

# reviewing county extension programs

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Program evaluation is a difficult and time-consuming task, especially when the program being evaluated is a broad and complex county Extension educational program. Extension agents continually evaluate as they critically observe and review various educational activities they're involved in. However, few agents have the time or training to conduct a thorough county program evaluation.

Our article describes a county evaluation done by the Office of Staff and Program Development, Kansas Cooperative Extension Service, at the request of the Douglas County Executive Board and county Extension director.

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## Definitions

Two significant aspects of the evaluation process are: (1) a measure of the quantity of something, such as activities, inputs, outputs, or impact and (2) some judgment of the value or worth of what resulted.<sup>1</sup> By involving people in these two aspects of the process, the evaluation can be a learning experience for them. Our evaluation involved county commissioners, county Extension council members, county Extension faculty, area and state Extension staff, and lay people of the county.

The term "evaluation" has implications of judgment beyond what were intended as a part of this pilot effort. Therefore, we used the term "county program review."

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Douglas County is essentially urban—83% urban, 11% rural nonfarm, and 6% farm residents. Its 1970 population was 57,932, ranking sixth in the state. Agriculture is no longer the main industry, yet in 1969 there were over 1,000 farms averaging 250 acres.

### **Why We Did Review**

The purposes of the program review were to:

- Determine clientele's level of awareness and acceptance of the county Extension educational program.
- Determine program strengths and weaknesses.
- Identify new program directions clientele wanted.
- Establish a base line for future evaluation efforts.
- Develop a methodology and materials to be used in reviewing county programs.

The review wasn't designed to evaluate individual efforts of agents or to compare county programs.

### **How We Did It**

The four methods used to gather information for the review were:

1. A review of secondary county and Extension program data, including SEMIS printouts for each individual agent.
2. Telephone interviews—400 telephone subscribers were randomly selected by computer from telephone directories, about a 2% sample.
3. Mail questionnaires.
4. Personal interviews.

We did pre-tests to improve the phraseology and validity of all the data-gathering instruments.

Four different mail questionnaires were sent to 980 people. Questionnaires covered the 4 major program areas of agriculture, home economics, 4-H, and community resource development (245 in each category). A list of real and personal property taxpayers was provided by the Douglas County treasurer's office. A computer selected every 27th individual (businesses, corporations, etc., were excluded) on the tax rolls. A total of 183 usable questionnaires was returned.

A review of secondary data gave us a good overall picture of the county. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the telephone interview contacts. These interviews were brief, averaging seven minutes each. The final draft of the mail questionnaires was developed after the telephone interviews to take advantage of what we learned from those calls. The personal interview schedule was used as a probe for new program ideas and suggestions for the future.

**Table 1. Telephone interview contacts.**

Categories	Number	%
Completed interviews	177	49.0%
Refusals	20	5.6
No answer *	34	9.4
Number no longer in service	33	9.1
Respondents not residents of county**	63	17.5
Business/government office numbers deleted	<u>34</u>	<u>9.4</u>
Total	361	100.0%

\*After three unsuccessful tries at three different times, a “no answer” was recorded.

\*\*The high number of nonresidents was attributed to the fact that there’s a university population of nearly 17,000 in the county.

Table 2 shows that the sampling technique used, at least as far as the telephone interviews were concerned, was highly reliable—because for each of the three groups (urban, rural nonfarm, farm), our sample percentage was about the same as the percentage of each group in the total population. There was an 18.7% response to the mail questionnaires, varying from a high of 26.2% for agriculture to a low of 11.6% for community resource development.

Twenty-four persons were personally interviewed, including mayors of the 4 incorporated towns, the 3 county commissioners, 2 state legislators, 11 Extension council members, and 4 leaders of county agriculture or home economics organizations. They were purposely selected because they knew a great deal about the county Extension Service.

All respondents received a thank you letter and a list of available bulletins from the county Extension director.

**Findings**  
*Program Knowledge and Acceptance*

Sixty-one percent of those randomly selected and contacted by telephone had heard of the county Extension Service. Fifty-eight percent knew the home economist by name, 56% knew the name of the agricultural agent, and 9% knew

**Table 2. Composition of respondents by residence.**

Place of residence	1970 Census	Telephone interviewees	Mail questionnaire respondents
Urban	83%	85%	76%
Rural nonfarm	11	9	6
Farm	<u>6</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>18</u>
Total	100%	100%	100%

the 4-H agent's name. Tenure for these Extension agents at the time of the study was 15 years, 3 years, and 8 months, respectively. The home economist and agricultural agent had radio programs and newspaper columns.

Ninety-six percent of the people responding by mail questionnaires answered yes to the question, "Have you ever heard of the Douglas County Extension Service?" It was expected that up to one-third of the residents might be familiar with the agents and programs. Twenty-five percent of the telephone interviewees had heard of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, a program that had been operating four years in the county.

Response to a follow-up question on the telephone, "How did you come to know the agricultural agent or the home economist?" is shown in Table 3. A majority of the respondents credited mass media with creating their awareness of Extension agents.

When asked how often they used the Extension Service, telephone interviewees replied: frequently—15%, occasionally—29%, seldom—34%, and never—23%. Interpretation of frequency was the responsibility of the respondent. In a related question on the mail questionnaire, respondents were asked if they'd had any contact with the Extension Service in the past year. Yes answers totaled 55%. Both these responses exceeded expectations of the local agents.

We thought many people had the impression that Extension works only, or at least primarily, with farmers. However, an overwhelming 82% of those questioned by telephone felt Extension tries to meet the needs of both urban and rural citizens. Ten percent said farmers were given preference, while eight percent said they didn't know.

People contacted by telephone and mail were asked to list problems or programs that should be tackled by the

**Table 3. Sources of awareness of county agents.**

Sources of awareness	Ag agent	Home economist
Local newspapers	37.3%	44.6%
Radio	15.8	26.0
Personal contacts (letter, telephone, visit)	16.9	7.3
Met at meetings	4.5	10.7
Other	21.5	8.5
Can't remember	11.3	7.3
Total	107.3%*	104.4%*

\*Respondents sometimes identified more than one source contributing to awareness.

Extension Service. Nearly a third of them offered suggestions. More than half of those responding said Extension should do a better job of publicizing their educational program so more people could take advantage of it.

***Recognition  
and Awareness***

We feel the widespread recognition of the Douglas County Extension Service is due to a strong mass media program using newspapers and radio. The information Extension presented was widely accepted—53% of the telephone interviewees felt Extension was “very effective.” Another 15% felt it was “somewhat effective,” while no one rated it “ineffective.” Thirty-two percent felt they couldn’t judge.

Of the 384 people contacted during the review, only 2 made negative comments. If there were weaknesses in the educational program, they were too difficult to identify. There could be several reasons for this:

1. The program appeared to be a strong one with considerable scope and support.
2. The people contacted weren’t aware of program weaknesses.
3. They weren’t willing to criticize the Extension Service.
4. They weren’t willing to find fault with individual agents.

***Identifying New  
Program Areas***

One question common to all survey instruments, even though the exact wording varied, was a request for program ideas to help the Extension Service meet the future needs of Douglas County citizens. Thirty-one responses were received by telephone and 67 by the mail questionnaire. Agents and advisory committees can definitely use these program suggestions.

Two suggestions with important long-range implications resulted from the personal interviews. One was the proposal that the number of agents in the county be increased from four to five. The other was the need for a more accessible county Extension building with adequate parking and office and meeting space.

**Summary**

This comprehensive review of a county program was done for two reasons. First, it was in response to a valid request for help. Second, it gave us a chance to develop instruments that, with revision and refinement, could be used in future program reviews.

***About the  
Methodology***

This was an exploratory effort. Certain activities worked well. Others were suspect. Based on this experience, we’d like to make several comments about methodology:

- Telephone interviews are efficient, and the data gathered seem highly credible.
- *Computerized and random selection of numbers and names from telephone directories and tax rolls* seems to be a valid method of choosing respondents in large urban counties. Stratified random sampling should be considered if a larger portion of farm or rural nonfarm respondents is found desirable.
- It appears that specific data gathered by the mail questionnaires are suspect because of the low rate of return and suspected bias of those who do respond.
- Personal interviews are time-consuming, but provide an opportunity to probe and gather in-depth material.

Most respondents answered questions willingly, almost eagerly, in many cases. A working knowledge of Extension, especially at the county level, is necessary for the interviewers. Many times a respondent would answer a question with a question. This exercise provided a good public relations forum.

*Observations  
Supported  
by Data*

Several general observations based on the data gathered can be legitimately reported. These deserve note because they lend support to our impression that the program in the county is strong, viable, and highly respected, but still has great potential for growth.

- There's a broad, strong base of public support for this Extension education program.
- Certain county residents and elected officials want an expanded staff and seem ready and willing to support it.
- Public awareness of the Extension Service and its program was higher than expected (before the survey, agents and advisory committee members believed only 25-35% of the respondents would be familiar with Extension).
- Educational programs designed to meet more urban needs would be welcome.
- Agents should publicize Extension offerings more vigorously.

Through this program review the agents learned how their clientele felt about their programs and activities. Recent discussions with the Douglas County Extension faculty indicate that a number of suggestions presented by respondents are being incorporated into this year's plan of work. For example, several respondents suggested that a repeat broadcast of agents' radio programs be considered—an idea now under discussion.

*A movement is under way to add another agent in the next fiscal year and there's a groundswell of support for a more convenient office location. It's not clear whether these aspirations were initiated by this evaluation, but it did help to clarify the issues as well as stimulate discussion.*

The evaluation may have fallen somewhat short of one of its purposes, that of determining program strengths/weaknesses; yet, the exercise was still of value to board members, agents, and researchers alike. It's possible that the major by-product, a stronger and better planned program, could be more valuable than the data actually gathered, analyzed, and reported.

- Footnotes**
1. Edward O. Moe, "The Evaluation of Development Programs" (Paper prepared for a workshop on evaluating State Title V Pilot Programs in the Northeast, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., October 29-31, 1974).