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# Graduate Students Serve Extension as Evaluation Consultants

**Megan McClure**

Extension Assistant

Texas AgriLife Extension Service

Texas A&M University System

College Station, Texas

[mmcclure@tamu.edu](mailto:mmcclure@tamu.edu)

**Nicholas E. Fuhrman**

Assistant Professor

Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication

University of Georgia

Athens, Georgia

[fuhrman@uga.edu](mailto:fuhrman@uga.edu)

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**Abstract:** In an effort to provide graduate students at a distance with field-based learning experiences and evaluation resources to statewide Extension programs, 24 Master's students participating in a distance-delivered program evaluation course served as evaluation consultants for Extension programs. State evaluation specialists unable to conduct face-to-face trainings with local Extension agents because of budget constraints should consider mentoring and allowing trained graduate students to assist with local program evaluation efforts. The graduate students benefit from an eager audience and a real-world setting in which to apply their evaluation skills, while their clientele benefit by acquiring individually tailored program-specific evaluation resources.

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## Introduction

As universities tighten their financial belts and make decisions about program value, the need for evaluation data on program impact becomes increasingly more critical. With dwindling travel budgets, state Extension specialists are less able to conduct face-to-face visits with agents and clientele. For specialists with split teaching and Extension appointments, leaving campus is even more difficult.

Graduate students enrolled in distance-delivered courses are often located statewide and, with the proper training, positioned to assist Extension specialists with local Extension programming efforts. In fact, employers have emphasized the need for graduate students with skills in program development and evaluation (Dewey, Montrosse, Schroter, Sullins, & Mattox, 2008; King, Stevahn, Ghere, & Minnema, 2001). Others have found that involving students in Extension program development service-learning projects builds local relationships and provides opportunities for applying course concepts, all while reducing program costs for county Extension offices (Horrisberger & Crawford, 2007). Graduate students participating in a distance-delivered program evaluation course recently helped Extension agents across Georgia in the

evaluation of their programs by serving as consultants through a service-learning project. The effort proved to benefit Extension professionals, their stakeholders, and the overall graduate learning experience.

## **The Consultants**

Twenty-four Master's level graduate students enrolled in The University of Georgia's Master of Agricultural Leadership Program recently served as evaluation consultants for Georgia Cooperative Extension programs. After receiving 7 weeks (of an 11-week semester) of program evaluation training from an Extension specialist, these geographically distributed students offered a unique type of local support for Extension programs. Seventy-five percent (n = 18) of the consultants were employed at the time as either agriculture teachers or Extension agents, making the relevance of evaluation skills beyond this project even more obvious. As students understood the applicable nature of program evaluation, they were better suited to provide practical solutions to actual data collection, analysis, and interpretation concerns for a variety of clients.

## **The Clients**

Extension programs and community organizations, reaching from the coast of Georgia to the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, served as clients for the uniquely prepared consultants. These clients, many of which were understaffed and in the midst of strict budget restraints, welcomed the evaluation support. Through the client/consultant collaboration, The University of Georgia was able to help its own programs and students alike, using state resources in an efficient and beneficial way. Community organizations benefited by receiving a free service enhancing their own accountability practices.

Clients of the evaluation consultants included the following.

### **Georgia Extension Programs**

- Master Equine Program
- Master Gardener Program
- Master Naturalist Program
- Rock Eagle 4-H Center Environmental Education Program
- Fulton County Riverside Farmer's Market

### **Community Organizations**

- Sandy Creek Nature Center (Athens, Ga.) Youth Camp Programs
- Georgia Sea Turtle Center (Jekyll Island, Ga.) Conservation Programs

## Consulting Methods

1. During the 7 weeks prior to their consulting experience, students were trained in participatory evaluation principles, including continuous stakeholder involvement, gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data, and communicating evaluation findings.
2. Consultants were grouped by geographic location and stated programming interest into two- to three-person teams. They were then matched with a client in their area who had previously requested evaluation assistance from the instructor.
3. Consultants coordinated an initial face-to-face meeting with clientele. At this meeting, consultants learned about their clients' programs and assessed the level of required evaluation assistance.
4. Based on knowledge gained during the initial meeting and through any subsequent follow-up, consultants developed an evaluation plan for their clients. Some plans included revamped program objectives and logic models, while others required more complex data analysis or the administration of a consultant-developed pilot questionnaire. Consultants also prepared tip sheets on evaluation best practices tailored to clientele needs.
5. Clientele were invited to attend a formal presentation of their program's evaluation plan, presented by the consultants, at The University of Georgia's main campus. This presentation covered all areas of the consultation project, including findings by the consultants and their recommendations regarding future evaluation actions.
6. Clientele were provided a thank-you letter from the instructor and hard copies of all evaluation plans, tip sheets, and suggested data collection instruments via U.S. mail.

## Developing Evaluation Consultants in Your State

The authors offer these recommendations to those considering involving students in a similar service-learning project.

- Discuss program evaluation-related needs with District Extension Directors or regional Program Development Coordinators first. These individuals can help identify Extension agents and programs most fitting for a student project. In addition, their ownership in this process is important for a sustainable client-consultant relationship.
- Check in with evaluation consultants at least once every week and clientele every 2 weeks. Students deserve constant support and feedback on their progress, and clients appreciate knowing that you are interested in how things are going.
- Share guidelines with students for how they will be evaluated, and, as an assignment, require

students to document their progress on a regular basis (e.g., reflective journaling). Journaling is helpful formative evaluation data for the instructor in determining where individuals or teams are struggling or succeeding and can serve as a vent for students to confidentially share team member difficulties.

- At the end of the semester, invite students, their clients, and your state's Extension administrators to an evening social and presentation of evaluation recommendations. Just as with actual consultants, ask the consultant teams to present their recommendations before their clients and the clients of other teams. Everyone can benefit from a sharing of the evaluation happenings of other programs, and ideas are often gained for use in future evaluation efforts.

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