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## Measuring the Outcomes of Professional Events: A Posttest-Only, One-Group Evaluation Instrument for Conferences and Symposiums

### Abstract

There are limited evaluation resources available to Extension professionals seeking to measure the effectiveness of professional events. This article presents a survey template that can be adapted to evaluate Extension conferences, workshops, seminars, or symposiums. This template is a useful tool for program planning teams to initiate the evaluation process while planning an event. Extension professionals can use the template to strategically develop thematic sessions based on anticipated outcome indicators, measure the effectiveness of planned events, and make informed decisions to enhance future learning opportunities.

**Keywords:** Extension events, program evaluation, program planning, survey instruments, survey template.

## Introduction

Planned professional events are important for building the capacity of adult learners as they provide structured opportunities for learning, networking, and skill-building (Beavers, 2009; Petty and Thomas, 2014; Robinson and Meikle-Yaw, 2007). Such events offer an environment where participants can learn from subject matter experts and interact with peers, resulting in enhanced knowledge and skill acquisition (Conner et al., 2018; Diaz et al., 2019). Moreover, planned events can provide adult learners with the chance to explore new areas of interest and gain fresh perspectives on their professional roles.

Traditional Extension events such as conferences, workshops, seminars, and symposiums deliver value to participants by facilitating peer-to-peer learning and advancing bonding social capital (Ricketts and Place, 2009). The objective of most Extension events is to provide opportunities for individuals to share their ideas, expertise, and experience with each other, and learn from their peers. In so doing, they foster a sense of community and collaboration that can strengthen social networks (Prins and Ewert, 2002; Robinson and Meikle-Yaw, 2007).

While Extension professionals plan regular events such as annual in-state conferences and retreats, there are limited evaluation resources available to those seeking to measure the effectiveness and outcomes of these gatherings. In many cases, program evaluation is considered after the event (Preskill and Catsambas, 2004) even though it is widely accepted as an integral aspect of program planning (Frechtling, 2010). The purpose of this paper is to provide a simple template for measuring the effectiveness and learning outcomes of professional Extension events (i.e., conference, workshop, seminar, or symposium). The template is designed to follow a one-group, posttest-only design. While there are limitations to such designs (Cohen et al., 2017), the template can be adapted during the program planning process to facilitate *evaluative thinking* to strategically develop breakouts, themes, and learning experiences for the event (Vo and Archibald, 2018). It serves as a starting point for program planning teams as they initiate the evaluation process while planning the event.

Planned professional events and activities are an important aspect of Extension programs (Denny and Ellard, 2022). Considerable amounts of time, resources, and efforts are invested in their success. As Extension professionals, we must ensure that our professional events lead to increased organizational capacity. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to provide Extension professionals with an evaluation template instrument that can be used for evaluating planned professional events. The evaluation instrument for this template was developed and successfully utilized for the 2023 *What's Up Down South* economic summit in Washington County, Utah, and a modified version was used to evaluate the 2023 Utah State University Extension Annual Conference (Hill and Ali, 2023).

### **Evaluation Instrument**

Included in the *Appendix* is a template of an evaluation instrument used to gather data on immediate reactions and learning outcomes from attendees at a professional Extension event. The survey is divided into the following sections:

1. Introduction
2. Experiences and Reactions
3. Learning Outcomes
4. Demographics

The *Introduction* is brief and provides information on the event's purpose, explaining how their feedback will help improve the event in the future as suggested in the social exchange theory (Cook et al., 2013). It also emphasizes the anonymity of responses and assures respondents that their input is highly valued. This section sets the tone for the entire survey and can impact the respondent's willingness to complete it based on their perception of the cost-benefit of completing the survey. A clear and concise introduction can encourage respondents to take the survey seriously and provide thoughtful answers. An effective survey introduction can make respondents feel valued, informed, and engaged in the process.

The *Experiences and Reactions* section follows Rockwell and Bennett's definition of *Reactions* in the Targeting Outcomes of Programs model (Rockwell and Bennett, 2004). It provides data on participants' immediate perceptions of instructors, learning material, and other contextual factors that affect short-term learning outcomes. This section asks attendees to provide feedback on each keynote and breakout session presentations they attended using display and skip logics. By gathering feedback on specific sessions, the program team can identify areas for improvement, determine which sessions and speakers were most effective, and understand the overall attendee experience.

The *Learning Outcomes* section relates to desired short-term outcomes of each session. We intentionally focused solely on knowledge acquisition and understanding as described in Level 2 of Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) to minimize the length of the survey. Adult learners are self-directed (Merriam, 2001), and we assume they will seek out opportunities to learn more about a topic area if they perceive it as useful and applicable to their professional development journey. While it is common to assess *Experiences and Reactions* for the overall event, the template includes both Sections 2 and 3 for each learning session; we assume if a professional (a) is satisfied with the quality of content, presenter effectiveness, relevance of information, and (b) perceives that anticipated learning outcomes were met, then they are more likely to explore advanced learning opportunities on the topic area. The interaction effect of *Experiences and Reactions* and *Learning Outcomes* likely results in higher-order outcomes of adoption and application of practices expected from capacity-building events.

We recommend the program planning team use the template to strategically select keynotes and create sessions and breakouts that fit with the overall goal of the event. With agreed-upon learning goals, the program planners should identify speakers, then reach out to them and ask them for their learning objectives in advance to ensure sessions are intentional and in alignment to broad learning goals. Planners can tailor the template by adding each learning objective to Section 3 of the instrument. Sections 2 and 3 should be repeated for each breakout session and keynote. The template also includes items to gauge the overall success of the event in Section 3.

The *Demographics* section collects information about participants' personal and career characteristics such as age, gender, role, and other relevant factors. This section is important as it allows Extension professionals to understand the demographic profile of the event attendees and assess reactions and outcomes by participant groups to ensure the event benefits all individuals. It also helps in determining whether the event served the target audience. The demographic information collected also helps to identify any gaps in the event's marketing efforts, allowing Extension professionals to adjust their outreach and promotion strategies. In addition, analyzing the demographic data can provide insights into the preferences and needs of different audience segments, which can inform future event planning and programming decisions.

### **Utilization in Extension**

The template in the *Appendix* should be tailored to the professional event. The items included are not exhaustive, and there are likely to be many additional questions of interest to program planners. Therefore, the template only serves as a starting point that encourages planners to think about desired outcomes during the planning process to identify keynotes and breakouts aligned to those outcomes. However, we recommend brevity in any final evaluation instrument. The survey should be administered preferably one day after the event when participants have returned to their regular working schedule. This reduces response bias (particularly acquiescence bias) that might occur when participants are still engaged in event sessions. We recommend adapting the instrument for use in Qualtrics, or another survey software as appropriate.

We acknowledge the limitations of the one-group, posttest-only design with respect to the myriad of threats to internal validity. However, the design leans on principles of utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2021). It provides a simple, non-intrusive, and practical process to gather evaluation data that can be used by program planners (i.e., the intended users) to improve future events for Extension professionals. Therefore, we recommend evaluators apply simple descriptive statistics to analyze the data. We suggest frequencies for all items, and crosstab analysis (without chi-square) can be

used to examine the descriptive relationship between experiences and reaction, learning outcomes, and demographics. Evaluators may also collapse categories (e.g., Strongly agree and agree vs. other) to examine overall relationships via two-way contingency tables.

## Conclusion

Professional events provide an important platform for people to feel a sense of community and belonging. They provide ample opportunity for social learning and capacity building that are essential to strengthening institutions dedicated to the land grant mission. We provide a simple survey template to evaluate the effectiveness of such events, and recommend practitioners use the instrument (as they see fit) to integrate evaluation in the program planning process to ensure events are meaningful to participants.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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# Appendix

## Section 1: Introduction

[University name] Extension is conducting a brief survey to learn more about your experience participating in the [Event name]. The [Event's name] purpose is to [Insert brief purpose statement for the event. Example: provide businesses and community leaders with critical information to plan ahead and strengthen our business community]. Your feedback will inform future decisions and improvements regarding this event for years to come.

We ask for your feedback on this short survey to improve the [Event name]. The survey will take no longer than 6 minutes to complete, and all responses are completely anonymous.

Your responses are extremely valuable to us. If you have questions about the survey, please contact [Name], [Title] at [Email address] or [Phone number].

Thank you.

## Section 2: Experiences and Reactions

Which of the following main session(s) did you attend? Select all that apply.

- Keynote 1: Name of speaker – Presentation title
- Keynote 2: Name of speaker – Presentation title
- Keynote 3: Name of speaker – Presentation title

[Display logic based on selection of main session(s) attended. Repeat for each option selected]

Please rate Keynote 1 [Name of speaker – Presentation title] on the following items:

	<b>Very Poor</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Very Good</b>
Quality of content	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Presenter effectiveness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relevance of information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall presentation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Which of the following breakout session(s) did you attend? Select all that apply.

- Breakout session 1: Name of speaker – Presentation title
- Breakout session 2: Name of speaker – Presentation title
- Breakout session 3: Name of speaker – Presentation title

[Display logic based on selection of breakout session(s) attended. Repeat for each option selected]

Please rate Breakout session 1 [Name of speaker – Presentation title] on the following items:

	<b>Very Poor</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Very Good</b>
Quality of content	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Presenter effectiveness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relevance of information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall presentation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Section 3: Learning Outcomes

[Display logic based on selection of breakout session(s) attended. Repeat for each option selected]

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement.

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
I learned about [Insert learning objective 1]	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I learned about [Insert learning objective 2]	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I learned about [Insert learning objective 3]	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How would you rate your **overall** experience at the [Event name]?

- Poor
- Fair
- Good
- Very Good

Excellent

[For paid events only] Based on your experience at the [Event name], do you think the event was worth more than the amount you paid?

Yes

No

Unsure

Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements about the [Event name].

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
The [Event name] is a valuable experience for me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The [Event name] has a good reputation among [Target audience].	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The [Event name] has provided valuable information for me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would recommend attending the [Event name] to my colleagues.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will use what I've learned at the [Event name] in my role.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Have you ever attended [Event name] before?

Never

Once before

A few times

Every year

How could the [Event name] be improved in the future?

[Open text response]

Are there any other comments, ideas, or suggestions you would like to share with us?

[Open text response]

## Section 4: Demographics

Please select your county.

[Dropdown list of all counties in target state(s)]

How many years have you worked for [Organization]?

- Less than 2 years
- 2 to 5 years
- 6 to 10 years
- More than 10 years

Please indicate your primary department/unit:

[Open text response]

Which of the following best describes you?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say
- Prefer to self-describe: [Open text response]

Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino or none of these?

- Yes
- None of these

Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Other: [Open text response]

Please select your age group.

- Under 18
- 18 to 24 years old
- 25 to 34 years old
- 35 to 44 years old

- 45 to 54 years old
- 55 to 64 years old
- 65+ years old