do their job better and more efficiently. The district agent's is to do the same thing for us.

Sharon mentioned other resources provided by the organization that she has found helpful to her since she began the appointment as Parish Chair. She feels as if she has had opportunity for professional development through workshops and conferencing offered by LCES Department of Human Resource Development. None of the frustration voiced by many of the Parish Chairs seems to be felt by Sharon as she talked about her training opportunities with the organization. When asked about organizational resources that she valued she answered,

The opportunity for professional development. The workshops that they encourage us to go to, encouraging us to get technical background, the time to do it. The time to network with other agents and conferencing...I could call up anybody in Baton Rouge and can say, 'I really need to work this out.' And they allow us to do this. That's what I value most as far as support. The opportunity and the encouragement to join professional organizations, and they allow us time to do that. And they even have now allowed expenses to go to some of

these meetings. Before they would give you the time, now they are even giving you expense mileage to go to it.

Although from her remarks it remains unclear whether any of Sharon's professional development was within the context of management skills needed for the Parish Chair tasks, she seemed to convey that she could call the state office for support in any area. In terms of specific management development, she did mention two resources beneficial to her, LCES specialists and the Internet. Sharon said,

I probably didn't even tell you that there is one other resource that I should mention that I use quite a bit: the Internet. The Internet is a powerful source for supervisors or managers, or anybody who wants to know about leadership...If I want to address a particular problem or need, LSU provides some resources. I feel that I can call on specialists. But I use the Internet quite a bit.

The fact that the previous Parish Chair had been coaching Sharon pointed toward a smooth transition from colleague to supervisor. The support given to her by her previous Parish Chair did not end with her appointment, but continued during the early months of transition. Sharon confesses being stumped by some budget issues she had never had to deal with. She called on her former PC for guidance. Sharon:

Oh, yeah. _____'s a tremendous resource. He's a good sounding board. "What am I supposed to do about this?" Or, "What have you done in the past? What has been the past?" You know, I would say, '_____, what do you think about this? 'How has this been done?', or 'What do you think about doing it this way?' And he still has a tremendous stroke with the governing body and the community and we respect that, so we hope to keep him involved after he retires.

In any given situation, Sharon made use of the experience of the former PC as she weighed it with her personal perception or understanding. Although Sharon felt that she could call on the former PC for guidance and information as to what had been done in the

past, she also stated that she felt no pressure to do things exactly as he had or as had always been done within that parish. Sharon was fortunate to have a supportive Parish Chair within the office; one other Parish Chair also found support from the former Parish Chair who had recently retired. Glenda expressed gratitude for the “open door” policy as she said,

No. no, it's my, I'm the facility supervisor. I mean if we run out of money, you know, and it comes down to flipping money from one budget to the other, uh, I do that. But, ____ sat down and went through that and I have called her numerous times... Yes, yes. And when she left, she left a wide open invitation to me to call upon her and I have. I've called upon her even when I just really wanted to gripe and grumble, and share my “joy” with her [laugh]. So she's been a support, you know, for me, as well as advising me. She did, I don't know how long she was PC...long time. She did it so long a lot of it was routine and she...She's had to dig back to help me because she just took it for granted. Its just she did it for so long that it just happens.

That support and guidance, whether from the former Parish Chair still in the office or from the one who has moved on to another parish or from one who has retired, gave these newly appointed Parish Chairs some grounding and much needed confirmation by their guidance. Some of the Parish Chairs suffered from what Carol encountered, a former Parish Chair who had done the job so long that much had become automatic, making it difficult to nail down what needed to be done, when, and how. Glenda approached her experienced secretary for much of the needed information. She said,

And, a lot of the things she turned over to ____, the secretary who's been here so long, to do, and I've had to come back and say, “O.K. ____, before you do this and send it in, show me what you did so I understand what in the world is going on.” And it sure wasn't because I

wanted to check up on her, that's not...but she has made an effort to say, "O.K. this is what I do and why I do it.

Sharon and Glenda both have attempted to understand the workings of the office, not only how things are done, but why things have been done the way in which they've been done in the past. Both felt that this broader understanding enabled them to make the best decisions for current situations that suited their style of leadership.

Shared Decision-making

Sharon's whole demeanor suggested that not only did she feel that she had been well prepared for what to expect, but also she felt that when she was not on sure ground, she had various avenues from which to gain the knowledge she lacked. Her experience of the previous Parish Chair "coaching," the smooth transition to Parish Chair, and her feelings that she had ample resources for things she felt were not her strength, spoke of little tension between staff in the office or a conflict-ridden appointment, a decided advantage to a newly appointed Parish Chair. This seemingly positive environment might explain Sharon's energy for innovative management practices. As discussed earlier with the "generational influence" of Parish Chairs, perhaps the respect she was shown by her previous Parish Chair, her District Agent and her colleagues has influenced how she runs the parish office. Her leadership style reflects tremendous respect for all the other agents in the office; she includes the entire staff in many parish office decisions. Sharon:

We have, I think, good staff conferences. And I'm very open about what I feel my responsibility is, what my idea on issues are, how I handle situations with our governing body so that all the staff's aware of it. I ask for their input if they think that is the right thing for us to do for our organization. I try to involve the staff in as much decision making as I can, down to the budget, down to where we're having a problem in the office with people not being to work on time, or maintaining office hours. How

do we want to handle this? I try to make it everybody's problem and everybody's solution.

Innovative involvement of the entire parish staff seemed a hallmark of Sharon's management style. Sharon spoke of the time when the parish had a vacancy in the office. She asked the staff to come together and write the job description for the new staff position.

When we interviewed the young man for the job for the Ag position, we invited anybody in the office that wanted to sit in on the interview...Because when you hire somebody like what we're doing, it's like adopting somebody. So now we're making sure everybody has an opportunity to sit in on the interview. And then there's a question and answer section after the formal questions are asked. Then there's a round table. The only catch to it is we've got to make sure that if you ask Cathy a question about her training in child development, and if that's what the job is about, then when Mary comes in, you've got to ask Mary the same question.

Sharon involved the staff in an activity that has become the primary responsibility of the Parish Chair. She worked the staff through a process of thinking about the job responsibility of someone with whom they would be working, thus setting a foundation for all the staff's increased understanding and ownership of a new colleague's responsibilities, as well as providing training in the hiring process. These were dramatic strategies to demystify of the job of Parish Chair, opening the door for all the staff to better understand the kind of administrative responsibility that comes with the Parish Chair assignment.

Sharon believed that one of the most important activities of her PC responsibility was to facilitate effective monthly staff meetings. Sharon used the staff conference as the opportunity for shared information between higher administration and field staff, between her and the entire parish staff, and between all the staff regardless of technical area of specialization. She felt that it was an opportunity for the staff to share their successes with

one another, and a moment to reflect together on those less than successful ventures. When asked to be more specific, she explained this way,

Just the order of business. We'll take and discuss Ag Center information. I try to make sure that everyone is informed...or a certain thing that the Ag Center has e-mailed us...that we discuss and we know about it. Whatever it is. Then I'll take each of the agents one by one, in terms of communications or information, and we'll discuss that. 'Are you aware of this?' or 'What are we doing about this?' And then we'll go through each one and I try to get them to tell me what programs they're working on. Well, actually, I go first. I tell them what I'm working on. I'll actually say things like, 'That was a flop a week ago Tuesday, here's what I would do differently.' I encourage that, the successes as well as the failures. It's to try and maintain a communication in the office that allows each of us to know where we're at, who's working on what, who needs help. And basically to try and reinforce teamwork. We go through our calendars of the past month and upcoming month's events. Go into detail, who attended, exactly what impact we thought it made, if any. Whether it was a positive experience or negative experience. The staff conference is very important.

The quote shows the variety of ways that Sharon uses the staff conference as the focus of knowledge sharing, on-going support, learning, and team building in the parish office. During the meetings, when they cover directives coming down from higher administration, she used the word "discuss" in relation to the directives, implying a more interactive involvement with administration's expectations rather than simple notification. Each agent in the office has an opportunity to talk about his or her program on a multitude of levels, from simple date setting and requests for help, to an exchange of ideas concerning expectations, successes and disappointments.

The Parish Chair Link Between Higher Administration and Parish Staff

Sharon also spoke of using the staff conference for mini training moments linking the administrative information given in workshops to the field faculty. If she attended a training, she would start a staff meeting with information from the particular session that she attended. She enthusiastically shared,

The formal training has been good, Ann Coulon's office has been doing quite a bit of that. They're doing a much better job of making administrators aware of what their responsibilities are. Tomorrow is interviewing. [I] try to cover some particular topic at each staff meeting. At this one I covered violence in the work place...and next month we'll cover compliance, complaint procedures, and we'll cover sexual harassment. I think it's great. It's something we've never had before. The previous Parish Chairmen didn't do that. Yeah, I think it's new.

Sharon views as important her role as the link between higher administration and field staff, not just in translating directives, but also sharing what she is learning about the organization. Reminiscent of the Parish Chair's quote in "Motivating Factors" to become a Parish Chair, "My job is still teaching, but it's rolled over now to teaching the agents the concept of what extension work is all about." Sharon was providing leadership development for the organization through her knowledge sharing. Again, a quote from the previous motivating factors section,

To me, my biggest role as Parish Chair is because I go to these Parish Chair meetings or administrative meetings, is to come back to my staff and tell them, "This is what our organization is doing." Because previously I didn't feel like I had that knowledge. It wasn't coming back to me. And I think that's so important, because if field people do not understand the goals or the mission of our administration in this organization, how can they work towards it?

Sharon wanted to share a vision with the entire staff that she felt she was being given by the higher administration. She commented that this was not automatically done, that it had not always been done for her, but that she was committed to attempting while on her “watch” as Parish Chair. She said,

I think our administration is very open to all their employees. The problem is, is it getting back to our employees? That’s one of my goals as Parish Chair, I really try to do that.

Sharon might not have been so motivated to bring back information if she had felt that she was excluded from the organizational vision. She spoke with feeling about a really good session at an administrative training session at Camp Grant Walker.

Feeling part of the administrative team seemed to be important as she said,

The Chancellor had an all-staff, all administrators meeting at Camp Grant Walker. Bring your toothbrush and spend the night. And that’s when we got a big dose of administrative work, how to handle this, that, and the other. But he talked about the new millennium, the things that we were going to try to do. And it was really good. It was one of the best sessions that I’ve been to. He brought all of the research supervisors, he brought all of the Department of Agriculture on LSU’s campus, all of the heads.

Sharon seemed appreciative of the “big dose” of concrete administrative work, however, her enthusiasm stemmed from her participation in the gathering of those who administer the organization. The message shared with them, what they were going to do in the new millennium, invited her to share in the vision of the organization that she was being asked to administer. She left the meeting feeling as if she had something insightful about the organization for which they worked to bring back to the staff. Gaining new understanding and knowledge about her organization energized her.

Preparing the Next Generation of Parish Chairs

Although Sharon's former Parish Chair had delegated much responsibility to her during his tenure, there were things that came up about the job that she did not expect or know how to handle. Because of what she knew as well as what she did not know, Sharon spoke of making sure that the "next-in-line" was coached for the position before he or she actually faced the Parish Chair assignment. She said of an agent with whom she currently works,

Oh, I would prepare her, invite her every place I go. Take her to meetings that are important. Make sure she knows the players. And she does, she's from here. But she's got the personality. She's got the care. She's got the compassion. She's got it all.

Sharon expresses strong feelings about some of the important characteristics that would make another agent in the office a good Parish Chair: personality, care, and compassion. Those things that can be taught or shown, Sharon stated that she would make sure she would provide. Sharon is demonstrating intentional leadership development within her own office. First, she is aware of the need to seek those who she thinks might have the important characteristics to do a good job when she is replaced. Secondly, she is already actively planning how she will pass on the necessary knowledge to enable effective parish administration.

Other Parish Chairs have responded to the challenges they have faced by vowing to make sure that the one that follows would be better prepared. Dennis:

Over the years, it was traditional that the Ag Agent who would become the next Parish Chairman would require, unofficially, the Ag/4-H Agent to shadow him in an effort to, 'Go to these meetings with me. I need you to be here so you can see what's going on.' That was never done for me. It was never even encouraged. I don't know for what reason, but it never happened...I'm not going to make

that mistake with the guys in the office, especially the new guy we just hired. I asked him to work together. I'm going to be there when I can...I'm going to ask them to cover each other's back at events and activities so that it's a team building experience, for one thing...And then when I walk out the door, I want to feel like that the guy there who stands a good chance of replacing me will have had the kind of experience he needs to step up to the table.

Dennis lamented that he had not been prepared, but his response is not to make the same mistake. Somewhat in contrast to Sharon's strategy, he is not singling out a particular agent within the office, he seemed more inclined to incorporate leadership preparation among the entire staff, at least among those with whom his programming most often interacts. Dennis couched some of his coaching in terms of team building, a Parish Chair responsibility valued by the Parish Chairs throughout the "Results" narrative. He talked of hands-on experience that would enable the next Parish Chair to be prepared for the leadership skills required. The words of Sharon and Dennis show they feel they have a stake in shaping the next generation of Parish Chair. Sharon is continuing a leadership development practice she was fortunate enough to experience herself. Dennis is determined that he will correct a mistake that he felt he had to overcome. Both value leaving the parish Extension office in good hands.

Recommendations

Sharon's story is one of "best practices" in knowledge sharing found in pockets throughout the state. Her words spoke of personal leadership preparation throughout her career by remaining open and aware of the needs of the organization in the parish where she worked. Her experience showed intentional leadership development prior to her Parish Chair appointment by both her former Parish Chair and her District Agent.

She also enjoyed the much needed support of both during the initial period of her appointment.

Sharon is using various ways to demystify the role of Parish Chair to her staff. She is including all her staff in decision making that involves both the parish Extension office and their outreach into the community. She is attempting to provide leadership training in innovative ways through the monthly staff conferences and delegation of responsibility. Sharon is interpreting directives from higher administration and helping the entire staff understand their role within the larger Extension organization. The staff conferences are used to share information between the entire staff, but also to encourage reflection by all the staff as to what they are learning from their work. She is intentionally preparing someone to follow in her footsteps who she feels would take the parish program forward and work well with staff.

Risking Moving Out of the Comfort Zone: Reflection in Action

Sharon's story has demonstrated ways how "pockets of knowledge" are intentionally being created and shared within Extension. At times, doing things differently can involve risk. When the Parish Chairs were asked if they felt that they could risk making mistakes within Extension, all PCs felt as if the organization allowed for exploration, innovation and risk taking that could lead to a mistake. However, they did feel that they would need to provide evidence of new knowledge gained by their mistakes to enjoy the continued blessing of higher administration. As one Parish Chair stated,

Without risk taking you are not growing in your program. We are told by our administration, other than me here, administration outside, that if you don't make a mistake from time to time, you're not really going anywhere in your job. If you don't leave that comfort zone and try

something different, you're never going to promote anything that would move from what you're doing.

Clayton claimed that the administrative rhetoric encourages all personnel to leave the comfort zone for professional development. Reflecting both his belief in his Parish Chair role as the interpreter of higher administration to field personnel and perhaps, his concern that he could back up his interpretation, he hesitated saying,

I don't know that they [field staff] trust them, us. 'Here they say something they haven't shown that they're not truthful with what they say, but they still kinda, Well _____'s telling us that this is what they said, but, do they mean it?' I wonder sometimes if that needs translating. I would think that if you would ask any of them, that they would tell you that 'Yes, I'm supported by administration' if they got out on that limb and fell off. But I don't know if they would truly mean what they are telling you, because (laughing) they don't know who you are.

Clayton knows the words have been said by higher administration. He knows he's repeated those words to his staff but his words reflected his concern that there might exist a gap between the rhetoric and belief. However, all the Parish Chairs spoke of feeling as if they had tried new things, occasionally made mistakes, and still had their jobs. Several Parish Chairs alluded to the need to recognize and respond appropriately to one's mistakes to benefit from administration's support. Reflection on their actions seemed to be at the heart of their ability to survive mistakes. Linda:

I don't know if you ever really figure it out, because every day is a new position, that you have a tendency to -- I think you keep your mouth closed a little bit more. You don't tend to react as fast....speaking before you think. You tend to look at both sides of it and then formulate an opinion. You make a lot of mistakes, but you learn from the mistakes. And I know in my instance, before I'd say, "Oh, that's just the way it is." And now I have a tendency

to want to look at everything, and then come up with the conclusion, because usually there's always going to be two sides to everything.

Linda recognized that she had made mistakes in the past by jumping to conclusions and speaking before thinking. She felt that what she had learned from those mistakes not only changed how she might respond in a similar situation, but also how she thinks through things differently. She acknowledged that speaking before thinking had led her to make some mistakes in personnel management, but that she had learned from them and rectified those mistakes. She spoke about how both the lessons and the mistakes had been handled in her annual performance evaluation. Linda said,

It's how you handle the mistake you made. If you make a mistake and you're honest and up front with it and you tell them [higher administration], 'Look, I tried this and it didn't work and I'm sorry it didn't work. I didn't realize this would happen and that would happen.' And they ask you, 'How do you plan to rectify that?' You learn your lesson and you move on with it. I think that's fine. But if you haven't gone back and explained, or – I don't want to say apologize, but really that. Say, 'Look, this just didn't work out. It wasn't a good deal. After my evaluation I realize that this was not a smart move. It's one I won't do again.' And then you live up to that by being a little bit more careful the next time. I think it's okay. But it all has to do with how you handle that mistake and how you go back and try to--You have to show them what you learned, what was not right with it, and why it didn't work out, and what you plan on doing futuristically.

The evaluation experience that Linda shared demonstrated an Extension policy to request that Parish Chairs reflect on their work and learn from their failures as well as their successes. Her words indicate her understanding that if she articulates her mistake, acknowledges it, and then demonstrates a willingness to change or improve on what was in error, she will have the full support of the organization.

Through the stories and analysis sections of the Results chapter, the findings have identified ways in which the Parish Chairs have attempted to define their role to themselves and to those with whom they work. The Results chapter has placed the findings of the study in narrative and story form in an attempt to allow the lived experiences of the participant/co-researcher Parish Chairs to be portrayed in their own words. The following table is a summary of the findings.

Table 3
Joint Account: Focus Group Results for All Focus Group Sessions

Issue of Concern	No. of Votes	Descriptive Accounts and Recommendations
Preparatory Training	27	<p>Perceived Current Situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PC selection process haphazard, based on inappropriate criteria • Intentional leadership development lacking • Job description inadequate • PCs not sufficiently prepared for job • PC role not clearly understood by LCES staff • Some Parish Chairs experienced in supervisory tasks due to work outside Extension Service, other PCs not. • No timely LCES training for specific PC responsibilities <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LCES provides official orientation or retreat before Parish Chair appointment • Retreat allows sharing between new PCs and experienced PCs • Content of orientation specific to PC needs such as personnel management, hiring procedure, evaluation, fund raising, etc. • Apprenticeship opportunities • Mentor program for PCs • Quarterly District PC meetings used partly for training • Parish Chair manual including some standardized guidelines, annual calendar

Table continued

Authority vs. Responsibility	24	<p>Perceived Current Situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parameters of PC authority unclear Responsibilities high with little authority In Supervisor role cannot hire or fire people Increased responsibility of office personnel performance appraisal not commensurate with authority <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> LCES clarifies PC parameters of authority and responsibility through job description and organization-wide education Top administration supports appropriate use of authority of Parish Chairs
Compensation	20	<p>Perceived Current Situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not adequate given the increase in responsibility and time demands Assumptions that compensation would be more Although similar demands, huge disparity exists between compensation increase from agent to PC vs. a promotion to District Agent <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pattern compensation more like private business, higher responsibility equates with higher compensation Not essential all compensation be monetary, recognition is important
Unrealistic Expectations	17	<p>Perceived Current Situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Given inadequate time for required tasks Inability to be effective in job performance in dual roles of PC and extension educator Quality of technical programming suffers Organizational downsizing has increased demands on Parish Chairs PCs led to believe tasks would take less time than they actually do 4-H and FCS jobs more difficult to balance with Parish Chair job Lack of acknowledgement from top administration that conflicts in effective performance of dual jobs exist Family-friendly rhetoric in LCES, difficult to balance with increased responsibilities <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore new models of parish administration including a 100% position that is administrative, PR, fundraising, etc. Recognize, allow for, and evaluate Parish Chair as 30-50% administrative position LCES needs to deal with family issues resulting from shift in appointments to younger PCs, more women PCs, more 4-H and FCS agents

Table continued

Role of Parish Chair	15	<p>Current Situation Energizers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote LCES to community, promote parish staff to organization • Positive influence in community, ability to provide a vision for development • Learn new things, gain management skills • Provide leadership to staff, leadership model based on respect • Enable other agents to succeed • Provide link between top administration and field staff • Demystify the role of PC to rest of staff through knowledge sharing and involvement of staff in decision making • Use of staff meetings in team building, training, and knowledge sharing <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parish Chairs recognize energizing aspects of the job, intentionally incorporate them into their work <p>Current Situation Problems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unrealistic expectations (see previous category) • Unclear parameters of authority • Personnel management, conflict • Establishing credibility difficult if appointment takes place with conflict • Women and minorities, 4-H & FCS agents face challenges not faced by white, male, county agent • Time constraints to maintain high visibility to community, local authorities, staff and clientele <p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LCES has a more adequately defined job description for the Parish Chair • LCES educates throughout state and organization wide the role of the Parish Chair • Acknowledgement by LCES of the demands of the PC job through adequate compensation and more reasonable expectations • LCES continues to explore different models of parish administration
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Table continued

Performance Appraisal	11	<p>Perceived Current Situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear purpose, who reads them? • Lack of standardization within state • Viewed mainly as punitive, not reward • Parish Chair role unclear in staff evaluations, input not heeded • Parish Chairs not adequately trained before having to perform evaluations • Area agents not accountable to parishes • Role of District Agent and Parish Chair unclear in appraisals • Additional time required for Parish Chairs to responsibly familiarize themselves with staff programming for evaluations • Creates tension as Parish Chair moves from colleague to evaluator <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be better used for discussion and as a professional development tool • Clarify evaluation role of DA and PC • Standardize evaluation procedure district by district • LCES improves understanding as to how performance appraisals are being used • LCES improves understanding as to how Parish Chair input is perceived • LCES improves understanding as to how performance appraisals are used for merit raises
Role of District Agent	10	<p>Perceived Current Situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Agent's main job is to enable PCs to be more effective in their jobs ♦ Different District Agents offered differing degrees of PC preparation and guidance ♦ DA first resource for most Parish Chairs when help needed, especially with staff conflict ♦ Lack of effective use of district quarterly meetings by some districts <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed alternative models for DA • Clearer job description between DA and PC • Quarterly PC meetings used for knowledge sharing, training and problem resolution

Table continued

Resources (Where to go when you don't know)	7	<p>Perceived Current Situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Agent • Experienced Secretary • Informal network of other PCs, friends • Previous PC, both in office and retired • Human Relations Department, workshops, continuing education events • Quarterly PC meeting • District Administrative Secretary • Computers, e-mail and internet access <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PC appointments should take into account resources available to new PC (i.e., is District Agent new to position, any experienced secretaries in the office? Previous PC available, friendly, hostile?) • Provide a Parish Chair calendar of schedules and annual deadlines, etc. • Mentor program • Potential for scheduled information sharing between parishes, districts
Knowledge Sharing	5	<p>Perceived Current Situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some PCs intentionally practice involvement of staff by sharing decision making, many responsibilities, community PR, others do not • PCs attempt to take great care with providing a conduit of communication between top administration and field staff • Some PCs felt "groomed" for PC position, others surprised by what the job entailed • Some PCs perceive all staff have potential for next PC and prepare them appropriately • Current informal networking effective for some, others feel they have no network <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use "best practices" of districts, parishes, and individuals to model good knowledge sharing techniques throughout LCES

Table continued

Characteristics of an Effective Parish Chair	4	<p>Perceived Characteristics of Effective Parish Chairs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good people skills; communication, listening, observation, team-building • Well-developed administrative skills • Professional attitude with colleagues, staff • Have conflict management skills • Ability to provide positive role model • Efficient time manager • Quick thinker, problem solver • Visionary for organization, community • Provides leadership development for staff • Includes parish staff in decision making <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LCES appoints Parish Chairs for the characteristics that would provide the best leadership in the office and community
Relationship with Local Authorities	1	<p>Perceived Current Situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agents perceive responsibility of local fundraising has increased • Difficulty explaining current state funding practices to local authorities • Time and energy constraints hamper public relations role with local authorities • Lack of guidance for dealing with damaged community relations • Many agents reported excellent community relations and that they receive anything asked • Concern that continued "spreading too thin" of agents would damage "cooperative" element of Cooperative Extension Service <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need training, techniques and guidance for competent CES advocacy role • LCES provide opportunity to know how other parishes and districts in the state create and sustain good community relationships

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Nature of the Study

In this qualitative study using participatory action research methodology we sought to increase understanding and insight into the experiences of newly appointed Parish Chairs of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service as they learned their job. Throughout the initial interviews and later focus groups, participants as co-researchers collaborated to produce meaningful descriptions and interpretations of their own learning experiences in terms that made sense to them. These descriptions allowed us to explore the themes and significant features of the Parish Chairs' experiences as newly appointed mid-level managers within the LCES.

Action research is uniquely situated within the rubric of qualitative research in that the results of the research have practical outcomes leading to improved practice in immediate contexts. Therefore, the results of this research should go beyond an evocative account of experience. Action research's moral imperative is that not only are the participants provided with new ways of describing and interpreting events, but are also provided the means to enable therapeutic transformations of problematic features of their lives (Roman & Apple, 1990; Soltis, 1990; Stringer, 1999). The documented current perceptions of their experiences as well as recommendations that stemmed from the collaborative interpretation of those experiences, are accessible for sharing with LCES professionals and administrators. Hopefully, this information will be used in important ways to make needed changes. The research methodology chosen

capitalized on a central qualitative research tenet: we learn from people rather than study them.

Context of the Study

The Cooperative Extension Service provides the educational link between the knowledge base of land-grant institutions and the general public. The mission of the Cooperative Extension Service is “to help people improve their lives and communities through an educational process that uses scientific knowledge focused on issues critical to the economic, agricultural, societal, health/safety, and environmental progress of all Americans” (Cooperative Extension Service, 1996).

In Louisiana, the Cooperative Extension Service provides service to its clientele in three major areas: Agriculture, Family and Consumer Sciences, and 4-H Youth Development. The LCES consists of Specialists, County Agents (adult, agricultural), Extension Agents (adult, Family and Consumer Sciences), 4-H Youth Agents, area agents, and administrators. Support for personnel and programming comes from special groups such as the human resources department, communications department, computer services, and material and supplies department. There is an extension office in every parish (county) and each office has an administrative, mid-level management position of Parish Chair (Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, 1993).

The individual appointed to the position of Parish Chair is responsible for providing leadership and administrative support for the overall planning, development, implementation, reporting, and evaluation of the parish extension program, for administration and management of the parish Extension office, and for conducting need-based educational programs.

Parish Chairs occupy a pivotal position in the complex functioning of an organization that simultaneously operates vertically and horizontally, working as a traditional-hierarchical organization as well as giving field personnel much freedom in decision making and personal judgment. In this position as parish administrator where top-down directives meet community-based needs, Parish Chairs require both technical and administrative competence. The job of Parish Chair entails being the link between “local governing bodies, parish and community leaders, and representatives of state and U.S. government agencies” (Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, 1992a) in an organization that describes itself as a “future -oriented, self-renewing, national educational network providing excellence in programs that focus on contemporary issues and needs of people” (Cooperative Extension Service, 1996, p. 2).

This study approached the LCES as a “learning organization.” The learning organization is one that learns continuously and transforms itself, operating not only as a production organization, but a knowledge-producing organization as well (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Or as Senge (1990) writes, “A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it” (p. 13).

Parish Chairs can provide a critical link in ensuring LCES lives up to the learning organization component of its description that LCES is a “self-renewing” organization. Parish Chairs need to be what Thomas Patterson (1991) describes as the extension educator of the future, i.e., to be effective in leading the organization in change, he or she must be a continuous, autonomous learner who has a thorough understanding of the learning process enabling quick response to organizational and clientele needs.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to describe and interpret the experiences of newly appointed Parish Chairs in learning their jobs.

The specific objectives of the study were as follows:

1. In collaboration with participants, identify themes and significant features in the Parish Chairs' experience of learning their job.
2. In collaboration with participants, identify the features of Parish Chairs' experience that promote and impede the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of new knowledge about their job as Parish Chair.
3. In collaboration with participants, explore an agenda for making action plans based on the identified features to improve the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of new knowledge about the job of Parish Chair.

Procedure

This study utilized individual and focus group interviews to obtain qualitative data from Louisiana Cooperative Extension Parish Chairs. Parish Chairs appointed since July of 1997 were selected to make up the participant population. A total of 20 Parish Chairs representing 19 parishes (see Appendix B) qualified (two participants served as co-chairs in one parish). Director Jack Bagent wrote a letter introducing the study and inviting all the eligible agents to participate. At the time of the initial letter, only 14 PCs were listed as eligible. However, before initial interviewing concluded, 6 more were added to the study. All eligible Parish Chairs agreed to participate in the study. Each of the state's five regional districts were represented. Of the participants, three agents served two parishes in their educator role. All subject matter program areas were represented in the study. Five PCs served in the area of 4-H youth development, 7 served as adult County Agents, 8 served as adult Family and Consumer Sciences

Extension Agents , and 1 served as Family and Consumer Sciences for both adult and 4-H youth development programs (see Table 4).

Table 4
Number of Parish Chairs by Area of Specialization

Technical Area of Specialization	No. of Parish Chairs
County Agents (Agriculture)	7
Family and Consumer Sciences (Extension Agent)	8
Family and Consumer Sciences 4-H Youth Development	2
Agricultural 4-H Youth Development	3

The age division of the Parish Chairs was as follows: 6 participants were between 30 – 40 years, 6 agents were between 41 – 50 years, and 8 agents were over 50 years. With regard to number of years the participants had served the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service before being appointed Parish Chair the breakdown was as follows: 5 – 10 years, 7 agents; 11 – 25 years, 9 agents; 26 – 45 years, 4 agents. One newly appointed Parish Chair had served as a Parish Chair previously (see Table 5).

Table 5
Number of Parish Chairs by Age
and Years of Service Prior to Appointment as Parish Chair

Age	No. of Parish Chairs	No. of Years of Service Prior to Appointment as Parish Chair	No. of Parish Chairs
30 – 40	6	5 – 10 years	7
41 – 50	6	11 – 25 years	9
51 – 65	8	26 – 45 years	4

Initial data were gathered through individual interviews with each of the Parish Chair participants. These interviews, lasting approximately 1 to 2 hours, took place in the parish office where each Parish Chair served, with the exception of three agents who met me at a mutually agreed upon site. The initial interviews and four focus groups took place throughout the state entailing 3979 miles of travel by the researcher. In an effort to minimize driving distances for Parish Chairs as well as adhere to the most effective discussion size, the researcher divided the state into two regions for the focus group meetings. Each regional focus group had 10 Parish Chair participants. Parish Chairs in Districts 1, 2, and 4 met 2 times in the Breaux Bridge Extension Parish Office, and those in Districts 3 and 5 met twice in the Bienville Extension Parish Office. Four hundred communication exchanges between the researcher and the participants/co-researchers took place over the length of the study, almost exclusively by e-mail.

Data Analysis

Research Process: Look->Initial Interviews

Data in this action research study were in the form of audio and video tapes, transcripts of audio tapes of all interviews and focus groups, member checked transcripts and my reflections/notes following all interactions with Parish Chairs. Important to the collaborative aspect of this study was the participation of the Parish Chairs in describing their situations clearly and comprehensively, identifying the key features of their experiences as well as analyzing the implications of their experiences and observations.

Following each interview, the individual Parish Chair received the entire interview transcript with the request to highlight what, in their perspective, were the most important things discussed (see Appendix F). Although only 10 Parish Chairs

returned corrections, additions, and comments on their transcripts, all 20 transcripts were used to bracket (Denzin, 1989 p. 56; Stringer, 1996, p. 76) the elements identified as most important to each of the Parish Chairs. According to Denzin, to bracket information is to “unpack” the participant’s description of the account looking for key elements and essential meanings. These bracketed elements were used to formulate 12 categories with essential features (observations) for each category further illuminating the meanings given to each. A summary of the bracketed categories and observations was distributed to all the participating Parish Chairs before the first focus group meetings.

Research Process: Think->Focus Groups

Following the completion and member checking of the initial accounts, the 20 participants were divided into two focus groups and asked to meet at least twice during the study. Focus groups were chosen because their primary purpose is to enable people to listen to and learn from one another (Morgan, 1997). Focus group #1 had six participants in the first session, and seven participants in the second session. Two Parish Chairs designated to this focus group did not participate in either session. Focus Group #2 had eight Parish Chair participants at each session. All Parish Chairs designated to that focus group attended at least one session. Driving distances were greater for participants in Focus Group #1, and might have negatively influenced participation.

The categories and observations stemming from the initial accounts were used in the initial hour of the focus group sessions to construct a joint account (see Table 3, Chapter 4). The Parish Chairs narrowed the 12 categories to 11 categories. The focus group gatherings were designed to extend the participants’ understanding of the issues raised during the initial interviews, and then, as a group, confirm or disconfirm the

importance of specific issues, discuss the implications of their analysis of the situations they had described, and explore potential plans for change. A modified nominal group voting technique (explained in Chapter 3) was used to give the participants an opportunity to weight the importance of the issues. Table 3, Chapter 4 category “No. of Votes” gives the results of that tally and identifies essential features by category.

Research Process: Act->Action Plans

Following the first focus groups, all Parish Chair participants received a summary of the discussion of the first focus group session, the tally of the votes on perceived importance of the issues raised, and questions for potential discussion during the second focus group sessions (See Appendix G). The second focus group session focused on the implications, recommendations, and potential for action plans of the issues raised and rated for importance. In addition to the outcome of the vote by category, Table 3 includes the Parish Chairs’ essential features of the categories identified, and recommendations to decision makers and policy development leaders of Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service. The issues identified, key features of each issue explored, and the recommendations made are the basis for Cooperative Extension’s next step, an agenda for action plans to enact the recommendations. Due to the limitations of a dissertation thesis, actual action plans for addressing the significant features of the Parish Chairs experience were beyond the scope of this research project.

One serendipitous development and personal insight in the data analysis process for the researcher was the discovery that as she delved deeper into the issues raised by the Parish Chairs themselves, each iteration with their words led her to discover new themes and seemingly important features that might or might not have been explored with the Parish Chairs. The re-visitation, reflection, and new insights mirror the cyclical

nature of action research, although this level of analysis took place primarily outside of the participatory setting. The researcher's reflections from these additional insights are included in the implications section of this chapter.

Contextualization

In this section the findings of the study are summarized and placed in a broader social context by comparing and contrasting the findings with the academic and organizational literature. The first two objectives of the study relate to describing the currently perceived situation of learning the job of Parish Chair. The third objective relates to the Parish Chairs' recommendations for the organization stemming from the identified themes and key features of their experience. The agenda for action plans are based on the key features of the Parish Chairs' experience. Action plans would be required to enact the recommendations for change proposed by the Parish Chairs.

Objective One: In collaboration with participants, identify themes and significant features in the Parish Chairs' experience of learning their job.

Theme 1: Who or What is a Parish Chair?

The foremost theme emerging from the data was the struggle of Parish Chairs to interpret their role to themselves and to those with whom they work. The results identified numerous significant features arising out of that struggle. The data suggest these features complicated the Parish Chairs interpretation of their role:

- a haphazard Parish Chair selection process based on inappropriate criteria,
- a lack of adequate preparatory training,
- inadequate job description,
- competing demands between technical area and administrative tasks,

- authority not commensurate with responsibility, and
- a shift from traditional PC appointments.

Theme 2: Unrealistic Expectations of Parish Chair

Linked to the first theme of a Parish Chair identity crisis is a second theme that emerged from the study: the perception that administration, and perhaps, the Parish Chairs themselves, had unrealistic expectations of what could be accomplished serving dual roles as an extension educator and parish administrator. Important features of this theme were the time and energy constraints to:

- sufficiently promote Extension's community image,
- maintain quality programming in their area of specialization,
- respond in a timely manner to the administrative demands of the parish office,
- provide the knowledge link between administration and field staff,
- overcome insufficient lead time for planning, performing or promoting specific requests from higher administration,
- balance competing demands between technical area and administrative tasks
- build positive relationships with and between parish staff,
- support parish staff programming,
- spend sufficient time with staff and their programming to responsibly administer performance appraisals,
- balance competing demands sufficiently to reflect positively on the Parish Chairs' performance appraisal.
- In addition, Parish Chairs deemed the monetary compensation inadequate for the added responsibility, time, and energy required of the job.

Theme 3: Energizing Elements of the Parish Chair Position

Results of the study indicate Parish Chairs find significant energizing elements of the job that sustain them. The energizing features of Parish Chairs are their ability to:

- learn new things and gain management skills,
- promote LCES to the community,
- influence and provide a vision for community development,
- promote parish staff to the wider organization,
- effectively administer the parish office,
- provide leadership to staff,
- enable other agents to succeed in their work,
- freedom to make mistakes as long as learning takes place, and
- solve problems.

Theme 4: Pockets of Knowledge Sharing Exist Throughout LCES

The data suggest that although LCES was not providing adequate, intentional or standardized procedures for the Parish Chairs to acquire, share and utilize new knowledge, individual Parish Chairs benefited from, attempted to use, and initiated knowledge sharing “best practices” in specific contexts throughout the state. The significant features of these best practices included were Parish Chairs who:

- remained open to professional development and career advancement throughout their years of service with LCES,
- were “coached” prior to their appointment, receiving intentional leadership development throughout their years of service,
- shadowed their former PC in preparation for appointment,
- were identified, chosen, and then supported by the District Agent before and during the initial months of appointment,

- enjoyed on-going knowledge sharing relationship with former Parish Chair,
- demystified the job of Parish Chair by delegating various Parish Chair responsibilities to entire staff,
- involved parish staff in decision making processes that concerned the entire parish staff,
- provided a conduit of communication between top administration and field staff,
- together with parish staff, interpreted higher administrative directives as they impacted them,
- made good use of formal and informal resources available for finding out information,
- attempted to provide leadership development for all parish staff,
- attempted to implement innovative knowledge sharing practices within the office, and
- intended to prepare the person to replace them by sharing their knowledge.

Objective Two: In collaboration with participants, identify the features of Parish Chairs' experience that promote and impede the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of new knowledge about their job as Parish Chair.

Features Promoting Knowledge Production

Knowledge production was promoted by higher administration by their support of this research project. In the learning organizational literature Kiely and Ellis (1999) state,

Action inquiry in organizations will not promote change if it is not supported at the highest levels within the organization. If senior management merely give lip service to this change process, staff will not be immersed in and excited by new found possibilities of adding to professional practice. They will sense they are not being given the complete picture. They will be rightly skeptical about senior managers willingness to proceed with outcomes not of their choosing (p. 32).

The findings suggest that the cooperation the researcher received from the Parish Chairs indicated that the Parish Chairs work within an organizational culture where belief, even cautious belief, exists that higher administration is supportive of change.

Specific quotes in the Results chapter indicated an energizing feature of the Parish Chair job was gaining a larger picture of what the organization was all about. The context of these quotes was almost always following a training event or gathering of administrative staff together for intentional leadership development by the organization. This sharing the big picture of the workings and vision of the organization, sending the Parish Chairs back to their staff with the understanding that this vision would be translated to the parish setting, is indicative of what the organizational learning literature refers to as knowledge sharing within a learning organization culture (Cook, Staniforth & Stewart, 1997; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross & Smith, 1994). Although not systematically promoted throughout the organization, those Parish Chairs who are practicing “best practices” of knowledge production, sharing, and utilization perceived themselves to be supported in their leadership style and innovation by higher administration.

The findings suggest that all Parish Chairs felt that there was a freedom to make mistakes, as long as one learned from them. The freedom to take risks and the general belief that higher administration would be supportive of mistakes from prudent risks, is a feature of an organizational learning environment mentioned in virtually all the literature on the learning organization.

The Parish Chairs documented in their reflections the increased attention to training and development needs of the Parish Chairs by LCES’ Department of Human

Relations. The findings suggest that the PCs perceived that there is increasing support for formal leadership workshops. The distance learning opportunities were cited as helpful resources as the Parish Chairs juggled the time constraints with long distance travel to educational meetings. LCES' commitment to providing each Parish Chair with access to e-mail and the Internet led to the perception that communication with other Parish Chairs, LCES state specialists, and other resources were (within certain contexts) accessible and easy. These opportunities for learning and channels of communication are examples of formal structures and policies that promote knowledge production, sharing, and utilization throughout the organization.

Features Impeding Knowledge Production

Knowledge sharing at almost all levels of the organization is perceived to be limited. However, the findings pointed to an assumption by top administration of Extension that knowledge is being shared throughout the organization. One organizational assumption, typified by many of the Parish Chairs' experiences, is the supposition that all agents, regardless of areas of specialization, are familiar with management issues outside of their particular area of expertise.

The organizational assumption that Parish Chairs naturally and informally learn the administrative skills necessary impedes the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of knowledge in important ways. The assumption that agents are acquiring both management skills and organizational knowledge throughout their years of service in the organization suggest there exists no urgency in offering formal training or guidance for the newly appointed Parish Chairs. The Parish Chairs acknowledged and appreciated the efforts made by staff of the Human Resource Department to provide classes and workshops relevant to the administrative tasks required of Parish Chairs. However,

Parish Chairs commented that frequently the continuing education and information did not come in a timely manner or were too general in content to help specific Parish Chair concerns.

Results show that newly appointed Parish Chairs relied primarily on informal networks of information, especially other, more experienced Parish Chairs. Parish Chairs differed as to whether or not the informal network provided sufficient informational support. Those Parish Chairs who found themselves in parish offices of high conflict, no or little access with former Parish Chair, inexperienced secretaries, and non-involved District Agents had fewer sources of support and information than those with low level conflict, supporting former Parish Chairs, experienced secretaries and involved District Agents.

A common perception by Parish Chairs was that an experienced extension employee should know what the responsibilities of the PC entail, how to go about performing those responsibilities, and the resources available for finding out information. Results of the study indicate that because the agents felt as if they “should have developed” many of the skills and frequently expressed the concern that they “should have known” certain things, they were more hesitant to ask higher administration or others about the unknown for fear of appearing incompetent. Again, Parish Chairs relied on informal networks of information in order to be able to choose a trusted colleague. Findings suggest that the Parish Chairs’ failure to share what is unknown leads to less effective sharing of that which is known. The literature corroborates that organizational learning is impeded when employees attempt to hide what is not known. People will not seek feedback for fear of exposing their vulnerability (Kiely & Ellis, 1999).

If, as the results of the study indicate, inadequate criteria exist for Parish Chair appointments, those people perceived to have the best characteristics for the job may or may not apply, or may not be asked to apply. The data suggest that the organization does not make known what qualities are sought in the appointment of parish leadership, neither does LCES intentionally develop those leadership qualities among its personnel in a formal or structural way. Results indicate that administration was unaware of the potential leadership development role played by Parish Chairs as they attempted to maintain integrated, knowledge sharing relationships between higher administration, field staff, and local authorities.

The Parish Chair Performance Appraisal instrument (1992) mirrors the Parish Chair job description (1992) with one important exception. The Performance Appraisal instrument gives guidelines for what is expected from the Parish Chair to achieve a high ranking on performance. The Parish Chair job description does not include these itemized descriptions. Lack of clear guidance as to “how” to accomplish many of the PC responsibilities was one observation of the Parish Chairs. Four out of the 20 Parish Chairs mentioned that they had never seen the job description, much less the itemized breakdown of how they would be evaluated as Parish Chairs. If Parish Chairs are not aware of the contents of the job description or the performance appraisal criteria, LCES is not using the existing instruments effectively to share information nor utilizing the instruments as potential leadership development tools.

The Parish Chairs’ perspective of the use and abuse of performance appraisals was indicative of how current practices in performance evaluations impeded knowledge sharing within the organization. Data suggest that the Parish Chairs viewed the performance appraisals for themselves and their parish staff as superficial instruments,

lacking in relevance to their overall performance and professional development. Parish Chairs were unclear as to how their input on staff evaluations was used for professional development or merit pay. The lack of clarity in performance appraisals, who reads the evaluations, and how the appraisals impact an individual's career, demonstrates an important gap in knowledge sharing and utilization.

The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service job description of the Parish Chairman (1992) identifies four areas in which Parish Chairs are to provide leadership to the parish staff. If leadership development is not endemic within the organizational culture at all levels of employees, learning may not be taking place throughout their careers for mid-level management to feel prepared to step into leadership positions. Parish Chairs spoke of mixed signals in leadership development. Parish Chairs are now paid to attend workshops, as well as receive the approval for the time away from the office, but Parish Chairs felt that typically these workshops are technical in content. Or, if they do have some leadership development potential, results showed the organization provides no outlet or way to plug them back into the organization in a beneficial way. The perception is that the higher administration of the organization is aware of the need to develop the leadership skills, but hasn't worked through procedures to adequately allow for implementation of lessons learned. This finding concurs with the learning organizational literature as it relates to the need for new knowledge to have outlets of sharing and utilization within the organization (Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell, 1991; Senge, et.al., 1994; Watkins & Marsick, 1993).

A breakdown in knowledge production, and the sharing and utilization of that new knowledge, is highlighted by the findings within the theme of "unrealistic expectations." All the Parish Chairs were led to believe by higher administration that

the job would take less time than it does. In terms of competing demands, the data suggest that top administration does not understand or respect the time constraints felt by the Parish Chairs. Parish Chairs tied inadequate compensation with administration's lack of understanding and respect for the position. They viewed the haphazard selection process for Parish Chairs and leadership development crucially linked to this lack of understanding. Time constraints were linked to performance appraisals in both specialized areas and administrative work as Parish Chairs expressed their concern of maintaining the quality of their technical programming and fulfilling their role as liaisons with the community and state governments. They all seemed to desire more recognition of the demands of their job and acknowledgement that for most of them, the motivation behind their continued efforts to perform effectively was concern for the continued viability of Extension. Results indicate that Parish Chairs were highly concerned with maintaining Extension's positive public image within the community. They were especially concerned that statewide budget cuts requiring greater demands for local fundraising would increasingly hamper the quality of their technical area programming. As the quality of the technical area programming became compromised, the "cooperative" nature of the relationship with the local authorities might become endangered. This perceived "lack of understanding" of their job demonstrated a breakdown in communication channels and knowledge sharing across boundaries of the LCES. These were significant features of the Parish Chairs findings in that the necessary interdependency of system thinking in learning organizations relies on knowledge sharing to easily pass from one area of an organization to another and the need to keep an organization connected to its environment (Nevis, DiBella, & Gould, 1996; Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993).

Objective Three: In collaboration with participants, explore an agenda for making action plans based on the identified features to improve the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of new knowledge about the job of Parish Chair.

Under this objective are the recommendations made throughout the study by the Parish Chairs. Their recommendations, based on the identified features of their experiences would provide the foundation for organizationally supported strategies to develop action plans to enact change.

Parish Chairs identified the lack of adequate preparatory training as the most important feature of the issues raised describing their experience. The data suggest that LCES, as a traditional hierarchical organization, does not follow a systematic method of preparing agents to move into managerial positions. The selection process of Parish Chairs was perceived to be based primarily on number of years experience with LCES rather than clearly identified leadership characteristics. No timely training, systematic orientation or written policies were provided to newly appointed PCs to guide them with immediate demands such as personnel management, office/property management, budget issues, fund raising and public relations duties with local authorities, conflicting responsibilities between administrative and technical jobs, to name a few. These features identified by the Parish Chairs in particular echo the literature in which a common practice of many organizations is to promote employees to positions of progressively increasing authority and responsibility in which specific preparation for those positions has not been provided by the organization (Garratt, 1990).

In their recommendations, all the Parish Chairs made reference to the need for better preparatory training. All thought that a special orientation session would be

helpful. Specific ideas were offered such as a one or two day retreat in which experienced and newly appointed PCs could discuss together both formal and informal agendas that dealt specifically with Parish Chair issues. Many Parish Chairs specifically requested more training and preparation with personnel issues; selection, motivation, team building, evaluation and, most importantly, conflict management. Attempting to provide transition time in apprenticeship situation with former Parish Chairs and initiating a mentor program for newly appointed Parish Chairs were two other recommendations suggested by Parish Chairs.

Although Parish Chairs requested better preparatory training immediately before the Parish Chair appointment, “Sharon’s Story” of the findings identifies features of leadership development Parish Chairs recommend throughout their careers with LCES. These “best practices” in knowledge sharing found in local contexts throughout the state are presented as recommendations to become part of the learning culture of the organization. The quotes throughout the best practices section of the results spoke of agents taking personal responsibility for leadership preparation throughout their careers by remaining open and aware of the needs of the organization, not just in their technical area. Their experience showed intentional leadership development prior to their Parish Chair appointment by both the former Parish Chair and the District Agent. The Parish Chairs also enjoyed the much-needed support of both during the initial period of their appointment. The Parish Chairs’ experiences reflected in Sharon’s story concur with the leadership development literature in that important to their development as leaders, they had opportunities early in their careers to broaden their job assignment (Kotter, 1995). The recommendation is that LCES structure the potential for leadership development for all agents early in their careers with Extension.

The findings indicate that there needs to be a demystification of the role of Parish Chair to the parish staff. In “best practices” of the Results chapter, parish staff was included in important decision making that involved both the parish Extension office and their outreach into the community. Parish Chairs were attempting to provide leadership training in innovative ways through the monthly staff conferences and delegation of responsibility. Parish Chairs envisioned a broadening role of the knowledge sharing link within Extension by interpreting with parish staff directives from higher administration and helping the entire staff understand their role within the larger Extension organization. Higher administration would need to improve communication with the Parish Chair level of management. Quarterly district meetings could be used partly for leadership training and problem solving, and as a more effective conduit up the communication channel, not simply as a meeting to receive directives from higher administration.

The monthly staff conferences could be used to share information between the entire staff, but also to encourage reflection by all the staff as to what they are learning from their work. In best practice situations, the Parish Chairs are intentionally preparing at least one agent to follow in their footsteps who they feel would take the parish program forward and work well with staff. Again, the recommendations are that this kind of knowledge sharing is structured into routine practice of performing the job of Parish Chair.

The above recommendations mean that the selection process for Parish Chairs take into account the characteristics of personnel who could provide leadership development within the parish office. Parish Chairs pointed out that the somewhat haphazard selection process did not capitalize on intentional leadership development

within the organization. Data suggest that the Parish Chairs recommend that the organization intentionally prepare people for leadership and provide the support for that leadership responsibility. Also, in the Parish Chair selection process, findings suggest that the parish Extension office environment be considered in the selection process, i.e., experienced secretaries, involved District Agent, hostility among staff, agents competing for Parish Chair position, politics within the local community, etc. These environmental circumstances factored greatly into the perceived effectiveness of the Parish Chair. Parish Chairs felt that LCES needs a compensation policy that reflects the amount of responsibility of the Parish Chair position. Better compensation might promote an incentive for competent people to purposively seek leadership within the office.

The creation of a policy manual specifically for Parish Chairs was one of the most frequently cited document resources requested. This policy manual would help individual Parish Chairs have a standard by which they could refer to such items as compensation for overtime, evaluation of area agents, appropriate channels of communication and redress, and help in determining priority of conflicting demands within the parish. The Parish Chairs recommended more guidelines for advocacy of extension programs within the local community and relationship building of community leaders.

Parish Chairs identified competing demands between their technical area and parish administration as another significant feature of their Parish Chair job. Results suggest that Parish Chairs often found it difficult to balance quality of their personal technical area program with effective administration of the local parish office. Results of the study show that the competing time demands might be an even greater challenge

for 4-H and Family and Consumer Sciences agents appointed Parish Chair due to less flexibility of the technical program area of their job. Time constraints were mentioned as a top stressor as Parish Chairs juggled the needs of their clientele, their parish staff and local authorities. Parish Chairs recommended exploring new models of district and parish administration. Given the importance placed on developing and maintaining effective and cooperative relationships with local authorities and agencies within the parish, Parish Chairs offered one example LCES might consider--a 100% administrative position that entails public relations at the state and community level, fundraising responsibilities, and staff, program, and leadership development. The position would be without the competing demands of technical area programming. One other model suggested was similar to the current Parish Chair position, except that higher administration recognize, allow for, and evaluate technical area programming and administrative duties in more realistic ways that acknowledge the demands currently made on Parish Chairs. Parish Chairs recommended that models used by other states be explored.

The Parish Chairs identified that the shift from white, male, agricultural agents traditionally appointed Parish Chair to increased appointments of women, 4-H, Family and Consumer Sciences, and African American agents as Parish Chair, increases the need for clear job descriptions and parameters of authority. LCES typically selects the Parish Chair from within the local office. Without clear cut policies, role definition and authority, the newly appointed Parish Chair is vulnerable to resentment, passive aggression, bypassing PC authority with contacts to higher administrative positions, and the undermining of his/her authority or team building efforts from staff in the office who either were not selected or disagreed with higher administration's choice. The

recommendation is that clear-cut policies concerning the role and authority of Parish Chair be written, followed by organization-wide education throughout the state as regards to these policies.

Conclusions/Implications for LCES

The Parish Chairs attempts to supervise staff without sufficient authority has powerful implications for leadership development within the LCES. Because the position of Parish Chair carries with it no clearly defined, legitimate power (Hughes, Ginnet & Curphy, 1995), Parish Chairs found that their influence stemmed from their personal credibility or referent power (Hughes, Ginnett & Curphy, 1995) and ability to convince parish staff to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the organization. There appears to be a disdain for those Parish Chairs who seem to set themselves or their position before the needs of the organization. The values indicated by the Parish Chairs quotes reveal that the respected Parish Chairs are those who place importance on integrated support of local programming and staff while ensuring the wellbeing of Extension's outreach into the community. These qualities carry more weight than a title or the position of Parish Chair.

The leadership style of the "best practices" approach was primarily a transformational (Bass, 1995; Burns, 1995) form of leadership using participatory ways to promote team spirit, clarity of purpose, and a sense of responsibility for their work. This might be as much a survival technique (Rosener, 1995) as an intentionally developed leadership style. Best management practices emerged where the transformational leadership was able to succeed. In the case of high conflict, transformational leadership was not effective and the Parish Chairs words spoke of the perception that they had no authority to shift into other leadership styles.

The description given by the Parish Chairs of a haphazard selection process did not seem to acknowledge the influence of Parish Chairs for “generations” of Parish Chairs. All of the Parish Chairs had been influenced by their predecessors, whether positively or negatively. When LCES arbitrarily or “by default” places agents with weaker leadership or administrative skills into the position of Parish Chair, the negative effects are not only for the appointed time. A weak link in the parish office has the potential to negatively influence networking, knowledge production, and leadership development for generations of Parish Chair appointments.

Given the assumptions that continual learning must take place for organizations to transform themselves, the researcher was particularly interested in what part learning plays for Parish Chairs in their work. The findings of the study indicate that “Educators are learners” (Cranton, 1996, p. 1) within the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service.

Peter Senge (1990) writes, “Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs” (p. 139). The results of the research corroborated the action inquiry assertion that learning takes place with the action inquiry process itself (Keily & Ellis, 1999; Warner, Henrichs, Schneyer, & Joyce, 1998; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). The Parish Chairs reflection on and articulation of their learning experiences and leadership style helped the Parish Chairs develop their own theory, in real time, and in their workplace (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989; Kiely & Ellis, 1999). The Parish Chairs brought what they are learning into conscious awareness; they made tacit knowledge explicit. Through a process of questioning, reflection, and feedback from others, the Parish Chairs deepened their understanding of the role of their learning in everyday activities. Their experiences spoke of individual personal development and

enhancement of professional managerial practice (Cranton, 1996; Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). The Parish Chairs actively reflecting on their experiences and making meaning of them, both individually within the organizational context, and then developing recommendations to change their organizational lives is indicative of the activities within organizations needed for self-renewal and change (Senge, 1990)

The Parish Chairs' reflections on how they might handle situations differently now than before, or how the organization might improve a specific policy demonstrated what Argyris and Schön (1978) refer to as single loop learning, learning that reflects a change or improvement in practice but does not challenge the organizational norm. However, some recommendations suggested by the Parish Chairs indicated that they are in a process of double loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978) or transformational learning (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1998) in that they are challenging the norms and assumptions of their work lives and of the organizational culture. As Parish Chairs articulated what energized them about their job, there emerged evidence of Senge's (1990) spirit of the learning organization, a space for Parish Chairs to explore a discipline he called "Personal Mastery."

Personal mastery is more than competence and skills, although he acknowledges that competence and skills are part of the picture. Rather, it means "approaching one's life as a creative work, living from a creative as opposed to reactive viewpoint" (p. 141). Parish Chairs gave evidence that they were attempting to incorporate the energizing aspects of their work in creative ways even as they juggled the challenging aspects. The learning that specific Parish Chairs described as coming from the former Parish Chairs, translating into their current practices and evolving into innovative ways of leading are encouraging signs of a basis throughout the state on which to develop an

intentional learning culture throughout the organization (Carnevale, 1991; Dodgson, 1993; Garratt, 1990).

This self-directed learning about one's practice, critical reflection on one's work and on one's own transformative development enable Parish Chairs, as educators, to take action as change agents. Extension needs to continue to refine certain skills required of its personnel, including the skill of action research (Dillman, 1986; Jimmerson, 1989). With the skills of action research they will be able to help clientele generate and communicate knowledge about themselves so that they can gain influence and power in an information era. Parish Chairs, having gained some skills in the process of action research, have the ability to move beyond the role of information providers and technical experts, to working as educators with people to promote personal, community, and societal change. Using action research methodologies in problem-solving, extension educators can help clients become critically aware of all forms of information they receive and learn to process information to make it their own. All these skills mentioned are building on the professional development of extension faculty to be autonomous, continual learners, who can model critical thinking and problem solving methods to their clientele.

In summary, action inquiry strategies are powerful approaches for continual development and learning within Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service. Hopefully, LCES will continue to support critical reflection in employees and through them enhance the learning culture within the entire organization.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study looked at organizational learning within the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service in a very context specific setting: the mid-level

management position of Parish Chair recently appointed to the position. An agenda for action plans based on the findings of this research has been recommended by the Parish Chairs. LCES in collaboration with Parish Chairs might want to use the action research model to develop strategies for recommended actions. Furthermore, the action research model could be used to explore organizational learning throughout the LCES.

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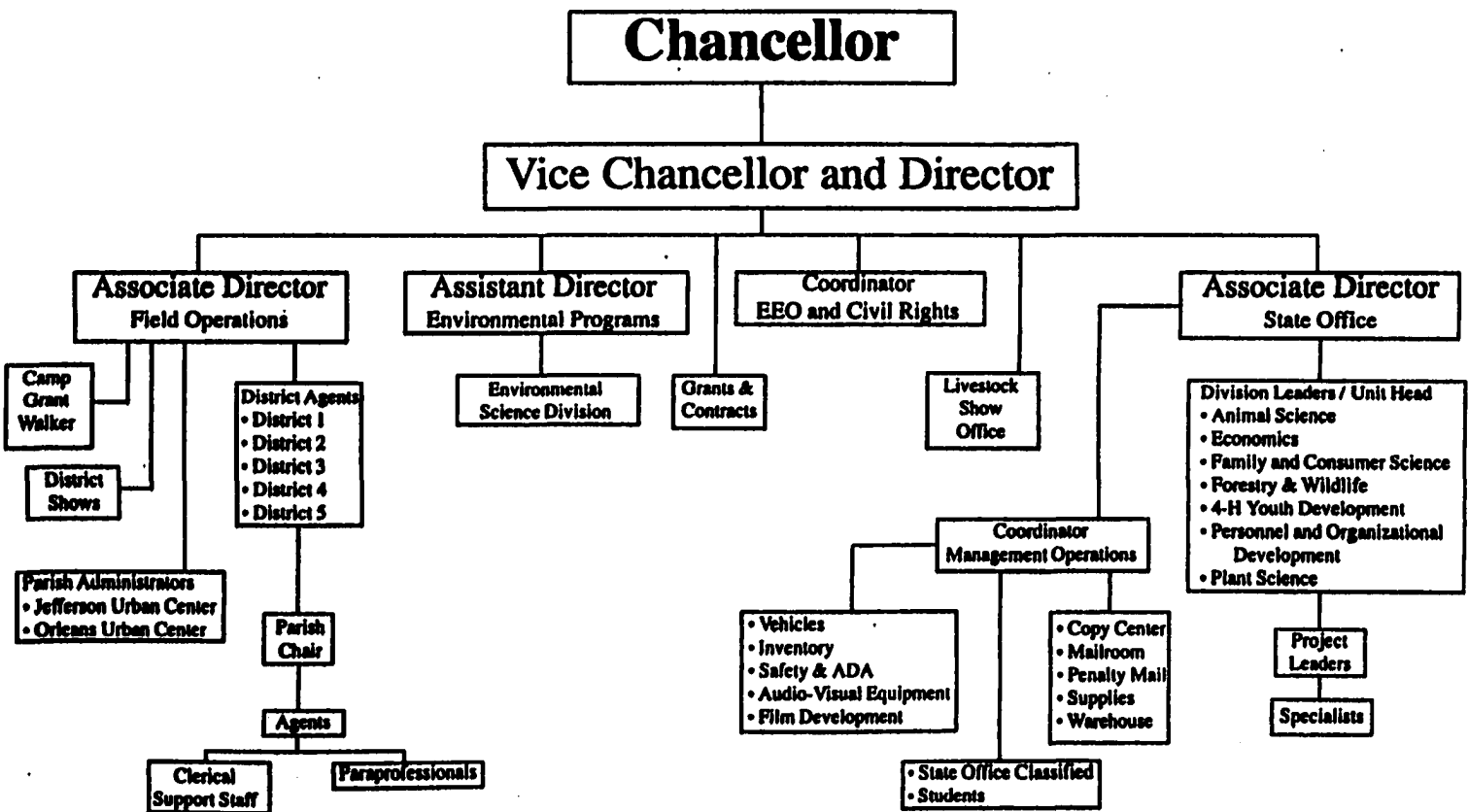
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APPENDIX A
LOUISIANA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



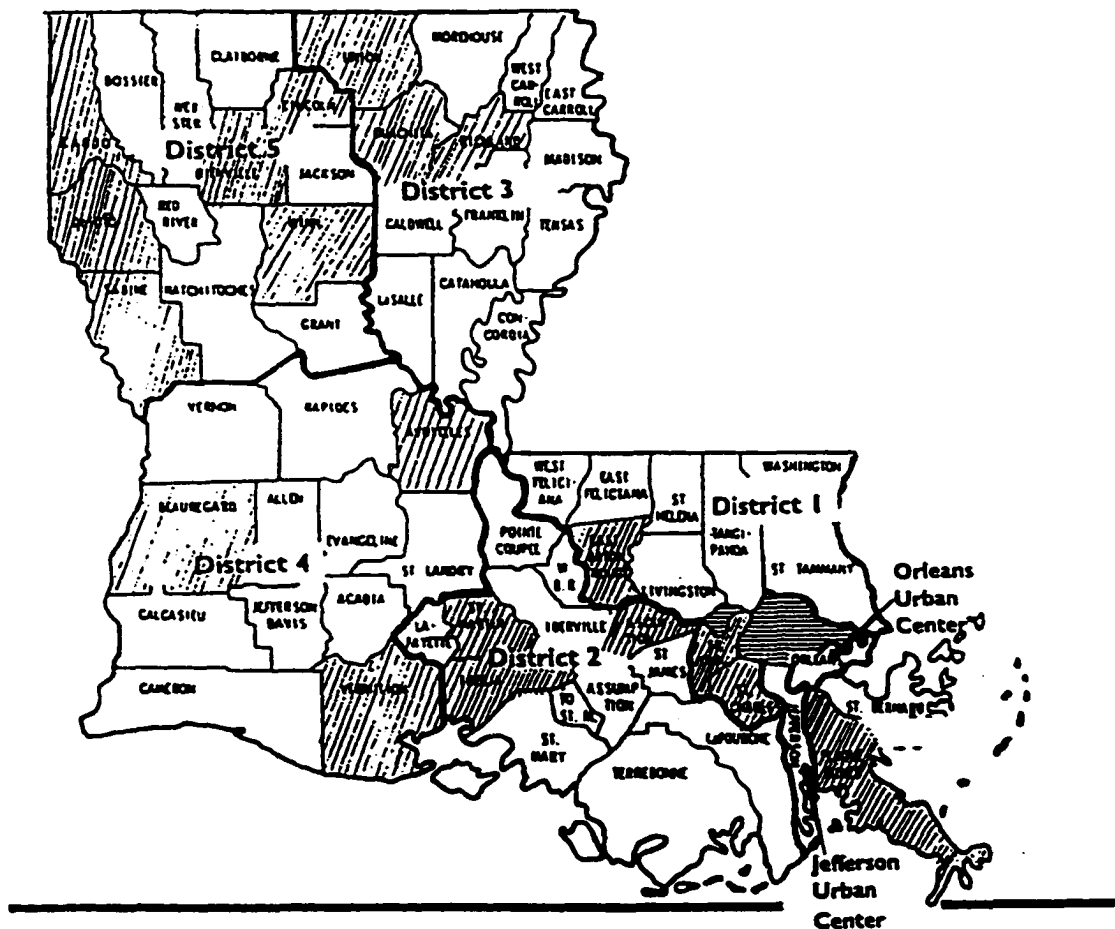
APPENDIX B MAP OF SELECTED PARISHES

Parishes involved in this study are crosshatched.



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APPENDIX C

DR. BAGENT'S LETTER TO PARISH CHAIRS

March 16, 1999

TO: Selected Parish Chairs

Ms. Cathy Hamilton is a doctoral candidate in the School of Vocational Education. Her research interest is in professional development through the use of collaborative inquiry. Her previous research with LCES has led to an interest in the role of the parish chairs within our organization, specifically, how do parish chairs learn to become effective in their job? For her dissertation research, she would like to work with those parish chairs who have served three years or less in the position.

The purpose of this action research project is to involve all of you in identifying issues which you think are important in your work, attempt both individually and collectively to pinpoint how you learn to work with those issues, and together develop action plans that might move towards resolution of problem issues.

You are asked to participate in a learning experience that will build your skills as reflective practitioners, i.e., improve your practice by applying your own wisdom and experience to practical situations, but in a thoughtful, reflective manner. By so doing, you will be enabled to take action, learn from the results of these actions, and incorporate what you learn into further action.

Your involvement will consist of an initial personal interview, participation in at least two discussion groups, and interaction with Ms. Hamilton for follow-up and feedback. It is expected that this involvement will take a small amount of your time, perhaps 2-3 working days spread over a 3-4 month period. LCES will reimburse all expenses incurred from your participation in this project. Although the contents of the individual interviews and group discussions will remain anonymous, results of the study will be presented in a dissertation and will be available to LCES.

(letter continued)

Selected Parish Chairs

March 16, 1999

Page 2

I believe each of you will benefit from participation in this project. Effective use of the reflective/practice cycle in your work will enable you to be intentional in your attempts to close the gap between theory and practice by assisting in the development of new knowledge and understanding as part of your daily work.

The organization should also benefit from the fact that you can serve as models of reflective practice in your work. The results will allow those of us in policy-making positions to make more informed judgments insuring that the organization legitimizes and allows time for learning.

Although your participation is voluntary, I encourage you to meet with Ms. Hamilton at our upcoming parish chairs meeting in Baton Rouge, March 23, at 8:00 a.m. in Nelson Memorial for a 20-minute introduction. You would be able to ask any questions you might have of her at that time.

Sincerely,

Jack L. Bagent
Vice Chancellor and Director

C: District Agents

APPENDIX D

LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS INCLUDING RESEARCH PURPOSE

Good day good people:

Most of you I have met briefly or you have at least received a couple of messages from me. However, one or two of you are newly appointed as Parish Chairs so my information and invitation will be unfamiliar. I have finally finished the approval process through the department of Vocational Education for my doctoral thesis research. My interest is in working with you on an action research project in which professional development takes place through collaborative inquiry, i.e., together we will be exploring the issues you find important as relatively new Parish Chairs within LCES. Currently twenty of you fall within the "less than 3 years period."

For those of you who were not able to be at the introductory meeting several months ago, Dr. Bagent confessed that he thought LCES could do a much better job as an organization towards preparing its personnel to assume the job of Parish Chair. Action research is a great way to have your experiences influence future policy making. I'm very excited about the opportunity to be a part of that research.

I include in this message the original letter from Dr. Bagent introducing the study and inviting you to participate. Also the brief statement of purpose and objectives of the research. Your participation is voluntary and any expenses incurred through your participation will be reimbursed by the LCES (these expenses should be minimal, primarily travel to the focus group meetings).

The process (quickly) will be an initial individual interview with each of you to establish the issues you perceive as most important. After the completion of all interviews, we would schedule two follow-up sessions in focus group format, divided by regions (Districts 3 & 5 together and Districts 4, 2, & 1)

Most of you responded to an earlier message that we could communicate effectively in between interviews and focus groups by e-mail. I ask that you respond to this message as well indicating your continued willingness to participate and if I have the most convenient e-mail address for you. I would like to begin scheduling the individual interviews immediately.

I will be in touch with each of you soon. In order to know if all the e-mail addresses are correct, I would appreciate a quick, "Got it." as well as an "I'm in" if you are planning to be a part of this endeavor.

[original letter from Dr. Bagent: see Appendix C]

And, the purpose and objectives of the study:

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to describe and interpret the experiences of new Parish Chairs in learning their jobs.

Specific objectives of the study are:

1. In collaboration with participants, identify themes and significant features in the Parish Chairs' experience of learning their job.
2. In collaboration with participants, identify the features of Parish Chairs' experience that promote and impede the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of new knowledge about their job as Parish Chair.
3. In collaboration with the participants, explore an agenda for making action plans based on the identified features to improve the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of new knowledge about the job of Parish Chair.

Cathy H. Hamilton
Louisiana State University
chamilt@i-55.com
Phone:504-542-6861

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

Dear Parish Chairs:

To give you an idea of what I hope we'll focus on in the interview I'll remind you that the focus of the study is the job of the Parish Chair and how each of you go about learning this new assignment. I want to give you a little preparation information so that you might be thinking about things that are important to you, insights that you've discovered in this process of learning a new job as well as trying to identify for yourselves specific events that have led to learning something new.

We would need about 1 hour (I'm always open to staying longer to hear what needs to be said). Also, part of the process is to go over what has been said before I leave to ensure that I understand the issues you believe to be most important. After our interview, you will receive a typed and e-mailed transcript (that only you and I will see) in which you can check for understanding, add to or request correction. I also ask that you highlight the points you believe to be most important and then return the transcript to me.

My first question is basic demographics: when and where you were born, parents occupations and BRIEFLY when and how you came to be Parish Chair.

Then I ask you to tell me about your job as Parish Chair. This question is deliberately vague because in action research, the themes and issues are to come from you all--the co-researchers in this project. I really want to know what you believe to be the important things to talk about throughout a discussion of your job. What I ask you to consider before I arrive, however, are the experiences in your past that you think have helped prepare you for this position, and also, what experiences have been moments of new insight or learning since assuming the position.

I regret it's taken me so long to get to speak with you, but greatly look forward to the opportunity.

Warmest regards, Cathy

APPENDIX F

LETTER TO PARISH CHAIRS WITH TRANSCRIPT

Dear

Finally got the transcript of our time together ready! Please let me know if the formatting doesn't make for easy reading. I can send it snail mail if you encounter any problems. The standard formatting should have a C: for my questions and your initials followed by a colon for your responses. There should be spaces in between when we each speak.

Again, please take the time to print out the transcript and go through what we discussed highlighting those things (literally with a highlighter) that you found most important. Also, remember that any additional comments, insights, issues or understandings can be added. You can clarify any thoughts that you feel are not accurately represented.

One more note; people talk really differently than they write or even think. Don't be put off by our casual, conversational style (EVERYONE has thought-gathering vocalizations "uh, uhm, you know"). I've found that people are sometimes caught by surprise by their speech. I enjoy the unique ways in which people express themselves!

Please return the reworked interview to me by [date]. Mail to:

Cathy H. Hamilton
819 South Olive Street
Hammond, LA 70403

Hope all is well with you!

Warmest regards, C

APPENDIX G

QUESTIONS FOR 2ND FOCUS GROUP

Dear Parish Chairs:

Questions we will consider for 2nd focus group and hopefully, create recommendations and an agenda for action plans from the discussion:

- ◆ When you were first appointed, did you feel as if you were already expected to know all that one needs to know to be an effective Parish Chair?
- ◆ What are the acceptable things to ask if you don't know? What would you be hesitant to ask about (or reveal that you didn't know or couldn't handle)?
- ◆ Traditionally, Extension has appointed male, adult agricultural agents as Parish Chairs. What implications to the role of Parish Chair/to Extension as an organization stem from the diversification of appointments that reflects more women, minorities, and people in 4-H and Home-Ec area specialization
- ◆ If your sole responsibility was the job of parish chair, what would you do differently?
- ◆ How has your appointment as Parish Chair affected your family life?
- ◆ In what ways are you allowing for reflection, evaluation of your job, your effectiveness, and your learning?
- ◆ What could be structured into your jobs or into Extension policies that would enhance the sharing of new knowledge and information?
- ◆ What would be the content of the ideal Manual for Parish Chairs?
- ◆ In what ways are you exhibiting leadership?
- ◆ What kind of preparatory training needs to take place that would give you the tools for effective leadership?
- ◆ What could be done to achieve a better balance between the PC's responsibility and authority?
- ◆ Some of you mentioned one of the things that energizes you about the job of PC is the opportunity to influence Extension's perceptions about your parish, its programming and personnel. Others about how the job enables you to have direct impact on the community. How can you go about ensuring that the "energizing" components of the PC position are structured into the job?
- ◆ What would be the ideal selection process for Parish Chairs? What should Extension be looking for?
- ◆ What makes for an effective District Agent? What other models might be more effective?
- ◆ What would make for a more useful, perhaps more meaningful performance appraisal system?
- ◆ In what ways would compensation more realistically reflect the added responsibilities of the Parish Chair position?
- ◆ What would be some guidelines offered to create and maintain good relationships with local authorities? Should this be included in the orientation, the "PC Manual?"
- ◆ What might an African American Parish Chair have to face within the organization or community that perhaps his/her White colleagues do not?
- ◆ What needs to be known before the appointment to PC and what kinds of continual training needs to take place?

We will not be able to thoroughly discuss all these questions, I know. However, rather than exclude any questions that have arisen from the issues you raised in both the interviews and the first focus session, I wanted to give you an opportunity to think about all of them. Come prepared to talk about the ones most important to you and, hopefully, much will be touched on in your discussions together.

Warmest, Cathy

APPENDIX H PARISH CHAIR JOB DESCRIPTION



Louisiana State University

Agricultural Center

Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service

Mailing Address: Knapp Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803-1900

Office: J. Norman Emerson Hall
LSU Agricultural Center
(504) 388-4141
Fax: (504) 388-4225

JOB DESCRIPTION

PARISH CHAIRMAN

PARISH

REVISED: 2/92

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**JOB DESCRIPTION
PARISH CHAIRMAN**

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Parish Chairman is responsible for supervision of parish programs and Extension personnel assigned to the parish and officially represents the parish staff with the local governing bodies. In addition, the Chairman, as an agent, is responsible for conducting educational programs in selected subject matter areas.

The Parish Chairman job is performed in a manner which is non-discriminatory on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion or handicap.

LINE OF AUTHORITY

The Parish Chairman is responsible to the District Agent. He/she is responsible through the District Agent to the Director.

SPECIFIC TASKS:

A. PROGRAMS

1. Provide leadership to staff members in the selection and use of advisory committees in the program development process.
2. Provide leadership to staff members and area agent in preparation and implementation of written programs and plans of work in accordance with existing policies, priorities and procedures established by the Director.
3. Provide leadership to staff members in the selection, training, and utilization and recognition of leaders involved in planning and implementation of Cooperative Extension program.
4. Provide leadership to staff members to develop and maintain cooperative working relationships with other agencies and organizations working on the same or similar problems and programs.
5. Continuously evaluate the parish Extension program to determine the extent to which it focused on and is meeting the needs of the people to be served (area agents program included).

B. PERSONNEL

1. Cooperates with the district agent in recruitment and selection of competent professional personnel as vacancies occur or new jobs are created, and orients new parish staff members to the requirements of their job.
2. Recruits and selects competent classified personnel as vacancies occur or new jobs are created. This is done under the leadership of and in consultation with the district agent. Train classified staff members to perform their job effectively and efficiently and evaluate for promotions and salary increases.
3. Assist district agent in decision making relative to allocation of salary, merit increases and travel funds for parish staff members.
4. Establish and maintain adequate local support of salaries, office facilities and equipment for parish staff in consultation with district agent. Also, assists district agent in obtaining same for area agents.
5. Maintains a parish office that is well equipped, supplied, and that operates efficiently and effectively.
6. Report to, develop and maintain a cooperative working relationship with local governing bodies, parish and community leaders, and representatives of state and U.S. government agencies within the parish.
7. Insure that all reports to be submitted by parish chairman and the staff members under his/her supervision are submitted by dates and time established for each one.
8. Insure that the provisions of the Extension Affirmative Action and E.E.O. Plan are adhered to by all Extension personnel under his/her supervision in the conduct of parish Extension programs.
9. Develop and maintain cooperation, coordination, and promote teamwork among and between staff members, including area agents and specialists. Keep staff members well informed on all administrative matters for which they are responsible.
10. Keep well informed on laws, regulations, policies, and procedures of state, federal, and local government, U.S.D.A., Louisiana State University, Louisiana State University Agricultural Center, and the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service that affect the conduct of Extension programs.

C. OTHER TASKS

1. To perform other tasks that may be assigned by the District Agent or the Director.

APPENDIX I

PARISH CHAIR PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL



Louisiana State University
Agricultural Center
 Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service

Mailing Address: Knapp Hall
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PARISH CHAIRMAN PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL INSTRUMENT

SCORE SCALE				
Excellent	Satisfactory	Acceptable But Needs Some Improvement	Unsatisfactory And Needs Considerable Improvement	Unacceptable Or Not Acceptable
100-90 (points)	89-80 (points)	79-70 (points)	69-60 (points)	59 & below (points)

The above scale is explained as follows:

Excellent - This rating means that the supervisor believes that the task is being performed at a very high level.

Satisfactory - This rating means the supervisor is satisfied and/or willing to accept the level at which the task is being performed so long as it continues to be performed at this level.

Acceptable But Needs Some Improvement - This rating means that the supervisor is willing to accept the level at which the task is being performed for the time being but feels strongly that improvement is needed and necessary.

Unsatisfactory And Needs Considerable Improvement - This rating means that supervisor is not willing to accept the level at which the task is being performed. Considerable improvement must be made before the next evaluation.

Unacceptable Or Not Acceptable - This rating means that the supervisor cannot accept this level of performance and would recommend appropriate action.

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**PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL AND CRITERIA
FOR
PARISH CHAIRMAN**

A. Programs

- 1. Provide leadership to staff members in the selection and use of advisory committees in the program development process.**

Criteria:

- a. Each agent on staff is aware of and has complied with the provisions of PP Letter No. 28 (Policy on Extension Advisory Committees) and Circular Letter No. 4. Each program area, Agriculture, 4-H, and Home Economics, must have a functioning advisory committee, minutes of meeting provided district agent.
- b. Each agent has identified the various geographic areas, interest groups and socio-economic levels and has selected representative persons to serve on advisory committees.
- c. Each agent has involved leaders, groups, and specialists in the collection and preparation of situational statements for advisory use.
- d. Each agent has met with his/her advisory group, has an advisory membership list, has agenda(s) for the meeting(s), and has evidence that each member has been informed of his/her responsibility and has agreed to serve. Parish chairman must be able to show evidence of program development in all program areas.
- e. Parish chairman meets with agent(s) and his/her advisory committee.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

2

2. Provide leadership to staff members and area agent in preparation and implementation of written programs and plans of work in accordance with existing policies, priorities and procedures established by the Director.

Criteria:

- a. Chairman has reviewed the guidelines with all agents, assisted agents in preparation of the program and plans of work, and has assurance that all these documents are in accordance with guidelines and reflect the input of advisory committees, subject matter specialists, and supervisory personnel.
- b. Each agent prepares a plan of work based on guidelines and on needs of clientele as identified in program of work.
- c. Program priorities are identified and given emphasis.
- d. Chairman reviews plan of work in development stage and counsels with agent(s) on selection of methods, techniques, and activities.
- e. Assures appropriate use of result demonstrations, farm and home visits, special interest meetings and community oriented programs.
- f. Provides opportunities for specialists to meet with parish chairman and agents to plan and execute and evaluate programs.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

3. Provide leadership to staff members in the selection, training, and utilization and recognition of leaders involved in planning and implementation of Cooperative Extension program.

Criteria:

- a. Chairman assisted agents to become knowledgeable of parish leaders and to gain skills in their selection, training and use.
- b. Chairman assures that advisory committee members understand their role in determining needs of the people, and setting priorities for program objectives.
- c. Through regular office conferences with agents, he/she assures that leaders are being appropriately involved and recognized in all parish programs.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

4. Provide leadership to staff members to develop and maintain cooperative working relationships with other agencies and organizations working on the same or similar problems and programs.

Criteria:

- a. Chairman sees that agents know the personnel from other organizations and agencies and are familiar with their programs.
- b. He/she promotes cooperative working relationships with parish staffs and staffs of other agencies.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

5. Continuously evaluate the parish Extension program to determine the extent to which it focused on and is meeting the needs of the people to be served (area agents program included).

Criteria:

- a. Chairman participates and contributes to the annual program and A.A.P. reviews for parish and area agents.
- b. Chairman counsels with agents on program and plan of work content and concurs with all program or plan of work changes.
- c. Maintains continuous evaluation of agents program activities to insure effective and efficient execution of relevant program activities.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

4

B. Personnel

1. Cooperates with the district agent in recruitment and selection of competent professional personnel as vacancies occur or new jobs are created, and orients new parish staff members to the requirements of their job.

Criteria:

- a. Cooperative and helpful in interviewing prospective agents.
- b. Chairman cooperates in carrying out formal orientation program with each new agent. This is done under the leadership of the district agent.
- c. Insures that staff members cooperate with new agent in introduction and orientation.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

2. Recruits and selects competent classified personnel as vacancies occur or new jobs are created. This is done under the leadership of and in consultation with the district agent. Train classified staff members to perform their job effectively and efficiently and evaluate for promotions and salary increases.

Criteria:

- a. Classified parish positions are filled with competent persons. All E.E.O. policies and guidelines are met and proper records are kept.
- b. Secretary(s) is trained and provides proper reception of office visitors and handles telephone calls properly.
- c. Insures that secretary(s) is prompt and adheres to office hours and policies.
- d. Insures that secretary(s) is efficient and effective in maintaining the recommended files and filing system.
- e. Parish chairman efficiently and effectively evaluates secretary(s), counsels with her and makes necessary efficiency reports.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

3. Assist district agent in decision making relative to allocation of salary, merit increases and travel funds for parish staff members.

Criteria:

- a. Chairman has knowledge about performance of personnel and provides fair and equitable recommendations to district agent for each individual.
- b. Chairman has knowledge of travel requirements and travel pattern of each agent and makes fair and equitable recommendations to the district agent for travel allocations.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

4. Establish and maintain adequate local support of salaries, office facilities and equipment for parish staff in consultation with district agent. Also, assists district agent in obtaining same for area agents.

Criteria:

- a. Annually reviews with district agent the situation regarding local contributions toward agents' salaries, office space, facilities and equipment.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

6

5. Maintains a parish office that is well equipped, supplied, and that operates efficiently and effectively.

Criteria:

- a. Maintains an adequate supply of appropriate bulletins and educational material for distribution to clientele.
- b. Insures that staff members are prompt and adhere to office hours.
- c. Secretary has knowledge of where all occupants of office may be reached at anytime during working hours.
- d. Monthly staff conferences are held to keep all agents and secretaries informed of all Extension activities and programs, office management, and to keep staff members well informed to facilitate communications and provide coordination of efforts.
- e. At least once each year the files are examined to assure that they are complete and current.
- f. Encourage professional attitude and performance among the staff.
- g. Assures that his/her own office and all offices under his/her supervision are maintained in a neat and orderly manner.
- h. Counsels with agents on professional dress and conduct codes.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

6. Report to, develop and maintain a cooperative working relationship with local governing bodies, parish and community leaders, and representatives of state and U.S. government agencies within the parish.

Criteria:

- a. Makes sure that members of the bodies are acquainted with all parish Extension personnel and with the total Extension program in the parish. This is to be done through regular reports, communications and review of Memorandum of Understanding through the leadership of the parish chairman.
 1. Initiate plans to meet and report to local governing bodies.
 2. Oral and written report to police jury and parish council.
 3. Oral and written report to parish school board.
 4. Notification to district agent upon completion of report and provide copy of report to district agent.
 5. Involve all parish staff members in reporting.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

7. Insure that all reports to be submitted by parish chairman and the staff members under his/her supervision are submitted by dates and time established for each one.

Criteria:

- a. Initiates such actions or systems that are necessary to insure that all reports from the parish are properly completed and submitted on time.
- b. Parish chairman reviews reports before submitting to district agent.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

8. Insure that the provisions of the Extension Affirmative Action and E.E.O. Plan are adhered to by all Extension personnel under his/her supervision in the conduct of parish Extension programs.

Criteria:

- a. Recruits and employs all classified personnel under the provisions of the E.E.O. Plan. Maintains all required records.
- b. At least one annual formal review of the Affirmative Action Plan should be carried out and parish and area staff members informed of needed improvements.
- c. Chairman to monitor programs continuously to insure compliance with the A.A.P. guidelines.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

8

9. Develop and maintain cooperation, coordination, and promote teamwork among and between staff members, including area agents and specialists. Keep staff members well informed on all administrative matters for which they are responsible.

Criteria:

- a. Provides for clear flow of communications between the chairman and all agents working in the parish.
- b. Conducts at least one formal parish staff meeting monthly, all agents to attend and minutes to be maintained with a copy sent to the district agent's office.
- c. Promotes attendance of area agents(s) at parish staff meetings. Initiates action to coordinate area agent and specialist activities within the parish.
- d. Provides for proper recognition of all agents contributing to parish programs.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

10. Keep well informed on laws, regulations, policies, and procedures of state, federal, and local government, U.S.D.A., Louisiana State University, Louisiana State University Agricultural Center, and the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service that affect the conduct of Extension programs.

Criteria:

- a. Insures that the office maintains an up-to-date set of records, files, and records that contain laws, policies, regulations, and procedures of the federal, state and local governments, U.S.D.A., Louisiana State University, and LSU Agricultural Center.
*Note: Book of Director's Permanent Policy Letters are kept in each parish office and are available to all personnel.
- b. Reads and studies all correspondence on these subjects.
- c. Attends area, district and state conferences.
- d. Insures that all personnel in parish have read the E.E.O. plan, the Affirmative Action Plan, the Consent Decree, and the Policies and Procedures manual as denoted by their initials.
- e. Maintains files on the above subjects.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

C. OTHER TASKS

1. To perform other tasks that may be assigned by the District Agent or the Director.

Criteria:

- a. Maintains flexibility in his/her work and attitude to take on other tasks assigned.
- b. Responds to program direction from administration in a positive manner.

100-90	89-80	79-70	69-60	59 & Below	POINTS

Constructive Comments: _____

	Possible Points	Actual Points	Possible Percentage	Actual Percentage
Programs	500		31.25%	%
Personnel	1000		62.50%	%
Other Tasks	100		6.25%	%
Overall	1,600		100%	%

The ratings included in this performance appraisal have been discussed with me by my supervisor(s) and I understand them.

Signature of Parish Chairman

Date

Signature of District Agent

Date

VITA

Cathy Hirsch Hamilton was born in West Texas in 1955. She completed her bachelor of arts degree in Plan II from the University of Texas at Austin in 1978. During the greater part of the 1980s, she served in Peru, Argentina and Chile with the Presbyterian and Methodist denominations working in community and leadership development and Christian education.

Upon her return to the United States, she pursued graduate study and in 1993 obtained a master of science degree from Texas A & M University in adult and extension education. Throughout her mission and academic careers she worked as editor or assistant editor of three publications and as director of educational ministries of several churches within two denominations. Her current interests are in collaborative research and community development.

Cathy is married to William T. Hamilton, an ordained Presbyterian minister and ethics professor. She and her husband are blessed by three children, Catherine, Lila, and Nathanael. She will earn the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the May 2001 Commencement.

DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Cathy Hirsch Hamilton

Major Field: Vocational Education

Title of Dissertation: Exploring Organizational Learning of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service: A Qualitative Study Involving Parish Chairs of Less Than Three Years Experience

Approved:

Larson Verna

Major Professor and Chairman

William Perkins

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

David Burnett

Penny Ramskill

Peter Munro

E. Thompson

Geraldine N. Helms

Date of Examination:

March 19, 2001