

looking beyond extension stereotypes

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“Most discussion about improving the functioning of public agencies comes from policymakers concerned with broad strategies of governmental programs, from administrators who face practical problems in their own agencies, or from specialists who talk in terms of increasing the technology of the delivery system. There’s a vast and profound neglect of the perceptions, experiences, and reactions of the people who themselves are supposedly being served.”¹

Who should evaluate Extension? The appropriate evaluator differs depending on what’s being evaluated. General program direction and philosophy ought to be addressed by policymakers and administrators. Assessing the efficiency of program delivery is the task of educational specialists. And, the determination of appropriate programming methods is generally handled by field staff. But agency staff, administrators, policymakers, and specialists aren’t the only appropriate individuals for making judgments on the adequacy of organizational performance.

Intended recipients of programs are in a key position to make organizational assessments. These intended recipients include not only the active participants who appear on mailing lists and meeting rosters, but also potential users of the services. Therefore, in deciding who should evaluate Extension, we must include all constituents who are affect-

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ed by Extension's programs, either directly as program participants or indirectly as taxpayers who share in the cost.

With Extension's extensive network of advisory committees and local contacts, one could argue that staff already have a good idea of what people are thinking. But do they really? Are the views of the public represented in the opinions held by Extension personnel? Likewise, one has to question whether advisory committee members and other Extension supporters adequately represent a cross section of the public. A critical concern for evaluation efforts is whether the public views the Extension organization the same way as do Extension personnel and people speaking on behalf of Extension. Misconceptions in the perception of reality lead to evaluation designs that serve to confirm inaccurate assumptions.

Myths or Reality?

Staff, legislators, and special interest groups frequently repeat a series of generalizations about Extension and its program. Often one hears Extension is an agricultural agency that primarily serves rural and farm residents, that these people are pleased with the services they receive, and that the agricultural community is the principal support base for Extension.²

Are these stereotypes really true? Or, are they merely myths that we repeat over and over? If these are expressions of Extension personnel, do the general public and users of the service agree with these viewpoints? The task is to examine each and determine which can be substantiated and which can't.

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Method

To confirm or reject the stereotypes, representatives of the general public were asked their awareness, use, satisfaction, and support of Extension as an organization, as well as for the 4 specific program areas of agriculture, home economics, 4-H/youth, and community development. Information was collected in a nationwide telephone survey conducted in 1982 by the Survey Research Center, University of Kentucky, using a random digit dialing technique.

This national sample consisted of interviews with 1,048 adults representing a response rate of 70%. The national findings are part of a larger study that integrated program inputs, activities, outputs, and environmental influences in a comprehensive systems effectiveness model.³

Stereotypes

Four commonly held stereotypes focusing on Extension's image, clientele, client satisfaction, and client support were examined.

Extension's Image

People who are aware of the existence of a public agency like Extension have formed an image of its identity. With Extension's long-standing service to agricultural producers, we'd anticipate that Extension would be seen first and foremost as an agricultural agency. Even though other thrusts like the home economics and youth programs were defined as appropriate activities of the agency from the beginning, service to agricultural producers continues to be seen by many as Extension's reason for being.

When a sample of the U.S. adult population was asked whether they'd ever heard of Extension programs in agriculture, home economics, 4-H, or community development, by far the greatest awareness was of the 4-H program. Over three-fourths of the public identified the 4-H program, while about half recognized each of the other 3 program areas (see Table 1). When combined, 87% of the population indicated familiarity with some aspect of the Extension program.

The programs of Extension were widely recognized by the general public. However, the program most visible was 4-H, not agriculture, as one might expect. This finding doesn't support the often-repeated assumption that Extension is seen primarily as an agricultural agency, at least not in the eyes of the public.

Another important aspect of Extension's identity is that fewer people recognized the name of the organization than they did any of the four program areas. Just 40% of the

Table 1. Awareness of Extension and its programs.

	N = 1,048
4-H/youth	77.3%
Agriculture	51.0
Community development	45.6
Home economics	45.0
Organizational name	40.2
Composite total	87.4%

respondents indicated they'd heard of the Cooperative (Agricultural) Extension Service. Thus, more people recognized Extension from its program descriptions than they did from the general organizational name.

This finding suggests that Extension struggles with multiple identities. People knew the organization by its unique services to specific audiences, a feature that can be both beneficial and harmful. Such diversity can provide for a wide base of support; however, a single unified image may be lacking. Extension needs to address the problem of multiple identities and, where possible, strive to consolidate them into a single image.

*Extension
Clientele*

The Smith-Lever Act identified the intended clientele of Extension as the people not attending or in residence at the land-grant colleges. Because the original purpose of the organization focused on the provision of educational information on agriculture and rural living and Extension was organizationally established in the U.S. Department of Agriculture and colleges of agriculture, it's not surprising that the primary clientele has been traditionally defined as farm and rural people.

A broadening of the clientele base of Extension through congressional directives and in response to clientele needs has occurred. In the 1982 Congressional Oversight Hearings on Extension, it was reported that 85%-90% of the current Cooperative Extension system's programs related heavily or exclusively to agriculture and home economics for primarily rural audiences.⁴

Contrary to this statement, the results of the national survey indicated that the extent of service to rural areas wasn't nearly that high. In fact, 64% of Extension clientele lived in metropolitan areas, compared with only 36% in nonmetro counties. Therefore, in sheer numbers, metro users of Extension services outnumbered nonmetro clientele almost two to one.⁵

Although serving more metro residents, Extension reaches a greater *proportion* of nonmetro residents (42% compared with 23% in metro counties). Furthermore, agricultural producers comprise 16% of Extension clientele. Again, this is a small percentage of all clientele, but a greater proportion of farmers use the services of Extension than do nonfarmers (57% versus 25%). In all, 27% of U.S. households (about 22 million households) reported using the services of Extension sometime in their lives.

The primary target audience for Extension programs has frequently been defined as farm and rural residents, but according to this study, the majority of Extension clientele resided in metropolitan areas. This finding is a reality we need to recognize.

First, the traditional concepts of rural as being people living in places of under 2,500 people and agriculture as farmers are too limited. Agriculture is much more than producers; it's a total system that includes consumers, distributors, and support services as well. Likewise, rural is as much a way of life and a set of values as it is a geographical location.

Second, Extension, in following the principle of providing the kinds of services people want, has reached beyond even these expanded definitions. One could argue that Extension has never really defined its target audience as rural and farm, but rather that at an earlier point in history the organization was providing educational programs to more rural and farm residents because that's where the greatest needs existed and where the majority of population resided. Today, the population structure is different and needs have changed.

*Client
Satisfaction*

A commonly heard statement is that Extension operates a quality program, is one of the few programs developed out of an expression of local needs, and is based on sound research findings.

Merely counting participation provides no qualitative assessment of the Extension program. Determining what the clients think is also necessary. The perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of program participants provide an important assessment of Extension performance. One way of registering client feedback is to ask clients whether they're satisfied with the services received.

Respondents in the survey who reported they'd used the services of Extension were overwhelmingly satisfied with the services they received. A total of 95% said they were satisfied or very satisfied with Extension. We expected rural and farm residents to be more satisfied than their urban neighbors, but that wasn't the case. People on and off farms and in metropolitan centers and nonmetropolitan areas were equally satisfied with Extension programs, with very few in any group voicing substantial dissatisfaction.

*Client
Support*

Historically, it generally has been concluded that Extension's primary support base originates from agricultural producers. Since its early days, Extension has depended on farmers and farm organizations to represent the interests of the agency to policymakers. Smith and Wilson observed in 1930 that ". . . the task of securing . . . funds for cooperation with state and federal government is largely left to farmers."⁶ That position is still widely held today. However, with a majority of clientele residing in metropolitan areas, has the support base shifted accordingly? Are

metropolitan and nonfarm people as supportive of Extension as farm and rural residents?

When asked whether they'd like to see support for Extension decrease, increase, or remain unchanged, 82% of Extension clientele identified in the national sample indicated they wanted to see the same or more support go to Extension.

However, contrary to popular belief, farmers were *not* more supportive of Extension than nonfarmers, and nonmetropolitan residents were less supportive than were metro residents. Among farm users, 28% wanted to spend more on Extension compared with 41% of nonfarmers. Likewise, 35% of nonmetro clients desired more support for Extension, while 43% of metro residents wanted to spend more.

Overall, a substantial support base was found for Extension; however, farm and rural clientele were no more likely to favor expenditures for Extension than were metro residents. Nevertheless, rather than focusing on why these traditional audiences weren't more supportive, it would be more fruitful to recognize the support among metro and nonfarm residents and develop ways of mobilizing it for the benefit of the organization.

Implications

From the standpoint of the general public, none of the four stereotypes about Extension was supported. If these statements are widely repeated generalizations about Extension, then there's reason for concern, because it's likely the essence of these widely repeated assumptions will become future criteria by which the organization will be evaluated. And if the findings of this study are any indication, Extension won't fare well. We can't indicate we're pursuing a course of action when it doesn't correspond to reality.

In this study, we've used information collected in a general population survey to examine assumptions of Extension programming. The findings prove to be both informative and illustrative. For example, to know that metropolitan residents comprise the majority of Extension clientele is informative, but the results also illustrate that the views held by constituents are considerably different than those repeated by Extension staff. The latter finding raises more general questions about important evaluation issues and methods.

The answer to the question *Who should evaluate?* becomes as important as *what* is being evaluated. A preconceived notion of the identity of Extension clientele has traditionally influenced who has been asked to evaluate the agency's performance, and no doubt has affected the evaluation results. Meaningful and useful evaluations are

contingent on selecting appropriate evaluators. From this study, one can conclude that the expression of the general public, both as program participants and cost bearers, is vital to the evaluation process.

Footnotes

1. D. Katz and others, *Bureaucratic Encounters* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, 1977), p. 1.
2. A discussion of the bases for the stereotypes can be found in James A. Christenson and Paul D. Warner, "An Assessment Model for the Cooperative Extension Service," *Rural Sociology*, XLVII (No. 2, 1982), 369-90.
3. Paul D. Warner and James A. Christenson, *Extension: A National Assessment* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984).
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. Seventy-three percent of the population live in metro areas (U.S. Census, 1981).
6. Clarence B. Smith and Meredith C. Wilson, *The Agricultural Extension System of the United States* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1930), pp. 21-22.