OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

Show Me the Money: Connections between County Funding and Extension Employee Retention

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to describe the relationship between county funding and the retention rates of Extension professionals in Ohio. Local county funding is a critical issue for Extension professionals due to the significant role it plays in local programming and staffing patterns. This impacts a professional's level of stress, use of time, and sense of community support. The accumulating stress of poor county funding contributes to staff burnout and position turnover. This study analyzed existing data from The Ohio State University College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Science's (CFAES) Finance Office and Office of Human Resources in order to identify connections between county funding and staff retention.

SIGNIFICANCE

Employee burnout is a state of emotional exhaustion, detachment, and decreased productivity that is identified by employee tardiness to or absence from work, poor achievement levels, and apathy towards projects and people[2]. This state frequently leads to position turnover[4]. Turnover disrupts programs, leaves constituents suspended or scrambling for interim solutions, and perpetuates low morale among co-workers[5].

Repeated change in personnel leads to a significant "loss of historical and programmatic knowledge, experience, and relationships that have been built up over time," as well as financial and administrative burdens that can equal one year's pay and benefits.[2]

Due to the small, cohesive dynamic present at the county Extension office level, professionals are acutely aware of the office's county funding status. When funding is irregular or low, professionals experience significant stress[3]. Determining the point at which Extension professionals negatively respond to this stress is an important contribution to workforce retention literature.

METHODS

Quantitative approach using federally audited data sets provided in MS Excel format from two entities:

- The OSU CFAES Finance Office provided ten years of data from OSU records on calendar-year (2005-2014) funding from each of the 88 counties.
- OSU CFAES Office of Human Resources, as the centralized manager of all employee hiring and termination, provided ten years (2005-2014) of coded employee data from OSU records on each of the 88 counties.
  - All employees, including unclassified and classified employees but not student employees, were included in the data set.
  - To provide a fairer assessment, retirements and transfers were excluded from staff turnover calculations.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data sets for notable correlations. The research team did not study other environmental factors commonly associated with workforce retention.

Table 1: Staff Turnover Declines as Per Capita Funding Increases

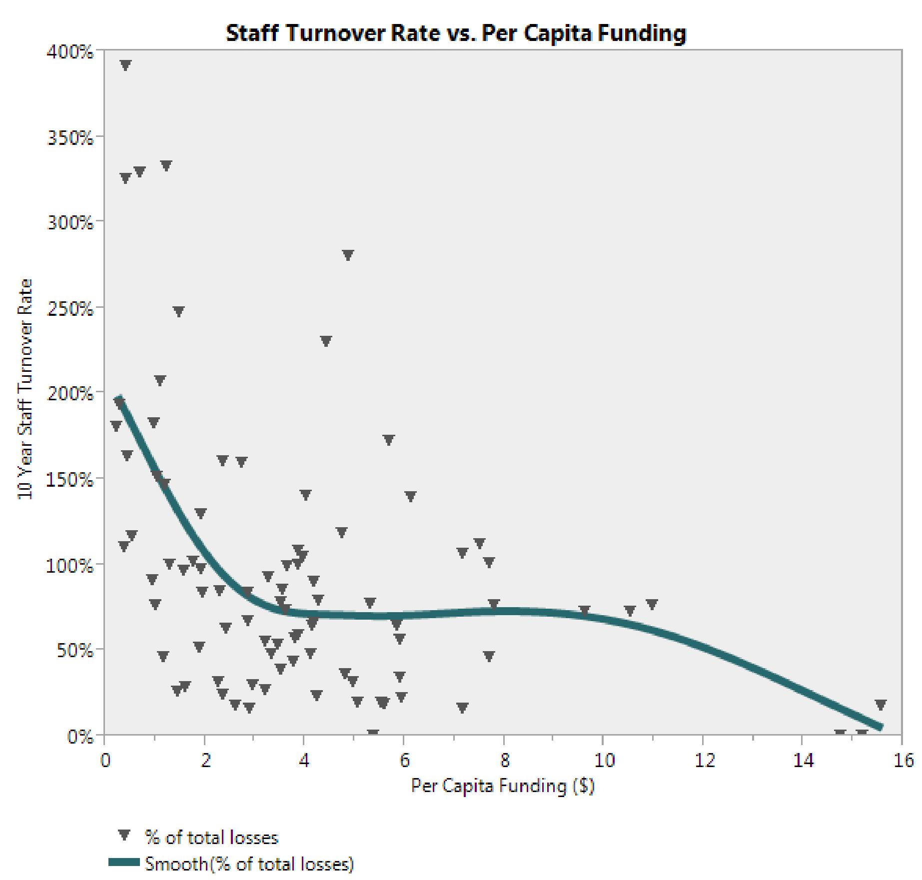
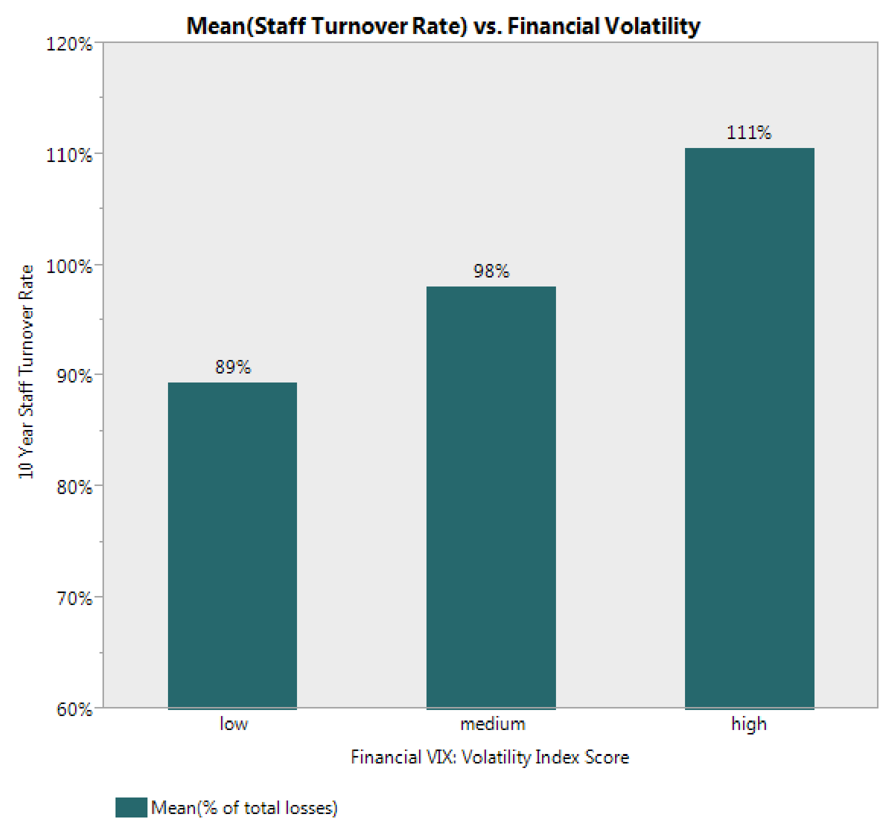


Table 2: Staff Turnover Increases as County Funding Becomes More Volatile



RESULTS

Data analysis shows connections between county funding and employee retention.

- Below $2 per capita, staff retention is poor and highly variable. Between $2-6 per capita, retention is improved but variability remains. Above $6 per capita, retention is strong and variability low. *See Table 1 for visual representation.*
- A linear relationship exists between per capita funding and employee retention. Counties experiencing poor or very poor retention [greater than 150% turnover in 10 years] received $1.76 per capita funding while those experiencing good or very good retention [10 year turnover of 100% or less] received $4.68 per capita funding.
- Counties experiencing high fiscal volatility—defined as two or more years with funding disruptions beyond one standard deviation from their 10 year average--faced an 111% employee turnover rate as opposed to an 89% rate for counties with no disruptions. *See Table 2 for visual representation.*

CONCLUSIONS

This research project identifies a relationship between county funding and Extension employee retention: county offices experience better retention rates when funding is ample and less susceptible to disruption. In light of generational retention challenges already facing employers[1], these results encourage Extension administrators to adopt several practices to proactively strengthen county funding and/or reduce the impact of funding disruptions.

TAKEAWAYS

- State administrators and government relations personnel should advocate for a $2+ per capita funding level in each county. Currently 26 of 88 counties do not meet this threshold.
- County directors should ensure sufficient budgetary carry forward amounts to minimize year-to-year fiscal disruptions. The current practice of a three month carry forward may be insufficient.
- Additional support resources should be offered to employees in counties facing fiscal disruption or chronically low per capita spending. This could include special funding grants for professional development travel, emotional support resources, and/or zero interest short-term loans.

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