

# research in brief

## Extension's Value

How good are Extension programs? Are they good enough particularly in the eyes of others? These questions have been asked for decades by Extension faculty. Yet, do we have the answers? Probably not, and for several reasons—one is the way the questions are asked. The philosopher asks, " 'Good' according to what?" And the administrator asks, "Did you meet your objectives?"

What if a research effort assumed that participants in our programs might have an opinion about what's a good program? One research effort did just that! Young and Cunningham reasoned that before we can pronounce our programs as good or bad, we must know what our audiences use as criteria for judging Extension output.

Their research purposes were "to identify the concrete evidences clientele accept as demonstrating Extension program accomplishment" and to test a technique for getting valid measures of Extension programs. Through unstructured telephone interviews of 36 agricultural clientele in 7 counties, they found out what clients considered "output measures" and how important each of these measures was. Their results are alarming or refreshing, depending on your viewpoint.

After coding unstructured answers, and determining reliability of the coding, they reported that measures related to "information" were most important, measures about the "agent" were second, measures related to "method" were third, and measures concerning "program" were fourth.

The 10 most important specific measures identified by clientele in order of importance were:

	<u>Mean score (1-5)</u>
1. Accurate Information	4.74
2. Agent knows where to get information and resources	4.63
3. Extension information is current	4.52
4. Agent is respected by farmers	4.52
5. Honesty and devotion of agent	4.51
6. Agent's character is good	4.45
7. Agent is knowledgeable	4.45
8. Agent's ability to apply knowledge	4.43
9. Agent's response to requests for assistance	4.42
10. Extension is a good source of information and help	4.40

Traditional measures like "number of meetings held" and "scope of total program" had scores of 2.76 and 3.78.

We should think about the following questions when we evaluate our programs and plan for the future:

1. Are my clientele still seeing me only as an information giver and, if so, should I evaluate my program accordingly?
2. Are my clientele more concerned about my honesty, reliability, and knowledge than about my contributions to their lives?
3. How important is my effectiveness to my clientele?
4. If I don't set objectives, or reach those I've set, will it be of any concern to people I work with?
5. Should next year's budget depend more on the number of meetings held this year, whether people get reliable information they want, or some other factor?
6. Ought I change my program objectives to fit clientele concerns?

In summary, we need to reevaluate the criteria we use to judge our performance and program accomplishments. Let's recognize that the value of what we do depends not on the data we collect, but on the values and criteria of the audience.

*Extension Output Measures As Identified by Extension Clientele.*  
Richard Young and Clarence J. Cunningham. Columbus: Ohio State University, Cooperative Extension Service, 1977.

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