



Planning a Program Evaluation: An Introduction for County Agents

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Introduction

A primary purpose of Cooperative Extension is to provide research based programming for the local community (US Department of Agriculture, 2010). This can be accomplished through the use of available research-based programs, developing new programming, and refining existing programs based on emerging trends and data (Higginbotham, Henderson, & Adler Baeder, 2007). When county Extension agents evaluate their programs and share their results they are contributing to their field. Findings from program evaluation can provide helpful lessons learned that can serve as a helpful guide to those offering similar programming.

Many Extension agents informally evaluate their programs through observation while they are being offered (Taylor-Powell, Steele, & Douglass, 1996). This does provide helpful information and may be all that is necessary for the maintenance of some programs.

However, careful planning and forethought can increase the utility and value of programmatic evaluations. The process of preparing a useful evaluation, while addressing common challenges, involves:

- Determining the purpose of the evaluation
- Choosing a method
- Evaluating with limitations
- Using results from the evaluation

Determining the Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation can vary greatly by program, county, and reporting requirements. Not all evaluations have to provide information concerning the impacts or outcomes of the program (Higginbotham et al., 2007). When planning a program evaluation two important questions to ask are:

- *What do I want to know?*
Some evaluations may be particularly interested in improving the presentation or course material,

the reasons people attended the program, or satisfaction with food that was provided. Other evaluations may be interested in participant opinions of the overall program or documented participant improvements in targeted knowledge or skills.

- *How am I going to use the information once it is collected?*

Data may be collected to inform immediate changes to the program (e.g., food, incentives, curriculum or format changes), changes to the program in the future (e.g., advertising, recruitment, location, curriculum changes), to meet grant requirements, or to publish findings to meet tenure requirements.

The answers to these questions will determine the method that will be needed to identify the desired information.

Choosing a Method

The method of data collection will depend on the purpose of the evaluation (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2006). Common methods that are utilized include:

- Observation (e.g., how many people attended, how engaged were the participants, how much food was left-over)
- Survey (e.g., at the end, before and after the program, follow-up)
- Interview (e.g., talking to participants about their experience)

Evaluations may utilize one or multiple methods. Sometimes specific methods are required in order to meet grant requirements or provide the necessary rigor for publication. Additionally, consideration must be given to the participants in the program. For example, a

pen-and-paper survey would not be appropriate if participants have literacy limitations.

Evaluating within Limitations

Evaluating programs can take extra time, necessitate money, and may also require certain expertise (Bamberger et al., 2006). Each method of evaluation, each group of participants, and each Extension agent will have their own unique characteristics and limitations. Adjustments, during the planning stages of the evaluation, can address common challenges. Some suggestions include:

- Shorten surveys: Narrowing the number of items on the survey to include only the most relevant to the purpose. This shortens the time to complete the survey and also the time to enter the data into a database.
- Online surveys: Developing an online survey can save costs of printing. It can also save time on data entry.
- Decrease sample size: If there are insufficient funds to evaluate everybody, a few participants could be randomly selected to complete a survey or interview. A focus group (several people interviewed at one time) could also be utilized.
- Utilizing volunteers and interns: Volunteers and interns could be trained to administer surveys, conduct interviews or focus groups, and input data.
- Partnering with other agencies: Many state agencies already have access to baseline data. Existing agencies may also have access to additional funds or materials that could limit costs.
- Collaboration: Extension specialists have expertise in the research process and can provide assistance in the planning, implementation, and reporting aspects of evaluation.

Using Results from Evaluation

The results from an evaluation study can be implemented immediately to improve different aspects of programming. Results can also be used to share information with the field at-large. This can be done informally through conversations and discussions with other Extension employees. It can be done formally through presentations at conferences and through scholarly publications. Regardless of the dissemination outlet, Extension agents should always be mindful of the strengths and weaknesses of their evaluation design. The rigor of the evaluation impacts the credibility and reliability of the findings.

When human subjects are used in research it is important to maintain participants' safety and trust. Universities have Institutional Review Boards (IRB) that must approve evaluation designs to ensure the research

is done appropriately and ethically. IRB approval is mandatory if results will be reported in a public venue.

Conclusion

Program evaluation can serve many purposes. There are also many challenges that prevent county Extension agents from evaluating their programs. By taking some time to plan an evaluation, many of these challenges can be lessened or overcome. The evaluation of programming is a helpful way to accomplish Cooperative Extension's purpose of providing research based information.

References and Helpful Resources

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