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Program Evaluation Competencies of Extension Professionals: Implications for Continuing Professional Development

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As states face tough economic times, extension organizations are increasingly emphasizing the importance of evaluation data to show program value. However, little is known about the evaluation skills and abilities of extension professionals expected to collect such data. This knowledge would help inform professional development opportunities designed to target evaluation–related deficiencies. A needs assessment was conducted with Georgia extension professionals to determine the evaluation competencies that provided the greatest opportunity for professional development. Results highlighted competencies within two constructs, analyzing questionnaire data and disseminating evaluation findings, which accounted for seven of the top 10 competencies with the greatest need. The continuing professional development needs of agents varied based on primary program area and experience level, indicating a need for even more targeted continuing professional development. Agents with five or fewer years of experience needed the most professional development in the areas of data collection whereas agents with more experience needed assistance with data analysis and reporting. Continuing professional development to build evaluation competencies in Georgia extension educators should also vary depending on the primary programming responsibilities of the participating extension professional. Although extension professionals with primary responsibilities in Agriculture and Natural Resources needed the most assistance with analyzing questionnaire data, those with primarily 4–H responsibilities needed help disseminating evaluation findings in reports.

Keywords: program evaluation; extension agent professional development; evaluation competencies

Introduction/Literature Review

Decisions about educational program value require impact data. Program evaluation is the process of collecting data to inform such decisions (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). As state Cooperative Extension units tighten their financial belts to compensate for reductions in funding, determining the value of programs and justifying the use of program resources through evaluation becomes an even more relevant and important practice. Program evaluation also provides data that can inform changes to existing, established programs or justify the development of new programs better targeted to client needs (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002).

Program evaluation is as much a practice as it is a skill, requiring on the job continuing professional development or formal classroom training as part of a degree program. In a study to improve extension–related curriculum, nationally recognized extension experts believed that entry–level extension professionals need to be competent in evaluating programs (Harder, Place, & Scheer, 2010). Others argue that program evaluation competencies should be taught to pre–service nonformal educators during graduate school (Dewey, Montrosse,

Schroter, Sullins, & Mattox, 2008). Building program evaluation competencies in nonformal educators like 4–H extension agents through professional development opportunities early in their careers has recently become a national top priority (Arnold et al., 2008). Although building evaluation–related skills in extension personnel is a national need, extension educators may lack interest in evaluating their activities and programs (Lekies & Bennett, 2011).

As adult learning theory suggests, this lacking interest may be caused by a lack of positive, prior experiences with evaluation or professional development opportunities tied to specific evaluation–related needs (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The ability to rigorously collect data on the outcomes (changes in participant knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors) and impacts (changes in societal, economic, and environmental conditions) of extension programs has become a skill of increased significance to extension educators in the field and extension specialists at the university. However, before decisions about program value or change can be made using evaluation data, and before professional development opportunities can be targeted to address the specific needs of extension professionals, their ability to collect, analyze, summarize, and make decisions using such data must be determined.

As evaluating the effectiveness of extension programs is critical for program improvement, so too is assessing the evaluation competencies needed by extension professionals. What skills are most necessary for these nonformal educators who evaluate their own programs? Lamm and Israel (2011) suggested that an increased emphasis on evaluation skill development for extension professionals is needed. Numerous resources have been developed to inform state extension specialists, university educators and other program evaluation professional development providers of the most critical competencies for those in agricultural and extension education (Boyd,

2009; Dewey et al., 2008; Russ–Eft, Bober, de la Teja, Foxon, & Koszalka, 2008). For example, 14 core international evaluation standards of practice have recently been published to assist in the development of evaluation–related needs assessments and continuing professional development within organizations such as extension. An extension education community of practice was also recently created by eXtension to assist with building evaluation competencies in extension professionals. Although earlier exploratory studies provided direction toward a taxonomy of essential *evaluator* competencies (King, Stevahn, Ghere, & Minnema, 2001), translating program evaluation theory into practice for extension professionals who may not be versed in evaluation continues to be a topic of increasing attention (Boyd, 2009; Stevahn, King, Ghere, & Minnema, 2005).

Although the program evaluation needs of extension professionals must first be identified to inform future continuing professional development efforts, identifying such deficiencies can also help determine assets. The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985) offers promise as a theoretical framework for predicting how assessing needs could also be used to highlight strengths and increase the likelihood of commitment to engage in future professional development activities. According to the theory of planned behavior, aside from organizational requirements, an extension professional's intent to engage in program evaluation best–practices is a function of his or her: (a) attitudes about data collection, analysis, and reporting, (b) perceptions of social norms about data collection, analysis, and reporting, and (c) perceived ability to collect, analyze, and report data, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Ajzen, 1991). By highlighting current evaluation skills alongside deficiencies during an organizational needs assessment, one can potentially improve attitudes toward evaluation, strengthen data collection and reporting norms, and enhance the perceived ability of extension professionals to engage in program evaluation (Ajzen, 1985).
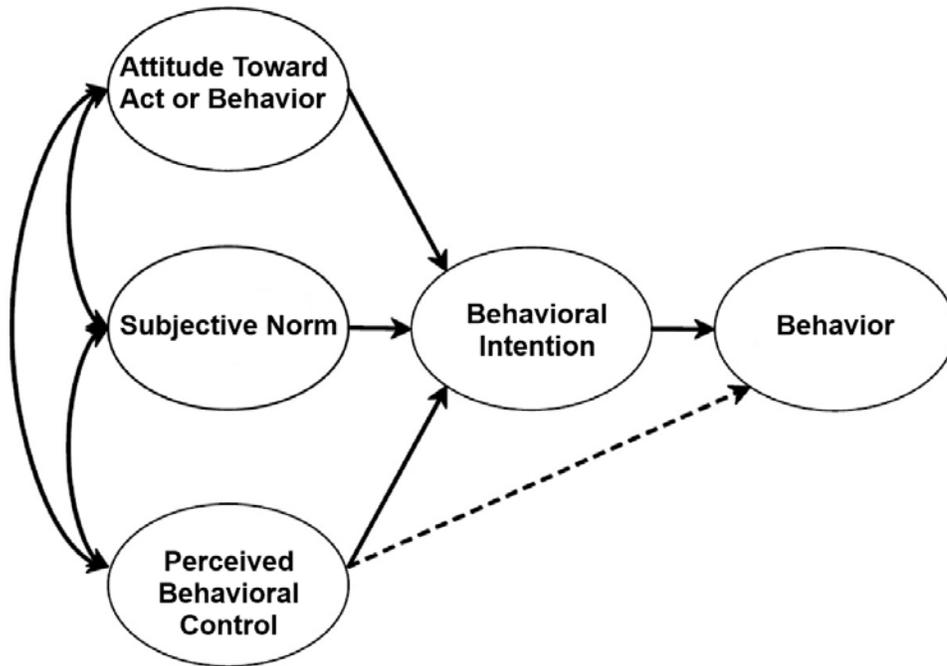
Figure 1. Theory of planned behavior. Adapted from "The theory of planned behavior," by I. Ajzen, 1991, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 50*, p. 182.

A comprehensive review of the literature on program evaluation–related competencies was performed by the authors and 48 competencies were found to be most critical. Competencies were grouped into the following seven categories/constructs with the associated number of items/skills comprising each construct in parentheses: program planning (13 skills), stakeholder involvement (4 skills), questionnaire development (8 skills), analyzing questionnaire data (3 skills), focus group development (6 skills), disseminating evaluation findings (10 skills), and applying evaluation findings (4 skills).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the program evaluation–related competencies of extension educators in Georgia according to the essential competencies identified in the literature. Borich's (1980) needs assessment model was used to prioritize the competencies by importance to extension and a professional's ability to perform each competency.

Specifically, the following objectives guided this study:

1. Describe the importance of and ability to engage in evaluation activities within seven evaluation competency categories as perceived by Georgia extension professionals.
2. Determine the evaluation competency areas that have the greatest need for professional development (high priority areas).
3. Determine whether the high priority evaluation competency areas vary with Extension professionals' program area and years of experience.

Methods

Based on the Borich (1980) needs assessment model, the researchers developed an instrument to assess agents' perceived levels of importance and ability to perform each of the previously determined 48 program evaluation competencies. A five–point, Likert–type scale

was used, including the following response options for importance and ability items: none, below average, average, above average, and high. An electronic questionnaire was created using SurveyMonkey™ and pilot tested with 4–H agents in Oklahoma following the Tailored Design Method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009) before data collection in Georgia. Responses from the Oklahoma pilot study ($n = 77$) were analyzed for validity and reliability. Nine items made no significant contribution to internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) following item analysis and were removed to improve reliability within constructs. All constructs on the pilot instrument were found to have internal consistencies ranging from 0.84 to 0.97.

Following the Oklahoma pilot study, the revised instrument was electronically sent to all extension professionals in Georgia using a census sampling method ($N = 249$) via SurveyMonkey. Extension personnel were asked to describe themselves based on gender, primary program area, and years of extension experience. The Tailored Design Method was followed (Dillman et al., 2009) and 88 usable responses were received (35% response rate). Early and late respondents were compared and no significant differences were found (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001). Comparing the demographic data from the achieved sample with the demographic data of Georgia extension professionals in general revealed close similarities, implying generalizability of the sample data to the population of Georgia extension professionals. Although extension administrators were included in the census sample, respondents who selected *administration* ($n = 5$) as their primary work area were excluded from data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 18.0. Internal consistencies within constructs were determined using Cronbach's alpha and all constructs were found to have reliabilities ranging from 0.71 to 0.96. The ratio between the number of items and the sample size was too small to allow exploratory factor analysis to identify the final constructs (Costello & Osborne, 2005). Data were also analyzed following the Borich (1980) needs assessment model, and a Mean Weighted Discrepancy Score (MWDS) was calculated for each competency. Mean Weighted Discrepancy Scores were calculated using the formulas in Figure 2.

Discrepancy Score (DS) = Competency Importance Rating – Competency Ability Rating

Weighted DS (WDS) = DS x Mean Competency Importance Rating

Mean WDS (MWDS) = Σ Competency WDS / *n*

$$\text{MWDS} = \frac{\Sigma\,[(\text{Importance} - \text{Ability})\,M_{\text{Importance}}]}{n}$$

Figure 2. *Formulas used to calculate mean weighted discrepancy scores*

The competencies were then ranked by MWDS from largest to smallest. In accordance with the Borich model, a larger MWDS represented a greater disparity between the perceived importance of a competency and the ability of extension professionals to perform that competency. Thus, competencies with larger MWDS's represented greater professional development needs.

Limitations for this study include the small sample size and resulting inability to perform advanced data reduction techniques such as factor analysis, and its timing. During the time the study was conducted, significant organizational changes were occurring in Georgia which could have affected the response rate. An additional limitation of this study was the limited access to extension professionals in

the pilot study, resulting in the inclusion of only 4–H agents, whereas all program areas were included in Georgia.

Findings

Sample Demographics.
As shown in Table 1, the majority (63.41%) of respondents had 10 + years of experience and the primary program area of most (45.12%) respondents was Agriculture and Natural Resources. Agriculture and Natural Resources extension professionals with 10 + years of experience comprised the largest group of respondents based on primary program area and years of experience.

Table 1
Primary Program Area and Years of Experience of Georgia Extension Professionals

Years of Experience	4–H f (%)	FACS f (%)	ANR f (%)	Total f (%)
5 or less	10 (41.67)	6 (28.57)	8 (21.62)	24 (29.27)
6 – 9	2 (8.33)	0 (0)	4 (10.81)	6 (7.32)
10 +	12 (50.00)	15 (71.43)	25 (67.57)	52 (63.41)
Total	24 (100)	21 (100)	37 (100)	82 (100)

Note: Table total does not equal total non–administrative respondents ($n = 83$) due to missing demographic data. FACS = Family and Consumer Sciences, ANR = Agriculture and Natural Resources

Evaluation Competencies by Construct.

Table 2
Evaluation Competencies Grouped by Construct

Construct	Imp. M (SD)	Abil. M (SD)	MWDS
Program Planning			
Selecting the most appropriate needs assessment method	4.19 (0.77)	3.46 (0.72)	2.54
Identifying how to collect follow up data	3.84 (0.85)	3.06 (0.83)	2.40
Developing an assessment tool for each learning objective	3.72 (0.93)	2.90 (0.73)	2.38
Determining the educational needs of clientele	4.34 (0.75)	3.71 (0.71)	2.32
Determining what to evaluate	4.06 (0.76)	3.40 (0.78)	2.25
Selecting an assessment tool for each learning objective	3.77 (0.87)	3.04 (0.72)	2.23
Developing clear learning objectives	4.22 (0.80)	3.64 (0.77)	2.10
Deciding how often to collect evaluation data	3.80 (0.76)	3.17 (0.71)	1.99
Determining when to collect evaluation data	3.83 (0.75)	3.28 (0.74)	1.82
Differentiating between outputs and outcomes	3.69 (0.91)	3.23 (0.80)	1.48
Obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval	2.78 (1.28)	2.18 (1.05)	1.31
Linking the logic model with evaluation plans	3.51 (0.93)	3.12 (0.88)	1.20
Stakeholders			
Involving stakeholders in my program planning efforts	4.13 (0.79)	3.48 (0.83)	2.27
Interacting with program stakeholders	4.36 (0.74)	3.81 (0.82)	2.11
Determining the stakeholders associated with my program	4.34 (0.72)	3.80 (0.76)	2.06
Questionnaire Development			
Determining appropriate answer choices for each question on a questionnaire	3.90 (0.86)	3.14 (0.70)	2.39

Table 2 (cont.)
Evaluation Competencies Grouped by Construct

Questionnaire Development			
Writing clear questions for a questionnaire intended for adults	3.96 (0.90)	3.25 (0.79)	2.31
Writing clear questions for a questionnaire intended for youth less than 12 years old	3.72 (1.11)	2.94 (0.95)	2.30
Implementing a questionnaire with adults	3.88 (0.88)	3.31 (0.73)	1.88
Implementing a questionnaire with a youth less than 12	3.63 (1.02)	3.00 (0.91)	1.88
Designing a questionnaire for use in multiple programs	3.70 (0.93)	3.10 (0.85)	1.87
Designing a questionnaire for use in a specific program	3.83 (0.87)	3.27 (0.80)	1.85
Analyzing Questionnaire Data			
Making meaning of the questionnaire data I collect	4.05 (1.02)	3.07 (0.85)	3.00
Analyzing the questionnaire data I collect	3.90 (1.00)	2.98 (0.87)	2.76
Entering questionnaire data into a spreadsheet for analysis	3.54 (0.98)	2.86 (1.00)	1.96
Focus Group Development			
Analyzing focus group data	3.67 (0.84)	2.82 (0.68)	2.41
Determining when its most appropriate to use a questionnaire or focus group	3.55 (0.85)	2.71 (0.80)	2.29
Making meaning of the focus group data I collect	3.70 (0.95)	2.99 (0.89)	2.12
Developing questions to use in a focus group	3.57 (0.86)	2.90 (0.84)	1.92
Facilitating a focus group with adults	3.59 (0.84)	3.11 (0.81)	1.50
Disseminating Findings			
Developing an impact statement based on questionnaire findings	4.05 (0.96)	3.19 (0.72)	2.73
Writing about questionnaire findings in an impact statement	3.99 (1.01)	3.16 (0.76)	2.62
Writing about focus group findings in an impact statement	3.86 (0.91)	2.98 (0.83)	2.62
Sharing focus group findings so they are understandable to others	3.90 (0.89)	3.06 (0.80)	2.58
Developing an impact statement based on focus group findings	3.80 (0.96)	2.93 (0.81)	2.54
Sharing questionnaire findings so they are understandable to others	4.02 (0.90)	3.31 (0.81)	2.36
Applying Evaluation Findings			
Developing a workshop based on evaluation results	3.82 (0.89)	3.00 (0.81)	2.46
Developing a lesson for adults based on evaluation results	3.93 (0.84)	3.24 (0.73)	2.23
Developing a lesson for youth based on evaluation results	3.71 (1.12)	2.96 (0.97)	2.21

Note: MWDS= Mean weighted discrepancy score.

Objective 1: *Describe the importance of and ability to engage in evaluation activities within seven evaluation competency categories as perceived by Georgia extension professionals.*

Table 3 shows the reliabilities and mean summated scale scores for each of the seven evaluation competency constructs. Each construct's importance mean scale score is larger than the corresponding ability mean scale score, indicating a need for continuing professional development in these areas.

Table 3
Reliabilities and Mean Summated Scale Scores for Evaluation Competency Constructs

Construct Name (items)	Importance α	Ability α	Importance *M* (SD)	Ability *M* (SD)	Min/Max
Program Planning (12)	0.91	0.91	45.75 (7.38)	38.18 (6.70)	12/60
Stakeholders (3)	0.90	0.85	12.83 (2.06)	11.08 (2.12)	3/15
Questionnaire Develop. (7)	0.92	0.88	26.63 (5.37)	22.01 (4.38)	7/35
Analyzing Quest. Data (3)	0.89	0.78	11.49 (2.72)	8.90 (2.27)	3/15
Focus Group Develop. (5)	0.94	0.88	18.08 (3.91)	14.53 (3.33)	5/25
Disseminating Findings (6)	0.96	0.94	23.61 (5.11)	18.63 (4.18)	6/30
Applying Eval. Findings (3)	0.83	0.71	11.46 (2.47)	9.20 (2.01)	3/15

Objective 2: Determine the evaluation competency areas that have the greatest need for professional development (high priority areas).

Table 4 shows the evaluation competency areas with the greatest need ranked by MWDS. Two constructs, analyzing questionnaire data and disseminating evaluation findings, account for seven of the top 10 competencies, including the six top ranked competencies. Five of the six competencies within the disseminating evaluation findings construct appeared in the top 10, comprising one–half of the competencies with greatest need. Nine of the top 10 competencies with greatest need are related to working with evaluation data once it has been collected. Competencies focused on impact statements and focus groups each ranked in the top 10 four times.

Table 4
Evaluation Competencies Prioritized by Greatest Need

Construct	Competency (*n* = 83)	MWDS
AQD	Making meaning of the questionnaire data I collect	3.00
AQD	Analyzing the questionnaire data I collect	2.76
DEF	Developing an impact statement based on questionnaire findings	2.73
DEF	Writing about questionnaire findings in an impact statement	2.62
DEF	Writing about focus group findings in an impact statement	2.62
DEF	Sharing focus group findings so they are understandable to others	2.58
PP	Selecting the most appropriate needs assessment method	2.54
DEF	Developing an impact statement based on focus group findings	2.54
AEF	Developing a workshop based on evaluation results	2.46
FGD	Analyzing focus group data	2.41

Note. MWDS= Mean weighted discrepancy score, AEF = Applying Evaluation Findings, AQD = Analyzing Questionnaire Data, DEF = Disseminating Evaluation Findings, FGD = Focus Group Development, PP = Program Planning

Objective 3: Determine whether the high priority evaluation competency areas vary with Extension professionals' program area and years of experience.

As seen in Table 5, determining the evaluation competencies with greatest need varies between extension professionals' primary program area. Agriculture and Natural Resources professionals' highest MWDS was 3.03 and the two highest need competencies were from the analyzing questionnaire data construct. Family and Consumer Sciences professionals' highest MWDS was 2.57 and two of the four highest need competencies were from the stakeholders construct. 4–H professionals' highest MWDS was 4.19 and all three highest need competencies were from the disseminating evaluation findings construct.

Table 5
Evaluation Competencies with Greatest Need by Program Area

Construct	Competency	MWDS
Agriculture and Natural Resources (*n* = 37)		
AQD	Making meaning of the questionnaire data I collect	3.03
AQD	Analyzing the questionnaire data I collect	2.74
PP	Determining the educational needs of clientele	2.58
Family and Consumer Science (*n* = 21)		
SH	Determining the stakeholders associated with my program	2.57
FGD	Analyzing focus group data	2.50
QD	Determining appropriate answer choices for each question on a questionnaire	2.48
SH	Involving stakeholders in my program planning efforts	2.48
4–H (*n* = 24)		
DEF	Developing an impact statement based on questionnaire findings	4.19
DEF	Sharing focus group findings so they are understandable to others	3.78
DEF	Developing an impact statement based on focus group findings	3.77

Note. MWDS= Mean weighted discrepancy score, AQD = Analyzing Questionnaire Data, DEF = Disseminating Evaluation Findings, FGD = Focus Group Development, PP = Program Planning, SH = Stakeholders, QD = Questionnaire Development

Table 6 shows the evaluation competencies with the greatest need when extension professionals were grouped by years of experience. The highest MWDS of professionals with five years and less experience was 3.74 and from the disseminating evaluation findings construct. The highest MWDS of professionals with six to nine years of experience was 3.69 and all four competencies with the greatest need were from the program planning and disseminating evaluation findings constructs. The highest MWDS of professionals with 10 or more years of experience was 2.87 and two of the highest need competencies were from the analyzing questionnaire data constructs.

Table 6
Evaluation Competencies with Greatest Need by Years of Extension Experience

Construct	Competency	MWDS
Five Years and Less ($n = 24$)		
DEF	Writing about questionnaire findings in an impact statement	3.74
QD	Writing clear questions for a questionnaire intended for youth less than 12 years old	3.66
AQD	Analyzing the questionnaire data I collect	3.65
Six to Nine Years ($n = 6$)		
PP	Selecting the most appropriate needs assessment method	3.69
PP	Determining what to evaluate	3.50
DEF	Writing about focus group findings in an impact statement	3.50
DEF	Developing an impact statement based on focus group findings	3.50
10 or More Years ($n = 52$)		
AQD	Making meaning of the questionnaire data I collect	2.87
DEF	Developing an impact statement based on questionnaire findings	2.55
AQD	Analyzing the questionnaire data I collect	2.50

Note. MWDS= Mean weighted discrepancy score, AQD = Analyzing Questionnaire Data, DEF = Disseminating Evaluation Findings, PP = Program Planning, QD = Questionnaire Development

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

After standardizing scores for comparison purposes, the greatest discrepancies in importance and ability means were in the analyzing questionnaire data and disseminating findings constructs (Table 3). These competency categories encompass working with, and making meaning of, evaluation data and using that data to write impact statements and inform stakeholders about program value. The finding that data analysis and dissemination of findings in accountability reports were priority continuing professional development areas supports the work of Dewey et al. (2008) who found that data management and sharing evaluation findings via reports were among the top skills needed in graduates pursuing careers in extension–related fields. Additionally, given recent budget discussions focused on Cooperative Extension and the potential to change the delivery structure of extension in Georgia, it is understandable that extension professionals expressed a need for assistance in disseminating evaluation findings by sharing the outcomes of their programming efforts in accountability reports.

Building the data analysis and dissemination of evaluation findings skills of agents is a top priority for future evaluation–related professional development. One way to build the dissemination skills of agents is through a mentoring program. Serving as a mentor and training new hires in data reporting would likely inspire more seasoned agents to refresh themselves on these skills in the same way a teacher is inspired to review concepts before teaching a lesson. Experienced agents and new hires may even find an avenue to co–author a publication on their evaluation findings.

To assist extension professionals in analyzing questionnaire data, some extension organizations, including Georgia, have promoted the use of online survey systems (e.g., SurveyMonkey™) and digital student response tools such as "clickers." These methods enable extension professionals to quickly gather quantitative data which are automatically entered into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis (Barker & Killian, 2011; Bird & McClelland, 2010; Conoley, Croom, Moore, & Flowers, 2007). With data collection and data entry automated, extension professionals are free to focus their efforts on calculating descriptive statistics and interpreting the results. Efforts to

build agent capacity in data analysis and interpretation could occur in targeted continuing professional development and with the use of Excel add–ins like EZAnalyze© that perform basic statistical processes (Poynton, 2007).

Extension professionals in this study saw the importance of analyzing and disseminating both quantitative and qualitative evaluation data to communicate the value of extension's efforts to stakeholders. Overall, they needed the most assistance in disseminating evaluation findings (Table 4). One way to build competencies in disseminating findings is through trainings on impact statement writing where impact statement templates are used. These ready–made templates could include blanks where locally relevant data could be inserted and would save the extension professional time that could be used to analyze and interpret their evaluation data (Boyer et al., 2009). In addition, templates could be written with specific local needs in mind and could come complete with relevance statements detailing how the extension programming efforts address the needs of local clientele. Extension professionals would then only need to provide details on how their evaluation data were collected, what they found, and the implications of their findings for addressing local needs.

In addition to quantitative data gathered from questionnaires, extension professionals need skill development in qualitative data analysis. Most notably, analyzing qualitative data gathered from focus groups emerged as a priority (Table 4). A continuing professional development session specific to qualitative data analysis is necessary for extension professionals in Georgia. This need is currently addressed through the recently developed Master Evaluator Program for Georgia extension professionals (Buckley & Fuhrman, 2011). One of six hour–long online sessions in the Master Evaluator Program focuses solely on qualitative data analysis. Although this session is targeted for agents in a yearly cohort, a session open to all extension professionals would be beneficial. Additional research is needed on the effectiveness of this professional development training program on building evaluation skills in extension professionals.

Continuing professional development to build evaluation competencies in Georgia extension educators should vary depending on the primary programming responsibilities of the participating extension professional. This study found that while extension professionals with primary responsibilities in Agriculture and Natural Resources needed the most assistance with analyzing questionnaire data (AQD), those with primarily 4–H responsibilities needed help with disseminating evaluation findings (DEF) (Table 5). At the time of this study, there was discussion of the 4–H component of Georgia Cooperative Extension being significantly changed. This may have prompted individuals working within 4–H to see the value in sharing the outcomes of their 4–H programming efforts with stakeholders, thus raising the importance scores on items within this construct.

Continuing professional development to strengthen the evaluation competencies of Georgia extension professionals should also be designed with the experience level of the extension participants in mind. Georgia extension professionals with five or fewer years of experience with extension needed more assistance developing questionnaires than did professionals with more extension experience (Table 6). Conversely, individuals with more extension experience expressed a greater need for assistance interpreting questionnaire data and disseminating evaluation findings to stakeholders. Professionals with more experience have perhaps been collecting and using evaluation data for some time and need assistance interpreting and reporting on data they already have, while less experienced individuals need help collecting new information and worry less about what to do with it once in hand. This supports the work of Lamm, Israel, and Harder (2011) who found that extension professionals who valued their own personal use of evaluation data were more likely to conduct in–depth evaluations.

As state budgets limit travel and face–to–face professional development opportunities, utilizing digital technology to implement professional development can be an effective alternative (Koch, Townsend, & Dooley, 2005). In fact, when Georgia extension professionals were asked how they would prefer to receive

professional development information to build program evaluation competencies in this study, the majority (61.4%, *n* = 51) indicated a preference for distance technology either synchronously or asynchronously. These types of professional development opportunities are currently underway through the Master Evaluator Program as extension professionals attend six on–line meetings, successfully complete application–based homework assignments for each session, and then become certified Master Evaluators. Agents with a Master Evaluator certification can then assist other extension professionals with evaluation challenges, much like a mentoring program.

This study provides guidance in answering a recent call for increased evaluation skill development in extension professionals (Lamm & Israel, 2011). Using the data from this study, Georgia extension's evaluation specialist will specifically target future professional development opportunities to build extension professional skills in analyzing questionnaire data and disseminating evaluation findings with specific consideration for the primary program area and experience level of the professional. With knowledge of the program evaluation competencies of Georgia extension professionals, perhaps other states will examine the evaluation needs of their extension personnel and develop targeted continuing professional development which will reflect the greatest deficiencies. Although decisions about extension program value require data, the ability of extension personnel to collect and analyze such data must first be examined.

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