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Do We Really Want To Evaluate? Have you ever gone along with something 'til you simply had to put down your ideas on paper and tell others. Well, my bubble burst reading the Udell article on evaluation in the September/October issue. It was the same old stuff: Tyler, formal evaluation, accountability, measurement of change, "control" the evaluation process, data collection, behavioral objectives, business efficiency, step-by-step evaluation, etc. The *Journal* issue on evaluation, though long overdue, was basically the same theme . . . let's figure out ways of determining the impact of our programs on others.

Don't get me wrong. I'm on friendly terms with all these authors. It's the idea that's getting to me.

When are we going to realize in Extension education that the problem is more than "translating [concepts and techniques from formal educational settings] into more meaningful terms and restructuring them into more useful forms?"

When are we going to realize that a whole different perspective on evaluation is needed if we're really going to see evaluation as the practical tool for Extension education that all writers seem to claim?

Why do I express such negativism and raise such nasty questions? Let me quote one very respected person who, like me, has been researching, teaching, and doing educational program (including Extension) evaluation for the past decade. Doug Sjogren sums up the feelings of many program evaluators involved in doing external, formalized, controlled, behavioral-objectives-oriented, mechanical evaluations.

The situation is almost a comedy. An "evaluator" is hired to play the role while both he and the project director know the evaluation activity will make little difference to anybody. . . . While the evaluation role is being played, the real evaluations that do make a difference are being made by the project staff and the constituents. The evaluator is often not even aware of their judgments.

Though we don't always do external evaluation in Extension, Sjogren's statement does summarize the general apathy or negativism towards formalized evaluation which also exists (and was recognized by Udell) among Extension faculty and our clients. I too have many personal experiences where I've been involved in helping others formally evaluate their programs, or doing it for them. In most cases, programming decisions are made irrespective of the data and written reports.

The point I'm trying to make is, with all the negativism, apathy, and lack of use of both currently advocated evaluation processes and the results from their uses, why do we keep insisting on the same ideas? Let's quit fooling ourselves. Let's not try to convince ourselves that "the change agents can't escape the need for the responsibility for some form of formal

evaluation.” Let’s not try to sell the same old ideas when they haven’t been used in the past.

You may be asking, “What’s the alternative?” Well, I’m glad you asked! I’m tired of always borrowing and translating and adapting. Those ideas haven’t been useful. Let’s instead start with a few different assumptions, like:

1. We’re basically working with adults, even in 4-H programs.
2. Any Extension program or activity involves a number of different types of adults—ourselves and fellow professionals, learners or participants, administrators, program leaders, specialists, Extension committees, other community influentials, legislators, and other persons looking on.
3. These adults are decision makers. They all, to various degrees, have something to say, directly or indirectly, about our programs regardless of their nature.
4. These adults all have different backgrounds, training, and responsibilities, and thus bring different concerns, issues, and criteria to the evaluation process.
5. That the value (or worth) of an Extension program (a simple definition of evaluation before we educators got a hold of it and twisted it around) depends on whose perspectives or criteria are being used.
6. And finally, if we’ve got people with different backgrounds, who all have a vested interest in the program, then any particular Extension program can be judged to be valuable in any number of ways, depending on who’s doing the evaluating.

The clincher to seeing a new concept of program evaluation (I use the term to refer to big, little, and medium programs, and various aspects of them) is to realize that judging the worth of something is a very natural pervasive process everyone participates in every day, regarding all things they have some relationship with. We *cannot* and *do not* escape from making informal judgments about the goodness-badness of things in our lives.

Now, if that’s true, then the people having vested interest in our programs do the same thing. People related to our Extension program with their varied perspectives also have natural inclinations to informally evaluate Extension programs or aspects of them using their own criteria, concerns, biases, or whatever regardless of whether we formally evaluate or not. And being these informal judgments are natural and real, I personally can’t dismiss them as less important than more formalized evaluations. Neither can you! It’s these existing, informal evaluations that reduce the “felt need” to formally evaluate or to accept others’ formal evaluations reporting

findings contrary to one's own judgments. It's these evaluations that can provide answers to our evaluation problems if instead of being anti we make them our ally.

Where do we go from here! Here are some concrete suggestions:

1. Let's recognize the overriding importance of inevitable, existing, pervasive, and powerful informal evaluations (they're the basis for most of the decisions being made).
2. Let's realize that the value or worth of an Extension program depends on the eye of the beholder.
3. Let's work with all people involved in our programs to understand their own personal values, criteria, and reasons for their informal judgments and those of others.
4. Let's help these various groups, with their various perspectives, understand each other and us.
5. Let's realize we don't always have to formally evaluate all the time. Some programs need more, some need less.
6. Let's help ourselves and people we work with to improve everyday evaluations.
7. Let's realize that evaluation isn't research. When it's done, we don't need rigid, systematic controls to prove to the world we've done this or that beyond all doubt. The critical test of whether evaluation is valid or not is: can a decision be based on it?
8. Let's realize people who we need to present reports to because of accountability, though seeing the program differently, are basically reasonable.
9. Instead of continuing to tell the same old story, let's work and share unique ways we've discovered on how to determine the various values of our Extension efforts.
10. Let's read Robert Rippey's *Studies in Transactional Evaluation* from McCutcheon, the most enlightening book on evaluation I've seen in years, which includes a model I see as having lots of application in Extension work, if we could just drop some of our ideas on systemized data collection, control, objectivity, formality, efficiency, and general imposing on natural, ongoing situations.

A few years ago as a new agricultural agent in a very agricultural county in Minnesota, I was introduced to the county board of supervisors as the new county agent. One

of the board members, an old fellow, looked up at me, grunted, and said, "We don't need any !†+\$%/&*! county agent in this county." Let me tell you, he'd evaluated and he belonged to a very influential group. Others who affect our program do the same. To ignore these informal evaluations of our programs is naive. To present to him and others like him a measurement of behavioral changes isn't going to be accepted. He has his own criteria and is using them. The degree to which we can empathize and work with him and others is the extent to which informal evaluations of our own and others will be useful and practical. Insisting on formalization and systemization of all evaluation isn't only impractical; it's illogical and unethical in most cases.