

# looking beyond traditional evaluation

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Evaluation, as an important part of the program development process, should get input and provide Extension decision makers—lay councils, paraprofessionals, field and state staff professionals, and top program administrators—with information they can use to assess and improve their programs. To meet this need, Illinois evaluated the statewide home economics specialized adviser program.

## Program Design

The specialized adviser program was established to: (1) extend the services of a limited number of home economics specialists who serve the entire state and (2) significantly increase the competency of the home economics Extension adviser in one subject area.

Specialized advisers are a select group of home economics Extension people representing each of the 10 Extension regions in Illinois and the 6 home economics subject-matter areas provided by the state specialists. Specialized advisers serve in this role within the geographic boundaries of their own Extension regions.

## Selection

Generally, a home economics Extension adviser isn't appointed as a specialized adviser until serving in the county position for one year, unless exceptionally well-qualified by unique educational background and/or previous experience. Advisers who are selected are assigned to a subject-matter area for special in-service education. Selection is based on one or more of the following criteria:

1. Special interest in a specific subject-matter area.
2. Strong educational background and/or expertise in a given area.
3. Need to fill a vacant position within the region.

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Regional directors recruit replacements for vacant specialized adviser positions and make recommendations to the assistant director of home economics who, in turn, discusses recommendations with state subject-matter specialists.

***In-Service Education***

Each year specialized advisers meet at the University of Illinois for concentrated two and a half day workshops planned by the state specialists. Specialists also provide specialized advisers with in-service education via TeleNet (a special telephone system) and written materials.

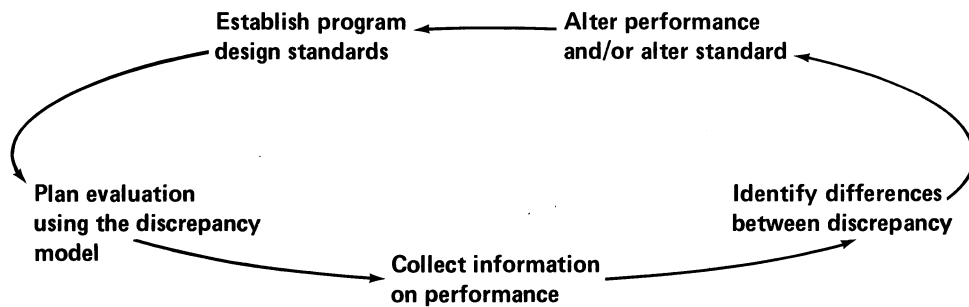
***Program Operation***

All county advisers are given a program development notebook that describes special support available from specialists and specialized advisers. Some regions schedule meetings for specialized advisers to explain the kind of information they've received at in-service workshops and to discuss the special program input they can provide for other counties.

County advisers are expected to ask for help in program development and delivery from specialized advisers in the region when needed. Appropriateness is determined by the type of in-service education specialized advisers have received.

**Discrepancy Evaluation Model**

The evaluation of the specialized adviser program was based on the Provus Discrepancy Evaluation Model.<sup>1</sup> The model provides a basis for assessing and improving educational program by comparing actual program performance with an established program design standard. Standards reflect the program design as established by program planners and staff. Discrepancies reflect differences that exist between what the staff thinks should be happening in a program and what actually is. According to the model, evaluation of the specialized adviser program can be visualized in the following cycles:



**Evaluation Objectives** The evaluation of the Illinois specialized adviser program had three major objectives:

1. To identify performance in the specialized adviser program.
2. To identify what personnel thought should happen in the program.
3. To identify ways to strengthen the program and improve it as a functional method of program support.

**Methods and Procedures**

A 75-item Likert scale questionnaire was used to collect data. Items were developed based on information obtained from interviews with subject-matter specialists, two county home economics Extension advisers per region, and written statements from home economics program leaders and regional directors. Space was provided on the questionnaire for adviser comments.

Data were collected at the December, 1976, Specialized Adviser Workshop. Questionnaires were mailed to those unable to attend. A total of 105 usable questionnaires were received.

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**Asking the right questions to uncover discrepancies between what is happening versus desired program outcomes is an important first step toward improving the educational effectiveness of Extension programs. . . .**

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**Findings**

Data were analyzed to identify discrepancies. Discrepancies were deemed to exist when 70% or more of the respondents agreed with an item that was contrary to the established program standard.

*Discrepancies in selection process.*

- Advisers should be allowed to choose their area of specialization on the basis of their interest.
- Advisers educational background in the subject area should be the major consideration in their selection as specialized advisers.
- Advisers who are currently specialized should be given the opportunity to change areas of specialization if they believe they would be more effective in another area.
- Selected comments from the questionnaires include:
  - I had no choice in my area.
  - I had no housing background, but was selected as there was a need for *someone* to bring this information to the counties.
  - I do think an adviser's previous experience and interest should determine her specialized adviser role.

- A lot of people were originally stuck in an area they had no background or passion for.

*Discrepancies in in-service education.*

- No discrepancies were reported in this category.
- Selected comments from the questionnaires include:
  - Training the specialized adviser gets is excellent.
  - Allows the adviser to keep current and strong in one area.
  - I am grateful for the opportunity to be specialized. It is nice to know a little above and beyond what others know in the area.

*Discrepancies in program operation.*

- Personal discussions with other specialized advisers are the most effective way of finding out what kind of program support is available.
- There should be a base line established as to the number of times a specialized adviser is expected to be outside the county.
- Use of specialized advisers across county lines depends heavily on peer recognition and expertise.
- Selected comments from the questionnaires include:
  - Regional updates are a vital phase of in-service training.
  - I believe that more time is needed in regional meetings to share information with other advisers.
  - Some areas of specialization are in much more demand than others. Therefore, the inequity of the specialized adviser concept.
  - I do not ask some specialized advisers into my county because I do not have confidence in their abilities and their methods of presentation.

## **Recommendations**

According to the Provus model, when discrepancy occurs, either performance or program design standards should be altered. Therefore, recommendations were made based on interviews and written statements from regional directors, home economics program leaders, subject-matter specialists, and the questionnaire results. These recommendations will serve as the basis for revising guidelines for the Illinois home economics specialized adviser program. Specific recommendations include:

1. The assignment as specialized adviser is a recognition of special competency and interest in a designated

- category of the home economics program. Appointment of the specialized adviser will be made by application of the adviser with the approval of the regional director and consultation with appropriate home economics state staff. Initiating the appointment by an application system will provide the opportunity for re-evaluation by and of individuals already assigned as specialized advisers.
2. The specialized adviser assignment requires a commitment on the average of 10% to 15% of the Extension adviser's time. This includes time devoted to in-service education in the specialty, as well as planning and delivering presentations scheduled. A specialized adviser will also consult with individual advisers through the use of telephone, TeleNet, letter or visit, etc., and will:
    - a. Prepare and/or supply resource material for county use.
    - b. Prepare mass media materials—newspaper, radio, newsletter, etc.
  3. A definite time should be provided for specialized advisers to share information about program support they're prepared to provide to other home economics Extension staff in the region. A minimum time block of four hours scheduled within three months of receiving in-service training is recommended. Specialized adviser reports should include:
    - a. Reviewing in brief the in-depth content received during in-service education.
    - b. Showing visuals and support materials available for loan and reference.
    - c. Suggesting ways of using informational materials in county programs.
    - d. Suggesting audiences for which content is appropriate and/or can be adapted.
  4. Program leaders should help specialized advisers in planning and reporting at regional meetings by:
    - a. Having a preplanning report session with specialized advisers.
    - b. Introducing the session and explaining its purpose in the overall program development process.
  5. A county may have a maximum of five specialized adviser programs per year. A program may consist of more than one session.
  6. A specialized adviser may teach a maximum of one program per year in a county other than hers
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(limited to within the region, except in unusual cases).  
The county Extension adviser shall attend these presentations and assume the responsibility for follow-up.

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## **Conclusion**

Evaluations of Extension programs can't rely on the traditional classroom evaluation technique of comparing scores. The Provus Discrepancy Evaluation Model provides an alternative that considers descriptions of process and program outcomes.

Asking the right questions to uncover discrepancies between what is happening versus desired program outcomes is an important first step toward improving the educational effectiveness of Extension programs. This way, evaluation becomes an integral part of program development.

## **Footnote**

1. Malcolm M. Provus, "The Discrepancy Evaluation Model," in *Readings in Curriculum Evaluation*, Peter A. Taylor and Doris M. Cowley, eds. (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Co., Publishers, 1972).