Evaluation Champions: What They Do, Why They Do It, and Why It Matters to Organizations

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Evaluation champions are individuals who serve as catalysts for building evaluation capacity within an organization. They advocate for the importance of program evaluation, model good evaluation behaviors, and mentor their peers in program evaluation skills and competencies. Interviews with 40 peer-nominated champions in four purposively-sampled Extension organizations identified the roles, contexts, and motivations of staff who act as evaluation champions. Findings underline the importance—and the limits—of mentors and project teams in building evaluation capacity in complex organizations. Implications for practice, research, and policy are discussed.

Keywords: program evaluation, evaluation capacity, evaluation capacity building, organizational learning, evaluation champions

Introduction

To be effective in diverse, complex, and rapidly-changing environments, individuals and organizations must be able to gather and utilize data on stakeholder needs and program contexts, resources, processes, and outcomes (King & Stevahn, 2012; Leuci, 2012; Patton, 2008; Rowe, 2010; Torres & Preskill, 2001). Thus, evaluation capacity building (ECB), including training staff to think about and do evaluation and structuring systems to facilitate organizational learning and change, is a priority for organizational effectiveness (Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013; King, 2007; Labin, Duffy, Meyers, Wandersman, & Lesesne, 2012; Preskill & Boyle, 2008). However, ECB represents a significant conceptual and logistical challenge in complex organizations (Franz & Townson, 2008; Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009). A key element in the capacity-building process is the emergence of *evaluation champions* (King, 2007; Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Taylor-Powell & Boyd, 2008). Champions are supervisors or peers who act as advocates, facilitators, and role models for evaluation process, with influence ranging from

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encouraging individuals to guiding teams to changing organizational resources and policies. This report describes exploratory research on the experiences of peer-identified evaluation champions in four state Cooperative Extension systems and describes their roles, contexts, and motivations for evaluation practice. The report concludes with discussion of implications for practice, research, and policy.

Community-based government and non-profit programs face increasing demands from funders, clients, and other stakeholders to evaluate the quality and outcomes of their work (Carman, Fredericks, & Introcaso, 2008; Rennekamp & Engle, 2008). A recent survey by the Innovation Network (Morariu, Athanasiades, & Emery, 2012) found that 90% of nonprofits conduct some type of evaluation (vs. 85% in 2010). Of those responding ($N = 440$), only 29% reported high evaluation capacity. Among nonprofits (Carman, 2007; Surr, 2012) and government agencies (Lamm & Israel, 2013) that survive accountability demands (nonsurvivors are less well-documented), evaluation often consists of fulfilling performance benchmarks set by funders (e.g., Office of Management and Budget, 1993) rather than a process of building stakeholder support and generating usable data on impact and improvement (Patton, 2008, 2011). Thus, it is not surprising that staff in many nonprofits perceive evaluation as (a) a resource drain and distraction; (b) an external promotional tool; or (c) a strategic tool to manage reporting, regulatory processes, project monitoring, management, and staff performance measurement (Carman et al., 2008; Lamm & Israel, 2013).

Cousins, Goh, Clark, and Lee (2004) observed that organizations cannot sustain the many and varied evaluation activities that support internal effectiveness and external accountability without significant investments in ECB. ECB can address (a) practical use (i.e., design and management of evaluation projects); (b) instrumental use (i.e., accountability and action on recommendations); (c) conceptual use (i.e., education and empowerment of program stakeholders); and (d) process use (i.e., engagement of staff and participants) that may promote broader organizational learning and change (Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013; King, 2007; Patton, 2008; Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Rogers & Williams, 2006; Volkov & King, 2007. Taylor-Powell and Boyd (2008) viewed these tasks as "strengthening and sustaining an organization's capacity to: (a) design, implement, and manage effective evaluation projects; (b) access, build, and use evaluative knowledge and skills; (c) cultivate a spirit of continuous learning, improvement, and accountability, and (d) create awareness and support for program evaluation and self-evaluation as a performance improvement strategy" (p. 56). They argued that in Cooperative Extension, as in other complex systems, ECB involves incidental or serendipitous, as well as intentional goals, processes, context limits and opportunities.

King (2007) identified integration of evaluation process use in everyday activities as the starting point for ECB, with evaluators acting as educators (Cronbach, 1980) facilitating a culture of inquiry and organizational learning. Project teams provide rich contexts for *doing* and *using*

evaluation process (Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013; Torres, Preskill, & Piontek, 2005). King (2007) also identified four practice-based indicators of readiness for ECB, including (a) organizational capabilities and expectations, (b) emergence of evaluation champions as advocates and role models, (c) administrative leadership, and (d) policies and practices supporting program and evaluation best practice. Evaluation champions, including supervisors or peers, provide the "personal factor" in ECB (Patton, 2008) by mentoring, engaging and guiding program teams, and influencing organizational practices and policies (Llewellyn, 2013; Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Taylor-Powell & Boyd, 2008), especially when supported by an expert and well-connected advisory team (King, 2007). Since academic and organizational training in program evaluation is still more of the exception than the rule in Extension and similar organizations (Carman et al., 2008; Lamm & Israel, 2013; Taylor-Powell & Boyd, 2008) and short-term, knowledge-oriented training is insufficient to promote flexible use of evaluation skills (Arnold, 2006; Dillman, 2013), formal and embedded systems provide the most practical and efficient means for building or expanding evaluation capacity.

Research on organizational change identifies champions as advocates, practitioners, and trainers among leaders or rank-and-file employees who act as catalysts to learning and innovation through (a) knowledge acquisition (development of skills, insights, relationships), (b) knowledge sharing (dissemination, engagement, collaboration), and (c) knowledge utilization or integration into new situations (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Nevis, DiBella, & Gould, 1995; Senge et al., 1999; Warrick, 2009). Although organizations may equip leaders to champion particular practices designed to enhance values such as efficiency or customer-friendliness, it is often front-line staff with passion for their work who learn, share, and use insights from everyday interactions to improve their work and advance the organization. Innovators and facilitators of adaptation and change typically meet with resistance due to system homeostasis (Senge et al., 1999), yet their experiments and even their errors are critical to making an organization relevant and effective in the context of rapid and complex change.

Despite the benefits of ECB, organizations may limit investments in it due to competing demands, inconsistent administrative support, lack of facilitators, or inadequate infrastructure (King, 2007). Under such circumstances, front-line champions may influence a relatively small circle of colleagues, although administrative champions may still make changes in policies and practices such as training, work teams, reporting, and reward systems (Lamm, Israel, & Harder, 2011; Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009). The challenge for many government and non-profit organizations with marginal evaluation resources and declining fiscal support (Franz & Townson, 2008; Lamm & Israel, 2013; Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009) is how to invest strategically in ECB to meet immediate accountability demands while creating a practical and sustainable network for improving staff competencies, programming, and organizational learning.

Organizational learning research (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Nevis et al., 1995; Warrick, 2009) and practice-based observations of evaluation professionals (King, 2007; Taylor-Powell & Boyd, 2008) identify evaluation champions as organizational assets and catalysts to ECB. However, no prior research explores the existence and experience of evaluation champions in Extension or parallel organizations. If such advocates and practitioners of program evaluation could be identified, understanding their motivation, professional growth, roles, and contexts might provide insight on questions of where to invest in ECB, at least within the Cooperative Extension system.

Cooperative Extension systems engaged in community outreach and technology transfer from more than 100 land-grant universities (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2014) have worked to improve evaluation and ECB over the past four decades in response to rising expectations for external accountability, internal program quality, and professional scholarship, despite reductions in governmental support (Rennekamp & Engle, 2008; Taylor-Powell & Boyd, 2008). In 2009, evaluation advocates working through the online eXtension network formed an Evaluation Community of Practice (E-CoP) offering web-based training and support to Extension staff at county and state levels. In 2012, an E-CoP team designed a research study to document the work and assess needs of evaluation champions in order to better understand and serve Extension professionals. This research project did not attempt to determine the number and specific competencies of evaluation champions in the system. Rather, for front-line and state program staff identified as advocates and model practitioners of program evaluation by administrators or evaluation specialists, we were interested in two questions:

1. How do evaluation champions promote and practice program evaluation within their organizations?
2. What initiated and maintains evaluation champions' motivation to learn, practice, and promote program evaluation?

Methods

An exploratory, qualitative interview design was selected to capture the breadth of contexts, activities, and roles of county- and state-level evaluation champions. This methodological approach was selected because it is well-aligned with the overarching purposes of this study; qualitative data, especially semistructured qualitative interview data, are well suited for exploratory studies aimed at developing a nuanced understanding of people's experiences with a given phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). This methodological approach is also consistent with the researchers' espoused epistemological stance for this study, which is a pragmatist, constructivist epistemology with elements of critical realism (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In terms of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity, all three authors are Extension evaluation specialists who work to support ECB, often by working with evaluation champions, in our

respective states. As such, while we seek to better understand evaluation champions, our positionality also predisposes us with a positive bias about them, and we have numerous anecdotes and preconceived notions about the experiences, roles, and needs of evaluation champions. Throughout this study, we have attempted to use this positionality as a productive heuristic guide rather than letting it compromise the trustworthiness of the study.

Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select one state Extension program in each of four Extension regions (i.e., Northeast, Southern, North Central, and Western). We do not report the names of the states to help ensure the confidentiality of participants in this study. Larger state programs were selected in order to ensure a sufficient number of respondents across a range of disciplines. Either via email or at state-wide in-person Extension events, evaluation specialists, administrators, and agents in each state nominated up to ten champions based on their advocacy, practice, and/or training efforts for program evaluation, continuing the purposive sampling at the level of individuals.

As this was an exploratory study, the selection of individual participants was purposefully open, without predetermined specific criteria for what constitutes an evaluation champion. Respondents were contacted by the authors and recruited into the study consistent with protocols approved by the Human Subjects Boards of the lead institutions. Almost all invited champions elected to participate in the study (five potential participants elected not to participate because of being too busy or being on maternity leave). Overall, the 40 champions, including 15 males and 25 females, had an average of 15 years of experience, with a state average range of 11.8 to 18.8 years, and an individual range of experience from 2 to 35 years. Champions represented all major Extension programs, with 18 having some responsibilities in 4-H; 17 in Agriculture and/or Natural Resources; 12 in Family and Consumer Science, Nutrition, or Health; and 4 in Community Development. The group of champions consisted of specialists and agents, representing various administrative positions within their respective Extension system, though the majority were county-based agents. In total, there were 6 state or county administrators, 6 state specialists/assistants, and 28 field agents in our sample.

Data Collection

During initial phases of the development of this study, five Extension evaluation professionals (all affiliated with the E-CoP) brainstormed items for the semistructured interview protocol used in this study. A list of the 13 items included in the final protocol is included in the Appendix.

Two of the authors (BS and PC) conducted all interviews (with three states' interviews conducted by BS and one by PC). As longstanding evaluation practitioners, the researchers have

extensive experience conducting interviews. The interviewers built rapport with interviewees through their shared participation in the same professional system, the Cooperative Extension system. In some cases, the interviewer knew the interviewee personally. Across the four states, 40 semistructured interviews were conducted by phone between July 2013 and May 2014. Interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes.

In most cases, to balance feasibility and precision, interviews were not audiorecorded, but extensive notes (including verbatim quotes) were typed by the interviewer during the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008; Tessier, 2012). In one state, interviews were audiorecorded. In order to improve accuracy of interview notes, interviewers conducted immediate member checks with participants by paraphrasing their responses during the interviews. In addition, completed and edited interview notes were shared with interviewees for formal member checking, with roughly 20% of participants suggesting minor changes to the interview notes.

Analysis

All three authors conducted the analysis of the data. A general inductive approach was used. This approach is an "easily used and systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings" (Thomas, 2006, p. 237). It serves to:

> (a) condense raw textual data into a brief, summary format; (b) establish clear links between the evaluation or research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data; and (c) develop a framework of the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the raw data. (Thomas, 2006, p. 237)

First, an initial coding dictionary was created as a separate Word document with a priori codes based on the objectives of the study and the items in the interview protocol. This coding dictionary included the code's name, identification number (for quick reference while coding), and a brief description or definition. Data were managed by entering each discreet phrase or sentence into an Excel database, where each phrase or sentence occupied a row, and potential codes were represented in the columns. In any analysis of interview data, there is a decision to be made between proceeding horizontally complete interview by interview, or vertically by variable or item. In this study, data management and analysis proceeded item by item, rather than interviewee by interviewee. This approach, discussed by Kvale and Brinkmann (2008), offers the advantage of allowing the coder to become immersed in the codes associated with a given item, thus increasing the likelihood for consistency in coding. This approach does, however, have the limitation that the narrative nature of the individual interviewee's data can be disrupted. Given the objectives of this study and its underlying epistemological and methodological framing, the item by item analysis was the most appropriate option.

The three authors assigned items for analysis between them such that each of the 13 items was coded by two researchers, with different permutations of paired researchers working to analyze each item. The coders first coded assigned items on their own by reading each interviewee response to that item and then assigning it with one or more of the established codes. Emergent codes were also identified during coding; in such instances, the code book for the affected item was updated, and like with the constant comparison method of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), data which had already been coded before the addition of the new emergent code were reread and if required, recoded to include the new code.

The pairs of coders then met to discuss any discrepancies and to ultimately come to consensus. In most cases, this co-coding activity led to changes in the coding of one coder only if she or he had omitted a code which was later deemed pertinent and appropriate. In very few cases, the two coders disagreed slightly and dialogued until consensus was reached. Finally, all three researchers met repeatedly to identify typical and distinctive themes in each item, noting illustrative quotations, examples, and contexts. As a pragmatic constructivist study, positivist notions of validity and reliability are not applicable. Rather, we endeavored to ensure the quality (i.e., credibility and provisional transferability) of our inquiry through feedback (including technical and reflexive member checks), "rich" (highly detailed) data, peer debriefing, and constant comparison (Maxwell, 1996; Mertens, 2005).

Results

Qualitative content analysis enabled us to identify themes related to each research question, as described below, with key quotations and themes summarized in tables.

Question 1: Champions' Promotion and Practice of Evaluation

Program evaluation roles. Consistent with practice observations (King, 2007; Taylor-Powell & Boyd, 2008), champions served at all organizational levels and varied in experience, academic discipline(s), and practice networks. Most engaged in roles as advocates, practitioners, and trainers with varying frequency, with specific activities reflecting the responsibilities, contexts, and experience as recalled in the open-ended question format.

Advocacy. "Speaking up for the cause" was perhaps the best-recognized role of a champion, evident in respondents' *talk* about evaluation and more frequent *actions* as monitors, models, and mentors, as illustrated by their statements in Table 1. Relatively few respondents described themselves as vocal "cheerleaders," yet most persistently reminded administrators, advisory groups, project teams, professional groups, individual coworkers or supervisees to invest time, resources, and gain rewards from skill-building and practice in evaluation. Reasons for advocating evaluation most often focused on funding or accountability, helping clients and

others see program impact, improving program quality, and learning about program subject matter. Both the few with "official" roles in evaluation (e.g., administrators, specialists) and peer advocates emphasized "improving practice" and "making a difference" in clients' lives over simply meeting organizational expectations.

Talk and action most often took place in practical contexts, such as project teams, where champions demonstrated the value of evaluation in program process by leading needs assessment, planning, monitoring, and reporting activities. Concurrently, they used these processes to engage and educate target audiences, staff, and funders about a program's purpose, potential, and impact. Although the quality and effects of advocacy were not a focus of this study, respondents' comments suggested that talking about evaluation helped sustain awareness, training priorities, and to a lesser extent, organizational practices in evaluation. Advocacy actions, perhaps because they were focused in project teams, were more often connected to changes in individual and project group practice than large-scale organizational change.

Table 1. Advocacy for Evaluation Comments by Theme

Question	Quotation	Theme
Advocacy/Talking	*I meet with other supervisors and remind them of the importance of evaluation and advocate for evaluation when we choose staff training priorities.—county director*	Supervisor/peer influence, importance, training decisions
	I wanted the funder to see what we were accomplishing. —county director	Stakeholder influence, demonstrating accountability
	To motivate myself and others, I remind them that it is important to show impact to retain funding or receive promotions and awards.—county director	Self/peer influence, importance for funding, promotion, recognition
	As the statewide community development coordinator…[I] encourage professional development in evaluation.—county agent	Peer/organizational influence, program role, training decisions
Advocacy/Action	*Last year I helped a staff member gain evaluation data from youth and adults in a livestock program.—county director*	Peer influence, program context
	I tend to be the one who develops the evaluation for multi-county efforts.—county agent	Peer influence, active contribution, project team context

Practice.   Champions gained experience and credibility with peers and clients by practicing what they advocated. As indicated above, advocacy and practice roles were conjoint but distinctive themes. Practice descriptions more often focused on process, *how evaluation was practiced*, than how many reports were produced or how many years were invested. Practice emphasis incorporated thinking, initiating, measuring, and using data to add value to peers' or clients' learning. Comments illustrating these processes are featured in Table 2.

Several champions described *evaluative thinking* as an extension of their personality, training, and/or programming experience. Consistent with Douglah (1998), they viewed action-and-reflection as consistent with Extension practice and inquiry in their discipline. They viewed systematic, utilization-focused evaluation as enhancing program practice. Evaluative thinking was also evident in guidance offered to others for (a) developing logic or pathway models, (b) assessing needs and focusing evaluation questions, or (c) examining measurement effectiveness.

Champions *managed* evaluation by engaging campus experts, community partners, and funders, and by working in project teams. They also maximized efficiency by focusing evaluation on priority programs, using reliable common measures, and adapting technology to enhance data collection and analysis. Consistent with, and perhaps as a consequence of, rigorous thinking and management, they gave careful attention to *measuring outcomes* rather than simply counting participants. Many also documented program quality or fidelity. Relatively few developed tools, but most mastered existing evaluation tools, especially surveys, but also used checklists, journals or log-books, interviews and focus groups, concept maps, observations, and testimonials. Several respondents used follow-up or longitudinal methods in addition to pre/post measures. A few developed or used cost-benefit measures. Those who worked intensively (e.g., singular focus for three months or more) and/or extensively (e.g., consistent priority over time) were most likely to report that they created, extended, or enhanced evaluation tools. Those who moved from project-to-project most often searched for and utilized existing instruments. In general, the wider the diversity of projects in which champions were involved, the greater the diversity of methods they mentioned and the more often evaluative thinking was evident in questions such as, "Which method fits what we want to know about this program?"

Evaluation champions were intentional in designing evaluation and in *using* evaluation data. Although keenly attuned to organizational reporting requirements and procedures, champions were principally self-motivated. Their priorities focused on using evaluation process and data to improve programs, improve their own program delivery skills, help program staff and clients succeed, and effectively interpret program goals and results for stakeholders. In the process of improving how they practiced evaluation, champions developed a greater understanding of the purpose of evaluation, the programs, and subject areas to which evaluation was applied. For many respondents, evaluation practice led to a deeper understanding of organizational mission, stakeholders, and the evaluation process itself, as reflected in this comment:

> Looking at evaluation from a broader perspective I could see that it was not just 'bean counting' but could help me, my supervisor, and the system to understand stakeholder needs and Extension impacts better and decide what programs should be continued or modified. (County agent)

Table 2. Evaluation Practice Comments by Theme

Question	Quotation	Theme
Practice/ Thinking	*I tend to be a science person and think about how and why things work, so evaluation is a natural part of science and Extension.—county agent*	Identity/training, evaluative thinking, programming process, organizational strategies
	I have a background in ethnography which I use to design group interviews.—county director	Identity/training, evaluative tools, program process
	Significant insight for [4-H] agents is that they are already doing evaluation as part of their youth program interactions.—state program assistant	Observation from training, programming process
Practice/ Managing	*I have partnered with faculty and their students in applied research fields at the university on several projects.—community development agent*	Engaging experts, working in teams
	I don't do evaluation in all my programs, but do apply it to my priority programs.—county agent	Efficiency-via-program priorities
	I have talked [with team partners] about techniques for using my cell phone to keep track of numbers and reporting.—county agent	Engaging peers, working in project teams, efficiency-via-technology
Practice/ Measuring	*I am always trying to design tools that capture the right information.—county agent*	Measurement-focused, stakeholder-focused
	I developed a calculator that shows the dollar value for benefits of IPM training used by Ag agents statewide.—county agent	Measurement-focused, stakeholder-focused, common measure-focused
	In 4-H livestock with novice learners, I evaluated what they knew before, during, and after…then tracked 3-10 years and measured.—county agent	Measurement-focused, longitudinal focus
Practice/ Using	*I implement evaluations to determine how to improve learning experiences for participants.—county agent*	Stakeholder-focused, quality (and presumably outcome)-focused
	That [program] value is recognized in the individual stories, testimonies, quotes, and capturing themes from focus groups.—county agent	Measurement-focused, stakeholder [esp. participant]-focused, interpreting program value
	I like putting information into chart form for others to better understand how we did.—county agent	Stakeholder-focused, interpreting program value

Mentoring and training.   For many champions, a reputation for evaluation practice opened opportunities for short- or long-term *mentoring* and *training* with peers, including supervisees or coworkers, most often in the context of project teams (see Table 3). Mentoring or team coaching typically utilized "teachable moments" in contexts of professional development (e.g., career start or promotion), project evolution (e.g., transition from output to outcome to reporting), and organizational learning (e.g., generating, training, and archiving logic models, measures, and reporting templates). Champions also advocated for and contributed to professional (discipline-based) organizations at local, state, and national levels through online or conference workshops. Many training events addressed multiple areas, but topics most often cited were planning, methods, and evaluation use, with design, data collection, and reporting cited less often. Many champions had been mentored by or worked closely with evaluation specialists or faculty as part of a formal or informal training team. In settings with more limited expertise, champions facilitated training events themselves. The most enduring theme across advocacy, practice, and training experiences was champions' *passion* for evaluative thinking and making a difference with people.

Table 3. Training-Related Comments by Theme

Question	Quotation	Theme
Training/ Mentoring	*I supervise and mentor staff and require them to do projects. We start with logic models and identify appropriate points in a program to conduct evaluation.—county director*	Supervisor influence, evaluation skills in program context, program process
	I am mentoring three others preparing their promotion papers. —county agent	Peer influence through mentoring, promotion help
	I involved 4-H volunteers in developing [a measure] and imagining where and how it could be implemented.—county agent	Professional influence with volunteers, measurement-focused, program process and context
Training/ Leading Workshops	*At our state conferences, I offer workshops on evaluation and model our practice with agents.—state program assistant*	Peer influence through training workshops, state level
	Taught [multiple evaluation topics] in a few webinars at the state and national level.—state program assistant	Peer influence through training workshops, national level

Question 2: Champions' Initial and Sustained Motivation to Evaluate

The journey toward becoming an evaluation champion began in graduate school for a few and inspired a return to formal coursework for a few others. More typically, champions learned evaluation skills through mentoring and project team experiences, then gradually accumulated

more skills through additional projects and professional development. For all respondents, much skill practice was self-taught, trial-and-error, and punctuated by peer learning or working with an expert or mentor.

Accountability requirements may have served to "get their attention" but did not inspire sustained interest, nor did the study of evaluation for its own sake. Rather, interest in evaluation grew from intense interest in a discipline, whether livestock or crop production, nutrition or food safety, and in clientele—producers, youth, or citizens of their county. Many expressed strong commitment to the ideals and institution of Cooperative Extension and viewed evaluation as a means to "tell the Extension story," improve programs, and make a difference in the community.

Sustained motivation was strongly related to early and intensive training, reinforced by rewarding practice. Positive evaluation experiences decreased resistance, reinforced evaluative routines, and increased relevance of evaluation work; as one respondent noted, "[Evaluation] is crucial to the ultimate success of what we do…funding, public relations, building the program for the future." Committed champions' motivation was self-generated and reinforced by new learning, additional funding support, and the rewards of making a difference in the lives of mentees and clients. Not surprisingly, positive feedback from stakeholders sustained motivation, whether it came from meeting a participant at the grocery store or after a presentation to Congress. One agent observed, "I read those statements when I complete my monthly report and it reinvigorates me in terms of what difference my work makes." He added, "finding ways to show impacts of helping…if you can't do that, you're out of business."

Evaluation that seemed irrelevant or was unused was demotivating, as was inadequate time to report or funding cuts despite good evaluation. However, many champions affirmed the value of negative feedback as a way to improve programs and track community needs. Champions sustained motivation by viewing the extra efforts or setbacks of each project in a long-term perspective of improving program and evaluation capacity.

The most enduring theme across advocacy, practice, and training experiences was champions' *passion* for evaluative thinking and making a difference with people, as illustrated by responses below. For many, evaluation was an integral part of the subject taught and extension of relationships with peers or clients: "I teach crop producers pest management strategies, challenging them to explore for insect pests to reduce losses or reduce pesticide application costs" (County agent). Evaluation champions saw the effects of their passion in responses of colleagues: "A light bulb comes on for colleagues when I talk about follow-up tools" (County agent). Finally, evaluative thinking contributed to both focus and broader perspective on the purpose and value of their work: "The reason I work with Extension is that I want to have an impact on my community and improve it, so measuring it and knowing that I have an impact is important to me" (County agent).

Discussion

This study, the first describing evaluation champions from their own point of view, explored their roles, activities, and initial and sustaining motivations in four diverse Extension systems.

Champions' Promotion and Practice of Evaluation

Consistent with prior organizational learning and ECB research and practice (Cousins et al., 2004; King, 2007; Warrick, 2009), champions engaged three complementary roles as advocates, practitioner-models, and mentor-trainers. Advocacy included "speaking up" in policy groups but more often—and perhaps more effectively—interpreting the value of and opportunities for evaluation to peers, especially in mentoring, project teams, and professional settings. Although sustained funding was the most often cited rationale for evaluating, as expected in the current economic climate, advocacy for client or peer learning and program improvement pointed to champions' influence on building deeper, longer-term foundations for program development.

Project teams and professional groups serve as valuable contexts for give-and-take in skill learning, practice, and mutual support (Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013; Torres et al., 2005), building on basic knowledge gained in formal settings (Arnold, 2006; Cousins et al., 2004; Dillman, 2013; King, 2007). Based on their reputation and enthusiasm for doing evaluation well, champions offered assistance or long-term mentoring to coworkers or supervisees; shared tools; helped with planning, problem-solving, or reporting, as they had been—or wished they had been—mentored. In addition, many champions promoted or provided training for statewide, regional, or national events. As advocates, mentors, trainers, and liaisons to professional evaluators, champions represent both the "personal factor" for peers (Patton, 2008) and organizational catalyst (Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Taylor-Powell & Boyd, 2008), roles critical to ECB and unique to change agents embedded in organizational systems (Warrick, 2009).

Champions perform above organizational norms in evaluative thinking (e.g., routine reporting, evaluation as "necessary evil") and evaluation use (e.g., "paperwork") (Baughman, Boyd, & Franz, 2012; Lamm & Israel, 2013). They prioritized evaluation instrumental use for accountability and funding support but also offered examples of process use to engage clients and partners, practical use to manage projects, and conceptual use of evaluation to educate stakeholders, consistent with Cousins et al. (2004). Simultaneously, doing and using the evaluation process seemed to enhance champions' identity as educators and leaders and their understanding of evaluation as a means to improve programs and make a difference in the lives of peers and program participants. Champions' own role descriptions more often fit the pattern of *indirect influence* which complements expert evaluators' more *direct and intentional* use of process in intensive training and consulting (Kirkhart, 2000, cited in King, 2007). Both roles are critical to ECB readiness (King, 2007) but are expressed differently in different organizations.

Champions' Initial and Sustained Motivation

Champions' interest in evaluation was shaped by internal passion for their field and clientele, as well as commitment to Extension organization and mission, yet evaluation was viewed as a competency, not an identity. Initially, motivation came from external requirements, perhaps reinforced by academic training or professional orientation. Later, relationships with mentors, early successes with self-directed or team projects, and problem solving with clients led to deeper commitments to *do* and *use* evaluation (Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013; Torres et al., 2005). Organizational investments in cultivating or engaging their skills reinforced champions' motivation, as did practice benefits such as program improvement, sustained or increased funding, and seeing the rewards of mentoring or organizational change. In sum, motivation was anchored in professional practice and reinforced by cognitive and affective rewards.

ECB in Perspective: Why Evaluation Champions Matter

Taylor-Powell and Boyd's (2008) description of Extension ECB offers a useful framework for reflecting on champions' experiences. Study results illustrate how *professional development* (PD), including training and technical assistance, mentoring, working in project teams, and sharing in multistate communities of practice serves as a watershed for ECB. What stands out in evaluation champions' narratives was their initiative in seeking PD resources, applying lessons, and urging others to pursue meaningful thinking and doing. Where budget cuts or competing training priorities limit formal training, champions connected with experienced practitioners within and beyond Extension. Where training was available, champions achieved higher levels of competence and confidence more rapidly, then applied skills to more of their plan of work. In either case, informal PD networks and self-directed learning contributed more to quantity and quality of growth than formal structures.

Evaluation champions represented critical ECB *resources and supports*, especially via informal networks. However, their effectiveness was limited when expertise, time, technology, and other organizational assets were less available. Champions were much more effective and energized when connected to support systems over an extended time period.

Finally, an *organizational environment* with clear, consistent leadership, policies, and structures that removed barriers and provided support for ECB enabled champions to grow and contribute much more than an organization with shifting priorities, high turnover, or unstable finances. Since much of champions' work and ECB generally is informal, such losses may be invisible but are, nonetheless, profound. In fact, as resources shrink, engaging champions as leaders is more critical for ECB and PD in all areas.

Limitations

As a one-time, purposive, and qualitative study, applications of the findings of this study to other settings should be made with caution. The peer nomination process may have introduced biases towards certain types of individuals, which may have been controlled through other sampling methods. The open-ended interview format captured a breadth of experience in this diverse group but lacked the continuity and detail of a fixed-choice instrument. Data collection in the interviews involved using written notation, paraphrasing, and in-process and follow-up processes that proved efficient and thorough but may have been improved with audiorecording and full verbatim transcription. Coders found more variation by context and respondent experience than initially identified by interviewers, but differences among coders were not analyzed systematically. Diverse perspectives and negotiated consensus of multiple coders aided accuracy and thoroughness of content analysis, yet different coders or processes may have generated different conclusions.

Respondents' descriptions were accepted at face value and not corroborated by alternative methods or explored for all relevant details. The same limitation applies to determining the quality of programs, evaluations, or capacity-building efforts. The study was able to document motivations, activities, and to some extent effects of champions' efforts, but unable to determine the impact of programs or quality of evaluation efforts which they described. Given the exploratory nature of the research and status of most Extension ECB efforts (e.g., consistent effort vs. rigor), attention to these details was not critical to this study but should be investigated in further research.

Recommendations for Practice, Research, and Policy

As an exploratory qualitative study, results may not generalize to all settings, but insights may be useful to some for future practice, research, and policy.

Practice. Competent professionals who are passionate about their discipline and people they serve will be most likely to ask, "How can I make (and measure) quality and impact?" First, hire people with these skills. Next, train in basic concepts of planning, implementing, and reporting to help new staff grasp the lingo and logic of programming and evaluation. Then, orient them. Skill mastery requires mentoring and applied practice in real-world settings (e.g., project teams, professional groups). Regularly nurture them. Careful planning and rehearsal of evaluation protocols optimizes effectiveness, as does the use of validated tools and templates. Continuously support them. Evaluation is a skill-set developed over time, not mastered overnight.

Encourage small beginnings (e.g., one project, audience, or tool), providing adequate support (e.g., time, tools, and expertise) to promote steady growth. Exhaustive or isolated efforts promote burnout. Help novice evaluators focus, succeed, and use the process and products of evaluations. Integrate evaluation into experiential learning to facilitate evaluative thinking and doing for clients, peers, partners, and the larger organization. Offer insight on where to target programming, how to connect with clients and evaluate impact, and how to interpret results and improve programs, as these will lead staff to advocate for evaluation. Affirm and engage emerging champions. The slow pace of organizational change may frustrate some. Engage them as contributors where positive change comes more quickly: as a mentor, trainer, advisor, reporter, or partner in multistate efforts. Never stop looking for ways to enhance capacity, use or create resources, or build an evaluation culture. Many narratives in this study illustrate this gradual, practical, personalized process in the emergence of evaluation champions.

Research. A more systematic examination is needed to trace the learning pathways and roles of champions, including external evidence for competency, activity, and effects. Research should also address broader and deeper description of contexts that empower or impede champions' emergence and influence. Such studies should include smaller as well as larger organizations and track organizational as well as personal ECB strategies and effects over time. Specifically, research should focus on benefits of basic and intensive training, mentoring, and project teamwork on champions' professional development and subsequent influence across diverse settings and roles.

Policy and procedures. Especially in times of retrenchment and rapid change, strategic investments in hiring, training, and supporting (aspiring) evaluation champions are critical to organizational capacity and flexibility in programming, learning, and morale, as well as evaluation (Franz & Townson, 2008). Engaging the insight and enthusiasm of champions in policy and procedure decisions will help administrators build evaluation capacity and morale.

King (2007) noted that front-line champions reach only a small circle of colleagues relative to large-scale policies or training investments. However, this study illustrates that relatively small investments in even a small cadre of motivated professionals can reach more staff more consistently over time and space and at a deeper level (e.g., skill and practice) than might be achieved by a single expert evaluator. Moreover, these champions can bridge evaluation and subject experts, interpret organizational goals and methods for peers, and provide leadership and mentoring at the street level.

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Appendix

Evaluation Champions Interview Protocol

1. Please describe some examples of things you have done to promote evaluation of Extension programs. *Probe, if needed for examples of:*
   - *specific program evaluation methods/tools developed*
   - *reminding colleagues who are developing a program that they need to create an evaluation*
   - *mentoring new staff to help them evaluate their program efforts*
   - *involvement in professional development opportunities related to evaluation*
2. What stimulated your interest in promoting and supporting evaluation of Extension programs?
3. What keeps you motivated to promote and support evaluation of Extension programs?
4. What resources related to evaluation development and implementation have you found to be useful? Please describe them.
5. What resources (type or content) are needed to increase your skills and those of your colleagues in evaluating Extension programs?
6. What technical support would be helpful related to accessing and using technology or accessing expertise in areas such as research design, statistics, data interpretation, and communicating results/report preparation?
7. What changes in the Extension organizational environment would help support your evaluation efforts?
8. What else would be important to encourage and support your evaluation efforts?
9. Can you name some other people in Extension that you consider to be evaluation champions? What do they do?
10. **Note:** *The following is an optional question to be used if you have checked the membership list of Evaluation CoP members and the individual is not on the list.*
    Are you familiar with or been in contact with the eXtension Evaluation Community of Practice members or website? (If not, interviewers share the following brief description of the Evaluation CoP membership and resources:
    "eXtension is the virtual venue through which the Evaluation Community of Practice (CoP) is accessible. The CoP serves as an evaluation resource for the entire Extension system. Since its beginning in 2010, CoP leaders and core members continue to develop, identify, review and post frequently asked questions and answers (FAQs) about evaluation, Moodles (online courses), appropriate fact sheets that support evaluation efforts among Extension personnel. The CoP uses eXtension features to make these resources available.")
11. Is there anything else you'd like to know or share?
12. How many years have you been employed with Extension?
13. What is your position program/area of expertise?