

EXTENSION EVALUATION: EXTENSION GETS RESULTS

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The University of Minnesota's Agricultural Extension Service involves extension agents in each of Minnesota's 87 counties, hundreds of volunteers, and specialized university staff who provide in-depth assistance to county agents for local extension programs.

The county extension agent represents an open door into the university, the avenue by which Minnesotans statewide can obtain sound, unbiased results of university research and expertise. The link between counties and the university is important for solving problems, planning programs, and meeting the needs of Minnesota residents.

The connection recently has been particularly helpful to several agents working to evaluate their programs. County extension agents are responsible for developing and conducting educational programs. To do this, they must consider the many potential audiences and the priorities of the community; identify appropriate educational methods; develop the instructional content; and assess the consequences of the program.

The university has had a long tradition of using research and evaluation in the development of new crops, better diets for people and animals, animal management, housing, youth development and forest management, and other areas. With similar care and rigor, extension agents are now investigating the effectiveness of their county programs, assisted by specialists and administrators. Because of this linkage with university expertise, the agent can conduct a careful assessment of clientele needs, evaluate an existing program, or compare experimental or innovative programs to traditional educational methods. The information obtained from such studies is of particular interest to local decisionmakers who serve on program advisory committees or county extension committees.

"Interest in program evaluation is growing," says Dick Krueger, extension leader, program evaluation, "and not necessarily because of state or federal recommendations. Extension agents are evaluating programs because they sincerely want to provide the residents of Minnesota with the best possible extension programs."

"In Carver County, evaluation is like an insurance policy," says Jeanne Markell, Carver County extension agent and director. "It ensures that the programs we deliver are of quality. We are proud that our programs reflect quality, and evaluation is the tool we use to ensure that the program is on target."

Larry Tande, Steele County extension agent and director, says, "My co-workers and I have always been involved in a number of evaluations in the past several years. In some cases it simply confirmed that programs were already top quality. In other cases, however, it helped us decide to modify or drop ineffective programs. Our efforts are now more productive because we are placing our time and attention on programs that make a difference."

Greg Hutchins, extension district program leader and district director, comments: "Evaluation of county programs has helped us to be more accountable to local, state, and federal funders who are increasingly interested in whether they are getting their money's worth. Evaluation helps show that extension programs are worth the investment."

Evaluations focus on three areas. Most evaluation efforts of county extension staff answer one of these three questions:

- What are the needs of county residents?
- Do present extension programs work?

- Are alternative or innovative methods better than what we currently have?

Here are some examples of the evaluation efforts of county extension agents:

AGRICULTURE

Death of dairy calves is a problem that concerns many dairy farmers and veterinarians. Larry Zilliox, extension agent in agriculture in Douglas County, was particularly interested in identifying the extent of the problem as well as possible solutions. Dairy farmers provided conflicting accounts of the extent and causes of the situation. In conjunction with university specialists in dairy and evaluation and a district program leader in agriculture, Zilliox conducted a carefully designed survey of dairy farmers and concluded that while two-thirds of the dairy farmers were following correct procedures, about one-third needed corrective or additional management practices. In addition, he was able to identify specific practices most associated with calf death. The survey information has helped Zilliox plan and design educational programs for dairy farmers and to share the results with veterinarians, vocational agricultural instructors and other community agricultural professionals for use in their educational efforts.

In response to requests by Steele County farmers and agricultural lenders for more information about grain marketing, Tim Arlt, county extension agent, agriculture, worked with an extension agricultural economist to present a series of introductory seminars in grain marketing, covering terminology, cash grain sales, forward contract, hedging, basis fix contract, feed to livestock, and government programs. Follow-up evaluation 11 months after the seminars showed that while 71% of the participants felt the program was excellent, only 39% had actually changed their marketing plans, and the level of understanding of the principles had dropped to about one fourth over the initial understanding. Arlt, concluding that more education is needed on hedging, futures markets, and basis fix contracts, is incorporating these needs into planning for future marketing education programs in the county.

Dary Talley, area extension agent for farm management in Lamberton, works with several farmers in the Southwest Farm Management Association, an organization which helps members develop good farm financial management practices. In assisting participants with farm income tax planning in 1983, Talley decided to evaluate its importance within an overall management plan. Following his usual procedure, he visited each farm twice that year to review records, and in November sat down with individuals to do the actual planning. In a survey of 82 participants on 75 farms, he found that average tax cash savings increased significantly per person as a result of tax planning, and concluded that farmers and tax practitioners who deal with farmers should be encouraged to implement tax planning as part of the management of the farm.

A few years ago university specialists and county agents developed a correspondence course in crops and soils to reach farmers unable to attend meetings. Anne Rabideau, Chisago County extension agent in agriculture, evaluated the correspondence course one year after it was completed to determine whether changes were actually made by those participating in the course. The results indicated that farmers ranked the course highly; they reported that they had applied and used the information, considered the course of value, and felt that their individual questions were answered. Over 58 percent of the farmers were able to pinpoint something in particular they had obtained from the course. As a result of the evaluation, this method of instruction will be made more widely available throughout the state.

HOME ECONOMICS/FAMILY LIVING

Ann Bosch, Kandiyohi County extension agent in home economics/family living, was concerned

about meeting the needs of county residents in her program area. With technical assistance from university specialists and a small grant from the Agricultural Extension Service, Bosch developed an extensive survey of 300 county residents. Analysis revealed that residents had high interest in money management and family health. The preferred delivery method was newspapers, followed closely by newsletters, publications, and meetings. As a result of the study Bosch was able to identify and provide specific programs of greatest need.

Stretching the food dollar is an important concern throughout Minnesota and a variety of methods are available to teach the concepts. Peggy Sloan, Crow Wing County extension agent, recently evaluated two different teaching methods in a program offered in Aitkin, Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd, and Wadena counties. One method used the traditional leader training approach, where volunteers were taught and then asked to teach others in small groups. (This program, Extension Homemaker Study Groups, has been popular within extension home economics for a number of years.) The second method was a correspondence course on the same topic targeted towards a similar audience -- young families, especially those who have reduced income or are unemployed. Sloan concluded that both methods were effective in helping families reduce food costs. The correspondence method resulted in larger savings for participants, \$107 annually versus \$67 for the traditional leader training method. Participants in the correspondence course were able to make greater changes than those in the leader training series; however, the correspondence course had higher costs for instruction. As a result of the evaluation, both methods will be continued, with additional emphasis on future correspondence courses.

Although window coverings can affect your energy bill, many people select window treatments without regard to energy efficiency. Linda Jacobson, Steele County extension agent in home economics/family living, conducted a series of workshops in southeast Minnesota on this topic. The series, part of extension's Living Resourcefully program, consisted of making conventional window treatments more energy efficient by sealing edges and sides of draperies, and using roller shades, drapery linings, and heavier drapery fabrics. Four months after the session, Jacobson surveyed the participants on the changes they had made. She found that 61 percent of the participants had used the ideas presented and everyone was satisfied with the results. In addition, the people attending the session had shared the information with an average of four additional people.

4-H AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Does 4-H appeal to kids ages 11-13? This was the question asked by Laurel Swanson, Redwood County extension agent in 4-H. After consultation with a university evaluation specialist and her district program leader, Swanson developed a 4-H club survey which was conducted by teen volunteers in Redwood County. The study led to a series of recommendations to encourage youth to stay in 4-H, including providing more social activities with project learning, additional assistance with 4-H records, leader training in the awards program, and increased sensitivity to the individual differences of youth.

Kathleen Sperry, Nobles County 4-H extension agent, recently completed an in-depth assessment of 4-H junior leaders, the teens who volunteer time to assist with club and county programs. A key question in the study was why some teens were involved in the program when others were not. Could something be done to make the volunteering more satisfying for those who were not very involved? Following a series of individual interviews with teens, Sperry concluded that the inactive teens often did not clearly understand what was expected of them, were shy or afraid to be involved, and received little or no encouragement to assist with the program. Using this information Sperry developed a series of steps for agents and volunteer adult leaders to help both adults and teens understand expectations for teen volunteers. Sperry consulted university faculty with expertise in youth development and evaluation for the study.



Competition among 4-H clubs, while intended to be positive, sometimes has negative effects. Bob Quinlan, East Polk County extension agent, 4-H, was concerned about the impact of competing for the honor 4-H club award, which emphasizes club participation, attendance, community activities, and other areas. With the help of university specialists, he surveyed teen and adult volunteers for their opinions regarding this competitive situation, and concluded that in this case the award was a positive asset to the program, providing motivation and encouragement for youth. With minor modifications, the awards will become available to clubs of all sizes on a trial basis, and the program will be reassessed after a suitable period of time.

COMMUNITY AND NATURAL RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Women in East Otter Tail County have been concerned about their involvement in various levels of government. The extension agent, Vickie Paurus, decided to conduct a telephone survey of county women to find out exactly what they wanted. The survey indicated the women were most concerned about governmental issues such as how to lobby, how to find out what issues will be coming up for vote, and how elected officials voted on issues of interest. The survey data were used to plan a series of seminars for women that focused precisely on their interests.

Getting started in a small business is difficult, especially perhaps for women. Romell Buer, Meeker County extension agent with responsibilities in community development, decided to explore the issue and sought university assistance in identifying knowledgeable local residents. The resulting study was a network analysis of Meeker County women who have started small businesses in which areas of local expertise on the topic and the extent of communication among people with similar needs were identified. The process also helped persons with particular skills in developing successful small businesses. Buer is finding results of the analysis helpful as she plans future educational opportunities on the topics.

These examples are only a few of the evaluation and research projects recently conducted by county extension staff. In all cases the emphasis was to obtain sound information with practical application in the county. In some counties the results were immediately and directly applicable; in others, additional planning or revisions of the program were required before it could be implemented.

Patrick J. Borich, director of the Agricultural Extension Service, encourages county extension agents to pursue evaluation activities. Borich says, "We are committed to providing excellent programs to the residents of Minnesota. We also realize that we are human, and some of our programs need improvement. Attention to evaluation is important, because it helps us identify what needs to be changed or improved and how to better reach the citizens of Minnesota."

County agents are encouraged to submit copies of the evaluation results to the university. These reports are kept on file for use by other staff members contemplating evaluation of similar topics: