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Putting Evaluation in Context

According to Radhakrishna (1999), "the most frequently asked question of Extension educators is 'What happened as a result of your program?' This question highlights the importance of evaluation in Extension's program development process. A well-designed, credible evaluation of your program will equip you with empirical evidence to effectively answer that question.

Evaluation is an integral part of Extension programming. From an agency-wide perspective, evaluation is used to gather information for our state legislature and commissioner courts all across Texas to demonstrate the impact Extension has made and justify continued funding for our existence. On an individual level, evaluation provides practical information about your programming efforts – how your programs are performing, who they are reaching, and what might be done differently to improve their effectiveness. There are many evaluation approaches and techniques available to you – with flexibility as to when, and how, they are used.

In order to become effective practitioners of the program development process, it is imperative that we begin by reviewing fundamental concepts and principles associated with program evaluation. Accordingly, this newsletter will cover the definition of evaluation, reasons to evaluate, and other preparatory concepts that will steer you toward conducting your own evaluations – which will be covered in the next newsletter.

What is Evaluation?
In Extension, evaluation can be thought of as "a process to bring information to bear on decisions about programs" where decisions can be process-oriented (how the program was implemented) or results oriented (did the program affect participant reactions or produce client change) (Lambur, 2008). Essentially, evaluation is simply gathering information about your programs.

Why Do We Evaluate?
Reasons to evaluate can be grouped into one of two general categories: 1) to demonstrate something (accountability) or 2) to improve something (Seevers, Graham, Gamon, & Conklin , 1997). Evaluations focused on accountability are called summative evaluations, while those that focus on improving something are called formative evaluations. According to Seevers et al (1997), "formative evaluations yield results useful to improve programs, whereas summative evaluations yield results useful for making decisions on the continuation of programs. Seldom are evaluations strictly formative or strictly summative; their purposes usually overlap."

Using these categories, as Extension educators, we include summative elements to our programs evaluations to. . .

- determine if a program has achieved its objectives (effectiveness)
- know how lives were changed (impact)
- estimate the economic impact of a program
- help direct programming efforts on a larger scale (coordination)
- report to stakeholders (accountability)
- report to management (performance appraisal)

use results in marketing the program (<u>promotion</u> and <u>increased visibility</u> of the program)
be <u>equipped</u> in <u>advocating</u> for a program or intervention

And include formative elements to our program evaluations to. . .
    <u>fine-tune</u> the design and implementation of a program in its initial phases
    modify programs that are not working according to plan or take advantage of something that is working
        exceptionally well (<u>improvement</u>)
    be <u>encouraged</u> and further <u>motivated</u> to continue excellence in programming
    help <u>identify opportunities</u> and <u>develop new efforts</u>
    <u>increase efficiency</u>

Evaluation Models

There are numerous evaluations models available today but one model of particular interest to Extension is Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Model – because of its simplicity and easy applicability to Extension educational programs. It utilizes four levels (with Extension's client change equivalent in parentheses):

    Level 1- Reaction (Customer Satisfaction)
    Level 2- Learning (Clientele Learning))
    Level 3- Behavior (Clientele Application)
    Level 4- Results (Long-term Programmatic Impacts)

Customer satisfaction (level 1) measures participant reaction to the program (i.e., did the program meets expectations in terms of content, instruction, and learning environment). Clientele learning (level 2) measures knowledge gain, skills acquisition, and/or attitude change as a result of the program. Clientele application (level 3) measures behavior change, adoption of best practice, and/or adoption of new technology as a result of the program. Programmatic impact (level 4) measures the final (or long-term) effects that result from participation in the program. Examples might include increased production, improved quality, decreased costs, reduced and/or severity of disease, or higher profits. Many of the programmatic impacts measured at level 4 can be measured and reported in economic terms.

This model provides a sequence of methods to evaluate programs. Each level is critical and has impact on the next level. As evaluators move from one level to the next, the evaluation process becomes more difficult and time consuming, but the information provided by that level of evaluation becomes more valuable.

Should You Evaluate a Particular Program?

Generally, the answer to this question is "yes" when the evaluation will be useful, feasible, proper, and accurate. The answer is "no" if the evaluation serves no purpose or need (or these are unclear) or if the data will not be used. Also, some one-time only programs will not merit spending time and resources on an evaluation. Generally, however, in the interest of continual program improvement, you should seek to conduct some form of evaluation on most of your programs. Consult your Regional Program Director and District Extension Administrator to determine which programs you should evaluate and the type of evaluation that will be most suitable.

Outputs vs. Outcomes

It is important to understand the difference between outputs and outcomes in the programming process – including how they differ in terms of evaluation. Outputs are the direct products of Extension programming efforts and are usually measured in terms of volume of work accomplished, participation, or satisfaction. Examples include number of workshops conducted, number of lessons completed, number of publications distributed, number of unique user sessions on a web page, number of participants, and the percentage of participants satisfied with an event overall.

Outputs are important and easily measured (and typically we do) but their real value lies in what happens as a result. They are designed to produce a desired benefit or change (outcome) for the target audience. Output evaluations measure outputs.

Ideally, program participants are positively influenced by a program's outputs. Outcomes, also called "client change," are the benefits or positive changes that clients experience because of an Extension program – the ultimate goal of Extension programming efforts. These include three associated with learning: (knowledge gain, skills acquisition, attitude change) and three associated with application (behavior change, adoption of best practice, adoption of new technology). Outcome evaluations measure outcomes.

Types of Data / Evidence

There are two types of data (or evidence): Quantitative (numbers) – this includes frequency counts, percentages, rankings, means, and other descriptive statistics. This type of evidence is more objective. Qualitative (words) – this includes responses to open-ended questions. This type of evidence is more subjective but can be just as valuable as quantitative data. A good evaluation will have both types of data. Quantitative data, however, will typically comprise the majority of evidence in Extension evaluations.

We'll see these basic evaluation concepts in action in our next newsletter as the focus will be on the practical steps to take in actually conducting a program evaluation in Extension.

Reference

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