Ever Wish You Had a Minion to Help with Program Evaluation?

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Introduction and Need for Strategy

A recently developed mentoring program aims to prepare undergraduate students in program evaluation, research methods, and data analysis through two academic courses and practical evaluations within [State Extension] programs. The project focuses on two key objectives: 1) enhancing undergraduate students' knowledge and skills in program evaluation methods and data analysis techniques, and 2) establishing a sustained collaboration system between undergraduate students and Extension faculty/staff to improve the evaluation of Extension programming.

Connection to Literature

With limited funding, Extension faces the challenge of demonstrating the private and public value of its programs for long-term outcomes (Lamm et al., 2013). Establishing an undergraduate student evaluation fellowship program addresses the identified need for local county-based Extension offices and enhances students' self-efficacy in applied research and evaluation, preparing them for graduate school and post-graduate careers (McClure & Fuhrman, 2011). Public value assessment, requiring time-intensive methods like focus groups and ripple effect mapping, is particularly challenging (Franz, 2014). A 2013 study by Lamm et al. revealed a minimal use of inferential statistics in Extension evaluation activities, attributed to Extension agents' self-efficacy, training, and confidence in evaluation planning and data analysis (Diaz, 2019). Involving undergraduate students as evaluation fellows can introduce more robust statistical methods to Extension agents and prepare students for careers in evaluation and research. Participation in undergraduate research programs has been associated with heightened degree aspirations and increased likelihood of enrolling in graduate programs (Hunter et al., 2006). Additionally, data analysis provides applied skills in mathematics and programming, benefiting students outside traditional math or technology majors (Cady & Rearden, 2010).

How it Works and Implementation of Strategy

Each year of the program, a cohort of 10-15 undergraduate students is selected from different universities throughout [State], fostering collaboration with local extension programs to enhance students' knowledge and contribute to programming efforts. Beginning in the spring semester of each year, both evaluation host site and student applications are solicited. Evaluation host sites are selected based on project need and capacity to supervise/mentor. Student applicants complete a virtual interview and are then “matched” with evaluation host sites. For the fall semester, fellows complete an online, synchronous lecture course, followed by a seminar course in the spring semester, providing a foundation for fieldwork and data collection during the subsequent summer. With the assistance of the project team and evaluation host sites mentors, during the

summer semester, students are fully engaged in their evaluation efforts, collecting and analyzing data and writing their final evaluation reports. Final reports and/or impact statements are reviewed by the project team before dissemination back to the evaluation host sites. After completion of the year-long program, fellows have the opportunity to return to the program as mentors and will undergo orientation training. They will support the new cohort during coursework and evaluation planning, providing guidance during data collection and report writing. The mentorship concludes at the end of the summer semester, completing the two-year fellowship.

Results to Date/Implications/Impact

To date, the first cohort of eight fellows and six evaluation host sites have been selected for participation in the program. Selected host site projects vary in scope, ranging from measuring the economic footprint of a new nature/hiking trail built by a local 4-H program, to demonstrating the impact of a statewide youth fire training academy. This fall, students will complete the online lecture-based course, where they will gain a thorough understanding of the Cooperative Extension Service and its model for educational programming, as well as evaluation-focused content in needs assessments, logic models, quantitative/qualitative methods, questionnaire development, human subjects research, data analysis, and program reporting. In the spring of 2025, students will complete the second seminar-based course, where they will have the opportunity to meet with their cohort on a bi-weekly basis to share and reflect on their current evaluative processes. Data collection and analysis will take place during the spring and summer semesters, followed by the completion and submission of a final evaluation report.

Future Plans/Advice to others

Advice to others regarding the evaluation design includes recognizing potential limitations such as the need for fellows' accurate completion of pre- and post-surveys. A recommended approach is adopting a multi-modal strategy, providing the survey in Qualtrics, on paper, and through a QR code. Additionally, implementing automatic reminders can help ensure timely survey completion. Another potential limitation involves Extension agents' willingness to participate in focus groups. To address this, it is advisable to host regional in-person focus groups to minimize travel time, along with offering a Zoom option for those unable to attend in person.

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