

evaluation for accountability

Connie McKenna

*"It is with our judgment as with our watches.
No two go just alike, yet each believes his
own."*

Alexander Pope

The hours and minutes that watches track for us can be compared to Extension accountability and evaluation efforts. A wide variety exists in the types we use and how accurate they are. Many variations in perceptions about what Extension accountability and evaluation ought to be and what it ought to accomplish are being expressed.

Accountability and evaluation (A/E) are familiar terms. Some Extension staff often, and incorrectly, use these words interchangeably. The dictionary defines being *accountable* as "answerable" or "explainable" and *evaluation* as "determining the significance or worth" of something "by careful appraisal and study."¹

How A/E Fit Together

To get the relationship between accountability and evaluation more clearly in mind, it may help to sort them out this way. Accountability is holding someone responsible for what they are supposed to do. Evaluation is the documentation used to prove that what was supposed to be done, in fact, was done and to determine how well it was done.

Logically, evaluation comes before accountability. Evaluation is a process used to systematically collect valid and reliable information—frequently called data—about a program. These data are then analyzed and interpreted to determine their meaning. Written reports become the visible product resulting from the evaluation process.

Of course, Extension doesn't always do everything just as planned. But evaluation can determine the extent to which

Connie McKenna: Program Coordinator for Methodology Review, Program Development, Evaluation and Management Systems, Extension Service, USDA, Washington, D.C. Accepted for publication: May, 1983.

objectives have been met. Evaluation can also provide information about program results and social or economic benefits and costs to clientele or society. Further, we should strive to “identify possible unexpected outcomes—program consequences, unintended and unplanned, positive or negative.”² Evaluation can provide the hard facts needed to back up Extension accountability claims.

Like evaluation, accountability is a process. But unlike evaluation, accountability is largely a public information process specifically targeted toward those inside and outside the organization who are in positions to influence decisions made about Extension programs, budgets, staffing, facilities, and related matters. And, it’s important to be aware of the dual internal-external purposes that accountability serves.

... every member of Congress lives in some Extension agent’s county. What they learn about Extension activities back in their home counties may well be a major, but largely unrecognized, factor in determining the level of their support for Extension in the federal budget and at other times and places critical to the entire Extension organization.

Internal accountability influences program management decisions. *External* accountability provides concrete evidence of our accomplishments to administrators to whom and through whom Extension reports to fundors and other decision makers within and outside the university. Evaluations can be planned to meet both external accountability needs as well as simultaneously provide information for program improvement or program management purposes.

To ensure high quality and efficiency in Extension programs, the latter is essential. But because the new Extension accountability/evaluation system being implemented in FY 1984 evolved as an internal response to the 1977 national evaluation of Extension mandated by Congress, an external source, this article addresses *external* accountability challenges facing us in Extension today.

Evaluation provides basic facts. Accountability uses these facts to influence the influentials. And several packages may be developed presenting the same basic information in different ways. Designing reporting approaches that will capture interest and command attention is a real challenge. Knowing who the influentials are and what information they want and will use is an even bigger challenge.

Sources of Influence

Why are Extension administrators promoting greater accountability and evaluation efforts? Nationally, pressure comes from many sources. Here are some examples:

- *U.S. Congress*: "The Secretary shall regularly conduct program evaluation . . . designed to provide information that may be used to improve the administration and effectiveness of agricultural research, extension and teaching programs in achieving their stated objectives."³
- *Extension Oversight Hearings*: "As we continue down the road of reduced government spending, all USDA programs must come under close scrutiny."⁴
- *Government Accounting Office*: "As resources for solving the problems of our society become increasingly scarce, the need to apply them more effectively increases. Public pressures to reduce the growth of government programs and improve their effectiveness point to increased demands for evaluation in the future."⁵
- *USDA-Science and Education*: "Throughout the Extension system, there is growing understanding of Extension's strong points, its limitations, and the issues it must now face . . . already in motion are plans to build an ongoing Extension evaluation capability that will overcome certain limitations encountered by this evaluation."⁶ This refers to the National Extension Evaluation mandated by Congress in 1977.
- *National Accountability Evaluation Task Force*: "Those making funding decisions want to compare money and results and decide about future spending. Bits and fragments of unconnected information do not satisfy the need for systematically collected information that can be compared over time."⁷

At first glance, this pressure, especially since it comes from national sources, may not seem relevant to you as an Extension professional. Besides, you may feel too far away from congressional activity to have any significant input into national decisions. Yet, every member of Congress lives in some Extension agent's county. What they learn about Extension activities back in their home counties may well be a major, but largely unrecognized, factor in determining the level of their support for Extension in the federal budget and at other times and places critical to the entire Extension organization.

Sources of Information

Members of Congress may well have one eye on the opportunities in the nation's capital and the other turned

toward home to try to keep up with the times there. But there's no question about the more exclusively county-based focus of many additional sources influential to Extension's present operations and future viability. Extension Service Administrator Mary Nell Greenwood made this point emphatically when she said:

As I travel across the states, I find the same information needs existing on university campuses, in state legislatures and among county officials. There is great need for improved accountability . . . it's a new challenge that faces each of us . . . regardless of our job in the Extension organization.⁸

County Extension staff throughout the country have identified several county-based "grass-roots" influentials who should be involved in the local program development and decision-making process.⁹ This involvement is especially true when it comes to deciding what to evaluate and determining what information is desired by county-based decision makers dealing with Extension-related concerns.

Table 1 lists influentials identified by county Extension agents in many states.¹⁰ The agents noted that it's likely the specific groups named may differ in the influence they wield even among neighboring counties in the same state, and as power bases shift, even within a county over a relatively short period of time.

Why Evaluate?

Evaluation allows us to provide county influentials and decision makers with concrete, objective information about Extension programs and operations. Accountability strate-

Table 1. Grass-roots decision makers influencing county Extension programs.*

County Executive Council	Media
County Program Council	Local legislative representatives
Clientele	County (commissioners/supervisors)
Vocal citizens	Citizen Budget Committee
Advisory committees	Commodity groups
Steering committees	Farm Bureau (and other farm organizations)
Office assistants	Civic and service organizations
Other CES professionals	ASCS and other USDA agencies
Minority alliances	Fair boards
Special audience groups	Funding sources

*Not in ranked order. Importance varies from county-to-county. Other groups may also be influential in some counties.

gies can be planned to present timely, usable, and credible information, proactively, *before* being pushed to do so by others.

- Accountability reporting without solid evaluation back-up is hollow. Extension's new A/E system is designed to help staff at all levels come to grips with the need to do a better job of letting others know what we accomplish.

- Using specific documented evaluation in selected programs will strengthen our reports of program outcomes. In the words of Greenwood:

It indeed is a monumental task to structure a new overall Extension A/E plan, but it has been done. Considering the competition of programs and priorities for scarce federal or state resources, the costs for implementing this system may be far less than the consequences of not having such a viable accountability system in the decade ahead.¹¹

Footnotes

1. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1979).
2. George Mayeske and John Michael, "Training Script for Impact Studies," in *Extension A/E System Training Manual* (Washington, D.C.: A/E Transition Team, 1982).
3. U.S., Congress, *Agricultural and Food Act of 1981*, Title XIV, Section 1471 (a).
4. U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Agriculture, Subcommittee on Department Operations, Research and Foreign Agriculture, *Extension Service Oversight*, Hearing, 97th Cong. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982).
5. *Assessing Social Program Impact Evaluations: A Checklist Approach* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1978).
6. *Evaluation of Economic Social Consequences of Cooperative Extension Programs: Executive Summary* (Washington, D.C.: USDA-SEA, 1980).
7. *Report of National Task Force on Extension Accountability and Evaluation System* (Morgantown, West Virginia: Extension A/E Task Force, 1981).
8. "Extension's Response," *Part II: A Formula for Change* [videotape] (Washington, D.C.: ES/USDA, 1982).
9. County Extension staff who participated in program development workshops/short courses with the author during 1982-83 provided this information as part of the exercise "Whose Opinion Counts/Whose Opinion Can You Count On," which was included in their work.
10. *Ibid.*
11. "The System Itself," *Part III: A Formula for Change* [videotape] (Washington, D.C.: ES/USDA, 1982).