

Best Practices



**LEADERSHIP
EXPERIENCE**

Evaluating the Role of Mentoring in Cultivating Future NEAFCS Leaders

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Abstract

Cooperative Extension professional associations face increasing challenges in sustaining quality leadership pipelines. The National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (NEAFCS) developed a structured mentorship and professional development program to address its leadership needs. This manuscript describes the development, implementation, and evaluation of the NEAFCS Leadership Experience program across four cohorts (2021–2025; $n = 143$). A mixed-methods evaluation included pre-, mid-, and post-program surveys and a focus group. The study revealed substantial gains in leadership confidence, knowledge, and readiness ($p < .05$), which correlated with broadened networks, heightened engagement, and underscored the program's viability as a replicable leadership framework.

Introduction

Professional associations support professional development, foster leadership capacity, and strengthen professional networks among their members. Within Cooperative Extension, the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (NEAFCS) provides important opportunities for the membership to develop leadership skills, share research, program innovations, and contribute to the advancement of the Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) profession. Despite the important leadership development opportunities professional associations offer, organizations like NEAFCS face increased challenges in cultivating a sustainable leadership pipeline.

Like other professional associations, NEAFCS has difficulty recruiting member

to serve in leadership roles at the national, regional, and state levels. Documented challenges in leadership succession persist across Cooperative Extension systems nationally (Aniche et al., 2025). In recent election cycles, NEAFCS leadership positions filled by unopposed nominees demonstrate a limited pool of viable candidates for organizational leadership. As experienced professionals retire or transition to new roles, Extension organizations must intentionally develop leadership capacity among newer professionals (Donaldson, 2024). Without effective leadership development efforts, organizations risk losing institutional knowledge, weakened organizational sustainability, and reduced member engagement. These challenges highlight a critical need for deliberate research-informed leadership development strategies within professional associations like NEAFCS.

A growing body of literature across professional associations/organizations like Extension identifies mentorship as a central and effective component of leadership cultivation. Mentorship has consistently been associated with increased leadership readiness, stronger professional identity, enhanced job satisfaction, and greater organizational commitment (Donaldson, 2024; Houchens et al., 2024; Radkiewicz et al., 2022). This body of research consistently supports mentorship as a critical mechanism for individual leadership development and organizational sustainability. However, mentorship alone is not enough; program design plays a critical role in determining effectiveness (Deng et al., 2022).

Established learning and social participation theories validate mechanisms through which mentorship contributes to leadership development within

professional associations. Published reports point to the importance of structured mentoring models that include intentional mentor-mentee matching, clearly defined expectations, professional development content, and ongoing evaluation (Aniche et al., 2025). Programs that integrate relationship-based support with leadership and skill-building opportunities are particularly effective in cultivating future leaders. According to Diaz and González (2023) this is important in professional associations where leadership development often depends on members' understanding of the organization's culture, governance, and pathways for involvement. Therefore, mentorship-based programs are most effective when they extend beyond simple participant pairing.

The NEAFCS Leadership Experience is evaluated through the theoretical lens of Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977, as cited in Rumjaun & Narod, 2025), complemented by the Communities of Practice framework proposed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave & Wegner, 1991, as cited in Fernandes et al., 2022). According to Social Learning Theory, skills, attitudes, and behaviors developed through observation, modeling, feedback, and experiences foster self-efficacy (Rumjaun & Narod, 2025). Through management-focused mentorship, emerging leaders build self-efficacy by observing experienced professionals and receiving guided feedback. This perspective explains how mentees enhance leadership preparedness through interactive experiences with their respective mentors as opposed to receiving passive instructions on leadership.

Communities of Practice further emphasize professional learning that occurs through participation in a shared community (Fernandes et al., 2022). NEAFCS, like other professional associations, cultivates leadership through member interactions with experienced peers, the acquisition of organizational knowledge, and a gradual increase in leadership responsibility. Collectively, these frameworks present mentorship as a dual process: one that fosters individual development and another that integrates individuals into professional circles. Viewed through these theoretical lenses, the NEAFCS Leadership Experience is a structured pathway for skill development in leadership, communication, socialization, and capacity building.

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to describe and evaluate the NEAFCS Leadership Experience, a mentorship-based leadership development program designed to cultivate future leaders within the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences. The objectives of this report are to:

- *Describe the structure and implementation of the NEAFCS Leadership Experience.*
- *Evaluate mentees' outcomes related to leadership confidence and professional engagement.*
- *Identify best practices for mentorship-driven leadership development within Cooperative Extension professional associations.*

Method

Recognizing the need to cultivate emerging leaders within the organization, the NEAFCS Mentoring and Leadership Committee developed a professional

development program with a dedicated mentorship component designed to increase leadership capacity among members. This program connects seasoned Extension professionals with emerging leaders for professional growth opportunities focusing on leadership abilities, clear communication, and involvement in the organization. The program combines mentoring relationships with a variety of leadership learning opportunities reflecting best practices reported in the literature. The program is in alignment with the theoretical understanding that observation and participation are critical for effective leadership development.

The NEAFCS Leadership Experience consisted of three phases: pre-program, program implementation, and evaluation (See Figure 1: Program Phases). The program included 143 mentors and mentees in four cohorts: Cohort 1, May 2021-February 2022, n=54; Cohort 2, Summer 2022-Spring 2023, n=44; Cohort 3, Summer 2023-Spring 2024, n=22; and Cohort 4, Summer 2024-Spring 2025, n=23. Program modifications from Cohorts 1 and 2 implemented in Cohorts 3 and 4 included reducing the length of sessions, the number of applicants, enhancing mentor-mentee connections, and facilitating structured networking experiences.

Pre-Program Phase. The NEAFCS Mentoring and Leadership Committee recruits participants through a competitive application process open to all members of NEAFCS. Applicants express interest in either serving as mentors or mentees. (See Figure 2: Mentor and Mentee Eligibility Requirements). Mentors and mentees are matched based on professional interests, leadership goals, and geographic representation. Mentors

participate in a two-hour virtual training session that outlines expectations, program goals, mentorship strategies, and suggested discussion topics.

Program Implementation Phase. The professional development content was adapted from the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) mentorship program (Stewart et al., 2023). Participants engaged in four virtual professional development sessions conducted during the summer months. Sessions focused on leadership development topics relevant to Extension professionals (See Table 1: Professional Development Topics). Following the professional development series, mentor-mentee pairs meet monthly for approximately nine months to discuss leadership goals, professional development, and identify opportunities for organizational engagement. Mentees are encouraged to attend the NEAFCS Annual Conference to develop and strengthen professional networks and interact with association leadership.

Program Evaluation Phase. The Mentoring and Leadership Committee used a mixed-methods evaluation process to assess the effectiveness of the NEAFCS Leadership Experience. A leadership self-assessment survey with closed-ended response questions collected pre-, mid-, and post-program quantitative data. A post-program open-ended survey and a focus group discussion with preselected questions collected qualitative data from both mentors and mentees. Thematic analysis included iterative coding procedures facilitated via Qualtrics. A survey adapted from Kahn et al. (2025) measured leadership competencies. Mentees completed this survey at three points: (1) Pre-program; (2) Mid program; and (3)

Post-program. The survey measured: (1) Leadership confidence; (2) Communication skills; and (3) Organizational leadership readiness. Additionally, a focus group conducted following Cohort 1 collected qualitative feedback on program effectiveness and opportunities for improvement.

Mentors and mentees in the Leadership Experience (n= 143) represented 54 state Extension systems across the United States (See Table 2: Participant Demographics). Survey findings showed statistically significant improvements in participant-reported leadership competencies among mentees (See Table 3 and Figure 3: Leadership Competency and Self-Assessment Scores). Paired sample t-tests examined changes between pre- and post-program scores. Results show statistically significant increases across all measured domains - leadership confidence, communication skills, understanding NEAFCS governance, and overall leadership readiness ($p < .05$). The magnitude of change across domains ($\Delta \geq 0.7$) shows moderate to strong practical growth in mentees' leadership capacity.

Mentor and mentee feedback from Cohorts 1 and 2 informed program improvements in subsequent cohorts (See Table 4: Program Improvements Based on Participant Feedback). These improvements enhanced mentee engagement and strengthened mentor-mentee relationships. Qualitative data gathered from the focus group and open-ended survey questions reveals the impact of the NEAFCS Leadership Experience on mentees, categorized into four main thematic areas.

- First, participants consistently reported increased leadership confidence,

expressing a greater sense of readiness to pursue leadership roles within NEAFCS and their respective Extension systems. In general, mentees described feeling more empowered to engage in committees, apply for leadership positions, and contribute to organizational initiatives.

- Second, mentees highlighted the value of expanded professional networks, noting that connections with peers and mentors across multiple states enhanced collaboration, idea sharing, and professional support. These relationships, often described as ongoing, were beneficial beyond the duration of the program.
- Third, mentees demonstrated an improved understanding of organizational leadership pathways, gaining clearer insight into NEAFCS governance structures, expectations of leadership roles, and opportunities for advancement within the association. More than ten participants have held or now hold positions on the 2025-2026 NEAFCS National Board.
- Finally, mentees emphasized enhanced professional growth, attributing this to the mentorship experience, which provided individualized guidance, accountability, encouragement, and exposure to diverse leadership perspectives. Collectively, these findings underscore the role of structured mentorship in nurturing both personal and professional development among Extension professionals.

Discussion

Despite extensive research on mentorship in professional and organizational settings, there remains limited empirical evidence examining structured, mentorship-driven leadership development within Cooperative Extension professional associations. This gap is significant because existing research primarily focuses on mentoring in workplace onboarding, faculty development, or general career advancement. On the contrary, leadership development within professional associations emphasizes the intersection of service, governance, and member engagement. The NEAFCS Leadership Experience addresses these components by offering a structured mentorship model tailored to the needs of Extension professional associations.

The findings of the NEAFCS Leadership Experience program evaluation suggest that mentorship-driven leadership development effectively strengthens leadership pipelines within professional associations. Consistent with prior research, participants demonstrated increased leadership confidence, enhanced professional identity, and greater engagement within NEAFCS. Beyond confirming existing findings in the literature, this evaluation contributes new insight into how structured mentorship models function within the unique context of Cooperative Extension professional associations. Specifically, the integration of structured mentorship with targeted professional development helps to accelerate leadership identity by combining observational learning with opportunities for guided participation (Roofe, 2022; Stewart et al., 2023; Roofe et al., 2023).

According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, participants develop leadership self-efficacy through exposure to experienced leaders, feedback, and modeling of leadership behaviors. Simultaneously, the Communities of Practice framework helps explain how participants moved from peripheral engagement toward more active involvement in organizational leadership through networking, collaboration, and increased understanding of governance structures. Other findings suggest mentorship alone is insufficient in leadership development without intentional program design. Structured mentor-mentee matching, a defined leadership curriculum, and consistent engagement over time facilitate successful mentee outcomes. These components create a supportive environment that enables translation of knowledge into practice, strengthening both individual leadership capacity and organizational sustainability.

These findings highlight the dual impact of mentorship-driven programs within Extension systems: they support individual professional growth and contribute to broader organizational outcomes, including increased member engagement and leadership participation. The number of mentees from this program advancing into leadership roles within NEAFCS further underscores its effectiveness in developing a sustainable leadership pipeline.

Limitations. A key limitation in interpreting these program findings is that participation was optional, which could lead to self-selection bias among individuals already interested in leadership growth. Additionally, the provided sample may not be representative of the overall NEAFCS population. Future evaluations

are also needed of long-term outcomes of mentorship programs, and participants' involvement in leadership roles within NEAFCS.

Best Practices for Mentorship-Driven Leadership Programs

The NEAFCS Leadership Experience highlights best practices for Extension systems and professional associations seeking to develop leadership development programs: (1) Intentional mentor-mentee matching; (2) Structured leadership curriculum; (3) Regular mentor-mentee engagement; (4) Professional networking opportunities; and (5) continuous program evaluation and adaptation.

Implications for Cooperative Extension

Leadership development remains a critical priority for Cooperative Extension systems nationwide (Burnsed, 2025). As organizations face workforce transitions and increasing program complexity, intentional leadership development initiatives are necessary to cultivate future leaders. The NEAFCS Leadership Experience demonstrates how mentorship-driven programs can strengthen leadership pipelines, increase member engagement, and provide professional development. Extension organizations and professional associations may consider adopting a similar mentorship model for leadership development and organizational sustainability.

Conclusion

The NEAFCS Leadership Experience represents a strategic and evidence-informed approach to leadership development within Cooperative Extension professional associations. By integrating structured mentorship with

intentional professional development, the program effectively cultivates leadership capacity among emerging professionals. Participants increased leadership confidence, expanded their professional networks, and increased engagement within NEAFCS. These outcomes are critical for sustaining a strong and active membership base.

The NEAFCS Leadership Experience offers an adaptable model for professional associations seeking to build sustainable leadership pipelines. By aligning mentorship with structured learning, organizational socialization, and leadership skill development, this model demonstrates how professional associations can move from passive participation to active leadership cultivation. Future research should examine the long-term impacts of such programs on leadership retention, organizational effectiveness, and member engagement across Extension systems. Collectively, these efforts will help to ensure the continued vitality, relevance, and leadership capacity of Cooperative Extension and the Family and Consumer Sciences profession.

Author Information

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Tables

Table 1. Professional Development Topics

Session	Topic	Key Learning Objectives
1	Leading Yourself	Self-awareness, personality assessment
2	Leading Others	Communication and conflict management
3	Leading in Extension	Partnerships, program leadership
4	Leading in NEAFCS	Governance, leadership pathways

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Category	Mentors	Mentees
Number of participants	71	72
Average years in Extension	17	4
States represented	54	44
Prior leadership experience	76%	32%

Table 3. Leadership Competency Self-Assessment Scores

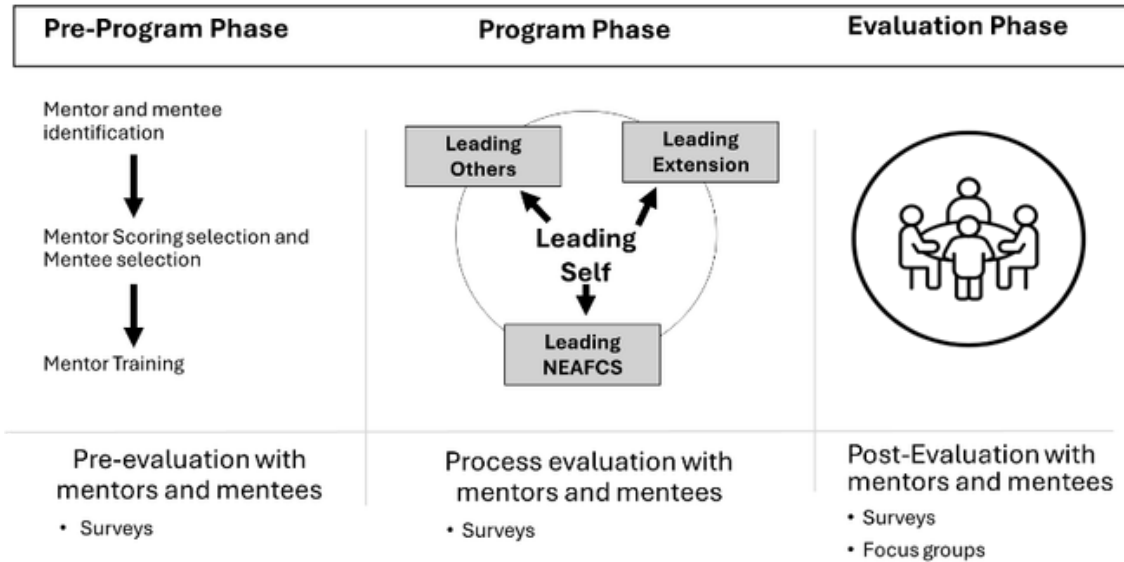
Competency	Pre-Program Mean (SD)	Post-Program Mean (SD)	Change (Δ)	<i>p</i>
Leadership confidence	3.2 (0.68)	4.1 (0.55)	+ 0.9	< .05
Communication skills	3.5 (0.72)	4.2 (0.60)	+ 0.7	< .05
Understanding of NEAFCS governance	2.8 (0.80)	4.3 (0.50)	+ 1.5	< .001
Leadership readiness	3.1 (0.70)	4.0 (0.58)	+ 0.9	< .05

Table 4. Program Improvements Based on Participant Feedback

Issue Identified	Improvement Implemented
Sessions too long	Reduced session length
Mentor-mentee connection delays	Paired participants earlier
Limited networking	Added structured networking opportunities

Figures

Figure 1. Program Phases



Note. This figure demonstrates the elements of the three phases of the Leadership Experience Program: Pre-program, Program, and Evaluation. Additional program information collected in the pre-program phase was used in the evaluation (n=143).

#	Cohort Participation	%	Count
1	May 21-Feb 22: Cohort 1	37.76%	54
2	Summer 22-Spring 23: Cohort 2	30.77%	44
3	Summer 23-Spring 24: Cohort 3	15.38%	22
4	Summer 24-Spring 25: Cohort 4	16.09%	23

#	Method of Identification	%	Count
1	Male	2.10%	3
2	Female	97.20%	139
3	Non-binary/third gender	0.00%	0
4	Prefer not to say	0.70%	1
	Total	100%	143

Figure 2. Mentor and Mentee Eligibility Requirements for Application and Selection.

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MENTOR

- Minimum of five years of NEAFCS membership.
- Demonstrated leadership experience within NEAFCS or Cooperative Extension.
- Attend a mandatory mentor training.
- Desire to help develop future NEAFCS leaders.
- Initiate contact with your mentee and lead the first discovery call.
- Work with the mentee to establish mutually agreed-upon goals.
- Communicate with your mentee at least once a month.
- Encourage and support your mentee as he/she grows in confidence and knowledge.
- Resolve issues or recommend reassignment as needed.
- Attend the NEAFCS Annual Session if possible, but attendance is not mandatory.

MENTEE

- Minimum of one year of NEAFCS membership.
- Interest in pursuing leadership roles within the association.
- Desire to surpass current levels of performance.
- Actively participate in cohort training.
- Be an active partner in the mentor-mentee relationship.
- Work with your mentor to establish mutually agreed-upon goals.
- Work with your mentor to establish a method of monthly communication.
- Be willing to contact and ask questions of your mentor as needed.
- Bring issues forward so your mentor and mentee can resolve them together.
- Attend the NEAFCS Annual Session if possible, but attendance is not mandatory.



Figure 3. Pre versus Post Leadership Competency Self-Assessment Scores