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Perception of Current and Ideal Practices Related to Public Value in Extension

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Abstract

Extension professionals are increasingly encouraged to engage in practices that can advance the public value movement. It is unclear, however, whether recommended practices related to public value are being adopted. In 2014, 235 Extension professionals at Mississippi State University responded to an organizational capacity survey that included questions on public value practices. Research described here explored discrepancies between current and ideal public value practices among Extension professionals. Paired-samples t-tests revealed statistically significant discrepancies between current and ideal public value practices. The findings can inform efforts by Extension professionals seeking to increase awareness and practices related to public value.

Disciplines

Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Leadership | Higher Education | Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education | University Extension

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Abstract

Extension professionals are increasingly encouraged to engage in practices that can advance the public value movement. It is unclear, however, whether recommended practices related to public value are being adopted. In 2014, 235 Extension professionals at Mississippi State University responded to an organizational capacity survey that included questions on public value practices. Research described here explored discrepancies between current and ideal public value practices among Extension professionals. Paired-samples *t*-tests revealed statistically significant discrepancies between current and ideal public value practices. The findings can inform efforts by Extension professionals seeking to increase awareness and practices related to public value.

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Over the last decade, professionals in Cooperative Extension have consistently stated a need to identify the public value of their educational programs, or "the value of a program to those who do not directly benefit from the program" (Kalambokidis & Bipes, 2007, p. 12). Foundational articles on the public value of Extension have challenged Extension professionals to measure and communicate the benefit of Extension programs to individuals who do not participate in Extension efforts as well as to articulate the benefits of these programs to society as a whole (Franz, 2011, 2013; Kalambokidis, 2004). In a relatively short time, strategies that can advance practices related to public value have been provided. For example, frameworks for clarifying the relationship between public value and Extension evaluation have been published (Chazdon & Paine, 2014). Innovative evaluation methods and communication templates that focus heavily on public benefits have been developed and diffused (Boyer et al., 2009; Emery, Higgins, Chazdon, & Hansen, 2015).

One of the most beneficial contributions reported in the literature was the identification of practices that can help Extension systems transition from defining private value (i.e., the value of Extension programs to clientele) to also defining public value. Franz (2011) recommended applying practices that included (a) understanding the difference between public and private value; (b) collecting evaluation data that can identify the economic, environmental, and social benefits of Extension programs; and (c) explicating Extension efforts in terms of public value, specifically to external stakeholders. In response to these recommendations, Extension systems have focused on "organizational, professional, program, and scholarship development that promotes determining, measuring, and sharing Extension's public value" (Franz, 2015b, p. 15).

Despite noteworthy progress, the extent to which Extension professionals engage in recommended practices related to public value has not been documented. Nor has the literature documented whether Extension professionals perceive that ideally they would engage in such efforts.

Organizational Change Related to Public Value

Extension has continually had to evolve and adapt to meet the needs of organizational stakeholders (Franz, 2015a). Positive changes, such as a more diverse audience, volunteerism, campus expectations, and rapid technological innovation, as well as negative changes, such as economic declines and/or changing funding channels and accountability, require Extension to continuously change (Brunns & Franz, 2015; Morse, 2009; Smith & Torppa, 2010). The call to articulate Extension's public value could be considered a response to ongoing changes experienced and challenges encountered (Franz, 2015b; Kalambokidis, 2004; Morse, 2009).

Previous changes in Extension provide evidence that organizational transformation is often met with resistance and apprehension by professionals within the organization (Holz-Clause, Koundinya, Franz, & Borich, 2012). Fear and resistance arise when employees are asked to charge more for services and programs, when positions and responsibilities are changed or cut due to restructuring, and when emotion drives nostalgic notions of the organization's structure, purpose, and programs (Morse, 2009).

In an effort to understand the current status of organizational transformation related to public value, Extension evaluation specialists at Mississippi State University (MSU) Extension initiated a project that explored public value practices in MSU Extension. As part of a broader assessment of the organization, evaluation specialists developed survey items intended to assess Extension professionals' engagement in practices related to public value. Development of the survey items was the first step toward quantifying such practices. After the survey items were developed and administered, evaluation specialists could document participants' perceptions about practices they currently employ and practices they ideally would employ.

Methods

In 2014, Extension evaluation specialists conducted an organizational capacity survey (OCS) of MSU Extension professionals, including specialists, agents, administrators, and instructors. The purpose of the OCS was to explore the organization's current state and areas for improvement while Extension went through a series of organizational changes. Evaluation specialists administered the Qualtrics electronic survey May through June 2014. Four hundred seventy-four MSU Extension professionals were invited to participate through a series of emails. The MSU Extension director sent an introductory email to notify potential participants that they would be invited to participate in the OCS. Next, an evaluation specialist sent an invitation email that included a link to the survey. The same evaluation specialist sent a reminder email to potential participants 1 week and 2 weeks after the initial recruitment email was distributed. A total of 235 MSU Extension professionals participated in the survey for a response rate of 50%.

Survey Instrument

Thirty-six questions assessed Extension professionals' perceptions of how MSU Extension was performing and ideally should be performing on five organizational components: (a) Extension's vision and commitment, (b) plan of work, (c) working relationships, (d) diversity and pluralism, and (e) public value. Items related to plan of work and public value were newly developed for the current OCS. Items in other components were slightly

modified from the Extension's Capacity to Support Programs for Children, Youth, and Families at Risk organizational change survey (Betts, Peterson, & Roebuck, 2003) to be inclusive of all Extension program areas, not just Family and Consumer Sciences.

Strategies that Franz (2011) identified as ways to enhance Extension's public value were phrased as 20 statements in the OCS (Table 1). The statements described 10 current and 10 ideal public value strategies. The dual statements allowed evaluation specialists to explore discrepancies between a respondent's perception of the way things are and his or her perception of the way things should be. Results from such comparisons can uncover areas of organizational and/or professional development (Betts et al., 2003). Respondents were asked to select level of agreement with each statement by using a 5-point Likert-type scale (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). Face validity of the public value scale was established through expert review, with minor revisions made on the basis of expert recommendations. Cronbach's alpha was .782 for the "current" public value items and .865 for the "ideal" public value items.

Table 1.
Public Value Survey Items

Item pair	Current practice	Ideal practice
Pair 1	I decide whether or not to continue offering a program based on its ability to result in economic, environmental, and/or social benefits to the public, not just Extension clients.	I should decide whether or not to continue offering a program based on its ability to result in economic, environmental, and/or social benefits to the public, not just Extension clients.
Pair 2	I communicate to policy makers and other community leaders the benefits of Extension programs to clients.	I should communicate to policy makers and other community leaders the benefits of Extension programs to clients.
Pair 3	When thinking about the benefits of Extension, I distinguish between benefits that clients experience and benefits to the public.	When thinking about the benefits of Extension, I should distinguish between benefits that clients experience and benefits to the public.
Pair 4	I communicate to policy makers and other community leaders the benefits of Extension programs to the public.	I should communicate to policy makers and other community leaders the benefits of Extension programs to the public.
Pair 5	I engage the public to identify needs not currently being addressed by Extension programs.	I should engage the public to identify needs not currently being addressed by Extension programs.
Pair 6	I decide whether or not to offer a program based on its ability to result in economic,	I should decide whether or not to offer a program based on its ability to result in economic,

	environmental, and/or social benefits to the public, not just Extension clients.	environmental, and/or social benefits to the public, not just Extension clients.
Pair 7	I have evidence of at least two reasons why Extension is valuable to the public, not just clients.	I should have evidence of at least two reasons why Extension is valuable to the public, not just clients.
Pair 8	I conduct evaluations that demonstrate changes in clients' knowledge, attitudes, and/or behaviors.	I should conduct evaluations that demonstrate changes in clients' knowledge, attitudes, and/or behaviors.
Pair 9	I conduct evaluations that demonstrate changes in economic, environmental, and/or social conditions that affect the public.	I should conduct evaluations that demonstrate changes in economic, environmental, and/or social conditions that affect the public.
Pair 10	I communicate needs identified by the public to policy makers and other community leaders.	I should communicate needs identified by the public to policy makers and other community leaders.

In brief, the statements clustered around engaging the public to identify needs; deciding whether or not to offer a program on the basis of its ability to affect economic, environmental, or social indicators; and communicating the public value of programming to stakeholders. Survey items related to public value were reviewed by an Extension expert on the topic and revised as recommended.

The analysis addressed in this article is limited to items in the OCS related to public value. Evaluation specialists used descriptive statistics to compare statements of current public value practices and statements of ideal public value practices. Next, the mean was calculated for each current practice statement and ideal practice statement, with a mean ranging from 1 to 5. Discrepancy scores were calculated for each of these items by subtracting the mean response to the ideal practice statement item from the mean response to the current practice statement item. The discrepancy scores revealed the size and direction of gaps between respondents' perceptions of current and ideal practices. Finally, a paired-samples *t*-test was calculated to assess whether the discrepancy between each current practice and its related ideal practice was statistically significant.

Participant Characteristics

Participants were primarily in the age categories of 36–40 years (17%), 41–45 years (17%), and 51–55 years (17.5%). The majority of participants (79%) were White, and just over half of the participants (55%) were male. The majority of participants (53%) had a primary responsibility in agriculture and natural resources. Other participants had a primary responsibility in family and consumer sciences (22%), 4-H youth development (22%), and community development (12%). The vast majority of participants (86%) held a

graduate degree. The efforts of almost half of the participants (45%) were primarily focused on county Extension programming. Remaining participants' programming efforts were at the state level (39%), regional level (10%), or multicounty level (6%). A quarter of the participants (25%) had been employed by Extension for 1–5 years. Other participants had been employed by Extension for 6–10 years (23%) or for more than 20 years (19%). At least one Extension professional from each of the counties in the state participated.

Findings

The majority of participants reported performing almost every practice related to public value that was presented in the survey. For example, 84% of participants reported engaging the public to identify community needs, 83% of participants reported communicating the public benefits of Extension to policy makers and community leaders, and 80% of respondents reported having evidence of two reasons why Extension is valuable to the public, not just clients. Fewer participants (54%) reported conducting evaluations that demonstrate changes in economic, environmental, and/or social conditions that affect the public. Similarly, less than half the participants (49%) reported distinguishing between the benefits clients experience and the benefits the public experiences from Extension.

Although the majority of participants reported that they currently perform practices related to public value, even more participants stated that ideally they would perform these practices. For example, 93% of respondents reported that ideally they would engage the public to identify needs, and 91% reported that ideally they would communicate the public benefits of Extension to policy makers and community leaders. Additionally, over three fourths of the participants (77%) ideally would conduct evaluations that demonstrate changes in economic, environmental, and/or social conditions that affect the public. Once again, fewer respondents (59%) reported that ideally they would distinguish between the benefits clients experience and the benefits experienced by the public.

There was a discrepancy between the means for each pair of current and ideal practices related to public value. The amount of discrepancy varied from practice to practice, but the "ideal" mean was higher than the "current" mean for every practice related to public value. The highest discrepancy score ($M = -.608$) was related to conducting evaluations that demonstrate a change in economic, environmental, and/or social conditions that affect the public. The lowest discrepancy scores ($M = -.197$) were for deciding whether or not to offer a program based on its ability to result in economic, environmental, and/or social benefits to the public and having evidence of at least two reasons why Extension is valuable to the public. As shown in Table 2, the differences between the current mean and ideal mean were statistically significant for each practice.

Table 2.
Public Value Survey Items Paired-Samples *t*-Tests (Current Practices/Ideal Practices)

Survey item (abbreviated)	Current practice	Ideal practice	Discrepancy score	<i>t</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	
I decide whether to continue offering a program based on its ability to result in economic, environmental, and/or social benefits to the public, not just Extension clients.	3.82 (.840)	4.03 (.854)	-.209 (.643)	-4.436***

I communicate to policy makers and community leaders the benefits of Extension programs to clients.	4.08 (.783)	4.42 (.667)	-.338 (.704)	-6.817***
When I think about the benefits of Extension, I distinguish between benefits that clients experience and benefits to the public.	3.29 (1.019)	3.60 (1.121)	-.313 (.700)	-6.293***
I communicate to policy makers and community leaders the benefits of Extension programs to the public.	4.06 (.749)	4.39 (0.707)	-.328 (.715)	-6.508***
I engage the public to identify needs not currently being addressed by Extension programs.	4.01 (.680)	4.36 (.642)	-.350 (.671)	-7.381***
I decide whether or not to offer a program based on its ability to result in economic, environmental, and/or social benefits to the public, not just Extension clients.	3.90 (.866)	4.10 (.869)	-.197 (.636)	-4.241***
I have evidence of at least two reasons why Extension is valuable to the public, not just clients.	4.11 (.782)	4.31 (.728)	-.197 (.555)	-5.063***
I conduct evaluations that demonstrate changes in clients' knowledge, attitudes, and/or behaviors.	3.75 (.945)	4.22 (.846)	-.476 (.848)	-7.721***
I conduct evaluations that demonstrate changes in economic, environmental, and/or other social conditions that affect the public.	3.45 (.922)	4.06 (.902)	-.608 (.873)	-9.367***
I communicate needs identified by the public to policy makers/community leaders.	3.78 (.827)	4.25 (.699)	-.476 (.809)	-8.089***

*** $p < .001$

Implications

The study described here was an initial attempt for MSU Extension to quantify public value practices as well as a preliminary effort to identify discrepancies related to the perceptions of current and ideal practices. Results indicate that some employees perceive that there is room for improvement in the system's public value efforts.

Franz (2015b) highlighted steps Extension should take to advance public value efforts. Many of these strategies directly relate to development of Extension professionals. In the study described here, some of the discrepancies identified are areas where program and staff development specialists could focus efforts, in collaboration with administrators and other support units, to increase awareness and practices related to public value. These efforts would directly align with Franz's suggestion to expand professional development with a focus on public value for Extension professionals. Examples of professional development could include offering face-to-face seminars during in-service training, moderating periodic webinars, and/or hosting an annual conference that focuses on building the capacity of Extension professionals so that they are prepared to perform practices related to public value. Additional efforts could focus on introducing newly hired Extension employees to public value concepts and practices.

Ideally, the OCS, including the public value questions described here, should be repeated every 3 to 5 years to document whether Extension professionals are increasingly engaging in public value practices and whether

they consistently perceive that ideally they would perform such practices. Repeated surveys could identify organizational trends as conversation about public value continues and professional development strategies are implemented.

Conclusions

Extension professionals will continue to play one of the most important roles in advancing the public value of the organization. It is hoped that the preliminary evidence presented here suggesting that many public value practices are perceived as *ideal* will translate into widespread adoption of such practices by Extension professionals. Diffusion of these practices is essential to Extension's being able to respond to diverse needs of individuals, families, and communities.

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