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Key Facts and Key Resources for Program Evaluation

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Key Facts and Key Resources for Program Evaluation

Abstract
Extension educators have been more and more involved in program evaluation. This article gives some tips on different ways to create evaluation, which formats are best, how to ask questions, and how to communicate the results to the stakeholders. This article indicates also several helpful resources to learn more about program evaluation.

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When to Do an Evaluation

Evaluation is not a useless activity for Extension programs and is increasingly required by funders and universities. Evaluations can serve different purposes, which are summarized in Figure 1 (McNamara, 2007).

Figure 1.
Purposes of Evaluation

- May be part of the proposal (create a differentiated proposal, generate additional revenue)
- Show the participants that the company cares and is interested in their opinion
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of a program to improve it or to duplicate the strengths in other programs
- Report results for public relations and marketing purposes
- Compare results over time to see evolution
- Compare programs to see which to retain
- Make decisions (what needs to be improved, which instructors should be retained, which subject could be added, whether to duplicate a program)

Not all programs may require or justify an evaluation (Figure 2). For programs where the outcomes may be negative, Extension staff have to ask themselves whether they want an evaluation, what the objective of the evaluation will be, and how the clients will react (PennState, 2007).

Figure 2.
Situations When Program Evaluation is Useful

• The program contains several activities
• The program has strong and measurable objectives
• The stakeholders expect an evaluation
• There are opportunities (time, money, resource) to change the program
• There is an interest to change or improve the program
• The program or a similar program will be offered in the future

Which Evaluation Method

The evaluation method(s) to use will depend on the audience, the type and amount of desired information, and the available resources. There is also a trade-off between quantity and quality. Figure 3 lists methods used to evaluate programs (McNamara, 2007). Several methods can be used to evaluate the program if the budget is available.

Figure 3.
Evaluation Methods

• Questionnaires/Surveys/Checklist
• Interviews (phone, mail, and more)
• Documentation review
• Focus group/Open forum/Verbal feedback session
• Observation
• Knowledge assessment (pre and post-test, participants portfolios – presentation and report)
• Performance assessment
• Case studies
• Listening posts/Informal conversation
• Box of ideas, comments, suggestions
• Peers' assessment
• Instructor's self evaluation
• Testimonials

Create the Evaluation Material

Creating the evaluation requires determining the questions of interest and deciding on the answer categories of those questions. The format is also important.

Questions Examples and Answer Categories

To avoid bias in the results, evaluations start with some general questions concerning the overall feeling of the program (program focus, format, relevance). The program dose (depth, frequency, amount/quantity) is also of interest. Several evaluations also include logistics and marketing questions. Evaluations sometimes rate instructors and topics. Some demographic information may also be gathered. It is also important to know what learners think about the delivery method and if they have suggestions (Would there be a more effective way? How would you modify the program in the future?). Finally, questions have to be determined based on what the stakeholders want to know and what the objectives of the program are (PennState, 2007).

Often, evaluations contain a mix of closed and open-ended questions. Closed questions may ask for a specific answer or may list suggested answers to choose from (Figure 4). Suggested answers should be typed in bold and small caps and include at least four categories. Furthermore, repeating the same set of answer categories (when possible) helps the respondent unless the set is repeated too often (PennState, 2007).

Figure 4.
Suggestions for Correct Interpretations of Closed Questions

For questions that ask for a specific number, the interpretation process needs to be able to interpret a 0 and an absence of answer as a "did not answer" or "not applicable". Therefore, it is useful to use the format mentioned below.
How many times a day do you ....? ____ (if none write "0", if not applicable write "NA")

To interpret correctly all the answers, the following answer categories are helpful:
How do you ...? (circle all applicable answers)

NONE *(at the top of a list)* ANSWER 1 ANSWER 2 ANSWER 3 ANSWER 4 NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT IT OR NOT SURE OR DON'T KNOW OR NO OPINION	or	ANSWER 1 ANSWER 2 ANSWER 3 ANSWER 4 NONE OF THE ABOVE (bottom of the list) NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT IT OR NOT SURE OR DON'T KNOW OR NO OPINION

Scales may also be used as answer categories for rating questions. Scale can have a number or word basis. Both have advantages and disadvantages (Table 1), and, therefore, some evaluations use scale numbers with a word interpretation (PennState, 2007).

Table 1.
Advantages and Disadvantages of Scales with Numbers and Words

Characteristics	**Scales with Numbers**	**Scales with Words**
Advantages	• Appearance of objectivity • Clear difference between the different categories • No coding required	• Meaningful • Words are prevalent as means of communication
Disadvantages	• Numbers are impersonal • May lead to lack of seriousness and therefore validity • Numbers are not always meaningful	• Not easy to find differentiated set of words if lots of answer categories are needed • Require coding

Ranking questions should be avoided, particularly when many items need to be ranked. Instead, the participant should be asked to determine the main issue or the three main issues in the list (PennState, 2007).

Some programs may have pre-, post-, and post-post program evaluation. Some studies have shown that participants can be more truthful about their pre-program behavior or knowledge if asked after the program. Because participants do not behave consistently, behavioral questions should ask for the frequency, include the word "ever" or propose answer categories not limited to yes or no (Figure 5) (PennState, 2007).

Figure 5.
Examples of Behavioral Questions

The following question can be used as pre or post-behavioral question:
• How often do you ...? (circle the most appropriate answer)
1. almost all the time
2. frequently
3. occasionally
4. hardly at all
5. not at all
6. not applicable.
The following question can be used as pre or post-behavioral question:
• Do you ....? (circle the most appropriate answer)
1. yes (if yes, how often in the last 6 months?_____)
2. not yet
3. not at this time
4. plan to do within 3 months
The following question can be used as a post-behavioral question to assess the degree of achievements:
• Since the program, to what extent have you been able to do each of the following? (circle the most appropriate answer)
Item 1: Thought about or discussed Started writing Completed writing Not get started Did before program
or
Item 1: Did before program Started since program Plan to do within 3 months No plans Not applicable
Since some people may not have had the opportunity to make any changes yet since the end of the program, an open-ended question may be considered:
• Many people may not have had an opportunity to make any changes since the program. If you are one of these, please indicate why?

Questions regarding age, race, and marital status are extremely challenging (Figures 6 and 7). Age is a sensitive question and hence should be avoided unless the information is needed. The question should be placed at the end of the questionnaire unless the screening is on age. Age categories should be used (including one higher than the oldest persons of the audience), be relevant to the audience, and be mutually exclusive. If the exact age is needed, asking for the year of birth leads to more accurate answers (PennState, 2007).

Figure 6.
Race Question

Many persons identify themselves as belonging to two or more races. Therefore, the use of the US Census Bureau method (reported below) is recommended for questions regarding race.
How would you describe yourself (circle all that apply)?
1. Black/African-American
2. Hispanic
3. White (Non-Hispanic)
4. Other (please specify):

Figure 7.
Question Concerning Marital Status

The following question may be used to give people the opportunity to report that they live with another adult besides a legal spouse.
What is your marital status? (Circle the appropriate answer)
1. Single
2. Living with significant other or partner
3. Currently married
4. Divorced or separated
5. Widowed

Close-ended questions should replace open-ended questions if many different answers are likely to be given by the audience. To determine the suggested answers, an open-ended question can be asked the first few times the program is given. An "other" category should also be added to the suggested answer to give the participant the opportunity to add something not included in the list (PennState, 2007).

Format

Survey research demonstrates that design is more important than length to motivate completion. It has to look easy to do and be consistent. Tables are not recommended because they tend to make the evaluation look hard. For open-ended answers, lines should be shortened and centered. Suggested answers should be placed each below the others to give an impression of space (PennState, 2007).

Administering the Evaluation

Before administering the evaluation, it is recommended to pretest the evaluation with a small sample. When the evaluation is administered or advertised, it is necessary to give a rationale (i.e., explain the purpose and the reasons) for the evaluation and show that confidentiality is respected (PennState, 2007).

After the Evaluation

For questions involving numbers, results should be reported on a percentage form for each suggested answer. The mean or the average for each question with numbers should also be mentioned. For open-ended answers, comments should be organized into meaningful categories, and patterns should be identified. If participants are quoted and their names are reported, the participants should have given their consent (McNamara, 2007).

The results should then be used for marketing purposes. Results should also be communicated to the team involved in the program. Positive results can be excellent motivation tools. Results (if requested or positive) should also be shared with the clients or grant funders. This may help generate more grants. Finally, some follow-up may be organized, and some participants may be contacted to get a better understanding of the comments or to ask for their opinion on replacement solutions.

More information on the subject of program evaluation is available at:

http://www.msu.edu/~suvedi/Resources/Evaluation%20Resources.htm

http://www.phcris.org.au/infobytes/evaluation_gettingstarted.php

Also see *The Targeted Evaluation Process (Combs, W. L., & Falletta, S. V., 2000).*

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