OVERCOMING CHALLENGES IN PROJECT DESIGN AND EVALUATION OF DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION-FUNDED GRANTS AT HISPANIC-SERVING

CEEE

By: Rebecca M. Eddy & Steven Margell

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The evaluation of Department of Education-funded Title III and Title V educational projects to support Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) provides both challenges and opportunities for evaluators and the higher education institutions they serve. The expertise required to successfully evaluate these projects requires that professionals use flexible strategies based on research literature and professional practice. This brief presents common issues and challenges that arise in program evaluations for these types of projects and offers strategies for program staff and evaluation professionals to overcome such challenges.

COMMON QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN DESIGN, EVALUATION, RESULTS, AND REPORTING

Program staff and administrators often have common concerns related to both the project design and evaluation of Title III and Title V-funded projects at HSIs. Evaluators can often learn from professionals who have also encountered similar challenges. The following questions and answers present common issues and challenges in the evaluation process of publicly-funded grant projects

COMMON ISSUES IN PROJECT DESIGN

Question: What if we find that the project design is not feasible for our institution?

Answer: The purpose of formative evaluation is to provide feedback that can be used to improve project design (Scriven, 1991). In the first year, if formative evaluation findings suggest parts of the project are not succeeding, consider modifying project elements to better meet student or other stakeholder needs. Often, this involves minor revisions to project processes and will not involve a complete project redesign. For example, if formative evaluation findings reveal that Hispanic and/or low-income students are less likely to utilize the tutoring services from a new STEM Center on campus the program evaluator may consider administrating a short online survey to the Hispanic and/or low-income student population to determine the factors contributing to low utilization. The survey results may suggest that Hispanic and/or low-income students would be more likely to use the STEM Center if the hours of operation were extended or changed to accommodate class and/or work schedules, which would require minor modifications to the overall project design.

Question: We are not sure that we will have enough faculty buy-in for our project once we get started. What are some strategies that we should try?

Answer: This is an opportunity to pilot test an intervention or project element on a small scale and gather faculty feedback before you roll it out to other departments or the rest of the campus. Pilot testing everything from instruments, procedures, and other logistics often prove to be useful. This process should be based on both the research literature and feedback you gather from participants. If the pilot intervention is successful (e.g., improves Hispanic student persistence in STEM fields), the findings can then be leveraged to elicit buy-in and engage stakeholders across campus.

Question: Our project is set up and going well, but has low participation. How can we fix this?

Answer: It often takes time for word to get out about a new project on campus, even if the services offered are desperately needed. Many project personnel underestimate the amount of thought and planning necessary to effectively market the project. Work on an intentional marketing plan (e.g., flyers, emails, social media, presentations) and elicit support from faculty, staff, and students who can advocate for the project and collaborate with other groups or organizations on campus. You may have to try different marketing strategies to see which have traction. For instance, visiting various Hispanic student-led organizations on campus and requesting help with promoting a new center or program on campus may garner interest and increase participation rates. Additional strategies could include offering incentives to new participants and/or asking faculty for some class time to introduce a new center or program to students.

Question: Our new policy or campus priorities do not align with project goals. What are some ways to address this?

Answer: Consider using other campus leaders and program directors as a sounding board and actively solicit suggestions for ways to better align the project with campus-wide priorities. The program evaluator can often be a good source of ideas as they will likely have knowledge of changes that have worked at other institutions. The program officer can also approve changes to the project design that are not meeting student needs.

COMMON ISSUES IN EVALUATION DESIGN

Question: What is the first step to ensuring we are collecting accurate project data?

Answer: The first step is for the evaluator and project staff to agree on data collection processes and data sources. If they are not already in place, the evaluator should help project staff to establish data collection systems. For example, it may be efficient to collect workshop attendance using a student ID card swipe system to ensure accurate attendance is captured. In addition, evaluators will often assist in setting up spreadsheets or other forms to help project staff organize implementation data that can be easily recorded and analyzed when needed. Data systems should be feasible, easy to use, and accurate. Additionally, data collection, analysis and reporting systems established should also ensure that sensitive information is maintained confidentially.

Question: How do we select the right instruments to measure project outcomes?

Answer: The research literature should provide guidance on measures that are widely used by others studying similar phenomenon (e.g., academic self-efficacy) or project elements (e.g., number of STEM tutors to hire). For example, if an expected short-term outcome is related to improving students' academic self-efficacy, there are published scales to consider that have strong psychometric properties (reliability and validity). In addition, longer-term outcomes often include institutional research (IR) data related to student retention and graduation. Working closely with the IR department on campus can improve the accuracy of these data. A review of the evaluation literature also provides insight into the types of measures that are appropriate for program evaluation (Rossi, Lipsey & Henry, 2018).

Question: What should we do if our original evaluation design does not rigorously test the intervention?

Answer: Before the evaluation begins, the evaluator and project staff should revisit the evaluation design to determine if the most rigorous evaluation design is feasible and then plan the evaluation accordingly. It is important to be familiar with a range of evaluation design options and understand the drawbacks and benefits of different types of designs. Some funders require that rigorous evaluation designs be conducted that meet What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) Designs Standards with Reservations (IES, 2020). Keep in mind that even carefully-planned evaluations that aim to meet WWC standards may fall short due to factors outside the control of the evaluation team (e.g., attrition or lack of equivalent comparison group).

Question: What can we do if our project design keeps changing in response to local policies or practices?

Answer: Evaluators should be flexible, but remind program staff of original goals to ensure activities are still relevant to grant guidelines and funder requirements. It is important to be responsive to formative feedback and the local context, but the core elements of the program should remain intact so they can be fully implemented and tested. Any substantial changes need to be approved by the program officer.

COMMON ISSUES IN PROJECT EVALUATION RESULTS

Question: What should we do if early results fail to show positive effects on students?

Answer: A first step would be to revisit the project/intervention model and the research literature. Consider the following questions: Does the research literature provide additional clues regarding how the intervention should function? Are there additional data that should be collected to ensure accurate program participation is being captured? A second step is to revisit the logic model and refine elements that are not in place or not feasible (Kekahio, 2014). Often the person who developed the proposal is not part of the project staff responsible for implementation. Ultimately, the evaluator and project staff should be able to determine whether outcomes were not achieved because of implementation failure (e.g., the project/ intervention failed to be properly implemented) or theory failure (e.g., the anticipated project outcomes did not follow from the project/intervention design). Always keep in mind that sometimes it is tempting to make a judgment with very little data; however, it is possible that more time needs to pass before any improvement is shown. Be patient and persistent.

Question: What happens if there is not enough time to measure long-term outcomes within the time period of grant? For example, we are supposed to be tracking 6-year graduation rates during a 5-year grant.

Answer: The ideal situation is that there is enough time to fully implement a project and observe all articulated outcomes during the grant period. Some projects address this by requesting a no-cost extension that will allow for one additional year of data collection to include in their final reporting. Other projects address this challenge by refining longer-term goals to reflect the original timeline. For example, they may develop proxy measures, such as cumulative credits earned instead of graduation for some cohorts of students. Others include using self-report measures, such as intention to pursue a graduate degree or enrollment in a graduate program instead of relying on objective reporting of graduate program completion. While there is no ideal solution, any reporting of medium-term and long-term outcomes should be discussed in advance to ensure that the indicators are meaningful and aligned to funder requirements.

COMMON ISSUES IN PROJECT REPORTING

Question: What should we do if we want to report qualitative findings in our Annual Performance Report (APR), but the DOE reporting template does not readily support qualitative data?

Answer: Qualitative data can provide a great deal of insight regarding program success or failure. Although the APR templates do not easily accommodate these types of data, evaluators and project staff will often include qualitative data when reporting on Focus Area Outcomes within the “Supporting Statement.” In addition, one can include qualitative data when reporting on the Project Status within the “Objective Narrative” and in the Executive Summary.

Question: What should we do when the format and timing of a federal report does not provide useful information related to project efficacy for institutionalization?

Answer: Evaluators will often develop a primary report document for the program to use that includes all relevant data, such as a description of program activities and changes as well as survey data and progress on performance measures. This “local” report can serve as a much more comprehensive document and be used to communicate findings to stakeholders. The timing of this report can occur well before the annual APR and can be used for timely decision-making. The evaluator and project staff should be clear on the content and timing of all evaluation reporting deliverables to ensure that what is developed is useful to the project.

Question: What should we do when key stakeholders on campus do not have time to read the evaluation report or published article?

Answer: Evaluators and project staff will often produce multiple deliverables to meet the needs of various stakeholder groups that should be informed about project progress. For example, an evaluator may want to develop an executive summary or infographic of key findings that can be presented in an annual advisory board meeting; others may want to develop a slide deck that includes higher-level findings that can be shared with multiple audiences.

USING EVALUATION TO BE RESPONSIVE TO STAKEHOLDER NEEDS: A CASE STUDY AT HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERISTY

Question: How should we respond when program relevance is challenged by other entities on campus?

Answer: Grant activities are intended to determine what works on your campus by using evaluation findings to inform project design throughout the lifetime of the grant and to eventually contribute to the broader empirical research base. However, evaluation methods can be used to address specific campus needs that arise outside for the intended grant outputs and outcomes. Below is a narrative for illustration of how project evaluation can be used and expanded to dynamically respond to campus needs.

At Humboldt State University, a group of students not involved in the Title III HSI-STEM programming raised concerns that the grant-funded activities were not directly improving the Hispanic student experience on campus. Hispanic program participant success on campus was demonstrably improved in the metrics of retention, GPA, and survey data on Sense of Belonging and Skills/Attitudes. The concern was that these metrics did not accurately reflect the true student experience and the student voice was left out when demonstrating efficacy.

In an effort to explore this missing perspective, we collaborated with our Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and a representative from the concerned student group to design and hold focus groups comprised of program participants to explore the programming impact qualitatively. These focus groups were not anticipated in the original evaluation plan but the data was relevant and of interest to campus stakeholders. Our working group developed the prompts which explored friendships, ethnic/racial identity values, faculty/peer support, and challenges faced on campus. In order to expand campus collaboration and ensure neutral facilitation, facilitators were recruited from actively enrolled Sociology graduate students.

Overall, this process assuaged the concerned students since they were involved in developing the prompts and the facilitators were a neutral party. We were able to acknowledge their concerns and explore whether the positive effects we saw from institution-level data (e.g., retention, GPA, etc.) mirrored positive experiences and attitudes in the program participants. The results of the focus group provided valuable insights into the student experience and additional data that validated the program efforts as being both positive and effective. Additionally, there were areas of improvement identified which we have worked with campus partners and stakeholders to address.

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SUMMARY

Common challenges arise when designing and evaluating project interventions for Title III and Title V-funded grants. Although project designs supported by this funding can be limited, working closely with an evaluator can help to address many of the common challenges faced by institutions. It is important for project staff to have a good working relationship with an evaluator characterized by mutual trust and open communication. Evaluators can often provide responsive guidance based on the research literature and their own professional experience. Together, project staff and evaluators can work together to improve their institutions by learning from others' experiences and implementing a range of solutions.

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AUTHORS

Rebecca M. Eddy
Cobblestone Applied Research & Evaluation, Inc.

Dr. Eddy and her team at Cobblestone have served as the external evaluators on more than a dozen Department of Education Title V and Title III funded grants, including several at CSU campuses (CSU San Bernardino and Cal Poly Pomona).

Steven Margell
California State University, Humboldt
Title III HSI-STEM Lead Evaluator

With a background in Mathematical Modeling, Steven Margell approaches evaluation with statistical rigor incorporating techniques such as Structural Equation Modeling and Propensity Score Matching where appropriate.

CEEE

The Center for Evaluation and Educational Effectiveness (CEEE) at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) is a part of a partnership that involves 10 California State University campuses working together to learn collectively about best how to support the success of first-generation, low-income, and/or Hispanic students in STEM at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). This brief is part of a broader project that has received funding from the U.S. Department of Education (Award Number: P031C160085-18A). For more information on this project please visit www.csulb.edu/HSI-STEM-Lessons-Learned.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY
LONG BEACH

Center for Evaluation and Educational Effectiveness

California State University, Long Beach
1250 Bellflower Blvd.
Long Beach, CA 90840-2012

Phone: (562) 985-8868

Email: cededeffectiveness@csulb.edu