Evidence of Impact: Informing Legislators to Improve Decision-making

Sarah A. Bradford
Valerie K. York
B. Jan Middendorf
Janice R. Cole

Office of Educational Innovation and Evaluation
Kansas State University
Manhattan, KS
oeie@k-state.edu

Abstract

Our office, the Office of Educational Innovation and Evaluation, serves as evaluator of Kan-ed, a statewide broadband network initiative. Evaluation activities include collection of data related to the impact of the network on its four constituencies, including K-12 school districts, higher education institutions, hospitals, and libraries. The office increases the value and meaningful use of the evaluation by compiling the impact data into legislative packets for use in the legislative session, to assist Kan-ed in justifying continued state funding for the initiative. This paper will discuss the methodologies used and presentation of data to the legislators. These data are tailored to each legislator to present evidence of the impact of the statewide network on constituents in that legislator's district or region, including network usage statistics, funding and equipment received, and impact statements and stories. The value of using advocacy packets and a website feedback survey to collect impact data will be discussed.

Evidence of Impact: Informing Legislators to Improve Decision-making

Introduction

Kan-ed, a statewide broadband network initiative, was created by the 2001 Kansas Legislature and is administered through the Kansas Board of Regents. Kan-ed provides a broadband technology-based network to ensure that K-12 schools, higher education institutions, libraries, and hospitals have quality, affordable access to the Internet, videoconferencing, and distance learning opportunities. Kan-ed's current membership represents 154 hospitals, 340 K-12 schools, 53 higher education institutions, and 338 libraries for a total of 885 members throughout Kansas. All members have access to a variety of specialized resources, programs and content areas provided by Kan-ed. Many members also have Kan-ed network connectivity.

Kan-ed is currently funded through the Kansas Universal Service Fund. Each year, Kan-ed must advocate for its continued funding by responding to legislator requests and presenting evidence of initiative impact. Our office, the Office of Educational Innovation and Evaluation (OEIE), serves as evaluator for the Kan-ed initiative and collects network impact data from Kan-ed members. OEIE enhances the value and meaningful use of the evaluation by formatting this impact data in an effective way for communication with legislators.

This paper will include details about how impact data is currently collected and presented to legislators as well as new steps that will be taken to collect impact data in the future. The topic is relevant to the field of evaluation because evaluators collect impact data for most projects, and many evaluators work on projects for which project leadership must periodically advocate for continued funding from the state or another source. This paper reveals how one office contributes to the advocacy effort, how the quality of the evaluation is improved by tailoring informational packets to each legislator, and how the significance of impact data can be highlighted through use of member advocacy packets.

Gathering Impact Data

During the course of evaluative data collections, OEIE requests that respondents share examples of how Kan-ed grants and services have had an impact on their organization. These examples of impact are traditionally collected via telephone interviews, surveys, and email communication. OEIE maintains a database that contains information related to each of the 885 members as well as affiliated non-member organizations, including up to four contacts at each organization. Given that there are multiple contacts (i.e., Kan-ed member representatives) at each of the member organizations, there are ample opportunities to gather impact data. Further, during impact data collections, our office always includes an item requesting contact information for any additional individuals within or outside of that organization that the respondent thinks would have feedback to share about their usage of the Kan-ed network or services. During these data collections, OEIE also requests that the respondent provide permission to include their name, position title, and member affiliation along with statements of impact they have provided.

For advocacy efforts, impact data is generally used in two formats: impact statements and impact stories. Impact statements are quotes that typically range from one to several sentences and are accompanied by the respondent's name, title, and member organization name, whenever possible. When respondents share examples that are particularly detailed and relevant to illustrate the impact of the Kan-ed initiative, the responses are formatted into impact stories. These stories are one-page editorial style articles that describe the impact of Kan-ed, usually on one specific member (a school district, library, etc.). The purposes of creating these impact stories are to 1) document the impact of Kan-ed services on its constituents, and 2) create eye-catching articles that can be distributed to legislators and other stakeholders to encourage their continued support for Kan-ed funding.

Current Advocacy Efforts: Legislative Packets

The OEIE evaluation team compiles Kan-ed impact data into legislative packets tailored to each Kansas legislator, including all 40 senators and 125 house representatives. Impact data is presented in three ways within these legislative packets: a data summary of Kan-ed members within the district, a collection of impact statements, and an impact story.

First, the data summary includes a list of all Kan-ed members in the legislator's district, including K-12 schools, higher education institutions, libraries, and hospitals. It also includes indications of which members use various resources provided by Kan-ed. The informational summary also specifies the amount of funding received to date by each member directly from Kan-ed by way of grants and subsidies to assist with network connectivity. A footnote clarifies that the funding received to date does not reflect overall benefits received through Kan-ed because it excludes the cost for network infrastructure and administration.

The next section of the legislative packet is a collection of four to six impact statements. These statements are quotes that have been gathered from members in the legislator's district or region about how the member uses the Kan-ed network and resources. When statements are not available from the legislator's district, statements are taken from their region to maintain the highest level of tailoring possible. These collections of impact statements represent each of the four Kan-ed constituent groups (i.e., K-12 districts, Higher Ed, Libraries, and Hospitals). As mentioned above, each statement is accompanied by the name, position title, and member organization name whenever permission is granted.

The final component of the legislative packet is an impact story, which, as described above, is a one-page editorial style article that describes the impact of Kan-ed on its members. For examples of impact stories, please visit www.kan-eddata.org/impact. An impact story usually focuses on one specific member from the legislator's district or region, although sometimes they may include information from multiple members within the same constituent group (e.g., two or three hospitals) in the district or region. As with impact statements, when impact stories are not available from the legislator's district, stories are taken from their region of the state to maintain the highest level of tailoring possible. There are far more impact statements to select from than there are the longer impact stories, so it is less likely that a legislator will receive a story from their district. There also is more overlap in terms of multiple legislators receiving the same

impact story compared to impact statements. Given that legislative packets are prepared for the legislative session each year, care is taken to record which statements and stories are provided to each legislator so that they will not receive the same statements and/or stories across multiple years. An effort is made each year to gather as many new impact statements and stories as possible to create a new collection from which to select.

These legislative packets are prepared by OEIE prior to the legislative session and sent to Kan-ed, who distributes the packets to legislators' mailboxes in the courthouse. These legislative packets also are posted on Kan-ed's website (packets from the latest legislative session are available at http://www.kan-ed.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&catid=37:exec-dir-news&id=91:legislativedistrictsheets). OEIE remains available to respond to any questions or additional data requests that Kan-ed may receive from legislators in response to these packets. Preparing and distributing packets to all legislators helps our client be timelier as requests are made. In the past, legislative packets were prepared only for legislators that requested information about Kan-ed impact; however, more recently packets are being prepared for all legislators to more effectively assist in getting the word out to legislators about the impact of Kan-ed. Also, the packets assist in making more legislators aware of the specific Kan-ed members within their district.

Future Steps: Advocacy Packet and Website Feedback Survey

Future advocacy efforts will include utilizing the newly developed Kan-ed Advocacy Packet and Website Feedback Survey to reach out to Kan-ed members as potential and important advocates, and to solicit feedback about network impact. Both will be made available through the Kan-ed website and will be advertised through the Kan-ed listserv.

The Kan-ed Advocacy Packet is intended as a tool-kit to: 1) get members thinking about advocacy, what information is meaningful to legislators, and why their local advocacy is important, 2) present tools for actions any member can take and a boiler plate for emails and other communication, and 3) provide information members could share with legislators. The goal of the advocacy packet is to help individuals recognize that they can make a difference and equip them with resources to allow them to connect with legislators, assist with advocacy efforts, and share their first-hand experiences with the Kan-ed network. The packet is designed to provide members with information about Kan-ed as well as tools and suggestions for how they can help speak to the value and impact of the services Kan-ed provides. It also encourages them to share the advocacy packet with others in their organization and to share with Kan-ed their ideas for improving the packet.

A one-page announcement about the advocacy packet will be sent by Kan-ed to its membership via listserv. The announcement will include an invitation to advocate for Kan-ed. It will describe what the packet contains and where it can be obtained as well as describe the importance of advocating for Kan-ed locally with their legislators and what specifically members can do to help.

The first section of the advocacy packet describes why advocacy is important at the member level and provides tips on how to identify the message that will be advocated. It describes that

advocacy is important regardless of how much time the member has to dedicate. It also provides general tips for advocacy with legislators, such as keeping the message local, personal, and real as well as brief, polite and respectful; keeping it personalized to reflect experiences and successes related to Kan-ed to tell a story about local impact; and making a personal connection with decision-makers.

In the second section, the advocacy packet walks members through the steps of creating a personal action plan for advocating for Kan-ed. It identifies which legislators the member may want to contact, such as local legislators, legislators that review Kan-ed funding and legislation, legislators that support their institution or constituent group, and other local and state decision-makers. For each of these types of legislators, the packet includes an explanation as to why advocating to these individuals is important. The packet identifies several methods for advocacy, such as emails, phone calls, personal visits, and letters, and it describes why each method is useful. The packet then goes on to describe more involved ways to advocate for Kan-ed, such as testifying to the legislature, advocacy that is organized by a regional or statewide network or association, and facilitating news reports and media. Again, each method includes an explanation of why that type of advocacy is helpful to Kan-ed.

The third section of the advocacy packet contains resource pages. In other words, it contains information about Kan-ed that members can share with legislators. A general resource page is included related to the benefits of Kan-ed to Kansas and its members, and additional resource pages are included that are tailored to each of the four constituent groups, with information related to benefits of specific services and programs made available through Kan-ed for that constituent group.

The next section provides tips and examples for carrying through with the action plan, including examples of text that could be included in email and letters. Other tips include the best times to reach or visit with legislators and how to find their contact information. The idea behind the advocacy packet is that members are much more likely to advocate for Kan-ed if barriers such as lack of knowledge and strategy are removed. This packet arms Kan-ed members with specific tasks that they can perform, and even types of language they can use, to advocate for Kan-ed.

The second strategy that will be implemented to gain additional impact data for use in the legislative session to advocate for Kan-ed is the Website Feedback Survey. The Website Feedback Survey will offer members a convenient link on the Kan-ed website to provide feedback to Kan-ed. Members can provide statements related to the impact of the Kan-ed network and services and particular stories of success in using Kan-ed services. Placing a link to this survey on the Kan-ed website, and advertising its availability through the Kan-ed listserv, will allow an easy opportunity for any member to provide statements to Kan-ed at any time of day, any time of the year. This Feedback Survey also will provide a place for members to report any challenges experienced with the network.

These two new resources are designed to increase the use of evaluation data for decision-making and help motivate members to get involved by providing them with information and specific steps to take to advocate for the network. Advocacy is more likely if there is a quick and simple guide.

The Relevance of Evaluation in Advocacy

In this project, the value and meaningful use of the evaluation data has been enhanced by targeting information to specific audiences and using it to educate decision-makers and advocate for the program. Most evaluation projects involve collecting some type of impact data, which is provided back to the client to offer justification for the existence of the program. For the Kan-ed project at OEIE, Kan-ed impact data that has been gathered from members is compiled into three different formats and tailored to individual legislators to increase its effectiveness in advocating for continued funding. Tailoring the legislative packets to individual legislators' districts make the information more relevant for those legislators; it offers specific details within the data summary about specific organizations in the district that are benefiting from Kan-ed funds and services as well as offers quotes from specific individuals within the district or region within those organizations that are using and benefiting from the Kan-ed program. Presenting the data in a tailored and organized fashion, and in multiple formats, increases the likelihood that it catches legislators' attention and thus increases the application of the evaluation data.

In the future, the impact data gathered from Kan-ed members also will be fed back to Kan-ed members who are recipients of Kan-ed services. This information will be available through the Kan-ed website, which has the legislative packets and impact stories posted. Further, the Kan-ed Advocacy Packet also will provide members with information about how other members are using services as well as tools to better equip them to advocate for Kan-ed. This combined with the Website Feedback Survey provides Kan-ed members with unlimited opportunities to share feedback with Kan-ed and legislators related to success stories with Kan-ed services. This feedback loop also opens up opportunities for members to learn about what is possible through Kan-ed (e.g., what other members are using) so that services reach more members than they have before, which will in turn create more success or impact stories that can be shared.

Policymakers and other decision makers can make better decisions if they have good information, and the results of evaluation are an important component for understanding project impact and determining program priorities. However realistically, we believe the format, focus, and presentation of information must fit the audience if we are to be successful in reaching legislators and policymakers. Legislators and other decision makers are more receptive to brief material, information that describes real outcomes, constituent-based information, and personal impact stories. Evaluation should be part of the decision-making process, but the methods of communicating results must be geared to this audience.