

Exploring Educators' Barriers to Evaluation to Strengthen and Justify Extension Programming

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Introduction and Need for Study

Cooperative Extension funding has become scarce and uncertain in recent decades. Program planning and evaluation are widely regarded as essential for justifying the broader value of the Cooperative Extension system and individual state programs (Radhakrishna & Relado, 2009). Extension program planning and evaluation efforts are crucial to identify, measure, and report the impacts and outcomes of education and outreach initiatives. However, effectively conducting Extension program planning and evaluation may be hindered by perceived or actual barriers. Extension professionals continue to face challenges operationalizing the general concept of program evaluation: how to define program planning and evaluation, how to design and achieve desired outcomes and impacts, and how to report results (Hachfeld, et al., 2013). Furthermore, literature highlights gaps in the evaluation practices of Extension professionals (Franz & Townson, 2008; Lamm & Israel, 2011; Lamm et al., 2013). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore [University Extension] educators' perceived and actual barriers to program planning and evaluation.

Theoretical Framework

The program planning cycle is the framework that guided this study. Using this cycle results in comprehensive evaluation and planning to achieve targeted and measurable outcomes and impacts (Diaz et al., 2017; Harder, 2010). The cycle includes eight stages or steps to help achieve these outcomes and impacts. These steps are: (a) engaging stakeholders in dialogue, (b) conducting a needs assessment, (c) developing program goals and objectives; (d) creating a logic model, (e) developing the program, approach, and materials, (f) delivering the program, (g) evaluating, analyzing, and reporting, and (h) learning, adjusting, and improving. This study examined Extension professionals' perceived barriers within the eight-step planning cycle to help strengthen Evaluation Capacity Building (ECB) efforts.

Methodology

We employed an exploratory qualitative design, applying virtual focus groups with current Extension professionals to capture nuances and gain deep insights into the barriers to their evaluation efforts (Ploll, et al., 2022). We recruited via a comprehensive email list of all [University Extension] educators. A total of nine educators indicated interest in participating in the focus groups, but only six participants (three each) actually joined our two approximately one-hour sessions. Before the sessions, all the participants verbally consented to participate after the researcher read out the IRB-approved consent form. The expert validated focus group protocol included seven open-ended questions (plus an opportunity for additional comments) to explore evaluation barriers and identify capacity needs. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. We manually analyzed the qualitative responses using inductive thematic analysis. Based on the study's goal, we grouped the codes into categories and later into themes (Lester et al., 2020) to identify common and unique barriers.

Results

The study explored Extension educators' perceived barriers within the eight-step program planning cycle to help strengthen Evaluation Capacity Building (ECB) efforts. The analysis identified barriers to educators' program planning and evaluation efforts across different operational levels—individual, organizational, and community. At the individual level, the major barriers included a lack of time, limited expertise, and the perception that evaluation is overwhelming. For instance, a participant said: “I might not have all the expertise for the types of evaluation.” The organizational level encompassed challenges such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, insufficient resources, inconsistencies, miscommunication, and a lack of connections and partnerships. For example, a participant said: “But I think part of it really is the communication within the organization.” Barriers at the community level involved respondent fatigue, social and economic issues, and federal government policies. One participant said: “I'm trying to do a needs assessment and struggling to get people to even respond to the needs assessment.” The analysis showed that most barriers were related to program evaluation rather than program planning.

Conclusions

Evaluation is a broad, common challenge faced by [University Extension] educators. The challenge arises from various individual, organizational, and community barriers, although program planning appears less challenging. These findings offer insights into how Extension educators' efforts in program planning and evaluation are impeded and how best to address these issues. Due to barriers at different operational levels, the findings highlight the need for Extension leaders and professionals to adopt practical, holistic approaches to overcome these obstacles.

Implications and Recommendations

Evaluation remains a key avenue for justifying federal funding and resource investment in Extension programs. However, due to barriers identified in this study, Extension educators may not fully succeed in their evaluation efforts. The barriers, identified among [University Extension] educators who have relatively greater access to resources and expertise, imply crucial challenges for all educators. Therefore, support in overcoming these barriers is crucial. Through training and collaboration, Extension evaluation specialists could help educators select appropriate evaluation methods, understand how evaluation data is generated, and use the data to achieve personal program goals while meeting reporting requirements. While participants reported difficulties with time management and expert use of data collection tools, we recommend training on time management and advanced platforms like Qualtrics. Building connections and partnerships in program delivery can also improve evaluation capacity. Although resources may remain limited, evaluation procedures and requirements, such as the IRB process, should be streamlined. Evaluation guidance and communication should also be standardized to ensure all educators are on the same page. Additionally, focusing on building relationships and trust with communities/constituents could boost participation and successful follow-ups. Lastly, future research into solutions that can make program planning easier and how these can be applied to program evaluation is recommended.

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