Getting to the Bottom Line: How Using Evaluation Results to Enhance Extension Programs can Lead to Greater Levels of Accountability

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Extension has enhanced the lives of U.S. citizens through adult education in a myriad of ways. However, as budgets get tighter, accountability becomes increasingly more important. Over the years, Extension has reported low level impacts rather than the long–term successes that those working within the system know are occurring. Without enhanced evaluation–driven environments, Extension systems will continue to inadequately report programmatic successes, resulting in a lower perceived public value of Extension programs. The use of evaluation can create an atmosphere which encourages organizational thinking resulting in the types of accountability reports which are adequate for decision making. This study examined how Extension professionals' perceptions of evaluation use related to their evaluation behaviors. The findings suggest a substantial percentage of Extension professionals are doing just enough evaluation to complete mandatory reports. It also showed that Extension professionals who valued their own personal use, but not necessarily organizational use of their evaluations, were more likely to conduct in–depth evaluations. Recommendations for enhancing evaluation driven work environments include clearer communication from administration demonstrating the value of evaluation beyond the role it plays in accountability and working directly with Extension professionals to promote evaluation–oriented conversations rather than just delivering state–led in–service trainings.

Keywords: evaluation use, extension, accountability

Introduction

Extension is extremely diverse and widely distributed, offering the largest adult education system in the United States (Franz & Townson, 2008). It encompasses nearly 3,150 county Extension offices, 105 land–grant colleges and universities, and the federal government through USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) (Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, n.d.). Extension professionals' work is extremely valuable due to its ability to enhance the lives of U.S. residents by *extending* the reach of the land grant university through research based education on topics including agriculture, community development, youth development, natural resources, nutrition, financial management, and horticulture (Rasmussen, 1989).

However, due to its size, development, and growth over the past hundred years, Extension faces some unique challenges when held accountable for proving its worth to the public. Accountability is a "state of, or process for, holding someone to account to someone else for something – that is, being required to justify or explain what has been done" (Rogers, 2003, p. 2). Accountability is typically used as a justification for conducting evaluations. However, accountability driven evaluations place an emphasis on looking back and judging programs by placing blame or praise and leave little room for learning (Patton, 2008). Cronbach (2000) believed evaluation is better used to gain an understanding of processes and outcomes to guide future activities in a positive way. Accountability is based on the premise that funders will use the information in evaluation reports to guide future funding and

policy decisions. The information they gather is, however, rarely adequate for conducting these types of appraisals. In essence "accountability systems serve the purpose of providing an account of how things are going but not enough information to inform decisions or solve problems" (Patton, 2008, p. 121).

Evaluation Use

Extension's future is largely dependent upon its ability to adapt and learn from its employees and environment (Burke, 2008). The use of evaluation can create an atmosphere which encourages organizational thinking and learning resulting in the types of accountability reports which are adequate for decision making. "Learning means the willingness to go slowly, to try things out, and to collect information about the effects of actions, including the crucial but not always welcome information that the action is not working" (Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 2004, p. 7).

A culture supporting evaluation use within most state Extension systems has been limited (Radhakrishna & Martin, 1999) despite recognition of the importance of evaluation as an Extension employee competency (Harder, Place, & Scheer, 2010). Due to an initial push to measure short–term changes in the 1980s, most Extension professionals are assessing their level of educational success through results from posttests administered at the conclusion of each educational activity (Franz & Townson, 2008). While immediate reactions and some knowledge and skill gains are accounted for through posttests, actual behavior changes over time along with social, economic and environmental impacts of Extension programs are lacking. As such, the state and federal Extension systems will continue to inadequately report programmatic successes over time, resulting in a lower perceived public value of Extension programs. Identifying and using evaluation systems to assess programmatic impacts of Extension efforts is part of the National Research Agenda: Agricultural Education and Communication, 2007–2010 (Osborne, 2007). Therefore, a study exploring the ways in which Extension professionals' evaluation behaviors are related to personal and organizational evaluation use can yield valuable data assisting Extension leaders in developing protocols that

will enhance how evaluations are used system–wide.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on Patton's (2008) theory of utilization focused evaluation. Utilization focused evaluators work with intended users "to determine priority uses early in the evaluation process" (Patton, 2008, p. 98). The chosen intended use then informs the design of the evaluation process including data collection, timing, data analysis, and reporting. Through prior planning, the intended use increases the chance the evaluation will result in the desired impact and be used as intended. Recognizing the different contexts of which the term use can have within the practice of evaluation is important. Program planners often think they are conducting utilization focused evaluation, when in fact they are organizing evaluations for other purposes under the guise of "use." Patton (2008) recognized there are many distinctions in how evaluators, program coordinators, and administrators refer to use. These distinctions included (a) direct intended uses, (b) longer term uses, (c) primarily political uses, (d) misuses, (e) non–uses and (f) unintended effects (Patton, 2008). This study will focus on the direct intended uses of evaluation in the context of Extension programming.

Direct intended uses include instrumental use, conceptual use, and process use. Instrumental use of evaluations includes using findings to directly inform decisions and often contribute to problem solving (Patton, 2008). Instrumental use links the results to an action essentially becoming an instrument of action. An example of instrumental evaluation use would be a basic assessment of an Extension program or tool. In Arkansas, a farm pond management website was evaluated over a four year period (Neal, 2010). Responses to an online survey were collected, identifying that the web site was stakeholders' preferred method of communication. As a result, the other more traditional Extension media used for communication with these stakeholders was discontinued (Neal, 2010). Another example of instrumental use is an evaluation conducted by Menalled, Grimberg, and Jones (2009) assessing agricultural agents' needs, knowledge, and

interests as they related to sustainable farming. The information collected was directly applied to the creation of a distance education program in sustainable agriculture (Menalled et al., 2009).

Conceptual use informs thinking about a program or policy. The results of conceptual use evaluation are used to assist key people in understanding a concept but no action or decision can be directly attributed to the results (Patton, 2008). While this type of evaluation can contribute to offering future conceptual insight it is not specific to a certain time or place like instrumental use evaluation. Kaplan, Liu, and Radhakrishna (2003) conducted a needs assessment study in order to plan and develop a statewide intergenerational Extension program. Kaplan et al. (2003) collected data noting Extension professionals' preferences regarding program content and delivery format. The results were used to make key decisions about the direction curriculum would take and future program delivery strategies but were not specific to one place in time. Culp and Kohlhagen (2004) conducted an evaluative study examining Extension professionals' level of competence when working with volunteers. They then used this information to plan and develop volunteer administration professional development opportunities that would increase Extension professionals' knowledge and/or performance in the future.

According to Patton (2008), "Process use refers to cognitive, behavioral, program, and organizational changes resulting … from engagement in evaluation process and learning to think evaluatively" (p. 108). Process use is essentially learning from the evaluation process itself and engaging in decision–making based on the process and not the end result. Rather than being results oriented, the evaluation process can begin to become a tool for making programmatic decisions, as it helps program planners further refine and define exactly what they want as an intended outcome. Cummings and Boleman (2006) worked to identify issues the Texas Extension system needed to be addressing during the Texas Community Futures Forum by engaging stakeholders to gain their input. Through this process not only did they identify issues of need, but they were also able to engage all levels of Extension faculty in conversations to deal with common issues, develop issue

responses, and identify resources needed to address these needs (Cummings & Boleman, 2006). Therefore, not only did the evaluation results assist in identifying needs, but the evaluation process facilitated open communication that would otherwise not have occurred.

An examination of the literature has revealed that a focus on evaluation use has the ability to enhance programmatic evaluation behaviors thereby resulting in more appropriate measures for accountability purposes. Through a review of the theory of user focused evaluation, it has been established that individual and organizational use can be categorized into three areas: instrumental, conceptual, and process evaluation use (Patton, 2008). By understanding how use is perceived and related to evaluation behavior, research based recommendations on how to enhance evaluation behaviors in the future can be made (Patton, 2008).

Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how Extension professionals' perception of evaluation use relates to their evaluation behaviors. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How are Extension professionals evaluating their programs?
2. What are Extension professionals' perceptions regarding the use of evaluation?
3. Do Extension professionals' perceptions regarding the use of evaluation have a relationship with the level at which they conduct evaluation?

Methods

The study presented here is part of a larger study and is descriptive and correlational. A census of the 128 Extension professionals and county directors working directly with customers in their respective counties, all within the same state, was conducted. The study was limited to this state because the Extension administration is currently stressing the importance of evaluation for accountability within the system due to budgetary issues.

The target population's access to the Internet and use of e–mail as a communication tool enabled the use of an online survey instrument (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2008). Due to a lack of previous research on the topic, an instrument measuring the variables of interest was not available, therefore the researcher created an organizational evaluation instrument. Four sections of the survey instrument were germane to the findings in this article: personal evaluation behaviors, perceptions of organizational evaluation use, personal perceptions regarding evaluation use, and demographics.

The instrument was reviewed by an expert panel with expertise in Extension and the practice of evaluation for content, face validity, and survey design. The panel of experts represented four universities including North Carolina State University, Oklahoma State University, Purdue University, and the University of Florida. Reliability was calculated *ex post facto* on the two constructs specific to this study. The personal perception regarding evaluation use construct had a Cronbach's alpha = .82. The perceptions of organizational evaluation use construct had a Cronbach's alpha = .83.

To measure their evaluation behaviors, participants were asked to report on how they evaluated their *best* or *most important* program. Participants were asked to respond by marking whether or not they had engaged in 27 specific data collection or data analysis/reporting methods during the past year. If they marked they had engaged in the specific method they were given a point. The points assigned for each item the participants reported engaging in were then summed to create an overall behavior score which could range from 0 to 27.

Participants were then asked to assess their personal perceptions regarding evaluation use by rating a set of six questions related to their personal use of the evaluation process on a Likert–type scale. The scale ranged from 1 – *Not at all true for me*, 2 – *Slightly true for me,* 3 – *Somewhat true for me*, 4 – *Mostly true for me*,

5 – *Completely true for me*. Three of these six items referred to the instrumental use of evaluation while the other three referred to the conceptual use of evaluation.

Next, participants were asked to rate seven statements related to their perceptions of organizational evaluation use on a Likert–type scale. The scale ranged from 1 – *Strongly Disagree*, 2 – *Disagree,* 3 – *Neutral*, 4 – *Agree*, 5 – *Strongly agree*. Six of these seven items referred to instrumental use of evaluation, while one referred to the process use of evaluation. Finally, participants were asked to identify their gender, race/ethnicity, educational level, and primary program area.

Participants were contacted via e–mail using Dillman et al.'s (2008) Tailored Design Method. All of the original 128 e–mail addresses were valid. A response rate of 84% ($N = 105$) was obtained. There were 11 responses removed due to missing or incomplete data so the useable response rate was 73.4%. There were no significant differences between respondents and non–respondents demographic characteristics; therefore the results of the study can be generalized to the target population.

The general demographics collected in the survey are displayed in Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the demographic data showed that there were 52 female (55.3%) and 42 male (44.7%) respondents. The large majority (86.7%, $n = 85$) of respondents were Caucasian/White (Non–Hispanic) with Hispanics representing 9.2% ($n = 9$). African American, Native American, and Other categories were represented minimally. The majority of respondents (77.8%, $n = 70$) had obtained a Master's degree while 15.6 ($n = 14$) had a Bachelor's degree.

All program areas were represented with 37.8% ($n = 34$) of respondents focusing on 4–H Youth Development, 23.3% ($n = 21$) on Family and Consumer Sciences, 17.8% ($n = 16$) on Agriculture, and 10.0% ($n = 9$) on Horticulture. The remaining 11.1% ($n = 10$) of participants represented Community Development and Natural Resources specializations.

Table 1
Demographics of Respondents

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	52	55.3
Male	42	44.7
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	1	1.0
Asian	0	.0
Caucasian/White (Non–Hispanic)	85	86.7
Hispanic	9	9.2
Other	3	3.1
Education Level		
Associate's Degree	2	2.2
Bachelor's Degree	14	15.6
Master's Degree	70	77.8
Ph.D.	4	4.4
Program Area		
4–H Youth Development	34	37.8
Agriculture	16	17.8
Community Development	6	6.7
Family and Consumer Sciences	21	23.3
Horticulture	9	10.0
Natural Resources	4	4.4

Data Analysis

The first two objectives were addressed using descriptive statistics. Responses were coded for computer analysis using SPSS. Relationships between Extension professionals' evaluation behaviors and their perceptions regarding the use of evaluation were described by calculating Pearson's product–moment correlation coefficient using Davis' (1971) convention. Magnitude of the relationship is noted by Davis (1971) as $.01 \geq r \geq .09$ = Negligible, $.10 \geq r \geq .29$ = Low, $.30 \geq r \geq .49$ = Moderate, $.50 \geq r \geq .69$ = Substantial, $r \geq .70$ = Very Strong.

Results

Evaluation Behaviors

Participants were asked to report on how they evaluated their *best* or *most important* program by marking whether or not they had engaged in 27 specific data collection or data analysis methods during the past year (see Table 2). The responses were summed to create an evaluation behavior score. Overall evaluation behavior scores ranged from zero to 27 ($M = 10.53$, $SD = 6.39$).

When data collection methods were reviewed the majority of participants kept program participation records ($n = 70$, 74.5%) and used posttests to evaluate specific activities ($n = 64$, 68.1%). Approximately half of the participants used posttests to evaluate their entire program ($n = 51$, 54.3%), tracked their participants' gender ($n = 50$, 53.2%), and used interviews to evaluate specific activities ($n = 47$, 50.0%). Very few used a comparison group as a control when evaluating ($n = 5$, 5.3%) or used tests to evaluate social, economic, or environmental (SEE) condition changes ($n = 17$, 18.1%). Examining data analysis/reporting methods revealed the majority of participants are reporting the number of customers attending a program ($n = 72$, 76.6%), creating summaries of written accounts ($n = 55$, 58.5%), and reporting means and percentages ($n = 50$, 53.2%). Very few used any type of inferential statistic ($n = 2$, 2.1%), compared groups ($n = 12$, 12.8%), or reported standard deviations ($n = 13$, 13.8%).

Table 2
Participants Evaluation Behaviors

Behavior Items	*n*	*%*
Data Collection Methods		
Keep program participation records	70	74.5
Posttest to evaluate activities	64	68.1
Posttest to evaluate entire program	51	54.3
Track participants' gender	50	53.2
Interviews to evaluate activities	47	50.0
Participant written accounts	43	45.7
Interviews to evaluate entire program	43	45.7
Pre/posttest to evaluate activities	42	44.7
Collect artifacts	39	41.5
Interview to evaluate behavior change	39	41.5
Track participants' race/ethnicity	38	40.4
Pre/posttest to evaluate entire program	37	39.4
Test to evaluate behavior change	29	30.9
Interviews to evaluate SEE changes	22	23.4
Test to evaluate SEE changes	17	18.1
Comparison group used as a control	5	5.3
Data Analysis/Reporting Methods		
Report actual numbers	72	76.6
Summary of written accounts	55	58.5
Report means or percentages	50	53.2
Summary of artifacts collected	44	46.8
Summary of interview results	43	45.7
Examine change over time	25	26.6
Comparing content of interviews for similarities and differences	19	20.2
Member checking interview results	19	20.2
Report standard deviations	13	13.8
Compare groups	12	12.8
Advanced inferential statistics	2	2.1

Perceptions of Evaluation Use

Table 3 displays participants' personal perceptions regarding the use of evaluation. Using a five–point scale (1 = *Not at all true for me*, 5 = C*ompletely true for me*), participants felt evaluation was a critical tool for improving Extension programs ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.84$), that they identify the needs and interests of their stakeholders prior to developing programs ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.85$), that they think it is important their evaluation results can be used by others in their state system ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.82$), and

that they use their evaluation results to make decisions about their programs ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.90$). They were not as sure their evaluations served the information needs of their community stakeholders ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .91$) and that they report their evaluation procedures and results to their community stakeholders ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.94$). Responses to all six perceptions of personal evaluation use items were summed and averaged to create an overall perception of personal evaluation use score ($M = 3.90$, $SD = .63$) that tended to be positive.

Table 3
Participant's Personal Perceptions Regarding Evaluation Use

Evaluation Use Items	Evaluation Use Category	*n*	*M*	*SD*
I feel evaluation is a critical tool for improving Extension programs	Instrumental	94	4.30	.84
I identify the needs and interests of my stakeholders prior to developing programs	Conceptual	94	4.01	.85
I think it is important my evaluation results can be used by others within my state Extension system	Instrumental	94	4.01	.82
I use evaluation results to make decisions about my programs	Instrumental	94	4.00	.90
I report evaluation procedures and result to my community stakeholders	Conceptual	94	3.61	.94
My evaluations serve the information needs of my community stakeholders	Conceptual	94	3.45	.91

Note: Scale: 1 = *Not at all true for me*, 2 = *Slightly true for me,* 3 = *Somewhat true for me*, 4 = *Mostly true for me*, 5 = *Completely true for me*

Table 4 displays participants' perceptions of organizational evaluation use using a five–point scale (1 – *Strongly Disagree*, 5 – *Strongly Agree*). They were in slight agreement that their county directors were interested in using their evaluation results (*M* = 3.59, *SD* = 1.04) and also slightly agreed that there is a moderate interest in using data to make decisions in their Extension offices (*M* = 3.52, *SD* = .92). Participants did not report a high level of agreement when asked to rate the level at which their county director (*M* = 3.05, *SD* = 1.12) or regional director (*M* = 3.07, *SD* = 1.02) communicates about how evaluation results will be used. Responses to all seven perceptions of organizational evaluation use items were summed and averaged to create an overall perception of organizational evaluation use score (*M* = 3.22, *SD* = .74) which was slightly higher than neutral.

Table 4
Participant's Perceptions of Organizational Evaluation Use

Evaluation Use Items	Evaluation Use Category	n	M	SD
My county director is interested in using my evaluation results*	Instrumental	44	3.59	1.04
There is a strong interest in using data to make decisions in my Extension office	Instrumental	90	3.52	.92
My regional director is interested in using my evaluation results*	Instrumental	81	3.49	.98
Extension professionals discuss evaluation approaches, challenges, and use in my Extension office	Process	90	3.22	.97
The state Extension director seeks evaluation information when making decisions	Instrumental	89	3.22	.84
My regional director clearly communicates how evaluation results will be used*	Instrumental	81	3.07	1.02
My county director clearly communicates how evaluation results will be used*	Instrumental	44	3.05	1.12

Note: Scale: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neutral*, 4 = *Agree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree.*
*Participants not reporting to a county or regional director did not respond to these items.

Relationships between Evaluation Behaviors and Perceptions of Evaluation Use

The personal perceptions index was moderately correlated with evaluation behavior, while the organizational perceptions index had only a low correlation with evaluation behavior (Table 5).   All but one of the personal perceptions of evaluation use items were moderately correlated with the participants' evaluation behaviors.   Whether or not the participants' evaluations served the information needs of their community stakeholders ($R = .43$) had the highest correlation among these items. Of the organizational perception of evaluation use items only one, if Extension professionals discuss evaluation approaches, challenges, and use in their Extension office ($R = .36$), had a moderate correlation to their evaluation behavior. Extension professionals' perception regarding whether or not the state Extension director seeks evaluation information when making decisions had a negligible negative correlation to evaluation behavior ($R = -.04$).

Table 5
Correlations between Evaluation Behaviors and Perceptions of Evaluation Use

	Evaluation behavior	
Perceptions of Evaluation Use	*R*	Magnitude
Personal Perceptions	*.47*	*Moderate*
My evaluations serve the information needs of my community stakeholders	.43	Moderate
I report evaluation procedures and result to my community stakeholders	.36	Moderate
I use evaluation results to make decisions about my programs	.35	Moderate
I identify the needs and interests of my stakeholders prior to developing programs	.32	Moderate
I think it is important my evaluation results can be used by others within my state Extension system	.30	Moderate
I feel evaluation is a critical tool for improving Extension programs	.28	Low
Organizational Perceptions	*.27*	*Low*
Extension professionals discuss evaluation approaches, challenges, and use in my Extension office	.36	Moderate
My county director is interested in using my evaluation results	.31	Moderate
My county director clearly communicates how evaluation results will be used	.29	Low
My regional director clearly communicates how evaluation results will be used	.17	Low
There is a strong interest in using data to make decisions in my Extension office	.16	Low
My regional director is interested in using my evaluation results	.14	Low
The state Extension director seeks evaluation information when making decisions	-.04	Negligible

Note. Magnitude: .01 ≥ *R* ≥ .09 = *Negligible*, .10 ≥ *R* ≥ .29 = *Low*, .30 ≥ *R* ≥ .49 = *Moderate*,
.50 ≥ *R* ≥ .69 = *Substantial*, *R* ≥ .70 = *Very Strong*.

Conclusions

This statewide study sheds light on the evaluation behaviors that Extension professionals are engaging in. It also gives insight into how Extension professionals perceive their personal use of evaluation procedures and results as well as their perceptions of how their Extension system as a whole values the use of evaluation. This study has shown Extension professionals are engaged in a wide variety of evaluation behaviors. The majority are keeping program participation records (74.5%), conducting posttests of their activities (68.1%), and conducting posttests on their overall programs (54.3%). They are not using comparison groups as a control (5.1%) or conducting any type of inferential data analysis on their results (2.3%). This study supports

Franz and Townson's (2008) claim that the majority of Extension professionals currently utilize posttests given at the conclusion of their educational activities to assess the level of success. Even though Harder et al. (2010) found evaluation as a key competency for Extension professionals, this research suggests Extension professionals are only engaging in evaluation at the most basic level.

In general, participants tended to believe they used evaluation (*M* = 3.90, *SD* = .63) but had a more neutral perception of organizational use (*M* = 3.23, *SD* = .74). On a personal level, Extension professionals agreed they used evaluation instrumentally more than conceptually. Therefore, Extension professionals are using their evaluation results to directly inform their decisions regarding future programming rather than to gain future

conceptual insight (Patton, 2008). In addition, all but one personal perception of evaluation use items had a moderate correlation to evaluation behavior. The finding that evaluation behavior and personal evaluation use are related is supportive of Patton's (2008) previous research that a focus on evaluation use has the ability to enhance programmatic evaluation behaviors. Only two organizational evaluation use items had a moderate correlation with the evaluation behaviors of Extension professionals. This is in direct opposition with previous research showing organizational commitment to a behavior will create an atmosphere which encourages organizational thinking and therefore an employee commitment to the behavior (Burke, 2008).

Implications and Recommendations

This study was designed to examine the direct use (Patton, 2008) of evaluation by Extension professionals. Recall that direct use includes instrumental, conceptual, and process use (Patton, 2008). The findings of this study provide evidence that suggests Extension professionals may use evaluation for instrumental use, as indicated by their tendency to believe evaluation is a critical tool for improving programs. To a lesser extent, conceptual use was evidenced as Extension professionals mostly thought it was true that they used evaluation to make decisions about their programs. Both findings are encouraging as they indicate a professional commitment to delivering quality programs. What may be more interesting, and concerning, to note from the findings of this study is not the direct use of evaluation by Extension professionals but rather the implication that Extension professionals in this state believe their Extension system as a whole uses evaluation for political purposes.

According to Patton (2008), political use includes imposed use and mechanical use. Imposed use refers to evaluations conducted in response to mandates issued by those in power, such as a federal requirement. In fact, there are both state and federal requirements for Extension to report the number of people reached through Extension programming and the demographic characteristics of those people. Mechanical use occurs when people go "through the motions" of evaluation simply to be in compliance with evaluation requirements (Patton, 2008, p. 112). The high percentages of Extension professionals who reported keeping program participation records and tracking gender, race, and ethnicity as opposed to the percentages of Extension professionals who used more rigorous evaluation methods such as pre/posttests, interviews to evaluate long–term outcomes, and control groups are clear indicators of imposed and mechanical use.

While it must be acknowledged that some Extension professionals simply lack the evaluation expertise to perform behaviors such as measuring long–term outcomes or using advanced inferential statistics, the findings from this study suggest a substantial percentage of Extension professionals are doing just enough to get by when it comes to evaluation. Franz and Townson (2008) also noted a tendency for Extension professionals nationwide to use a low level of rigor when conducting evaluations. Program participation records, post–test only designs, and *interviews* (the quality of which is undetermined) are behaviors that require a minimal amount of effort, and produce little information that can be used to improve programs. Yet these are often good enough to satisfy organizational accountability requirements. The popularity of these methods is contradictory to the Extension professionals' purportedly strong beliefs that evaluation is a *critical tool for improving Extension programs.* Note the item "critical tool for improving Extension programs" $R = .28$ to evaluation behaviors, which is empirical support for a weak relationship. This should be cause for concern.

At the organizational level, Extension professionals perceived their county and regional directors' desire to have evaluation results to use was more evident than how the results would be actually used. Similarly, the Extension professionals did not strongly agree that their state director used their evaluation results when making decisions. Clearer communication from administration would be helpful in demonstrating the value of evaluation beyond the role it plays in accountability.

The Extension professionals in this study made their decisions about using evaluation largely independent of what they believed about how their county, regional, and state directors value and use evaluation. More plainly, Extension professionals are likely to do what

they are going to do, regardless of what administration tells them. Extension instead needs to focus on improving its culture of evaluation by building upon the positive relationship that was observed between evaluation use and evaluation discussion. Extension professionals who work in offices that talk about evaluation are more likely to conduct evaluation. Working directly *with* Extension professionals to promote evaluation–oriented conversations, rather than just delivering more state–led in–service trainings and other top–down efforts, is a key step towards building an organizational culture that values evaluation.

Although many barriers exist in engaging Extension professionals in the practice of evaluation, they can be overcome. In order to gain more insight into the issues surrounding the challenges of getting Extension professionals to increase the amount of evaluations conducted, and the level of rigor in which they approach evaluating programs, more research should be conducted. This study was specific to Extension professionals working in a single state and generalization beyond the population should be done with great caution. A study conducted to determine if Extension professionals working in other state Extension systems (size, regional location, etc.) will assist in a broadening the interpretation of the results.

In addition, a study examining the impact of state Extension system structure (i.e. professional development offered, communication, system–wide culture, work unit climate) has on evaluation use will offer administrators an idea of what is already working within their system and how to enhance what is not. In addition, research exploring why specific Extension professionals have chosen to evaluate their programs with a high level of rigor, even though the majority does not, would assist in gaining an understanding of how barriers against evaluation use have been overcome.

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