

# program evaluation: extension needs to get serious about it<sup>1</sup>

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For many years, we've heard that we should do more program evaluation, and from time to time we've done so. Periodically, Extension has been the focus of evaluations at the national level in the form of the Scope, Kepner, and other reports.

The recent national evaluation of the "social and economic consequences" of Extension work isn't, however, another similar emphasis on program evaluation. This time, the questions being addressed had some serious implications for the future of Extension work. (Neither was this evaluation a one-time occurrence, as in the past.) We can expect to be participating in more frequent, perhaps even annual, evaluations on a large scale.

As one of those responsible for completing a portion of the national evaluation project to Congress, my efforts and involvement have provided me with a perspective on the current situation I feel needs to be shared with all Extension professionals if we're going to meet future demands placed on us. That perspective involved reasons why we need to do some serious program evaluation.

## (Reasons for Program Evaluation)

( A cursory review of evaluation literature reveals many reasons for program evaluation:

1. Identify the needs of clients and/or future clients.
2. Help choose among alternative program activities.
3. Improve program effectiveness or help management.
4. Demonstrate program accountability.
5. Decide whether to begin, continue, expand, "certify," or modify a program.
6. Obtain evidence to rally support for or opposition against a program.<sup>2</sup> )

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Besides these reasons for evaluating, there are other reasons less commonly cited because they're generally seen as "pseudo-evaluations":<sup>3</sup>

1. "Eyewash": a deliberate focus on the surface appearance of a program to make it look good.
2. "Whitewash": an attempt to cover up program failures during the investigation.
3. "Submarine": the political use of research to destroy a program.
4. "Posture": evaluation undertaken only because it was necessary for funding.
5. "Postponement": using evaluation to postpone needed action.

However, the reason for doing more serious evaluation of our Extension programs today is perhaps more pragmatic, and definitely more critical, than any of those cited above: *it's presently impossible to answer adequately the questions with which we're faced.* To understand this fully, it's necessary to consider (1) what these questions are and (2) why we're currently unable to answer them.

## Evaluation Questions

The most general question underlying the national evaluation of Extension mandated by Section 1643 of the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 is: "Why should Extension be supported by public funding—especially federal funds?"<sup>4</sup> There seem to be three basic criteria by which Extension programs are to be judged:

1. Do Extension programs serve an otherwise neglected population?
2. Does Extension deliver its product(s) more effectively and/or efficiently than its competition?
3. Does the product it delivers deserve federal funding support?

For an educational program like Extension, these are difficult questions. They're even more difficult when we realize the general field of education itself hasn't adequately addressed them. However, they're not unreasonable questions. They arise from a political and administrative perspective in a fiscally conservative era of our nation's history.

In a recent meeting with USDA personnel, a presidential advisor pointed out that the basic philosophy driving government policy making today is that *the federal dollar will be allocated to what would otherwise not be accomplished.* Since they are reasonable questions, there's no need to be

defensive in our attitude toward them and those who ask them . . . that only makes us appear suspect.

Further, Extension is in a position to demonstrate leadership in developing appropriate answers because we have a reputation for innovativeness and the resources of the land-grant universities to support our efforts. Therefore, I propose we consider these questions as answerable. Basically, I believe we're presently unable to answer these questions because we haven't kept abreast of the changing evaluation environment for publicly sponsored programs. However, *why* Extension hasn't kept up isn't as important as the *effect* of our laggardness.

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## Evaluation Environment

### *Focus on Consequences*

The evaluation environment has changed over the past couple of decades in at least three aspects. First, there's been a change in the *focus* of evaluation. In the early 1960s, when evaluation became popular, the focus was primarily on objectives, and addressed the question: "Does this program meet its stated objectives?" Later, the focus shifted to needs, and the question became: "Does this program meet the needs of those it was intended to serve?" More recently, we've been besieged with "impact evaluations" that ask for an evaluation of the overall impact of the program under consideration—including impacts that may have been unintended.

The national evaluation focused on "consequences," which may represent another shift in focus as interests of the evaluation audience go beyond impacts. For instance, in most cases, administrators support Extension's contentions that its programs have an impact on individuals because they acquire knowledge and skills, or change attitudes and behaviors. They're more interested in the question: "What are the social and economic consequences of these individual impacts?" These consequences are judged according to the set of criteria listed above.

As the national evaluation has shown, in most cases, Extension objectives are insufficiently stated for evaluative purposes, needs of clients are rarely systematically assessed and used to develop programs (when viewed from the federal perspective), and we don't even have a great deal of evidence

that the individual impacts we claim to be having are actually ~~documented~~.

*Acceptable  
Evidence*

Next, there are changes in the nature of *acceptable evidence* in evaluation. As the result of the influence of various executive agencies (U.S. Office of Management and Budget [OMB] and General Accounting Office [GAO]), as well as the Congressional Budget Office, there's a strong demand for "harder" evidence—evidence that's obtained by more systematic or scientific methods. Thus, Extension needs to reassess the relevance of "client satisfaction" data, and more clearly recognize its usefulness and its limitations.<sup>5</sup>

*Political  
Environment*

Finally, changes in the *political environment* relevant to evaluation indicate that evaluation contexts are becoming strongly competitive and comparative. This change recognize that: (1) there are limits to the total public expenditure, (2) there's an ever-expanding set of values in competition in the public arena, and (3) consequences of many publicly sponsored programs aren't unique, but quite similar. This last factor is especially significant for Extension since we often claim "uniqueness." However, when viewed in a comparative perspective, one can see that many other youth organizations today produce the same kinds of impacts as 4-H, such as the Boy Scouts, and home economics programs in nutrition are closely paralleled by such programs as Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). In agriculture, ~~consider~~ information relating to crop production and home gardening can be obtained from retail garden supply stores. Even simple kits are available to test your own soil. When the criteria of effectiveness of producing impacts and efficiency are considered, we have little evidence on which to base an argument for continuing federal support.

**Ways To  
Evaluate**

If we agree that these are practical reasons for doing serious program evaluation, the next logical step is how it is to be accomplished. In my view, several things are needed before these questions can be adequately answered. First, we need a new commitment—to *do* evaluation. We've heard and said the words before; now we need to take action. That means allocating time, money, and thought to program evaluation at a time when all our resources are being fully used.

Second, we need a new attitude, one with which we're familiar and (hopefully) comfortable. That is, Extension is

an organization for innovation, and, as Extension professionals, *we're ready and willing to demonstrate this kind of leadership.*

Lastly, we need new methods, especially a long-term strategy for Extension evaluation at state and federal levels.

These methods need to consist of:

1. A framework for an evaluation strategy that relates clients to methods to consequences.<sup>6</sup>
2. A needs assessment technique (or techniques) on which to target, more effectively, programs and resources.
3. More effective monitoring techniques—since EMIS and other required reports will clearly be around a long time, we should make better use of them.
4. Generalizable data (a factor that doesn't always mean randomized field experiments with elaborate controls).
5. The development of measurable program objectives and the willingness to be responsible for them.
6. Acknowledgement of the "consequences problem," meaning that we should take the initiative in seeking out consequences and being open to their full discussion with our evaluation audiences.

To review, some practical reasons for serious program evaluation are:

1. The nature of the present public funding environment.
2. Changes in the nature of evaluation.
3. The present unanswerability of the questions that face Extension.

In my opinion, based on my interactions over the past year with USDA and OMB officials, these questions are real, serious (potentially damaging), and won't fade away once the current national evaluation is complete.

## **Implications**

One of the primary implications of this discussion is that criteria for usefulness of evaluative information have changed, and this means the "model" of evaluation used by Extension must meet the new criteria. Until now, it seems that Extension evaluation has relied on the Charity Model and Pork Barrel Model.<sup>7</sup> In the Charity Model, the criteria are the sincerity and good intentions of program staff and supporters. In the Pork Barrel Model, the criteria are the political strength and leverage of the program's constituency. These models are "out of synch" with the current evaluation demands.

As many observers have pointed out, one of the impacts of the 1960s has been the trend toward the rationalization of government decision making through the use of scientific information. This trend received its greatest impetus from

Robert McNamara's influence on Department of Defense planning systems, an influence that has now found its way into nearly every agency of state and federal government. Rationalization demands tremendous rigor in planning and the generation of ever larger amounts of statistical data to improve government management and demonstrate accountability of public expenditures. Rationalized decision making recognizes that there isn't enough money to do everything, and it takes more than money to solve most problems.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, we've seen, in the last decade, evolution of a new model for evaluation—evaluation research.<sup>9</sup> Its influence is apparent in the preceding discussion. This isn't to say evaluation and research are the same, but only to acknowledge the change in models. Nor does it mean that evaluation research will replace politics completely in government decision making. Rather, the effect is intended to be one of reducing the previous central influence of special interest groups.

Evaluation research is a means of facilitating decision making "in an attempt to get as much as possible from the money that is spent."<sup>10</sup> In this regard, it's closely analogous to "consumer research."<sup>11</sup>

Evaluation research is now considered the "legitimate" model for evaluation; it can take the heat off decision makers by providing data (reasons) for making unpopular decisions in a time when *every* decision is unpopular with someone. Additionally, and most importantly for Extension, evaluation research is just "good politics." Because we don't have the resources to do everything and please everyone, at least the odds of doing something and pleasing someone can be increased by spending our resources on *demonstrably effective programs*.

## Footnotes

1. Some readers may respond to the use of the word "serious" in my title as implying that previous evaluation in Extension has been "frivolous." Whether or not I feel this is true is not as important as the defensive reaction evidenced by Extension professionals whenever Extension programs are under review. It *is* important that we recognize the political context in which we work and the implications such a reaction can have as well as the attitude it communicates to outsiders.
2. John G. Gross, *Cooperative Extension Evaluation Planner* (Washington, D.C.: Extension Service, USDA, 1977) and Scarvia B. Anderson and Samuel Bell, *The Profession and Practice of Program Evaluation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978).
3. Edward Suchman, "Evaluation for What: A Critique of Evaluative Research," in *Evaluating Social Programs*, Carol Weiss, ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972), p. 81.

4. There are admittedly many other questions involved in the national Extension evaluation such as that in the legislation: "What are the social and economic consequences of Extension?" But, most of these are subsidiary to this more fundamental policy question.
5. Malcolm Bush and Andrew C. Gordon, "The Advantages of Client Involvement in Evaluation Research," in *Evaluation Studies Review Annual*, Vol. 3, Thomas D. Cook et al., eds. (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1978), pp. 767-83.
6. Similar models are presently available. See Robert L. Hammond, "Evaluation at the Local Level," in *Educational Evaluation: Theory and Practice*, Blaine R. Worthen and James R. Sanders (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, Inc., 1973), pp. 157-70.
7. Michael Q. Patton, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1978), pp. 13-14.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
9. As with any emergent discipline, there exist many different definitions of evaluation research. Evaluation can be considered the determination of the worth of something. This can *sometimes* be accomplished satisfactorily with the Pork Barrel or Charity Models. The addition of the term "research" implies the use of a *systematic, scientific* approach to generate information that can be used to make the evaluative judgment. The emphasis on a more scientific approach to gathering information is the key element in the prevailing demands for evaluation.
10. Patton, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, p. 16.
11. William J. Gephart and James Potter, "The Generalizability Problem and a Borrowed Solution," *The CEDR Quarterly* (Summer, 1976), pp. 9-11.