

tools of the trade

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A tool is anything that helps a person do a job. Some tools can be used immediately with no prerequisites, others can be used only after development of other skills or understandings; some can be used proficiently on the first try and others require a lot of repetition or practice for proficiency to develop; some are how-to-do methods and techniques and others are of the why-to-do variety. Many of the evaluation tools described here fit the latter dimensions of these tool characteristics, that is, require prerequisites, require repetition for proficiency, and present a rationale or philosophy about why-to-do.

No tool can tell agents or specialists exactly what to do in assessing program outcomes. The variety of contexts, the politics of each situation, and the availability of resources all dictate variations. No single method or recipe exists; nor is there any formula to plug in as part of a mindless procedure—as some currently available models and approaches suggest is possible.

Evaluation isn't a simple process and one should be wary of approaches that suggest a "cookbook" approach. However, there are principles of program evaluation to consider and techniques that can be adapted to particular program situations. Several tools, offered in this context, are critiqued by Extension colleagues.

Extension in the '80's

Extension in the '80's: A Perspective for the Future of the Cooperative Extension Service. USDA/NASULGC Joint Committee. Madison: University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension Service, 1983. No cost. Limit of one copy per order from Extension Service, USDA, Publication Request and Distribution, Washington, D.C. 20250.

Extension in the '80's is the latest in a series of reports about the Extension Service and its future. The report provides an authoritative statement by the Cooperative Extension System about its mission, program, resources, organizational structure, and audiences; and about its problems, needed changes, future directions, and future program scope and priorities.

The 80s report is a useful reference for those interested in program evaluation. Program evaluation is a broad concept that addresses the systematic study of policy, organizational structure, or programs. Evaluation study results are used to help in decisions about organization and program purposes, management, resources, methods, and clientele.

The 80s report has something to say about each of these dimensions. Important themes of the report include: (1) the need for retaining flexibility in the scope of programs and definition of clients, (2) the importance of accelerated use of computers and other electronic technology in Extension activities, (3) the necessity for strengthening the research base of Extension programs and the support of academic disciplines in the universities, and (4) the need for obtaining increased financial resources and other support from the private sector.

The report signals some potentially important changes in the direction of the Extension System—changes that could have consequences for resource requirements and the way programs are conducted. Two examples are the title change of the Community Resource Development program area to Community and Small Business Development and an expansion of the traditional three-party partnership—the federal, state, and county partners—to include the private sector, research organizations, and other state, local, and federal agencies.

Each of the themes and potential system changes, and many other specific recommendations in the report, offer a menu of potential topics for program evaluation studies that are important for Extension's future. The report also contains specific recommendations for a few studies. Those who are responsible for developing agendas for state and federal evaluation programs for the Extension accountability/evaluation system during the 80s will find the 80s report a helpful place to begin.

There's a separate section in the 80s report on "Program Evaluation and Public Accountability." The establishment of the new Extension accountability/evaluation system is commended. The development of improved evaluation methods is encouraged. The report stresses the importance of evaluation for accountability—the importance of informing the public and decision makers about Extension activities and accomplishments.

Program evaluation has other purposes. The report gives little attention to the use of evaluation study results, by those within the Extension system, to strengthen and improve Extension programs. This attention reflects the present view in Extension about the role and purpose of program evaluation. The Extension system must come to understand and embrace a more complete view of evaluation if its new emphasis on accountability and evaluation is to be sustained. This change in perspective is an important responsibility, during the 80s, for those in Extension who are responsible for and concerned about program evaluation.

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