Evaluation: A Practitioner's Perspective on Continuing Education Programs

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Raymond C. Meyers, DSW

"How will I know if I have gotten to where I wanted to go if I haven't specified it beforehand?"

Paraphrase from Richard Bolles

Introduction

Bolles was promoting a conscious approach to career development rather than a proactive approach to service provision when he wrote those words. He was concerned that people would haplessly meander through their lives holding various jobs and arriving "somewhere" in their career, but not necessarily where they might have wished to be if they had planned ahead. Social service agencies can experience similar wandering – providing a variety of services to different types of consumers, being "all things to all people" – and find themselves overwhelmed, unsure how they got that way, and perplexed about how to make sure that they don't go that way again.

Evaluation from the Practitioner's Perspective

The transition from overwhelmed and perplexed to proactive and successfully "surfing the whitewater" of social services may take any of several paths, but the constant, which must be there, can be reduced to the systems model of plan-implement-evaluate-refine the plan-implement- and so on. Practitioners involved in making the transition can benefit from consulting with an evaluator during the initial planning stages of a program. In such a consultation, the evaluator can guide the planning staff through formulation of the agency's mission; operationalization of goals and objectives; and identification of the types of evaluation which will be completed and the consequent timeline. Or, if these tasks have already been completed, the evaluator can direct a team (possibly including agency staff members and even clients) in obtaining, entering, and analyzing data; interpreting the findings; and developing a report.

Clearly, the evaluation from the practitioner's perspective is something different from the responses received in an informal survey of MSW students and social workers in the field. Contrary to the completions that some gave to the statement "Evaluation is..." (e.g., "a nuisance," "a waste of time," "not my job," and "just a way that administrators can say you haven't done your paperwork"), others said that evaluation is "a means of validating that service provision is effective," "a way of checking on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats," and "a way to maintain a global perspective despite the inevitability of being overwhelmed by the daily grind."

Evaluation Supports Direct Service Providers' Increased Functioning

Evaluation provides feedback to direct service providers and administrators about individual and organization-wide functioning. It does this by examining those practitioners' documentation of their field activities, surveying clients about their experiences of, and satisfactions with, receiving services, and investigating the extent to which agencies' goals have been achieved. Those who give credence to the resultant feedback and respond accordingly, approach service delivery in a planful manner; which includes determining how to achieve established goals, identifying attainable benchmarks, projecting reasonable timelines, and relating all of the information to their organizations' strategic plans.

Some administrators in such agencies insist that the individuals and organizational units feel ownership of their agency's strategic plan by utilizing the skills mentioned above. They, the individuals and the units to which they belong, identify their contributions to achieving the goals set out in their agencies' strategic plans. Scaled to their level, they identify benchmarks, project timelines by which those benchmarks will be achieved, and periodical-

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ly participate in examining the extent to which they have accomplished their individual goals. Finally, they begin thinking beyond the number of services provided to also include the transformations that their clients have made because of the interventions that they have performed.

Process vs. Outcome

Conducting program evaluations used to mean that an organization would look at process measures (e.g., how many clients they served during how long a period of time) and satisfaction measures (i.e., how satisfied clients were with the services they had received). Within the last ten years, agencies have begun to be evaluated on the basis of outcome measures (i.e., how clients have changed because of an applied intervention, and achievement of a numerical goal because of how a population segment has changed its behavior). For example, an agency might have determined that a high percentage of children entering school had not been prepared, in terms of skill development, at the time they were age appropriate to begin school. The agency might establish the extent to which future groups of children would be prepared for school as an outcome it wishes to measure. Having worked with parents to help them prepare children, the agency would then measure the degree of change. The degree would be a global measurement since it would look at the group of children; however, the goal — of changed behavior — could not be achieved unless the participation of individual parents was able to be measured.

The Future of Program Evaluation

I spent this morning working with three electronic marvels (i.e., fax, voicemail, and email) that did not exist when I entered the field of social work about twenty years ago. Twenty years prior to that time, devotees of science fiction were alone in fantasizing about these technologies. With such rapid, global changes, I feel somewhat daunted by the prospect of predicting what will be seen in our

field five years from now, let alone in ten or twenty years.

Nevertheless, my attempt follows. Future efforts in program evaluation may be perceived as falling into three areas: methodologies, services, and technologies.

Methodologies. I foresee an even greater increase in the number of outcome evaluations being conducted. Not that fewer process evaluations will be conducted, because they are essential for determining how organizations are functioning, but that more end term evaluations will be outcome-focused. A second aspect will be an increase in the number of evaluations that include some aspect of direct line staff and client involvement in both data collection and determination of the meaning of information that other consumers have provided. Frequently, staff and clients challenge evaluators' conclusions on the assumption that the latter has limited (if any) experience of the hardships that clients face and/or spent time providing services to resistant populations. In the future, evaluators will increasingly use the input of staff and clients as a means of building credibility, while still protecting privacy and confidentiality. Both of these population segments should be engaged in this process, or risk widening what has become known as the "digital divide," i.e., the space between those who administer programs and those who provide services and those who receive them. The more distance that is created by technocrats speaking a language that clients and some direct service practitioners cannot understand, the greater the risk that an increasing number of consumers will feel alienated from the agencies and their services.

Services. Greater collaboration among social service agencies has been the key to increasing the perceived number of resources to be shared; decision-making that takes more information into account; and serving more people over a larger geographical area. Collaborative program evaluation, i.e., efforts that are interdisciplinary in nature, and/or are put forth by several agencies, can pro-

vide similar advantages. Just as working with other disciplines to ensure that clients receive a full complement of services can enhance their well-being, so too can an organization benefit from receiving the constructive criticism of several pertinent disciplines operating as a team when conducting an evaluation. Pertinent to this discussion is the work in which Robert George and his colleagues at Chapin Hall have pioneered concerning matching data across service systems. The ability to build client histories, by accessing multiple social service databases and tracking them longitudinally, has meant that we can gain a much truer picture of how service are being used and project how they will be needed in the future. The same can be said of our increasing capacity to map service use geographically.

Technologies. Alvin Toffler warned the world of the increasingly rapid speed with which we accumulate and process information because of our burgeoning technological capacities. Events of the recent past, such as the increasing speed at which computers operate; the greater capacity of data storage mechanisms; and the increasing availability of mechanisms to assist in generating, analyzing and retrieving information, have only added to the speed at which this occurring. Information sharing available now with the development of the internet and the World Wide Web may only be in its infancy if these technologies follow a similar path to that of television. It was only several years ago that cable access made the enlarged programming choice a reality, and increased screen size made it possible to feel as if the viewer were actually in whatever environment they wished. More ubiquitous access and enhanced graphics capabilities can only make our reality even more virtual.

One of the trends that I keep hearing about is making social service delivery more business-like. While usually this means that managers may recognize an opportunity to apply administrative and delivery methods that induce organizations to operate in a more efficient, methodical, and systematic

manner, it can also mean that professionals from social work and business collaborate to develop new ways of reaching and serving clients. An example of such integration is CareAssist System, which has been created by Q-linx. The CareAssist System, an internet application, focuses on connectivity among members of an agency and the clients and communities they serve as well as management of the data concerning who they are and their interactions. With an increasing number of people having access to the internet, the program will facilitate social workers' and clients' communication and data access.

Distance technology used for the purposes of providing education, monitoring clients' activities, and video conferencing are other capabilities that will further our abilities to communicate better, and hopefully conduct even more effective program evaluations.

Conclusion

I know that I have barely described the proverbial "tip of the iceberg" here. Others of you, the readers, are aware of additional methodologies and technologies given the many disciplines within our profession.