

## Keeping the Cart in Front of the Horse

### INTRODUCTION

In addition to working as a planning and evaluation specialist, I teach a graduate course in program evaluation. This semester I changed textbooks in the course and am now using the book by Rossi, Freeman, and Lipsey (1999, see reference at the end). Changing textbooks and preparing for the course anew made me think about what we do in Extension program evaluation versus perhaps what we should be doing. I'll try to summarize briefly.

In the book, Rossi et al. approach evaluation from a social program standpoint, with the idea that the programs exist to ameliorate some social need. (In my opinion, this idea falls in line with Extension thinking, for the most part.) They describe the five areas into which most evaluation questions fall:

- Questions about the need for program services (needs assessment)
- Questions about program conceptualization or design (assessment of program theory)
- Questions about program operations and service delivery (process evaluation)
- Questions about program outcomes (impact or outcome evaluation)
- Questions about program cost and efficiency (efficiency assessment)

Lately, we have done a lot of talking in Extension about impact and outcome evaluation and how it should be accomplished. Please don't think I am against this trend--I believe we need to know what good our programs are doing. But the first two (and sometimes the first three) areas identified by Rossi et al. are often ignored in our desire to show impacts. As a result, we often are left wondering "why?" This problem is especially true when the impact information we collect does not paint such a rosy picture.

This realization hit me hard a few weeks ago when a graduate student and I were analyzing some results from our family nutrition project. When originally designed, the program was an eight-week program where participants came for a workshop once a week. The primary evaluation was to determine eating habits using a food recall questionnaire (I know it sounds funny, but that is what the nutritionists call it--think of it as a diary or log). Anyway, we found out that almost no participants came to all eight meetings and had basically nobody who was there the first week and the last to complete the questionnaire. Then we went to a pretest-posttest plan to try and determine knowledge gained for each session of the program. The results were not favorable (no statistical increase from pretest and posttest) and we started trying to answer the "why" question. I found the Rossi et al. book helped me a lot.

So, let's look at the first three areas briefly to see if they can help us answer the "why" question that sometimes eludes us as evaluators.

## **NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

The evaluator must determine the problem a program is addressing in its own political context. It helps to start with a good definition of the problem. You may be able to find one in program documents, newspaper accounts of its launch, proposals for funding the program, etc. Hopefully, the definition can be found, allowing the evaluator to move along with questions in the other four areas.

If you can't find a definition of the problem/need, the evaluation should probably start with this area by assessing the needs of the population using either existing data sources or needs assessment surveys. (Sidenote: This semester, I found that some of my students need to make this their primary evaluation focus, because no problem could be identified using existing documentation.) Rossi et al. do a good job of describing this area in their book. They make two important points that a lot of needs assessment manuals omit.

1. Identify the Targets-- Who has the need? Examples: individuals, groups, geographical area, physical units. The targets may be direct or indirect. The evaluator should specify the boundaries and perspectives.

2. Describe Service Needs--In addition to describing the targets (potential clientele), a needs assessment must also provide useful information about the specific character of the need. This allows a program to adapt its services to the local nature of the problem and its distinct circumstances. Some questions to answer:

- How is the problem experienced?
- What are their perceptions about relevant services and programs?
- What are the barriers and difficulties they encounter in attempting to access services?

These questions can play a huge role in how effective a service is even before the program is implemented.

## **ASSESSMENT OF PROGRAM THEORY**

This evaluation area involves making sure the conceptualization and design of the program reflect valid assumptions about the problem and a feasible approach to resolving it. It answers the question - is it "supposed to work?" (Maybe its "would you expect such a design to work?")

Rossi et al. tell you to do two basic things here. First, find or make an explicit and detailed graphical representation (flow chart, etc.) of the program. Second, examine how reasonable, feasible, ethical, and otherwise appropriate it is.

## **PROCESS EVALUATION**

Once the need for the program has been established and the assessment of program theory has determined that the design of the program makes sense, the only way for the program to fail to produce the expect results is by having problems in its activities/service delivery. To answer questions in this area, look at how well the program is functioning, including

- How well the services match the goals,

- Whether services are delivered as planned,
- How well service delivery is organized,
- Effectiveness of program management, and
- Use of program resources.

## **SUMMARY**

Of the five areas commonly looked at in program evaluation, let's don't get so focused on impacts that we forget the others. Looking at the first three (needs assessment, assessment of program theory, and process evaluation) can help us determine why programs are not making the impact desired.

For a good reference on this topic, try the following book:

Rossi, P. H., Freeman, H. E., and Lipsey, M. W. (1999). Evaluation: A systematic approach. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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