



Measuring Extension Program Impacts: 4. Evaluating Long-Term Impacts

Mark Larese-Casanova

Department of Watershed Sciences, Quinney College of Natural Resources

Cooperative Extension educators conduct **program evaluation** to measure the fulfillment of the program goals, and to answer the important question of “did the program result in positive impacts?” An intentional goal of every Extension program should be to increase knowledge and adoption of practices, as well as to change behaviors in a positive way. Conveying the impacts of an Extension program demonstrates the relevance and value of Extension to the public.

Measuring short-term, or immediate, impacts of a program is relatively easy using a variety of evaluation tools (Larese-Casanova, 2017a). In fact, most Extension educators focus only on evaluating short-term impacts immediately after a program, rather than measuring medium- and long-term impacts (Franz & Townson, 2008; Lamm, Israel, & Deal, 2013). In general, long-term impacts of Extension programs are rarely evaluated (Workman & Scheer, 2012).

Evaluating long-term impacts of an Extension program requires focused efforts that are planned before the program is even delivered. It is important to remember that a logic model created during the initial development of an Extension program details the expected outcomes or impacts of an Extension program, and guides the evaluation process (Larese-Casanova, 2017b).

Understanding the lasting, long-term impacts of an Extension program can be more challenging, and requires distinctly different efforts. The goal of a shorter Extension program may simply be that participants increase knowledge and adopt practices. However, longer Extension programs have the potential to cause change over a broad time scale, leading to personal or societal improvement.

Repeated Surveys

One of the easiest ways to evaluate the long-term impacts of a program is to repeat a survey at least 6 months, and as long as several years, after the culmination of a program. The participants’ practices or behaviors would be surveyed before and immediately after the Extension program to evaluate short-term impacts. The same survey, when administered later in the future, can help quantify retention of behaviors. It may even require a multi-year effort of administering follow-up surveys to truly understand the long-term impacts of an Extension program (Higginbotham, Henderson, & Adler-Baeder, 2007).

An effective Extension program should result in a significant short-term knowledge gain and adoption of practices and behaviors. A follow-up survey several years later might reveal a small, but perhaps statistically significant, decline in knowledge, practices, or behaviors since the end of the

program, indicating slightly imperfect retention by participants. However, these factors should still be significantly higher than they were prior to the Extension program, indicating that long-term, positive impacts are present (Wardlaw & Baker, 2012).

Follow-Up Surveys

A follow-up survey may be implemented to evaluate the long-term changes in behavior as a result of participating in an Extension program. The measures included in a follow-up survey should focus on the specific long-term impacts outlined in the logic model. For instance, a farm finance program might evaluate the degree to which farmers' confidence in managing finances has improved, whether they have participated in more finance programs or used other resources, or even if their farm has been more profitable in the years since their participation in the farm finance program (Balliet, Douglass, & Hanson, 2010).

Interviews/Case Studies

Although time consuming to conduct, personal interviews can result in high response rates and valuable results. Delivering a follow-up survey in-person or over the phone allows an Extension educator to probe the deeper meaning of a response that cannot be captured as easily through a survey. However, interviewers should consider the audience when determining the best venue for conducting interviews. For instance, when working with an immigrant Latino population, the need for relational trust may influence which Extension educator participates in an interview, and the interviews should be conducted in Spanish (Meraz, Petersen, Marczak, Brown, & Rajasekar, 2013).

Conducting a case study of a select number of participants can reveal in-depth qualitative impacts of Extension programs. For instance, visiting a parent of a 4-H participant would provide an

Extension educator with an opportunity to better understand the impacts of practices and behaviors on the youth's quality of life in such a way that a survey could not capture (Stephenson, Morford, & Berry, 2002). Developing an in-depth, qualitative understanding of long-term impacts complements quantitative information collected with surveys.

Working Together

Understanding the longer-term impacts of Extension programs into the future is challenging, but is made considerably easier through mutually supporting each other. Several Extension educators working together as a group can conserve individual effort while standardizing evaluation tools that would generate data that could be shared across programs and disciplines (Lamm, Harder, Israel, & Diehl, 2011; Lamm, Israel, & Deal, 2013). A relatively limited number of case studies related to evaluating medium- and long-term program impacts suggest that more support and training is needed for Extension educators. Consider sharing long-term evaluation successes at conferences and through publications, and encourage supervisors to support professional development needs.

Viable Data Collection

It is important to consider the way in which we collect evaluation data to ensure its viability. Keeping participant names anonymous is perhaps the most essential step. Connecting long-term evaluation tools to prior assessment surveys or evaluation forms can be achieved through coding the documents (e.g., have participants write the month of their birth date and the same last four digits of a family member's phone number on each form). It is most ethical to collect only the data that is needed and will be used. Lastly, if any of the evaluation results will be presented or published in a public medium, it is important to seek pre-approval from the respective Institutional Review Board.

Long-term evaluation aids in understanding the life-long benefits of Extension programs, and provides invaluable justification to stakeholders

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