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The Role of Evaluation in Determining the Public Value of Extension

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The Role of Evaluation in Determining the Public Value of Extension

Abstract

Extension has developed a strong evaluation culture across the system for the last 15 years. Yet measures are still limited to the private value of programs, looking at problems in a linear way and at isolated efforts. Across the country, Extension evaluators and administrators need to step up to help answer the "so what?" question about complex issues and related programming through stronger evaluation that leads to articulating the public value of Extension work.

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For a decade, articulating the public value of Extension work has been discussed as one way to enhance support for Extension (Kalambokidis, 2004, 2011; Franz, 2011, 2013). The concept of public value was first explored in the realm of public administration (Moore 1995). Public value is the benefit to those not directly served by a program (Kalambokidis, 2004). Extension staff have participated in public value workshops (Kalambokidis, 2004, 2011), teams explored steps for Extension organizations to embrace public value (Franz, 2011), and implementing public value stories (Boyer et al., 2009; Franz, 2013) as public funding for the organization has declined.

Extension administrators promote the need to articulate public values and pressure staff to produce public value talking points and stories from their programming. After a decade of conversations and workshops on public value, Extension workers see the need to report public value and create tools to do so. However, public value measurement and articulation is not an organizational norm. Public values of Extension and Extension programs are relatively easy to list, such as decreasing health care costs, increasing economic stability of communities, or increasing civic engagement to strengthen communities. Accordingly, Extension program evaluators have long focused on public value as an ultimate goal of program impact, often measured as social, economic, or environmental condition changes for the larger community. Even so, most Extension program evaluation falls short by

measuring only the private value of programs by documenting learning or behavior changes of participants engaged directly with Extension programs.

Nonetheless, Extension staff and administrators are seeing a connection between program evaluation and public value articulation over the last decade. Some efforts have taken place to determine and use common program impact measures across the nation to more consistently share public value across the system. However, these efforts are not fully embraced. For example, ECOP commissioned the Excellence in Extension database to provide system-wide data to benchmark organizational measures (Archer et al., 2007). These measures were organizational inputs and outputs but recently address outcomes and public value through program success stories. Many Extension institutions fail to input the data, ensure data quality, or use the data. Administrators need more assistance from Extension evaluators to better understand the supports to produce public value data and stories tied to strong evaluation and research.

The Connection Between Evaluation and Public Value

Difficulty in articulating public value often lies in having credible evidence that programming contributes towards such value. Some staff participating in public value workshops indicate they are unable to or uncomfortable with making a safe inference between the private value derived from their program and research that shows public value.

Extension seems to be stuck evaluating private value even though funding for programs comes mostly from public sources. The organization's evaluation has been mostly driven by accountability (Baughman, Boyd, & Franz, 2012). Extension needs new strategies, methods, and partners to measure public value and to answer "so what?" about programs, but the organization lacks strong capacity and leadership to change practice. For example, developmental evaluation focused on the context, rather than logic model-driven evaluation better fits online learning environments because it helps evaluators address difficult problems in complex and dynamic situations (Baughman & Kelsey, 2012).

The time has come for Extension evaluators to lead the way to this new land! There are other, better ways of conducting evaluation in Extension, but evaluators are the ones to change the field, not the administrators. Extension evaluators need to fuel a national sustained evaluation change effort to match the current context. The public value movement is one lever to catalyze this effort. Extension programming and evaluation models need to move from a linear orientation to the project-based climate driven by today's funding portfolio to embrace the more complex programming and political environment.

Program evaluation and public value by nature are transdisciplinary, bringing a variety of disciplines and perspective to the table to show the worth of a program. Yet difficulty arises in Extension with educational programming deeply entrenched in higher education's academic departments and tenure and promotion cultures that resist holistic approaches. Measuring and articulating public value often stalls out because Extension is held hostage by academic disciplines or values only outcomes-based evidence instead of attention to issues and their contexts.

Another connection between program evaluation and public value is who holds responsibility for both

efforts. Two approaches tend to exist in Extension—hiring a few staff with evaluation and public value articulation in their job description or expecting all staff to conduct evaluation and public value work. Systems using both approaches tend to have a stronger commitment to and articulation of public value. State level evaluators and communicators build evaluation and public value capacity in all staff and sometimes conduct large-scale evaluations. Most Extension systems currently have a deep disconnect between their interest in measuring and articulating public value and investing in evaluation to do so.

What Needs to Be Done?

To move the public value movement ahead and help Extension program evaluation mature to fit our current context, attention needs to be given to:

- Developing public-private and public-public partnerships, including better use of resources on our own campuses such as survey research centers, in our own states, and across Extension institutions.
- Hiring economists and statisticians to provide analytical expertise to determine the economic impact of Extension programs and develop more quantitative approaches for assessing impact. Social Return on Investment as an approach is promising for determining impacts of much of our work with youth, families, and communities (Boyer et al. 2009; Sorte, 2007).
- Encouraging NIFA and Extension administrators to commission research on the public value of Extension similar to National 4-H Council's use of a private firm and internal evaluators to assess the 4-H science investment. (Le Menestrel, Walahoski, & Mielke, 2013).
- Developing at least one state Extension service to become a center for Extension program evaluation best practices for use across the system, similar to the way the University of Wisconsin Extension catalyzed early use of the logic model in the 1990s.
- Sharing program evaluation data and measurement strategies across states and institutions. Our work currently lacks common measures and systems spanning Extension ecologies, although headway has occurred with the 4-H Common Measures instruments. Mary Emery's work with colleagues on a social capitals framework to measure impact of large-scale systems should be looked at more carefully as an example of a potentially powerful common measure for Extension (Calvert, Emery, & Kinsey, 2013).
- Conducting national and state public value summits with invited economists, sociologists, evaluators, and program staff to provide different level of analysis for program impact. For example, STEM education is looking at educational processes, teacher professional development, mentoring youth and teachers, and school environments to enhance global competitiveness.
- Engaging Extension communicators to assist with public value storytelling, communications planning, creating info graphics, and web-based visualizations to help people see change.

- Asking professional associations and organizations such as the American Evaluation Association Extension Education Evaluation Topical Interest Group and the Program Evaluation Community of Practice to have conversations on public value and select and support Extension administrative champions for public value evaluation to support evaluation and public value talent in every state and to operate as a system.
- Recognizing that new visionary leadership is needed to enhance our current evaluation and public value capacity, including adding more public evaluation economists and evaluators to Extension staff.
- Employing technology to more fully capture and share public value evidence with tools such as ripple effect mapping and online focus groups.

Most of all we need to work together as a system to provide leadership for meaningful Extension evaluation practice to enhance public value and related evaluation.

Conclusion

Program evaluation started with the great society in the 1960s with the need to invest in public programs for the public good. At that time, a research model was used to evaluate programs that didn't fit well, often because the defined outcomes were so narrow that the program looked like it failed, when in fact, much public good happened, but was missed due to the evaluation approach. Extension continues to experience this misfit when trying to determine when a program is working or not, the public value of the program, and how our decisions are made if a program does or does not show public value.

The process should not be black or white but must reflect the current and potential value of a program as well as program changes and improvements needed. The EFNEP return on investment study conducted in Virginia (Rajgopal, Cox, Lambur, & Lewis, 2002) was an example of going the next step in program evaluation. However, evaluation quickly returned to our old methods. A strong evaluation culture has developed across Extension in the last 15 years. Yet measures are still limited to the private value of programs, looking at problems in a linear way and at isolated efforts. Across the country, Extension evaluators and administrators need to step up to help answer the "?" question about complex issues and related programming through stronger evaluation that leads to articulating the public value of Extension work.

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