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Perception of County Extension Agents' Organizational Fit After Participating in the Mentoring Component of the Cooperative Extension Service Onboarding Program

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Perception of County Extension Agents' Organizational Fit After Participating in the Mentoring
Component of the Cooperative Extension Service Onboarding Program

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Human Resource and Workforce Development Education

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the perception employees of the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service (CES) after participating in a mentoring program. The CES implemented an onboarding program in 2010 which included a yearlong mentoring component for county extension agents because they were resigning at an alarming rate. The study aimed to illuminate if the mentoring program increased the county extension agents' perception of fit after completing the program by determining if they felt they possessed characteristics that were compatible with the organization.

This study was founded on the mentees' viewpoints of their perceptions of person-organization (PO) fit, operationalized by the person-environment (PE) fit framework. The researcher was able to identify implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and research by analyzing the literature regarding acclimating new employees, organizational commitment, and employee fit to describe the nuances of fit within the county agent's working environment.

The four major themes to surface in the study was mentee perceptions of CES culture, history, and traditions, employability skills needed for success, what might have increased feeling of fit, and effective mentor qualities and practices.

Mentees conveyed that mentor qualities and practices had varying results depending on the nature of the mentor and their chosen actions. Effective qualities and practices like being positive, approachable, encouraging, and devoting sufficient time to the mentorship resulted in the mentee feeling positive about the experience, but if the mentor was negative, difficult to approach, did not offer words of encouragement, and did not devote enough time to them the mentee developed negative feelings for the value and impact of the program. Several mentees

mentioned had it not been for the mentor program, they would not have continued working for the CES. Mentees had clear opinions on what elements would have increased their feeling of fit had they been included in the mentoring program including more time with other mentees, more involvement from their direct supervisor, and having more than one mentor. Additionally, mentees would have liked an option to continue the formal mentorship for more than one year, to have an opportunity to be involved in a formal internship program, and for the CES to offer mentors additional incentives for their involvement in the mentoring program.

Acknowledgements

What a journey this has been. I first want to thank my husband, Monty for your unending support throughout this process. You have sacrificed so much and taken the burden with little complaint. I love you. To my children, who halfway through this journey urged me to continue and not to give up. My sweet colleagues who have had to listen to me whine about homework on weekends, thank you for the pep talks. To my mom and dad, who paid for my undergraduate degree making me the first person in my family to earn a degree, your vision far surpassed mine. You are always there for me and I love you. To my advisor, Dr. Schmidtke, your patience and occasional pep talks kept me going, it is amazing how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together in the end.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Monty, and my three children, Ellis, Grayson, and Brodie. Thank you for your support, encouragement, and patience throughout this process.

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Chapter 1: Background & Overview of the Issue

Employee retention concerns have long been an issue for organizations. Rubenstein et al. (2013) contended that the cost to hire a new employee is 200% of the former employee's annual salary, so it is in the best interest of the organization to invest the resources necessary to ensure that new employees become acclimated to their new surroundings and culture. Fulfilling an organization's mission is dependent on employee productivity. Employees recognize when organizations understand this dependency and take steps to develop tools and strategies to address productivity and longevity (Cloutier, Felusiak, Hill, & Pemberton-Jones, 2015). Research shows that that 51% of employees are actively seeking a new job or watching for other career opportunities and are growing in confidence that other options are available (Gallup, 2017).

When the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service (CES) recognized that local county educators known as *extension agents*, who are responsible for conveying research to local citizens, were leaving at a seemingly rapid rate, it initiated an internal study to review employment data from April 4, 2006, to April 1, 2010. After conducting this internal employee retention review, the realization was substantiated. The CES hired 50 new extension agents within that time period, and 21 of those newly hired extension agents had left the organization within five years, representing an early-career agent turnover rate of 42%. Indeed, the organization was losing county extension agents at a rate that would jeopardize the Arkansas CES and its clientele if a solution could not be found. In response to these findings and prior research, the CES in 2010 developed a multi-faceted new employee onboarding program, which included a mentoring component to address the needs of county extension agents for the first year of their employment and implemented the program in 2011.

To understand this study's implications, one must understand the organizational structure of the CES as it relates to the nature of the position of county agent. The CES is an educational organization funded cooperatively with local, state, and federal dollars. The Arkansas CES is a state agency of the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture with its headquarters in Little Rock, Arkansas. The goal of CES is to provide research-based information on various subject matter including health and wellness, financial security, gardening, and positive youth development to Arkansas citizens in their communities. It is not a typical university that is geared toward a classroom setting but brings research principles and methods to local citizens in an informal setting. The Cooperative Extension Service is a subsidiary of the Land Grant University (LGU) system. The Morrill Act of 1862 established land-grant universities to educate citizens in agriculture, home economics, mechanical arts, and other practical professions. All universities engage in research and teaching, but the nation's more than 100 land-grant colleges and universities have a third critical mission—extension. "Extension" means "reaching out," and, along with teaching and research, land-grant institutions "extend" their resources to solve public needs with college or university resources through non-formal, non-credit programs. Together, local citizens and interest groups solve problems, evaluate learning techniques, and develop suggestions to prioritize the needs of the community. County agents can rely on relationships they have built to form trust and effectively conduct educational programs with citizens (University of Arkansas, 2018).

The United States Congress created the extension system in 1914 to address exclusively rural agricultural issues. At that time, more than 50% of the United States' population lived in rural areas, and 30% of the workforce was engaged in farming. Extension's engagement with rural America helped make possible the American agricultural revolution, which dramatically

increased farm productivity. Fewer than 2% of Americans farm for a living today, and only 17% now live in rural areas. However, the extension service still plays an important role in American life—rural, urban, and suburban. With its reach of having an office in or near most of the nation's approximately 3,000 counties, extension agents help farmers grow crops, homeowners plan and maintain their homes, and children learn skills to become tomorrow's leaders (University of Arkansas, 2018).

Extension was initially called the Farmers' Cooperative Demonstrative Work of the United States Department of Agriculture under Dr. Seaman A. Knapp's direction and began in Arkansas in 1905 with the appointment of J. A. Evans as a state agent and A. V. Swatty as a district agent. By 1907, four district agents and seven county agents had been appointed. When the Smith-Lever Act went into effect, the personnel of the state organization (Farmers' Cooperative Demonstration Work) consisted of a state agent in charge, a state home demonstration agent, a state 4-H club agent, 3 male district agents, several specialists, 52 county agents, 15 home demonstration agents, and the necessary clerical force (Evans, 1938).

Extension was formalized in 1914 with the Smith-Lever Act. It established the partnership between the agricultural colleges and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to provide cooperative agricultural extension work. At the heart of agricultural extension work were the following two tasks:

- Developing practical applications of research knowledge (Smith & Wilson, 1930).
- Giving instruction and practical demonstrations of existing or improved practices or technologies in agriculture (Evans, 1984).

Smith-Lever mandated that the federal government, in the form of the USDA, provide each state with funds based on a population-related formula. Today, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) distributes these formula grants annually.

Currently, the Arkansas Cooperative Extension employs 187 extension agents with at least two agents stationed in each of the 75 counties in Arkansas. County agents in Arkansas are college-educated individuals with either a bachelor's or master's degree in the areas of agriculture or family and consumer sciences. There are four types of agents in Arkansas: family and consumer science, agriculture, community and economic development, and 4-H agents (University of Arkansas, 2018). Every county in Arkansas currently has at least two extension agents on staff as well as at least one support staff member for clerical duties.

County agents are educators, facilitators, and volunteer managers. Whether local citizens want to learn more about a topic, need someone to guide them through a process, want to develop local partnerships, desire to make community changes, or just need an answer to a question, county extension agents are local, trained citizens in their counties. Other services might include an agriculture agent's recommendation that saves money for the client with a new research-based pest control method or a new seed variety. Another example is a family and consumer sciences agent who works with a family after they were forced to file for bankruptcy and were directed to seek financial management skills through the court system.

There are certain personality characteristics that must be either present or developed for extension agents to be deemed successful in their role. Agents must be able to listen to clientele, work on several tasks at once, and possess the educational fortitude to answer important questions regarding a wide variety of topics such as current effective farming practices, fiscal responsibility, healthy living practices, and youth development. All these skills are coupled with effective facilitation techniques, time management skills, and an adequate knowledge base of the required subject-matter expertise. Recommendations that agents disperse in the four subject areas listed above stem from research-based studies and are non-biased (Cooper & Graham, 2001).

Successfully implementing skills to support local clientele with their various needs is valued by stakeholders because it directly affects citizens and their local issues and problems. The state extension office and university personnel would not need to conduct research if there were no clients to whom to extend their research efforts. Fulfilling an organization's mission is dependent on employee productivity. Employees recognize when organizations understand this dependency and take steps to develop tools and strategies to address productivity and longevity (Cloutier, Felusiak, Hill, & Pemberton-Jones, 2015).

The Arkansas CES Program and Staff Development (PSD) department developed and facilitates an employee onboarding program that starts the first day that county agents begin their new assignment and includes several components strategically planned throughout the new employees' first year. The onboarding program involves a team of people including the new employees' immediate supervisor, district director, state program leader, co-workers, assigned mentor, Human Resources, and even the volunteer base they will be working closely with throughout their tenure in the county. To instill a sense of organizational protocol, the CES onboarding program offers professional development opportunities to county agents to develop competency in organizational effectiveness, communication skills, technology software programs typically used by the CES, and personal development.

Key Elements of the Onboarding Process

The new employee onboarding program includes five key elements involved in the onboarding process (University of Arkansas, 2018).

1. Online Courses

- a. *Extension 101* - This introductory course for new county agents provides a basic orientation to Extension technical systems, the organization culture, and

- communication and time management tips. The goal of the course is to assist new agents with time entry, accountability, and completion of basic onboarding steps.
- b. *Presentation Skills* – Employees learn about the seven keys of effective educational presentations and how to achieve them. The course addresses how to determine needs, design presentations, use personal attributes to deliver presentations with confidence, and evaluate presentations.
 - c. *Southern Extension History* - Teaches the history of Extension in the South. This course has five modules, each featuring a narrated video, handouts, and questions to check one's knowledge.
 - d. *New Agent Onboarding and Mentoring* – This course provides an overview of the new agent onboarding and mentoring program and will build the agent's knowledge, skills, and abilities to become an integral part of Extension. Agents completing this course should better understand Extension's culture and expectations and be able to identify key resources for professional development and program support.
 - e. *Staff Chair & Mentor Onboarding Training* - This course provides key training and resources to ensure that staff chairs and mentors understand and have support for their roles in effectively onboarding and retaining new agents. Upon completion of this training, staff chairs and mentors should have the knowledge and tools to increase the organization's probability of retaining new agents.

2. “Mentables” Teleconference Sessions

These sessions consist of monthly video conference meetings featuring experienced employee guest speakers presenting a variety of topics that are beneficial to

first year county extension agents. Topics covered include building community networks, evaluating programs, marketing, managing volunteers, and discussing other common experiences for new agents. New employees interact with seasoned agents and human resource personnel through question-and-answer sessions. All sessions are recorded for future reference.

3. Filling your Extension Toolbox In-Service

This onboarding component consists of both an online pre-requisite and a face-to-face four-day training. The topics provide professionalism advice, peer-to-peer interaction, and program planning and evaluation using the logic model.

4. Mentoring Program

- a. Mentee* – new employee
- b. Mentor* – experienced employee
- c. Supervisor* – mentee's direct supervisor
- d. District Director* – one of three supervisors each providing leadership to 25 counties in Arkansas

The mentoring program is a one-year program beginning on the new employees' first day at work. The new employees are assigned a mentor by their district director. The mentor ideally welcomes the new employee within the first week on the job. The mentor, mentee, and the mentee's direct supervisor each receive a mentorship notebook which provides timetables and checklists to ensure all participants share common goals throughout the mentoring process.

5. Check-In and Tune-Up In-Service

The check-in and tune-up in-service training is a required one-day workshop for new employees. Topics covered include the “big picture” of Extension and tips and advice on how to be successful in their new jobs.

Problem Statement

If a county extension agent resigns, the CES organization is at risk of losing productivity and longevity. Citizens involved in the CES programs in the counties where the county agents were located are at risk of receiving sub-par services because of lack of personnel available to conduct educational programs, provide mentorship opportunities for youth, or manage essential duties associated with volunteer program management.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the perception of county extension agents about their organizational fit after participating in the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program. The Arkansas CES was losing employees at a high rate of speed, which led to the creation of an onboarding program to help slow the high turnover rate. It is not known if the creation of the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program has helped to increase the perception of new county agents’ fit in the organization. A review of the literature is lacking on whether onboarding programs in the CES system are perceived by new county agents as a method of aligning their values and goals to those of the organization. Investing in human capital through employee engagement is one way to ensure an organization is set up for success. If employees are regarded as an investment rather than a liability, leaders can expect a return on their investment instead of a loss if they are willing to instill trust in their employees. A climate built on trust, availability, and transparency will create a sense of identity between the employees

and the organization and will unleash latent intellectual capital in the employees who perceive they have been entrusted with vital information (Swain, 1999). Through conversations with their mentors, newly hired county agents may gain understanding of the organization's norms and values to determine compatibility with their own characteristics. If so, they may be more inclined to remain in their position.

Overall Research Question

Did the mentoring component of the employee onboarding program implemented by the Arkansas CES in 2010 provide adequate support to ensure employees perceived themselves as possessing characteristics that were compatible with the organization?

Questions to be Answered

- How did participating in the mentoring component of the onboarding program affect the way in which new county agents perceived that they had the characteristics to effectively face the demands of their workload at the CES?
- Why did county agents perceive themselves as being a good or a poor fit between what CES offered them and what they needed in a job after participating in the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program?
- How did county agents perceive the CES's values to be congruent with their own values after participating in the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program?
- How did county agents perceive their worth to the organization as compared to before participating in the mentoring program?

Theoretical Framework

Studies on the topic of organizational commitment (Amos & Weathington, 2008; Valaei & Rezaei, 2016; Valentine, Godkin, & Lucero, 2002) and onboarding programs in general (Bielski, 2007; Cable, Gino & Staats, 2013; Graybill, Carpenter, Offord, Piorum, & Shaffer, 2013; Gundry & Rousseau, 1994; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein, & Song, 2013; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Lavigna, 2009; Saks, 1997; Snell, 2006) recognize the importance of identifying employees' needs and values. These factors may influence employees to remain employed at an organization or leave. However, there was a limited number of studies regarding employees' perceptions of their individual organizational commitment level after involvement in an onboarding program (Meyer & Bartels, 2017). A review of research databases did not identify any studies that specifically studied the mentoring component of an onboarding program within the Cooperative Extension Service system or other organizations with similar cultures.

This study employed the theoretical concept of Person-Environment (PE) fit. The theoretical concept of PE fit was first proposed by the Greek philosopher Plato (Kaplan, 1950) and developed further by occupational psychologists like Dawis et al. (1964) and Holland (1959). The concept has its roots in the interactive perspective in psychology (Kaplan, 1950), which recognizes that individuals' attitudes and actions are determined cooperatively by their personal characteristics and their environments. In studies of PE fit, persons are operationalized in terms of individual traits such as abilities or preferences. Environments usually refer to some characteristics of a setting such as demands or norms (Yang et al., 2009).

Broadly defined, fit is the compatibility between an individual and an organization (Kristof, 1996), and PE fit is defined as the *extent* to which an employee is compatible with the workplace environment (Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 1996). Person-

environment fit theories surmise that there are benefits for both the employee and the organization if they are positively matched (Carless, 2005). Many factors can influence an individual's perception of PE fit. Edwards et al. (2006) researched perceptions of PE fit as both similarities and differences of the person and environment. They concluded that the phenomenology of PE fit is very complex and should include greater emphasis on both employee and environment perceptions and the multitude of influencing factors.

Muchinsky and Monahan (1987) distinguished between two main conceptualizations of PE fit, supplementary or complementary: "By supplementary we mean that a person fits into some environmental context because he or she supplements, embellishes, or possesses characteristics which are similar to other individuals in this environment" (p. 269). Other researchers described supplementary fit as the similarity between the individual and the environment on a measured concept, such as a value or goal (Edwards et al., 1998; Kristof, 1996).

Complementary fit is a reciprocal environment in which the capabilities of the individual and the environment meet the needs of the other (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Edwards et al., 1998; Kristof, 1996). Research has identified two types of complementary fit, needs-supply and demands-ability (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). First, needs-supply fit is conducive to an environment that provides the resources and rewards that support the individual's interests, values, inclinations, and motives (Edwards, 1998; Kristoff-Brown et al., 2005). Needs-supply fit recognizes that individuals have different preferences, needs, and motives that require different resources from their organization (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Demands-abilities fit, conversely, is focused on what the individual can provide to the environment. Demands-ability fit recognizes that individuals must possess certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) to meet their

requirements, expectations, and norms (Edwards et al., 1998; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

Typically, the focus of the research concerning an employee's PE fit is measured by his or her supplementary fit (Kristoff-Brown et al., 2005).

Person-environment fit remains an expansive term, even though there are different classifications of compatibility encompassing many aspects of the environment (Edwards & Billsberry, 2010). Therefore, more specific dimensions or conceptualizations of PE fit have emerged with multi-faceted views distinguished by the comparison of the environment being studied. These different dimensions of fit include person-organization (PO), person-vocation (PV), person-supervisor (PS), person-group (PG), and person-job (PJ) fit (Edwards & Billsberry, 2010; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). This study will focus on PO fit. When comparing PE and PO fit, one can conceptualize PE fit as an employee who fits into an organizational environment and becomes an active and contributing member, and PO fit defines the organization as the environment in which the employee participates and contributes.

Person-organization fit examines the relationship between an individual's characteristics and an organization's characteristics (Cable & Judge, 1996; Kristof, 1996). Research has also identified organizational benefits related to PO fit. Organizations that concentrate on hiring for fit may improve upon their employees' productivity and work. Person-organization fit has been shown to lead to increased demonstrations of loyal behaviors to the organization (Wei, 2012). Additionally, PO fit intensifies an individual's desire to seek, gain, and share knowledge with other members of the organization, exhibit ethical behavior, and remain with the organization (Coldwell, Billsberry, Van Meurs, & Marsh, 2008; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

How well an employee's values, goals, and personality fit the organization has commonly been measured within the PO literature. Often referred to as *value congruence*, this fit has been shown in the PO fit literature to be the most consistent and effective predictor of employee outcomes (Verquer et al., 2003). Therefore, value congruence has become the most widely accepted definition of PO fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) and is the definition employed for this study. Employees naturally strive to realize their values in their place of employment, and organizations prefer that employees conform to their values (Atkins et al., 1994; Suar & Khuntia, 2010); it is a goal that both employee and employer find common ground toward value congruence (Michailova & Minbaeva, 2012). Chatman (1991) examined the role of PO fit, operationalized as congruence between the work values of the employee and the dominant work values of the organization in the newcomer's adjustment to the organization, job satisfaction, and intent to remain with the organization. Chatman believed PO fit is influenced by the organization's values and by the changes of the individual's values following employment.

Person-organization fit is a common topic of research because of its benefits to both the individual and the organization. Employees are likely to have higher career satisfaction and commitment to an organization if they share similar values (Newton & Jimmieson, 2009; Ostroff, Shin, & Kinicki, 2005), and positive attitudes are more likely when PO fit is high (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Furthermore, when value congruence is high, the organization benefits because employees display less stress and a better attitude toward their work (Newton & Jimmieson, 2009; Ostroff et al., 2005).

Overview of Population and Methods

The 95 employees who had completed the one-year mentoring component of the CES onboarding program by September 1, 2019, were eligible to participate in the study. Since

Hagaman and Wutich (2017) proposed that saturation often occurs around 12 participants in homogeneous groups, the researcher decided to interview 12-15 mentees who had completed the CES onboarding program. To seek depth, a smaller number of people was studied to explore an open range of their experiences regarding the CES mentoring program. A purposive random sampling strategy which focused on certain characteristics of a population that are of interest (Patton, 2003) was employed to enable the researcher to answer the research questions with information-rich content by illuminating the questions under study. Studying cases that have rich information produces insights and understanding with more depth and breadth instead of firsthand generalizations. Rich descriptions helped the researcher to learn about key issues of central importance to the *purpose* of the inquiry. The purposive random sample (Patton, 2003) was generated using the Excel software program and used a random number table certifying that no systematic process was used to sample from the population.

Before any research took place, the researcher sought permission from the CES director and then proceeded to the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). All research studies involving human subjects are required to be reviewed by the IRB. This policy is enforced by the University of Arkansas and by federal regulators. After being granted permission to continue with research, the researcher began gathering information from the participants in the study. Additionally, prior to contacting selected agents, the researcher proceeded through the proper channels to allow access to agents to interview. It was necessary to secure permission from one of the three CES district directors depending on the county in which the mentee is employed.

Initial contact was made with eligible employees by telephone to describe the interview process and to explore their interest in participating. Potential participants were provided a synopsis of what the consent form contained, stressing that the interview was purely voluntary.

The researcher asked participants not to give a final answer until they received an email that included the informed consent document for their review. If they agreed to participate, the researcher sent a hard copy for agents to sign before the interview and again went over the form in detail to provide them an opportunity to ask any questions about the interview process. The researcher then telephoned or emailed the mentees to set up a videoconference interview utilizing an online software called Zoom at a time that was convenient for them.

After approval from the dissertation committee and gathering data, the researcher used qualitative analysis software to examine the qualitative data to place words and phrases categorically by topic or theme. The researcher employed techniques of axial and open coding in the study to discover common themes and interpret meaning of the relationships as they arose from the data.

Definition of Key Terms

Division of Agriculture:

The University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, which includes the Cooperative Extension Service, sixteen Research Agricultural Experiment Stations, and the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville (Seevers, Graham, Garmon, & Conklin, 1997).

Land-Grant College/University:

Established by the Morrill Acts of 1862 & 1890 and expanded from the Hatch Act of 1887 and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. Land-grant colleges provide practical knowledge, linkage to research, and the use of hands-on learning in a non-formal setting (Sanderson, 1988).

Cooperative Extension Service:

The Cooperative Extension Service is a public-funded, nonformal, educational system that links the education and research resources of the United States Department of Agriculture, land-grant universities, and county administrative units (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 1995).

Non-Biased:

Showing no prejudice toward or against anything

District Director:

Faculty member of the Cooperative Extension Service with administrative duties who supervises county agents and support staff in Arkansas. There are 3 districts in Arkansas consisting of 25 counties each. Therefore, there are three district directors.

Stakeholders:

An individual who has a stake in an enterprise (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

County Extension Agent:

Employees of the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service who serve as professional county educators in each of Arkansas's 75 counties.

Employee Turnover:

Cessation of membership in an organization by an individual who receives monetary compensation from the organization (Mobley, 1982).

Job Designations of County Extension Agents:

The job labels of county Extension agents in Arkansas reflect the agents' major job responsibilities. Agents have responsibilities in three key areas:

- Horticulture and livestock - agriculture agent

- Health, financial management, and family matters - family and consumer science agent; and
- Youth development - 4-H agent

The staff chair is the county extension agent with responsibilities in the aforementioned areas who supervises the other staff in the county office and acts as a liaison between county staff and the district director.

Onboarding:

The action or process of integrating a new employee into an organization or familiarizing a new customer or client with one's products or services.

Mentoring:

To advise or train (someone, especially a younger colleague).

Significance/Unique Aspect of the Study

Organizations are continually being asked to make a greater impact with fewer allotted resources, making it increasingly important to use their resources in a responsible, accountable manner. The CES relies heavily on local stakeholders to communicate the relevance of CES services to local constituents and lawmakers. If local stakeholders consistently see high turnover that interrupts services within a county or state office, they may decide that the funding the CES receives is not the best way to allocate taxpayer money, which may negatively affect the way the CES functions. The CES system does not produce tuition and only receives a small percentage of formula funding through the Division of Agriculture, creating a unique financial structure which makes the employees' relationship with key stakeholders very important.

Prior research has been conducted analyzing CES employees in various locations throughout the U.S. regarding the presence and application of onboarding practices, including

the mentoring component (Ladd, 2001; Lee, 1995). Furthermore, the learning styles of adults in professional settings that better acclimate them accurately to their new surroundings have been identified as being vital information (Laughlin & Moore, 2012; Mumford, 1995). Recognition has been placed on mentees specifically by Cohen (1995), who identified mentees in the workplace as adult learners relating the importance of tapping into their learning style to building professional development opportunities. However, there was inadequate research focusing on the perceptions of mentor-mentee relationships, analyzing their success, effectiveness, or whether they met their expectations (Denny, 2016).

Discovering the mentees' point of view was thought to potentially help gauge the effectiveness of the mentoring program in the Arkansas CES as it related to the overall onboarding program. If a result was found that positively influences an employee's organizational commitment and alignment of goals and values, then perhaps CES institutions nationwide could utilize the techniques in their own systems.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this study was considered an instrument of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Rather than using inventories or questionnaires, the data were facilitated through this human instrument. As a former CES agent in the field and later a member of state level extension programming efforts, the researcher was aware of the potential to display bias because of her close connection with the study. During and after the study she recorded detailed notes of her observations and reflections to allow readers to realize how she came to her conclusions. The researcher sought to build a depiction of participants' perceptions using theories and ideas discovered in conversation with participants. The researcher asked probing

questions, listened, thought, then asked more probing questions to get to deeper levels of the conversation (Punch, 1998).

Limitations and Delimitations

This study included full-time CES agents who participated as mentees as part of the Arkansas CES onboarding program when they were newly hired and was limited to the 95 county agents who served as mentees in Arkansas counties in the past eight years and who now have job designations as county extension agents – agriculture, family and consumer science, or 4-H. Each mentee was assigned a mentor based on length of service, geographic proximity, and characteristics of the job description. Employees in any other classification of employment were not included in this study, nor were employees who had left the CES. The study concentrated on those agents with similar work environments such as number of employees in one office and county population size and attributes. If county agents have six agents in one office versus two in another, they may have more support in their immediate surroundings than those with only two agents in their county.

Despite the CES being replicated nationwide through land-grant colleges, data results may be interpreted as specific to one organization and not be generalizable beyond the specific populations from which the sample was drawn. However, many characteristics and problematic employment issues of the CES are shared by numerous service organizations. These may include but are not limited to salary restrictions, size of the pool of qualified employees, and competition from other organizations.

Late spring and summer are very busy times of the year for agriculture agents, who support row crop farmers and family, and consumer science and 4-H agents, who work with youth at 4-H summer events and activities while they are out of school. Therefore, interviews

were conducted in the fall of 2019 and were limited to agents in Arkansas. Additionally, the researcher did not interview any employees who had left the CES prior to the study. The study concentrated on mentees who had actively participated in and completed the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program, which began in January of 2012.

Summary

The University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture CES implemented an employee onboarding program in 2012 after realizing it was losing a high percentage of county extension agents in a short period of time after the agents began working for the CES.

The Arkansas CES onboarding program consists of several components including online courses, live and recorded videoconference sessions, mentoring, and in-service training opportunities. This study sought to evaluate county extension agent perceptions of the mentoring component of the onboarding program regarding the effectiveness of whether it developed or nurtured employee perception of value and goal alignment with the Arkansas CES.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The focus of this study is the mentoring component of the onboarding program at the Arkansas CES. Literature was reviewed that included a sequence of common organizational socialization processes, current applications used by managers and human resource professionals to acclimate new employees, descriptions and classifications of employee commitment, and perceptions of fit that these processes afford new employees.

New Employee Socialization

Socialization can be described as a learning process (Klein & Weaver, 2000; Louis, 1980; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Wanous & Colella, 1989) for newcomers to acquire organizational information and behaviors to help the organization become or remain strong in developing new concepts and delivering a high performance (Fisher, 1986; Korte, Brunhaver, & Sheppard, 2015). As Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, and Gardner (1994) explained, the definition of organizational socialization has progressed from simply “learning the ropes” to a more specifically distinct “process by which an individual comes to appreciate the values, abilities, expected behaviors, and social knowledge essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organizational member” (p. 730). The quality of social interactions and relationships between newcomers and insiders is an important indicator of successful socialization (Korte, 2009; Korte et al., 2015; Sluss & Thompson, 2012).

After an employee joins an organization, the socialization process normally occurs quickly (Bauer & Green, 1994), followed by a period of relative stability (Morrison, 1993). Researchers have traditionally associated “new employee” with a specific tenure range, often the initial two to three years after entry (Gundry, 1993; Kin & Sethi, 1998; Lee & Allen, 1982; Morrison & Vancouver, 1997; Rollag, 2007). Friedman (2005) found that employees decide

within the first 30 days whether they feel welcome in a new organization. This swift acclimation to the new environment suggests that socialization variables should be evaluated early in the employment process (Klein & Weaver, 2000; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). A longitudinal study on newcomer socialization procedures and organizational commitment showed that after six months and twelve months, respectively, employees who experienced reinforced social support reported higher levels of organizational commitment than those who did not (Meyer & Allen, 1990; Meyer & Bartels, 2017). Furthermore, to become and remain acclimated, employee socialization should last the length of a career, not just the first few weeks or months, as it takes several months for newcomers to acclimate to the culture of the workplace and feel like a contributing member (Acevedo & Yancey 2011; Barge & Schlueter, 2004, Fisher, 1986; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanber, Rubenstein, & Song, 2013; Wanous, 1992; Wanous & Reichers, 2000).

The more quickly employees adapt to their surroundings, the sooner they can begin contributing to the company's productivity, regardless of their role or department (Snell, 2006). New employees are less productive before they learn how to use their skills and experience to make a positive contribution to the organization, so organizations are wise to quickly and intentionally implement timely, relevant training and development sessions in new employees' first weeks on a job because such sessions are likely to influence their ensuing adjustment. An important element to training and development sessions is to ask for adequate feedback from new employees to reduce their uncertainty. It would be beneficial for employees and employers if organizations considered using self-assessments to determine the training needs of newcomers. In this way, organizations should be able to design training and other socialization programs that adequately suit newcomers' needs and desires (Saks, 1996).

Socialization is not one sided; it should be a shared investment that benefits both the employee and the employer. There is work to be done by the organization *and* the newcomers to ensure a smooth socialization process, and new hires can offer organizations real-time feedback on what is working or not (Friedman, 2005). Organizational socialization can be obtained by studying broad frameworks that provide content and consequences of common socialization practices (Chao et al., 1994). The new employees' supervisor has the power to create conditions to facilitate socialization (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Snell, 2006) by using specific techniques to help newcomers feel increased actual and perceived fit in their new environment (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005).

Fostering positive communication is an important element in orienting new employees to existing organizational cultural values because communication engages and promotes employee commitment to the vision and values of the organization (Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 1991). An organization that invests time to consistently build a standardized guide of communication processes between managers and newcomers will build a strong connection between the person and the organization (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011; Collins & Mellahi, 2009). For this reason, it is crucial to develop open lines of communication from the employee and the employer. This investment will send the right message to newcomers of how they fit in the organizational system, but the organization must first understand its own culture before communicating its cultural values to new employees. The results of poor communication in an organization lead to a poor work culture, which in turn leads to employee turnover (Cloutier, Felusiak, Hill, & Pemberton-Jones, 2015).

It is important to confirm that new employees are socialized properly, but it is also a major need of new employees to know *how* they fit into the overall purpose of the organization

(Baldoni, 2013). Concisely providing newcomers with details about their new job and role within the organization is an important strategy (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Saks, 1996). A common practice where newcomers reported a good explanation of their company involved managers providing a tangible diagram of the overall company structure, explaining the workflow (Verquer & Beehr, 2003). It also helps to prepare newcomers by making them aware of the specific experiences they might face early in their employment with the organization (Korte et al., 2015).

Moreland and Levine (2002) found that organizations may find success in socializing newcomers not only to the organization as a whole but also to their corresponding work groups because gaining the group's acceptance is very important for new employees (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011; Barge & Schlueter, 2004). Socialization occurs when new employees hear evaluative statements from coworkers about their job and feel inclined to agree with them to "fit in" (Wanous, 1980). New employees listen to feedback and adopt the advice they are offered by coworkers who also provide information on how to react to and perceive their environment and the culture of the organization (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Among the most satisfied and productive newcomers were those who experienced frequent and high-quality interactions with their managers and coworkers; those who did not expressed higher levels of anxiety, frustration, and job dissatisfaction (Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1964). It is imperative that newcomers be welcomed into the various teams in the organization over time due to evidence that persons attracted to, selected by, staying with, and behaving appropriately in organizations are more loyal and committed to their position (Weinstock & Bennett, 1971).

Taking measures to ensure that new employees feel they are part of the team in an organization is as important to building retention as developing effective recruitment strategies is

to hiring (Friedman, 2005). Opportunities for newcomers to interact with colleagues through face-to-face meetings, informal introductory exercises, and serving on small committees are all acceptable avenues to socialize newcomers. With high levels of uncertainty and little knowledge of the nuances of the workplace, newcomers make sense of their situations by referring to past experiences, asking questions, and observing others (Carr et al., 2006; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992), giving coworkers a heavy influence in the new employee socialization process. If enough support is offered by their colleagues, newcomers tend to be proactive and naturally socialize themselves on their own volition if given ample occasions to do so (Klein & Weaver, 2000). Organizations should be aware that newcomers must share *some* attributes with the organization so they can find common ground (Cloutier et al., 2015; Schneider, 1987).

It is beneficial to organizations during the recruiting, selection, and training processes to focus on identifying individuals who will prosper in the organization's culture to enable the organization to increase productivity (Cory, Ward, & Schultz, 2007). New employee socialization processes have been shown to be enhanced by encouraging autonomy even if it goes against organizational cultural attitudes, but some organizations find balancing socialization and autonomy difficult. Organizations must be open to the practice of allowing new employees some independence (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011). While ensuring that new employees are nurtured, organizations must allow them to have a degree of autonomy to stand out from the crowd. Improving their individual capabilities, building up positive attitudes, doing their best, being organized, and enriching their work effectiveness significantly decreases various forms of job withdrawal actions like lateness, absenteeism, and burnout (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Steel, Griffeth, & Horn, 2002).

Organizational Congruence and Culture

Organizations are said to have built certain cultures when employees share a common set of assumptions, values, and beliefs (Cable & Judge, 1996). Determining compatibility involves the comparison of one aspect of the person with one aspect of the environment to predict a behavioral or psychological outcome (Edwards & Billsberry, 2010). This comparison is referred to as *congruence* (Adkins, Russell, & Werbel, 1994). Attention to value congruence among existing employees is warranted because value congruence remains an important influence on incumbents', not just newcomers', attitudes (Ostroff, Shin, & Kinicki, 2005). Individuals estimate the match between their personality, attitudes, and values and the organization's values, goals, structures, processes, and culture (Carless, 2005; Edwards & Billsberry, 2010; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). This comparison is referred to as the employees' *perception of value congruence*, which helps the employees weigh their importance within the organization (Newton & Jimmieson, 2009).

The knowledge gained about the organization in an orientation training program may help new employees develop social relationships with other organizational members. Having a better understanding of the history, traditions, and values of the organization may help new employees engage coworkers in discussion, join in on others' conversations, and be more quickly accepted (Klein & Weaver, 2000).

Purportedly people can receive all the rewards they desire from a job and have the right skills to do the job but still not relate to the organization's cultural values (Amos & Weathington, 2008). When employees do not share the values of their organization, they have been found to be less likely to identify with the organization, less trusting of the organization's motives, less willing to help the organization with extra-role contributions, and less likely to stay in the

organization (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Employees sharing the values of their organizations are more committed to their organizations, more satisfied with their jobs, and less likely to quit (Chatman, 1989, 1991; Judge & Bretz, 1993; Meglino, Ravlin, & Adkins, 1989; O'Reilly et al., 1991). Cable and DeRue (2002) contended that many employees perceive values congruence as a reward of their job. Kristof (1996) and other researchers (e.g., Hogan & Coote, 2014; Schein, 1992) found that strong relationships exist between personal values and psychological needs as well as between organizational values and supplies (Cable & Edwards, 2004).

Integrating newcomers into an organization requires a cultural change for the newcomers and the organization, which allows an assimilation of satisfying relationships between newcomers and those already in the organization (Friendman, 2005). Organizations tend to become accustomed to certain types of employees that the organization deems fitting for its culture, values, and mission. Company administrators tend to get into the habit of advertising for and selecting the “right types” of employees. This practice weakens the organization by allowing it to become ingrown with employees who have similar characteristics because the people, structure, and processes may be narrowed to a small niche (Aldrich, 1979), making the organization impervious to new ideas (Argyris, 1976). It is important to find a compromise where there is some sharing of proclivities for both historical values and more current organizational performance habits (Alderfer, 1971).

From the beginning of the recruitment process through long-term employment, managers should pay attention to how clearly they are communicating work unit and organizational values and culture. This should aid in the attraction, hiring, and retention of individuals who share those values and are inspired by an organization that reinforces them. One effective way to communicate culture is to transmit it through myths and stories, and when large groups within

organizations share the meanings of these myths, a culture is said to exist (Schein, 1992; Schneider, 1987). It has been determined that some employees judge satisfaction with their jobs and careers primarily based on the fit between their personal needs and the rewards that they receive in return for their inputs (Judge & Martocchio, 1995) and not on the basis of shared values with their organization or ability to perform the job (Cable & DeRue, 2002).

Acclimating New Employees

Orientation

New employee orientation (NEO) programs are a form of employee acclimation process designed to introduce new employees to their jobs, the people they will be working with, and the larger organization (Klein & Weaver, 2000). NEOs start off the socialization process, help new employees fit into their new surroundings (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Wanous & Reichers, 2000), and are a deliberate attempt by an organization to introduce new employees to what working for the organization will be like (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011; Goldstein & Ford, 2002). Training should be formal, job related, and available as an option for all employees (Cloutier et al., 2015). Training during the first several months of socialization can influence newcomers' impressions and attitudes toward the organization and assist them in their adjustment (Saks, 1996; Tannenbaum, 1991). Employees are more apt to stay if employers provide and invest training in their employee (Baldoni, 2018; Cloutier et al., 2015).

The attributes employees need to succeed on the job, including those desired upon entry into the job, can be found through an analysis of the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required to perform the essential functions of the job (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011; Muchinsky, 2003). Orientation programs have been shown to increase newcomers' KSAs, potentially making orientation a very powerful piece of employee development and motivating

employees to remain loyal to the organization and become part of a cohesive workforce (Cloutier et al., 2015). Although many organizations include NEO as part of their new employee development tactics, few truly utilize its full scope (Allen & Meyer, 1990). If NEOs can improve employees' person-organization fit, organizations might reduce turnover and increase employee commitment and job satisfaction (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011).

Research indicates that employees are not adversely affected when they receive “too much” organizational orientation (Mowday, 1996). In fact, oversupply may be optimal for establishing fit in the organization for a newcomer (Saks, 1996). A greater amount of time spent in formal training was related to more positive job attitudes, ability to cope, job performance, and lower intentions to quit (Saks, 1996). These findings are consistent with the general trend of results from equity theory, which suggests that overpayment is not as troubling to employees as underpayment (Pritchard, 1969). Korte et. al (2015) found that newcomers often described general orientation as “drinking from a fire hose” because of the large amount of detailed procedural information presented, and other employees reported that this experience was not helpful because they had little context from which to make sense of this information (Wanous & Reichers, 2000).

If employees are given a choice of whether to attend an NEO, Klein and Weaver (2000) found that new employees who voluntarily attended NEO programs were significantly more socialized with the organization's goals, values, history, and people than those employees who chose not to attend. A new employee attending an orientation program should become more socialized on the goals/values dimension and become socialized sooner than new employees left to haphazardly infer the organization's goals and value over time on their own (Klein & Weaver, 2000). In addition, employees who attended the program had considerably higher levels of

affective organizational commitment as mediated by socialization elements (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011). Heathfield (2008) posited that making a concerted effort to continually train employees is important and has a significant economic impact. Cloutier et al. (2015) agreed that training and development are tools for motivation and optimize the potential for employee retention by increasing their commitment.

As employees gain tenure in the organization, training should be more than one stop in the new hire process (Friedman, 2005). For a company to truly benefit from the attributes and skills recognized in all new employees, it is essential to support them through a comprehensive introductory process (Snell, 2006). Continuing the orientation practice assists organizations in ensuring that new employees are up and functioning as soon as possible.

Onboarding

The terms *orientation* and *onboarding* are often used interchangeably in conversation to describe the process an organization uses to acclimate new employees. Orientation and onboarding concentrate on certain contexts of the organization whereas socialization is an overall cultural connection (Cable, Gino & Staats, 2013). However, there are distinct differences between orientation and onboarding. Employee orientation is an event or a short series of events, is usually conducted in the classroom, and includes factual, formal introductions about the organization. Often, new employees attend from all levels of the organization regardless of their job title or department (Eisner, 2014).

Onboarding is a more strategic process that usually takes place over several months to a year. Ideally, an onboarding program begins when the offer is extended to new employees and ends when the newcomers are considered fully functional members of the organization

(D'Aurizio, 2007). Onboarding concentrates on the newcomers' roles in their team and is a sequence of events that may include orientation initially.

Because acclimating new employees is expensive, organizations should concentrate onboarding efforts to ensure they are effectively preparing employees for on-the-job success by delivering the proper content and teaching it the right way because training and development are critical for employee retention strategy (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011; Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005; Heggstad & Kanfer, 2005; Holladay & Quinones, 2003; Hugh & Bergin, 2006). If NEOs can improve employees' person-job fit, they might reduce turnover and increase employee commitment and job satisfaction (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011).

Onboarding supports employee socialization, which is the transition of the employee from organizational stranger to integrated member and can be described as the direct bridge between the promise of new employee talent and the attainment of actual productivity (Snell, 2006). There are common underlying goals of onboarding programs that include creating an inviting and positive experience for new employees and aligning new employees with key business strategies to communicate how the new hire will contribute to the overall mission and vision of the organization (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013).

If the onboarding process is implemented properly, it will enhance new employees' transitions into the organization and help them become more engaged (Graybill, Carpenter, Offord, Piorun, & Schaffer, 2013). Through onboarding, employees gain an understanding of the goals, responsibilities, and legal implications of their roles within the greater structure of the organization. According to Meyer and Bartels (2017), best-in-class onboarding programs result in highly integrated, productive, and satisfied employees and dramatically affect turnover rates as well as customer satisfaction.

Several onboarding tactics are positively correlated with organizational commitment after six months (Bauer, Bodnar, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007). A well-designed and automated onboarding process reduces costs, hastens time to productivity, and improves retention due to greater employee satisfaction (Snell, 2006). Encouraging new employees to be successful can have a direct impact on how committed they are to their position. Committed and dedicated employees are better employees and often stay at their jobs longer, perform better, and become more vested in their success (Weinstock, 2015). Effective onboarding is positively correlated with job and customer satisfaction, organizational commitment, engagement, performance, and loyalty and inversely related to turnover (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013; D'Aurizio, 2007; Lavigna, 2009; Meyer & Bartels, 2017; Snell, 2006).

Similar to creating an image of what it would be like to work for an organization during the recruiting stage, in the onboarding stage the organization needs to deliver on that image to ensure it mirrors the environment in which employees have the desire to put forth the effort to work. Because organizations frequently invest significant time in recruiting and acquiring talent, onboarding is a crucial piece in ensuring retention and preparedness of their employees (Graybill et al., 2013). Meyer and Bartels (2017) said, "Large amounts of time and money are invested in searching for and recruiting new employees; therefore, organizations cannot afford to marginalize a new hire at the beginning of his or her tenure" (p. 10).

Onboarding typically incorporates various offices and functions, addresses the whole range of employee needs (equipment, accounts, training, networking), and is strategic in focus (Weinstock, 2015). During the onboarding process and after it concludes, it is important for new hires to build personal relationships quickly (Graybill et al., 2013). Organizations should identify potential job candidates inside and outside the human resources department who can make sure

the new hires have the information they need to be successful. An onboarding checklist for both human resources (HR) and managers is a helpful tool to keep everyone on track and to ensure all the necessary details are incorporated (D'Aurizio, 2007).

It is imperative that current employees buy in and accept ownership by way of participation to implement any onboarding program. Onboarding experiences that newcomers experience in a group setting have a higher relationship with organizational commitment (OC) than experiences newcomers go through individually (Bauer et al., 2007; Meyer & Bartels, 2017). According to Brandt (2010), "If I could wave my magic wand, no one would ever let anyone start recruiting anyone ever until key stakeholders were aligned around all aspects of a cohesive total onboarding program" (p. 5). An effective onboarding program should provide the new employees the tools and support needed to succeed and identify new hires that are not a good fit for the organization (Graybill et al., 2013).

Mentoring

Some organizations incorporate a mentoring component in their onboarding program by assigning a mentor to ease the transition for the newcomer (Friedman, 2005). A mentor is a seasoned employee who offers advice about the values, beliefs, norms, and accepted rituals of an organization (Denny, 2016; Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). Utilizing workplace mentoring as a tool is one strategy for facilitating career development and support and has been shown to effect a wide range of positive outcomes (Danielson & Berntsson, 2006; Denny, 2016; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & Dubois, 2008; Ragins & Kram, 2007) to help mentees understand their role in the organization and the professional standards and expectations by which success is measured (Danielson, 2002; Denny, 2016).

Mentoring has become a part of the everyday workplace contributing to increased job satisfaction, personal productivity, and employment stability within an organization (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001), and formal mentoring programs are widely used as part of onboarding programs (Graybill et al., 2013). Regardless of industry, it is agreed that mentoring is important to the success of new hires (Foote & Solem, 2009; Sorcinelli, 1994). Newcomers generally make efforts to interact with others in their workgroup to get to know and understand them, and the cultivation of good working relationships is predicated on getting to know others personally. Mentors are key facilitators of developing newcomers and getting them accepted by others in the group. Instead of newcomers individually learning to do their job and work with others in the workplace, newcomers learn through their relationships with others (Korte, Brunhaver, & Sheppard, 2015). Placing new hires into positions and environments that may be unfamiliar and complex without guidance often leads to increased stress, poor working relationships, and reduced morale, productivity, and quality of work (Glavis & Godwin, 2013; Korte et al., 2015, Place & Bailey, 2010).

The best outcomes derive from mentoring programs that are conceived, assessed, and revised with identified goals and effective practices and continually reconfigured if assessment so indicates (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001). Mentorship is not one sided. Mentees develop a sense of professional identity and personal competence and can provide mentors with a sense of generativity and purpose (Allen et al., 2008; Eisner, 2014).

The process of selecting a mentor is very important and should be done with careful consideration. Mentors need to be positive, competent, and accepting of new staff (D'Aurizio, 2007; Eisner, 2014). The mentor should also be someone who can teach, guide, and protect his or her mentees by providing vocational and psychosocial support and serving as a role model for

desired behaviors (Denny, 2016; Gibson, Tesone, & Buchalski, 2000; Lankau & Chung, 1998).

The interactions and transfer of information between managers and newcomers are critical processes for learning and interacting. Collectively, research identified that the organization and employee must both be satisfied and have common ground between them for their relationship to be sustainable (Korte, 2009; Sluss & Thompson, 2012).

The keys to establishing a successful mentoring relationship include creating a relationship of trust, clearly defining roles and responsibilities, establishing short- and long-term goals, using open and supportive communication, and solving problems collaboratively (Byinton, 2010). A healthy mentoring relationship also depends on several other factors, including a mentor's willingness to commit his or her time and build trust (Eisner, 2014; Zimmer & Smith, 1992), a mentee committed to learning and growing personally and professionally (Cohen, 1995), clear expectations, and appropriate nurturing (Godwin et al., 2011).

Having a mentoring program does not per se indicate that potential positive outcomes will be achieved. McClurken (2009) tentatively noted that just because one has a mentoring program does not guarantee effective mentoring is happening. Eisner (2014) contended that even though some companies offer formal mentoring programs, some are not helpful to newcomers in the early stages of learning their jobs. Newcomers needed the help of someone in the work group who knows the details of the job tasks in that group. Korte, Brunhave, and Sheppard (2009) labeled these roles *local* mentors to emphasize the importance of proximity of the mentor to the work of the newcomer. However, Allen and Eby (2003) found that mentors reported higher quality mentoring relationships and greater reciprocal learning when paired with a mentee who was similar in gender and other demographic characteristics along with having perceived similarities in attitudes, values, and beliefs (Denny, 2016). Daloz (2000) and Franz et

al. (2009) suggested that mentees should be paired with mentors who have backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences different from theirs, that both mentors and mentees should be trained in facilitation skills to have a more productive learning relationship, and that mentees should engage in critical reflection activities to make the most out of their transformative learning. Further studies back this up by mentioning that one aspect new hires assess is their demographic similarity (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Jackson et al., 1991; Rynes et al., 2007). Jackson et al. (1991) proposed that “demographic attributes are powerful determinants of both perceptions of similarity and perceptions of PO fit” (p. 676).

The Cooperative Extension System is no exception (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001; Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998; Nestor & Leary, 2000; Ukaga et al., 2002). Smith, Hoag, and Peel (2011) deduced, “Agents could benefit from knowledge about how experienced agents have become and continue to be successful and what is required from the environment around them to cultivate success” (para. 4). County extension agent orientation and retention in the Cooperative Extension System can be strengthened by preparing agents with critical skills during their first three years on the job (Baker & Hadley, 2014; Brodeur, Higgins, Galindo-Gonzales, Craig, & Haile, 2011). Bengtson et al. (2011) and Kutilek et al. (2002) identified peer mentoring programs, professional support teams, leadership coaching, and orientation and job training as organizational strategies for helping new agents acquire critical skills. A qualitative survey of successful veteran agents in Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming, and Oregon (Smith et al., 2011) revealed that good mentoring was essential for helping young agents set themselves up for professional success in the future (Denny, 2016).

Organizational Commitment

Baldoni (2013) helped us to understand that employee commitment goes beyond productivity; it reduces employee absenteeism, quality concerns, and safety incidents. The more information is delivered and relationships are built during organizational entry, the greater the levels of job satisfaction indicated by respondents (Meyer & Bartels, 2017). An important attitude resulting from onboarding is organizational commitment (OC), which is an attachment to the organization “characterized by shared values, a desire to remain in the organization, and a willingness to exert effort on its behalf” (Meyer & Bartels, 2017, p. 12). Research supports that employee commitment and performance will be enhanced when employees perceive themselves to fit with their work context and when they are able to satisfy their psychological needs (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009).

Retention and Turnover

Many people use the terms *retention* and *turnover* interchangeably. These two terms, however, are opposites, but not necessarily the inverse of each other. Retention refers to the number of employees who *remain* with an organization, and turnover refers to the number of employees who voluntarily decide to *leave* an organization within a given period.

For example, if in a department of eight people, two people left and were replaced within the measurement period, then the following applies:

- $R \text{ (retention)} = (6/8) \times 100 = 75 \text{ percent}$
- $T \text{ (turnover)} = (2/8) \times 100 = 25 \text{ percent}$

However, if during the measurement period two positions became vacant, were filled, became vacant again, and were filled again, then the calculation looks like this:

- $R \text{ (retention)} = (6/8) \times 100 = 75 \text{ percent}$

- $T \text{ (turnover)} = (4/8) \times 100 = 50 \text{ percent}$

Tracing both metrics gives the employer a more complete picture on employees lost to attrition. Understanding that there is a difference provides organizational administrations with the knowledge needed to determine the proper protocol to respond to positions that need to be filled. Hausknect, Rodda, and Howard (2009) contended that research is lacking in the area of *how* an employee makes the decision to stay with an organization and specifically *what* factors determine this decision.

Research has demonstrated that newcomers' early experiences within an organization are important predictors of job performance, learning, satisfaction, commitment, and retention (Ashforth et al., 2008; Bauer et al., 2007; Korte et al., 2015; Ostroff & Dozłowski, 1992; Saks et al., 2007). For this reason, organizations need to equally focus efforts on recruitment and retention *and* on adoption, development, and retention of workforce talent (Friedman, 2005). Organizations that fail to retain high performers will be left with an understaffed, less qualified workforce that ultimately will hinder their ability to remain competitive (Hausknect, Rodda, & Howard, 2009; Rappaport, Bancroft, & Okum, 2003). The risk of losing high performers means that companies should consistently have deliberate discussions and utilize in-depth analysis of data and employee feedback as a strategy to retain its employees (Cloutier et al., 2015).

The effectiveness of Extension programs and the overall job satisfaction and productivity of extension agents depend, in part, on the pre-entry and career-long competencies of the extension agents (Lakai, Jayaratne, Moore, & Kistler, 2012). Organizations can benefit from knowing whether retention reasons differ by job level, which might call for different onboarding strategies, depending on individuals' positions in the organizational hierarchy (Hausknect et al., 2009).

High employee turnover increases cost in resources, recruiting, and time when replacing open positions. Hebenstreit (2008) contended that the cost to hire a new employee adds up to between half to 200% of the former employee's salary, so it is in the best interest of the organization to invest the resources necessary to ensure new employees are acclimated to their new surroundings and culture. Ignored by management, even small-scale attrition problems can lead to significant cash outflows over time. By taking steps to promote employee retention, management can keep costs down and productivity up (Steel et al., 2002). The strain that this large investment and additional work puts on other employees when a position is vacated makes it difficult to maintain positive employee culture and morale (Cloutier et al., 2015; Hebenstreit, 2008). D'Aurizio (2007) found that employers who track turnover rates will find a correlation between departments/areas that welcome and assimilate new hires and those that do not and have a "sink or swim" mentality.

Over the past 25 years, 55 studies comparing the quit rates of high and low performers produced a consistent picture. One meta-analysis concluded that low performers are more likely to quit than high performers (Steel et al., 2002). Another strong predictor of turnover intention is age. With increasing age, employees showed lower turnover intention. This finding confirms much of previous research (Blomme et al., 2010; Carless & Arnup, 2011; Tschopp, Grote, & Gerber, 2013). Cramer (1996) contended that tenure is an important indicator of turnover intention. Organizations with high levels of tenure have low turnover rates, and employee engagement increases an organization's rate of production and reduces absenteeism and turnover.

Combatting employee turnover intentions may seem like an uphill battle to organizational administrators. Gallup Research (2017) showed that that 51% of employees are actively seeking

a new job or watching for other career opportunities, and a report by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) (2004) stated that 75% of employees are actively seeking a different job. This high percentage should alert employers whose bottom line is dependent on employee productivity. The SHRM survey supposed that 43% of employees vacated a position to receive better money, 32% left for better career opportunities, and 22% left because they were dissatisfied with opportunities in their current job (Cloutier et al., 2015). No matter how much of an effort is exerted by an organization to retain employees, some employees will leave.

Organizations can benefit from asking employees who leave about their work experience in the organization by using the employees' input to strengthen the organization's hiring and retention strategies (Friedman, 2005).

One might assume that the reasons employees might leave are opposites of the reasons they might stay, but Steel et. al (2002) conveyed, "The fact is often overlooked, but the reasons people stay are not always the same as the reasons people leave" (p. 152). Both aspects of attrition must be studied in order to develop an adequate employee onboarding program that will address both sides of staying or leaving an organization. By effectively identifying reasons why employees stay and why they leave while developing onboarding components to strengthen competency areas and instilling common practices to increase perception of fit, employees might be encouraged to achieve longevity in their position (Hausknect, Rodda, & Howard, 2009).

Employee Fit

Fit implies compatibility between people and organizations (Cloutier et al., 2015), and people are inclined to behave according to their overall fit. Studies of value congruence asked respondents to describe their own values and the values of their organization and combined these measures to gauge the fit between personal and organizational values (Bretz & Judge, 1998;

Cable & Judge, 1996; Judge & Bretz, 1992). Fit is then operationalized as the congruence between an individual's self-description and the aggregate organizational climate (Hoffman & Woehr, 2006). One assumption that underlies fit theory and research is that a greater degree of fit results in better individual adjustment as well as more harmony and cohesiveness among employees and that higher perceptions of fit are related to higher job satisfaction and lower intentions to leave (Ostroff et al., 2005).

New hires seek out information about the new organization to assess their fit into various aspects of the organizational environment such as their jobs, the people they work with, and the overall organization (Chatman, 1991). Employers wishing to maximize the benefits of fit are encouraged to attend to the various aspects of the environment with which fit may occur (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Implicit in much fit research is the assumption that applicants actively can establish fit and thus their future job satisfaction through self-selection based on fit (Bowen, Ledford, & Nathan, 1991; Cable & Judge, 1996; Schneider, 1987; Wanous, 1980). Enhancing fit often begins with recruitment and selection and is considered reciprocal, involving the assessment of fitness for a role with the organization from both the employee's and the organizational viewpoint (Cloutier et al., 2015). Recruiters and managers would be wise to highlight what jobs and organizations provide to maximize fit perceptions.

For employees to know how they fit into an organization, the organization must have a standard process of communication that connects employees to the right message from the employer (Cloutier, et al., 2015). By asking people to talk about the things that influence their sense of fit, Billsberry et al. (2005) showed that perceived fit is much richer than previously expected. High perceptions of fit with an organization can mitigate the negative influence of a

variety of job and social stressors on employee adjustment and has positive implications for organizations and their members (Newton & Jimmieson, 2009; Verquer et al. 2003).

People do not interact with only one part of their environment but are simultaneously nested in multiple dimensions of the environment (Granovetter, 1985; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2001). These dimensions include “internal” factors like personality, values, attitudes, skills, emotions, and goals and “external” factors such as job requirements, expected behavior, organizational culture, pay structures, and collegiality (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). Therefore, regardless of what *type* of fit people and organizations determine is present in employees, employees’ work experience is comprised of interdependent interactions with their environment (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). This finding explains why people have difficulty responding to the general question, “How well do you fit?” (Billsberry et al., 2005; Talbot & Billsberry, 2007) but can respond more quickly to more specific questions about how they fit their jobs, colleagues, or employers (Edwards & Billsberry, 2010).

Once employees determine that they fit, they shift their focus to the more dynamic aspects of the organizational environment such as their fit to their jobs and people, so pairing individuals with similar others is advisable for enhancing fit assessments (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Two other common factors influenced the level of camaraderie newcomers found in a group: age and lifestyle. Differences in these two factors made it harder to integrate socially into the group. Additionally, people with low self-esteem were more attracted to decentralized organizational structures (and larger firms) than people with high self-esteem, thereby suggesting that people are attracted to organizations that mirror their personality (Hausknect, Rodda, & Howard, 2009). In addition to personality and values, other personal factors that have been explored include goals, interests, and attitudes (Korte, Brunhaver, & Sheppard, 2015).

Employees tend to leave if they feel like they do not fit well in their environment (Cable & Judge, 1996), making the process of helping a new employee fit into his or her job and organization important when considering job satisfaction, commitment, and retention (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Gabriel (2014) tested the relationship between perceived fit and the overall attitude associated with an employee's positive experiences on the job and showed that there is direct correlation between PO fit and job satisfaction (Cloutier et al., 2015). However, what "fit" means is often ambiguous (Cable & Judge, 1996; Trank, Rynes, & Bretz, 2002). In short, there are many forms of fit (Edwards & Shipp, 2007; Edwards & Billsberry, 2010) that are often considered elusive and complicated. Researchers do not know if all forms of fit have been identified (Billsberry et al., 2005), but there are predominant definitions that have been identified to allow employers an instrument to gauge their strategies for the best environment to nurture employee fit.

Person Organization (PO) Fit

PO fit perceptions have most often been referred to judgments of congruence between employees' personal values and an organization's culture (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Kristof (1996) defined PO fit as "the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share fundamental characteristics, or (c) both" (p. 271). PO fit examines how individuals fit into the culture and climate of the organization beyond the specific job requirements. PO fit has prospered in part because of the research and literature on person-environment (PE) fit (French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982). PE fit has been used as an umbrella concept to label how individual and environmental influences cooperate to determine features such as attitudes and behavior (Caplan & Van Harrison, 1993). Several facets of fit have been identified in the PE fit literature including person-job (PJ) fit,

person-group (PG) fit, person-vocation (PV) fit, and person-organization (PO) fit (Cable & Judge, 1996; French et al., 1982). These concepts tend to overlap in their description and how they operate; each focuses on a different facet of the fit relationship. All these constructs could potentially be used to validate research, but present interest is at the organizational level.

PO fit theory posits that selecting individuals whose goals, personalities, and values are congruent with that of the organization is vital to retaining a workforce that is dedicated and productive and that such employees possess more positive attitudes and behaviors (Argyris, 1957; Chatman, 1989; Hoffman & Woehr, 2005; Kristof, 1996; Pervin, 1989). The person-organization (PO) fit concept embodies relationships between employees and the organization, considering the knowledge, skills, and abilities individuals bring to the job (Gabriel et al., 2014).

When employees' and organizations' values are aligned, organizations are more likely to provide circumstances enabling employees to satisfy their basic psychological needs, leading to favorable employee outcomes (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009).

Organizations can intensify PO fit by increasing the newcomers' knowledge of the organization's goals and values (Anderson & Ostroff, 1997; Chatman, 1989, 1991; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006; Ostroff & Rothausen, 1997), and the longer individuals stay in a given work environment, the more probable it is that they have arrived at some adequate adjustment with this environment. If an individual leaves a given work environment, one may infer that the adjustment was inadequate (Dawis et al., 1964).

PO fit does not always occur during the job search. For example, employees may experience PO fit with an organization not because they choose an organization where they "fit" during the job search but because subsequent organizational socialization practices affected their values, their perceived fit, or both (Chatman, 1991; Mortimer & Lorence, 1979). Employees

whose organizations inform them about career timelines and career stages report higher levels of PO fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001; Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009). Men reported more fit with their organizations than women, although this difference was not quite significant (Cable & Judge, 1996). Additionally, recruiters' perceptions of applicant PO fit are more likely to reflect the *similar-to-me* bias than true fit with the organization's culture (Adkins et al., 1994; Howard & Ferris, 1996). Recruiter perceptions to fit suggest that although applicants and recruiters are strongly influenced by perceptions of PO fit during recruitment and selection, these perceptions have little if any connection with reality. In short, PO fit appears to be promising as an important determinant of employee attitudes, but there are several intriguing issues yet to be determined (Verquer et al., 2003).

Fit is an important factor in both retention and turnover as it is correlated with job satisfaction and positive interactions in the workplace. Research has indicated that PO fit has shown sizeable relationships related to many job-related outcomes, including intent to quit or stay, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, co-worker satisfaction, and supervisor satisfaction. If turnover intentions are an indication of actual turnover, it may be extrapolated that PO fit would have a positive impact on the organization (Verquer et al., 2003). PO fit is most salient during selection and in long-term tenure (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006).

Supplementary Fit and Complementary Concepts of Fit

People become dissatisfied when they have psychological needs that are not met by the environment (Kahn & French, 1962; Maslow, 1954; Porter, 1962) and when their personal values are incongruent with their organizations' values because people seek cultures similar to their own (Chatman, 1989; O'Reilly et al., 1989).

Two distinct conceptualizations of PE fit have been proposed that interpret the compatibility of a potential employee and the organization. These concepts are *complementary* and *supplementary* fit (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). *Complementary* fit occurs when people's or an organization's characteristics provide what the other wants. Thus, complementary fit refers to occasions when the weaknesses or needs of the environment are offset by the strength of individuals and vice-versa (Carless, 2005; Muchinsky & Monahan 1987; Powell, 1998). Therefore, complementary fit can mean that an organization requires a skill set that employees have or that an organization offers the rewards that individuals want (Cable & Edwards, 2004). *Supplementary* fit exists when people and an organization possess similar or matching characteristics and could occur if an organization hired employees with skills that replicate those already widely possessed in its workforce (Kristof, 1996; Newton & Jimmieson, 2009), meaning that people possess characteristics that supplement or embellish the existing similar traits of others in the environment. Individuals fit because they share similar interests, values, and goals with other individuals already employed in the organization (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987).

Subjective and Objective Measures of Fit

A concise measurement domain of PO fit has yet to be settled upon by researchers, but subjective and objective fit measures have been identified as the most prevalent. No agreement presently exists regarding whether to use one over the other; justification stems from the research being investigated. French et al. (1974) differentiated the measures into *subjective* fit, defined as the match between person and environment as perceived and reported by the person, and *objective* fit, the match between the person as he or she really is and the environment as it exists independently of the person's perception of it.

It is possible that subjective fit with organizational culture is a predictor of organizational identification. That is, the feeling that one fits with the culture can ultimately lead to self-categorization with the in-group that then affords the benefits of the shared identity and the coping benefits that are associated with that group (Newton & Jimmieson, 2009). Subjective fit is positively related to employee ratings of perceived organizational support and performance indicators (Cable & DeRue, 2002).

The primary commonality between subjective and objective fit is that they both assess discrepancies between the characteristics of an individual and the characteristics of the organization. However, the method used to obtain this measure of person-organization discrepancy varies widely across the two approaches. Subjective fit is the practice of directly asking employees how well their characteristics fit with their employing organization's characteristics, using self-report items (Hoffman & Woehr, 2005). Subjective fit measures do not involve the explicit measurement of either individual or environmental characteristics. Instead, respondents are assumed to have a mental representation of the organizational profile and to cognitively examine the congruence between their personal characteristics and their perception of the organizational profile (Edwards, 1991; Hoffman & Woehr, 2005).

Objective fit measures first ask individuals to describe their own characteristics and then ask other organizational members to describe the characteristics of the organization (Cable & Edwards, 2004). It has been argued that people's perceptions of fit may be more important than objective and indirect measures. If individuals believe they do or do not share similar values with the organization, their perception of fit may be all that is necessary to influence affective and behavioral outcomes (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al, 2005; Newton & Jimmieson, 2009).

Thus, people develop and use perceptions of fit as they maneuver through organizational life. In fact, because they are more proximal determinants of behavior, perceptions of fit are better predictors of people's choices than the actual congruence between people and environments (Cable & Judge, 1997; Cable & DeRue, 2002; Endler & Magnusson, 1976; Kristof, 1996). As suggested by Saks and Ashforth (1997), people who perceive a good fit with their organization are likely to at least partly define themselves in terms of their organization. In essence, people who fit their organization's values join a "psychological group," which Turner (1984) defined as "a collection of people who share the same social identification" (p. 10).

Schneider (1987) argued, "While people may be attracted to a place, they may make errors, and finding they do not fit, they will leave" (p. 442). Talbot and Billsberry (2007) agreed that people tend to leave if they perceive they do not fit into their new work environment and that people who label themselves "misfits" have a clear understanding of their misfit. While most people understand what being a "misfit" is like, they do not naturally have an understanding of what being a "fit" is (Billsberry et al., 2005; Edwards & Billsberry, 2010). Perception of fit is important because people can respond to misfit only when they are aware that such misfit exists (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Endler & Magnusson, 1976; French et al., 1974).

An individual's fit may decrease over time even if his/her values initially fit the organizational culture. Absolute congruence or fit does not always relate to more positive attitudes; only when fit is achieved at higher levels of values are more positive attitudes observed. However, individuals may remain in an organization for a variety of reasons, such as a lack of market opportunities or the personal resources to quit, even when they experience a lack of fit (Cable & Edwards, 2004).

Summary

Trying to socialize new employees is an investment that tends to pay off, especially if the organization spends time and energy socializing newcomers in a workgroup and begins the process soon after newcomers arrive. This socialization can begin as soon as the newcomers are hired, even before their first day of work, as current employees prepare to welcome newcomers into the workgroup and acclimate them to the organizational culture. Socialization should be shared with managers and colleagues of the newcomers to ensure a smooth socialization process, and feedback should be asked of the newcomers to continue to improve the practices of the socialization experience for future employees.

Two forms of acclimation are often used to introduce new employees to their jobs, their colleagues, and the larger organization: orientation and onboarding. These are two practices that can be used to help newcomers adjust. Orientation is generally a shorter process that concentrates on new employee paperwork, introduction of company policies and practices, and physical accommodations of the workplace. If employees voluntarily attend an NEO, they are significantly more socialized than those who chose not to attend an orientation (Klein, 2000). Onboarding is a more intense, longer strategic process to acclimate new employees to an organization and encompasses the whole range of employee needs. Building new working relationships quickly is crucial to newcomers' success. Existing employees are essential to the success of an onboarding program. Through careful selection of a mentor and a careful process, both mentee and mentor can benefit from the exchange.

Through the socialization of newcomers, organizations can experience higher retention rates and lower turnover of employees because these practices increase the compatibility or fit between the employee and the organization. The types of fit that are explored in this study are PE

fit and PO fit, which can be used to indicate the commonalities between the employee and employer. People naturally seek out their congruence with organizational values immediately upon arrival, and an assumption underlying fit theory is that a better fit will result in increased individual adjustment and lower intentions to leave (Ostroff et al., 2005).

Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter describes the purpose of this qualitative study, the research questions, and details of the research design. Data collection processes and strategies were examined along with data analysis. Methods used in this study included the number of individuals who were interviewed, and the medium used in the interactions. Ethical considerations were outlined as the researcher was closely tied to this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore county extension agent employee perceptions of the mentoring component of the Arkansas CES onboarding program as it related to the employees' perception of their fit in the organization. In 2010, the Arkansas CES developed a mentoring component as part of a larger onboarding program for new employees because of the alarming number of new employees vacating their jobs. The CES hoped that further preparing new employees for their job responsibilities might help them perceive being a better fit in the organization and urge them to stay longer in their jobs. The Arkansas CES was losing employees at a high rate, which led to the creation of an onboarding program to help slow the high turnover rate. At this time, it is not known if the creation of the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program has helped to increase the perception of new county agents' fit in the organization.

The mentoring component of the onboarding program was the focus of this study. The researcher sought to determine if, through conversations with their mentor, newly hired county agents gained an understanding of the organization's norms and values to determine compatibility with their own characteristics. If so, were they more inclined to remain in their positions?

Overall Research Question

Did the mentoring component of the employee onboarding program implemented by the Arkansas CES in 2010 provide adequate support to ensure employees perceived themselves as possessing characteristics that were compatible with the organization?

Research Questions

- How did participating in the mentoring component of onboarding program affect the way new county agents perceived that they had the characteristics to effectively face the demands of their workload at the CES?
- Why did county agents perceive themselves as being a good or a poor fit between what CES offered them and what they needed in a job after participating in the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program?
- How did county agents perceive the CES values to be congruent with their own values after participating in the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program?
- How did county agents perceive their worth to the organization as compared to before participating in the mentoring program?

Research Design

The approach to qualitative research used in this study was pragmatic qualitative research (Denzin, 2009). In general, qualitative studies seek to interpret and understand a problem or topic through the lens of the local population it involves. When obtaining culturally specific information about the opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of a specific population, qualitative research is especially effective. Qualitative research helps provide data of how people experience and interpret a situation. One advantage of qualitative methods in research is the use

of open-ended questions and follow-up questions to give participants the opportunity to respond in their own words rather than forcing them to choose from fixed responses. Open-ended questions can evoke replies that are meaningful and culturally salient to the participant, unanticipated by the researcher, and rich and explanatory in nature (Symon & Cassell, 1998).

When researchers utilize the qualitative approach, they become an integral component of the research because they become the primary instrument to in the study (Creswell, 2009). Realizing this, they must remain flexible and not attempt to predetermine the conclusion before carefully reviewing the data. Listening to what the participants say instead of forming prior opinions should be kept in the researcher's mind throughout the study. What people experience cannot be freed from time and location because people categorize their experiences by the context in which they occur. Therefore, the values and interests of participants and researchers become part of the phenomena under study (Smith, 1983).

Pragmatic qualitative studies are fundamentally interpretive, ideally remaining flexible to allow the exploration of nascent ideas as the researcher identifies and examines data as it emerges from participant responses during the study (Patton, 2002). By listening to the participants, researchers try to understand how people came to their conclusions and how experiences developed into their reality (Dey, 1993). The researcher does not manipulate the data, but interprets the data offering his or her own perspective of what is emerging from the information allowing it to follow unanticipated directions even if it prods the researcher to inspect and potentially alter prior beliefs (Schram, 2006). This can be a challenge because researchers should not assume that what they see or hear is the way things are because data are filtered through the research participants' and the researcher's reasoning. Thoughts and reactions

that a researcher conveys to describe what they observe are more accurately defined as factual claims of what he or she perceives (Schwandt, 2001).

An appropriate approach for this study was to employ a pragmatic qualitative research design in that the researcher took into consideration that human beings do not always act logically or predictably. The complex nature of the CES system is that each county has different clients, cultures, and colleagues so that personal interpretations of experiences are varied depending on the circumstances surrounding the employees. Reflecting on participants' descriptions of experiences that have formed their perceptions of fit and professional ability was vital for the researcher to develop meaning from the data provided. The researcher developed her interpretation by collecting, recording, examining, and reflecting on the experiences of the participants, the mentoring component, and the CES system.

Setting

Interviewing and observing using qualitative inquiry are often the most difficult and time-consuming parts of a research study (Shuy, 2001). Conducting in-person interviews presents challenges for interviewees and the interviewer when they are geographically dispersed (Sedwick & Spiers, 2009). While sharing a personal space in the interviewees' natural environment is ideal and helps to build the important element of rapport with the researcher, there are viable alternatives to conduct quality face-to-face interviews if geographic location and erratic work schedules prove in-person interviews to be unrealistic. Telephone interviews allow for auditory cues such as pauses, emphasis on certain words, emotional cues, etc., but they prohibit the evaluator from witnessing non-verbal cues and communication that the interviewees exhibit during the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The rich medium of videoconferencing allows for immediate feedback based on observations made by the researcher (Chapman, Uggerslev, & Webster, 2003).

Videoconferencing is a practical alternative to physically traveling to interview each extension agent in person or conducting the interviews by telephone. As Salmons (2012) described, videoconferencing allows for a “real-time, synchronous conversation to occur online, with the ability to send and receive audiovisual information” (p. 22). Visually studying the participants during the interview provided the researcher the opportunity to witness verbal and nonverbal cues made during the videoconference, closely resembling in-person interviews.

Data for the interview portion of this study was collected by using the video-conference software named Zoom. Arkansas CES extension agents are well trained in the Zoom video conferencing software because many of their in-service training opportunities and professional meetings are conducted using Zoom. Each county CES office is equipped with broadband Internet and the computer hardware capable of participating in a high-quality Zoom session, and each employee already has a Zoom user account. An added feature of the Zoom software is a functional transcribing feature that can be a useful tool in the data analysis phase of the study.

Despite numerous opportunities associated with the use of videoconferencing, there are limitations that may make it unsuitable for some situations. Interactions involving conflict resolution, negotiation, or the need for rapid clarification and feedback should ideally be facilitated in a face-to-face interview setting (Sedwick & Spiers, 2009). Another disadvantage of videoconferencing occurs when participants discuss a highly sensitive topic or a topic perceived as very difficult because physical proximity is sometimes needed to comfort the participant. In addition, videoconferencing does not allow the researcher to fully assess the participant’s environment, which may lead to loss of contextual data when data analysis occurs (Irani, 2018).

Last, connectivity may impede videoconferencing interviews. If an interview is interrupted by the lack of video or the images are distorted, the distraction might influence the satisfaction level of the participants because higher bandwidth connections generally result in greater satisfaction with the videoconferencing experience (Sedwick & Spiers, 2009). If the Internet connection was disrupted and distorted to the point that it was not feasible to continue the interview without interruption, a common remedy used by the researcher was ending the meeting by closing the application and rejoining the meeting, which typically took 15-20 seconds. Furthermore, using the Zoom app on a mobile device sometimes yielded more favorable video results and was an alternative to a desktop or laptop computer.

Selection of Participants

A purposive random sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was employed to best enable the researcher to answer the research questions with information-rich content by illuminating the questions under study. The researcher identified participants who had completed the mentoring component of the Arkansas CES onboarding program. A sample was drawn from participants who had served as mentees in a mentoring pair and were employed in a county which housed two agents. There was a population size of 95 currently employed mentees who had completed the mentoring program. A random sample was generated using the Excel software program to identify potential interviewees ensuring that no bias was used in determining the sample. The researcher selected 13 participants from the qualified population to be interviewed.

Prior to contacting selected agents, the researcher proceeded through the proper organizational channels to gain access to the selected agents to interview. The Arkansas CES has three district directors who supervise 25 counties each. The researcher secured each district director's permission to interview agents for the purposes of this study.

Conventional consent procedures involve discussions between the researcher and the potential participants, resulting in a signed document that verifies the agreement. The researcher contacted each selected mentee by telephone, explained the purpose of the study, and asked if he or she would be willing to participate in a Zoom videoconference interview. After verbally sharing the purpose of the study with the potential participants on the telephone, the researcher provided an informed consent document to those participants who agreed to join in the study that described the study, purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality precautions, whom to contact with concerns or questions, and participant rights. The researcher delivered the informed consent document through a computer software named Panda Doc® for an eSignature for the participants to electronically sign and return.

Data Collection Processes and Strategies

Studies that use more than one methodological combination are less vulnerable to errors. Using a technique called *methodological triangulation* can strengthen a study by combining data collection methods to determine if the different methods divulge contradictory or comparable data (Patton, 2002). The researcher utilized data collected from semi-structured interviews, internal mentoring guides, and observations of current mentorship pairs. The strengths of one approach can compensate for the weaknesses of another approach, therefore increasing validity (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

The researcher employed semi-structured interviews, which leave room throughout the interview if there is a topic that requires probing or follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Semi-structured interviews involve determining questions before the interviews to ensure that each interviewee receives the same initial questions or stimuli. The questions this study employed fell into three categories of related questions: main questions, follow-up questions, and

probes which provided a framework for respondents to fully express their own opinions and understanding of the issue.

The researcher's goal should be to smoothly transition from main question to main question by referring to and linking the interviewee's prior responses to the next question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In this study, main interview questions assured that all the basic research questions were answered by all participants, and the interviews followed the same basic structure by examining focused questions of the research problem. Main questions were prepared in advance and used language that matched the interviewee's experiences.

Follow-up questions are a good tactic to further the interviewees' thoughts or feelings on a subject through their cultural lens and are used to seek depth, richness, and detail to explore an earlier response within a larger context. Follow-up questions are unplanned but thoughtfully considered to refrain from leading interviewees away from their own judgments and ensure the interviewer can ask additional questions to explore unanticipated perceptions that may emerge (King & Horrocks, 2010).

A probe ensures the researcher has fully understood an answer if it seems abbreviated. Non-verbal probes could be as simple as a nod of the researcher's head, a pause, leaning forward to show interest, or taking a lot of notes to show that you are interested in what the interviewee is saying (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). One way to use a probe verbally is to repeat what the interviewee said and ask if the understanding of the answer is a fair summary of what they really meant. Occasionally, this may be reduced to repeating one key word from the participants' answers to urge them to explain in more detail (Diccicio-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). During the interviews, the interviewer occasionally found the need to use verbal or non-verbal probes to receive clarification on an answer.

Interviewees typically experience several emotional phases as they prepare for and proceed through an in-person qualitative interview. Diccico-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) found that rapport between the interviewee and the researcher in video-conference interviews progresses through the stages of apprehension, exploration, cooperation, and participation in a fashion similar to in-person interviews.

Apprehension is considered a feeling of uncertainty regarding the new relationship between interviewer and interviewee. It is important for the interviewer to begin the conversation quickly with the first question, which should be designed not to be intimidating and broad in scope. Apprehension ends when the interviewees appear to relax. This stage helps the researcher gather plenty of information in a non-leading way with the interviewees sharing freely and on their terms (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

The exploration stage begins once the interviewees are at ease, and a sense of sharing and bonding should occur. In this stage, interviewees engage in rich descriptions of their experiences. This is an ideal time for the researcher to listen and learn while continuing to build a rapport with the participants. As the interview progresses, a level of cooperation is sensed when the researcher and participant feel less inhibited and begin to share without fear of offending the other (Birch & Miller, 2002). This is an opportune time for the researcher to ask questions considered too sensitive to ask earlier in the interview.

Although not always reached in an interview, the participation stage occurs when the interviewees take on the lead role in educating the researcher and guiding the direction of the interview. This occurs when rapport happens quickly or when the length of the interview allows for the highest level of trust. The quality of the data obtained during an interview is largely

dependent on the interviewer and the aptitude to create an atmosphere for comfortable self-disclosure to illuminate the participant's story (Patton, 2002).

Observation gives researchers a way to familiarize themselves with the environment and the language (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) and provides an additional method of data collection, which can strengthen the study. An observation component was included where the researcher observed mentoring pairs in person. In-person observations advanced a comprehensive view to evaluate the interaction between mentors and mentees to develop in-depth, descriptive, and rich details of the meeting. This method has been shown to add rigor to the methodology by setting new standards of trustworthiness, which makes results more transferable to sessions held by other mentees and mentors because the inquiry becomes more collaborative (Savin-Baden & Major, 2004). The three most common types of observer roles are full participant observer, partial observer, and nonparticipant observer (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009). Full participant observers are defined as being heavily involved in the development of a program, and it is nearly impossible for them to stay out of being asked their opinion when studying the outcomes of the program.

Data for the observation sessions conducted in this study were gathered in person as a partial observer. All mentorship pairs were contacted by telephone to ask if they would be willing to contribute to the study by agreeing to be observed for a typical mentorship session or educational effort they were conducting together. Partial observers can be described as a neutral party to the interaction and can become involved if invited to do so but can also stay aloof and separate during an observation. The researcher in this study sought to employ the role of partial observer because of her familiarity with the mentoring program. As a partial observer, the researcher kept a low-key role, giving her an opportunity not only to take field notes but also to answer questions about the program if asked (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Nonparticipant observers do not communicate with participants during an observation but witness the session as onlookers or outsiders. Observers do their best to fade into the background to the point that the employees being observed forget that they are being watched. County extension agents are used to teaching before an audience but are rarely observed for an evaluation of their performance or interactions. Non-participant observations are most successful when those being observed are used to being observed (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009), so this method would not be the best method to use for the CES employees selected for an observation.

Document analysis involves examining documents related to a study that may provide more descriptive, historical data that interviews and observations cannot provide. Documents are valuable not only for what is included in the records but also for comparison of original intent of a program and the actual outcomes after a program is implemented. Investigating written documentation of why a program was created, records kept during the evolution of program processes, and the amount of work involved in creating and implementing a program can provide valuable insight for data topics that may arise in the data analysis phase (Patton, 2002). The researcher analyzed three mentoring notebooks created for the mentor, the mentee, and the mentee's supervisor that had been utilized throughout the creation and implementation of the onboarding project to compare whether the original intentions of program developers were realized after the program had been in place for several years.

Recording and Transcription

As interviews took place, a record of what was said was pertinent to a successful interpretation of results. The practice of note taking forced the interviewer to listen for important points and allowed time to process thoughts about the participant's answers before asking the next question as the interviewee would pause to allow the interviewer to finish taking notes

(Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher employed thorough note taking while observing non-verbal cues.

Data Collection and Management

Raw recordings and field notes need to be simplified and digested by researchers to begin to develop a manageable arrangement of a schema. According to Saldaña (2009), researchers who conduct a qualitative study have the task of finding codes, categories, and themes that emerge from the bottom up by organizing data into increasingly more abstract units of information. Using an inductive approach to qualitative data analysis, the lowest level consists of relatively descriptive codes that are applied directly to the data. At the next level, researchers gather similar codes into more conceptual categories. Finally, they summarize what they have learned with a limited number of interpretive themes. While a qualitative research study begins inductively, it can morph into a deductive study after interviewing and determining themes (Creswell, 2014). The inductive process occurs as researchers work with the data until they establish an inclusive set of themes. Afterwards, researchers deductively determine whether they need more evidence to support each theme or whether they have enough information. Ultimately, there is no substitute for researchers' understanding and decisions about what makes sense in the data. Qualitative research is interpretive research subject to personal experiences and ethical issues (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2013). In the process, reflecting on the data and taking detailed memos throughout this process allowed for review of this researcher's thoughts as she revisited her notes later.

Recordings of the Zoom sessions were utilized during the interview to ensure that the researcher collected data in their entirety. After securing informed consent for the interview, proper protocol was followed by ensuring verbal permission was granted by the mentees before

proceeding with the recording. If a third person were to walk into either participant's space during a recorded interview, it will have been brought to the third party's attention that the conversation was being recorded before proceeding. The Zoom software includes a reliable transcription piece that transcribes responses verbatim to capture the natural conversations of the mentees because the exact observations and words captured in the actual interview can never be duplicated (Patton, 2003).

Confidentiality

Taking precautions to protect research data from confidentiality breeches ensures researchers can develop a complete dataset allowing them to get a sense of the whole of the study. The responses given by participants in a study can never be duplicated or reproduced in the exact same way if data is lost. It is sensible to make backup copies of the data, securing all hard copies in a locked file cabinet and all digital files in a password protected folder on a computer. Mentees were assured that all information was confidential, and to avoid deductive disclosure (Tolich, 2004), the researcher assigned pseudonyms to mentees for transcription purposes. Computer audio and video were password protected throughout the transcription procedure; notes and computer files will be safely stored for up to five years after transcription and then will be destroyed. Data was protected by storing handwritten notes in a locked file cabinet.

Analysis Strategies

In recent history, there has been a growing body of work on criteria of qualitative research and a large collection of positions on what constitutes comprehensive qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 2003). Thorough analysis of data leads the researcher to a comprehension of varying responses through

clear guiding principles of coding to develop themes, categories, and patterns. This section will focus on evaluating the research findings in a methodical fashion to find key characteristics of the data collected.

Coding

A code is a word or short phrase that describes a key feature of a characteristic of data. Using codes to classify qualitative data produces a framework for organizing and describing the data collected by the researcher. Coding means the researcher must break ideas into meaningful chunks of data.

Urquhart (2013) termed the three phases of coding as open, selective, and theoretical. Open coding happens when a transcribed interview is coded line by line. Open coding uses a few words to describe the data in the transcribing process based on the participants' responses. Selective coding occurs when there are no new open codes or when the interview comments relate to core categories that begin to emerge or have already emerged. Urquhart suggested reconsidering code categories if too many selective codes emerge. Coding is the first step toward a more arduous and succinct understanding of the data (Saldaña, 2009) and begins with labeling, but it does more than that as the first link to something larger: "It leads you from the data to the idea, and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea" (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 137).

Computers and software are valuable tools utilized to help researchers make sense of their data in its entirety. Software can help in storage, coding, retrieval, linking, and comparing, but the researcher must still do the analysis. Software can locate categories and themes that have been coded already, putting data sets together and comparing incidents in field notes. Patton (2002) contended that using computer software as a tool to understand qualitative data is helpful, but it is still the researcher's responsibility to analyze where categories, themes, and patterns

form and extract those in a sensible manner. The researcher used an online qualitative data analysis (QDA) transcription and data software called NVivo, which is commonly used for the analysis of unstructured text, audio, video, and image data to determine categories by topic. This sped up the processes of linking coded categories and themes, grouping the data together, and looking at field notes as they compare to transcripts.

Categories and Themes

Coding is an instinctual, dynamic, and creative process of inductive reasoning where researchers continually refine their interpretations to gain a deeper understanding of what they have studied (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). After coding data into larger chunks, the researcher categorized those chunks into similar groupings. Once the researcher recognized or sensed a manifestation of an idea, she began to determine where to categorize that idea. Categories began to emerge as the researcher studied the chunks of data that stood out for several reasons, but the goal was to create categories that covered the significant topics that emerged from the data. After using computer software to find the larger themes and categories, the researcher used manual coding to further develop the themes and categories of the study to draw on her first-hand experience with settings, informants, or documents to interpret the data.

Merriam (1998) suggested that researchers keep a few key points in mind as they continue sorting categories. Researchers should not lose sight of the research purpose and should keep a written reminder that they are answering a specific question with the research. Additionally, the titles of the categories should be named in a way that it is clear what information is included in that category to easily allow researchers a way to find the topic.

Saldaña (2009) contended that themes are outcomes of codes but are not themselves coded. Themes are found within the groups of categories, and if researchers listen carefully, they

can learn to sense themes even if the information seems random (Boyatzis, 1998). Themes should reflect the purpose of the research while the researchers continually refer to the transcription to stay true to the intentions of the interviewees' responses.

Patterns

Patterns are the most descriptive findings that can be grouped together under the same theme. With practice, researchers can develop a sense of recognizing when patterns begin to emerge from categories and themes. Patterns can begin to emerge early in the coding process, so researchers should pay close attention to sense them from the beginning to the end of the coding process. It is important to use techniques to continually review data to find connections until saturation occurs. Data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012), when the ability to acquire new material has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible (Guest et al., 2006). Rich and thick data descriptions obtained through relevant data collection methods assist with this process when tied to an appropriate research study design that has the best opportunity to answer the research question. Additionally, asking the same research questions of interviewees helps attain consistent data; otherwise, one would not be able to achieve data saturation as it would be a constantly moving target (Guest et al., 2006).

Rigor and Trustworthiness

The accuracy of a research project is determined by the techniques used in gathering and relaying the results of the qualitative study. Rigorous measures taken by the researcher ensure the accuracy of the results of the study and should be clear, explicit, and written in a descriptive way that is not cloaked in mystery and terminology that is difficult for colleagues to understand.

Clearly describing how themes are recognized, how codebooks are constructed, and why each was utilized brings more rigor to qualitative research (Tesch, 1990).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described four criteria to help establish trustworthiness to incorporate into the qualitative inquiry process: The criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The researcher made her best attempt to adopt the procedures necessary to establish and maintain trustworthiness or rigor in this study by being cognizant of the provisions necessary to address each of the four criteria.

Credibility is establishing that the results of the qualitative study are plausible and truthful. One way to establish credibility is using the method of triangulation, which uses multiple methods to answer the research questions and develop a comprehensive understanding of the problem being studied. The researcher used observations, interviews, and document analysis to achieve triangulation in this study. Another way credibility can be established is through member checking. Member checking is taking the researcher's interpretation of the themes that emerge from the interviews and offering the interpretations to participants for review (Cresswell, 2009). Three types of member checking most often used are peer validation, audience validation, and participant checking (Kvale, 2007). The practice of peer validation and participant checking involves allowing other researchers or the interviewees working within a similar branch of research and who are familiar with the general study area an opportunity to provide a substantiation regarding the researcher's understanding of the data. The researcher requested peers who are in the same line of applied research to study codes that emerged to confirm the validity of the themes and categories. Audience validation is the practice of allowing an audience like the intended readership of the study an opportunity to offer their views of the data analysis. Participant checking involves sending the mentees transcription documents for

review to check for resonance and accuracy with their answers. If people involved in the member checking techniques agree that researcher's interpretations make sense, it adds credibility and rigor to the study. The researcher supplied the participants with transcriptions of their interviews to verify the accurateness of their responses.

The qualitative inquiry process depends on several components to help ensure credibility. Credibility is thought to be the degree to which a phenomenon is interpreted, described, and defended through convincing study results. Rigorous methods, credibility of the researcher, and philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry are three standard methods to ensure credibility (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). The researcher did her best to gain the trust of the participants of this study and protect the information conveyed. Each participant was treated in the same manner; respect was shown for the interviewees and the sites; and the interviewees' schedules and surroundings were disrupted as little as possible. The researcher phrased questions in ways to avoid formalistic replies so that interviewees felt comfortable speaking from their own experience and not generalizing to the entire organization.

Transferability occurs when researchers can provide evidence that the study's findings are relevant in other circumstances, populations, or intervals (Patton, 2003). Achieving transferability intensifies the accuracy of the descriptions of the study by adding rich descriptions and specific details of the qualitative experience. *Thick description* (Geertz, 1973) is a term used to open a world to the reader through concrete descriptions of the surroundings and the participants (Patton, 2003). If readers can compare details of the research study and methods to another situation that they are familiar with, the original research can be deemed more credible. By taking various aspects of the interview surroundings into consideration, researchers can

provide a richer and fuller understanding of the transferability of the information collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While researchers cannot necessarily prove the application in other contexts, they can provide evidence that it *could be* relevant.

The extent to which a study can be repeated by other researchers is called *dependability*. If other researchers can examine the process of the study and determine that they may collect, store, and analyze data in a similar fashion and get a consistent result, then the original study could be deemed dependable.

Confirmability is the practice of reporting data based on participants' responses without any personal motivations or potential biases of the researcher. To guard against bias and establish confirmability, researchers can offer an audit trail that provides a transparent description of every step taken throughout the data collection and analysis phase. During and soon after each interview, the researcher recorded her perspective of the overall interview through detailed field notes and reflective memos, which helped make interviewees' observations transparent and assisted the researcher in staying close to the data. Recording her perspective will allow readers to see (as much as they desire to) how the researcher arrived at her conclusions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Researcher Positionality/Subjectivity

A researcher's positionality shapes his or her research by influencing understanding and interpretation of the information collected in research. Researchers must be willing to reflect honestly that they are part of the culture to be examined. This researcher practiced reflexivity (Patton, 2002) and remained mindful of the origins of her own perspective while listening and valuing the perspectives of the participants. These understandings were brought forward from the researcher's personal culture, history, and experiences. Personal experiences coupled with

comparison on the findings from literature brought forth new realizations or confirmed prior ones. Using emic codes, the researcher brought the characters in the study to life and illustrated the surroundings of the interviewees through language.

This researcher has worked in the CES organization for 24 years and knew that her experiences and background within the Arkansas CES would inadvertently shape the direction and interpretations of the study; however, the researcher was careful to not advance her own inclinations and principles on to the study. Ethical considerations were carefully measured due to the “backyard research” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 173) being conducted because the researcher was studying within the organization where she is employed. As the mentees’ responses were inventoried, the researcher made a concerted effort to identify the mentees’ *emic* analysis or what they understood within their worldview (Patton, 2002).

When a study involves human participants, it is important to ensure their safety, protect their identities, and keep them fully versed on the purpose of the study and what the researcher plans to do with the data collected. Consulting colleagues about research within the organization and informing people what is happening in a research study shows respect and professionalism. Displaying sensitivity to colleagues will show that the researcher has admiration for the values of the organization and the employees.

Although the researcher is immersed in the culture of the Arkansas CES, her department had no responsibility in creating, maintaining, or evaluating the onboarding program, nor did the researcher have a direct stake in the success or failure of the CES onboarding program since the Program and Staff Development (PSD) department held the responsibility of facilitating the onboarding program.

There were responsibilities the researcher considered while conducting research at her workplace to guard against bias. Those responsibilities included careful attention to participant feedback, early evaluation of data (analyzing the data, not making assumptions), triangulation in the methods of gathering and interpreting data, and an awareness of the issues represented in the project (Costley, Elliott, & Gibbs, 2011). Insider research had the unique ability to bring her academic perspective to common organizational practices that were founded on the existing knowledge the researcher held.

“There’s no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all” (Hall, 1990, p. 18). Objectivism and subjectivism meet at an axis, which is often referred to as *positionality*. Because researchers are human, they will always have a degree of subjectivity regarding their interactions with others, and it is naïve to think that they will be able to be totally objective in their responses to data. While researchers must endeavor to be objective, they must always be aware of their subjectivities and the effect they may have on the research (Bourke, 2014).

Ethical Considerations

Because the research involved human subjects, the study was required to be reviewed by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This policy is enforced by the University of Arkansas and federal regulators.

Many ethical considerations were upheld:

- Made certain that all participants in this study received equal treatment to the best of the researcher’s ability by putting into place a list of provisions for treatment and controls.
- Discussed the purpose of the study and how the data would be used with participants.

- Involved the participants as collaborators in the study and kept the researcher's personal opinions and beliefs private.
- Did not side with anyone.
- Did not disclose only positive results; negative results were revealed as well.
- Participants had the right to withdraw at any time during the study.

Summary

The goal of this chapter was to outline the research method used to answer the research question. A discussion of the research design, data management processes, and data analysis procedures outlined the specifics of how the study was conducted and who participated in the study. The researcher's trustworthiness, rigor, and positionality were discussed as a method to understand and interpret the research presented in a principled manner, and steps were presented to ensure ethical behavior to ensure balance between the possible risks of research and the probable benefits of the study.

A pragmatic qualitative research design was used to determine the perceived fit that county agents had after participating in the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program. Study participants were asked about their experiences in the mentoring program and their perspectives of whether participating helped them to achieve a feeling of fit in the CES organization.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore county extension agent employee perceptions of the mentoring component of the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service (CES) onboarding program as it related to the employees' perception of their fit in the organization. Employing formal socialization tactics during employees' first several months of employment can influence newcomers' impressions and attitudes toward the organization and assist them in their adjustment (Saks, 1996; Tannenbaum, 1991), but few organizations utilize their full scope of resources and make them available to new employees. The CES sought to increase the retention rate of its employees by offering seasoned and new employees easy access to tools to implement an innovative approach to new employee training.

The Arkansas CES developed a one-year employee preparation onboarding process in which all new county extension agents participate immediately upon arrival to their new positions. The CES onboarding program offers professional development opportunities for county agents to develop competency in organizational effectiveness, communication skills, personal development, and technology software programs typically used by the CES. The six key components in the onboarding program require involvement of the employees' immediate supervisors, district directors, state office faculty, co-workers in their office and surrounding counties, formally assigned mentors, and potentially the volunteers with whom they work closely in their county. The factor considered for this study was the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program.

Mentoring has become part of the everyday workplace because it contributes to increased job satisfaction, personal productivity, and employment stability within an organization (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001), and formal mentoring programs are widely used as part of onboarding

programs (Graybill et al., 2013). Regardless of industry, mentoring is important to the success of new hires (Foote & Solem, 2009; Sorcinelli, 1994). Placing new hires into unfamiliar and complex positions and environments without guidance often leads to increased stress, poor working relationships, and reduced morale, productivity, and quality of work (Glavis & Godwin, 2013; Korte et al., 2015; Place & Bailey, 2010). Research supports that employee commitment and performance will be enhanced when employees perceive themselves to fit into their work context and when they are able to satisfy their psychological needs (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009).

The researcher employed semi-structured interviews to examine the mentees' perceptions of the study's overarching question - Does the mentoring component of the employee onboarding program implemented by the Arkansas CES in 2012 provide adequate support to ensure employees perceive themselves as possessing characteristics that are compatible with the organization? Guided by the theoretical concept of person-environment (PE) fit, the interview questions were constructed to collect information regarding the following elements in an endeavor to answer the research question:

- Characteristics to effectively face the demands of their workload at CES
- Being a good or poor fit between what CES offers them and what they need in a job
- Their value congruence with the values of the CES
- Their perception of self-worth to the CES now as compared to before

Thirteen interviews, three in-person observations, and three mentoring notebooks, a mentor copy, a supervisor copy, and a mentee copy, were examined to determine the perceptions of the mentees and the comprehensive understanding of the phenomena presented. A purposive random

sampling strategy that focused on certain characteristics of the population (Patton, 2002) was employed to designate the participants.

Data for the interview portion of this study was collected using the video-conference software Zoom. Arkansas CES extension agents were well trained in the Zoom video conferencing software because many of their in-service training opportunities and professional meetings are conducted using Zoom. Each county CES office is equipped with broadband Internet and computer hardware capable of participating in high-quality Zoom sessions, and each employee has a Zoom user account. An added feature of the Zoom software is a functional transcription feature, which was a useful tool in the data analysis phase of the study. Using Zoom resulted in a few technical difficulties because of lower bandwidth in county offices located in the more rural counties. When an interruption occurred, the researcher asked the agent to use the Zoom application on a mobile phone to connect through the cellular network to circumvent the low bandwidth signal. In the two instances when an interruption occurred during an interview session, there was a marked improvement once the agent converted to the cellular network.

The researcher addressed trustworthiness throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure the data was represented in confidence, interpretation, and methods. The researcher asked participants to sign an informed consent form, which stated that they were able to withdraw from participation at any point in the process without negative consequences. Transferability was sought in the study by intensifying the accuracy of descriptions and by adding rich descriptions and specific details of the qualitative experience. Dependability was exercised when generalizing the study for others if researchers wish to duplicate the study. Confirmability existed in the form of the audit trail of the collected data, and original recordings are stored on a hard drive along with the transcripts of the interview conversations, and notes

from the observations to limit potential biases. The researcher revisited and analyzed the data several times to avoid bias as much as possible.

The researcher interviewed former mentees who had completed the one-year mentoring requirement, observed current mentor/mentee pairs, and studied the three onboarding notebooks which mentors, mentees, and supervisors received when they began the mentoring program. The codes emerged as a result of the researcher's reflection of the interview responses, observation notes, and notebooks and were sorted with the research questions in mind.

Descriptions of the Participants

The 13 former mentees who participated in the interview portion of the data collection process were currently employed county extension agents from less populated county offices which housed two county agents and were considered to have limited resources. County extension agents who completed the one-year CES mentoring component of the onboarding program were randomly selected to participate in the interviews. The participants had all been mentees in their first year as a county extension agent and completed the components of the CES onboarding program. All participants were adults over the age of 18. Three of the people in the sample were men, resulting in 23% of the sample being male; ten of the people in the sample were women, resulting in 77% of the sample being female. Employees were chosen so the three districts which constitute the Arkansas CES would be represented as equally as possible. Four of the participants were employed in the Beta District, four were from the Alpha District, and five were from the Gamma District. Five participants had primary responsibility in the area of agriculture, resulting in 38% of the sample; five had primary responsibility in the area of family and consumer sciences (FCS), resulting in 38% of the sample; and three had primary responsibility in the area of 4-H, resulting in 24% of the sample.

Three additional mentee/mentor pairs who were currently enrolled in the mentoring program were observed to triangulate the study. Data collected from the observations was collected and reported separately since the mentorship pairs were still actively participating in the mentor program and were at a different stage of the mentoring process. Pair #1 were two family and consumer science agents who met for a face-to-face mentoring session at the mentor's county extension office during business hours. Jessica was the mentee from Dunder County, and Donna was the mentor from Mifflin County. Donna had worked for 24 years, and Jessica had been working for three months. Pair #2 were two family and consumer science agents who met in the evening hours at the mentor's office, beginning with a short mentoring session followed by a cooking and service-learning workshop led by 4-H youth and 4-H volunteer leaders and parents. At the time of the observation, Angela had worked for four years in Scranton County, and Meredith had worked for two months in Hills County. Pair #3 were two agriculture agents who co-taught a pesticide applicator class to landowners. Arthur had been working for 25 years and was housed in Cherry County, and Ed had been with extension for three months and was in Watson County. The workshop participants owned property in one of the two counties where the agriculture agents worked. The group met at a county fairground building during regular business hours.

All participants were asked to explain their decisions to pursue a career as a county extension agent. Teresa came from a family of educators and always assumed she would follow in the footsteps of her siblings and her parents to become a teacher. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in home economics and thought teaching was her only career option. While she was at the university, she heard about the CES and felt it was something she might

want to pursue. When she noticed a job posting in Laredo County for a county FCS agent, she believed she was in the right place at the right time.

Lindsey planned to use her degree in nutrition to become a registered dietician. She did not think there were many options to choose from to use her degree until she shadowed an extension agent as a requirement for a class in college. During that job shadowing experience, she enjoyed her time with the family and consumer science agent in the county and decided she would use her degree to serve as a county extension agent. She applied for and received a position in Truman County.

Susan grew up in the 4-H program and always wanted to follow in the footsteps of her county FCS agent. She and a fellow 4-H member had the same goal to become FCS agents, and they both went to college together in the field of home economics. Susan took education classes and initially secured a job as an FCS teacher. Her fellow 4-H member and college friend had settled in as an extension agent and called Susan from time to time to urge her to become an extension agent. When an FCS agent position became available in her hometown in Tabor County, she decided to move home and work for the CES.

Before applying for a job as an agriculture extension agent, Duke was an agriculture teacher, but he was not satisfied. He did not think he was doing the job justice because of the outdated curriculum that was being used, and he felt insecure because the school district he worked for was rumored to be consolidated. He wanted to work with children, but not every day, and he wanted to use his agriculture degree to help youth who wanted to learn about agriculture, not only those who were a captive audience in a classroom. Helping agriculture producers understand the latest research to grow the best possible crop is also a goal of his. Although Duke

was content with his teaching position, when he discovered the CES job was open in Cameron County, he applied and was thankful when he received the job.

Phyllis accepted a position with the CES in Diamond County because there were not many job options which matched her skillset in the area in rural Arkansas where she resided. As she was pursuing a degree in elementary education, she and her husband decided to start a family, so Phyllis left the education program to raise her family. When her youngest child started school, Phyllis desired to reenter the workforce but was grappling with the decision of becoming a teacher or finding a different approach to teaching. An advertisement containing a job posting for a county extension agent piqued her interest since she had a history with youth organizations in her home state, but she was not familiar with 4-H. Because of her limited knowledge of 4-H, Phyllis proactively researched the CES website thoroughly so she would know what responsibilities were involved in the county agent position. She interviewed and has not regretted accepting the county agent position because she likes the non-traditional teaching model and variety of youth she encounters.

Jo worked in a different area of CES for several years before going home to raise her children. When her children became school aged, she realized it was time to return to work, so when she noticed a position for a county extension agent in Barnett County was open, she applied. One of the main reasons she showed interest in the CES was that she grew up on a family farm and felt confident with her rural background that she possessed the ability to implement practices learned on the farm in her youth. She enjoyed communicating with farmers and serving the farming community by guiding them on best practices to implement the CES recommendations on their property.

Dorothy and her husband were involved in a volunteer organization which provided social and economic development to those in need and worked with many different people including youth and adult groups, providing education in gardening and water improvements. Upon their return, the couple contemplated their career choices. After reflecting on her experiences, she decided her work with the Peace Corps was so fulfilling that she wanted to find something comparable to which to devote her career. Because Dorothy was a 4-H member when she was a child and was familiar with the CES and its programs, she realized the organization had similar goals as the volunteer organization she and her husband had volunteered with, so she decided to seek employment at the CES. She attended graduate school with that goal in mind, raised her children until they were old enough to attend school, and then secured a position as an FCS agent in Smith County.

Savannah grew up in the 4-H program, and the extension agents who worked in her county were a big influence in her life. She thought their job was admirable because they conducted and facilitated fun and educational programs, projects, and trips for youth. Craving the freedom to have variety in her schedule, she contemplated her options. After shadowing a teacher in a traditional school classroom, she quickly discerned she had no desire to spend her days in a classroom environment. When she determined her goal was to work for the CES, she did so with determination and applied for every available opening in the state, which led to an FCS position in Tampa County.

Jason always said there were two jobs he would never take, agriculture teacher and county extension agent, because their schedules can be grueling. He was working for a large insurance company, which forced him and his wife to live separately while they were expecting their first child. Jason decided to search for a career which would allow him to be home more,

and he found the extension job posting for McLaughlin County. He thought it was ironic because he had always bragged that he would never do extension work. The job he had prior to being a county agent was very stressful and dealt with financial information, so to transfer to a career where people sought him out asking for help was refreshing and a positive change. Now Jason feels completely different about county agent work and realizes it was not the work he wanted to avoid, but the frequent night meetings and community events had concerned him. He loves his job, enjoys investing in the people in his community, and would not change his decision now.

Isaac worked for almost a decade in the classroom as an agriculture teacher, which he enjoyed very much. After his first child was born, Isaac did not want the commitment required with being an agriculture teacher, so he seized the opportunity to become a school counselor at a local school district. He accepted the counseling job with the belief he would be able to interact one-on-one with students and help them achieve their goals. When he realized he was responsible for testing and scores with very little time to counsel the students, he decided it was time for a career change. The thought of having an adult audience and more flexibility appealed to him, so when he read the job posting for an agriculture agent in Durango County, he applied for the position.

Lucy had close relatives who worked for extension, so she was present at many of the events and activities her local county agents provided. She decided not to pursue a career as a county extension agent and obtain a degree in another area instead. Upon graduation, she struggled to find a job when someone mentioned to her that county agents actually have responsibilities in the field she had chosen for her degree and she could put her degree to good use, so she began to see how she might enjoy the work and applied for and secured the county agent position in Oakley County.

Kelly began her professional career as an educator for another state agency and loved working with children and adults in the public sector. The factors she enjoyed the most were program coordination, volunteer management, and advertising. However, Kelly was forced to resign from her position to take care of a very ill family member and took a leave of absence. Eventually she secured a job with a local business with numerous responsibilities including writing, illustrating ads, and photography. Although she was able to interact with the public at the local business, she missed providing educational opportunities to youth and adults. Because of where she worked, she was the first person to see the announcement for a local county extension agent position in Palmer County and felt it was a great fit between her earlier work as an educator and her prior professional experiences.

Trudy agreed to be interviewed and signed the necessary consent forms, but after beginning the interview, it quickly became apparent to the researcher that Trudy was not engaged in the conversation and answered numerous questions in two or three words. The researcher attempted several probing follow-up questions for each initial short answer with no success and finally accepted that Trudy was not interested in being interviewed after all, so the researcher finished the interview by asking the remaining questions while still receiving similar responses. The interview transcript was removed before coding participant responses and is not included in the data set. The remainder of the other interviewees were eager to answer questions about their mentoring experiences and remained engaged throughout the conversation. They were attentive, maintained good eye contact, and communicated in a quiet workspace with little or no interruption.

There were a few instances where participants hesitated before answering a question and asked the researcher to reassure them that their comments would remain anonymous before

continuing. The researcher referred them back to the agreement signed during the procedural ethics stage of the data collection process and assured the mentees that all efforts would be made to avoid confidentiality breeches, which potentially lead to deductive disclosure by readers.

Research Findings

This study was directed by the overarching theoretical concept of Person-Environment (PE) fit first proposed by the Greek philosopher Plato (Kaplan, 1950) and developed further by occupational psychologists like Dawis et al. (1964) and Holland (1959). Broadly defined, fit is the compatibility between an individual and an organization (Kristof, 1996), and PE fit is defined as the *extent* to which an employee is compatible with the workplace environment (Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 1996).

More specific dimensions or conceptualizations of PE fit are distinguished by the comparison of the environment being studied. This study focused on the conceptualization of Person-Organization (PO) fit, which examines the relationship between an individual's characteristics and an organization's characteristics (Cable & Judge, 1996; Kristof, 1996). When comparing PE and PO fit, one can conceptualize PE fit as employees who fit in an organizational environment and become active and contributing members, and PO fit defines the organization as the environment to which the employee participates and contributes.

The researcher has worked in the CES organization for 24 years and knew her experiences and background within the Arkansas CES had the potential to inadvertently shape the direction and interpretations of the study; however, the researcher was careful to not advance her own inclinations and principles on to the study. Ethical considerations were carefully measured because the researcher was studying the organization where she is employed, also known as "backyard" research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 173). Because of the researcher's

close connection with the organization, the researcher made a concerted effort to identify the mentees' *emic* analysis or what the mentees understood within their worldview (Patton, 2003). This approach sought the beliefs, perspectives, explanations, and logic of those studied and used the information to explain their practices or values.

Theme 1: Mentee Perceptions of the CES Culture/History/Traditions

The first theme revealed mentee perceptions of the CES culture, history, and traditions and their fit within the organization. New employees were immediately exposed to the CES onboarding experience through videos, videoconferencing, and an onboarding website, which offer a plethora of information regarding the CES system. Early in employment, it is pertinent to quickly acclimate new employees to the culture of the organization, making it necessary for organizations to be aware of their cultural values and how best to present them to the new employee. An effective conduit to impart messages about the culture of the organization is good communication, and the complex onboarding process disseminated key historical factors and organizational hierarchy information to new CES employees. Once new county agents absorbed the information and reflected upon its meaning, they realized there was an expectation to contribute efforts to sustain the excellent reputation the CES maintains. Additionally, the program prompted mentees to ponder their existing characteristics and philosophical views and form an opinion of the qualities needed to fit into the organization by drawing conclusions about whether their values aligned with those of the CES.

Category 1: Office culture. Data revealed that all levels of the CES organization possessed a culture with differing opinions, cultures, and applicable programs, but they all had a commonality in the overarching message to serve the people of Arkansas. These differences related to population, demographics, cultural norms, traditions, and the amount of resources the

county possessed. Discovering the needs of the county and matching those needs with the natural skill set or interests of the mentees seemed to help in their perception of fit. A majority of the mentees who were questioned perceived they fit in the CES culture because they learned to do their jobs with help from their mentors, and even though the mentees may have implemented changes, they thought they were meeting the goals of their work plans.

Mentees rapidly discovered that what works in one county may not work in other counties in the state. Duke reported that he did not realize at first that county agents relate to clients through their own unique ideas, opinions, and programs differently than other county agents do, but different counties manage to produce the same or similar results because the basic message is consistent within the CES system. Dorothy added to the theory by suggesting that when an agent's values and skills match the county's needs and culture, the combination typically yields programs which attract more people and are more successful.

Quality programming. Providing quality programming is the heart and soul of a county extension agent's endeavors since the CES is an educational institution affiliated with the University of Arkansas. Because of the importance of the educational component to the system and to an agent's job, several of the mentees suggested program quantity is not as important as quality although historically, administrators have stressed that agents should reach as many people as possible. Agents are asked to spend a considerable amount of time reporting the results of their efforts to quantify the impact of their programs, often to the detriment of the quality of their programs. Attempting to reach higher numbers rather than offering programs that best meet the needs of their citizens was a point of contention in the mentees' opinion.

Sarah thought the organization was more worried about the number of people she reached than the quality of her programs by conjecturing "the organization would rather see 500

individual contacts for a few hours rather than 500 hours with a couple of kids.” She would rather make a substantial difference in the lives of 20 children versus making a miniscule difference in 200 lives. Isaac relayed that his job was to host the event, and if people wanted to attend, they would. After hosting a few programs where very few people attended, he tried not to take it personally, but he questioned himself on what he did wrong in relation to his event promotion practices and abilities. In his opinion, if 20 people attended every event he hosted all year, he would rather make a large impact on fewer people than a small impact on more people.

Lucy agreed. Even though she spent a great deal of time and effort on educational programs, occasionally they were poorly attended. Despite knowing it was not her fault, she was tempted to take poorly attended meetings personally, but she learned that not every program would meet her attendance expectations. Phyllis agreed, and after some experience, she concentrated on providing quality programs to produce higher impact instead of programs she thought would draw a lot of people with little impact. Once she made that programming change, Phyllis increased her feeling of fit within her county and the organization because she witnessed the impact the quality programming had on the lives of her clients through their changed behavior.

Reporting requirements. Because of the requirement for the CES employees to show impact, the CES organization created an internal reporting software referred to as the Arkansas Information Management System (AIMS) where agents submit a plan of work at the beginning of the year and each month record the hours they work in preselected program areas, which includes how many people are reached with their educational efforts. The CES employed a coordinator assigned to the AIMS software who is available to answer frequently asked questions, and she meets with new agents one-on-one to discuss reporting requirements. The

AIMS reporting software was mentioned in ten out of the twelve interviews, all three mentoring notebooks, and two of the three observations. Data revealed agents found learning the proper way to enter information into the AIMS system as one of the most difficult aspects of their new job. Reporting in AIMS was an area where the mentor helped immensely, and most mentors made a point to personally sit down with their mentees, demonstrated their own reporting methods in the system, and shared resources they created to make reporting easier for the mentees.

Teresa claimed that the reporting aspect was especially difficult for her because her prior job was at another state agency where she used a different software for entering reports, and she kept confusing the two software programs. The following is what she had to say about her mentor's assistance with AIMS:

Well, I had mentioned AIMS because I had other resources at the other state agency I worked for keeping track of our contacts and our time. But, I did seem to have, you know, quite a bit of problem with that at first and understanding where to put different things. And so she really helped me with that. The first time we met face to face, we spent the majority of it working in AIMS and she had given me, you know, some ideas and ways to keep up.

Most of the mentees placed great importance on performing their job duties correctly because it was considered a direct correlation to their programmatic efforts. They were grateful to have support in this area, and when they could tangibly see the results of their work on a spreadsheet, they had more of a feeling of fit. Lucy supported this finding by mentioning that when she felt stressed, her mentor suggested she write down all the things she had accomplished over the past few months, which helped remind Lucy she was undertaking more than she realized.

Category 2: Importance of research and non-traditional education. The Division of Agriculture's catchphrase is "I Care, We Serve," and the mentor notebook mentioned the CES'

mission is to provide research-based non-formal education to help Arkansans improve their economic well-being and the quality of their lives, and the mentees appeared to accept and agree with this philosophy. One example of this acceptance was when Kelly voiced that she hoped she had done her part to fulfill the mission of extension when she offered outreach and educational opportunities which contained research-based information.

Mentees also valued the non-traditional educational model the CES chose for its programs. Phyllis and Isaac both liked and agreed with the hands-on learning method used, and Teresa and Jason agreed the method is essential to personalize learning experiences. They both conceded by using the method it showed the unselfish character of the employees who worked for the CES because they were not providing programs for themselves; the employees were putting forth the effort for the agency and the individuals they served.

Mentees believed that to perform their jobs well, they must separate their opinions from the facts the research indicated. Isaac specified he based everything he taught on what the research had taught him, not on his opinions or experiences. Agents, especially the agriculture agents, said because of this research-based message, they were very careful to ensure they knew the answer before making recommendations to clients. Often, their recommendations could cost a client thousands of dollars if conveyed incorrectly. Jo mentioned situations had arisen during her time in extension that had demonstrated the CES stands behind scientific evidence even in the most difficult of situations. The CES had proven that a weed control chemical produced by a powerful chemical company caused catastrophic damage by drifting to unintended crops after being sprayed on fields. Although the chemical company questioned the CES' scientific research results because the results were not in the company's favor, employees and the administration of

the CES stood behind their research, which taught Jo that the CES really did support scientific facts even when under enormous stress from big companies.

Public trust. Administrators generally recognize that organizations need the public's trust for legitimacy, accountability, and support to continue to receive the resources necessary to exist. Phyllis contended that a lot of influences were trying to change the CES or tell the organization it was no longer relevant, but she was proud her programs were rooted in science and well established. She recognized she had found a place in the organization that complimented her personality. She did not necessarily believe she had natural talent as an agent, but her personality had changed to adjust to what the system promoted, and she was very vocal about her loyalty to the CES. Because of this consistent research-based message, the mentees had a constant element they could always rely on – science. If an inquiry was too technical for them, they could contact a specialist who had expertise in the field. Duke said he would “put our specialists against anybody, and I think we’d come out on top smiling big.”

Jason believed people trust the CES with their money and their children, and those two things are the most important things in many people's lives. He specified, “They’re spending money on our recommendations and they’re sending their kids with us to different places and different projects and stuff. So those are what I think of when I think of our organization and, you know, people.” Teresa had similar sentiments when she said, “Agents frequently work with 4-H youth, so parents must think that their children are safe and we are good role models for their children or they wouldn’t leave them in our care.”

Category 3: Philosophies of the CES. In this category, mentees described their desire to help people as a value they deemed important. Some mentees also felt their values aligned with

those of the CES, and those philosophies were significant motives to continue their careers in the organization, but there were a few mentees who were not convinced their values were aligned.

Helping people. The philosophy of helping others was an important aspect of why mentees identified with the CES' culture. Nine out of the twelve mentees mentioned the ability to help clients was an important part of their job, which they enjoyed immensely. Duke saw the act of helping people as an investment in his community, and Kelly understood the value of providing information to her clients in an easy-to-understand way as a form of helping them. Isaac liked the process of finding tangible solutions for a client because he felt it really mattered to the public to provide immediate help. Having a background in the school system, he said people showed more appreciation for the tangible difference he made in his clients' lives. Susan mirrored those sentiments when she said the following:

I just love it. And so I like helping people that want to be helped because I've taught in a public school and those people who don't always want to be here. So, it's a whole different audience of people that really want to learn.

Kelly defined helping people as not only providing an enjoyable program but also influencing people enough to change their behavior and witnessing the impact it has in their lives. Duke reported when clients stopped him at a store to thank him for a recommendation, he admitted, "It just makes you feel good and want to help more people." Jo liked that the CES offered free, non-biased consultation services, which helped people by saving them money.

For the most part, the mentees thought their values aligned with the cultural values of the CES, which enhanced their perception of fit. One of the most notable pieces of evidence was their willingness to stay with the organization, knowing they could make more money in another job. Jo talked about former colleague who took jobs elsewhere with chemical companies because they could make more money, but she would rather be able to stand by her moral values and

know the reason she recommended something is because of the science behind it, not because she is trying to further the agenda of a chemical company. Isaac said he had been around long enough to witness large companies try to pressure agriculture agents to work for them, but he would rather stand behind the science and provide well-respected information.

Value alignment. A portion of the data collected provided evidence that the values people had which were congruent with the CES' values were needed to survive long-term in the culture. Lucy said the following:

To be in extension, you have to have that value of 'I Care We Serve' you know or 'To Make the Best Better [the 4-H motto]' and if you don't have it before you start extension, I don't know if you'll ever learn it.

One mentee conceded the alignment of values between employees and the organization was so important that she could not work for an agency which did not correspond with many of her values.

Two mentees were not convinced that their values or opinions always aligned with recommendations garnered from research. Dorothy said the following:

While my opinions don't always line up with our programs or curriculums I've become a person that's more open to hearing what research has to say and adapting to it. And I think that's one of the things extension, you know, we're based on research. So you pretty much have to be open to change.

Theme 2: Mentee Perceptions of the Employability Skills Needed for Success

The second theme to emerge was the mentees' perceptions of the specific traits and skills needed to be successful agents in the CES. Employability skills are developed through personal experiences allowing individuals to increase aptitude and proficiency in the skill. These skills are assumed to be transferable and continue to evolve and develop as professionals progress in their career. The predominant employability skill categories identified by mentees as essential for

success as new agents were good communication skills, connections with people, a sense of professionalism, and principled work practices.

Category 1: Communication skills. Effective communication has been identified as an important factor in maintaining the health of an organization. If an organization does not communicate effectively, it can lead to a poor work culture, which in turn leads to employee turnover (Cloutier, Felusiak, Hill, & Pemberton-Jones, 2015). The multifaceted CES mentoring program immediately provided mentees the resources needed to learn concise details about their new jobs and roles within the organization, prepared them for specific experiences and cultural norms, and has been deemed an important strategy (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Saks, 1996). According to the mentees, the mentoring program also helped prepare newcomers by making them aware of the specific experiences they might face early in their employment with the organization, which seemed to be achieved through the mentoring process (Korte, Brunhaver, & Sheppard, 2015).

Interview data revealed that the ability to speak in public, carry on a conversation while maintaining good eye contact, and practicing quality listening skills were beneficial when attempting to succeed as county extension agents. The value of good communication skills was evident in the interviews, the observations, and the mentoring notebooks provided by the CES onboarding program.

The mentoring program notebooks proposed communication as an essential skill needed to maintain successful mentorships. The notebooks contained attachments that covered the following:

- Questions: An Open Door to Conversations with your Mentee
- Good Habits for Effective Listeners

- Listening Self-Assessment
- Suggested Discussion Topics for Mentors

Listening skills. Duke said willingly listening to people with sincerity, even if one does not agree with the person's point of view, is imperative to communicating with clients so they know they are being heard. Making eye contact was noted as an important skill to combine with quality listening even though Duke said he had to concentrate to learn that skill. His mentor pointed the fault out to him, and Duke worked on honing the skill until he was comfortable looking people in the eye for an entire conversation. One of the observation participants demonstrated this skill as the researcher was walking into the building before an observation session. Jessica, who did not know who the researcher was at the time, looked the researcher directly in the eye, smiled, and said hello. As they chatted, Jessica was maintaining eye contact and nodding her head as she listened, which displayed active listening skills. Isaac believed the more advanced in age individuals are, the more they value face-to-face communication. He claimed his older clients would rather make a visit to his office than calling him on the telephone or emailing him. To maintain good relationships with people in the county, it is critical to assess the clientele to determine which communication style they prefer.

Public speaking skills. Several of the mentees discussed the importance of strong public speaking skills, effective teaching skills, and an ability to build an educational program in the county. Teresa concluded that building a program took ample amounts of creative thinking and planning and was convinced many new county agents did not realize the number of duties associated with conducting programs, especially when they were in their first careers. When multiple sessions are involved, the work entails more than just showing up once and leading a one-hour activity. Agents must practice the material so that the transitions between the lessons

are smooth and that the agents are considered to know their subject matter. Additionally, plenty of communication skills are needed when working with various people to secure a venue, provide meals, and prepare the lesson materials.

It was obvious Arthur was an experienced presenter because his timing was impeccable. At one point during his and Ed's observation, the pair were having technical difficulties with the computer equipment, so Arthur told a quick joke while Ed worked on the equipment. The audience was very engaged during the joke, and as soon as the joke was over, the audience laughed, and the training immediately started again. Kelly had witnessed programs where county agents displayed excellent communication skills when delivering programs, but she had also seen agents who needed to improve their skills because they were not adequately holding the attention of their audiences. Kelly admitted she had to work on her public speaking skills and found being very prepared helped more than honing her dialect or the content. Her confidence grew as she prepared and conducted additional lessons. With pride, she bragged that speaking to a group of any size no longer bothered her, and it did not matter if she conducted the lesson in person or virtually.

Exercising silence. Lindsey was predominantly an extremely vocal person who freely shared her opinion but quickly realized when communicating with clients at work that she should remain non-biased because the CES is a state-funded agency. Exercising silence in conversations she normally would have participated in fully allowed her to remain unbiased, and she realized it was acceptable if her opinion was not always evident. Lindsey said the following:

Treat people with respect and how you want to be treated. You don't always have to agree with people, but you don't have to tell them how you feel about them either.

Kelly admitted she had to learn to exercise silence, which was difficult for her to grasp because she was extroverted, but as she grew to understand what she was passionate about within her program areas, she found she experienced joy when she shared her knowledge with others in a way where she was not always the center of attention. The other mentees who contributed to this category were not as extroverted as Kelly but also determined that learning to actively avoid saying everything that came to their minds was helpful in their success as county extension agents.

Category 2: Connecting with people. Possessing the skills to relate to people cultivates quality relationships and bridges gaps in understanding between organizations, employees, and those the employees serve. Data collected in this category revealed it was important to possess certain skills for an easier transition in a new work environment like relating to a variety of people, being approachable, and working harmoniously with colleagues.

Relating to a variety of people. The ability to relate to many types of people regardless of their socioeconomic, demographic, or professional status was an important skill for successful county agents. In fact, all but one of the mentees mentioned this skill during their interview; in addition, the skill was displayed in an observation. Furthermore, the mentor notebook mentioned public relation skills when it stated a skillful mentor should recognize the diverse backgrounds, personality styles, and developmental needs of new agents and differentiate support accordingly. There are many community and civic groups county agents work with to further the CES's mission, so being able to communicate effectively and nurture community relationships is key. Lindsey agreed that county agents must have an engaging personality and like people. When asked what she meant by that, she said an agent must be able to talk to anyone in the county, be

it the county judge or someone picking up commodities at the local food pantry. Savannah mirrored that opinion when she said the following:

You also have to have great people skills because you're working with people of all ages like parents, grandparents raising their grandkids and their kids. So, working with three or four or five different generations of people and knowing how to work and interact with people at different ages. Also, how to work with people of different backgrounds lifestyles and you have to be able to talk to people who would donate thousands of dollars to your program because they have some extra money at the end of the year, and you have to be able to talk to the mom who can't afford the \$10 t-shirt for her kid so that they fit in and look like the rest of the kids. So, you have to be able to talk to tons of different kinds of people and make conversation and meet them where they're at and understand where they're coming from and make relationships with people of different backgrounds.

A good example of displaying the skill of building and maintaining relationships with people in the county was noted during Donna's observation in Mifflin County. As Jessica and the researcher waited for Donna to finish an unexpected visit with a client, they could hear Donna in her office, talking to an adult male. The researcher mentioned to Jessica the man very well could be the city mayor or the county judge. When Donna ended her meeting and joined the observation meeting, she explained the gentleman in her office was the president of both a county and state volunteer organization, and she had missed a face-to-face meeting the night before, so he wanted to let her know what occurred at the meeting.

Being approachable and open was very important to Jo, who said county agents must be approachable so people do not think they are conceited. She liked when people felt they could approach her and feel confident enough to come to her house and know they were always welcome to ask her to help them work on a piece of farming equipment or ask questions at a ball game about spraying techniques.

Harmonious working relationships. Having or developing the ability to get along with colleagues was identified as a crucial skill to possess when working as a county agent. Although

the ability to get along with others is not a new discovery in general, when working with the public, the county personnel must work together to ensure they are sending a cohesive message, especially when controversy strikes. Data collected in this area suggested that even when conflict arises, the employees could work out the issues causing the conflict if the agents cared about the people they worked with.

One obstacle that was brought to the researcher's attention during an observation was when new agents move from another state, it can be especially difficult to communicate in an effective way with colleagues to ensure a healthy working relationship. Communication styles differ depending on the area of the country a person is raised, and those differences can often be misinterpreted if the working pair is not continually communicating by asking questions and ensuring they understand what is being conveyed. Jessica and Donna revisited the topic of an inner office conflict previously discussed, and Jessica reported the conflict with the colleague was much improved now because they had learned to communicate more effectively and discuss their issues. Jessica and her co-worker learned to let each other know when they were going to be out of the office and communicate when they would be available if they needed to discuss an issue. They also had some conflicts regarding who oversaw certain programmatic responsibilities and learned to communicate in a precise, but tactful way. Jessica explained she did not believe in prolonging a conversation and uses sharp, concise language when speaking with others. Blunt conversation has not been well received in the county where she now resides, and Jessica has learned people in the South tend to enjoy long conversations that could be accomplished in much less time. Jessica became more aware of how she broached a subject because in the South it is considered rude to be too direct with a question or reply. One must raise subjects gently, which typically takes longer than simply asking a direct question or making a statement.

Another observation yielded a similar conversation between Meredith and Angela. Angela asked if a conflict between Meredith and one of her colleagues had been resolved, and Meredith acknowledged some progress had been made by outlining clear expectations to each other because they realized if they were going to work together, they needed to find common ground and not battle for control of the program.

Jason, Phyllis, and Lucy all had similar remarks regarding their feelings for their colleagues. They cared about the people they worked with and considered them friends in addition to colleagues. Phyllis appreciated serving the public together with her colleagues and tied her feelings to the mission of the Division of Agriculture of “I Care, We Serve.”

Category 3: Workplace ethic and being ethical. Managers seek job candidates whose moral philosophies guide them when faced with difficult decisions and circumstances. The researcher found there was a difference between workplace *ethic* and workplace *ethics* according to what the mentees conveyed. When a mentee referred to ethics, they were referring to the way that one’s values influenced his or her work, and when they referred to work ethic, they were referring to one’s inner motivation to do his or her work and the sense of responsibility accompanying the motivation. While the mentees predominantly identified work ethic philosophies, they did mention a few instances of work ethics.

The mentor notebook specifically addressed ethical behavior, calling it “vitally important to practice and reward ethical behavior in all stages of the relationship” (University of Arkansas, 2010, p.19). One example of ethical behavior is maintaining confidentiality regarding conversations during the mentorship, and a section in the mentor notebook warned mentors to be cautious when discussing mentees with their supervisors. Disclosing content from confidential

conversations between the mentor and mentee may cause the mentee to lose confidence in the mentor's ability to keep other sensitive conversations private.

Jason was appreciative of his mentor's advice after seeking guidance regarding a colleague's questionable ethical behavior. After confirming that it was not illegal behavior, his mentor suggested Jason try to avoid the colleague as much as possible so that he would not be blamed if the organization frowned on the behavior. He said it was a relief to have the opportunity to seek advice from his mentor regarding the uncomfortable situation. Another mentee placed great importance on practicing ethical behavior, citing ethical behavior as a predominant value for her and believed extension values integrity, too. She said, "If you are not ethical, moral, and have high integrity, you really do some damage to the organization."

Data gathered during the study and document analysis uncovered certain workplace ethic behaviors thought to be beneficial to be a successful county extension agent. Utilizing a moral compass is a preeminent characteristic deemed advantageous for an employee's success. Some work ethic principles like accountability, flexibility, initiative, time management, and stress control were thought by the mentees and the mentoring notebooks to be superior to possess.

Being prepared. Mentees defined being prepared as an important work ethic characterized by possessing superior organizational skills and having the desire to use the tools available to prepare for professional duties. Immediately after beginning their jobs, agents begin receiving programmatic calls every day, and it is common for them to become frustrated if they cannot instantly provide an answer. Questions can range from how to freeze strawberries, treat a lawn for weeds, or balance a bank account, and it is important to provide correct answers. In an effort to provide sufficient answers, mentees reported relying on their mentors frequently during the first year to ensure they answered questions correctly. Consequently, mentees learn to place

value on being prepared because colleagues depend on each other to co-lead programs and expect a high level of professionalism in their presentations.

Kelly says she is a highly organized individual, which makes it easier to arrive fully prepared for a program and to find information quickly for a client when asked. Isaac says he does not enjoy returning client calls without being prepared. When his support staff member takes a message from a client, Isaac prefers the message to be organized and include details of the client's specific needs. Returning a call only to have to gather more information before finding a remedy for the situation causes him stress. Dorothy had a similar response when she said she believes the skill of organization is the most important professional skill to achieve in order to gain trust from clients because they realize the agent took the time to prepare to offer a good program.

Flexibility. Many of the mentees commented about each day in the CES being different, and that sentiment was echoed in the mentoring notebook which conveyed to mentees they should be flexible, adaptable, and receptive to new ideas. For many, those qualities are appealing, and it retained their interest in moving ahead with new goals and challenges each passing year. But for some, constant change was a stressor. Sometimes the perception of the job shifted because the job description may have been vague, and once the agents secured a position, the job was not what they expected. Two of the mentees interviewed were promoted to a supervisory role within their first year of employment, and both reported they felt ill-prepared to assume the responsibilities associated with the job but felt supported by their district directors and colleagues in other counties. Teresa said having flexibility and being open to change was something that she often embraced and had the following to say:

I really didn't consider that less than a year later as a new employee, I would become staff chair and take on those responsibilities and the changes due to

finances in the county and being shorter staffed than when I was originally hired. It's not a bad thing, but it's much different than when I was hired. You're in a position through attrition, or whatever it is, when you become shorter staffed and take on more responsibilities for the most part, your whole position changes.

Dorothy recalled how she was gradually convinced by a state specialist to consider preparing her community for the development of a program where city and county governments worked together to benefit everyone. Feeling confident, she was adamant that her county did not need the program when she was initially asked to consider signing up. Finally, last spring, she attended a conference which described the program in detail and conceded that community development may work in her community.

Lucy and Susan both commented about how they had learned to adapt when they get a new supervisor because they must adjust to learn the new supervisor's management style. Lucy stated that depending on the new supervisor, it is difficult to continue to operate under new management. When asked to explain, she said it is frustrating when an employee is required to change supervisors too often. Teresa said this:

I wasn't prepared when I came on board." It's late night and long days and you have to be available. You have to work people in when they show up at your office. They don't understand if you're tied up in something. So, you have to be flexible and open to change your schedule if need be.

Adapting to technology. The mentor, mentee, and supervisor notebooks advised new agents to contribute to the application and use of new technologies, practices, and approaches to ensure the CES remains a valued and responsive source of research-based education for Arkansans. County agents are required to market their programs to find ways to reach new audiences, and evidence shows several steps new agents can take to contribute to their success in their county.

By pairing technology with educational programming, Isaac became an unlikely but popular CES video educator. He described why he began to communicate and educate with videos:

I started using technology in a rural county. We're in a very split county, the northern half and the southern half - its world war over here. So, we aren't cohesive on anything. So, it's just allowed me to kind of go from the office and present it. And then if they want to watch it, they can. I think in those situations you find ways to get the job done.

During an observation session, Donna and Jessica discussed marketing programs and how Jessica's social media efforts were getting more "likes" each day and had resulted in the Mayor's Office taking notice. They discussed newsletters and whether Jessica's clients still had a need for them. Donna told her that newsletters are still relevant, but they could be distributed electronically instead of as a hard copy mailed each month depending on the group. Donna suggested to Jessica that she assess her audience to determine their preferences.

Initiative. Eight of the twelve mentees and one observation pair discussed the importance of being self-starters or being self-motivated to take the initiative to build effective educational programs in their county. Lucy began her explanation of being a self-starter with the belief that county work required flexibility, and because no one stood over her every day ensuring she completed her job duties, there was not a lot of accountability to perform at a high level. She continued by saying the county staff chair had their own programmatic efforts and did not have the time to make constant suggestions to new agents. Finally, Lucy completed her thoughts on the subject by saying, "Although expectations are in place for recruitment efforts, you are not going to get fired for a stagnant program, but you are also not going to get recognition or promotions either." Dorothy mirrored Lucy's response by saying no one tells agents precisely what to do because all have their own jobs and cannot check on new employees all the time.

Lindsey commented, “You are only going to get out of it what you put into it,” meaning the mentoring program. She believed mentees must be able to admit to their mentors when they need help or are uncomfortable performing one of their job duties, but it is solely on the mentees to determine how much effort they devote to their new jobs. Furthermore, she did not believe a county agent’s job could be learned in a year due to its difficulty and said it is the responsibility of new agents to be resilient and develop mechanisms to complete their first year successfully.

Time management. The skill of time management was a significant ethical professional practice mentioned in eight of the twelve interviews and one of the three observations. The ability to complete job tasks and manage time prevents job errors and allows employees to be more present during other work responsibilities. Work-life balance is an issue many employees struggle with and can be especially difficult when workers’ minds are divided between work and home.

Teresa compared attempting to get all her job responsibilities completed as a battle to balance the different programs areas within one county agent position. She felt she struggled to find time to perform all her FCS duties because 4-H took a great deal of time and was not her primary focus area. Her inexperience in the youth development portion of the CES programming efforts required her to spend more time on researching the details of the 4-H youth program. Her comprehension of what was involved in each 4-H project area was limited, and she believed many new agents do not know the time commitment involved, either. One of the observation sessions yielded similar advice when Donna cautioned Jessica that eventually she would need to start making decisions about prioritizing which meetings to attend because she would not have the time to devote to all of them in the future. Lindsey said choosing which direction a program takes requires time and knowledge, “You do not know what it’s supposed to be, so you are lost.”

She confessed her mentor was instrumental in helping her determine what she was most comfortable teaching because there are so many features involved in the 4-H and FCS programs. Susan asserted she feels guilty when she devotes too much time to one program area because she cannot do justice to the various programs and wishes to excel at something, but she cannot because her schedule is too full with the array of events required by the two areas. Dorothy seemed to agree when she pronounced, “We expect people to be experts in too many things.”

Lindsey, one of the youngest mentees, admitted the CES was not her top priority in life although she appreciated the paychecks. Early in her career, she learned how to set boundaries in her personal and professional lives and emphasized knowing her limits and values. Spending time with her family and friends was disclosed as her most important value, but Lindsey noticed the seasoned agents went home and thought about extension and wondered what they were going to do at work the next day. She pointed out that her generation is considered selfish for not letting their job consume them all the time and said, “If I quit tomorrow, they are replacing me the next day, so I gotta take care of myself and my family first.” Lindsey noticed how some agents never say no and feel tired and worn out and why she believes there is so much turnover in the CES.

Susan often felt torn between her different program responsibilities and felt guilty if she was not devoting equal time to each, a balance that was difficult to achieve. The following is what she conveyed about her attempt to balance her time between community development and FCS:

I'm feeling torn between the two because it's like when you get into those community development meetings those people are wanting things from you all the time. And so you feel drained when you leave the meetings because you've got five more things to do, because they want you to do this and this and this and so it's hard to get your base program set up because now your calendar is full. I think a successful county extension agent is somebody that has a, a well-rounded

program, but they're not overwhelmed with it, they don't just continue to say yes to everybody. They've been with it long enough, which I think is five years. I should be there, but I'm not.

In another instance, Jessica told Donna during an observation session about how she struggled with designating enough time to each of her three subject matter areas. The advice Donna provided to Jessica was that she needed to determine the overall goals for the programs in the county as compared to offering many different randomly selected programs.

Teresa delayed applying for a job with the CES because she was a single mother raising her children and knew she could not devote the time it took to be a successful county agent and a successful mother. She knew the hours were not typical, but she learned they were flexible enough to work around personal issues, so she eventually applied for a county agent position. Isaac applied for a job in the CES because of the lack of flexibility in the school system where he worked. Being a father, he liked the flexibility and the ability to work around medical appointments and other responsibilities without having to find a substitute as he had done when working for the school. Even when the mentees realized they needed more work/life balance, they had difficulty acting on that priority. Phyllis confessed, "My perception on time management surely has changed, but I haven't done anything about it." She said she now realizes she needs to say no more and schedule more time for herself and is attempting to make the adjustments in her schedule.

Poor time management skills were a contributing factor for some of the participants of the study and resulted in their feeling overwhelmed and stressed, compromising their capacity to perform at a high level. The feeling of being overwhelmed was mentioned by three of the mentees as a concern when they were new agents. Jessica mentioned she was overwhelmed at first but began to feel better about her job the longer she was an agent, and Donna encouraged

her to take time out to find things that brought her joy and not let herself get too mentally exhausted and devoid of motivation. Jason said he was very overwhelmed at first, and Phyllis admitted she still initiated projects before realizing she really did not have the time to complete them. Both mentees have developed methods to practice relaxation techniques to replenish their mental health.

Category 4: Effects of engaging employability skills. It seemed to the researcher that once the new county agents settled into their roles and continued to work with their mentors, they learned to utilize the skills and resources made available to them, which resulted in increased perception of compatibility, fit, and worth. The mentees commented on their feelings of enjoyment and their increased levels of credibility and confidence.

Showing passion/enjoyment for work. Showing enjoyment and passion for a profession stems from caring deeply about outcomes of the efforts put forth. Employees are more likely to enjoy their work if they are personally invested and motivated by its mission. Kelly mentioned several times throughout her interview how much she loved working for the public and had the following to say:

People are drawn to others who are passionate about what they are selling and as an agent you are selling extension. So being able to share that passion to change their lives and then they start changing their behaviors, and that's a really big reason I do what I do. You have to be passionate.

Phyllis disclosed she found being the cool and nontraditional educator appealing and conveyed she enjoyed all aspects of her job. Duke admitted he looked forward to coming to work most days, and he liked the fact he was often able to help people.

Increasing credibility. As new research becomes available, successful county agents have been identified as those who assert themselves in their discipline area, seize opportunities to grow in areas where they have weaknesses, and share their strengths with colleagues. Successful

agents who perceived themselves as a fit in the CES felt an obligation to uphold the reputation of the organization and strived for perfection. Jason commented he stresses to himself and his staff that sending out social media posts and other correspondence with errors is unacceptable. He is admittedly strict about ensuring correspondence has no errors and said, “I don’t care how small – double check, and then double check each other,” because if their office sends out correspondence with even a small mistake, he felt their credibility could be damaged. The skills he stressed the most with his staff were sacrifice, hard work, credibility, and commitment. Jason commented if agents have even a small amount of work ethic and drive, they want to be credible and respected by their clients. Jason could not help looking up to agents who had built excellent programs and were well respected by other county agents and producers.

Duke’s comments aligned with Jason’s. Soon after being hired, he felt like it was his responsibility to uphold the CES’s good reputation and his own, and he realized the following:

I’ve realized I’m part of something big here and it’s my job to make sure that Cameron County don’t get a black eye because they had a bad agent.”

The data collected conveyed new county agents were scrutinized closely by existing clients in the county program. Jo acknowledged she made sure to do her research because she knew clients were questioning whether she knew what she was talking about. She said if she kept research on the forefront of her mind and gave sound recommendations in a competent manner, her clients would say, “That girl knows what she’s talking about,” which made her want to continue to excel in her area of expertise to gain credibility.

In an observation session, Arthur bragged about his mentee’s accomplishments by informing the clients in the workshop about Ed’s past farming success before joining the CES. Ed reciprocated by proudly proclaiming to the group that the training was Arthur’s 58th PAT training. This recognition of his mentee was a practice directly supported by the mentoring

notebook, which stated mentoring is a supportive, professional relationship (University of Arkansas, 2010). In a conversation with the researcher, both Ed and Arthur mentioned they realized early in their relationship that they complemented each other well because of their backgrounds. One was proficient in fruit production, and the other was skillful in row crops, which balanced out their strengths and weaknesses.

Gaining confidence. The mentor notebook expressed a mentor's job is to strengthen the mentee's leadership skills and self-confidence (University of Arkansas, 2010), and many of the mentees mentioned their confidence in their abilities grew over time. Some of this came from the mentor relationships, but some came from positive feedback from clientele, prior experience, or a direct supervisor.

Five of the twelve mentees said time is an important factor when building confidence in their professional abilities. Savannah mentioned her confidence grew by starting conversations about her programs with strangers whom she thought would benefit from the services the CES offers. Kelly said she was a lot more comfortable after her first year because she knew more about the schedule of annual events and how to prepare for them. Jo said she advanced and improved upon her programs and delivery every year, but they were not all perfect. Jason shared those sentiments about his programs by admitting, "The bad ones will sort themselves out over time." Isaac thought the mentoring component helped develop his vision of what he wanted to accomplish in the county. He wanted growth in his program but understood it took time to build growth and had to start with a firm foundation. Meredith told her mentor in an observation session that she did not feel like she was drowning now as she had done at the beginning of her time as a county agent because having time to digest the information had helped.

Some mentees reflected on their mentoring experiences and realized the mentoring component was a primary resource for their success, but not the only reason. Lucy remarked she is not convinced it was only her mentor who helped her through her first year, but her staff chair and the agents with whom she conducted multiple programs over the course of a year helped her the most. She said the following:

I mean, if I look back on my first two years or so it wasn't really the mentor that helped me feel like I could be an agent. It was my staff chair. It was people I did programs with all the time.

Kelly was confident her successes were not attributed to her mentor but to her prior experience with state government in an educational role, and Duke acknowledged he was not entirely confident he would be able to successfully face every situation in the future because of his mentorship training; however, he immediately followed with, “But I still believe having a good mentor is invaluable to being a successful agent.” Lindsey said her feeling of confidence depended on where she is located. She felt more confident and valued in her community than when she was with other agents at state training events. Even though she knew she was putting forth her best effort and felt her programming impact showed proof, Lindsey still felt inadequate around other county agents.

Theme 3: Mentor/Mentee Relationships

Theme three indicated certain mentor traits were perceived more desirable and more likely to produce a complementary mentorship pair. The data gathered during the interviews, observations, and document analysis exposed effective and ineffective mentor qualities and practices, and it was clear those practices affected the outcome of mentoring relationships. Other practices which played a role in the success of the mentoring relationships was being mindful of

proximity, sharing knowledge, promptly contacting the mentee, and carefully pairing the mentee and mentor.

Category 1: Effective and ineffective mentor qualities. Behaviors and methods used by mentors, either perceived as effective or ineffective, seemingly had an impact on mentee behavioral and emotional outcomes. The mentees commonly agreed the most desirable traits of effective mentors were being positive, personable, approachable, and honest. If mentors behaved with negativity, pushiness, and grumpiness, they were considered the least helpful.

Being paired carefully. The data presented that if mentors were chosen carefully and intentionally by CES district directors based on common job responsibilities, backgrounds, and personalities, it seemed to make a difference in the success of the mentorship. Most of the mentees enjoyed their mentors and felt fortunate to have been paired with them. Ed told the researcher he and Arthur immediately formed a bond, and Kelly said she was not sure how pairings were determined, but she was very content about being paired with her mentor. Savannah thought the reason she and her mentor got along so well was because of their similar personalities and interests. Because Duke worked in the same county where he was raised, he had known his mentor all his life and had grown up with his mentor's son.

Jason believed the personalities of the mentor and mentee was the most important factor to consider when pairing mentors and mentees. He said proximity was a limitation, but the ultimate question was, "Do you have someone who pairs well with the mentee?" Duke had an idea for an alternative way of pairing by allowing the mentees to choose their own mentors. He had the following to say on the subject:

Once you find the person that you match up with and connect with, being able to mentor with *that* person, instead of getting paired up. Some people didn't get along with mentors, but maybe they just didn't get on the same page. Mentors

come naturally, don't be shy, go talk to people and learn what they do, they're proud and will share.

Duke added that if a mentoring pair discovers the pairing was a mistake, they should have the option to change mentors with no questions asked. He thought perhaps a personality assessment could be administered to new agents and utilized as a tool to pair them with a mentor who has similar qualities.

Proximity. Although the proximity of the pair seemed to play a major role in the effectiveness of the mentoring experience, opinions differed on what an ideal proximal distance was. Some mentees thought being in a neighboring county was ideal because it was not necessary for the mentorship pair to spend a great deal of time traveling to meet with each other. Many of the mentees agreed being closer to their mentors led to increased opportunities for mentorship, especially for overseeing day-to-day job duties. However, the mentees who shared that opinion happened to be in neighboring counties and had a complimentary personality fit with their mentors. Others thought that when a mentor and mentee were paired only because of proximity, there was not always an ideal fit between the two because the formal mentor was not a personality match or their programmatic areas were not similar. All agreed the bond formed between mentor and mentee was more important than the proximity of the pair but understood proximity logically must be a factor when pairing individuals.

Positivity. Positivity was mentioned most frequently by the mentees as a trait that was appreciated and desired by new agents to remain optimistic about their new surroundings. Mentees noticed during state meetings when other agents complained about their jobs or other organizational changes with which they disagreed. When mentees had a positive mentor, they seemed to use the negatively charged experiences witnessed from colleagues and compare them with the positive outlook their mentors possessed. Savannah said her mentor seemed to love her

job, which made it surprising when she went to a state extension meeting and realized some agents thought, “It’s more fun to complain about your job and gripe” than to focus on the positive aspects of their job. The suggestion was made to vet the mentors very carefully but also acknowledged that there are not many qualified mentors in the district. Phyllis recently attended a workshop where the negative agents were in attendance and began making negative comments, which led to a loss of momentum for the instructor who was trying to be positive about upcoming changes in the system. Verbal negativity by informal mentors can influence mentees, too, but perhaps if mentors sufficiently buffer those negative experiences by continuously displaying positive role model behavior, it may neutralize the adverse impact on mentees.

Approachability. Jason’s experience with his mentor was not a negative experience, but he understood how much more enriching it could have been when he began serving as a mentor. Soon after his mentorship began, Jason realized his mentor was not open to a close relationship with him, and it left Jason feeling uncomfortable, so he was reluctant to ask crucial questions. His mentor never joked or sought to find common ground with Jason, which Jason described as awkward, but he respected his mentor and his credentials. While Jason’s mentor was a very well-respected agent with 30 years of experience, Jason suggested, “Sometimes we forget to stand in those new shoes when we get too far away from it.” With his own experience as a mentor, he was careful to be as open and approachable as possible with the mentee whom he served. Phyllis said although her mentor experience was not negative, it was uncomfortable at times. She knew her mentor was well intended, but Phyllis felt her mentor could be bossy and, even today, will still revert to her mentor role and be assertive at times. Phyllis said, “I have learned I can push right back nowadays.”

Dorothy did not feel she was comfortable approaching her mentor very often. When Dorothy tried to contact her mentor, she was not very responsive, and Dorothy had the feeling she was being hurriedly excused each time she was able to communicate with her mentor. As a result, Dorothy quickly decided not to approach her mentor very often and formed other informal mentor relationships instead.

Category 2: Effective and ineffective mentor practices. As with mentor qualities, commonalities existed between mentor practices which proved effective or ineffective. Mentees identified several practices which had a direct impact on the quality of their mentoring experiences, including contacting the mentee, sharing knowledge with the mentee, informal mentors, and encouragement.

Contacting the mentee. Mentors were instructed to initiate contact with their mentees within the first week of being assigned as their mentor and maintain contact throughout the mentees' first year (University of Arkansas, 2010). The data confirmed that the quicker the mentors initiated first contact with the mentees, the more supported the mentees felt.

Lucy believed, "You can grow stronger because of the mentor program." She also said if new agents are not assigned a mentor when they first begin work, it might take quite a bit of time before they are assigned one. Lucy began work in late fall and did not get a formally assigned mentor until spring because there was a large turnover of agents in counties surrounding Oakley County, and there was no one available and qualified to be assigned. Isaac and Kelly both had the positive experience of receiving a quick introduction to their mentors soon after beginning work. Isaac had already met his mentor during the interview process, but his mentor also called the first day and came to visit the first week. Kelly's mentor called and then followed up with an

email to further introduce herself, and then they soon met face-to-face and continued meeting often until her mentor secured a position with another organization and moved.

Phyllis and Dorothy had been informed who their mentors were but did not hear from them within two weeks of employment, so they took the initiative and called their mentors first. Phyllis admitted she is “a little quirky in that I took it upon myself to make contact because I was coming in blind to 4-H and needed to learn,” so she believed the mentors and mentees should get together soon after employment to establish their mentorship. Dorothy lamented she initiated all the meetings with her mentor except for one, which was the opposite of what she believed should happen. Jo theorized phone calls are an adequate way to communicate, but suggested the mentor and mentee occasionally meet face-to-face, sit down together, and go through the calendar to be sure the new employees understand what is involved regarding the CES training opportunities offered during the first year of employment.

Sharing knowledge. The interviews conveyed mentees were pleased when mentors consistently shared their experiences and knowledge of the CES, including providing historical knowledge of the organization, sharing educational resources, modeling teaching techniques, and managing volunteers. The mentoring notebook supported this notion when it expressed mentees must be educated in organization philosophy, goals, policies, and values (University of Arkansas, 2010).

It was evident some of the mentees were unaware of how the CES system came into existence when they accepted their position. Duke realized the mentoring program was formed to “introduce me to what I needed to be doing, its values and the organization as a whole.” After completing the mentoring program, Isaac believed everyone who had participated in the mentoring program should be versed in not only the history of the CES but also the land grant

system as a whole. He said at first he thought the history of the CES was an uninteresting topic but soon realized the importance of the system and said, “A bell went off on what a land grant university does and it started to make sense.” Teresa had the same views but now believes the mentoring program should focus on teaching the CES system more because younger agents do not understand what it involves unless they grew up in the 4-H organization.

Teresa was very impressed with the eagerness of her formal and informal mentors to share information with her. She had the following to say:

I've never worked around people that were so willing to share. You know, even though they've worked on something and planned it, they might share it with everyone and say use it at your discretion or don't use it. That in itself... You know, shows the unselfish character of agents and specialists because they're working hard, but it's not just for themselves. It's for the agency so it makes a big difference. And it helps.

It was noted how helpful it was for the mentoring pair to have face-to-face meeting time for mentors to impart knowledge even without a formal teaching opportunity. Savannah spoke of being shown how her mentor organized her own storeroom, pointed out the most successful curricula, and secured copies of curricula from state specialists for Savannah when necessary. Then, her mentor paid a visit to Savannah's storeroom and helped update and organize her program materials. Lucy had a similar situation occur when her mentor invited her to review her curricula. Lucy said, “We talked about different programs. She gave me some pointers for some of the different ones she did in the schools.” Duke also mentioned, “It was important to see how to run a meeting by having handouts, sign-in sheets, all the little things until I got my feet on the ground.”

Another method of sharing knowledge with mentees was when mentors modeled teaching techniques as they conducted programs to slowly introduce the concept of teaching lessons to groups of clients. Savannah watched her mentor teach a program at a school for the

first class, and then Savannah was allowed to slowly incorporate teaching components in subsequent classes. Savannah described one teaching opportunity in particular:

We hatched chicks in the classroom, which I had no experience with, but she showed me the different steps and showed me her materials. She showed me how she prepared for the program and talked to me about what she was going to do. She did the program and then she reviewed it all with me and I felt like I could go do this now. And I did. There's no way I could have done that by just reading a notebook...job shadowing I guess what you could call it was probably the most important part of the mentoring program for me.

Lindsey, Duke, Teresa, Jason, and Jo all mentioned similar situations, providing examples of how their mentors facilitated the more difficult portions of a program but gave their mentees a less complex part to teach. During two separate observations involving Meredith and Angela and then Arthur and Ed, the researcher witnessed this teaching model occur. Angela and Meredith met early to review the workshop agenda and assign roles, and early in the workshop Angela began at one station, and Meredith began helping after the first rotation. Arthur and Ed co-taught a pesticide class, and although Ed commenced the meeting, it was apparent Arthur was the main speaker throughout the day. Ed conducted more topics as the lesson progressed.

Mentors were shown to have different preferred teaching styles. One style was to model as described above, but another style noted was when mentees called their mentors and asked specific questions, and the mentor told them exactly how to handle the situation. Depending on the mentor, sometimes the question would be about making a recommendation to a client or a soil test procedure where there was no modeling of behavior. Duke said his mentor was “very to the point, there wasn’t a whole bunch of hoopla, here’s what you need to do, get this done, do this.” Jo said her mentor could remember details about any situation to give her insight on subjects in which she was not proficient. Those mentors who had a blended approach to teaching seemed to produce the most satisfied mentees.

Yet another teaching method was revealed during the study where mentors shared program implementation techniques without modeling. During the observation between Donna and Jessica, Donna shared the process for building a successful program and how she slowly implemented various components as the program grew. Jessica told how, after discussing a program implementation plan with Donna at a prior mentor visit, the program is working. Jessica partnered with a new organization to start an exercise program, was learning to network with people in her community, and had received more phone calls each week. When Jessica voiced concern that there were not many new members who had joined yet, Donna told her, “It’s worth it – keep going, even when you don’t see immediate results.” Isaac had another experience pertaining to verbal direction. His mentor met him for lunch occasionally for Isaac to share successes and frustrations, and his mentor had enough tenure to direct and inform Isaac because of her own experiences in similar situations. The advice was appreciated because Isaac did not yet know all the unwritten rules. This was a direct correlation with what the mentor notebook advised:

Mentors should offer feedback, advice, assist in learning new job responsibilities, and help mentees get acquainted with the organization. The mentor will provide an opportunity for the mentee to ask questions, test ideas, and talk about challenges and solutions (University of Arkansas, 2010).

Jo credited her mentor with demonstrating professionalism, which Jo then mimicked in her own work. Jo believed enhancing professionalism traits was needed to be a successful agent, which she is still working to achieve. She said witnessing the professional skills her mentor had honed over time was beneficial because visual examples of professionalism were often more impactful than verbal or written. The development of more motivation was also attributed to Jo’s mentor by serving as an advocate and cheerleader when Jo exhibited innovative programming and positive results.

It might be beneficial for mentees to have a mentor with professional skills which do not precisely align with their own. Kelly said she observed examples of organization techniques from her mentor which were not similar to hers and seemed disorganized compared to her own, so Kelly developed an organizational style more appropriate for her needs. Savannah realized her professionalism skills are still a work in progress and has gained confidence in her professional abilities. Her trials and errors have taught her successful methods she can utilize to perform her job duties effectively.

Dedicating time to be a mentor. Having the time to devote to mentees and intentionally taking the time to effectively mentor was important to mentees, and it was apparent if mentors intentionally did not dedicate a sufficient amount of time to the mentorship. The mentor notebook specifically emphasized that the willingness of the mentor to devote time and energy on behalf of the mentee is a major contribution to the program (University of Arkansas, 2010).

Lucy referred to her mentor as a valuable tool because she was always available, and she could answer questions because her mentor had been through a wide variety of situations. Susan said she did not have to wait until a mentor session to access her mentor; she could call or text her mentor for help any time. Jo said her experience was similar. Her mentor's "phone was always open for me to call in with any questions."

Adversely, there were also mentors who did not dedicate as much time to their mentees as the mentees would have liked. When asked if Dorothy's mentor reinforced her perception of fit, she said the following:

No, no. No, no, because I felt like she was always in a hurry. You know? Yeah, on to the next thing, and distracted and...I couldn't really get the response I needed from my mentor. And I did not have a great mentor. Okay. She had very little time for me. And when I would reach out to ask a question, she almost...she just wasn't very responsive, and would try to give me just a quick brush off type

of answer so I pretty quickly learned that she's not somebody I'm gonna really approach so...

Dorothy's mentor had a new job assignment around the time of their formal mentorship assignment and also had two other mentees, so Dorothy thought her mentor's busy schedule may have added to the problem. She believes her mentor was overwhelmed and just could not devote the time needed to truly serve as an effective mentor.

Informal mentors. The topic of the impact of informal mentorship was the most frequently specified subject matter during the data collection process. All but one mentee mentioned this topic as a significant aspect of their first year of employment at the CES. Although not assigned as formal mentors, CES employees at all levels were identified as crucial sources to aid new employees when they needed assistance. Current and former agents in their immediate office, other county offices, supervisors, district directors, and state specialists were all identified by mentees as serving as informal mentors.

The mentoring notebook backed up the importance of informal mentors when it stated, "Successful onboarding is a team effort with shared responsibilities and engagement of the staff chair, district director, new employee, mentors, co-workers, the Professional and Staff Development department, the Human Resources department, and the Information Technology department" (University of Arkansas, 2010, p.5).

Some mentees preferred informal mentors over the formal mentors they were assigned and reported they received more assistance from their informal mentors. The data collected revealed the mentees were usually the ones who reached out first to informal mentors. Phyllis took it upon herself to contact agents in other counties and districts who had plenty of experience with 4-H programming after recognizing 4-H is vastly different elsewhere in the state. Additionally, she found employees at the state office who readily provided curricula and advice.

Eventually, she had formed a group of seasoned agents who were willing to share experiences and program ideas openly so she “thinks we need to encourage the informal mentor development, too.” Duke had a similar experience where he found informal mentors as he listened to other agents conduct programs he attended. He found there were county agents who had different areas of expertise and witnessed they were making a difference. He realized his career goals were not only about reciting a journal article or a white paper, “These guys really know what they are talking about on this stuff.”

Dorothy, Lucy, Lucy, Jo, Jessica, Isaac, Duke, and Meredith all revealed they heavily relied on agents in neighboring counties who were influential in helping with programs or answering questions. The practice of reaching out to others taught Dorothy it was “okay to ask for help when I need answers.” Lucy knew of several county agents in surrounding counties with similar program interests who often worked together on program efforts. She said the agents always included her, and she learned presentation skills from watching them work and received positive feedback from them when she taught a portion of a lesson. In turn, Lucy now offers to help new agents when she meets them for the first time.

Dorothy particularly stressed her formal mentor offered little help as a fellow agent from whom to gain knowledge. When asked if her mentor helped her feel supported, she said the following:

With that particular mentoring relationship? No, but relationships with other agents? Yes. So, if we open up the term mentoring to include just other agents who had an influence on me, then, absolutely.

Isaac, however, had an opposing opinion. He said, “The mentor program was more impactful than just my contact with other agents.” On multiple occasions during two observations, the mentors provided the names and contact information of specialists housed at the state CES office

who were available to help with certain educational programs. Duke and Jason named specific specialists whom they have found to be very helpful when they asked questions, and Duke ventured to say he knew that if he were to call some of the top administrators in the organization, he expected they would accept his call.

Isaac mentioned he felt uniquely supported by a retired county agent who was his immediate predecessor. When Isaac first started his position, the clients and civic groups in town were still calling his predecessor for advice, but instead of becoming frustrated and territorial, Isaac used the opportunity to learn more about the county and appreciated the extra time he had to learn about the position.

Alternately, two of the mentees voiced concerns about feeling they did not fit in with other agents. Lindsey said she often felt lacking as if she was ill prepared to be in her professional position when she was around other agents because her smaller, poorer county did not have the same amenities or resources: “Some of these things are there because they [other counties] have this, that, and the other, while I don’t.” She said she knew that sentiment is not true and was told by her clients in her county that she was a very good county agent, but she still felt like she did not know what she was doing when she was around colleagues at the state level. Jason had a comparable concern when he felt he did not fit well within the group of agriculture agents, but as far as his personal skills and tending to county job responsibilities were concerned, he unquestionably felt confident he was a good fit.

Encouragement. The act of encouragement by mentors provided the mentees a safe space to seek advice without fear of interrogation regarding the complexity of their questions or thoughts. Even after the formal mentoring was over, the mentees knew they could rely on their assigned mentors to continue to provide support. Duke recalled his mentor “gave me that boost

and told me that I knew what I was doing. It made me feel like I wasn't alone." When mentees became discouraged, their mentors were the ones who offered words of encouragement to comfort the mentees and let them know they were not alone. Jason acknowledged, "It's easy to get discouraged, and it's good to have someone to say chin up, you can do it!" Because her mentor was so helpful, Jo divulged she was very supportive of the mentoring program because it kept new agents from feeling alone and disoriented. She added she relied on her mentor because she did not feel as comfortable asking anyone else similar questions at first. Phyllis retorted that asking question could be mistaken for weakness, which is why she was reluctant to make inquiries to other colleagues. The researcher repeatedly documented words like supportive, grateful, thankful, appreciative, and safe, which alluded to feelings of gratitude and comfort regarding the actions of their mentors on behalf of the mentees. Isaac said he was so appreciative of his formal and informal mentors that he sent a thank you note to every agent who reached out to him and helped him beyond what was expected of them.

However, there were reports of mentors who were overly supportive. Phyllis recalled being asked to go to her mentor's county and teach a program within approximately two weeks of being hired, which made her feel like her mentor did not want to do the program, and Phyllis did not feel prepared for the responsibility because she was not trained in that curriculum. Phyllis still has negative connotations toward teaching that curriculum because she felt required to teach it before she was ready early in the mentoring program. Susan had a similar experience where she spent a lot of time in her mentor's county where she felt she was doing her mentor's job instead of being mentored.

Accountability. The accountability component of the mentoring program assured that the mentor and mentees conducted required meetings and interactions to produce a healthy

mentoring relationship. In the mentoring notebooks, there were guidelines to monitor accountability, including checklists and timelines which provided mentors and new agents an intentional process for an improved mentoring experience (University of Arkansas, 2010). Lucy and Susan said they did not think there was adequate accountability involved in the mentoring program. Lucy suggested it might have helped to have a quarterly teleconference to ensure that all those involved were adequately managing their mentoring responsibilities to “make sure they are doing it, and if they are not doing it, they need to stop being a mentor.” Susan referred to the accountability aspect of the mentoring program as a weakness and said, “There’s no interest in whether this is done or not done. Nobody’s asking me about it.” However, Dorothy commented she thought the accountability built into the mentoring program was good. She received calls from the state office and was required to submit paperwork, which she interpreted that the program was substantial and important enough for someone to be concerned with the results.

Reassignment of mentors. Two mentees were assigned mentors who were reassigned to other job assignments within the CES before the mentorship was over, but the mentees were not reassigned new formal mentors. They both felt a little lost although they were thankful their mentors were still in the organization and available to answer questions.

Category 3: Results of effective and ineffective mentor qualities and practices.

Mentees described effective and ineffective mentor qualities and practices after participating in the year-long mentoring component of the CES onboarding program. They increased their knowledge of the system and desired to continue working for the CES.

Continued working for the CES. Three of the participants said they would not have completed their first year with the CES if it had not been for the mentoring program. Teresa was the most outspoken about this topic. She said she did not think she would have lasted through the

first year and would have become frustrated with lack of direction without the guidance of her mentor. Duke said, “I was about to quit until mentorship,” and Jason began to think he was the only one feeling like he was not going to make it through his first year, but mentoring “helped me from quitting and doing something different because there were some days I was about ready to do anything but be a county agent.”

Mentoring was a positive experience. Several mentees spoke of how the mentoring program helped them grow as county agents and were thankful it was available. Isaac said the mentoring experience was a new way to learn for him and helped him expand his knowledge base in an innovative way. Dorothy claimed she thought the mentoring program was an important asset to the CES, and Susan said she is better qualified to be a county agent because of mentoring. Duke said, “It taught me to build relationships by talking to people, and having a good mentor was an invaluable resource to be a successful agent.”

Mentoring was a negative or useless experience. Because of her prior experience and knowledge, Kelly was adamant that no part of the onboarding process helped her. She said she gained a good friend from the process but “nothing really new stood out to me or changed anything for me,” and she speculated it did not take long for her mentor to realize Kelly did not require much help. Lucy was in a similar situation, and as she reflected upon her first year of employment, she realized it was not the mentor who helped her but her direct supervisor and other agents in counties surrounding hers with whom she frequently conducted programs. Dorothy disclosed a similar opinion when she said her mentor relationship did not shape or influence the way she did her job in any way because she discovered more helpful informal mentors.

Theme 4: What Mentees Perceive May Have Increased Their Feeling of Fit

As the mentees reflected on their mentoring experiences, several items were revealed which, they believed, would have increased their feeling of fit had they been available as options. Suggestions included an increased variety of people who are involved in the mentoring process such as other current mentees with whom to compare experiences, increased interaction with the mentees' staff chair, and the assignment of more than one formal mentor. Additional mentoring components could include a longer formal mentorship period, implementing a formal job-shadowing program, adding a mentor and mentee incentive plan, and creating more direction for the face-to-face meetings with their mentors.

Category 1: Increase the variety of people involved in the mentoring process.

Mentees communicated they would have liked to involve more people in the mentoring process in addition to their formally assigned mentors. They thought they would have gained valuable insight from other current mentees, increased staff chair involvement, and additional formally assigned mentors.

More time with other mentees. Several of the mentees mentioned that peer-to-peer training would have been very helpful. After some investigation, the researcher discovered that in 2014, the CES implemented a series of hands-on learning experiences for agriculture agents where they learned how to perform basic elements of their agriculture work. This teaching model is still being used at the CES where experienced agriculture agents teach their newer counterparts skills like calibrating farm spray machines, scouting a row crop field, vaccinating cows, and figuring ratios for pesticides. Jo said if she had started working for the CES before the peer-to-peer trainings, she would have had greater difficulty learning those programmatic elements. She described, "Before the trainings, there was a whole lot of question just left hanging out there."

Lucy said she wished there were a peer-to-peer training for family and consumer sciences and 4-H, too, because there would be a person solely dedicated to mentoring young agents, but the option does not exist at this point. Duke occasionally still attends the peer-to-peer trainings in the areas where he needs a refresher course and wishes they had been available when he began his career. Kelly suggested one form of peer-to-peer training which would have been helpful is if a mentor could meet with several agents in small groups periodically to have discussions. She suggested conducting the meetings through a videoconferencing system and having an experienced agent familiar with the mentoring program facilitate them.

More staff chair involvement. The staff chair is an agent who is the immediate supervisor to other agents in a CES office, and three interviews and one observation involved a conversation centered on the desire for more staff chair involvement in the mentoring program. Dorothy said keeping the staff chair involved was important and suggested the mentor and the staff chair meet and get a plan together before the new agent begins work “so they know what the mentor is doing and vice versa.” She has heard some staff chairs wanted more involvement, and some just wanted to be told what was expected of them during the mentorship. Susan suggested having a videoconference with the staff chair, mentor, and district director before the new employees’ first day to have a conversation so all parties are privy to the plan.

More than one mentor. Another common theme which emerged from the study was that mentees would have liked to spend more time together to talk about what is going on in their counties to compare notes with one another. Duke had a unique idea to bring new employees together with potential mentors and allow them to form their own connections. He asserted the following:

I would sit down with new employees and mentors and let them spend a weekend together at the 4-H Center. Just working together being with each other. By the

end of the weekend, they should know who they would fit well with. I think it'd be great spending weekend together and talk about things, spend time with each other and rotate and figure out who the first choice is.

In her first year, Teresa naturally gravitated to other mentees when she attended in-service trainings for her program, and at one of the first trainings she attended, she said the trainers introduced all the new agents to each other and provided an after-hours gathering where they all spent time together, including their mentors. She liked that she was able to network with people who were in similar situations as she was. Kelly had similar thoughts and recommended mentees find counties sharing similar characteristics to allow mentees to meet and have the opportunity to “troubleshoot and talk about program ideas with people who are at your current level. Sometimes it’s just nice to know you are not alone.”

Two mentees recommended assigning more than one formal mentor per new agent to allow mentees to experience more than one point of view. Sarah appreciated the opportunity to have a mentor to the degree that she would have liked to have had two mentors assigned to her. She contended she would have benefitted from seeing the way different agents conducted educational programs to witness their similarities and differences. Phyllis suggested having two mentors would have given her a better sense of the variety of possible programs. She said if mentees were assigned agents who did not take the time to be effective mentors, then having an additional mentor would keep new agents from perpetuating flawed program habits.

Category 2: Additional components added to the mentoring program. Mentees conveyed they believed additional components could have been added to the mentoring program, which may have improved their experience. These additional components included extending the time period of the formal mentoring program, offering a formal job shadowing/internship

program under an experienced agent in the same county, providing mentor and mentee incentives, and providing more direction in the mentoring notebooks for face-to-face sessions.

Extend the time period of the mentoring component. Lindsey said she had heard many times that it takes three to five years to figure out the job as a county agent. If that time period was true, she questioned why the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program lasts for only one year, so she suggested spreading the mentoring program out over the first three to five years and meet less often as the new agents become accustomed to their jobs. Furthermore, Phyllis and Teresa both proposed the mentoring program be lengthened to provide a firm foundation for new agents. Phyllis avowed, “I don’t think we need to be limiting that. I think a mentee/mentor should be something that’s ongoing.” Isaac jokingly said his mentor knows the only way she will get rid of Isaac is to pass away or leave the CES. He believes he is a lifelong mentee.

Formal job shadowing program/internship. Four of the mentees mentioned they needed more time to shadow experienced agents as they conducted their day-to-day activities, and they had various ideas for how this could work. Savannah reflected how her success would have been limited if someone had just “dropped me off in this office and left me with a bunch of notebooks to read and said the best of luck” because she thought the face-to-face in-person interactions were invaluable. She disclosed that in the past the CES had a yearlong internship and thought “that would be 10,000 times more valuable than a few meetings with a mentor per month.” Isaac said if his predecessor had been able to hire him six months before retirement, it would have been a more effective training tool than the mentoring program, but he realized hiring someone early was not always possible with CES budget limitations. He later divulged he would have preferred an internship over the mentoring program. Lucy echoed those thoughts when she

commented that at a minimum agents should have to spend one week in another county to “see what their program is like because that is the only way you are going to learn is watching other people.” Lucy continued by saying the CES used to have an internship program but said, “If that’s not possible, just go spend more time with your mentor than just a few times per month.”

Mentor/mentee incentives. Providing mentorship to new agents takes a great deal of time and resources, and the time commitment is compounded when mentors have more than one formal mentee or if former mentees continue to need the mentor’s help beyond the first year. Three of the mentees suggested incentivizing the program, believing it would aid counties with fewer resources and further support mentors who have more than one mentee. Some other suggestions were to provide a stipend, officially dedicate a percentage of the mentors’ time for mentoring, and provide mentors and mentees a spending account for travel and meal costs. Mentees believed mentors may be more excited about their extra mentoring responsibilities if offered incentives knowing it would not take money away from their county travel budgets.

More direction for content of face-to-face mentoring sessions. Savannah suggested there be a more detailed written guide added to the mentoring notebooks, providing mentors some activities specifically created for each program area. Savannah was more inclined to conduct science programming since her mentor was very interested in science-based activities. Although she enjoyed teaching science, she felt her FCS and agriculture areas were lacking because of concentrating so much on science. She suggested there should be a mentor in each of the three main program areas so mentees could be exposed to all sorts of programs. Phyllis explained she would like to see a hands-on learning component added to the mentoring program because everyone has a different learning style.

Summary

The findings of this study revealed effective and ineffective qualities and practices displayed by mentors as perceived by new county agents who participated in the one-year-long mentoring component of the onboarding program for the Arkansas CES. The qualities and practices of the mentors were identified by mentees as important factors that created the perceptions surrounding their new role as professionals at the CES.

Throughout the mentoring process, mentees developed perceptions of workplace culture, learned the components of the research-based and non-traditional educational models, determined value alignment, and established their philosophies surrounding their motives for pursuing a career as county extension agents. Many mentees determined they worked for the CES because they wanted to help others, and they desired to work for an organization which had a history of establishing trust among its constituents.

As mentees modeled the behavior of their mentors, they developed a sense of the traits and skills needed for success as county extension agents, including communication, connections with people, employability skills, and principled work practices. Being able to listen, display transparency, and get along with an array of personality types were all deemed important. Practicing skills in flexibility, preparedness, and adaptation facilitated increased confidence and the perception of credibility for new agents, which contributed to being motivated to demonstrate passion and engage in ethical behavior.

The findings serve as a description of what mentees believed were the most influential characteristics and approaches used to facilitate effective or ineffective mentoring. Factors which influenced successful mentoring experiences included pairing mentors and mentees carefully, considering proximity, displaying a positive attitude, and being approachable. Effective practices

included communicating efficiently, sharing knowledge, dedicating ample time, offering encouragement, and having informal mentors.

Finally, mentees clarified the components which may have increased their perception of fit within the CES organization. Mentees indicated they may have felt an increased perception of fit if they had experienced an increase in the variety of people who are involved in their mentoring experience such as other knowledgeable agents, more supervisor support, and additional formal mentors. Additional components suggested which may have offered more support to mentees were to extend the mentorship program time period, have access to a formal job shadowing program, add monetary or programmatic incentives for those involved in the mentoring program, and provide more materials to give direction for face-to-face sessions between the mentor and mentee.

Chapter 5 - Background and Overview of the Issue

Employee retention concerns have long been an issue for organizations, and research shows that 51% of employees are actively seeking a new job or watching for other career opportunities (Gallup, 2017). Rubenstein et al. (2013) contended the cost to hire a new employee is 200% of the former employee's annual salary, so it is in the best interest of an organization to invest the resources necessary to ensure new employees become acclimated to their new surroundings and culture. It is also in an organization's best interest to recognize that its mission is dependent on employee productivity, so when employees recognize that organizations understand this dependency, employees choose to take steps to develop tools and strategies to address productivity and longevity (Cloutier, Felusiak, Hill, & Pemberton-Jones, 2015).

The Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service (CES) conducted an internal employee retention review after recognizing that local county educators known as extension agents who are responsible for conveying research-based information to local citizens were leaving at a seemingly rapid rate. The CES reviewed employment data from April 4, 2006, to April 1, 2010, and the study confirmed that the organization was losing county extension agents at a rate which would jeopardize the Arkansas CES and its clientele if a solution could not be found. The study revealed that between 2006 and 2010 the CES hired 50 new extension agents, and 21 of those newly hired extension agents left the organization within five years. The awareness of the early-career agent turnover rate of 42% spurred the CES to respond by developing a multi-faceted new employee onboarding program, which was launched in 2011. A major component of the onboarding program was a one-year mentoring component to be implemented on the new employees' first day of work.

The mentoring component of the CES onboarding program is part of a larger process to integrate new employees into the Arkansas CES by familiarizing them with culture, knowledge, and expectations related to their new position. The CES onboarding program offered several components including two online courses, teleconference sessions, face-to-face training, and mentoring. This study focused on the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program.

Purpose

It was not known if the creation of the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program helped increase the perception of new county agents' fit in the organization. A review of the literature was lacking on whether onboarding programs in the CES system were perceived by new county agents as an effective method of aligning their values and goals with those of the organization. The study explored the perception of county extension agents' organizational fit and whether they believed they had characteristics that were compatible with the organization after participating in the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program.

Through conversations with its mentors, the CES anticipated that newly hired county agents may gain an understanding of the organization's norms and values to determine compatibility with their own characteristics, and if so, they could be more inclined to remain in their positions. If employees are regarded as an investment rather than a liability, leaders can expect a return on their investment instead of a loss if an organization is willing to instill protocols to gain trust from employees. A climate built on trust, availability, and transparency will create a sense of identity between the employees and the organization and unleash latent intellectual capital in the employees who perceive they have been entrusted with vital information (Swain, 1999). Investing in human capital through employee engagement is one way to ensure an organization is set up for success.

Summary of the Findings

The findings in this study discovered the perception of fit former mentees had after participating in the CES mentoring component of the onboarding program. The constructs of PE fit theory undergirded the study to present a systematic view that allowed the researcher to understand the variables that emerged. The PO fit framework was used as a lens through which the researcher determined margins for values, skills, and the mutual benefits which the perception of fit provided to the employee and the organization.

The concept of the PE fit theory is that individuals' attitudes and actions are determined cooperatively by their personal characteristics and their environments. In this study, former mentees shared their values and the characteristics they perceived were needed to succeed in their work environment. Responses revealed, at varying degrees, that former mentees believed they possessed the characteristics required to achieve compatibility with the Arkansas CES after completing the mentoring program. Additionally, they revealed whether they were a good or poor fit in the organization, if their values were congruent with the CES, and if they supposed their worth changed after participating in the CES mentoring program.

Research Questions Discussion

This chapter comprises a discussion, implications, and recommendations for future research to aid in answering the overall research questions:

Overall Research Question

In the following section the researcher sought to answer the following overall research question as it pertained to perceptions of the mentees who completed the CES mentoring program over the required one-year time period: Does the mentoring component of the employee onboarding program implemented by the Arkansas CES in 2010 provide adequate support to

ensure employees perceive themselves as possessing characteristics that are compatible with the organization?

Mentees involved in this study did perceive that they possessed the characteristics that were compatible with the CES. They believed they were adequately supported by supervisors, mentors, and colleagues to attain compatible characteristics needed to perceive a feeling of fit in the CES program. Throughout their first year of employment while participating in the mentoring program, mentees realized their compatibility was the result of 1) discovering and internalizing the history and traditions of the CES organization; 2) reflecting upon congruent core values between themselves and the CES organization; 3) honing the employability skills needed to relate to colleagues and clients through observation of their formal and informal mentors educating clients; and 4) and utilizing mentoring sessions to confide in their mentors.

The feeling of compatibility was an evolution and did not happen immediately upon arrival in the CES, but as the one-year mentoring program progressed, the mentees learned lessons which layered upon one another to create the sense of fit for the mentees.

Research Question 1

How has participating in the mentoring component of the onboarding program affected the way in which new county agents perceive that they have the characteristics to effectively face the demands of their workload at the CES?

After participating in mentoring sessions and observing their mentors conducting educational programs, one of the predominant themes to surface in the study was the mentees' perception of the skills and characteristics they should possess to be successful in their jobs. Mentees observed their mentors conducting programs and duplicated those learned skills in their own county programs. A method acknowledged by Lindsey, Duke, Teresa, Jason, and Jo

specifically found it extremely helpful when mentors modeled teaching techniques as they conducted programs and gradually allowed mentees to co-teach with them. This transmission of skills from mentors to mentees was not limited to formal mentors but involved contributions from informal mentors, too.

In their own counties, mentees naturally gravitated to very similar programmatic subject areas, particularly if the mentees had never worked in a professional setting. The mentees with prior careers appeared to display more autonomy by relying on their prior experiences and solutions to manage complications than the mentees hired immediately after graduating from college.

Mentees indicated the necessary skills for success in the CES were common employability skills which would hasten professionals to succeed in most occupations, but some were deemed more important and took precedence as the foremost skills that should be mastered like 1) having excellent public speaking and listening skills; 2) exercising silence; 3) connecting with people; 4) getting along with colleagues; 5) being prepared; 6) being flexible; 7) being adaptive; and 8) developing time management skills. Many mentees spoke about how their skills became stronger as they continued their careers in the CES, and they learned how to better manage difficult situations by relying on the skills they observed mentors using or by utilizing skills to personally navigate issues on their own.

The ability to connect with people in positive ways was documented as a critical skillset necessary to relate well to colleagues and clients and was shown to be one of the first employability skills to be addressed after being hired. Mentees emphasized the importance of making positive connections with people most specifically in the areas of relating well with various types of people and maintaining harmonious relationships with colleagues and

volunteers. The study revealed demonstrating harmonious working relationships should be the mentees' focus very early in their careers, so they and their colleagues exhibited solidarity to the public.

Communication skills and workplace ethics were cited as the two leading categories of employability skills thought to increase mentees' success and included 1) listening with intent; 2) effectively speaking in public; 3) exercising silence; 4) being prepared; 5) exhibiting flexibility; 6) adapting to technology; 7) taking initiative; and 8) managing time. As mentees observed and modeled their mentors' behaviors and devoted time to refine their own employability skills, they were more likely to enjoy their work, increase their credibility, and gain confidence in their abilities.

Research Question 2

Why do county agents perceive themselves as being a good or a poor fit between what CES offers them and what they need in a job after participating in the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program?

The feeling of being a fit or misfit can occur when employees perceive they are not offered what they need from their organization. This study found there were direct results on mentees' perceptions of fit when considering effective and ineffective mentor traits and practices. As a result of *effective* practices, employees continued working for the organization, and they promoted the organization by sharing their positive experiences with others. The main result from *ineffective* mentors and their practices was that employees reported their negative feelings about their experiences in the mentoring program to colleagues and others.

Mentees reported numerous factors which may have increased their feeling of fit as they progressed through the mentoring program. Increasing the variety of people in the mentoring

program, offering networking time among mentees, providing additional staff chair involvement, and assigning additional formal mentors to each mentee were all cited as components which, if available, may have added more depth to the mentees' experiences. Additional ideas generated by mentees as potential supplements to the CES mentoring program included formal job shadowing opportunities, internship programs, mentor and mentee incentives, added direction for face-to-face mentoring sessions, and extending the mentorship time period.

Research Question 3

How do county agents perceive the CES values to be congruent with their own values after participating in the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program?

Most of the mentees reported sharing congruent values with the CES, the most pertinent being the act of helping people and sharing fundamental core values. Mentees shared their perception of CES culture, history, and traditions and whether those perceptions aligned with their own. Mentees sensed value congruence when they succeeded in increasing their employability skills and began to enjoy their work at a higher degree. After discovering the joy in their work, mentees commenced to sharing that passion with clients; the clients reciprocated by realizing and spreading the word of the mentees' credibility, which increased the mentees' confidence levels.

Likewise, the consequences of effective and ineffective mentors altered the perception of fit for most mentees. The act of careful mentorship pairing, concern with proximity, and positivity and approachability were leading factors in mentor and mentee relationships and their success. Mentors were recognized as an extension of their organization's values; if mentees perceived their own values were like those of their mentors, the mentees supposed their values were similarly linked to the organization's values.

Ethics were viewed through the lens of fundamental principles mentees possessed, which guided their behaviors. The mentees recognized that work ethic and ethical behaviors played a vital role in their perception of value congruence with the CES and was conceptualized through their acknowledgement of the importance of being prepared, flexible, adaptive, motivated, and effective time managers.

Research Question 4

How do county agents perceive their worth to the organization as compared to before participating in the mentoring program?

The mentees observed how the public trusts county extension agents with their farms, food, and children. As mentees gained the trust of their communities, they understood the importance of their position in the historical institution for which they now worked. Throughout their first year of employment, as more clients sought their opinions and they honed their skills, mentees were more inclined to possess an increased perception of their professional worth and voiced they would be missed if they were to vacate their position.

Both effective and ineffective mentors made a significant difference in the well-being of the mentorship relationship and were reported as a factor in evaluating the mentees' perception of worth. The mentees demonstrated their awareness of the effective elements by sharing the most supportive actions the mentors performed such as initially contacting their formal mentees in a timely manner, freely sharing knowledge, dedicating adequate time for the mentorship, introducing mentees to colleagues, and offering steady encouragement. Reportedly ineffective mentor practices were being unhurried to contact their mentees, guarding their knowledge, and being discouraging. Additionally, some mentees believed that the mentoring program did not contain enough accountability, leading the mentees to believe the organization was not invested

in the program. Finally, two mentees were left without a mentor after the mentor was transferred and were never reassigned a formal mentor, which led to a feeling of abandonment decreasing their feeling of worth.

Connection to Literature

By carefully exploring the perceptions of fit and value congruence of former mentees, this research study supported the literature in areas related to the mentees' perceptions of organizational socialization, acclimation, and commitment after participating in the CES mentoring program. Results of this study corroborate previous research, which indicated PO fit operationalizes as congruence between the work values of the employees and the dominant work principles of the organization (Cable & DeRue, 2002). The findings of this research were aligned with most of the literature presented, but areas where there were discrepancies are noted.

New Employee Socialization

Socialization can be described as a learning process (Klein & Weaver, 2000; Louis, 1980; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Wanous & Colella, 1989) for newcomers to acquire organizational information and behaviors to help the organization become or remain strong in developing new concepts and delivering a high performance (Fisher, 1986; Korte, Brunhaver, & Sheppard, 2015). Mentees generally became well socialized with their colleagues through office dialogue, observation, and various components of their onboarding or orientation programs, but there was another element of employee socialization which involved their volunteer base and clientele in the counties. It was with those groups that they acquired a newfound appreciation for their value in the county.

The literature described the process of achieving organizational socialization as more complex than only learning facts about an organization and meeting colleagues but ensues when

employees become appreciative of their organizational role (Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994). This concept of public trust is supported in this study by the mentees’ perception that the public trusts them to guide clients in the right direction with research-based recommendations on topics like farming, financial management, and youth development. Agents revealed they quickly grew to respect their educational role in the CES and took the methodology seriously when relaying research-based information to their clientele.

One study by Friedman (2005) found that employees decide within the first 30 days whether they feel welcome in an organization, but this study found that new employees displayed more patience than Friedman contended. The mentees advised that the mentoring process was a cumulative process involving interactions with multiple individuals to completely feel welcome and part of the organization.

Organizational Congruence and Culture

Determining compatibility involves the comparison of aspects of people with their environment to predict a behavioral or psychological outcome (Edwards & Billsberry, 2010). This comparison is referred to as *congruence* (Adkins, Russell, & Werbel, 1994). The literature conveyed employees who share the values of their organizations are more committed and satisfied, urging them to stay longer. The CES’ motto “I Care, We Serve” resonated with the mentees and was mentioned on several occasions throughout the study. Overwhelmingly, mentees recognized that the CES prioritized helping people as a significant professional obligation and cited helping others was a primary reason they came to work for the organization. Mentees considered helping people as a valuable contribution to their clientele and were committed to providing high quality educational opportunities. It was stated by one mentee that

if one were fortunate enough to work with a client to change behaviors resulting in an improvement in their lives, it was the ultimate payback for one's efforts.

Routine work tasks were thought to be an integral part of the CES culture, resulting in an inordinate number of mentees who showed concern for this subject. A surprising number of mentees mentioned their anxiety related to completing internal software reports which contained the number of contacts they reached each month. Submitting the reports correctly caused worry for them, and a significant number of mentees sought help from their mentors. Regardless of the personality type of the mentoring pair, interviewees and observation participants focused on proper reporting protocol on several occasions during the study.

Acclimating New Employees

Orientation. New Employee Orientations (NEOs) begin the socialization process, help new employees fit into their new environment (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Wanous & Reichers, 2000), and are a deliberate effort by an organization to familiarize new employees about what working for the organization will be like (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011; Goldstein & Ford, 2002). NEOs are an important part of the acclimation process, and most of the mentees felt those components of the onboarding process were not as beneficial as the mentoring component. Nevertheless, mentees still found value in the experience, which supported the literature that new employees who participate in NEO programs are significantly more socialized with the organization's goals, values, history, and people than those employees who choose not to attend (Klein & Weaver, 2000).

Onboarding. There are distinct differences between orientation and onboarding programs. Employee orientation is an event or a short series of events introducing formal facts about the organization and its processes. Onboarding is a more strategic process than NEOs,

usually occurring over several months to a year, and often new employees participate in onboarding programs from all levels of the organization regardless of their job titles or departments (Eisner, 2014). The CES onboarding program was a multi-pronged endeavor with additional components not included in this study; however, the doctrines in each section of the CES onboarding program overlap one another in their effectiveness. Other components of the onboarding program were often mentioned by the mentees but were not investigated in the study because it was outside the scope of the researcher's question under investigation.

The extended length of time allotted for the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program contributed to the development of employability skills that mentees perceived were needed to succeed as county extension agents. During the one-year time period of the mentoring program, it was advantageous for mentees to observe their mentors as they performed their roles during educational programs and mentoring sessions. The observations proved to be an excellent teaching tool for the mentees to model their mentors' teaching techniques. If the onboarding process is implemented properly, it enhances new employees' transition into the organization and assists them in becoming more engaged (Graybill, Carpenter, Offord, Piorun, & Schaffer, 2013). The mentees emphasized that observations of their mentors and their colleagues had a significant role in assuring they learned the skills needed for success as county extension agents and encouraged the mentees to be more productive. Mentees perceived that their ability to gradually become more adept at the employability skills was probable by participating in conversations and observations with their mentors.

Mentoring. A mentor is a seasoned employee who offers advice about the values, beliefs, norms, and accepted rituals of an organization (Denny, 2016; Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). Utilizing workplace mentoring as a tool is one strategy for facilitating career development

and support and has been shown to effect a wide range of positive outcomes (Danielson & Berntsson, 2006; Denny, 2016; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & Dubois, 2008; Ragins & Kram, 2007) to help mentees understand their role in the organization and the professional standards and expectations by which success is measured (Danielson, 2002; Denny, 2016). The findings in this study yielded evidence to support the literature considering that a vast majority of the mentees perceived their time with their mentors as being beneficial.

However, a few mentees were convinced if they had *not* had a formal mentor, their success would have been the same. This is supported by the literature, which claims that just because a mentor is assigned, it does not guarantee effective mentoring is occurring (McClurken, 2009). One mentee asserted that her prior experience was all she needed to be successful in her position, and no part of the mentoring process helped her. This attitude was supported by the literature, which cited that mentorship is not one sided (Allen et al., 2008; Eisner, 2014), and both the mentor and the mentee must be open to learning from each other. Another mentee claimed she was not positively affected by the mentoring program because her mentor had little time for her, resulting in the mentee's continuously feeling like she was being brushed off. This was supported by the literature, which cited a mentor must be willing to commit his or her time to the relationship (Eisner, 2014; Zimmer & Smith, 1992).

All but one of the mentees were paired with mentors who were the same gender as they. Allen and Eby (2003) supported this form of pairing by positing mentors reported higher quality mentoring relationships when paired with mentees who were the same gender and possessed similar demographic characteristics. All the pairs had similar educational backgrounds, which led to comparable professional experiences within their areas of expertise. Literature further supported the asset of comparability by conjecturing individuals who are demographically like

other organizational members (in terms of race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.) appear to enjoy important benefits more than individuals who are less like their peers (Cable & Judge, 1996; Pfeffer, 1981).

Since there is abundant literature on the importance of the process for helping new employees fit into their jobs as related to job satisfaction, commitment, and retention (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), it appeared that there was not a methodical process for pairing mentors in the CES program. The study showed the results of successfully pairing mentors and mentees was a clear indicator of the mentees' perception of fit into the CES. It was unclear in the mentorship notebooks exactly how mentors and mentees are paired in the CES mentoring program. During the interviews, when mentees were asked how they were first introduced to their mentors, the mentees explained they were informed of the name of their mentor by their district directors either on the telephone or by email. The district director told them that their mentor would be contacting them soon, but the mentees were unaware of the formal process of assigning mentors and mentees. There seemed to be a disconnect concerning the important precursor of thoughtfully pairing mentors and mentees in the CES mentoring program.

Organizational Commitment

Retention and turnover. High employee turnover increases costs in resources, recruiting, and time when replacing open positions. Hebenstreit (2008) contended the cost to hire a new employee adds up to half to 200% of the former employee's salary, so it is in the best interest of the organization to invest the resources necessary to ensure that new employees are acclimated to their new surroundings and culture. Creating the mentoring program seems to have been a good investment for the CES since several of the mentees stated they would not have

completed their first year if not for their mentors. If what the mentees reported is true, this study has shown that the CES' benefits have outweighed the costs of the onboarding program and produced an improved employee experience.

Employee fit. People do not interact with only one part of their environment but are simultaneously nested in multiple dimensions of the environment (Granovetter, 1985; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2001). These dimensions include “internal” factors like personality, values, attitudes, skills, emotions, and goals and “external” factors such as job requirements, expected behavior, organizational culture, pay structures, and collegiality (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). Employees' work experiences are comprised of interdependent interactions with their environment regardless of what *type* of fit a person and organization determine is present in employees (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). The literature supported this notion when mentees shared their perceptions of the skills required to become successful county agents. Mentees' perceptions of themselves having these skills were varying, but they all agreed that they continued to improve these skills the longer they were employed. Mentees perceived that interpersonal skills such as communication, connecting with people, and work ethic and ethical behavior were enhanced as they observed their mentors in their multidimensional working environments.

High perceptions of fit with an organization can mitigate the negative influence of a variety of job and social stressors on employee adjustment and has positive implications for organizations and their members (Newton & Jimmieson, 2009; Verquer et al. 2003). Even though the mentees had varying descriptions of how positive or negative their mentoring experience was, other aspects of their jobs or informal mentor support might have mitigated any negative effects their formal mentors had on their perception of fit.

Theoretical Support

Organizational commitment and onboarding programs in general recognize that it is important to identify employees' values and needs. Factors associated with organizational commitment often influence employees to decide to remain employed or to leave an organization (Bielski, 2007; Cable, Gino & Staats, 2013; Graybill et al., 2013; Gundry & Rousseau, 1994; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein, & Song, 2013; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Lavigna, 2009; Saks, 1997; Snell, 2006). The mentees in this study, the curricula developed to guide the participants, and the observations of the researcher supported the notion of PE fit theory and the PO fit framework. The researcher applied the supplementary and complimentary conceptualizations within the PO fit framework in this study to evaluate the compatibility between the mentees and the CES. Additionally, the PO fit framework was operationalized by reviewing the match between individual behaviors and their organizational perceptions. To assess the mentees' perception of their fit, the researcher applied the concept of subjective fit to assess any discrepancies between the characteristics of the mentees and the characteristics of the CES by directly asking the mentees how well their characteristics fit in the CES organization. This self-reporting practice is supported in the literature as subjective fit measures do not involve the explicit measurement of either individual or environmental characteristics. Instead, respondents are assumed to have a mental representation of the organizational profile and to cognitively examine the congruence between their personal characteristics and their perception of the organizational profile (Edwards, 1991; Hoffman & Woehr, 2005).

The data exposed the mentees' insights into the CES culture, the skills needed to succeed, and how their relationship with their mentors impacted their perception of overall fit in the

system. Furthermore, the mentees were enthusiastic about sharing suggestions for additional mentoring processes and components which may have increased their feeling of fit.

Person Environment (PE) Fit

The literature review delineated the theoretical concept of Person-Environment (PE) fit, which was first proposed by the Greek philosopher Plato (Kaplan, 1950) and developed further by occupational psychologists like Dawis et al. (1964) and Holland (1959). The concept recognized that individuals' attitudes and actions are determined cooperatively by their personal characteristics and environments and are motivated by their traits, abilities, or preferences (Yang et al., 2009). One's values are not concrete but are nuanced and subtle depending on one's environment. Values are often difficult to discern and even more difficult to predict, but when some values align with employees' work environments, values can shift from residing within an individual to being shared with others in one's environment.

Considering the definition of PE fit, mentees were accurately described as being motivated to uphold the values of the CES system by serving others through teaching educational programs using research-based information. The PE fit theory posits that attitudes and actions are determined cooperatively by their environment and their personal characteristics (Yang et al., 2009). This concept was buttressed when mentees said they desired to improve the quality of life for their clients and mirrored the actions of the mentors. The mentees' attitudes and actions were operationalized by their awareness of the skills needed for professionals, communication tactics, and effective methods for relating to the public.

Fit has been described as the compatibility between an individual and an organization (Kristof, 1996), and PE fit is defined as the *extent* to which an employee is compatible with the workplace environment (Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 1996). Person-

environment fit theories deduce there are benefits for both the employees and the organization if they are positively matched (Carless, 2005). The descriptions and observations of mentee and mentor sessions made it apparent the mentors served as extensions of the CES organization. The mentors encapsulated the cultural knowledge, skills, and qualities the mentees desired, and if the mentoring pair shared positive experiences, the mentees' initial perceptions of fit were higher. However, if mentees with less productive formal mentoring experiences were paired with quality informal mentors within a few months of employment, their perceptions seemed to increase or "catch up" over time with those who began with a positive mentoring experience.

Mentees took the initiative to increase their abilities during their first year and beyond, including becoming more adept at communication, flexibility, adaptability, and the willingness to fit into their new role.

Complimentary and Supplementary Conceptualizations

Two distinct conceptualizations of PE fit have been proposed that interpret the compatibility of potential employees and the organization. These concepts are *complementary* and *supplementary* fit (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). *Complementary* fit occurs when a person's or an organization's characteristics provide what the other wants (Carless, 2005; Muchinsky & Monahan 1987; Powell, 1998), and *supplementary* fit exists when a person and an organization possess similar or matching characteristics (Kristof, 1996; Newton & Jimmieson, 2009).

Research has identified two types of complementary fit, needs-supply and demands-ability (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). First, needs-supply fit provides the resources and rewards supporting the individual's interests, values, inclinations and motives (Edwards, 1998; Kristoff-Brown et al., 2005). Demands-abilities fit, conversely, is focused on what the individual can

provide to the environment and recognizes individuals must possess certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) to meet their requirements, expectations, and norms (Edwards et al., 1998; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

This study initially sought to measure only supplementary fit because research posited that complementary fit is most often used to determine employees' PJ fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), but data revealed mentees put great value on the professional skills required to successfully fit in the organization so this study also focused on PO fit. Because the mentors served as replicas of the CES organization, both parties were giving and taking during the entirety of the mentorship. The mentees accepted the county agent position, actively participated in the mentorship, and desired to learn more skills; the mentors provided training; and the organization provided a salary with benefits and room for advancement. Both supplementary and complimentary factors were present in the data and were interwoven throughout interviews, observations, and the mentoring guide books.

Connection to Framework

Person-environment fit remains an expansive term, and more specific dimensions or conceptualizations of PE fit have emerged with multi-faceted views distinguished by the comparison of the environment being studied (Edwards & Billsberry, 2010). One can conceptualize PE fit as an employee who fits into an organizational environment and becomes an active and contributing member, and PO fit defines the organization as the environment where employees participate and contribute. PO fit is the framework on which this study is centered, and by utilizing the tenets of the various aspects of PE fit and applying the framework of PO fit, the researcher was able to better understand the value of considering the unique aspects of each to make sense of the data. Furthermore, the theoretical framework and conceptualizations

provided the lens for the researcher to determine margins for values, skills, and the reciprocal nature the perception of fit provided to the employees and the organization.

Person Organization (PO) Fit

PO fit has prospered, in part, because of the research and literature on person-environment (PE) fit (French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982). PO fit theory posits that selecting individuals whose goals, personalities, and values are congruent with the organization is vital to retaining a workforce which is dedicated and productive (Argyris, 1957; Chatman, 1989; Hoffman & Woehr, 2005; Kristof, 1996; Pervin, 1989). When asked if their values were congruent with those of the CES, it was difficult for some of the mentees to answer right away, and several of those who hesitated asked for clarification. This reluctance was explained by Talbot and Billsberry (2007), who agreed that people tended to leave if they perceived they did not fit into their new work environment. People who label themselves “misfits” have a clear understanding of what the term means; however, while most people understand what being a “misfit” is like, they do not naturally have an understanding of what being a “fit” is (Billsberry et al., 2005; Edwards & Billsberry, 2010).

A concise measurement of PO fit has yet to be settled upon by researchers, but subjective and objective fit measures have been identified as the most prevalent ways to determine value congruence. French et al. (1974) distinguished the measures into *subjective* fit, defined as the match between the person and environment as it is perceived by the person, and *objective* fit, the match between the person and the environment as it exists independently of the person’s perception of it. This study concentrated on subjective fit as the mentees perceived their place in the CES organization. Most of the mentees explained that they perceived themselves as being a fit in the CES, but for some it depended on whether they were interacting with colleagues or

clients. Mentees felt more confident with their clients because the new agent was recognized as the expert, but with peers the mentees occasionally felt lacking in their knowledge base and facilitation skills. It reminded the researcher of the “big fish in a little pond” concept; since the mentees were from smaller counties, their clients trusted the mentees were the resident experts on certain subject matter areas because there was a lesser chance others in the smaller populated area would claim the same qualifications.

The desire to fit can be measured by employees being willing to seek, gain, and share knowledge (Coldwell, Billsberry, Van Meurs, & Marsh, 2008; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), and the researcher focused on those attributes to gauge perception of fit. Seeking knowledge was an attribute some mentees exhibited when they initiated an introduction with informal mentors if their formal mentors did not contact them quickly enough. The mentees gained knowledge when they actively participated in mentoring sessions, followed the mentor guidebook, and observed educational programs led by their mentors. Presently, former mentees are sharing knowledge by serving as mentors themselves, being active members of their professional associations, and educating clients in their counties.

Comparing the data shared by participants, the mentees sought work with the CES for various reasons, but they all had the goal of serving people. Several mentees shared they could easily earn more money elsewhere and had turned down jobs with other companies but chose to stay with the CES because they cared about serving the community more than making additional money.

Mentees in the study informed the researcher that because of their mentors’ qualities, they felt they were welcome in the CES community. They felt extremely welcomed and appreciated the variety of support they received from both formal and informal mentors, and

many stated they planned to continue their careers with the CES. When mentors had positive attitudes and appeared approachable, the mentees were appreciative. Similarly, the mentees were grateful when administrators took the time to carefully consider the pairing and proximity of the mentors and mentees.

Implications and Recommendations

The investigation sought to determine if the mentoring component of an onboarding program gave new employees the perception of possessing the characteristics to succeed as county extension agents in the CES organization. Founded on the mentees' viewpoints of their perceptions of fit, the researcher was able to identify implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and research. A discussion follows of the themes that emerged from the study.

Theme 1: Mentee Perceptions of CES Culture, History, and Traditions

Implications and recommendations for practice. The results of this study and prior research indicates that not all labor is equal, but organizations may invest in employees to increase productivity which is critical to success by offering a mentoring program. The culture, history, and traditions associated with the CES were recognized and respected attributes, and the mentees were motivated to continue the legacy, but their responses indicated that culture varies significantly within the system. It is recommended that all new employees undergo a standardized, in-depth organizational history and system structure lesson guided by their mentor but created and facilitated by an HRD representative. The lessons could involve touring the facilities that constitute the Division of Agriculture system, including various county offices, research stations, the state Extension and Division offices, and the Division's college on the land grant campus. Because of the complexity of this task, the training should utilize mixed media platforms including webinars, online lessons, videos, and face-to-face visits which could be

conducted in groups or divided by CES districts. Development and facilitation by an HRD representative from each component of the Division system will result in a shared program which would aid recruitment efforts, increase the retention of employees, and develop a cost share between administrations.

Implications and recommendations for policy. Because the literature conveyed value congruence as an important factor to consider in hiring, it is recommended the CES research relevant value assessment tools and select one to offer to applicants as a component of the hiring process to determine if value congruence is present in potential employees. If possible, the assessment tool should include indicators to determine the source of the values that have been developed from personal experiences, environmental influences, and observational learning of the new agents. The CES has several options for evaluating value congruence between mentees and the CES. Some recommendations in the literature of standard value congruence instruments include the Competing Values Framework (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983), the Organizational Culture Inventory (Cooke & Szumal, 1993), or the Perceived Personal and Organizational Value Congruence Scale (Veinhardt & Gulbovaitė, 2016). Additionally, various online companies offer value assessments and can be found with a simple web search. Since the data conveyed that county cultures could vary significantly, an assessment tool which considers population, size, and historical programs would assist administrators when making decisions regarding where to place county agents.

The CES is funded based on the extent of educational impact employees contribute to the citizens in their county, and it is important to maintain parity in the demographic breakdown of the contacts employees reach each month for civil rights purposes. Because of the importance of proper reporting, it is recommended employees attend a mandatory in-depth training within their

first month after employment to ensure accurate records are being kept. Because the internal reporting system, AIMS, was mentioned often by the mentees, this training should include a “demo” county test within the AIMS platform for new employees to practice entering contacts including built-in scenarios to determine if the employees are inputting the information in the system correctly.

Employing a diverse group of personnel encourages innovation and brings fresh perspectives to the organization. Because one limitation of the study was that the participants were all Caucasian, it is recommended that the CES continue to endorse hiring practices which promote a diverse workforce which mirrors the general population in Arkansas.

Implications and recommendations for research. Because literature on the impact mentoring programs have within CES organizations across the county is lacking, it is recommended that researchers from each of the three CES regions in the United States work collaboratively to produce a universal evaluation tool for mentoring programs. In the long-range plan, the researchers should continue to collect results of the mentoring successes and failures, which will save resources and have greater impact than each system working independently. The evaluation tool could utilize self-reflection, surveys, and attitudinal behavior assessments.

Theme 2: Mentee Perception of Traits/Skills Needed for Success

Implications and recommendations for practice. As the data indicated, mentees were aware they should acquire certain professional skills, referred to in this study as *employability skills*, to prosper as county agents. It is recommended that a deliberate effort be made to ensure new agents possess an awareness of their natural strengths and take a vested interest in improving any deficient skills in the areas of communication, connecting with people, work ethic, and ethical behavior. Although some traits are innate, they can also be taught, and it is

recommended that CES administration work in collaboration with the CES professional associations to provide opportunities for new and seasoned agents to develop their employability skills and workplace ethics when necessary. Special consideration should be paid to public speaking and teaching skills because those topics frequently emerged from the data, especially if the employee did not participate in education courses in college. It is recommended that mentees model the behaviors of their formal and informal mentors as observations appeared to have the greatest influence on the mentees.

Finally, since mentees implied they are reluctant to ask their mentors sensitive questions, the mentoring program should implement an anonymous online question portal where new agents may pose questions to seasoned county or state office faculty. For state level questions, the inquiries should be forwarded to an appropriate employee in the department to which the question is related, and appointed county agents representing each district should be assigned to field incoming questions for county-related questions. The district representatives may either answer the questions themselves or forward them to an appropriate agent.

Data should be collected from new and seasoned employees to weigh the importance of each identified skill to prioritize educational efforts for mentees. Once the appropriate skills are determined, the CES should focus intense training in those areas for new and seasoned employees who were shown to have weaknesses in skill levels in certain areas. For instance, the CES could examine perceived unproductive mentors to gauge the proficiency of each of their employability skills identified in the study to determine if they showed enjoyment for their work, displayed credibility, and if the feeling of confidence in their work.

Implications and recommendations for policy. It is recommended that administrators offer to offset all or a portion of training costs for mentors and mentees to attend to enhance

employability skills if they have been identified as having a deficiency in a skill. The training opportunities could be attended via the CES' internal online course system, webinars, or professional development face-to-face trainings. Ample opportunities may be found by conducting a web search or through recommendations of those who have experienced the training in the past.

Implications and recommendations for research. Literature would benefit from understanding whether those mentors considered less productive were lacking in the employability skills found to be helpful to produce successful county extension agents.

When mentees with less productive formal mentors were paired with quality informal mentors, their positive perceptions seemed to increase over time to align with those of mentees with productive mentors. Additionally, further research can examine and develop a set of standards for administrators to define what would constitute productive mentors vs. a non-productive mentors. Researchers could determine an assessment tool to identify the features, actions, and strategies for successful mentoring relationships, and administrators would use the tool to assess potential mentors to better impose compatibility.

Theme 3: Mentor/Mentee Relationships

Implications and recommendations for practice. Most of the mentees interviewed had a positive mentoring experience, but if a negative experience was mentioned, the factors stated were similar among the mentees for both their successes and their failures. The literature supported careful pairing of mentors, but the factors influencing perceived effectiveness seemed to differ from what this study revealed. Because of the data that emerged from the study, it is recommended to judiciously consider proximity when pairing mentors and mentees. If the travel distance was too far for mentees and mentors, additional resources, primarily travel expenses,

were necessary to perform high-quality mentor sessions, and there were no additional funds allotted to offset the extra costs. Regardless, mentees would rather have a mentor than not even if the mentor were not located nearby.

This study revealed that although mentees respected mentors who were very experienced in their subject area and had high credibility, they would have rather been with a mentor they could relate to on a personal level, someone who had a positive disposition and was approachable. Data showed that one mentee found a good friend, but not a mentor, and another mentee said his mentor was not friendly; neither of those mentees experienced what they considered a valuable mentorship. Potential mentors must be evaluated to determine if they possess the acumen to reflect upon their career experiences and develop effective methods to relay corresponding information to fill critical gaps and needs of new employees. The CES should realize the goal is to align a mentor's experiences with the mentee's development needs. It is recommended the CES utilize a mentor and mentee match company to evaluate both mentors and mentees to determine mentor/mentee pairs. Many online companies are available that use an algorithm software for mentor and mentee pairing and can be found by conducting a simple web search.

Another alternative to evaluate mentor and mentee pairs is to use a personality assessment tool to aid in the mentor pairing process. Pairing mentorship pairs by their personality characteristics can be achieved by requesting mentors and mentees to complete a chosen accredited personality assessment tool like the DiSC (Sugerman, 2009), the Big 5 (Zillig, Hemenover, & Dienstbier, 2002), or the HEXACO (Anglim, Morse, DeVries, MacCann, & Marty, 2017) inventories.

One of the largest categories which emerged from the data was the importance of having support from other employees outside the mentor relationship. Those mentees whose mentors either were not effective or were transferred during the mentorship naturally found informal mentors on their own initiative. The data provided evidence that informal mentors were eager to share their knowledge with new employees. It is recommended that seasoned county agents in counties surrounding new employees, especially in the same discipline area, be encouraged to contact new employees to serve as informal mentors. Loose guidelines for progression through the time period should be provided to the informal mentors but to a lesser degree than a formal mentorship. This could be achieved by having the district director introduce two or three agents to new employees by email and at face-to-face training sessions for natural pairing as mentees meet and communicate with their colleagues. A follow-up phone call or email to the mentees and the potential informal mentors from the district director would serve as a way for administration to stress the importance of informal mentor relationships.

Implications and recommendations for policy. It is recommended the mentee's district director immediately assign a replacement formal mentor if a mentor is relocated or resigns from the organization within the mentees' first year of employment. Having a gap between formal mentors proved to be stress producing when a new mentor was not assigned soon, and mentees reported feeling disregarded and having a lack of value when left without a formal mentor.

The CES organization would benefit from developing a formalized process for interviewing mentees who resign from their positions before the mentorship period is complete to determine if improving factors within the mentoring component might have prevented an exit. Conducting exit interviews, including questions associated with mentees' perception of fit and values, can inform the CES about areas of value misalignment. By identifying these issues, the

CES can change its search criteria to better identify those whose values align with the CES's. Although telephone interviews are conducted during the mentorship at three months and an online survey is given at the conclusion of the mentorship by the state facilitator, the researcher is unaware if interviews have been conducted after premature resignations and would recommend that the facilitators do so to capture recommendations which may improve the mentoring experience.

Implications and recommendations for research. Since the informal mentor data was such a predominant topic during this study, it requires attention, and additional research is recommended specifically within the CES system to determine if informal, formal, or a combination of both forms of mentorship programs is more beneficial to shape future adjustments to the current CES mentoring program.

A portion of the mentees cited having a negative experience in the mentoring program, so a future study regarding how that negative experience may have affected their own practice as mentors is recommended if they are assigned mentees in the future. During the interviews, three of the mentees mentioned they have used the lessons learned in a negative mentoring experience to shape their actions as they later served as mentors. Future research in this area would help determine the effect that a negative or even a positive mentoring experience can have.

Two of the mentors, one in the observation session and one in the interview session who now serves as a mentor, were younger than their mentees. Both mentors expressed being younger created uncomfortable situations in the mentorship because the mentees may have perceived them as being insufficiently prepared to be mentors so soon in their careers, regardless of how long they had been with the CES. A future study is recommended exploring the effects of

mentors who are younger than their mentees and how age may have influenced the mentoring relationship.

Theme 4: What Mentees Perceive May Have Increased Their Feeling of Fit

Implications and recommendations for practice. The data indicated that in the past, an internship program was implemented at the CES where individuals served as interns for a year under the constant supervision of an experienced county agent. The researcher recommends this practice be reinstated so that paid interns have the opportunity to observe the day-to-day nuances of a county extension office work environment under the direct supervision of an experienced CES county employee to explore useful actions and assess reactions to certain experiences throughout the program year.

During interviews, the researcher learned of a recently developed peer-to-peer training the CES offered to new agriculture agents. Led by an area agriculture and natural resources specialist hired specifically to plan and facilitate an interactive learning environment, seasoned agriculture agents demonstrate necessary skills that county agriculture agents are expected to master in a low-risk environment through hands-on demonstrations. The peer-to-peer teaching technique was very popular with the agriculture agents and seemed successful in allowing agents to learn skills at their own pace. Several of the participants who work in the remaining two CES areas, FCS and 4-H, requested the development of a similar program containing materials relevant to their subject matter area. It is recommended the CES administration allocate resources to hire area specialists in the areas of FCS and 4-H to facilitate similar hands-on learning experiences for both new and experienced agents who need assistance with professional and programmatic skills. If hiring individuals full-time is not feasible, the responsibilities could

be contracted out on a part-time basis, or existing employees may be able to dedicate partial responsibilities to this task.

In consideration of the data that emerged regarding communication between mentors and the mentees' supervisors and their roles in the mentoring program, it is recommended the supervisor and the mentor participate in a prescribed training after the formal mentor is assigned, which would provide an opportunity to determine roles both would portray as they undergo the mentorship. The meeting would increase communication between the mentor and the supervisor so that they could work together on allocating agreed-upon goals for the mentee based on experiences of former employees in the same role and supervisor requirements. Promoting practices proven successful in the mentor's career would enrich the mentoring experience and allow for a more personalized mentorship.

Implications and recommendations for policy. Considering remarks from mentees regarding the reasoning for the time period chosen for mentorship, it is recommended the CES department facilitating the program offer an optional extension of the time period for the formal mentorship program if desired by the pair. Considering experiences reported by the mentees, extending the formal mentoring time period would align with the CES's culture of informing new employees that it takes two to three years to learn all facets of the county agent position.

It is recommended that additional resources and incentives be made available to mentors and mentees as they progress through their mentorship as several mentees in the study were convinced this would intensify participation from both mentees and mentors. Incentives should include a travel budget, reimbursement for supplies for demonstrations or workshops when mentors are modeling an educational activity, and monetary compensation. Additionally, a time adjustment should be allowed for the mentors, which would assist them as they maneuver their

standard responsibilities while managing a mentee. Furthermore, if mentors had permission to decrease programmatic responsibilities for the year they are serving as mentors, they would have more incentive to concentrate on their mentees, and both would reap benefits.

Although the mentorship notebooks included a timeline and suggestions for mentoring sessions, mentees expressed the desire for an improved rubric for the notebooks to ensure best practices are followed for mentorship. The rubric would not necessarily be associated with extra paperwork but would be a guide with suggestions for field work.

Responses concerning the mentor and mentee notebooks were contradictory, and while some mentees commented on the usefulness of the book, others said they glanced at it once or twice and then developed their own mentoring system. It is recommended the mentee and mentor notebooks be customized for each of the three major program areas in the CES because the notebooks are nearly identical; the only difference in the three notebooks currently is that the mentor guide includes an additional tab specifically for mentors with two additional pages of information. If more customized, the notebooks would contain specific information benefitting each discipline to a fuller extent. It is recommended each customized mentorship notebook contain scenarios and solutions for common new county extension agent errors or situations including techniques to aid mentors when navigating uncomfortable topics. Because the data revealed the need, the mentoring notebooks should provide a link to an updated directory with state and county level faculty and their job responsibilities. Finally, it is recommended a comprehensive evaluation instrument be distributed to all former mentees, mentors, and supervisors for feedback on the mentorship notebooks, requesting their recommendations for improvements.

Implications and recommendations for research. More research is needed specifically within the national CES system to study a best practices model for a universal mentoring program customized by state or county levels. Several levels of staff and faculty would benefit from a mentoring program including support staff, researchers, and administrators with slight adjustments made to compensate for the unique role of each position. If the CES does not currently employ personnel who can further research and develop a model, it is recommended to contract with an outside vendor to create the model with heavy input from stakeholders who will benefit from the final product. To meet this goal, it is recommended the Arkansas CES collaborate with other state CES organizations in the United States and share the cost to fund a full-time position or contract a company to develop a mentoring program to encompass several career levels within the national CES system. If funding such a position is not possible, a committee should be formed to investigate any applicable grants which might fund the research or create a task force to develop the program.

Limitations

The major limitations of the study were centered on the demographics of those who participated, with 100% of the participants being of Caucasian descent and 26% of them being male. These factors may indicate a biased sample, limit the generalizability of the study, or may have influenced the results, but the demographics of this study are a close representation of the demographics of race and gender of county extension agents in Arkansas. This study is also limited by the number of observations conducted. Additional observations of mentees and mentors participating in co-teaching programs may have added validity to the importance of the topic and the triangulation of the study and is recommended for future studies on this topic.

Summary

This study has implications for practice, research, and policy regarding the perception of organizational fit that county extension agents in Arkansas had after participating in the mentoring component of the CES onboarding program. Mentees conveyed their awareness of being part of a larger entity encompassing ample history, culture, and traditions, and they overwhelmingly believed the importance they placed on the act of helping people was a core value they had in common with the Arkansas CES.

Mentees conveyed that mentor qualities and practices had varying results depending on the nature of the mentor and their chosen actions. Effective qualities and practices like being positive, approachable, encouraging, and devoting sufficient time to the mentorship resulted in the mentee's feeling positive about the experience, but if the mentor was negative, difficult to approach, did not offer words of encouragement, and did not devote enough time to them, the mentees developed negative feelings for the value and impact of the program. Several mentees mentioned had it not been for the mentor program, they would not have continued working for the CES. Mentees had clear opinions on what elements would have increased their feeling of fit had they been included in the mentoring program, including more time with other mentees, more involvement from their direct supervisor, and having more than one mentor. Additionally, mentees would have liked an option to continue the formal mentorship for more than one year to have an opportunity to be involved in a formal internship program and for the CES to offer mentors additional incentives for their involvement in the mentoring program.

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Appendix



Cooperative Extension Service

**Arkansas is
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2301 South University Avenue • Little Rock, Arkansas 72204-4940 • (501) 671-2000 • www.uaex.edu

May 8, 2019

Angie Freel
500 Ruth Drive
Bryant, AR 72022

Dear Angie:

I approve your request to interview and/or observe eligible University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service county extension agents for your doctoral dissertation research on the effects of the mentoring component of our onboarding program.

Additionally, I am granting permission to use all or a portion of the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service organizational name in your dissertation.

I look forward to reading the conclusions of your research and wish you luck on the completion of your doctoral degree.

Sincerely,

Richard D. Cartwright, Ph.D.
Associate Vice President for Agriculture-Extension and
Director, Cooperative Extension Service

Recruiting Script

Angie Freel

9/13/19

Interview Recruiting Script

Hello, my name is Angie Freel. I am a doctoral student at the U of A – Fayetteville in the Human Resources and Workforce Development program and work at the state 4-H office. I am conducting a research study examining county agents' perception of fit after participating in the mentoring component of the Cooperative Extension Service's onboarding program. I am inviting you to participate because you completed the mentoring process as a new agent.

Participation in this research includes participating in a Zoom session set for a time at your convenience where I will interview you about your experience in the mentoring process. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and will be recorded to a safe location on a hard drive. You will also be asked to sign a consent form. This is completely voluntary, and you may say no if you do not wish to participate. If you agree and we begin the interview and you decide you no longer want to participate, we will stop. I will not identify you in any presentation or written reports about this study. If given permission, I might want to use direct quotes from you, but these would only be cited as from a person or with a job title. There is no expected risk to you for helping me with this study. There are no expected benefits to you either.

Observation Recruiting Script

Hello, my name is Angie Freel. I am a doctoral student at the U of A – Fayetteville in the Human Resources and Workforce Development program and work at the state 4-H office. I am conducting a research study examining county agents' perception of fit after participating in the mentoring component of the Cooperative Extension Service's onboarding program. I am inviting you to participate because you are currently meeting as a mentee/mentor pair within the mentee's first year of employment.

Participation in this research includes participating in an observation session with me physically present set for a time at your convenience where I will observe you as a mentoring pair. The observation will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and will be recorded using an audio device and note taking by me as the researcher. All recordings and notes will be stored in safe location on a hard drive and locked file cabinet. You will also be asked to sign a consent form. This is completely voluntary, and you may say no if you do not wish to participate. If you agree and we begin the observation and you decide you no longer want to participate, we will stop. I will not identify you in any presentation or written reports about this study. If given permission, I might want to use direct quotes from you, but these would only be cited as from a person or with a job title. There is no expected risk to you for helping me with this study. There are no expected benefits to you either.



To: Carsten M Schmidtke
 GRAD 101
From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
 IRB Committee
Date: 11/12/2019
Action: **Expedited Approval**
Action Date: 11/12/2019
Protocol #: 1909219878
Study Title: Perception of County Extension Agents Organizational Fit After Participating in the Mentoring Component of the Cooperative Extension Service Onboarding Program
Expiration Date: 10/20/2020
Last Approval Date:

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Angela Denise Blacklaw-Freel, Investigator

Perception of County Extension Agents' Organizational Fit After Participating in the Mentoring
Component of the Cooperative Extension Service Onboarding Program

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Angela Freel

Faculty Advisor: Carsten Schmidtke

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study about perception of fit after participating in the Cooperative Extension Service mentoring program. You are being asked to participate in this study because you were assigned a mentor and completed the mentorship process.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who is the Principal Researcher?

Angela Freel
afreel@uark.edu

Who is the Faculty Advisor?

Dr. Carsten Schmidtke
cswded@uark.edu

What is the purpose of this research study?

The purpose of this study is to determine the perception of fit that county extension agents have after participating in the mentoring component of the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) onboarding program.

Who will participate in this study?

12-15 CES employees will be questioned about their experience in the mentoring process. Each person must have completed the one-year mentoring component of the program.

What am I being asked to do?

Your participation will require the following:

You will be required to participate in a Zoom session where you will be interviewed. You will answer questions pertaining to your experience in the CES mentoring program.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

There are no anticipated risks in participating in this study.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

There are no anticipated benefits in participating in this study.

How long will the study last?

The interview should last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?

No

Will I have to pay for anything?

No, there will be no cost for participation in this study.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. Your job will not be affected in any way if you refuse to participate.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law. All recordings will be stored in a password protected folder on the computer. All hand-written notes will be kept in a locked file cabinet until they are later destroyed.

Will I know the results of the study?

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Carsten Schmidtke (cswded@uark.edu) or Principal Researcher, Angela Freel, afreel@uark.edu. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Principal Research's name and contact information

Angela Freel
afreel@uark.edu

Faculty Advisor's name and contact information

Dr. Carsten Schmidtke
cswded@uark.edu

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP
Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Research Compliance
University of Arkansas
109 MLKG Building
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201
479-575-2208
irb@uark.edu

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Signature

Questions to be Answered

1. Tell me the reason/s that led you to decide to become a county extension agent.
[Researcher could share her story about a guest speaker coming a college class to describe their day-to-day job responsibilities].
2. What characteristics of CES attracted you to a career as a count agent?
3. Describe the qualities that you think a successful county CES agent needs.
 - a. Why are these qualities important?
 - b. To what degree do you think you have them?
 - c. Since you began your career at the CES, how has your perception changed regarding which qualities are needed?
4. Do you think you fit *into* the organization?
 - a. How are your values (in)congruent with the AR CES' values?
 - b. If you do not think you fit, why not? (probe)
 - c. Do you think the organization fits *your* characteristics?
 - d. How has the onboarding program shaped your thoughts about your fit within your role at the CES?
5. Tell me about the mentoring part of the onboarding process.
 - a. How were you and your mentor paired up and introduced to each other?
 - b. What is the relationship like with your mentor? (frequency, usefulness, comfort level, etc.)

- c. Describe what happens in a typical mentoring session.
 - d. How do you feel about the mentoring sessions? What works? What could be improved?
6. Did the mentoring component reinforce your perception of fit?
- a. Do you think the mentoring process helped you determine whether your values are congruent with the AR CES' values?
 - b. Do you feel confident after completing the mentoring process that you had the qualities to face the demands of the job?
 - c. Did the mentoring process offer you tools to help you be more effective in your job?
7. How do you perceive your worth to the organization now as compared to before participating in the mentoring program?
8. Based on your experience, what would you say are the strengths of the CES mentoring program?
9. Based on your experience, what would you say are the weaknesses of the CES mentoring program?
10. If you had the freedom to make changes to the mentoring process, what you would do differently.
11. Is there anything about the mentoring program that I didn't ask but should know?