making evaluation manageable

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Extension programs just don't stand conveniently still for close inspection—they change even while under scrutiny.[1] So, how is the beleaguered Extension field worker, who because of limited staff resource has to double as evaluator, going to find the skills needed to get a handle on programs?

Just wanting to do a better job of Extension programming without working at it is like trying to pound a nail into hard wood without a hammer. But help is available. The most useful tool I've found to date for jumping into evaluation of ongoing programs is the Provus Discrepancy Evaluation Model.[2] It fits both carefully planned programs and those that "just grew."

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Provus Model   The Provus Discrepancy Evaluation Model provides a basis for evaluating educational programs that's highly compatible with the Extension programming system. In the Provus model, the evaluator identifies problem areas by comparing program performance—what we would call achievement in Extension—with an established program design standard. This term was coined by Provus to describe programs as envisioned by program planners and staff. The results when programs "hit the road" aren't always identical with initial plans . . . discrepancies can occur.

Provus considers discrepancies to be the essential clue in program evaluation. Discrepancies point out differences that exist between what program planners think is happening in the program and what's actually happening. Provus recommends that when discrepancies occur, either program performance or program design standards be changed.

Translating Into Extensionese

Extension has a language and set of acronyms all its own that I call Extensionese. As a matter of fact, new Extension workers are usually as confused by some of our terminology as first-time clients often are. But it only takes a small dose of Extensionese, regularly repeated, for the strangeness to dissolve into familiar terms readily incorporated into daily use. Soon Extension workers become so comfortable with Extensionese that they develop a resistance to learning other special languages.

Unfortunately, Provus isn't an Extension worker and so doesn't describe his model in Extensionese. That probably explains why Provus' Discrepancy Evaluation Model hasn't already been snapped up by Extension field workers—because it certainly is a marvelously versatile, easy-to-use tool for evaluating and improving programs.

We can begin removing the language barrier by explaining three basic phrases in the Provus model.

1. *Discrepancy:* means differences.
2. *Program performance:* what Extension refers to as program implementation, results, and/or accomplishment.
3. *Program design standard:* means objectives.

Using Provus' own words—and Extensionese—the Discrepancy Evaluation Model can be visualized as an ongoing cycle, as shown in Figure 1.

Provus Simplified

The value of the Provus model to Extension workers is its system for incorporating acceptable evaluation into routine program planning. To use the Discrepancy Evaluation Model, follow these steps:

1. *Decide which program to evaluate. This might be:*
   a. A new program just being developed for introduction.
   b. An ongoing program that may appear to be running out of steam.
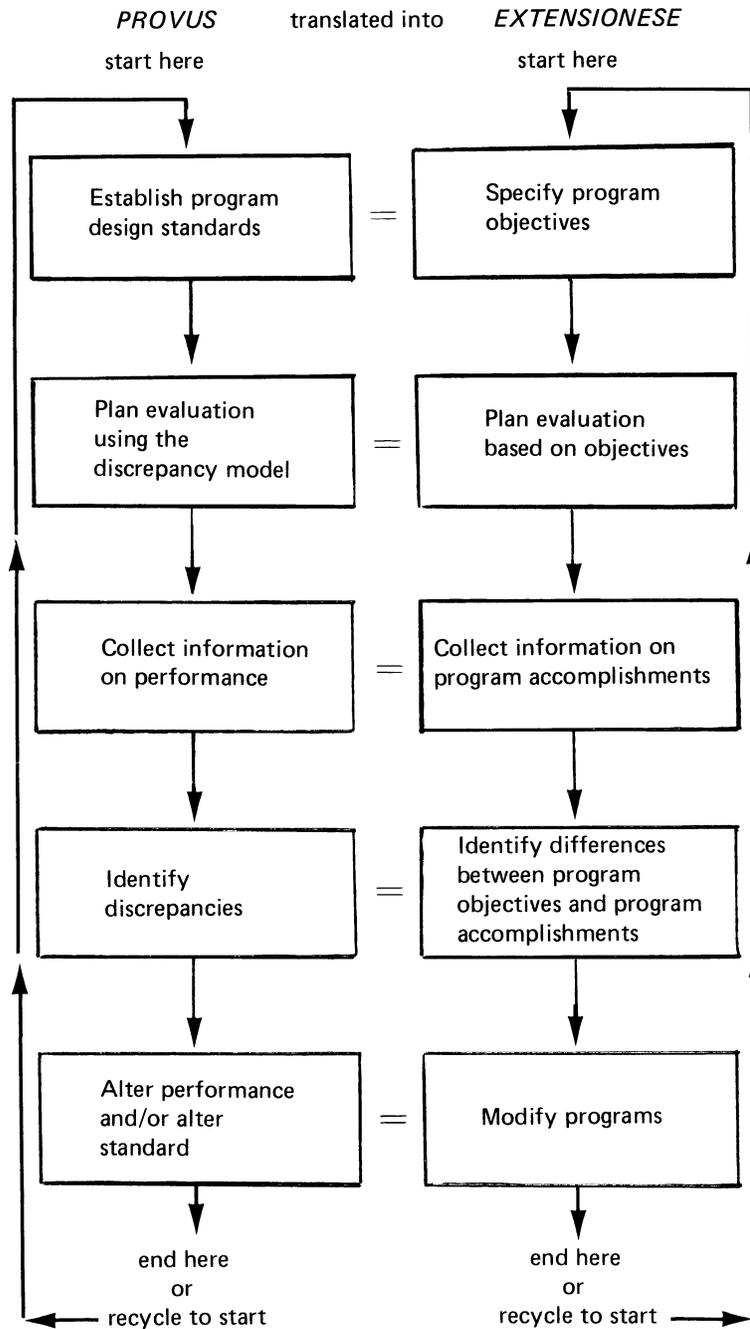   c. A program that seems to be working just fine, but appears to have switched directions.

PROVUS   translated into   *EXTENSIONESE*

start here   start here

Establish program design standards	=	Specify program objectives
Plan evaluation using the discrepancy model	=	Plan evaluation based on objectives
Collect information on performance	=	Collect information on program accomplishments
Identify discrepancies	=	Identify differences between program objectives and program accomplishments
Alter performance and/or alter standard	=	Modify programs

end here
or
recycle to start

end here
or
recycle to start

Figure 1. Discrepancy Evaluation Model.

You might involve your program advisory committee in helping to decide which program should have this special attention. You might also want to consult with colleagues, Extension supervisory staff, and specialists. Provus recommends that all levels of program staff should be represented in program assessment. If the group is large, it should be broken into groups small enough for effective discussion to take place.

2. *Determine objectives for the targeted program.*

Are written objectives already available? How well do they reflect the program as you know it? As participants know it? The advisory committee? Others? You see, not everyone views what ought to be through the same eyes.

If there's any confusion about program objectives, get them clarified before proceeding. Involve several people and, if necessary, determine objectives now (which Provus says is okay to do at this time if it hasn't already been done before) to establish the base against which discrepancies can be measured.

3. *Plan the evaluation.*

What information do you need to know whether and how well objectives are being accomplished? How can you get at that? Who can help? It's unrealistic for an Extension field worker to get deeply into evaluation. The rest of your program responsibility just won't stand still for that.

Whatever information is needed must be possible to collect, and reasonable in terms of the work that collection entails. Specialists often help with developing evaluation plans and usually have advice and experience to share. Don't try to reinvent the evaluation wheel all by yourself!

4. *Follow through by implementing plans to collect information.*

5. *Identify discrepancies between program objectives and program accomplishments.*

Again, have people with different points of view take a look at your findings. Where do differences exist? What have you learned about them—their causes, effect on program, participants, other pertinent information?

6. *Plan what to do next.*

At this point, the Discrepancy Evaluation Model says it's time for remedial planning. Either the basic

program design standard or performance should be revised so that objectives and accomplishments are consistent.

But, which should change—objectives or implementation? At this point, it's wise to involve others who have helped make decisions about earlier phases of the evaluation. Also, changes suggested may indicate the need to get cooperation and support from administration, specialists, or others.

Review your options carefully. What's possible? Why or why not? Are you sure you haven't overlooked other choices? Select the best alternative and incorporate it into the next regular Plan of Work planning cycle.

At this point the Provus Discrepancy Evaluation Model has also completed one cycle. However, the program just reviewed should be monitored through another cycle if discrepancies precipitated significant changes in expectations. Otherwise, the program can continue as is. Further use of the Provus model will depend on future program evaluation needs.

Making the Most of Evaluation

Evaluation of any educational program is inevitable. Judgments about programs and their effectiveness are commonly made by program participants, Extension educators, and public and private funding sources. The question isn't whether to evaluate Extension programs, but how casually or formally to evaluate them.

Evaluation is dynamic. There's much overlap and interplay between and among stages in the Discrepancy Evaluation Model cycle described. Oftentimes, the evaluation process is so stimulating to program development that program changes begin while evaluation is in progress. But when evaluation can become a regular part of planning, the program (Plan of Work) all Extension workers are expected to do, it requires little extra work—and can be tremendously useful.

Extension field workers are much too busy not to make the most possible mileage from whatever effort they put into evaluation. How can evaluation contribute to improved programming support? Remember, the purpose of evaluation is to provide information that decision makers can use. You're a decision maker on programs. Who else is?

What information does evaluation reveal that should be shared with clientele, administrative or policy level decision makers, and those who do—or could—allocate operating funds? How can such facts be presented colorfully, forcefully?

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that most of the shadows in life are caused by our standing in our own sunshine. Provus' model can help us find the best way to focus more light on the many excellent features Extension programs already have.

Footnotes

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).
2. *Ibid.*