Impact Statements: So What? Who Cares?

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The growing importance attached to impact reporting at land-grant universities around the United States in recent years has made the development and distribution of impact statements a major annual priority in most land-grant university communication offices. Despite this trend, some communicators wonder what is actually being achieved, given all the effort and resources invested in impact reporting. This matter might be easily settled by evaluating the effectiveness of impact statements with the many audiences for whom they are intended. However, simple, easy-to-use tools for evaluation of impact reporting programs are not readily available. In the absence of measurement, a nagging question remains: What is the impact of our impact statements?

Perhaps impact reporting is not quite the accountability cure that many hoped it would become 15 years ago. Its national significance and credibility appeared to take a hit last year when the leadership of the USDA Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) National Impacts Database project decided to forego producing the 2006 series of national impact fact sheet summaries.[1] The USDA CSREES National Science and Education Impacts Database (http://csrees.usda.gov/newsroom/impacts/impacts.html) is an impact information resource for research and Extension. It is targeted first to Washington, DC-based decision-makers and second to state-level elected officials and stakeholders. In 2005, this database included more than 4,000 impact statements submitted by more than 100 U.S. land-grant institutions.

Preparing impact statements for the National Impacts Database has grown into a major annual impact reporting assignment for most land-grant university communicators who have organizational accountability as part of their annual or multiyear plans of work. While the development of national impact fact sheet summaries has been discontinued, submission of impact reports to the national database is continuing as of this writing.

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[1] Impact fact sheet summaries were a series of short roundup-type articles focused on specific topics, such as environmental quality, bio-security, or rural economic development. The impact fact sheet summaries were intended as a source of research and education highlights from the larger USDA CSREES National Impacts Database and were made available to elected officials and their staff and others involved in the federal policy process. The summaries were produced annually by a team of land-grant university impact writers representing all regions of the United States.

Commentary

Although the National Impacts Database is in a state of flux, the production of impact statements for state, local, and national accountability will likely continue to be a top priority for many land-grant university communication offices. This situation may be related to the nationwide decrease in funding for Extension and Agricultural Experiment Stations that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. Stiff competition for scarce public funds has led to increased scrutiny of budgets and a greater demand for information about program outcomes and impacts by elected officials and decision-makers (Richardson, Staton, Bateman, & Hutcheson, 2000).

These days, many Extension and Agricultural Experiment Station administrators probably agree that "a commitment to accountability [reporting research and education program outcomes and impacts] pays dividends whether the taxpayers are skeptical or enthusiastic in their support" (Dutson & Evans, 1995, p. 1).

Even so, doubts remain for some about the usefulness of impact reports. To some extent, these doubts are supported by earlier research. The authors know of only two studies that have attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of impact statements. Boone, Tucker, and McClaskey (2002) conducted a study of congressional aides to measure their familiarity with the national impact fact sheet summaries prepared from impact statements submitted to the National Impacts Database. (As noted earlier, development of fact sheet summaries was discontinued in 2006.) The Boone et al. study found that just 40% of 54 congressional staffers surveyed could recall ever having seen a National Impacts Database fact sheet summary.

In March 2005, Boone conducted a similar study using a focus group approach with former congressional staff members, members of Congress, and administration officials. Following two focus group sessions, Boone found that only one participant could recall having seen a National Impacts Database fact sheet summary, and none recalled seeing the online National Impacts Database (Boone, 2005).

Could it be that despite the considerable efforts of impact writers to build the National Impacts Database, it is almost unknown to the audience for which it was designed?

Example

Land-grant university communicators at Washington State University (WSU) are asking the same question about their statewide online impact report database, now in its fifth year of operation.

The Washington State Impacts Web site (http://ext.wsu.edu/IMPACT/) was launched in 2002 to extract greater value from the WSU impact reports

that are developed and submitted annually to the USDA CSREES National Impacts Database. Some WSU administrators had questioned the value of this effort and the amount of time it consumed.

One WSU administrator emphatically stated that he had no use for WSU's impact reports in the National Impacts Database. He wanted the Information Department of the WSU College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences to develop a proposal to place these annual reports in the hands of local lawmakers. (Until 2002, WSU impact reports had been written solely for submission to the National Impacts Database.) A WSU impact reports Web site was seen as a way to furnish state elected officials at all levels with timely access to impact reports on research, Extension, and academic programs affecting their constituents.

The Washington State Impacts Web site was developed after a review of similar Web sites across the country. Advice was also gathered from WSU's government affairs staff. The Web site was built using Microsoft Access database software. Users can search for impact by county, state legislative district, and U.S. congressional district, and by sources of funding cited in impact statements. Advanced search options enable users to combine counties, search for reports by the year they were added to the database, conduct text searches, and search by names of faculty associated with the reports.

A Web form was added to the site in 2003 to enable faculty to submit reports to the Web site throughout the year. (Impact reporting is voluntary.) About 10 reports are generated in this way each year. Most of the impact reports in the database are still developed by impact writers. The effort dominates most of November, December, and January for the communicators who produce the reports, and requires additional small amounts of time throughout the rest of the year.

While the Washington State Impacts Web site has received sporadic feedback (mostly positive) from internal audiences through the years, the big question has always been: Do lawmakers and legislative aides actually visit the site, and how well does it serve them? Without this knowledge, it is difficult to convince faculty who already feel overburdened by reports to assign any priority to impact reporting.

Communicators in the WSU College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences are in the early stages of planning a survey that they hope will answer questions about the effectiveness of the Washington State Impacts Web site.

The current situation with the National Impacts Database and WSU's experience with its Washington State Impacts Web site underscore the basic

concerns put forth in this commentary. What are we achieving by producing impact reports for the National Impacts Database and for state-level audiences? What do we have to show for our efforts? Are our impact reports reaching the intended audiences?

Measuring Impact

These questions highlight the need to find useful ways to measure the effectiveness of impact reporting efforts. The ability to accurately gauge the impact of our reports will allow us to refine impact information delivery strategies as needed to ensure successful communication with target audiences.

The measurement question, in particular, is paramount. Communicators need to be able to measure their success (or lack thereof) so they can find ways to improve communication with external audiences. In addition, internal administrative leaders are increasingly calling upon land-grant university communications units to show the impact of their work. This is challenging in the communications profession. Communicators may often feel intuitively that their work is important and contributes to the organizational good, but without tools to demonstrate this, convincing others can be a deeply frustrating exercise (Williams & Gillis, 2003).

In 2005, while preparing to develop this article, the authors conducted an online survey of land-grant university communicators who contribute impact reports to the National Impacts Database. The survey was intended to gather input on many of the questions voiced during recent ACE conference sessions about impact writing and reporting. The survey included open-ended general comments from respondents. This data can be viewed online at http://tinyurl.com/aoh32 (password: ACE2005).

Results from the study suggest that many communicators are searching for solutions to the measurement question (see Table 1). Sixteen (36%) of the 44 writers responding to the survey item, "How, if at all, do you measure the impact of your impact reporting efforts?" replied that they do not measure. Seven (16%) replied that they look at funding support as an indication of impact reporting effectiveness—a crude measure at best. Many land-grant university impact writers don't have simple, efficient evaluation strategies for measuring the effectiveness of their impact reports. Do these reports just "disappear into a black hole," as one respondent put it? If that is the case, then much valuable time is being wasted.

Table 1. *How Do You Measure the Impact of Your Impact Reporting Efforts? (N = 44)*

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Don't attempt to measure	16	36
Other responses: approval of plan of work; unsure how to measure; measured as part of staff performance evaluation; consider impact report to be effective if information it contains is viewed as effective	11	25
Use feedback from administrators, decision-makers; use of impact report information by news media; general public awareness of our programs	10	23
Use funding levels as measure of effectiveness	7	16

Our data indicate that respondents believe research and Extension faculty should be involved in identifying and reporting the impacts of their programs. It certainly seems reasonable to expect that faculty who design and conduct research projects and educational programs are the best sources of information about the outcomes and impacts of these efforts. Survey results show that faculty at many land-grant universities are required to conduct impact reporting.

The data also suggest that land-grant university impact writers generally consider impact reporting aimed at state-level decision-makers to be a high priority. This is consistent with the conventional wisdom that "all politics is local." In her focus group study, Boone (2005) emphasized the importance of targeting impact information to specific audiences at the state level. This recommendation affirms an impact reporting strategy that many land-grant university impact writers employ.

Finally, the survey included an item about respondent interest in a national workshop devoted to accountability issues and impact writing and reporting. Several communicators attending recent ACE conferences have supported the idea. Over half of those responding to the survey item expressed support as well. Perhaps the time has come to consider this possibility more seriously.

We hope this commentary has been thought-provoking. Please enrich the discussion by sharing your ideas, information, or experiences regarding impact reporting and evaluation. You can do so via the pages of the JAC