

evaluation: an essential process

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Intro.

(A message is being heard throughout the Extension organization . . . a message that evaluation is a “must do”!)
(No longer can it be taken for granted that programs are good and appropriate. Both from within and outside the organization, Extension is being challenged to look at itself . . . to evaluate what it’s doing . . . to check to see if things are going as well as they could. Increasingly, evaluation processes are being used at the county, state, and federal levels to support the organization’s efforts to survive and prosper in an era of accountability and resource constraint.)¹

Functioning in Accountability Era

(Extension is operating in a new environment—an environment of more open criticism and demands for justification of actions.) During the 1970s, as the economy slowed and resources couldn’t be stretched to cover demands, an era of increased consumer and taxpayer scrutiny emerged. Organizations of all types were judged by new rules. These new rules focused on results, not just effort. For instance, the public schools were challenged to guarantee that graduates have basic competencies. Manufacturers were forced to consider the quality and performance of their products. In this environment of accountability, the public demands assurances that benefits result from the provision of goods and services.²

All publicly funded agencies, not just Extension, are vulnerable in these times. (Taxpayers and sponsors want to know that they’re getting their money’s worth. In trying to balance tight budgets, public officials are forced to make hard choices—often between equally good and needed services.) To make these decisions, basic information about likely costs and benefits of services is needed.³

In an era of accountability, Extension must be able to defend who and how people are being served. It also needs

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to document that programs are achieving positive results.⁴ The following show the kind of accountability demands Extension is facing:

- Are programs focusing on the most critical needs?
- Could and should Extension serve a broader range of clientele?
- Does Extension adapt quickly enough to changing social, economic, and environmental conditions?
- Are programs having intended impacts? Are they cost effective?⁵

Who's asking these questions? Is it clientele, legislators, or university colleagues? It doesn't really matter. The pressures vary from place to place and may be slightly different at county, state, and federal levels. Therefore, Extension should raise these questions itself. As a Pennsylvania county commissioner commented, "It is the attitude of accountability that is important . . . holding ourselves accountable."⁶

Extension could selectively gather and present facts for each external inquiry. But, the organization would spend more time responding than operating! The approach the organization is taking is a proactive one—creating the mechanisms internally for the organization to ask critical questions of itself. In this proactive approach, evaluation plays a prominent role—helping the organization know what's happening with programs so it can be more responsive, effective, and efficient in its operations.

Changing Evaluation Concept

Just as Extension and the sociopolitical environment have changed over the decades, so has the concept of evaluation. When Summers and others surveyed the state Extension Services in 1981 to document program evaluation practices and needs, a limited image of evaluation emerged.⁷ Evaluations generally were informal, ad hoc, and less scientifically rigorous than would be needed for organization-wide decision making or external consumption. Evaluations mainly served program development needs—helping individuals make personal educational strategy decisions.

Today, not only does the range of applications of evaluation need to be expanded, but to really contribute to management and communication functions, the quality of evaluations must change. The objectivity or scientific rigor of evaluations must improve. To do this, more systematic planning and the commitment of resources to evaluations is needed.⁸ Evaluations also must be designed and conducted

so the results can be applied broadly—used by many different people and planned to serve multiple organizational needs.

In these times of increased pressure to defend organizational decisions, the role of evaluation in supplying objective information is of ever-increasing value. The following sections present some of the contributions of program-related evaluations to Extension.

Program Development

As programs, clientele, and delivery methods change, a continual flow of new information is needed to design appropriate programs. For instance, evaluation processes help clarify needs and identify learning styles for more relevant programming. The intimate understanding of clientele-program interactions derived from program evaluations can be used to personalize local service for improved effectiveness. Impact evaluations can help identify factors affecting success to fine-tune programs for increased efficiency. In many different ways, evaluation can serve instrumental roles in developing and refining programs.

Organizational Management

Managing a complex, dynamic organization like Extension requires the constant flow and integration of information.⁹ As an organization perceives shifts in such areas as staff morale, personnel turnover, clientele or legislative support, program innovation, or operational costs, the organization makes changes. To some extent, Extension management decisions have been based on informal evaluations—nonstructured processes using perception rather than the analyses of evidence.

Evaluations have traditionally contributed to three Extension functions: program development, organizational management, and public relations. The relative scope of activity across the three is, however, shifting. With increased accountability, emphasis is needed equally across the three, not just for program development. . . .

Increasingly, more formalized evaluation strategies are being used in administration. For instance, staff development records and systematic inputs from staff about in-service needs are helping to shape effective personnel development programs. Affirmative Action results need continual checking to be sure strategies and efforts are on

target. Good budget records and analyses of those cost trends are indispensable in managing programs.

Costs are becoming an important consideration in meeting clientele needs. Cost-effectiveness evaluation is one of the newer types of analyses used in Extension to help decision makers understand the likely costs and benefits of various program alternatives.¹⁰ The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) is an example of a program that has the capability to apply cost-effectiveness analyses. Once program results or benefits can be measured satisfactorily, the costs of various delivery strategies and their corresponding benefits can be compared. More programs need this capability to prioritize and contain costs in an era of scarce resources.

As can be seen, the ability to manipulate information and analyze alternatives is a necessity to effectively manage an organization such as Extension. How rationally and equitably the organization manages itself influences staff morale, innovativeness, and ultimately organizational viability. Thus, organizations must address these issues to survive and prosper.

Public Relations

The era of accountability requires conscientious efforts to communicate about organizational functions to those outside the organization. Many legislators, county officials, university administrators, and even clientele have a limited understanding of Extension. In these days of increased competition for both private and public funding, Extension needs a broad base of support from key influentials as well as the general public. Knowing how Extension operates, who it serves, and the impact or results of programs is of key interest to these external audiences. They need to know how Extension is making a difference in the lives of people and communities.

Program evaluation results can be used for a variety of public relations objectives. Concrete evidence of how individuals or groups are benefiting from Extension can be a powerful promotion tool, helping to attract new audiences to programs. Results information, disseminated through public channels, can reinforce clientele to continue to apply good practices or seek new information.¹¹ Evidence of program results can also reinforce and engender support for the worth of Extension. Understanding in a personalized way how local farmers, families, communities, or youth are changing because of involvement in Extension can be a powerful tool in winning friends for Extension.

However, some may ask: is the purpose of evaluation to create more impressive success stories? No. Evaluations should address what's really happening—both the good and

the not-so-good. External audiences need to know if the results documented by evaluation studies meet expectations and if they don't, what's being done to improve effectiveness? A key message in public relations is the fact that by conducting studies and using evaluation results, Extension is trying to improve operations. Being accountable is being willing to make changes, recognize errors, and strive to be better.

Conclusion

Evaluations have traditionally contributed to three Extension functions: program development, organizational management, and public relations. The relative scope of activity across the three is, however, shifting. With increased accountability, emphasis is needed equally across the three, not just for program development. Also, more systematic and objectively derived information is needed. By improving the objectivity of studies and by more conscientiously planning and coordinating studies for continual input into organizational decisions, evaluation will help Extension become more accountable.

Footnotes

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