

national evaluation of extension: issues and opportunities

Maynard C. Heckel

All of us are regularly involved in evaluations of one kind or another. These evaluation efforts may be so informal they aren't even recognized, or so formalized they take a good deal of time and effort.

The process of carrying out the national evaluation of Extension, completed in March of 1980, was an experience I believe is worth sharing with other Extension educators. This comprehensive evaluation effort surfaced issues important to the future of the Cooperative Extension Service. It brought to the attention of national decision makers the varied, effective, and innovative programs being undertaken by Extension educators across the country. Both of these outcomes can be beneficial to each of us as professional Extension educators, and present us with opportunities to further inform our various "publics" about the impacts of Extension efforts at all levels. Our impact at the local level is, by far, the most important.

Dynamics of the Process

A sharing of my experience with the national evaluation may help you to better understand some of its limitations and complexities. These insights may be of value if you become engaged in formal evaluations in the future.

For 2½ years, I was involved with the overall evaluation process and procedures. Following are some comments describing this experience, as I feel an appreciation of the dynamics of the process can be of help to all Extension educator when reviewing the national evaluation results and preparing for evaluation efforts in the future.

Maynard C. Heckel: Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Associate Dean, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, University of New Hampshire—Durham. Accepted for publication: October, 1980.

The congressional mandate, which called for an evaluation of the social and economic consequences of programs in agriculture, 4-H, home economics, and community development of both SEA-Extension and all of the state Cooperative Extension Services, was broad and all-encompassing. Such a mandate lent itself to: (1) a variety of interpretations, (2) freedom to determine the appropriate focus of the mandate, and (3) freedom to design methodologies to complete the task.

It would be helpful, in the future, if evaluation efforts could be more sharply focused and have clear limitations. Such focus is essential, whether conducting evaluations at the local, state, regional, or national levels.

Not long into the evaluation effort, it became evident that a number of misunderstandings about the organization of Cooperative Extension and the nature of the Extension educational process needed clarification.

. . . It's essential, however, that all Extension educators share in the responsibility of keeping our publics well-informed. If citizens at the local, state, regional, and national levels better understand Extension, the organization will be stronger and more effective.

Programs of the state Extension Services are, by comparison to programs of "straight-line" agencies, diverse and not governed by specific national objectives and goals. This diversification is considered a major strength of the Extension educational system, but presents major obstacles to a national evaluation where aggregation of data and similarity of objectives are being sought.

People who view the Extension Service as a straight-line agency wonder why evaluation is such a difficult task and wonder why specific kinds of evidence don't exist to clearly identify program impacts at the national level. Further, such a view usually fails to appreciate the difficulties in obtaining "hard data" in relation to educational programs.

State Extension Services respond to national issues, but do so in ways that reflect local citizen input and guidance. This approach provides grass-roots involvement held as so important, not only by the states, but at the national level as well. At the same time, it's difficult to apply evaluation techniques on a national level that will lend themselves to such diversity.

Members' Expectations

Members of the National Evaluation Policy Group brought with them both personal and organizational expectations about the outcome of the evaluation. Some policy group members saw the national evaluation as a "launching pad" for the initial articulation of policy issues and as a basis for further analysis and resolution of such issues. Others viewed the evaluation as an effort to go beyond the identification of issues and provide analysis and recommendations for resolution. Consequently, the end product is a melding of these and other expectations.

The varied expectations brought to the national evaluation can be considered positive as well as presenting degrees of confusion. As the expectations were discussed and clarified, the policy group reached points of mutual agreement that led to further understandings.

Another factor, worthy of consideration, relates to the extent to which certain conclusions or tentative conclusions were substantiated by an adequate data base. Some conclusions were quite well-substantiated, while other conclusions and statements made reflected a high degree of personal judgment.

Surfaced Issues

Parts of the evaluation surfaced issues that must be dealt with further, and must be brought to a point of resolution. Many of these issues weren't adequately dealt with through the data collected in the evaluation process:

1. *Organizational Relationships:* More effort should be devoted to a review of working relationships between state CES and SEA-Extension, Extension (federal and state) and other USDA agencies, and Extension (federal and state) and agencies of other departments of state and federal government. Such a review will further strengthen the programs of CES and, just as important, create greater understanding between and among agencies.
2. *Funding:* Further evidence of Extension impact and clarification of relationships between state CES and SEA-Extension should have a positive effect on future funding.
3. *Establishing Program Priorities:* Review of the various program development processes currently used to establish program priorities may result in even greater citizen involvement in decision making and thus provide added assurance that the Cooperative Extension Service is directing its resources toward meeting the most significant needs.

4. *Clarification of Clientele Mix:* Who Extension serves continues to be questioned. Consideration of this question at all levels within the Cooperative Extension Service may reveal significant gaps that, when eliminated, may well generate further support for Extension.
5. *Reporting Systems:* Extension has continually tried to design reporting systems that will provide decision makers with useful information. The national evaluation has again focused on this need.

Efforts are underway to revise current reporting systems so that such reports will more adequately provide meaningful data that can be aggregated on a national basis, while reducing staff time committed to reporting.

6. *Methodology of Extension Education:* The national evaluation raised certain questions concerning methodology. Are the best methods being used considering the increased demands for information?

A closer look at the way we spend our time as Extension educators should help us make adjustments in methodology that will lead to even greater efficiency and effectiveness in program determination and implementation.

7. *Continuing Evaluation:* A large number of Extension educators were involved, in one way or another, in contributing to the national evaluation. This involvement has increased awareness throughout Extension of the need to evaluate programs.

This awareness clearly suggests the necessity of collecting varied data that can provide evidence of impact.

Every staff member has the opportunity, in his or her own way, to design and conduct evaluations that include informal or formal techniques.

As We Look Ahead

I feel that the major benefits of the national evaluation will be internal rather than external. Internal impact is evident.

The comprehensive approach, with its strengths and weaknesses, has caused staff members at all levels of the organization to become more sensitive to "what we're about." This is the result of an extensive involvement of people from throughout the organization who contributed data, thoughts, and ideas to the evaluation base.

This participation wasn't only important in contributing to the content of the evaluation, but was just as important in motivating individuals to seriously look at the Extension

educational programs being carried out, and their social and economic impact.

A close look at Extension programs at the community, county, state, regional, and national level has revealed commonalities. It has also revealed differences. In any case, this intensive review has encouraged staff to seek linkages between local, state, and national programs, as well as to seek evidence of results.

Part of a motion passed by ECOP at its March, 1979, meeting reaffirms a national commitment to continuing evaluation. A section of the motion follows:

. . . continue the serious commitment of USDA and the State Cooperative Extension Services toward evaluating the consequences of Extension educational programs and the effectiveness of Extension as a system for providing educational opportunities to citizens, and to further facilitate the cooperation of USDA and the State Cooperative Extension Services in this endeavor.

Unquestionably, the national evaluation has been a learning experience, and should prove of real help in refining evaluation processes in the future. More important, this effort will contribute to the design of future national evaluations that should have clearly defined targets and be of less magnitude.

I strongly encourage Extension educators to gain access to the evaluation report and accompanying substudies for review and discussion. Integrated reports on each major program area (4-H, community and rural development, family education/nutrition, and agriculture/natural resources) are available and include much more detail than the congressional report.

I'm confident the national effort to evaluate Extension work will pay dividends to our state and federal Extension operations. It's essential, however, that all Extension educators share the responsibility of keeping our publics well-informed. If citizens at the local, state, regional, and national levels better understand Extension, the organization will be stronger and more effective.