

## **“Just In Time” Learning: An Alternative Paradigm for Evaluation Capacity Building**

In the January 2002 edition of *Hear It From The Board*, Ellen Taylor-Powell chronicled the recent discussions within the evaluation community, Cooperative Extension System, and University of Wisconsin - Extension to define what constitutes “good” program evaluation. Stemming from the primary discussion on quality standards is a secondary discussion regarding the specific competencies needed to conduct quality evaluation. Ellen leaves us with the fundamental question “Is there a set of core competencies for Extension education evaluation around which we can build capacity? Or are organizations, contexts, roles, and professional ‘world views’ too diverse to come to consensus?”

Ellen’s question is indeed profound. Organizations vary in their expectations regarding program evaluation. Programs vary in terms of their scope and purpose. Extension faculty and staff fill a wide variety of roles in the organization.

Yet, I still believe it is possible to develop a list of competencies needed to do quality evaluation. I offer the recent work of King, Stevahn, Ghore, and Minnema (2001) in support of this premise. In the Spring-Summer edition of the *American Journal of Evaluation*, King, et.al., describe a process by which they involved 31 individuals representing a diverse array of backgrounds, approaches, and contexts of practice in rating the relative importance of 69 domains, categories, or items of evaluation competence. Using what they describe as a variation of a multi-attribute consensus building process, the authors report that they achieved significant agreement on 54 out of the 69 (or 78 percent) competencies. Such findings are encouraging.

It is important to point out, however, that the purpose of the King study was to identify a common set of essential “evaluator” competencies. As AEA looks at issues such as professionalism and certification it is certainly understandable why this approach to identifying competencies was taken. However, as our TIG looks at capacity building within the Cooperative Extension System, I suggest we focus less on “evaluator” competencies and more on “evaluation” competencies. That is, “What competencies are needed to do high quality evaluation?” Not, “What competencies are needed to be a professional evaluator?” At this point, some might argue “What’s the difference?” Here’s my take.

Literature related to the development of competency-based learning systems suggests that one not develop competencies for a specific job, role, or professional title but rather the business of the organization. In other words, the competencies needed within the organization to accomplish what it is trying to do. As Scott Matthews of Maritz Learning states, “core competencies are the same for everyone in the organization” but “every employee has specific competencies unique to their position (Tyler, 2002).”

So efforts related to building evaluation capacity within Extension would more appropriately begin with a process to identify the global set of knowledge, skills, qualities, and abilities needed to do program evaluation, regardless of one’s job, role, or professional title within Extension. Such a process would yield what I would term a “master evaluation toolbox.” At that point we can begin the process of helping people figure out what tools to use when and who needs to learn how to use them. Perhaps Mary Marczak, in the February 2002 edition of *Hear It From The Board* said it best when she suggested that, “answers to questions such as ‘core competence for whom and under what program conditions?’ may help us be more strategic about capacity building.”

Through her citations, Mary makes the point that the nature of the program itself can be a determinant of an evaluation’s scope and rigor and consequently the competencies needed by an individual or team conducting the evaluation. A simple process evaluation might require only a small subset of the “tools” that would reside in the master toolbox. A more complex evaluation might require more tools. The nature of the evaluation would determine the **project-specific competencies** needed to effectively carry it out. The specific evaluation project would also determine the level of proficiency needed for any one competency.

Some evaluations are conducted by individuals. In these cases, the person conducting the evaluation must possess all of the project-specific competencies. Other evaluations are conducted by teams. In these cases, various members of a team bring specific competencies to the table. The competencies needed by any one member are determined by their role in the evaluation project. For lack of a better term, I call these **role-related competencies**.

But a key question remains unanswered. “How should individuals within the organization go about acquiring the level of proficiency they need for a particular competency?”

There was a time not too long ago, when I would have argued that everyone in the Extension system needs a “course” of some sort in program evaluation. I still maintain that there is value in discussing expectations for evaluation and basic principles of its conduct with all Extension faculty and staff. As time goes on, however, I find myself questioning whether the “bring ‘em in and tell ‘em what they need to know” approaches are as effective as I once thought in filling one’s

evaluation toolbox. There is a lot to be said for the power of the teachable moment.

As Matthews puts it, employees don't have the time to sit through an extended training "just to take away a learning nugget" they need right now. The key is being able to "quickly identify and give people the information they need in small, highly digestible pieces." Successful organizations do this through such approaches as e-learning, coaching, mentoring, and on-the-job activities. Matthews adds that technology has provided the vehicle for "just in time, just enough training, exactly where it is needed." In many ways, our Extension evaluation community is right on track with such cutting edge thought.

As Mary Marczak stated in last month's article, her most successful capacity building efforts occur when she is directly involved with program staff as they work together to evaluate a program under "real life" conditions. After working with school staff and Extension personnel earlier this year to evaluate four 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers, I too can attest to the capacity-building outcomes resulting from serving in a role of evaluation "coach" or "mentor." Similarly, Nancy Ellen Kiernan's Program Evaluation Tipsheets are an excellent example of providing "just in time" capacity building to field faculty via electronic means.

Currently, a number of states are in the process of developing competency-based learning systems for Extension faculty and staff (North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, 1999; and Stone and Coppernoll, 2001). Either independently or collaboratively, they are seeking to identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes which undergird best practice in Extension education. The Association of Southern Region Extension Directors (2002) recently commissioned a regional effort to identify a taxonomy of core competencies and to catalog or develop learning objectives which help faculty and staff develop those competencies.

So from my perspective, development of a universal set of essential Extension education evaluation competencies seems to be an admirable goal. Such a taxonomy would surely be welcomed by those currently seeking to implement competency-based learning systems across the country. Such a taxonomy also provides a practical index of the required knowledge, skills, and abilities for which learning resources might be developed. I see a key role for the EEE-TIG in both the development of such a taxonomy and the learning resources which address key areas of evaluation competence.

## **References:**

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