

## **Capacity Building and Beyond: Evaluator's Role in Extension**

Recently, a National Academies of Science panel released a report titled, "Community Programs to Promote Youth Development (2002)." Under the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, a committee on community level programs for youth, chaired by Jacquelynne Eccles, found plenty of evidence to tell us that youth development programs work and why. The panel also discussed gaps in research and made recommendations for future efforts in research and evaluation. The full report and ordering information can be accessed at <http://www.nap.edu/books/0309072751/html/>.

What was especially intriguing to me was the committee's discussion about two general categories of evaluation that differed in scope and rigor. According to the committee, the most comprehensive evaluation, which involves a multi-method assessment of the quality of implementation as well as outcomes and impacts should happen under the following conditions: 1) the object of study is a program component that repeatedly occurs across many of the organizations currently providing community services to youth; 2) an established national organization provides the program being evaluated through many local affiliates; and 3) theoretically sound ideas for a new demonstration program or project emerge and pilot work indicates that these ideas can be implemented in other contexts. They go on to say that few high quality comprehensive evaluations of community programs for youth exist due to: the low priority accorded to evaluation by organizations struggling to fund services; inadequate funding for such evaluation and over-reliance on program staff to conduct such evaluation.

A comprehensive evaluation, according to the committee, must involve a collaborative team of evaluators and practitioners and be designed to answer these questions:

- Is the theory of the program that is being evaluated explicit and plausible?
- How well has the program theory been implemented in the sites studied?
- In general, is the program effective and, in particular, is it effective with specific subpopulations of youth?
- Is it or is it not effective-why?
- What is the value of the program?
- What recommendations about action should be made?

Other programs that do not meet the criteria for a comprehensive evaluation, still need to provide information about the strengths and weaknesses of program implementation, identify patterns of effective practice, and generate hypothesis about why programs fail. According to the panel, this type of program evaluation

should be used when: a program is not matured; evaluation has to be conducted by the staff of the program under evaluation; major questions of interest pertain to the quality or implementation of the program theory; the program is broad, involving multiple agencies in the same community; and the program is mainly interested in reflective practice and continuing improvement.

The notion that comprehensive evaluation is not warranted nor even desirable for all programs and that comprehensive evaluation should be designed and conducted with involvement of researchers and trained evaluators offered an intriguing set of questions for me that adds to Ellen Taylor-Powell's question, "is there a set of core competencies for Extension Education Evaluation around which we would/could build capacity?" (Hear It From the Board, January 2002). For instance, should all Extension programs be evaluated and to what degree? Can Extension programs be defined clearly enough so we can determine where comprehensive evaluation is necessary? Related, are there some Extension programs where trained evaluators must be involved? Who in Extension needs to have evaluation competence, and to what degree? And finally, what is the role of evaluators in answering these questions?

At the very least, answers to questions such as "core competence for whom and under what program conditions?" may help us be more strategic about evaluation capacity building, including identifying core competencies. It may also help Extension better determine evaluation needs, whether existing evaluation resources (including evaluation expertise) are adequate to meet those needs, and if not, what the system needs to do to obtain the necessary resources. Capacity building through evaluation training may be one answer but may not be adequate to meet the system's evaluation needs.

I am sure many of you are in the same boat as I am-- during this era of accountability and high demand for outcome measures, many groups have asked for evaluation capacity building. While I continue to offer evaluation training for professionals in and out of Extension, I also continue to struggle with the fact that staff development and training around evaluation are often inadequate for program staff whose primary responsibility is program design and delivery and not evaluation. Where evaluation capacity building has been most successful, albeit unintended, were those cases in which I was involved as an evaluator on a specific project. Here, program staff witnessed first hand how evaluation models, design and implementation and reporting actually play out under real program contexts. Thus in some cases, the system's evaluation needs may be better met with a cadre of trained evaluators collaborating with program staff to evaluate key programs Extension has identified as appropriate for comprehensive evaluation.

After my initial "What!?" reaction to this year's AEA Conference theme, I began to realize just how apropos the theme is to Extension. "Evaluation: a systemic process that reforms systems" focuses on the reciprocal impact between

evaluation and the system within which evaluation occurs (Molly Engle, 2002 AEA President). It got me thinking more seriously about the role evaluators might play in impacting the Extension system beyond evaluation capacity building. For example, could evaluators, through their contribution around a set of criteria for selecting programs for comprehensive evaluation, actually contribute to defining and identifying critical Extension programs? Or, as a friend of mine once suggested, should I “get my head out of the clouds?” 😊

In any case, let’s continue the dialogue!

#### References:

Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth, Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman, Editors, Board on Children, Youth, and Families, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002). Community programs to promote youth development. National Academies Press.

Engle, Molly (2002). Get Involved! AEA President’s discussion on the call for conference proposals.

Taylor-Powell, Ellen (January, 2002). Competence in Extension Education Evaluation- What is it? What does capacity building entail? Posted on the EEE-TIG website- <http://danr.ucop.edu/eee-aea>.