

Hi

It is good to be invited to talk with you. I am a little concerned about the fact that two questions deal with pressure. Why is pressure bothering you? Are people unrealistic in their expectations of you? If so, how can you help them be more realistic? Don't let them get you into chasing a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Help them realistically understand how little impact most programs have and yet remain very valuable. Or, if you are really affected by pressure, consider whether there is another job you would enjoy more. A feeling of great pressure often results in poor work and poor health.

Now for the questions. You will notice that I used the politician's approach of reinterpreting them to say what I want to say.

### **1. During the height of your evaluation activities, what pressures did you most feel?**

I'm sorry, but I do not recall feeling pressure. By the time my work assignment was evaluation, I was fairly along in my career and had tenure, thus felt secure. Basically, I am an independent kind of person and quietly did not permit any one or any situation to pressure me. I had a huge bump of curiosity and thoroughly enjoyed the amount of work that was involved in evaluation because I was finding out things. Resources were usually short. I found it a challenge to find ways to stretch them.

I was disappointed that people made very little use of the findings. I was especially disappointed that administrators wanted results to display externally rather than for program improvement. I seldom felt that the value of the use matched the cost involved--both time costs on the part of the people providing information and time costs for the evaluation staff. I thought that too much emphasis was placed on securing data and too little on interpreting and using data.

### **2. What pressures do you think evaluators now face that you're glad you didn't?**

I have no idea what pressures Extension evaluators are feeling today. Here are two that they might be facing. **(1)** It must be more difficult to get people to respond. I had the joy of using telephone interviews before telemarketing took hold. **(2)** A traditional and in my view outdated Skinnerian concept of Impact seems to have hardened into a mold which could be oppressive. It was hovering when I left. I could cope, but I felt it was extremely unrealistic so did some things in addition to that indicated by the prevailing impact concept.

I hope that those who commission evaluation have gotten away from a stimulus-response view of program results—that is, thinking that a program of their agency is the only stimulus affecting program participants and that there will be a direct, major “take” on the part of participants. There was a strong tendency on the part of Extension people to treat programs very simplistically without trying to understand the complex interactions involved. Agencies only looked at their programs from the agency’s point of view, which narrowed and concentrated the beam as though the program were a high powered spotlight. If one looked at the program from the participants’ standpoint, the light from the program often was very dim and diffuse in comparison to the other things that were going on in the person’s life. Unfortunately, agencies get caught up in a benevolent dictator stance, assuming that their agency always knows exactly what is good for everyone and the impact that they say they are aiming for is both appropriate and important in the eyes of potential participants.

I hope that you folks are free to explore the value of programs broadly rather than being only chained to specific program objectives. (Checking on the accomplishment of agency and participant objectives is useful, but it is just a small part of understanding the effects and value of a program)

I also hope that you are sharing results and have built a data base of “what it is reasonable to expect” as a result of how specific program inputs interact with participants of specific characteristics who are living or working in a specific context. It is only then that you can begin to find meanings in data and make them meaningful through interpretation. Look at “batting averages” (40% is great) as your rule of thumb for some programs rather than thinking in terms of A grades (80% or above).

### **3. What opportunities are available to contemporary evaluators that we should jump at more readily?**

**(1)** Learn all you can from the social sciences. Understand learners as thinking beings free to make their own decisions. Remember that program participants are human beings and not sheep. Explore the different ways people learn and the conditions under which people are living and working which affect how they make use of Extension programs. Get into some of the broader concepts of cognitive psychology and of the effect of emotion on learning and action. Emotion is now legitimate to many scientists. Become more aware of the effect of context and study program methodology to see what works in what situations. Really understand the complexity that you are working with rather than just making assumptions about the program and the participants and what the results should be. In addition, build an understanding of the effects of the specific elements in a program. What elements, if present, are likely to result in more valuable results than if they are missing? Help Extension personnel think about findings and explore how to improve the value of their work. Help them see value through the eyes of the participants and the community in addition through the professional eyes of the power structure in Extension.

(2) Keep up with developments in the computer field so that both qualitative and quantitative data are handled at peak efficiency and minds are free to think about the data.

(3) Refresh yourselves occasionally with speech and journalism workshops which help communicate findings and recommendations in such a way that they will be effective. Data have no value until minds understand and begin using them.

(4) Explore prevailing philosophy in terms of beliefs and assumptions about people, agency's roles, importance of various programs and objectives. Know the philosophy of your agency and where it came from. Know the philosophy that undergirds the program you are evaluating and what is expected of your evaluation position. Recognize different philosophies. Beliefs and assumptions can differ.

#### **4. If you had one advice for Extension in terms of impact evaluation, what would that be?**

Sorry, I can't keep it to one piece of advice. Here are two.

(1) Methodology. Learn how to involve others in interpreting findings in such a way that those findings enrich thought and action for further programming. When you have your findings, seek to answer the questions "Why?" (why this much), "How?" (how did the program accomplish this) "Where?" (where could it have done more?) and "What?" (what good or harm is done because of this program). Use findings to stimulate thinking and creativity. Keep in mind that it is through diverse interpretations that we learn the most. There usually is no one correct interpretation. Do not expect people to make decisions based upon one evaluative study. Encourage them to triangulate using that study, their own gut reactions, and other less scientific data sources.

(2) Conceptually. Place impact within a broader concept of value. What value did the impact have for whom? What value did the program have in addition to the impact that was achieved? Remember that there are many kinds of value. Economic value is only one. Sometimes isn't the most important value that a program can have. Sometimes a high impact program can have negative value. Impact is valuable only if it contributes something that is valuable to people and/or communities.

Impact evaluation techniques have been spelled out so well that many people can carry out good data methodology whether quantitative or qualitative. Today, professional evaluators' value rest in their knowledge of people and how they learn and adopt and adapt information, the knowledge of the effect of specific programming processes, and their knowledge of specific programs which results in the evaluators ability to help diverse audiences understand and use the results of program evaluation.

### **My Background:**

I am sufficiently beyond retirement that I have lost my resume so will only give a short bio. Probably the most important part of that bio is that I had an itch to know and was able to find ways to satisfy that itch. Which made me a natural for doing program evaluation. I had a joint resident and Extension appointment at the University of Wisconsin and taught both the evaluation course and some seminars exploring the nature of learning. Teaching made me learn about both subjects and enriched my perspective.

I started with Extension as a Home Economics Agent in 1952 and worked in two counties for three years each before completing my Ph.D. in Extension Education with minor in Rural Sociology. I retired in 1996 having worked in Wisconsin Extension for 44 years. I wrote a great deal, but very little of it was formally published and is presently available. Even the national impact study of volunteers and Extension I directed has disappeared from the scene. I probably was concentrating on program development by means of studies for the last 20 years of my work time.

**My email address is [smsteele@wisc.edu](mailto:smsteele@wisc.edu) if you want to interact with me on a one-to- one basis. Thank you for this opportunity. Enjoy the rest of the conversations.**

**Sara**

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This is part of “A Conversation With Key Evaluators” series sponsored by the EEE-TIG Board. We hope these conversations not only help us reflect on our practices but also encourage dialogue with other EEE-TIG members. Please send public comments to [eee-tig@ext.msstate.edu](mailto:eee-tig@ext.msstate.edu). If you have ideas for future “conversations” including individuals and/or topics of interest, please send a note to Mary Marczak at [marcz001@umn.edu](mailto:marcz001@umn.edu).