

From Fellows to Mentors: Evaluating the Impact of the Extension Mentoring IN EvaluatION (MINION) Fellowship Program on Undergraduate Student Development

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Introduction/Need for Study/Relevant Literature

Cooperative Extension faces increasing pressure to demonstrate program impact as funding becomes more constrained; only 2% of Extension professionals utilize inferential statistics to evaluate outcomes, a gap linked to limited evaluation training and self-efficacy among county-based agents (Lamm et al., 2013; Diaz, 2019). Simultaneously, undergraduates across disciplines lack structured opportunities to build applied research and evaluation skills in preparation for graduate study and professional careers (McClure & Fuhrman, 2011). The Extension Mentoring IN EvaluatION (MINION) Fellowship Program at West Virginia University (WVU) addresses both needs by placing undergraduate fellows at WVU Extension County host sites, where they complete two academic courses in program evaluation and conduct field-based evaluations alongside county Extension agents. In their second year, fellows transition into peer mentor roles. This study reports findings from the program's first two cohorts (n = 12 first-year fellows; n = 1 second-year mentor) and examines the program's impact on student knowledge, skills, and course satisfaction.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

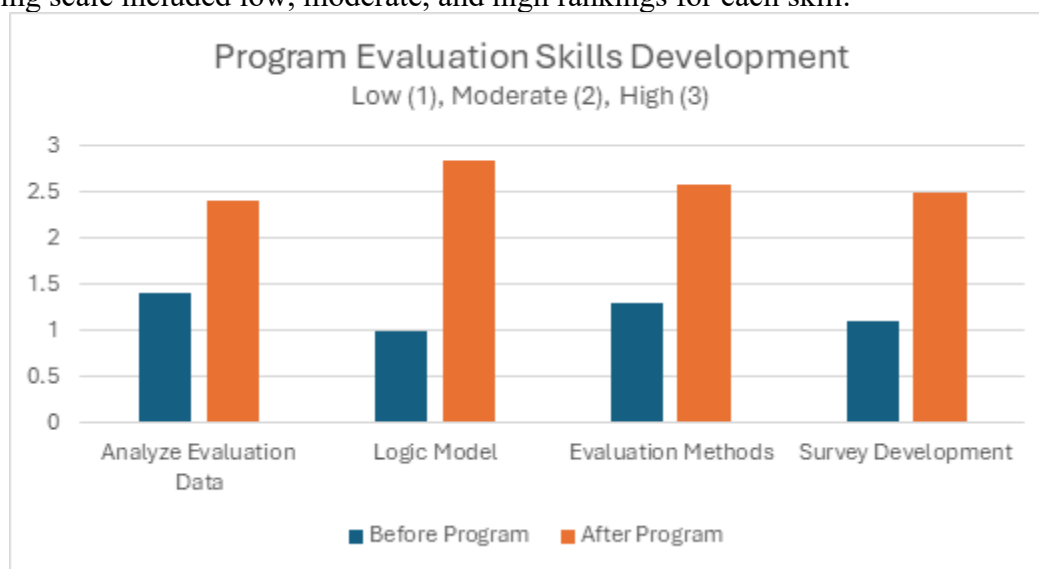
The program is grounded in Bandura's (1977, 1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which guided its three-level structure: coursework targets cognitive factors (knowledge and attitudes); field placement targets behavioral factors (skills and self-efficacy); and the peer mentor role targets environmental factors (social norms and peer influence). Kirkpatrick's (1994) Four-Level Training Evaluation Model provided the assessment framework, with the post-course retrospective survey addressing Level 1 (Reaction) and Level 2 (Learning) outcomes.

Methodology

A retrospective pre-post survey design was used to evaluate program impact across two cohorts (n = 12 first-year fellows). The post-course retrospective survey assessed Level 1 Reaction via four Likert-scale items (engagement, career relevance, instructor effectiveness, and likelihood to recommend) and Level 2 Learning via nine before-and-after self-assessment items covering key evaluation competencies including logic model development, evaluation question design, method selection, data analysis, and conducting a full program evaluation. Three open-ended items captured the most valuable course of elements and skills applicable to future academic and professional work. Descriptive statistics were applied to quantitative items, and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used for open-ended responses.

Results/Findings

Across both cohorts ($n = 12$), Level 1 Reaction data indicated strong student satisfaction. Most of the participants (83.3%) found the course engaging, while 91.7% reported they would recommend it to other students. Regarding career relevance, 11 students rated the course as relevant, with only 1 remaining neutral. Instructor effectiveness ratings were notably high, with 83% of students rating their instructor as extremely effective at explaining concepts. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses revealed that the most valuable aspects of the course centered around the evaluation process, hands-on application, and program development. Students identified data analysis, data collection, and the development of tools such as surveys, logic models, and timelines as the knowledge and skills most applicable to both their future academic and professional work. Students rated their knowledge and skill level on core competencies before and after the program. The rating scale included low, moderate, and high rankings for each skill.



Conclusions

Early findings from two MINION cohorts indicate the program is effectively building undergraduate evaluation capacity and generating high levels of student satisfaction, consistent with SCT's emphasis on knowledge acquisition through structured, applied experience. The near-unanimous recommendation rate and strong instructor effectiveness ratings suggest students perceive the program as both relevant and well-delivered. In addition, students felt their skills on key evaluation core competencies increased after the program. Thematic findings further indicate that students are connecting course content to concrete, transferable career skills, particularly in evaluation or research methods and data analysis.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact

The MINION program demonstrates that undergraduates with no prior evaluation experience can develop meaningful competencies within a single academic year when structured coursework is paired with field placement. Land-grant institutions with Extension partnerships should consider replicating this model, particularly where Extension evaluation capacity is limited. Future program cycles should incorporate Kirkpatrick Levels 3 and 4 assessments to track whether skills transfer into students' careers and whether host sites demonstrate improved evaluation of quality. As the program grows toward its projected 65–70 fellows over the five-year grant period, the MINION model holds strong potential for expanding Extension's evaluative capacity at both state and national levels.

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