How do I determine what extension programs to evaluate?

The work of an extension professional is multi-faceted and time and resources can feel stretched, so it is not practical, or even valuable, to evaluate every aspect of extension programming. This fact requires you to make decisions about what extension programs to evaluate.

Whether we realize it or not, all programs are already being evaluated to some extent. Often extension professionals evaluate programs informally as they pay attention to casual feedback and their own observations. However, a more concerted effort towards program evaluation is valuable and/or necessary in other situations and requires a thoughtful process of identifying evaluation questions, collecting appropriate information, and analyzing and reporting the results. Since a formal evaluation cannot be done for each and every aspect of extension programs, it can be helpful to think through two types of considerations.

First, consider the value and usefulness you expect from the information you gather. Evaluation information can be valuable when it is required, as it often is for reporting purposes. If a program you deliver meets the specified outcomes of your Program Focus Team, it would be important to make sure you evaluate this program. If another program is funded by a special grant, grant funders frequently require reports that include evaluation information about specific programmatic impacts.

Program evaluation is valuable and useful in other situations as well. If you are delivering a new program, especially one you hope to deliver again, evaluating the program can help you refine the program and make it more effective. For similar reasons, you may have an established program, but you want to determine how to improve it or how to adapt it for a new setting or format. You may also choose to evaluate a program to demonstrate its worth to stakeholders.

Second, it is important to balance consideration about the value and usefulness of evaluation with consideration about the feasibility of conducting one. You should think about costs of required resources, including monetary costs and staff time for collecting and working with data. Some programs have evaluation instruments already developed that include instructions for collecting and processing the data. These steps can considerably reduce the resources required for evaluation, making the evaluation more practical.

You should also consider the program format. If your program consists of a one-time workshop, for example, it could be challenging to include a formal evaluation activity and the collected data may be of little value. If your program involves a series of sessions, it may be more resourceful to evaluate the program at particular time-points, like the beginning and the end, than after every session, or by involving a carefully selected participant sample rather than every participant.
New initiatives and pilots have uncertainties as well as high potential. These programs need to be better understood in order to optimize or replicate any success.

Programs that have potential for large benefits or appear to be cost-effective, and the return on investment is unknown.

Programs phasing out can be closely evaluated for best practices and valuable insights to be applied in successor initiatives.

One-time events such as guest speakers, or topical workshops may only need a simple follow-ups.

Is the value or utility of the knowledge you hope to gain proportional to the cost of conducting the evaluation?

Are you evaluating to improve the quality of your program? To document the impact of your program? Or, to determine what works, why, and in what context?

It is important to take stock of the resources available. OEIE is only one of several resources at Kansas State University that can help with the evaluation process.