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### **SESSION: EVALUATION AND EXTENSION FUNDING**

#### **PERFORMANCE MONITORING - BRINGING IN THE LOCAL PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Introduction**

In 1993, a highly visible, urban county in Wisconsin requested an audit of its Cooperative Extension program. Despite a longstanding reporting system including various statistical and accountability reports, the county Extension program was unable to answer the questions asked. UW-Cooperative Extension undertook a comprehensive program review, with external evaluators, to appraise the county program and reestablish its credibility. In retrospect, it was clear that local decision-makers had their own measures of program performance, which were not the same as Cooperative Extension's. In Wisconsin, where 40% of the county Extension budget (salaries) is financed by county government, local perspectives and measures of program performance become particularly critical.

Subsequently, the UWEX Administrative Committee called for a better understanding of the information needs of local stakeholders. An exploratory study was designed, initially to include four counties. One county dropped out at study start-up given a local political struggle so the study included three counties. The question, "what do stakeholders want to know?" was constructed from a naturalistic perspective to explore (1) what do stakeholders consider when making judgements about Extension, and (2) what influences decisions regarding county budget allocations that affect Extension's program?

The study was based on the assumption that customer satisfaction and perception of benefits are central to Extension's survival. The "customer" or "stakeholder" was defined as local influentials that have an influence on the County Extension budget and operations. The focus group interview method was selected since the intent was to listen to county influentials -- to hear the words and concepts they use for valuing Extension. The purpose was not to evaluate the county program, per se. It was expected that the results from this initial work would determine if other interviews would be appropriate and how the process and findings might be used in program accountability to enhance Extension funding both at the

county and state levels. As the new conservative wave has spread across the country, county government officials across Wisconsin and state legislators are asking:

What have you done for the people of my county lately?

What difference have you made for the \$100,000 we've invested in you?

In each of the three counties, Extension agents identified twenty potential participants - individuals they felt were the "movers and shakers" in the county. Letters of invitation were sent to these individuals with the expectation that seven to twelve would respond positively to an early morning one-hour meeting. Actual participation in the focus groups ranged from eight to twelve with a total of 28 participants for the three counties, seven of whom were women. Tables 1 and 2 present pertinent characteristics of the counties and the focus group participants.

The group interviews were purposely confined to one hour in the early morning to accommodate busy schedules. Key questions were covered in each group. However, the format was left open to allow local concerns and perceptions to emerge. The tape-recorded interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed by standard content analysis with interpretation by the three co-investigators.

This study is consistent with the emerging demand for customer measures of quality. It supplements work being done from Extension's internal perspective (examples: Minnesota, Texas, Maryland). The findings do not represent an exhaustive or prioritized list of program quality criteria. Rather, it is an initial attempt to learn from a select group of key county influentials about their measures of performance.

Administration is reviewing the full results and a packet of materials is being prepared for county faculty who wish to conduct focus group interviews as part of continuing customer research. The following paper briefly describes some of the major findings from the focus group interviews. These are then discussed in light of the literature relative to the practice of Extension evaluation.

## **Findings**

### **I What is a quality extension program?**

Before we could talk about what makes a high performing county program, we needed to have a common understanding of the "county Extension program". Therefore, the focus group interview started with the question, "If someone were unfamiliar with the county Extension program, what would you tell them to help them understand what the county Extension program is?" A number of defining characteristics emerged as seen in Table 3.

**Table 3. Characterization of county Extension program by local influentials**

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- 1) 4 program areas: agriculture, family living, 4-H/youth, community & economic development
  - 2) extension of university: way to reach the university and access latest research and knowledge
  - 3) continuing education: provides opportunity for continuous learning throughout lives
  - 4) a resource: offers and provides education -unbiased information source
  - 5) rural, agricultural agency
  - 6) reliable source of help in times of emergency
  - 7) outreach: extend out to people; don't wait for people to come to you
  - 8) educational and prevention agenda versus regulatory agencies; mandated services
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Once the group participants were using a common interpretation of the Extension program, the discussion moved on to what people consider when forming judgements about Extension. The lead-in question was, "What are some of the critical factors that make a high quality Extension program?" From the synthesis of the data from the three groups, the following indicators of performance emerged.

**A. Good Staff.** Participants in all three counties linked Extension program performance to *good staff*. Further probing revealed the following indicators of quality staff (no ordering by importance):

- a. professional manner;
- b. commitment to job - not a 9-5 mentality;
- c. availability - on the job and available to answer questions;
- d. responsiveness - attentive to questions and seek answers, *if they don't know the answers, they get them for you very quickly*;
- e. ability to access people and information, the ability to go into the UW system and use the full system: agents may not have all the answers but can bring the right
- f. people together to solve the problem. *It's virtually impossible to connect into that [the Madison campus] without the local units.*
- g. local identity - *The local folks want to talk to the locals. They don't want to be pushed off. They want the answer from their agent.*
- h. public relations and motivational skills -the ability to promote programs and get people involved;
- i. ability to get things done;
- j. mature; experienced.

Interestingly, participants did not bring up the aspect of technical competence or disciplinary expertise, per se. Instead, they focused on the notion of access -- valuing the county agent as a link to knowledge. In the words of one participant, *those four staff people bring a lot of talent to [ ] county but probably equally or more important is their ability to go into the system and use the entire system.*

**B. Relevant Programming.** Program performance was linked to relevance. Participants wanted the county program to meet county concerns and be useful to a wide number of residents. During this discussion, participants linked relevance to the changes they saw occurring in their own counties and lives. The current instability in agriculture, the declining numbers of farms/farmers and the many problems facing families and youth dominated the discussion. In relation to these concerns, a variety of perspectives about Extension's relevance were expressed: (1) Extension is stuck in the old ways and is not changing to meet current needs; (2) Extension is trying to change but is thwarted by a rural, agricultural image, (3) Extension is responding and meeting new needs, (4) Extension is moving into inappropriate areas such as counseling and social service work that is done by other agencies. Even within these fairly small and homogeneous groupings, many of the same issues were expressed as seen in the national debate about Extension's future direction (Sauer, 1990; Franklin, 1990; Schutjer, 1991; Dillman, 1991; Sandmann, 1991; Conone, 1991; Bloome, 1992; McDowell, 1992; Smith, 1992; Panshin, 1992; Schutjer, 1992; Lamm, 1992; Jones, 1992; Jordan, 1992; Walla, 1992).

Whether holding the perception themselves or not, most participants expressed the view that Extension is not broadly understood or viewed outside its rural and agricultural orientation. This, then, leads to the question of Extension's relevance. ... *a lot of supervisors don't know what Ag and Extension is. I didn't either until I got on the committee. I still felt it was a rural program. And because of the reduction in the amount of family farms ... statewide, people are looking at Extension and saying do we still need it?* In general, the focus group participants expressed the opinion that there must be greater awareness of Extension's relevance in people's lives today if Extension is to maintain public support. Various participants spoke about the need for improved *public relations, marketing, promotion, and advertising*, particularly in urban areas. Reference was made to the *voting power* of the urban counties and that agriculture represents ... *a small voting minority and getting smaller.*

Participants also spoke about what they saw as relevant audiences and content for Extension programs. The agricultural representatives, for instance, spoke about the need to focus on all audiences, including

urban audiences (not just agricultural-related audiences) to enhance understanding of and support for the food and fiber system, the need for business management and financial decision-making assistance and interpretation of agricultural information making it relevant in peoples' lives, while keeping the unique aspects of the current program that no one else serves, i.e., help/information in times of emergencies, unbiased information source, linkage to university research and resources. In the family/youth area, participants seemed overwhelmed by the problems and lack of solutions. Particular mention was made of the need for school-to-work opportunities, help for abused and neglected children, technical training for school drop-outs, household budgeting, and new collaborative arrangements such as the Kiwanis-Extension partnership that provides age appropriate parenting educational materials.

**C. Broad-based clientele.** As part of the discussion on program relevance, participants talked about use. Questions and concerns about whom and how many Extension serves were expressed in each group. Participants expressed the opinion that Extension needs to serve a broad-based constituency.

Vocal in this discussion were those participants who felt that Extension's clientele base is decreasing. This appeared to be the viewpoint, particularly, among those who saw Extension as largely agriculture-oriented. In the words of one participant, *The thing that I see is as we go down the line; you can't continue to serve a smaller and smaller group. In my opinion, it's going to destroy Extension in the long run. Because you're going to get this other element that's not being served that feels that what Extension is offering is not pertinent to them, maybe. But that element is going to rise up and say, I don't want to pay that kind of taxes for this.*

Perceptions related to use and access influence judgements about Extension's performance at the local level and bear directly on decisions related to budget allocations. Several participants asked for greater clarity about who and how many are being served by Extension. From the interviews, the following indicators of use were mentioned:

- 1) Numbers served
- 2) Who is served:
  - a. Successful, unsuccessful or a cross-section?
  - b. New users versus repeat users?
- 3) Geographical distribution of outreach: whether localized around the county office or spread across the county
- 4) Indirect contacts: participants value the thought-to-be large number of people who benefit indirectly from Extension.

**D. Unbiased and current source of information.** Participants talked about the value of Extension as a source of unbiased information. This was mentioned over and over again by participants in various contexts. Although participants spoke about the growing involvement of the private sector in information delivery, they clearly valued Extension as a neutral information source in contrast to the profit motive of the private sector.

Along with information being unbiased, participants spoke about another quality of information -- how current and timely it is considered to be. In this regard, a number of participants expressed the opinion that the private sector's information is more up-to-date and cutting edge than that provided by Extension. However, they valued Extension for helping people interpret and assess the private sector's information. The feeling was expressed that without Extension, people would have no one else to turn to for reliable, unbiased information.

**E. Responsive.** Another way in which participants talked about the value of Extension was in terms of its ability to marshal resources and expertise in order to respond to local needs. This was mentioned particularly in relation to local emergencies (Father's Day frost, potato blight) and Extension's

performance in mitigating disasters. Participants wondered who else would or could play this role if it were not for Extension.

**F. Focus.** Extension's performance was also linked to programs (and agents) that were focused and had clear priorities. Participants seemed to be asking Extension to focus on a few things and do them well ... *If you stretch yourself so thin like that, you don't do anything well. So you got to prioritize and pick some of the most important things.*

**G. Long-range plan.** Related to focus, participants spoke about the need for a long-range plan that clearly communicates Extension's program direction and priorities -- another measure of Extension's performance. At various points in the hour-long interview, participants referred to the value of such a long-range plan for maintaining program direction when staff change and its use in times of budget allocations. Without such a plan, it was felt that staff developed programs on-demand or in relation to their own interests rather than relative to prioritized county needs.

**H. Efficiency.** A number of remarks made by the focus group participants could be related to the performance measure of efficiency. These included comments about numbers and roles of county faculty - "who is serving what", state specialist numbers and level of state support, and the inevitable need for streamlining and down-sizing. In reference to streamlining, one participant offered, *I think you gotta do the same thing and everybody else is going to have to do, you're going to have to be slick and mean.* Some discussion focused on how counties might maintain a satisfactory level of programming without the full complement of staff. Various participants mentioned the possibilities of cross-county programming, sharing agents, and using more volunteers. Many called for increased use of long-distance technologies.

**I. Programs that do not duplicate other services.** In only one county did the issue of duplication emerge from within the group. In this county, critics felt that Extension was moving into the domain of existing services, for example, duplicating the work of the social service agencies, or was being replaced by private sector entities such as in agricultural information delivery. For others, however, duplication was not a concern. Some made the distinction between duplication and overlap and expressed the need for some overlap. Various participants called for greater cooperation and collaboration among agencies, both public and private. Opinions were expressed about Extension's competitive advantage - who was considered better equipped and positioned to carry out certain functions - and voids or niches that Extension needed to fill.

Interestingly, participants who appeared to understand and value Extension's educational role were less apt to see Extension as duplicating other services. Yet, the majority of the taxpaying public may not see Extension as an educational agency. Miller (1986, cited in Hogan, 1994) found that the majority of state legislators view Cooperative Extension as a public service, not an educational institution. A clearer portrayal of Extension's niche as an educational institution and expected outcomes in helping resolve priority issues would appear to have merit.

## **II County Budget Decision-making**

The other major theme of the focus group interviews centered on how decisions were made that affect the Extension program budget. The question that sparked this discussion was, "Could you tell us a bit about how budget decisions are made here in the county ... If you had a reduction in budget, say of 5%, how do you decide what gets cut?" Not surprisingly, a variety of factors were discussed that influence local budget decision-making.

First, participants talked about the position of mandated services in budget allocations. Mandated services take priority. In the words of one participant, *First, let's take what you have to do ... There is so much that has to be done.* Participants also spoke about the prominent role that politics, relationships and special

interests played. Various participants referred to the political nature of budget decisions, where data or results, are less compelling than special interests and successful lobbying. In the words of one participant, *... I don't think that budget cuts are ever done on equal footing. It's always how well the various committees get greased... It's unfortunate that someone can get up and nearly cry crocodile tears to save a pet program, project or something in the department. That's the way government functions and it is not fair -- that's politics.* Also, participants referred to the nonrational nature of budget decision-making. No blueprint exists that directed the process in like manner each time. Some county committee members even expressed uncertainty about how the process actually works.

When asked how important information concerning program accomplishments and impact was to the decision-making process, several participants indicated skepticism about such data. In the words of one, *...the measurement, the ability to measure the value of the program is very difficult and very subjective, so I think every department head in the world would like to get in front of the county board and say, "now look at how great we have done. " And that generally doesn't get too far.* Also, it was felt that reports were "after-the-fact" and did not provide much that wasn't already known. Participants seemed to rely on their perception of staff performance as well as an intuitive sense of program performance gained from an ongoing knowledge about the program and the voice of its constituency.

*The committees are involved with these department heads all year. They're receiving progress reports from them all year as to what they're doing and the committees are aware of that just from the direct contact.*

*Constituents are the ones who need to talk with the county supervisors. If you have a broad-based, vocal constituency, they can assure budget support.*

### **Discussion: Evaluation and Extension funding**

While preliminary, this study suggests the type of information we can obtain in this manner and presents a number of considerations for our practice of Extension evaluation. In our efforts to conduct credible and useful evaluations that will improve programs and meet growing accountability needs, the following points are offered for discussion.

The demands for efficiency, effectiveness, productivity and quality are being heard everywhere. A number of counties across Wisconsin have called for performance audits, often based on narrowly defined efficiency measures. Performance contracting is in the air. This study begins to identify some effectiveness measures, based on customer expectations of performance, that could help position Extension at the local level and maintain our integrity as an educational institution. Few of these performance criteria are new. Further work is needed to verify and/or expand these measures and to develop actual indicators and practical methods for evaluating performance. We are suggesting that valuing the local perspective -identifying and integrating local-level criteria -- is critical if Extension wishes to maintain current levels of taxpayer support. The citizen-customer perspective becomes key, rather than academic or organizational standards of performance, and local partners become full participants in setting and evaluating performance outcomes. In the process, a challenge will be to articulate measures that capture the public interest -- newsworthy measures -- not only measures that express the public interest (Ammons, 1995).

It is clear that performance measures are value-laden. There are different perceptions of what is quality performance depending upon whom you talk to. Even the word "customer" (or "stakeholder" or "audience") lumps together many different people, often with different perceptions and expectations of Extension. Increasingly, we see the need to differentiate within our target audiences to understand various perspectives and better focus our efforts. This will be needed in our performance measurement process as well. Who is defined as the customer, what questions are asked, and how, all will influence the

performance measures we identify. And while perspectives may vary, we agree with Drucker (1995) that even divergent views coalesce when the thinking changes from ranking programs and activities according to good intentions and ranking according to results.

This study purposely chose the focus group interview as the way to identify performance measures in order to "listen to people". With no preconceived answers, the focus group can allow individual's own meanings to emerge. The point is not to generalize but to capture variety in perceptions and opinions. Another benefit is the synergy that the group discussion offers. Participants influence and are influenced by each other (Krueger, 1994). Many of the participants in the focus group interviews reported here interact infrequently. The group meetings provided the opportunity for these influentials to hear and learn from each other -a powerful learning environment. Also, "listening to people" builds support for Extension. Participants were pleased that Extension was interested in learning from them, involving them in issues of concern. Learning from our customers implies more participatory and inductive approaches than current methods within the dominant expert model. It also implies that we can and will act based upon what we learn which may be an ill-founded assumption. Program area structures, resource allocation systems and staffing patterns may determine program direction rather than what we hear (Conone, 1991).

Overwhelmingly, good staff means good programs. In this sense, personnel evaluation and program evaluation are the same from the local perspective. Quality staff has been and continues to be Extension's strength. In Boone's estimation, Extension staff is the "most potent weapon we have in our arsenal! ... staff development is one of Extension's most powerful and effective management functions" (Boone, 1990:4). The question is whether recruitment, professional development, performance evaluations and rewards are linked to measures of program effectiveness -- or, whose measures of effectiveness? If an effective program in the next decade is characterized (measured) differently from that of today, so must recruitment, professional development and personnel appraisal be different.

Front-line personnel, such as the county faculty, are only one part of the Extension delivery system. While not a focus of this inquiry, these interviews suggest, at the minimum, that local funding of Extension is also linked to perceptions about state specialist numbers, the relevance and timeliness of their work, and equity in the county-state partnership. One of the basic concepts of the total quality management philosophy is working with suppliers to ensure that the supplies used during work are designed for effective use (Cohen and Brand, 1993). If we assume that a role of the state staff is to "supply" the front-line, an internal evaluation function would be to monitor performance of state specialists and administrators in this regard.

The Extension evaluation paradigm is largely constructed from the assumption that if we know what stakeholders want, we will be in a better position to provide it and therefore positively influence Extension's standing. All we need to do is provide the right information to the right people in the right way at the right time. While the research on the use of social science information in policymaking continues, it is now widely recognized that such an assumption is oversimplified and over rationalized. Decision environments are complex, information seldom influences a specific or immediate decision, and decision makers are multiple. They often don't know what information they need, or ignore or use data for their own ends. As this study indicates, budget decisions are based as much on political realities and values as on results and statistics (Bellavita, 1986, Weiss, 1988a). Doing 'better' evaluations is no indication that they will be used ( Rist, 1994). The competition for public dollars is set in a political marketplace (McDowell, 1992).

However, this is not to abdicate responsibility for undertaking quality evaluation. Evidence of program effectiveness can be instrumental in decision making (Wholey, 1986, Smith, 1986, Patton, 1988, Rist, 1994) and people without data or evidence to support their programs are at risk (Weiss, 1988). In today's marketplace, Extension must do a better job of monitoring participation and implementation, assessing impact, and conducting continuous customer research. Perhaps, as suggested from the findings of this

study, we will do better to see evaluation in its "enlightenment" role - as a kind of continuing education (Weiss, 1988a), where decision-makers act based on intuitive judgements that develop over time from a store of information coming from multiple sources. This suggests a model for Extension evaluation that focuses on a more pervasive flow of evaluative information, effective communication and involvement. The power of the media, informal channels and personal communications cannot be overlooked; legislators "read people, rather than read reports" (Weiss, 1989). Political astuteness and communication skills may be as important as research rigor. Ongoing monitoring and responsiveness to customers may be more influential than costly "impact" evaluations focusing on "event decision making".

Such an enlightenment role, however, flies against another Extension construct - the reporting model - a model that developed largely to meet organizational requirements so that Extension educators find it difficult to demonstrate effectiveness to external customers (Ladewig and Boltes, 1992). This construct has placed the emphasis on static, written reports for someone else and has resulted in considerable internal negativism. Evaluation is viewed by many Extension faculty as something which is required with minimal personal value, rather than as a process for improving programs or services to customers. Reports flow into a black box to supposedly meet some minimal level of auditing and accountability needs. Rethinking our current structures and systems in order to internalize and integrate evaluation, as part of effective programming seems critical.

The demand is for focused, results-oriented programs. Evaluation to enhance funding can do little in the light of poorly thought out programs or programs that focus on activities rather than intended end results (Williams et al, 1991) As evaluators, we can play a role in helping articulate program theory, focusing on outcomes upfront in the program design process and integrating evaluation into the program as continuous quality improvement, rather than handling evaluation as a separate activity or as an add-on, usually at the end or as an after-thought. We may do better by paying more attention to learning about successes and failures than simply evaluating (Sechrest, 1994).

Just as Rist (1995) argues for a new paradigm in the evaluation of international development assistance, so might we argue for a new way of doing Extension evaluation business. Increasingly, Extension is being held accountable for issues of broad public concern but much of our evaluation practice is grounded in project, program or individual objectives that may or may not have the semblance of customer-driven outcomes. Hahn, Greene and Waterman (1994) found few of the Kellogg/Farm Foundation funded public policy education projects assessing impacts on anything other than individuals. We need innovative methods, eclecticism and vision. Evaluation has a role to play in the evolving direction and future funding of Extension ... are we up to the task?

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**Table 1. Basic demographic information for the three counties**

	Wisconsin	Dodge	Manitowoc	Portage
Population	4.9 mil	76,559	80,421	61,405
Median Family Income	\$35,082	\$33,471	\$33,002	\$34,926
% population				
- in urbanized	50.4	0	0	0
- in other urban	15.3	45.3	59.8	50.8
- in rural areas	34.3	54.7	40.2	49.2
living on farms	4.0	9.3	5.6	4.7
not living on farms	30.3	45.5	34.6	44.6
Unemployment rate (annual avg. 1994)	4.7	4.5	5.1	5.4
% High school graduates	37.1	43.5	43.8	40.2
% White	92.2	97.6	97.9	97.9

\* Definitions: Urbanized area: generally a city together with the surrounding high-density territory that together have a minimum of 50,000 persons. Other urban: consists of incorporated places with 2,500 or more population. Rural: comprises incorporated places of less than 2,500 persons and all areas outside incorporated places (e.g., towns).

Source: 1990 Census, UWEX-Extension Applied Population Laboratory

**Table 2. Characteristics of participants in the three focus groups**

	Dodge n 8	Manitowoc n = 10	Portage n = 10
<b>Occupation</b>			
County Employee		2	3
Private Business		2	3
Farmer	4	1	3
Professional	1	3	1
Media	3		
Other		2	
Retired)		(3)	(4)
<b>County Position</b>			
Elected Official	5	2	4
Organizational Representative		2	1
County employee		2	3
<b>Relationship to Extension</b>			
Committee member	2	1	2
Volunteer/collaborator	2	8	1
Participant/user (present, past)	6	7	3
<b>Gender</b>			
Women	2	4	1
Men	6	6	9