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A National Survey of Title IV-E Evaluations: Lessons Learned and Recommendations for the Future

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Introduction

For more than twenty years, Title IV-E training dollars have supported continuing education in child welfare. Zlotnik (2003) reports that in the late 1980's the National Association of Social Workers and the Council of Social Work Education suggested that the challenging workforce issues in child welfare could be addressed by increasing the number of professionally educated social workers in the child welfare field. Studies have shown that employees with social work degrees tend to stay longer at child welfare agencies, primarily because they feel more competent and have the appropriate training (Steib & Blome, 2003; Ellett, 2000; Albers, Rittner & Reilly, 1993; Booz, Allen, & Hamilton, 1987; Teare, 1986). The increased professional education and training of child welfare staff has also been linked to higher job effectiveness (Fox, Miller, & Barbee, 2003; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2003; Gansle & Ellett, 2002; Zlotnik, 2002; Jones & Okamura, 2000; Hopkins & al., 1999; Lewandowski, 1998).

Title IV-E training and administrative funding is a major part of the effort to professionalize child welfare. The Title IV-E program is part of the foster care and adoption assistance entitlement program, is uncapped, and is built upon match from public agencies such as university social work education programs. In most cases Title IV-E training programs consist of a partnership between universities and child welfare agencies who work in collaboration to increase staff retention and increase professional education within the child welfare field. The training program funds a number of efforts including short-term and long-term continuing education training for current staff; training for foster and adoptive parents, education for prospective staff (BSW and MSW students), and curriculum development. Current employees are often provided tuition and fees or stipends to continue their education (NASW, 2003; Robin & Hollister 2002). There is a considerable variation in the types of continuing education and training provided; each program is based on the individualized needs and interests of the local and state child welfare agencies and the particular strengths and interests of the university partner. Title IV-E programs, with all of their varied approaches, are examples of what Rosenthal (2003) called the complex relationship between professional social work and continuing education. The evaluations of these programs offer excellent opportunities for linking practice and research.

This research study was conducted in order to find out how Title IV-E training programs are evaluating the components of their individualized continuing education programs. Using a descriptive survey, the study asked program directors questions about evaluation design, method, survey instrumentation, dissemination process, satisfaction with their evaluation methods, utilization of their findings, and recommendations. In addition to providing a snapshot of common practices being used in the evaluation of continuing education programs, the results present us with important questions about the purpose and use of evaluations in continuing education programs and allow us to offer recommendations for the future.

Literature Review

Child welfare has had a long history of workforce crisis including issues such as shortage of personnel, untrained workers, lack of funding, and staff dissatisfaction (Alwon & Reitz, 2000; Smith, 2002; Zlotnik, 2001, 2002; Zlotnik et al., 2005/ 2006). Recently, child welfare agencies have rising concerns about the issues of high turnover rates and under-qualified workers within

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their organizations. There have been significant problems with employee retention and staff turnover sometimes resulting in the hiring of personnel who were not well prepared. Research suggests that there needs to be an increase in more educated and trained staff to provide services (Smith, 2002; Zlotnik, 2002). Jones and Okamura (2000) noted that it is imperative for child welfare agencies to have highly skilled employees in order to carry out their mission because the job requires professional knowledge of a trained social worker. According to Steib and Blome (2003), research has linked social work education to lower turnover in child welfare agencies. Fox, Miller and Barbee (2003) reported that employees who had more training and education felt more comfortable in their positions, were more prepared, and experienced less stress than other workers.

Perry (2006) reports that there has been considerable investment of both federal and states funds in the development of a specialized curriculum for students preparing for public child welfare. Although he recognizes that there are findings that assert social work graduates attain better outcomes with clients and that they remain in child welfare longer, he points out that many of the studies have limited rigor. His concerns and those of multiple voices (both pro and con Title IV-E training) confirm the critical need to examine program evaluations of Title IV-E programs.

Antle and Martin (2003) reinforce the importance of evaluations in training and continuing education programs by explaining evaluations are necessary to promote best practices and positive outcomes. Title IV-E partnership programs need to provide data showing that there is a link between more educated staff and the outcomes of the children and families; evaluations should also show the link between training and worker performance (Zlotnik, 2002; Antle & Martin, 2003). Accountability requirements make it clear that evaluations are no longer a luxury or an add-on to continuing education training programs; evaluations are a necessity (Myers-Walls, 2000). Evidence of effectiveness needs to be apparent, or it will be very difficult to prove there is a need for this funding, which in turn will cause agencies to have less qualified workers once again (Whitaker & Clark, 2006; Zlotnik, 2003; Jones & Okamura, 2000).

There is a paucity of empirical data showing that the recipients of Title IV-E continuing education training have profited any from the program, and the studies that have been carried out have not been conducted rigorously (Perry, 2006; Smith, 2002). Many current authors (including Dickinson, 2006; Lieberman & Levy, 2006; Hughes & Baird, 2006; Mathis, 2006; McCarthy, 2006) agree with Perry that there is a great need for more information in this area; strong evaluations could assist agencies in learning what factors are related to retention and satisfaction among staff and how training programs, like Title IV-E, are actually working. As Kelly and Sundet (2003) aptly point out, this is a complex issue and even research in progress is helpful to our understanding. More research is definitely necessary to show if the individual components of Title IV-E training programs are benefiting the recipients and if not, where the weaknesses are and how they can be improved.

This study of evaluations of Title IV-E programs is part of a larger, national effort by continuing education programs to give attention to their evaluation processes. Recent state budget crises have forced many continuing education programs to look at evaluation strategies, the dissemination of their results, and ultimately the use of the findings; taxpayers only want to pay for programs that are working. More than ever before in history, quality program evaluations are a critical necessity. Not only are program evaluations useful tools in determining program effectiveness; they can show where weaknesses and strengths exist in program procedures and what necessary changes need to be made for program improvement (Smith, 2002; Myers-Walls, 2000).

Evaluations are an absolute essential, and it is time we looked carefully at Title IV-E program evaluations. With the goal of increasing our understanding of evaluation strategies that can be used in continuing education programs for both accountability and practice improvement, this national survey provides a snapshot of common practices being used in Title IV-E program evaluations.

Methodology

Participants were the population of Title IV-E program directors or their designees from all programs in the United States. The participants were identified using a list compiled by a national consortium of universities involved in the Title IV-E program. The list included all of the Title IV-E programs, their directors, and their contact persons. At the time of the survey in 2006, there were seventy-nine programs identified, and the survey was sent to each director or the program's contact person. Participants were told the survey was voluntary and were able to decline participation if desired. A letter was sent in an email with the web-based link to the survey. The letter explained that the survey had Institutional Review Board approval and that the results would only be shared in the aggregate.

A web-based survey was used to collect and analyze the data. The researcher utilized an online survey tool because of its user-friendly design and the low-cost. The survey created by the researcher gathered both qualitative and quantitative data. The primary domains of the survey were the evaluation design and the dissemination process.

The survey instrument included open-ended, check-box, and five-point rating scale questions. The check-box questions had an option to check other and then a text box to provide their response. Validity was tested by receiving feedback in a pilot survey from seven directors representing a wide cross-section of program types prior to distributing the survey. Reliability was not tested on this instrument since it was created specifically for this study.

A direct link to the survey was sent out to the contact person's email addresses. The email included a cover letter stating the purpose and importance of the study followed by a request for participation. Reminders were sent out weekly to only the participants who had not yet responded. The respondents were given four weeks to reply. After four weeks, the researcher called the participants who had not yet responded and asked them for their participation in the study one last time, either directly or by voice mail.

Results

Forty-six or 58% of the programs responded to the survey; these 46 programs represent 80% of the states who have the Title IV-E training program and provide a broad geographic representation of location and size of program. Most Title IV-E programs sponsored continuing education components; the majority of the programs provided short-term training for staff and offered educational opportunities for employees to obtain the MSW degree. As Table 1 indicates, 63% provided short-term training and 61% offered current employees graduate education opportunities with salaries, stipends, or tuition waiver. The least represented component of Title IV-E programs was technical assistance.

The majority of the programs (more than 81%) evaluated their Title IV-E programs. Results showed that 72% of the programs included the faculty in the development of the evaluation, 70% included child welfare supervisors, and 65% included child welfare staff. Clients were only included in the development of the evaluation by 4% of the programs that responded. Students who receive educational stipends for earning their MSW degrees were the primary respondents for providing information for the evaluation. The least represented persons for providing data for the evaluation were the clients (4%).

When asked about type of methodology and type of evaluation used, 81% of respondents re-

Table 1. Continuing Education Components of Title IV-E Contracts

Type	Number	%
Short-term Training for Staff	29	63
Current Employee Opportunities for MSW Program	28	61
Curriculum/Module/Material Development	24	52
Short-term Training for Foster/Adoptive Parents	23	50
Other	15	33
Technical Assistance	8	17

(N= 46 programs)

ported using mixed methods and 69% said they use both an outcome and process evaluation. As Figure 1 illustrates, surveys were the most popular method used to gather information with 97% of the respondents using a questionnaire/survey, 50% using focus groups, 44% using self-rating, and 44% using interviews. Only 6% of the programs use normative comparison and only 9% use a suggestion box to gather information for their components. When programs were asked about reliability testing for their evaluation instrument, the majority of the respondents reported that their evaluation instrument for each of their components is not tested for reliability or validity.

As Figure 2 shows, the participants were asked about who sees the findings of their evaluations and 87% said that the directors of the program see the results, 77% said state officials see the results, and 47% said county officials see the results. The least represented populations were clients and federal officials, with only 7% of programs reporting they see the results. Only 10% of programs reported that alumni see the results.

As Figure 3 shows, 87% of participants reported that the results for their evaluations are disseminated through a written report, and 47% said they are disseminated through a presentation. The least common methods of dissemination are newsletter (7%), internet posting (20%), and a journal article (23%).

Figure 1. Methods Used to Collect Evaluation Data

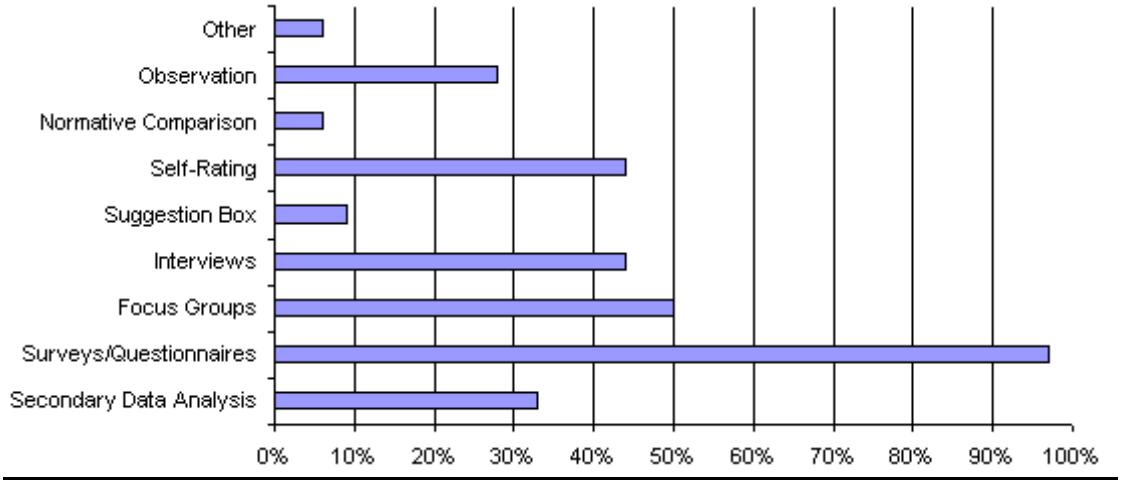
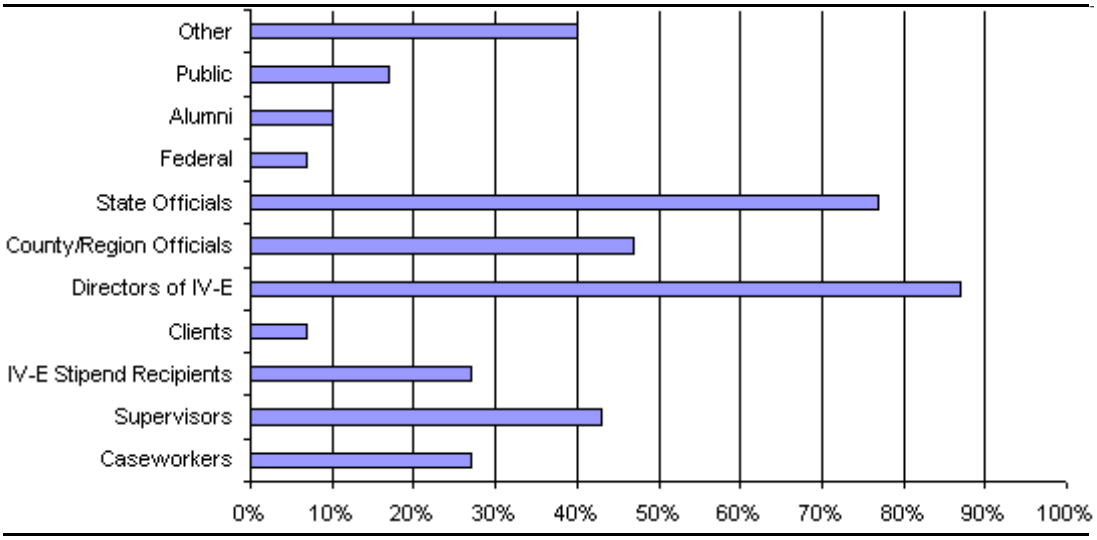


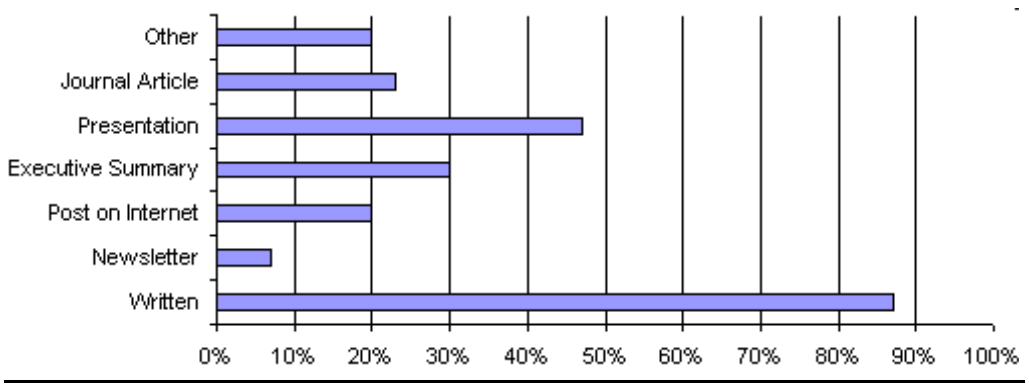
Figure 2. Stakeholders Who See the Results



The survey also asked participants what they felt the strengths and weaknesses were of their evaluation process. Some of the strengths mentioned were the use of the longitudinal design for the evaluation, utilizing the feedback gathered, involving all stakeholders and participants, and using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Some of the weaknesses mentioned were the need for more funding for evaluation, the need for more staff and time for the evaluation process, the need to evaluate more often, and the need to be able to assess the effect of the program in achieving its long-term goals of system transformation in the child welfare system.

In the area of dissemination, strengths mentioned were getting the information to the "right" people who will use the information for enhancement of the program, the actual discussion of the

Figure 3. How Programs Disseminate Evaluation Results



reports, and the availability of results to look back on when necessary. The weaknesses in the area of dissemination reported were the need for written reports to be provided regularly, need for more time to evaluate results more effectively, need for everyone involved to see the results, and the need for more dialogue about the results among stakeholders like federal, state, and agency partners.

Interestingly, eighty-three percent of the respondents answered that they were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their evaluation process for at least one of their components. When asked about their satisfaction with their dissemination process only 50% reported being very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the process.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine existing practices in the evaluation of continuing education components of the Title IV-E child welfare program. Although most Title IV-E programs conduct evaluations of their continuing education components, most of the evaluations are limited in scope and do not include all the stakeholders in the design, data collection and dissemination of the results. Most importantly, it is the clients and foster and adoptive parents who are the least likely to be included. Also, most of the evaluation designs do not extend beyond surveys. Surveys are quick, easy, and inexpensive, but they are limited in their ability to access all aspects of a program. Continuing education programs are not varying techniques in this area, and they need to look at multiple methods of gathering data from multiple stakeholders. Although programs report using both qualitative and quantitative studies to gather information, they usually gather that information only with surveys. Fewer than half the programs used interviews or focus groups. In addition, most of the programs did not test their evaluation instruments for reliability or validity. This is very disappointing since the majority of the Title IV-E programs are based in universities who teach basic research methods. Also somewhat perplexing is that the majority of programs were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the evaluation process. This sentiment is contrary to the expected response about the need for stronger evaluations of Title IV-E programs.

Dissemination of results is also mentioned as an important part of the evaluation process by respondents, but once again the results show that quality dissemination could be improved in the Title IV-E evaluations. Only a few stakeholders are seeing the results and many others, who are extremely involved in the program, are not seeing any of the information gathered. Also, the study showed that frequently the results of the evaluations are written in reports but not disseminated broadly. Only a few programs report presenting results to stakeholders. A few programs report that they use the results to modify and improve curriculum and trainings. Specifically they cite changes to the interview and hiring process based on evaluation results.

Some would argue that the lack of rigor in the research design of Title IV-E evaluations and the limited dissemination of results may be related to the lack of funding, and the findings from this survey lend some support to the argument. Sixty-five percent of programs do not have any funding for evaluations, and the programs that do have some funding for evaluation only use 1% or less of their total funding for evaluation. Most programs reported that their components are evaluated by an internal evaluator.

Conclusion

This study provides a preliminary snapshot of the current status of Title IV-E program evaluations. This exploratory, self-report study has limitations, and it should only be used as a starting point for asking more in depth questions. Future studies should look at the actual evaluations. Consideration should be given to possible differ-

ences in types of evaluations conducted by internal/external evaluators, small/large programs, and state/consortium programs/individual programs. Although these results are not generalizable to all Title IV-E continuing education programs or to all continuing education programs, the results do challenge us to ask more questions and seek ways to improve Title IV-E evaluations.

Although there are many excellent features within some of the Title IV-E evaluations, many Title IV-E programs could make improvements in order to get the best information possible from their evaluations. Programs need to employ more types of designs and use a variety of methods to gather information. Of particular importance is the need for more measures that capture date on changes in behaviors and skills rather than on perceptions of gains. Multiple methods and sources can help identify some of these changes.

More extensive dissemination efforts would also help ensure that evaluation results are used. Sharing what works and what does not work is a first step in helping each program improve the evaluation process. No one approach will work for every Title IV-E program or for every continuing education program.

Knapp (1995) uses the term "thin" to describe the methodology literature to date about how to study partnerships, and his view would certainly apply to looking at evaluations of continuing education programs such as those conducted by the Title IV-E program. These are indeed complex partnerships with lots of different stakeholders and goals. Evaluators use many different frameworks for organizing evaluation plans, and there may be no one perfect plan for every continuing education program. Drawing on the work of leading evaluators, the authors suggest that programs consider Chavkin and Brown's (2003) eight steps for evaluating university/agency partnerships and apply these tools to Title IV-E continuing education evaluations. Using these beginning steps as a guide, each Title IV-E partnership team might take a renewed look at its evaluation and develop its own individualized plan.

Step 1: Identify the Stakeholders

Although identifying the stakeholders seems easy at first to most continuing education programs, but that is not always the case. Step 1 Identify the StakeholdersIt is not as simple as listing the attendees at a workshop or students in a program. Stakeholders might also include the clients served by the workshop attendees or perhaps future clients. The evaluation plan must begin with all stakeholders identified and involved.

Step 2: Clarify the Goals

Although this step sounds routine and quite simplistic, it is one of the most difficult aspects of the evaluation process. It is difficult for many stakeholders to write a simple paragraph about what the goals of the continuing education project are and what they expect to achieve if they accomplish the goals. If the stakeholders do write about what they think the goals of the continuing education project are, often stakeholders have written markedly different goal statements. The continuing education team needs all the stakeholders to participate in this step, and this basic step is the foundation to a good evaluation.

Step 3: Review Assumptions about Program Processes

Once the continuing education program is clear about the goals of the project, the program needs to draw a picture of what the assumptions are about the continuing education effort. The program needs to think about the assumptions the continuing education is making, i.e. about what management structures and processes will work. Many evaluators call this a logic model, a blue print, or graphic depiction because it shows the relationships between goals, outcomes, actions, and assumptions. These linkages are very important to understanding what we know or think we know about our target population and the systems that serve them. Next the team needs to ask

questions about the picture. Does information flow clearly? Is there a clear understanding of responsibilities and a system of accountability? These assumptions should drive program activities, and an evaluation will test the accuracy of the assumptions. The team needs to see if the continuing education program's activities are addressing the assumptions they made and if the outcomes they expect are being produced so that they can reach the goal.

Step 4: Choose Indicators

Indicators of success or outcomes should be established for all aspects of a continuing education program. Programs will want to assess whether they are achieving the goals they have set for meeting their students' needs by examining factors such as: numbers of participants completing continuing education; participant attitude, course taking, program completion, performance, agency satisfaction, and impact on the community. Programmatic and management issues will need to be assessed by an appropriate set of indicators measuring the smoothness of operation, the flow of information, the system of accountability, and whether services are provided at the level of quality intended. Effective evaluations use several types of information to measure results. It is essential to establish short-term indicators of success to introduce the practice of continuous improvement in a program. Information on rates of attendance, instructor evaluations, and placement evaluations may provide a short-term means of assessing a program's progress towards its goals. Short-term indicators of program processes could include surveys, interviews, focus groups with all levels of staff about their understanding of their responsibilities and their satisfaction with the system of accountability.

Step 5: Begin Collecting Information

Strong evaluations collect information on participants, activities and services, staff and other resources, collaborative partners, and community perceptions. Sources of information may include: focus groups, community forums, surveys, registration or intake forms, staff activity logs, comparison groups that match similar groups, demographic databases that reveal trends in the general population, and self-comparisons over time. Sometimes time and money constraints interfere with the gathering of information. Some continuing education programs have used e-mail surveys, conference telephone calls, distance conferencing (by interactive television or satellite) to help meet these challenges. Most programs find that it is both time and cost effective if the collection of information is routine and part of the normal operating routine. The key to achieving a non-invasive evaluation is to plan ahead for it and schedule it as part of the regular partnership activities.

Step 6: Analyze Information and Use It for Quality Improvement

Evaluations create tools for improving strategies or services and refining goals and objectives. An evaluation can show whether a program has reached its objectives and whether the failure to meet an objective was caused by inadequate implementation or flawed assumptions. This knowledge helps programs fine-tune approaches and set goals, creating a continuous loop of useful feedback. Linking the feedback to program activities on an ongoing basis allows the program to improve on a continuous basis without waiting until the end of a contract year or other specified date. This step is important in understanding how the program is being implemented and sharing information for dissemination with all stakeholders. Teams will already know either from performance assessments or monitoring evaluations if the program is being accountable to its objectives (is it doing what it said it was going to do?). This step is to develop a picture of the quality of what is being done. Step six is the time to examine the participants' perceptions about the program using both qualitative and quantitative data. This dis-

semination and feedback is essential to a strong continuing education program.

Step 7: Examine Outcomes

This step focuses on what changes have occurred. Looking at the short-term objectives and using questionnaires, interviews, observations, performance tests, and similar measures, the evaluation should now be focusing on results. What has actually happened to students who completed the continuing education program? Is the performance of those who have completed the program better than the performance of those who did not? The team needs to look closely at the indicators they have chosen. The team needs to ask if the indicators present a clear picture of the outcomes of your project. If the indicators are not sufficient, the team may want to begin collecting additional data. At this point, it is often helpful to use an outcome indicator plan. A typical outcome indicator plan has four dimensions of performance measurement: quantity of effort; quality of effort; quantity of effect; and quality of effect. These four dimensions are best understood by examining them in a multidimensional grid where you look at both inputs and outputs form the perspective of both quantity and quality.

Step 8: Assess Impact/Cost-effectiveness

Assessing long-term impact follows the examination of outcomes. This is point where the team will need a rigorous research design, including a comparison group. How the team designs an impact study depends on time, money, and the results of the outcome studies. There is a dearth of impact studies in the field, and it may be to the team's advantage to link with other continuing education programs in order to have a larger sample and more resources than the team would usually only one program. To examine cost effectiveness, one continuing education program calculated the cost savings to the agency when it did not have to hire new employees because of a lowered turnover rate. Each continuing education program needs to find ways to examine impact and cost effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study takes a beginning look at the evaluation strategies used by Title IV-E programs. Evaluations of continuing education programs like the Title IV-E program are essential in today's outcomes-based society; evaluations are essential for internal improvements in effectiveness and efficiency and for external accountability and sustainability. It is important to remember that the evaluation process is not linear. Evaluators must loop backward in order to move forward. Systematic periodic assessment of who the stakeholders are, the efficacy of service improvement strategies, goal and objective clarifications, and other modifications need to made along the way to examining outcomes.

This study is a first step in examining evaluations from Title IV-E programs. There is much more to be done in this emerging field. For further study and information about the training programs, evaluation designs, and specific results, the authors suggest contacting individual programs for information about their evaluations. There are also annual national gatherings of Title IV-E Programs at the Council for Social Work Education Annual Program meeting, and the University of Houston maintains a national database of contact information and resources: (http://www.sw.uh.edu/communityoutreach/cwep_title_IVE.php).

In sum, learning from Title IV-E evaluations and applying tools from the eight beginning steps can be very helpful to the field of social work professional continuing education. The issues addressed are of critical importance to both the continuing education field and child welfare outcomes. Because evaluations of continuing education programs like the Title IV-E partnership programs are often works in progress, they constantly challenge us to be discussing and considering issues that have a great effect on account-

ability and practice improvement.

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