

Fitting Developmental Evaluation Concepts into Government Evaluations: Our Journey from Objective Outsider to “Critical Friend”

Trade Adjustment Act Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant evaluations offer an important opportunity for evaluators to apply more innovative, utilization-focused methods than are usually possible for federally funded programs. Awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor, these grants enable community colleges to implement innovative career pathways training programs. TAACCCT grantees are required to hire evaluators to conduct implementation analyses, and both Hezel Associates, LLC and Social Policy Research Associates are currently engaged in these projects. In our past experience evaluating grant programs for the Department of Labor and other cabinet-level agencies, the primary audience for the evaluation was program officers at the federal level, and one of the key goals of implementation studies was to describe the programs under study. TAACCCT grants present a different model: the client and one of the key audiences for the implementation study is the grantee, and many evaluation deliverables focus not on describing the program, but on providing a continuous feedback loop so that programs can make any necessary course corrections and strategic adjustments.

Hezel Associates, LLC and Social Policy Research Associates have adopted some of Michael Quinn Patton’s Developmental Evaluation (DE) concepts into TAACCCT evaluations in an attempt to provide usable feedback to our clients. Key components of DE’s approach involve shifting the role of the evaluator from objective outsider to embedded program team member and moving away from lengthy, written evaluation products produced after significant lags to concise, real-time feedback provided in a variety of formats, known as “reflective practice.” The focus of the evaluation shifts beyond “what works” to how supporters must cooperate to effect lasting change in training delivery.

The “Critical Friend”¹ Role



Movement from objective, outside observer to “critical friend”

One of the most relevant, applicable aspects of DE for evaluating new government-funded programs is shifting the position of the evaluator relative to the program. By moving from objective outsider to someone embedded in the program’s management team, the evaluator is better poised to

provide the flexible, timely feedback needed by the program to make midcourse adjustments. In order to build this relationship, it is important that:

- Both the evaluator and client are willing to use the approach despite the extra effort involved
- Evaluators attend (in person or by phone) all key meetings and trainings to observe programmatic decision making in real-time

¹ Balthasar, Andreas. (2011). Critical friend approach: Policy evaluation between methodological soundness, practical relevance, and transparency of the evaluation process. *German Policy Studies*, 7, 187-231.

- There is enough budget for evaluators to attend these meetings and for them to provide their opinions and expertise on matters usually beyond the scope of evaluators
- Maintenance of trust by the evaluator is upheld by not airing “dirty laundry” outside the management team

Challenges to the “critical friend” role include obtaining the necessary budget (in terms of money and time) and delivering critical feedback without damaging the relationship. However, if these challenges are navigated, the “critical friend” relationship is of particular relevance to the government evaluation community given the current emphasis on collaboration and innovation in federal grant programs.

“Reflective Practice”² and New Deliverables

The Department of Labor outlines specific requirements for TAACCCT grant evaluation methods. These can trap an evaluator into simply collecting required data and generating a lengthy, stale, year-end report that ends up collecting dust in someone’s inbox. By weaving aspects of Patton’s DE concept, specifically “reflective practice,” into deliverable production, the final products can have more utility for grantees. Reflective practice involves:

Formally facilitated feedback to debrief program activities, discuss findings, share experiences and perspectives, capture lessons learned, and formulate ideas for future project activities and processes

Incorporation of dialogue of findings with traditional deliverables

Continuous cycle of data collection, analysis, feedback, discussion, and change

In practice, this has meant using various means to communicate information to grantees, such as frequent, brief memos and informal meetings or phone calls at strategic points in program development. Data summaries, short-term recommendations, and cascading data collection tools can also provide grantees with useful feedback. The intent is to institute a constant dialogue with grantees to not only facilitate program development and innovation, but to engage them in evaluative thinking so they will continue testing new ideas and, with evaluators’ assistance, improve them as they go.

Contact Us!

Hezel Associates, LLC:
 Catilin Griffin
 Caitlin_G@hezel.com
 Sarah Stewart
 sarah@hezel.com

Social Policy Research Associates:
 Kate Dunham
 kate_dunham@spra.com

² Patton, M. Q. (2011). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.