

Helping Educators Document and Communicate Impact: Evaluation Theory + A Dose of Politics = A Powerful Learning Experience

Many extension educators, be they on campus or off, find it difficult to articulate and document their work in terms of external impacts. I suspect that you too are asked questions like "How can I evaluate my programs in terms that decision makers will find convincing?" or "How do I make the case that this work is valuable?" Depending on the needs and context of the person asking the question, I use any of four approaches, each providing different benefits.

My default strategy is to start with a response like "Make sure you can tell the whole story!" I often use the traditional CIPP framework of Daniel Stufflebeam¹ to help educators think about evaluation needs related to describing the context, inputs, the educational process, and its outcomes and products.

In the particular case of communicating impact to program funders, it is helpful to think about the kind of claims we are making about our programs when we accept funding. When we strike a bargain with a funder, we make four types of claims:²

- An issue, problem, or opportunity exists that an educational intervention can help change.
- Programs will address the issue, problem, or opportunity in particular ways.
- Programs will have a particular impact.
- Funds will be used effectively (program will have the impact specified) and efficiently (program will be cost-effective).

Another approach is to use questions like the following to help educators consider the types of monitoring and evaluation information they might need:

- What was the intent of the program?
- What was the nature of the program?
- Who (number and characteristics) participated in the program?
- What did target learners (audiences) change, do, or gain as a result of the program?
- What improvements in the target issues resulted from the program?

¹ Stufflebeam, D.I., et al. 1971. *Educational Evaluation and Decision Making*. F. F. Peacock Pub., Itaska, Ill.

² Decker, D.J. and B.L. Yerka. 1990. *Organizational Philosophy for Program Evaluation*. Journal of Extension. Summer:28-29.

- Are the outcomes/impacts consistent with program purposes?
- Can the identified outcomes and impacts be explained by something other than the program? If so, can you identify the contribution of the program?
- Was the program efficient? (numbers reached, multipliers, relative impact, relative cost, leveraging of resources, etc.)

For those specifically interested in creating impact statements, I refer them to John Richardson's fine article *Developing and Communicating Effective Program Success Stories For Enhanced Accountability*.³

Even equipped with these tools, I found that many educators still were challenged in collecting and communicating information that spoke to the nature of and impact of their work. There was a missing ingredient that I didn't provide – practical political counsel.

While providing a workshop for educators to “strengthen impact documentation and communication,” I had the good fortune to team up with Dr. Michael P. Voiland, who recently returned to an extension assignment after a number of years working in the university public affairs office. I started the session with a conceptual outline similar to that above after which Dr. Voiland drew from his unique view of information needs of governmental decision makers at the state and federal levels. We included review of actual impact statements to suggest how impact communication could be strengthened. Here are a few of Voiland's key points.

Typical shortcomings of impact statements:

- Too long or short for intended use or user
- Short on context regarding why the program is important to society
- Written in buzzwords, jargon, acronyms, technical terms or occupational vernacular
- Focusing on activities and/or effort, not outcomes and impacts
- Extension's role is hidden, hard to discern
- Failure to come to closure, to make the point
- Claims without evidence and indicators
- Guesses, presumptions, or projections of outcomes or impacts without justification
- Over-reaching on impact; taking credit for too much

Guidance for writing impact statements:

³ Richardson, J.G. 1999. *Developing and Communicating Effective Program Success Stories For Enhanced Accountability*, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, NC State University

- **Who cares?** Impact statements need to provide the overarching social context of the work being carried out. What's the need or issue among the audience? What does society or government gain if the issue is resolved?
- **So what?** Impact statements need to articulate who or what changed for the better because of the program. Were there economic, business, cultural, civic, community, or individual improvements due to the program? Where did the program lead?
- **Who says?** Impact statements need to be less about claims, and more about documentation, solid estimates, and third-party testimonials.
- **And the point is?** Impact statements often do not hammer home the point, or relate that point to the social context.
- **Is this real now?** If expected impacts are mentioned, try to be definite and explicit on when results/impacts will occur.
- **And you are?** Impact statements should clearly note the educator's affiliation. Why is extension involved? What is the educator's role?
- **Who wants to know?** Ideally, impact statements should be tailored to individual audience. Impact statements for distribution to the public or use with public officials (especially those who may control allocation of public dollars) should stress societal, economic or policy benefits, and be short and to-the-point.
- **What's in it for me and mine?** In general, readers of impact statements will more easily relate to programs that impact them, their special interests, their "home turf," or those people they care most about. As such, good impact statements should be able to touch people where they live and mention the names of places where programs take place (or had impact).

The combination of evaluation theory and practical political counsel proved very effective for participating educators. The value of the comprehensive documentation and assessment approaches that I was pitching was apparent, as was the means for strengthening use of evaluation findings. Providing resources on assessing and communicating impact as a "package" created a powerful learning experience.

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