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Abraham S.D. Tidwell
University of Georgia

Alexa J. Lamm
University of Georgia

Kevan W. Lamm
University of Georgia

See next page for additional authors

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Abstract

Generating timely, honest, and useful feedback is the cornerstone of all extension program evaluation. However, historical evaluation practices, especially in the international agricultural extension context, have relied on models that emphasize external criticism. One model of evaluation that has the potential to shift the focus toward a more collaborative model of evaluation is that of appreciative evaluation. Appreciative evaluation strives towards building on existing strengths rather than criticizing weaknesses with an emphasis on identifying what an organization does well. This research note reviews the results of a recent survey given to a group of extension professionals within a large land-grant institution to examine how extension professionals view the role of evaluation within their programming from an appreciative perspective. Respondents (n = 204) expressed great professional satisfaction in their work delivering programs and a sense of self-worth stemming from the impact they have in their respective communities. Evaluation tools and techniques were enabling forces as they allowed respondents to gather timely data and make adjustments to programs in ways that were reflective of community needs. When asked to identify any structural components of the extension system that improve evaluation practices and procedures, respondents emphasized the importance of both formal and non-formal training opportunities, the development of modular evaluation tools, and collaboration both within extension and their respective community(ies). The results indicated appreciative inquiry methods have the potential to provide valuable feedback about existing programming.

Keywords

appreciative inquiry; extension education; program evaluation

Authors

Abraham S.D. Tidwell, Alexa J. Lamm, Kevan W. Lamm, and Jacqueline H. Tidwell

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Abraham S. D. Tidwell
Alexa J. Lamm
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Abstract

Generating timely, honest, and useful feedback is the cornerstone of all extension program evaluation. However, historical evaluation practices, especially in the international agricultural extension context, have relied on models that emphasize external criticism. One model of evaluation that has the potential to shift the focus toward a more collaborative model of evaluation is that of appreciative evaluation. Appreciative evaluation strives towards building on existing strengths rather than criticizing weaknesses with an emphasis on identifying what an organization does well. This research note reviews the results of a recent survey given to a group of extension professionals within a large land-grant institution to examine how extension professionals view the role of evaluation within their programming from an appreciative perspective. Respondents (n = 204) expressed great professional satisfaction in their work delivering programs and a sense of self-worth stemming from the impact they have in their respective communities. Evaluation tools and techniques were enabling forces as they allowed respondents to gather timely data and make adjustments to programs in ways that were reflective of community needs. When asked to identify any structural components of the extension system that improve evaluation practices and procedures, respondents emphasized the importance of both formal and non-formal training opportunities, the development of modular evaluation tools, and collaboration both within extension and their respective community(ies). The results indicated appreciative inquiry methods have the potential to provide valuable feedback about existing programming.

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Introduction

Since the 1960s, evaluation of extension programming world-wide has progressed from being viewed as a necessary evil to a core element of effective program design and implementation (Patton 1987). Much of this transition is owed to a growing agreement that evaluation should be done in collaboration with the users of the knowledge resulting from such studies; what is commonly referred to now as participatory evaluation (Patton, 1987). By involving the user of evaluation knowledge in the process of defining priorities, actors throughout the system can take a realistic assessment of existing program activities, the domains in which they operate (social, managerial, economic), and make adjustments to improve overall outcomes (O'Sullivan & O'Sullivan, 2002). It is often questioned then, why extension professionals across the globe resist or choose not to engage in, the practice of evaluation.

Contemporary and historical evaluation practices, dating back to the inception of evaluation (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2003), focus on identifying weak points in existing programming with the intent of reducing barriers to success while improving efficiency. Identifying ways to overcome weaknesses means the weaknesses must be uncovered and determined to be remedied. Those put under the scrutiny of an evaluator's eye often feel fear when it comes to identifying gaps (Patton, 2006). Perhaps they, or their program, will be questioned and eliminated as a result. It is this fear that often turns people away from the practice of evaluation.

Recent evaluative efforts have taken a different approach – rather than focusing evaluation on defining what is wrong with a given program, these approaches, known as appreciative evaluation, seek to elucidate

what is working well, what supports success, and how these successes can be used more widely within the program and the broader system in which it operates (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). Appreciative evaluation, as a conceptual framework, focuses questions on (a) what are the most effective activities; (b) what are the future possibilities for success; and (c) existing team synergies and efforts that support the current and future success of the program. The objective of such an approach is to create collaborative communities of practice; for example, Clarke, Egan, Fletcher, and Bryan (2006) brought together a group of teachers involved in science education professional development programming to identify existing strengths and shared experiences to strengthen future programming. Lamm and Lamm (2018) argued that such appreciative evaluation approaches could refocus international extension evaluation efforts and attention on working towards generating positive results. This is a critical change in frame of mind; where future action and resource allocations emphasize what is going well in a program rather than overcoming issues. Furthermore, an appreciative approach may prove uniquely useful in the context of international extension programming, where limited resources, dependence on volunteers, and the necessity of producing sustainable successes outweigh critiquing program failures (Lamm & Lamm, 2018). However, an appreciative approach has not been tested within the extension education space to determine its applicability.

Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine if an appreciative evaluation approach could be used to identify what supported extension professionals' engagement in evaluation and, therefore,

determine the best strategy for furthering engagement in the practice of evaluation.

The following objectives guided the study:

1. Identify the evaluation achievements for which extension professionals were most proud.
2. Determine what organizational factors helped to support that achievement.

Methods

The sample used in this study were extension professionals in the state of [State] in the United States. A simple paper-based survey was designed to elucidate the successful practices being undertaken by extension professionals in the context of evaluating their programming. The survey followed an appreciative evaluation approach (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006) which consisted of two open-ended questions: (1) Describe one outstanding or successful evaluation achievement or contribution of which you are particularly proud, and (2) What organizational factors helped to create or support your achievement? The survey was reviewed by two district extension directors and the state extension director for face and content validity. The survey was then distributed to all extension professionals attending mandatory district meetings throughout the state, all within the same week (November 2018). Extension professionals filled them out at the moment while engaged in a discussion about the future of evaluation within the state extension system. The survey was distributed to 339 extension professionals with 204 surveys completed with the depth necessary to conduct further analysis (60.2% response rate). As the purpose of this study was to identify strengths rather than weaknesses of existing programs, nonresponses were treated as not directly impacting the objectives of the research as the sample was drawn from the

same population (extension professionals) across the state (Blair & Zinkhan, 2006).

The survey responses were then typed into a digital format by a third party verbatim and analyzed with MaxQDA using inductive thematic analysis. The inductive thematic analysis focuses on identifying emergent patterns in qualitative research data that is informed by the research question at hand (Patton, 1987). Two of the researchers performed an initial review of all results and generated a series of codes based on commonly observed patterns. The researchers then separately conducted a word frequency analysis of the responses to generate a second series of codes. A standard set of codes and overarching themes were made, peer debriefed with two additional researchers, and verified against the initial survey results to ensure transferability (Creswell, 2002). In total, seven important themes emerged from the data. Three pertained to what elements of ongoing evaluation work extension professionals perceived were going well, and four defined what structural characteristics of the system enabled their success.

Results

Elements of Ongoing Evaluation Work

Extension professionals expressed significant professional satisfaction in developing, executing, and gathering quality evaluation data on programs that emphasized empowering participants while enabling positive behavioral changes. Common examples included following up with program participants and seeing their implementation of agricultural production best management practices (this was referred to in 31 of the written statements); seeing positive youth development in action related to both 4-H and STEM youth programming (again, referred to 30 times

within the responses); the impacts of health and nutrition programming, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) and the Extension Food Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) courses, on the eating habits of their program participants (referred to 24 times); and the results of training in the practice of education (referred to 19 times within the written statements).

Study participants also emphasized how much personal worth they garnered from effectively developing and executing evaluations that got participants engaged in providing feedback while providing them the ability to discuss how much their participants get out of a given experience. As one respondent noted, “I was able to make a poster for professional development based on the one-page evaluation at a monthly class series we hosted in our county.” Similarly, another respondent highlighted the fact that evaluation training helped them understand how to apply research methods within the context of their own master’s thesis work. Through evaluation training and application, respondents were able to create a positive impact in their communities and develop critical professional skills (e.g., Excel, Qualtrics, etc.).

The third theme was that professionals focused on relevant opportunities to gather timely data (in terms of community and programmatic needs) and thus allowed to see how the programs they implemented had a positive impact in their communities. As part of an agricultural program, one participant indicated how they used evaluation as a virtuous cycle for program improvement, “[f]ollowing my county Grassmaster’s program, I was able to assess the remaining needs of my clients by using a needs assessment survey, which happened to be forage testing.” Another emphasized how evaluation allowed

program leads to document the personal and emotional growth of student participants in a cooking program: “These kids never cooked...they seem so much more confident [after participating in the program].”

Organizational Factors Supporting Extension Evaluation

Four themes were identified that elucidate the organizational factors supporting extension evaluation practices. They were training (formal and informal), collaboration (local and regional), modular evaluation tools, and mentorship. A vital trait all these themes shared were that extension professionals emphasized the need to translate any knowledge or tools garnered to the specific context under which their program was being implemented and evaluated.

The first theme that emerged was training. According to the study participants, training was a critical force for enabling their ability to develop and execute sound evaluations of their extension programs. Training opportunities identified within their statements included formal workshops (e.g., master evaluator class), formal classwork (as part of advanced degrees), and informal learning venues (in particular online videos offered by extension evaluation specialists within the system).

The second theme that emerged was collaboration. In terms of intensity within the responses, collaboration emerged as relatively equal to training in its amount of influence on their evaluation engagement. Extension professionals mentioned cooperation with their peers at the county, district, and statewide level as a key way to generate sound evaluation processes and work toward consistent practices across similar programs. The study participants also actively sought out community members to bring into their programs that would create local buy-in and assist in

translating their programming to specific audiences (e.g., teachers). Working with local participants in their community, one respondent was “Developing a three-fold program with community partners and have had success of partners in families learning to be healthy.” Their collaboration also extended back into the extension network as they actively sought a “Specialist [research faculty] to help review the material to make sure it stayed within research based education.”

The third theme that emerged was mentorship at both the county and district level. Many participants identified mentorship as crucial for enabling the successful implementation of program evaluation. Extension evaluation specialists were also mentioned in this space but not as consistently. They were noted explicitly as providing scientific expertise on survey design and implementation. There was some mention of receiving mentorship from tenure-track faculty; however, these individuals appeared to have been seeking advanced degrees when receiving this assistance.

The fourth theme to emerge was the use of modular evaluation tools. The study participants expressed a deep appreciation and recognition that the development of evaluation tools by other units was critical in supporting their successful evaluation of programs. For example, a series of surveys were developed by several 4-H staff for use in 4-H programming. They were commonly referred to and appreciated by the study participants because they were easy to adapt to local program content and evaluation goals. Using these tools, respondents noted the ready-made surveys enabled quick program evaluation, with one respondent indicating they were “[g]etting feedback from [a] large sampling of 5th grade students of CCRPI [College and Career

Ready Performance Index] (500 of 3,000 students).”

Conclusions, Implications & Recommendations

Despite their location around the world, one thing all extension professionals strive to create is relevant programming for their communities that are attuned to local needs and wants. This commitment to relevance extends into the realm of program evaluation as extension professionals seek opportunities to develop evaluation procedures and practices where their community members will provide honest and timely feedback. As it relates to application, the results from this study provide insight into the elements of ongoing evaluation work as well as the organizational factors supporting extension evaluation. From a methodological perspective, the results indicated it is possible for extension professionals to gather insights using an appreciative evaluation approach when juxtaposed with gap-analysis type evaluation model that focuses on identifying weaknesses (Patton, 2006).

From an applied perspective, the results indicated having professional satisfaction in collecting evaluation data is an important theme associated with the behavior. This finding implies that if individuals can feel more personally connected and invested in the activity, they are much more likely to persist. An associated recommendation would be to frame evaluation as a good and impactful set of actions as necessary and essential as any of the preceding effort. Extension professionals should be encouraged to see evaluation activities as the final component of their hard work, an opportunity to demonstrate their professional satisfaction in their efforts and see programs fully through completion. The ethos of professional

satisfaction is further reinforced through the emergent themes of personal worth and impact.

In addition to the intrapersonal elements of ongoing evaluation work, four organizational factors supporting extension evaluation were also identified; specifically, training, collaboration, tools, and mentorship. Although each of the themes emerged independently, a higher-order or meta-theme of education might subsume training, collaboration, and mentorship. A recommendation would be to acknowledge the education meta-theme and consider using training, collaboration, and mentorship as unique tactics to accomplish the same intended goal. An additional recommendation is for extension professionals, especially those with evaluation skills and experience, to make their evaluation tools available for others. The combination of empowering others through education and providing them with the appropriate tools has the potential to create an environment supportive of extension evaluation.

A recommendation is for future extension evaluation research to consider a similar tactic. Focusing on what is going well, and building from a position of strength can be an empowering process (Lamm & Lamm, 2018). Although the results of the current study provide both applied and methodological insights, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study is limited in scope to one particular extension system. Although the purpose of qualitative research is not generalizability per se (Creswell, 2002), the implications and recommendations presented are limited to only the present study. Secondly, as a qualitative study, the results are constrained. Although data were collected and thematically analyzed in accordance with the research objectives, the data were limited to written responses, making it

preliminary. Interview and focus group techniques may uncover richer descriptions of the underlying phenomenon (Creswell, 2002). Therefore, a recommendation would be for future research to replicate the study using a different qualitative data collection approach.

Extension professionals around the globe are being asked to do more with fewer resources (Lamm & Lamm, 2018). Therefore, our efforts must be focused on the ways to get as much as we can out of every dollar that goes into extension programming. Appreciative evaluation may be a powerful tool to provide insights into what extension professionals are doing right, give the impact data needed to show return on investment, and refocus extension professionals on their successes (and building upon them) rather than fearing what is not going well and getting reprimanded as a result. Perhaps if evaluation can be reframed in this way, an increase in evaluation efforts will be obtained as fear is reduced.

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