

A Conversation with Richard Krueger *Summer 2003*

A note from Nancy Grudens-Schuck

The board of the Extension Education Evaluation (EEE) TIG is pleased to present its second interview with an influential member, Richard (Dick) Krueger. Richard Krueger is Professor and Evaluation Leader with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. He is currently serving as President of the American Evaluation Association (AEA). He has spent 37 years in Extension, the first 12 years as a 4H agent and the last 25 years as an evaluator. Perhaps best known in evaluation for his guidance and teaching around use of focus group methodology, Dick struck us a person who would increase our understanding of the back-and-forth interactions between Extension evaluation and evaluation in other fields, as well as other hot topics. As the Midwest Representative on the EEE-TIG Board, I conducted the interview this summer by e-mail. Enjoy!

Q: How have Extension evaluators contributed to the evaluation community in general?

A: Extension evaluators were the first to get organized within AEA, and so the EEE-TIG [Topical Interest Group] has the longest tradition of any TIG. In fact the Extension evaluators were meeting as a subgroup several years before AEA launched TIGs.

In my opinion, Extension evaluators have contributed to the field of evaluation in the following ways:

1. Their enthusiasm for meeting, sharing and networking has been a model for AEA.
2. They have placed high value on practicality and usefulness.
3. They understand different types of governance and different needs of decision makers.
4. They are adaptive – they reinvent themselves regularly.
5. They have had strong mentors.

Q: In what specific ways has Extension evaluation influenced AEA?

A: Look at the work Midge Smith has done for professional improvement for evaluators---not just for Extension evaluators but for all evaluators. Or consider Claude Bennett. Claude has been a major blessing to Extension and to evaluation in general. His "levels of evidence" [theory] have been an effective way to communicate the decision choices that confront evaluators. It's highly transferable. Several Extension evaluators, such as Ellen Taylor-Powell, Satish Verma, and Milt Fuji have served with distinction as chairs of AEA committees. Molly Engle and Mike Patton have provided valuable leadership. This list goes on and it is clear that AEA has benefited by the presence of Extension evaluators.

Q: Earlier you said Extension evaluators are adaptive. Tell me more?

A: I'm not sure what causes the adaptation, but I see a flexibility in Extension evaluators that doesn't exist elsewhere. Maybe it is because our environments change and we must change as well. For example, I mentioned that I admire Midge Smith. Midge has reinvented herself several times and each time it has been better than the time before. Her *Evaluation Institute* has become a premiere training venue for evaluation. Or look at Mary Andrews. Mary is always doing something new. She's an evaluator, an administrator, and an international expert.

Q: Can you say something about your well known work with focus groups?

A: Extension has given me an opportunity to try out ideas and be innovative. My work with focus groups really began with Extension audiences. Extension provided me with a statewide laboratory in which I could develop and perfect materials relating to focus groups. But it became evident to me that I couldn't publish unless I broke out of Extension. Publishers just weren't interested in books relating to Extension. From their perspective, they wanted books that could serve wider audiences and Extension was just too small for them to be profitable. The first manuscript that I submitted on focus group interviewing was rejected because it mentioned Extension too many times and the reviewers had no idea what that meant. The point I'm making is that it is worthwhile for Extension Evaluators to develop and cultivate interests, contacts and networks OUTSIDE of Extension.

Q: What do you think about the way the use of focus groups has mushroomed?

A: I didn't expect it. Focus groups look easy, but they are hard to do. Too often people do focus groups without adequate preparation, training or thought and consequently the results can be flawed. They then blame focus groups, but it is really because it hasn't been done well. We need to remember that in qualitative research, the researcher is the "instrument." If that researcher isn't at his or her best, then the results will be of lesser quality.

Q: You've written several books, many of them on focus groups. What advice do you have about writing?

A: For me, writing is hard work and it takes time. Too many writers just don't spend the time to write well. They think the first, second or third draft is sufficient. I've written about 6 books and a number of chapters in other books. Nobody sees my first 3 drafts and then my wife helps on drafts 4 and 5, and at about the 6th draft the document is shared with an editor or colleague for comment. The 8th or 9th draft goes to the publisher. By the time it is published attention has been placed on every word or phrase of the document and the meaning is as clear as it possibly can be. I know colleagues who are better writers. Some can do it faster and in fewer drafts. I can't. I've had some valuable writing coaches along the way. Some have been Extension colleagues. In most states there are Extension campus editors and I've found these people to invaluable. I'd encourage Extension evaluators to stay in touch with these editors and learn from them.

Q: What's it like to be known, at least in evaluation circles, as the "focus group guru"?

A: I really don't feel like an expert because I'm always learning how to do focus groups better. I've also learned that each situation is slightly different and what works in one place might not work in another. It seems that the older I get the less I really know.

Q: What advice do you have for a beginning Extension evaluator?

A: Extension is going to change and it is uncertain what it might be like in the future. Consequently the role of the Extension evaluator will also change. Based on my experience, here are some things that come to mind:

1. Build on the strengths of Extension.

Consider the strengths of Extension. The people who work with Extension are terrific. They are dedicated, hard working, and concerned about people. Over the years I've worked with lots of campus and field staff and I feel I've learned more from them than what I've given them. It is a valuable asset to have talented staff around you. My Extension colleagues have been willing to pilot test my evaluation ideas and occasionally we have crashed and burned, but they always gave helpful, corrective feedback.

2. Perhaps Extension evaluators ought to concentrate on program improvement.

After 37 years in Extension I am still surprised that we occasionally offer weak or incomplete programs. Extension staff throughout the nation are quite qualified and talented and yet, some programs just don't make sense. Evaluators could help ensure quality through formative evaluation, logic models, needs assessment, and other processes.

3. Look for opportunities to use your skills outside of Extension.

The skills acquired as an Extension Evaluator can be transferred to many other environments and in this period of budget reductions that is important for all of us. Some of these other environments have far greater resources than does Extension. I've been able to use many Extension evaluation skills with other audiences. The applications change over time but the evaluation strategies stay constant. At certain times there is abundant money and considerable interest in prevention programs (tobacco, drugs, alcohol, violence, etc.) and at other times there are other emerging fields such as customer satisfaction, public health topics, national security, or organizational development. So my advice to the new Extension evaluator is to perfect your basic skills in evaluation and use your skills first in Extension but be ready to cross-over into other fields. I would argue that experience gained outside of Extension makes you a better evaluator for Extension. Perhaps some will become more like market researchers as we move toward fee-based services. In other situations Evaluators might be called upon to do more economic studies. Or, perhaps in some places evaluation and accountability will become one of the topics we offer local communities. There is no template that fits everyone.

Q: How would an Extension evaluator get outside work going?

A: There are some things that one can do to increase their visibility such as presenting papers, writing for journals or serving on AEA committees. Another valuable step is to make a deliberate effort to network with evaluation colleagues outside of Extension. Get to know other evaluators within your university and within your community and state. As an Extension evaluator I regularly get calls from the general public who are seeking evaluation help and I refer them to evaluation colleagues who have skills and experience. I find that these non-Extension evaluators then refer people to me when my expertise is needed.

I rarely ask permission to work outside of Extension. I just do it. I'm careful about the time commitments and I pay attention to the university guidelines on outside consulting. At my institution we are allowed one day per week and I see that as my time to spend on professional topics and projects of interest to me.

Q: What challenges are ahead for Extension evaluation?

A: The picture is changing rapidly due to budget reductions. Staff are being cut around the country and programs are being consolidated and reconfigured. This will affect evaluators and I would encourage Extension evaluators to seize the initiative and dream up ways to reinvent themselves. Why should we wait for someone to tell us how evaluators should operate?

Too often we are guilty of waiting for someone else to define the role of the evaluator. Then when it is defined, we don't like it because we feel it is confining and limited. I suggest that we take the initiative and reinvent our jobs as Extension Evaluators.

Q: Can you say something about the current emphasis on outcomes evaluation? I personally get asked to spend a lot of time on this.

A: There's more to evaluation than outcomes evaluation—much, much more. In recent years, Extension evaluators have helped propel impact and outcome evaluation. This has been of benefit, but it also represents a danger in that it is only one type of evaluation. Overemphasis on outcomes evaluation can be injurious to the health of Extension. We need a balanced diet from the evaluation cafeteria.

Q: What else might Extension evaluators do?

A: Evaluators might serve as program auditors. Perhaps Extension evaluation ought to become an independent external entity that serves more of an audit capacity. In this role we would periodically examine programs and products and serve to ensure that minimum levels of quality are present and that exceptional effort is identified and understood.

Evaluators could also help decision makers. Perhaps Extension evaluation ought to be linked closer to decision makers at the county or university levels. Counties are really struggling with evaluation at all levels – public health, social services, transportation, law enforcement, libraries, etc. Also, universities are having difficulty getting beyond mere counting of graduates and hours of seat [classroom] time. This is an area where Extension can show leadership.

Q: What's the most important lesson you learned as an Extension Evaluator?

A: I've learned the value of listening. By listening, I don't mean just hearing someone's voice, but instead the active listening, the leaning forward when someone talks, and paying close attention to the content. It's been my observation that many Extension colleagues just need someone to listen to their program plans. Evaluators tend to listen differently, because we're listening from a measurement perspective. As we listen we're thinking of evidence that can give us insight into the program. We listen for the logic of the program and pay attention to the need for follow-through and reinforcement. After listening we ask a few questions that hopefully gets the person to a more sophisticated level of programming.

Q: Closing comments?

A: Years ago I was riding with Pat Borich, who was then our director of Extension and a new program leader, to a meeting in northern Minnesota. The program leader was unfamiliar with Extension and asked the director, "What does the evaluation specialist do?" I was sitting in back seat. Naturally, I was rather interested in what the director might say. The director smiled and said, "Well, I don't really know what he does, but I can tell you this. He makes our program better. I'm not sure how it's done, but it is worthwhile and valuable to us as an organization." I then realized that much of what I did as an evaluator was invisible. In fact, when I was at my best, it was because I was successful in making others look good and in helping others get recognition for their program efforts. Often they would get hooked on evaluation and then it became a part of their normal program development.

Q: Dick, thanks very much. We are looking forward to the methods theme of the 2003 American Evaluation Association, your chosen topic as president. Best wishes!

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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. 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.