A Tale of Two (Graduate Student) Evaluators

Carinna F. Ferguson
& Abhik R. Roy

*Based on experiences noted by
peer evaluator Joseph M. McNeill

West Virginia University
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES

Spring 2020:

- Two graduate student led evaluations of undergraduate programs
  - One funded, one lost funding

Funded Evaluation:

$$$

- More robust methodology
  - Multi-method, longitudinal evaluation
  - Interviews; N = 6, I = 2, Survey; N = 132, I = 5
- Increased participant recruitment and retention via monetary incentives
- Budget proposal and modification
  - Budget adjustments – travel, materials, & conference fees
  - Rigidity in how evaluation functioned
  - Evaluation team: paid members hourly

*Unfunded Evaluation:

- Limited capacity for methodological complexity
  - Qualitative Study, N = 3, I = 1
- Use of free or available software and data analysis tools
- Flexibility in evaluation expectations

Many of us assume that a funded project implies a simpler process or that evaluations without financial backing make for bad study . . .

this is simply not always true.

Resources, tools, & suggestions for graduate students and new evaluators:

Evaluation Implementation

Funded

Evaluation Planning
- Determine level of access to population.
- Develop timeframe for the evaluation, including solicitation, data collection, and reporting
- Develop a robust methodology to assess the breadth of the program and stakeholder's needs.

Developing a Budget
- Online template resources - This template provides a line item example budget.
- During evaluations, budgets may be adjusted, but only after the funding source approves changes. Account for this approval when designing spending plans or using funds.
- Account for participant solicitation and incentivization cost, hired evaluation team member payments, technology and software costs, and any travel expenses.

Conducting the Evaluation
- Employ data collection methods, incentivizing participation for a larger sample.
- Prepare for any situational or logistic issues that may impede the evaluation process. Adjust the predetermined timeframe, budget, or methodology as needed, following budget protocols.

*Unfunded

Evaluation Planning
- Determine level of access to population – *consider how many participants you will need to conduct a comprehensive evaluation.*
- Develop timeframe – *consider the amount of time you can invest in the evaluation process.*
- Develop a methodology to address stakeholder needs,. *while balancing methodological resources openly accessible to you.*

Conducting the Evaluation
- Funded evaluations are often tied to their proposed budget and evaluation plan – *unfunded evaluations can more easily adjust timeframes, methodologies, etc.*
- Strategically employ data collection methods & incentivizing participation for a larger sample.
  - Social Incentives via Solicitations: Outline privacy, relevancy, gratitude for participation
  - Development of Distribution Schedules: Set a schedule for sending reminders or following-up with participants to increase recruitment and retention
- Prepare for any situational or logistic issues that may impede the evaluation process. *Adjust as you are able, given the resources you have access to.*

Evaluation in Practice

Funded

Time Frame, Methodology & Population
- Conducted a Needs Assessment with stakeholders to address primary areas of interest, methodology, timeframe, and level of access to the population
  - Outlined specific subgroups within larger population to draw sample from.
- Developed a multi-method evaluation to address stakeholder's interests and address needs.

Developing a Budget
- Received university departmental funding after submitting a line item budget proposal.
  - Outlined transcription fees, participant payment, and conference & travel expenses

Conducting the Evaluation
- Distributed surveys via Qualtrics; Conducted interviews with selected subgroups of sample that volunteered to participate in paid interviews.
  - Paid interview participants used a microphone purchased with budgeted funds for clear audio
  - Readjusted interview protocol as COVID-19 Pandemic restricted in-person interviews.
- Used transcription service TranscribeMe to convert audio recordings.
  - Readjusted budget to account for longer than expected audio recordings
- Hired and paid an undergraduate student hourly to conduct data analysis as a secondary coder

Reporting
- Provided program with a robust description of evaluation findings, addressing needs and suggesting modifications to program.

*Unfunded

Time Frame, Methodology & Population
- Conducted several interview and Needs Assessment with stakeholder to address areas of interest and evaluation timeframe. Was provided limited access to population through primary stakeholder
- Developed an in-person interview protocol to address stakeholder's interests and meet set timeframe.

Conducting the Evaluation
- Solicitations sent to 20 sample requesting participation in interview. Deployed two follow-up emails requesting participation. Three participants agreed to be interviewed.
  - Participants were located outside of evaluation area. Interview protocol were transitioned to online interviews as in-person interviews would incur travel expenses.
- Conducted three interviews with participants via Zoom, using cellphone audio recording application.
  - Audio recordings were uploaded to Youtube. Using the caption function, recordings were transcribed and converted to text. While accuracy was limited, this form of transcription took considerably less time than manual transcription.

Reporting
- Analysis of data revealed a somewhat limited description of evaluation findings as a result of low participation rate.
- An Evaluation Report was provided to the stakeholder in which initially outlined programmatic needs were addressed and suggestions for program improvement were outlined.