Building Evaluation Capacity
Through Evaluation Partnerships
Cornell Office for Research on Evaluation
Summer 2008

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Acknowledgements

This paper was prepared by Monica Hargraves, Manager of Evaluation for Extension and Outreach, with substantial editorial contributions from Professor William Trochim, Director of Evaluation for Extension and Outreach.

The ideas and their articulation in this paper have been developed and shaped by discussions and collaborations with a number of colleagues over the years. We would like to particularly thank, without implicating, Ken Schlather (Executive Director, CCE-Tompkins County) for insightful discussions over time and detailed comments on this paper, and Mike Duttweiler (Assistant Director, CCE) for long-time contributions to and support for Extension evaluation and the Evaluation Partnership project in particular. The early and sustained support and commitment from CCE Director Helene Dillard has made this work within Cornell Cooperative Extension possible.

The Evaluation Partnership model and work described and envisioned here have benefited from the fine work of a number of colleagues. Cath Kane served as the first Evaluation Project Manager (EPM) in CCE-NYC, and the first Manager of Evaluation for Extension and Outreach, and in those capacities shaped the Evaluation Partnership project significantly. Don Tobias (Executive Director, CCE-NYC) put CCE-NYC forward as the first trial of the Evaluation Partnership project and contributed to its successful launch and sustained progress.

Jennifer Brown Urban and Sarah Hertzog provided superb research assistance and professional contributions as graduate Research Assistants on this project from its launch in 2006 through 2008. A number of undergraduate research assistants have provided valuable support at many stages of this project.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank the following partners in the current cohort of CCE “Evaluation Planning Partnerships” for their involvement and contributions to our learning: Clive Chambers and Patrick Ames (ED and EPM, CCE-St. Lawrence); Dick Halpin and Stephanie Graf (ED and EPM, CCE-Jefferson); Lydia Reidy and Roxanne Churchill (ED and EPM, CCE-Ulster); Ken Schlather (ED, CCE-Tompkins); Keith Severson and Kim Eaton (ED and EPM, CCE-Chenango); Don Tobias and Michelle Currie (Executive Director (ED) and EPM, respectively, CCE-NYC); and Paul O’Connor and Kelly Somerlot (former ED and EPM, CCE-Onondaga). Evaluation Partnerships outside of CCE, with the Cornell Center for Materials Research, and the Museum of the Earth, have also contributed to the development of this project.

This evaluation work has been supported in part by grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF EREC Grant No. 0535492 and NSF REESE Grant No. 0814364 (William Trochim, P.I.)) which have funded a number of graduate and undergraduate student assistants and contributed significantly to the resource and technology development.

Looking ahead, we welcome Margaret Johnson as the new graduate Research Assistant in the work with CCE. We offer thanks in advance to Margaret and to Claire Hebbard, Manager of the Cornell Office for Research on Evaluation, as they are already active in this work and will be key contributors going forward.
Executive Summary

The Evaluation Partnership model is well-suited to address key challenges for Extension evaluation and specifically to sustainable evaluation practice, with evaluation efforts that also contribute to the needs of program development and refinement, resource allocation across programs, reporting, fundraising, human resource management, and professional development for program staff and leadership. The structure and tools of the Partnership are excellent mechanisms for capturing economies of scale and scope, and leveraging existing resources and opportunities.

Fundamental components of the EP plan in the near term are to:

- Draw on the experiences of Associations that have participated in the Evaluation Partnerships in order to refine and develop the materials, resources, and developmental strategies that will support the next cohorts of Associations in all phases of evaluation planning, implementation, and utilization;
- Extend the EP model to a new set of Associations, focusing on selected 4-H Youth Development programs that are widely offered throughout CCE;
- Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the range of stakeholders involved in Extension evaluation policy and practice in order to ensure that incentives of key decision-makers are consistent with sustained commitments to effective evaluation practices;
- Coordinate with CCE Administration to ensure that the EP project is aligned with a wide range of Administration goals and initiatives, in order to provide positive reinforcement for evaluation efforts, capture synergies, and increase the “returns” to evaluation investments;
- Continue to develop the “Netway” cyberinfrastructure to facilitate ease of use, and build mutually beneficial linkages and search functions connecting researchers and evaluation practitioners including Extension educators.

Major outcomes anticipated in the next 3 to 5 years include:

- Increases in the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and standards of evaluation practice among CCE educators and leaders
- A comprehensive, accessible set of resources designed to facilitate evaluation in general, and specifically for programs using the EP tools including the Netway
- Increases in the amount, quality, and research-base of evaluation efforts in CCE
- On-going, active exchanges of resources and expertise within and across programs, Extension Associations, and university researchers
- Program improvements and stronger impact statements and public value evidence as a result of new evaluation work
- Recognized synergies between evaluation practices through the EP model and a range of other Association activities and obligations such as strategic planning, internal and external reporting, organizational and professional development, and others

Through the expertise of individual staff within the CORE team, and their connections to CCE and to University research more broadly, the Evaluation Partnership project operates from a strong foundation in state-of-the-art evaluation expertise and research, for a highly desirable integration of research and practice on evaluation.
I. A Vision of Sustainable Evaluation in Extension

The Evaluation Partnership (EP) approach is directed toward achieving a vision of sustainable evaluation for Cornell Cooperative Extension in which

- High-quality evaluation methods and tools are used throughout the Associations of Cornell Cooperative Extension, and evaluation expertise and resources are shared effectively across programs and Associations
- Results of evaluation work are used effectively in a range of ways, from program development and refinement to valuable internal and external reports of the impact of Extension programming
- Associations find it in their individual self-interest to commit resources on an on-going basis to support an optimal level of evaluation activity
- The culture of Extension embraces and standardizes evaluation such that it is thoroughly integrated into program planning and delivery as well as other Extension systems including strategic planning, reporting, performance reviews, etc.
- The success of Cornell Cooperative Extension’s evaluation policies and practices serve as a model for Extension systems nationally

The EP approach to building evaluation capacity, initiated in NYC in 2006, complements a number of other CCE initiatives and systems focused on Extension evaluation. The standards, expectations, trainings, and numerous resources provided through these other mechanisms are essential to the long-term effort to increase evaluation capacity and standards throughout the Extension system. The EP model offers specific attributes that can facilitate this effort and it addresses a number of the fundamental challenges to evaluation in the Extension context. Part II of this brief paper reviews the current state of evaluation in non-EP Extension offices; identifies basic challenges to the efforts to raise the standards and capacity for evaluation; and describes the strengths of the EP that are especially relevant to this situation. Part III reviews what has been accomplished through the EP thus far and how the Cornell Office for Research on Evaluation (CORE) proposes to continue these efforts over the next several years. A discussion of outcomes at the 3-5 year mark is presented in Part IV.
II. Where CCE is Now

a. Current Practices and the Challenges to Evaluation

Inducements toward program evaluation come from within Extension – in the form of explicit job responsibilities, Standards of Excellence for Associations, and so on – and externally in the form of reports to funders, and to County Legislatures needing and expecting accountability in allocating limited funds. In addition to these explicit mandates, educators have an inherent desire to continually ensure that their programs and their work with those programs are successful and effective. Extension educators and leaders are committed to doing good and meaningful work.

Nevertheless, in general, current evaluation practice is not adequate to meet the standards and needs of the Extension system. “Lack of time” is frequently cited as the principal obstacle. Educators are generally working to capacity already and juggling numerous competing demands for their time and expertise. Evaluation tends to feel like an additional burden on an already full schedule. The reality continues to be that evaluation tends to be conducted in a fairly limited, non-systematic way, often simply using what has been used before. Standards and practices vary considerably across Associations and among programs within Associations. Program terminology and structures, and therefore perceived evaluation needs, are diverse, so there appears to be little opportunity to share expertise and pool resources. Connections to the evaluation research-base tend to be limited. Progress has certainly been made in a number of cases, but the successes still tend to be somewhat isolated.

b. Identification of Critical Ingredients for Sustainable Evaluation Practice

For evaluation to be not only feasible but also sustainable and widespread throughout the CCE system, a number of ingredients are essential. The EP model is not intended to provide all of these independently of other efforts, but the design of the EP specifically and uniquely contributes to a number of them, as discussed below.

The critical characteristics of sustainable, high-quality evaluation practice within CCE include the following:

(1) Basic Evaluation Capacity and Understanding: Educators and Program Leaders have access to resources and materials on evaluation, and an understanding of the options, purposes, and value derived from evaluation plans and results;

(2) Expanding What’s Possible: Evaluation is conducted as efficiently as possible, so that educators within and across Associations are not duplicating each others’ work, and
program staff across the CCE system can share developments with colleagues elsewhere and can gain from the work and investments that other Associations and programs have made;

(3) Seeing – and Capturing – the Outcomes and Benefits: Decision-makers within Extension Associations have a thorough understanding of, and are able to measure and capture, the progress made on evaluation, and the “returns” on investments in evaluation capacity and resources allocated to on-going evaluation activity;

(4) Strategic Decision-Making: Evaluation resources are allocated efficiently – that is, educators, Program Leaders, and Executive Directors are able to identify the relative values of different evaluation efforts and are able to focus staff and other resources where the impact is most valuable.

c. The Role of the Evaluation Partnership Model

A core element of the EP is the emphasis on planning evaluation. The EP does not offer a “quick fix” for evaluation needs, but rather it builds capacity that can be used and expanded over time. Moreover, the planning process itself positions programs to capture a number of additional benefits beyond the immediate evaluation results.

The EP framework is built on the premise that to do effective evaluation it is essential to start from a solid and detailed understanding of the program in question – how it operates, what outcomes it seeks and serves, what “stage” of development the program is in, and an accurate picture of the array of stakeholders and their respective priorities. From these starting points, program staff can undertake deliberate, strategic planning of evaluation activity for both short- and long-term use. Fundamental building blocks of the planning phase of the EP are: Stakeholder Analyses; Program Descriptions and Lifecycle Analyses; Program Logic Models and Pathway Models; a determination of appropriate Evaluation “Scope” based on all of these components; and a uniform Evaluation Plan outline. ¹ The Netway software contributes an invaluable tool that allows for easy entry of information; easy output of logic models, pathway models, and evaluation plans; as well as search functions and a system for identifying programs (and thus staff) with similar activities, outcomes, and evaluation tools.

The building blocks in the EP model contribute to the key ingredients of sustainable evaluation practice as follows:

¹ The written “Systems Evaluation Protocol” (SEP), which will be available from CORE in Spring 2009, includes a detailed set of steps developed as part of an NSF-funded research project.
i. Raising Basic Evaluation Capacity and Understanding

The EP effort to date has included in-service trainings, on-site visits, and phone consultations with partner Associations that were specifically tailored to develop capacity as needed within individual offices for effective evaluation planning. Linkages to cutting-edge research-based evaluation knowledge have been integrated throughout the EP process. The early phases of the EP have been relatively consultation-intensive, blending uniformity with customized responses. The next phase of the EP will (of necessity, as the project scope increases) require more “decentralized” and self-supporting modes of evaluation capacity-building. The early phase has, however, yielded a set of field-tested training materials, guidelines, and instruction sheets for Evaluation planning and an evaluation cyberinfrastructure (the “Netway”) that will be invaluable in the next phases. It has also laid the foundation for a network of Evaluation Project Managers (EPMs) and program staff with shared experiences through the EP that will contribute to a self-sustaining process of raising evaluation capacity broadly within the CCE system.

ii. Expanding What’s Possible – Creating Efficiencies, Leveraging Successes

The EP process is well-suited to increase the efficiency of evaluation planning, implementation and utilization so that a given allocation of resources to evaluation can yield larger benefits:

- The use of standardized logic models and pathways models, with uniform output from both, makes it easier to identify common features among seemingly diverse programs and activities – this helps overcome the perception that programs are “all different” and makes it easier to leverage efforts in one area to the benefit of other programs.

- The impact on program planning and improvement is better if evaluation is directed toward the most critical program outcomes and tailored deliberately to the program’s stage in its lifecycle; Stakeholders analyses and Lifecycle analyses are essential components both for program planning and evaluation.

- The development of basic common language and tools for program analysis and evaluation makes it easier to communicate results with a wider set of internal and external audiences.
The Netway is designed to facilitate sharing of program information, concepts, evaluation plans and instruments; the network of EPMs and involved program staff add to this opportunity for building on existing infrastructure, efforts and successes.

Improved access to resources is not enough to build educator confidence and overcome a reluctance to expose programs to detailed scrutiny; the EP offers positive demonstration value by building transparency and having fellow educators go through the process of planning and completing improved evaluations.

iii. Capturing the Results and Other Benefits of Evaluation Planning and Action

The development of specific, uniform deliverables from evaluation planning (logic models, pathway models, concise Evaluation Plans with concrete goals) makes it easier for educators and supervisors to demonstrate and assess progress, and to ensure accountability. In addition, this comprehensive approach to evaluation offers additional potential benefits in terms of streamlined reporting, financing, strategic planning, the costs of staff turnover, and so on. Thorough understanding and documentation of program inputs, activities, outcomes, and impact can contribute to:

- Funding proposals and reports (which benefit from improved content and credibility by the inclusion of succinct, clear program descriptions, logic models, validated evaluation plans, and evaluation results);
- Written materials and other presentations on programs (annual reports, recruitment brochures, press releases, presentations to Boards of Directors, County Legislatures);
- Internal reporting, especially when tied to an outcome-driven planning process like four-year plans, Federal and statewide reporting systems, etc.;
- Reducing the cost of staff turnover (program logic models, pathway models, and evaluation plans and reports provide invaluable documentation that can facilitate transitions due to staffing changes).

iv. Ensuring Strategic Decision-Making with Respect to Evaluation

At any point in time, resources are limited and need to be allocated to their best use. It is not possible, or desirable, to evaluate everything all the time. The EP makes it much easier to make careful, grounded decisions about what aspect of a program to evaluate, how, and when. Careful planning then lends itself to sound multi-year decisions about allocations of resources to
program development and evaluation. The EP facilitates this at both the Association level, as EDs and Program Leaders make better-informed, comprehensive decisions about evaluation emphasis, and within programs as educators make informed choices about when to “stretch” for higher-quality research-based evaluation methods, and when to reserve those efforts for a more appropriate time or program.

III. Progress through the Evaluation Partnerships to Date, and Next Steps

a. Impact on Evaluation Planning through the Partnerships So Far

The CCE office in NYC is in its third year with the EP, and is currently working with 6 targeted programs as well as a large number of additional programs in various stages of planning. Among the targeted and non-targeted programs, there are 66 staff members who have been involved. Key successes include the voluntary continued participation of a number of the non-targeted programs, and internal and external synergies being captured as programs have been able to exchange ideas in the process of working on their plans. The NYC office went through a staffing change as the original EPM left the project and was replaced by a new EPM – the documentation and Netway materials that were in place contributed to a smoother transition and continued momentum on the evaluation work.

In 2007, six additional County offices joined the EP, including Chenango, Jefferson, Onondaga, St. Lawrence, Tompkins, and Ulster counties. These Associations are now in their second year of the EP effort, and are in the stage of refining and implementing the Evaluation Plans developed last year. Across the six counties there are 24 programs involved, all of which completed an evaluation plan by the end of 2007. Active involvement in the EP process has extended to 138 staff members in these 6 Associations. In a panel presentation in May 2008, EPMs commented on how much the Pathway model helped “pare down the focus of evaluation,” and on the benefits of working on the planning process as part of a team – “We thought we knew all the answers, but we didn’t know what we didn’t know. It was difficult, but helpful….“ One EPM emphasized the “credibility” of having been able to use selected research-based measures as part of the evaluation effort. In at least one Association, the Netway and EP tools have been used to develop materials for two (successful) grant applications for programs that were not initially part of the Evaluation partnership. Several other EP Associations have also extended to bring additional programs and strategic initiatives into the Netway and evaluation planning process.
b. Goals and Next Steps

i. Supporting Evaluation Implementation and Utilization

The Evaluation Partnerships to date have been focused on planning evaluations. As these Associations move further into the next phases of evaluation work – the implementation and utilization phases – the Evaluation Partnerships will shift focus accordingly. The CORE team will continue to follow the basic model of providing support for the initial cohort, and using their experiences as a basis for developing needed materials, trainings, and other resources. This will benefit the participating Associations, and provide a strong foundation for setting up subsequent cohorts to be able to follow through these next phases.

A related on-going goal is the continued development of the search functions and linkages to researchers through the Netway cyberinfrastructure. The search functions provide immediate identification of commonalities across outcomes in different programs, which is a key ingredient in allowing educators to benefit from the evaluation work of others. The expansion of the researcher portal will help to align the interests of researcher with the needs of educators – building incentives on both sides to use the system, and increasing the returns on this effort.

Complementary to the Netway is the development and strengthening of the person-to-person network among educators working toward similar goals. The early phase of the EP has laid a foundation for this network, and the strengthening of this opportunity will remain a key priority.

ii. Strategic Stakeholder Analysis

For evaluation to be truly sustainable within Extension, the systems and policies guiding evaluation need to take into account the interests of a wide range of stakeholders including program staff, program leadership, Association leadership, CCE Administration, and University faculty and research staff. An important component of the next phase of work for the Evaluation Partnership project will be to systematically assess the incentives, interests, and constraints operating at all of these levels, and incorporate the results into a comprehensive plan for embedding high-quality, sustainable evaluation within Extension.

iii. Expansion of the Evaluation Partnership Model to New Associations

The plan for the next wave of EP work is to focus on a particular program type that is present in a large number of CCE Associations, and build on the inherent common ground to develop a wide base of common language, definitions, and tools. The 4-H Youth Development
program offers a particularly useful area within which to implement this strategy. The 4-H Leadership is committed to improving evaluation capacity, and the existence of a structure and network of 4-H relationships across regions and counties of New York State provide infrastructure for communication and decision-making that can facilitate the EP work.

Specific planning for the expansion of the EP model to 4-H programming will be done in the summer and fall of 2008. Discussions with 4-H leadership will be essential in shaping the details of the plans to ensure that their goals and EP goals are coordinated and practicable. (The first full coordination and planning meeting with 4-H leadership is scheduled for June 16.) In advance of this more detailed planning, however, the CORE team anticipates the following needs and goals for the coming work:

- **Accessible language:** It is a hallmark of 4-H staff and programs that they use terminology and concepts that are specific to 4-H. One of the goals for the EP work with 4-H will be to take advantage of this internal self-understanding, while at the same time pushing for final products (program descriptions, outcomes, and tools) that can be readily understood by non-4-H colleagues and other external audiences.

- **Balancing Program-specific and Association-wide needs:** The selection of a set of 4-H programs for the next wave of the EP is another stepping-stone toward raising evaluation capacity throughout the CCE system. As such, a key element of the planning will be to design the EP work within 4-H in a way that positions the participating Associations to spread the evaluation knowledge and resources within their offices, not just within 4-H.

**iv. Further integration of the Evaluation Partnership system with other CCE goals, initiatives, and systems**

The contribution of the Evaluation Partnership project toward raising overall evaluation capacity across the Extension system will be improved significantly by integrating evaluation practices and policies with other Extension system practices and policies such as strategic planning, reporting, performance reviews, and staff and leader development. Continued emphasis on expectations for and use of evaluation work by CCE Administration will reinforce the incentives influencing decisions within individual Associations. The CORE team will work closely with CCE Administration and other partners to identify opportunities for synergies and reinforcement as this array of priorities moves forward.
IV. Looking Ahead: The Vision for the EP in Three to Five Years

The EP is designed to develop do two things jointly: (1) develop and support the knowledge, processes, and systems that are needed to sustain a practice of high-quality evaluation across a range of Associations and programs, and (2) develop an organizing structure and resources that can extend these outcomes to a further set of audiences in a more self-supporting manner. Observable outcomes for the first of these goals include the following:

- A set of Extension Associations that have participated in the EP and are able to design, conduct and use high-quality evaluations of their programs; are able to integrate research evidence effectively into program planning and reports; have an increased propensity to use systematic tools like Logic and Pathway models to describe and analyze a range of internal and programmatic initiatives; have a positive “culture” of evaluation; and have an efficient and effective allocation of resources to evaluation.
- A network of experienced Extension staff across the state who engage in productive exchanges of information, consultations, and resources on evaluation.
- A comprehensive set of resources in Extension evaluation that any Association can use, including evaluation planning tools; worksheets; checklists; measures and measurement approaches; data analysis templates, evaluation plan templates; report formats and examples, etc.

Observable outcomes for the second of these broad goals, of developing a system for extending evaluation capacity more broadly, include the following:

- A well-tested, documented Evaluation Partnership process for engaging any Extension program or Association in evaluation.
- An EP process that is designed specifically to integrate with other Association objectives, so that time and resources devoted to evaluation planning and implementation contribute also to reporting requirements, human resource management, strategic planning, staff development, and so on.
- A web-based infrastructure that supports evaluation in CCE statewide.
- A nationally recognized model for building Extension evaluation capacity.
There is evidence already of EP Associations using the tools and experience they have acquired through the EP for purposes beyond evaluation.² This sort of positive adoption will not only reinforce the development of sound evaluation practices in a large number of programs and Associations, but will make it possible to see and capture numerous benefits from the investment in evaluation capacity through the Evaluation Partnership process.

² CCE-Chenango used the Netway to develop Logic and Pathway Models for two successful grant applications; CCE-Tompkins is beginning to use the Netway and EP steps for evaluating progress on its Strategic Initiatives, and has adapted its new database for Four-Year Planning and associated reporting to align with Netway definitions and reporting features.