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## A Writing Retreat for Extension Professional Development Capacity Building: A Case Study of Arizona Cooperative Extension's 4-H Youth Development Program

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

This work was completed while I was the Associate Director and State 4-H Program Leader with Arizona Cooperative Extension. Thank you to the Arizona Association of Extension 4-H Agents for their financial contribution to making the writing retreat possible.

# A Writing Retreat for Extension Professional Development Capacity Building: A Case Study of Arizona Cooperative Extension's 4-H Youth Development Program

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**Abstract.** Extension Professionals have varying expectations of academic publication depending on tenure and promotion. And, the field of Extension needs the contributions of professionals across the system to support the translation and dissemination of the impacts of and findings from their Extension programming for academic and practitioner audiences. A writing retreat was held to support 4-H Youth Development professionals in academic writing. Because of this writing retreat five teams started working on an academic writing project which resulted in three journal articles being published. Teams also published conference presentations and Extension publications as a result of the initial academic writing project. Intentionally providing writing retreats that prepare professionals to write can support effective capacity building for academic publishing.

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## INTRODUCTION

Extension education is a bridge that helps translate research and innovation for stakeholders (Elliott-Engel et al., 2023). Research and Extension efforts in higher education are inextricably connected. Extension professionals can be effective when they are solely translating research findings into their practice. Yet, when Extension professionals are research-informed by conducting research and conducting program evaluation they can bring a richness to their work that supports their trustworthiness and effectiveness with stakeholders (Dunifon et al., 2004; Sjölund et al., 2022).

One of the four statutory areas of focus for Extension from USDA, 4-H youth development—along with Agriculture; Family, Consumer, and Health Sciences; and Community Development—also needs to have research-informed practice. Many 4-H professionals have faced a de-professionalization by the Extension system, with a trend of hiring less faculty and facing lower expectations of academic contributions (Astroth, 2003). Since Astroth (2003) called for the professionalization and academization of the 4-H youth development workforce, major strides have been made with theoretical (i.e., 4-H Thriving model (Arnold, 2018)) and practice frameworks (i.e., 4-H Targeting Life Skills model (Hendricks, 1998; see also White et al., 2021)) being developed, which supports county-based professionals, faculty development, and implementing research-informed programming. While also supporting the translation and dissemination of the impacts of and findings from their Extension programming for academic and practitioner audiences.

While every land-grant university has different factors and forces that inform the faculty tenure and promotion process, higher education has universally experienced a heightened focus on publication—and grantsmanship. Extension professionals, if they have tenure or similar eligibility status, are not immune from these pressures. At the same time, Extension professionals are not always hired with academic training, as many are hired for their technical and leadership skills. This dichotomy between the skills used to implement programming and the skills utilized to gain promotion and tenure leaves those Extension professionals who are in a tenure system in a frustrating and precarious situation. And even if Extension professionals are well-trained in academic writing, they still face challenges in completing writing efforts, including scheduling writing times, setting goals, and overcoming the fear of writing (Mills et al., 2016).

Extension professionals do need to embrace the concept of producing scholarship in written form (Mills et al., 2016). Yet this is not a solution that can be placed solely on Extension professionals alone; they need their organizations to provide support through professional development opportunities to encourage career growth no matter their background, position, or tenure eligibility. Creating an inclusive and expansive support structure allows professional advancement opportunities and capitalizes on the human resources in our ranks.

As Extension professionals work to meet the requirements for increased scholarship activities through multiple outlets, a collaborative writing activity (i.e., a writing retreat) can be an important instrument (Tueteberg et al., 2016). A writing retreat is an effective tool for building early-career research skills (Petrova & Coughlin, 2012; Tremblay-Wragg et al, 2021; Vincent et al., 2021) and thus could serve as a way to cultivate effective skills for Extension professionals who have not had a lot of experience with academic writing.

According to Garside (2015), writing collaboratively allows colleagues to support one another's strengths and work through problems together (see also Benvenuti, 2017; Eardley et al., 2021). A writing retreat increases strong social bonds with other professionals who are completing the same kind of writing, which can reduce the overall feelings of helplessness, frustration, and isolation that can come from the process of academic writing (Kornhaber et al., 2016). A writing retreat supports an increased motivation to write (Moore, 2003) and productivity (Murray & Newton, 2009; Noone & Young, 2019; Stanley et al., 2017).

## THE CONTEXT

Arizona Cooperative Extension hires the majority of their 4-H professionals (i.e., agents) with eligibility for a tenure equivalency, called continuing status. Faculty are required to meet the standard of faculty excellence, defined by the creation and dissemination of knowledge that advances their field. Prior to this writing retreat, it had been over a decade since there was a successful promotion of a 4-H agent in which continuing eligibility was conferred. Additionally, during the preceding decade, Arizona 4-H agents had published zero journal or Extension publications.

## WRITING RETREAT: HOW IT WORKED

In 2019, a writing retreat was prepared to help Arizona 4-H Extension professionals translate and disseminate the impacts of, and findings from, their programming for academic and practitioner audiences. This effort was made in recognition that Extension professionals needed guidance on how to write, what to write about, and who to work with to successfully publish. The objective of the writing retreat was to increase the number of academic papers written and to build the future efficacy of 4-H professionals to write papers outside of the formal structure of the writing retreat.

County-based 4-H agents comprised the team members that completed the writing retreat. Campus-based 4-H professionals and county-based program coordinators attended the event but chose not to continue on a team. Only one 4-H agent had published a journal article before the writing retreat.

## SETTING

The writing retreat was three days and two nights and was not connected with any other in-service activities. The event was jointly sponsored by the state 4-H office and the Arizona Association of Extension 4-H Agents. The event was held at a remote and rustic research station with a large meeting room and sufficient internet. Because of the remote nature of the event, cell service was a little spotty. The location was selected because it was a new location that was not previously used for professional development with this group; thus, it served to isolate individuals from their day-to-day job responsibilities (i.e., phone calls, emails) and other habits.

## FORMING A TEAM

Before any topics were discussed a facilitated conversation occurred. First, the participants were asked if they had a research project or set of data that they were currently working on. If so, then they were asked if they would welcome their colleagues into the project. The remainder of the participants who did not have a project in mind were then asked, "What is it that you have always wanted to know to improve your practice?" Everyone shared their

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topic on a sticky note and topics were clumped together. A facilitated conversation then occurred about what team members wanted to be on what project. In this particular effort, five teams were established. Some attendees never did commit or participate in a team.

### CONTENT: INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

Over the 16 hours of facilitated learning, the topics included: research ethics, finding the gap in the literature, writing strong research objectives, writing effective research questions, an introduction and overview of methodological approaches (i.e., theoretical, quantitative, and qualitative), academic writing standards, IRB, data management, and referencing. No assumptions of previous knowledge were made. The format of the seminar was instruction followed by practice time and then facilitated dialogue. Learners were asked to engage with their project and their team. This format allowed for individuals to learn the content, try to make sense of the material, and then the questions that emerged from each group exposed gaps and helped the facilitator find additional resources for the teams to reference and utilize.

### METHODOLOGY CONSULTATION

Each team was assigned a team member from the University of Arizona's Community, Research, Evaluation & Development (CRED) team. This meant that there was an evaluation and research expert that could guide the discussion and practice of each team in real time throughout the two-day session. The presence of the CRED Team provided a guardrail for the writing teams as they started to grapple with research objectives, questions, research design, and the appropriateness of a methodological approach. Each team ended up in a literature review paper after realizing that they would need to do that work prior to collecting data, and the CRED team helped make these connections.

### DEVELOPING A PLAN FOR ACCOMPLISHMENT

The learn-and-apply model allowed individuals to practice what was discussed and establish a plan, but there was not enough time for the teams to complete all of their efforts during the two-day event. For example, the discussion of locating a gap in the literature requires significant time to read the literature, whereas there was only an hour allocated to finding gaps in the literature on the agenda. Before the teams left the writing retreat they were given two hours to establish a timeline, roles of responsibilities, and an overall plan for the completion of each step before leaving the writing retreat. One of the most important discussions that emerged was author order and the ethics of authorship. This conversation connected to roles and successfully completing the plan.

### ACCOUNTABILIBUDDY

Each team was assigned an accountabilibuddy with academic writing experience from the state 4-H office team. The accountabilibuddy's charge was to check in on the progress of the team toward completing the paper and to provide editorial feedback and advice throughout the duration of the project. Each person serving in the accountabilibuddy role understood that they were not going to be included as an author of the paper. This was an important consideration to build trust between the Extension professionals and accountabilibuddy. Expecting that these individuals would not be authors allowed for open sharing and supporting their advisory role.

### OUTCOMES

Five teams were established as a result of the writing retreat. Only one team, the Evaluation Skill-A-Thon team, attended the event with a specific project to work on. Of the five teams, three teams (60%) were successful in completing a journal article (Table 1). Of those three, all were successful in being accepted to their first submitted journal. Four of five teams (80%) prepared conference presentation submissions, and all four had conference presentations accepted. One team (20%) followed up on their writing retreat efforts with a second journal article and an Extension publication on the same topic.

**Table 1.** Team Academic Publications Resulting from the Writing Retreat

Team	Team Size (# people)	Conference Presentation(s)	Journal Article (Year Published)	Extension Publication(s)	Follow-Up Work Published
Indigenizing 4-H	5	X	2021	X	X
Evaluation Skill-A-Thon	4	X	2021		
First-Generation 4-H Youth	3	X	2022		
Volunteer Motivations	1	X			
Mentoring Curriculum	1				

*Note.* All articles referenced in this chart can be reviewed in Appendix A.

Two of the five teams did not complete a journal article; these teams were Volunteer Motivations and Mentoring Curriculum. Both of these non-completing teams had only one member. Based on their interest in certain projects they chose to work on a topic by themselves. The Volunteer Motivations team did craft a rough draft article and present it at Extension conferences— however, the paper was never finalized. The Mentoring Curriculum team wanted to focus on finishing a large curriculum project. This group has yet to complete the project. Additionally, they have not submitted a presentation to a conference or produced an Extension publication from this work.

Two articles were published in 2021, and one article was published in 2022. Two articles were published in the *Journal of Youth Development* and one was in *The Journal of Extension*. One article was a systematic review of the literature, one was a literature review, and the third was a case study. No team arrived with collected data.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The writing retreat successfully increased the writing productivity of Arizona 4-H Youth Development professionals. The majority of the 4-H professionals participating in the writing retreat completed a journal article manuscript and had their writing accepted into journals. Most teams completed the submission and their work was accepted at national Extension conferences. The largest team was inspired by their writing retreat work to produce an additional paper and to translate their efforts into an Extension publication. This project did not measure efficacy, but some indicators show that efficacy increased (e.g., number of publications, acceptance on first submission to journal articles).

While this event was billed as a writing retreat, since the teams did not come prepared with a specific project and so many questions emerged, the event actually featured very limited time spent writing. Rather, the majority of the time was focused on forming teams, solidifying project goals, and sharing research skills. This event ended up being more of a preparation/planning-for-writing retreat.

The program was intentional and supported by the administration and the professional association. The intentionality is an important aspect to consider in understanding why this type of intervention successfully helped Extension professionals write. The intentional focus was not enough, as those who took on a writing project by themselves were not as successful in completing work even though they had support from the CRED team and an accountability buddy.

The role of interpersonal support may have contributed to the successful teams. The largest group also had the greatest success. While no extrapolation can be made from such small data points, further study should be conducted to explore the role of team peer pressure and the role of the accountability buddy in encouraging and achieving successful writing projects. Additionally, I wonder if larger teams are able to utilize their members' different strengths and motivations throughout the project.

Teams formed and commenced their efforts to learn the literature and read and explore the academic record. This was done with two of the three teams, who conducted literature reviews, and one of those teams took a systematic literature review approach. Teams conducting a literature review did require training on how to conduct

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these research methods, but the process allowed for more immediate progress without also having to design a research method and receive IRB. Additionally, when the teams used a literature review approach to start writing, it followed the doctoral training model. The doctoral training model starts with individuals reading, mapping, and understanding the literature, and that allows for a research agenda question to be developed and for follow-up data collection in the future.

The writing retreat proved that writing takes time. This writing retreat was held in 2019 and the first articles were published in 2021 and the last in 2022. It is important to note that there was a global pandemic during that time, which likely had motivating and de-motivating factors informing the process of writing. Yet, it is important to recognize that this event did not have an immediate result; it took upwards of two years to have a journal article published, so faculty need to be prepared for a long-term commitment to a writing project.

I did not conduct a formal survey for this event. Evaluation data used for this study came from the publication of products resulting from the event. Future research and evaluation need to be conducted on the influence of the content, the retreat context, the function of the CRED team members' role, and the accountability in successfully stewarding a writing project. Of course, in addition to a formal survey, the next measure of success for the writing retreat will be the success of these Extension professionals as they go up for promotion and review for continuing status.

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### APPENDIX: ARTICLES RESULTING FROM THE WRITING RETREAT

- Farella, J., Hauser, M., Parrott, A., Moore, J. D., Penrod, M., & Elliott-Engel, J. (2021). 4-H youth development programming in indigenous communities: A critical review of cooperative Extension literature. *Journal of Extension*, 59(3), Article 7. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.59.03.07>
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### FOLLOW-UP ARTICLES RESULTING FROM THE WORK COMPLETED FROM THE WRITING RETREAT

- Farella, J., Moore, J., Arias, J., & Elliott-Engel, J. (2021). Framing indigenous identity inclusion in positive youth development: proclaimed ignorance, partial vacuum, and the peoplehood model. *Journal of Youth Development*, 16(4), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2021.1059>

### EXTENSION PUBLICATIONS RESULTING FROM THE WRITING RETREAT WORK

- Farella, J., Moore, J., & Arias, J. (2021). 4-H applying the peoplehood model: An evaluation tool for working in indigenous communities. *Arizona Cooperative Extension*, AZ1909–2021. <https://extension.arizona.edu/pubs?text=The+Peoplehood+Model&pub=&startdate%5Bdate%5D=&enddate%5Bdate%5D=>