

Evaluating Small Farm Programming in North Carolina

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Introduction

Over the past 25 years, the Small Farm Program in the Cooperative Extension Program at NCA&TSU has experienced an evolution of its small farm evaluation process. The Farm Opportunities Program existed from 1972 until 1995 in terms of data collection. During that time, the focus of program evaluation was toward monitoring demographic data about program participants and the series of farm management educational programs that was being delivered to the farmer-participants over a several year period.

The reporting form used was the Benchmark Form. Approximately 300 were filled out and sent to the office per year. Initially there were serious data collection problems. Because there was no feedback loop, the numbers lacked credibility. There was no data verification or follow-up until the mid 1980's. Extension field faculty and farmers had questions about the use of the Benchmark Form until that time. It was only when data was shared back to the field faculty - data that was useful for both field faculty and farmers - that there was a basic buy-in from field faculty who also in the process validated the data they were supplying (O'Sullivan, annual Benchmark Form Reports, 1985-1995).

In 1996 the Cooperative Extension System in North Carolina (representing both Cooperative Extension at NCA&TSU and at NCSU) began a new Long Range Program build around Cooperative Extension Major Programs (CEMPs). This plan continues in use. Integrated into it is an electronic reporting system called the ERS (Extension Reporting System). This system lists evaluation objectives, measures of progress (MOPS), and impact indicators. In addition, success stories are also reported. The entire package is used to report successes to various stakeholders identified in a targeted marketing matrix (Richardson & O'Sullivan). The ERS can report outcomes of small farm programs to interested stakeholders at a moment's notice.

In 1988, Cooperative Extension at NCA&TSU received a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation called "Ways to Grow." It continued through 1994. As project

reporting vehicles, case studies were written describing the experiences of the 44 small farmers who tried different alternative enterprises. These case studies give information about production, marketing, specific project effort, plans, words of advice, and suggested resources for further information (Wechsler, 1995). These have proven to be very worthwhile evaluation reports, useful over a number of years to share information about the particular efforts of the farmers and to market the NCA&TSU program.

From 1994 until 1998 Cooperative Extension at NCA&TSU participated in another project funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, "Partners in Agriculture" (W. K. Kellogg Foundation). PIA was a coalition of seven partners and four community sites exploring sustainable agriculture and community development issues. The model used for evaluation in this project was collaborative cluster evaluation (internal and external). NCA&TSU was responsible for the internal evaluation of the project, which involved small farmers at several community sites. While the evaluation process was not as successful as it could have been - because of the failure to establish an agreed-upon evaluation plan - it did produce important outcomes. These included benchmark community overviews and an outside evaluation report. Finally the project results were disseminated to various publics through a video - which made a very compelling statement about the project experience in participants' own words.

Summary observations from these experiences evaluating small farm programs in North Carolina:

- Evaluation takes resources.
- Evaluation takes a plan - targeted (time, resource and focus) toward the expected uses of the evaluation.
- Evaluation needs buy-in by farmers and field staff.
- Evaluation needs an understood use by the farmers and field faculty. Both of these steps can be accomplished.
- Evaluation does not need to be conducted by outside experts, although technical assistance may be needed for planning, comparative perspective,

and specialty services such as videotaping.
· If the evaluation is not started, it won't ever get done.

A suggested model for successful evaluation design for small farm programs:

Recent presentations concerning a clear evaluation design for programs like a small farm program can be found in "Evaluation Voices: Promoting Evaluation From Within Programs Through Collaboration" (Evaluation and Program Planning 21, 1998, 21-29) and in "Advanced Topics in Conducting Collaborative Evaluations," presented in a pre-session of the American Evaluation Association annual meeting, November 3, 1999.

- A. Need for enhanced internal program evaluation must be clearly understood and agreed to throughout the system.
- B. Cluster evaluation - to ground the evaluation and minimize resource costs.
- C. Community voices build local resource skills, shared vision, and stakeholder understandings.
- D. Evaluation voices build evaluation expertise throughout the program with all stakeholders.
- E. The steps for a successful evaluation sequence within the cluster:
 1. Program purpose/outcomes formulated.
 2. Development of meaningful and answerable evaluation questions which can show achievement of the purpose or desired outcome.
 3. Implementation phase - gathering evidence of activities, programs (inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts as agreed to) (documentation and use of the data).
 4. Use appropriate and reasonable data collection techniques.

As can be readily judged, this approach of "evaluation" is different from "monitoring" or "accountability." These latter two activities are the traditional Extension processes of keeping track of inputs and the activities of an educational program. Those are still important in terms of accountability. However, if there is need to show outcomes or results, then a decision has to be made to move into a planned evaluation process such as described above. In this model, changes in the skills and behaviors of program participants need to be reported to show program successes. Results like that need program participants to share their experience.

That process can best be achieved by following the steps laid out above. This strategy has been used in a number of situations that are comparable to small farm educational outreach programs. These include community-based pre-school programs, school programs,

and "school to work" programs in North Carolina.

A "cluster" evaluation model brings together programs that have a common theme, place, or process. Within the "cluster," evaluation questions are agreed upon and evaluation steps, timetable, and other evaluation components are conducted in common. A "collaborative" evaluation is one in which program participants (as key "stakeholders") are engaged actively in the evaluation process. These approaches get beyond traditional reporting. It might include case studies or other types of qualitative reporting which help explain the context, process, and experiences learned. It might include the development of an evaluation fair so that different clusters or educational program leaders have the opportunity to share results and outcomes. Such efforts allow participants to learn from each other.

It is a new day for evaluation of small farm programs in Extension and elsewhere. Stakeholders want to learn about results and outcomes of programs. This requires evaluation collaboration, a clear evaluation plan, and resources to carry out the planned process. These all need to be in plan early on in the process. None of the steps needed are insurmountable. Evaluation is a learning experience.

References

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