



Documenting Impacts of Extension Programs

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Impact

Documenting “impact” is central to an Extension professional’s career.

Impact reporting tools and training sessions may focus on the requirements and logistics of the act of reporting. However, the importance of measuring impact extends beyond reporting requirements to the central mission of extension programs. If you know how to document impact, you know how to develop impactful programs, and that is the ultimate professional goal.

Defining Extension Terms

We use a lot of terms in Extension – activities, inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts—to describe a process by which we are trying to elicit a beneficial change in our target audience. Essentially, we put in time and effort (inputs) to develop programs and content (outputs), that are used by our stakeholders (outcomes) to help them improve their farming operations (impacts). Fundamental to these is their timeline – inputs, outputs, and outcomes can come quickly, but true impact takes time.

Outputs and Outcomes versus Impacts

As professionals, we have often confused (or masqueraded) outputs and outcomes with impacts, because of short reporting timelines. Outputs and outcomes often have easy-to-collect numbers and metrics. Impact tracking takes more intentional effort. As such, we focus on reporting the *number* of activities, inputs and outputs. But just because we are busy with outputs – hosting a workshop, writing a paper, delivering a presentation – doesn’t mean those efforts were used by our stakeholders to make an on-farm change. Busy does not mean impactful and being impactful doesn’t mean you have to be overly busy. You just need to be intentional.

A Program versus Your Program

The flow of extension activities can occur at the microlevel, such as developing an individual presentation, or workshop (and individual project, or program). You plan for the presentation, you determine what you want to cover and why, you develop the presentation (inputs), and you deliver the presentation (outputs), and maybe, you get post-presentation feedback from the attendees (outcomes). It can also occur at the macrolevel (“Your Program”, or what your expertise is known for), where we intentionally develop a curriculum with several components (inputs) that are delivered over time (outputs), adjusted based on feedback and use (outcomes), and then reflected upon to determine if the change you wanted to see happened (impact).

Impacts to Document

Since documenting impacts is an intentional process, before you deliver a program, or develop Your Program, you need to identify what you consider an impactful change. This will help formulate the types of information or data you will need to gather, and the timelines for when those data need to be gathered.

Short-Term: Knowledge Change

Documenting short term impacts is often easy to accomplish for most extension programming. Short-term impacts tend to center around changes in the target audience's knowledge, awareness, opinions, or motivations. Most extension programs gather these data with post-event surveys that document self-reported changes by the target audience.

Medium-Term: Behavior Change

Changes in how stakeholders respond to a situation or a challenge, as a direct result of the information or skills they have learned, is the natural follow-up for evaluating broader programmatic impacts. This behavior change is likely a result of attendance at a series of workshops, or exposure to other Extension and outreach outputs over a period of time.

Because of the longer timescale, assessing program impacts for these types of behavioral changes is often reflective, occurring after a multi-year project or effort. Therefore, these assessments typically involve surveys with broader reach, which may have quantitative and qualitative aspects, or through analyzing publicly available data sets on certain farming or business activities.

Long-Term: Societal Changes

Changes related to economics, governmental policy or regulation, social acceptance or normalization, and general social improvements are considered societal changes. These data are typically gathered from publicly available data sets on certain farming or business activities or by monitoring policy / regulation / social norms that may have fundamentally shifted and that could be attributed in part to the action of your program.

Example Survey Questions – Short Term

- What is 1 (or more) thing you learned from today's lesson / workshop / field day?
- Do you feel more confident in X after attending today's lesson?
- Do you feel your level of understanding or awareness of X has increased after attending today's lesson? (This could also be quantitative).
- Do you have the tools and feel prepared to teach X to a colleague or intern?

Example Survey Questions – Medium Term

- What is one (or more) thing you will change on your farm as a result of attending this (or series of) activities?
- Identify a practice you now conduct on your farm, that you didn't do X years ago. What made you adopt this practice?
- What resources do you use prior to making an on-farm decision or change?
- Who do you communicate with (internally and externally) when making an on-farm decision?

Example Data to Monitor – Long Term

- Public records such as farm pesticide / fertilizer / other product use (county or state-specific), crop production information (state or NASS)
- Private records such as farm pesticide / fertilizer / other product use
- History (through record comparison) of local, state, or federal policy changes and rule-making rational
- Formal economic surveys (academic) or commodity-specific Economic Impact analyses (private-company funded)

Conclusion

Fundamentally, to successfully document impact takes time and planning. This involves budgeting resources to collect short- and medium-term impact through the course of the program and revisiting long-term impacts at the appropriate time scale. Planning should include clearly defining the types of resources, activities, and response data needed to effectively elicit, and then demonstrate impact in your target stakeholders.

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Resources

Program Development and Evaluation. The University of Wisconsin-Madison, Division of Extension. [Online]:
<https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/programdevelopment/>. Accessed 23 January 2025. *This is an absolute must-bookmark website for any Extension professional.*

Program Evaluation Resources – Training Materials. Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station. [Online]:
<https://njaes.rutgers.edu/evaluation/resources/training-materials.php>. Accessed 28 February 2025. *This is a comprehensive resource list, including many items from the University of Wisconsin listed above.*

Adedokun, O.A. 2023. Identifying Extension Program Outcomes. University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension, Program and Staff Development. PSD #101. [Online]:
<https://psd.ca.uky.edu/sites/psd.ca.uky.edu/files/PSD%20101.pdf>

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