Doing effective evaluations: a case study of family empowerment due to welfare reform

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Abstract

Effective evaluation of human service programs is rapidly becoming more critical as more and more stakeholders demand dependable documentation of a program's impact. Comprehensive evaluation, done purposefully, improves services to our clientele and, ultimately, increases the chances a program will be sustained long-term. To meet this requirement for more rigorous program assessment, program planners and evaluators can benefit from theoretically sound tools that help them evaluate the impact of social service programming has for clients, organizations, states, and federally based programs. This manuscript presents an evaluation framework and applies it to a family empowerment program in Montana called Educating Families to Achieve Independence in Montana (EDUFAIM), developed in response to welfare reform. The framework is sufficiently broad in that it has applications within a variety of activities and settings. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Effective evaluation for human service programs is rapidly becoming more critical as a greater number of stakeholders demand documentation of a program's effectiveness. As a result, program evaluation needs to be relevant to a wide variety of constituents. Program evaluations must meet the needs of funding sources, policy makers, program staff, other critical audiences, and the program participants. For example, evaluation for many government human service programs is now becoming mandatory or increasing in sophistication. Also, evaluation needs to be conducted in a manner that can assist funding sources and policy makers in demonstrating accountability of scarce public funds and in determining if the program continues to meet the agency's overall objectives. Evaluators and program planners can benefit from tools that help them thoroughly address these needs and concerns.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present an evaluation process that has been developed for Montana Extension's Educating Families to Achieve Independence in Montana (EDUFAIM) program. The authors will present a comprehensive approach for evaluating a program developed in response to welfare reform, designed to help participants make the transition from public assistance to self-sufficiency. This evaluation framework will be helpful to program planners and evaluators in designing and assessing the impact of their programs. We begin with a brief discussion of EDUFAIM and its conceptual roots. We then follow with a discussion of the theory behind the evaluation framework that encompasses seven areas which includes developing objectives, identifying what information needs to be collected, utilizing appropriate collection techniques, relevant data collection methods, effective analysis procedures, understandable reporting techniques, and developing a sound conceptual framework.

2. Montana extension's EDUFAIM program

In 1994, Montana Senate Bill ♯209 reformed welfare

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and authorized the creation of the Families Achieving Independence in Montana (FAIM) program. FAIM has three components: the Job Supplement Program; the Pathways Program; and the Community Services Program. The Pathways Program is designed to provide families with "educational opportunities leading to permanent public assistance alternatives". Families coming off welfare often need self-sufficiency skills that can be provided through education.

Working in partnership with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Extension Specialists at Montana State University created EDUFAIM: Educating Families to Achieve Independence in Montana. The goal of EDUFAIM is to help FAIM and other at-risk families gain the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to attain effective family resource management and self-sufficiency. The project is supported by a State Strengthening grant from the Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) initiative of the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service.

EDUFAIM is based on principles of empowerment (Cochran & Woolever, 1983). Empowerment implies that families already have strengths that can be mobilized, and that families have some idea of what their goals ought to be and what they need to do to achieve them. Even if they are not functioning well, the empowerment approach holds that families can develop the necessary skills and strengths they need to have the kind of family life they want.

EDUFAIM program areas may include, but are not limited to, nutrition and health (preventive health education, maternal and infant nutrition, food preparation, food safety, planning and purchasing), individual and family development (job readiness, parenting, building family strengths, balancing work and family, building self-esteem), resource management (time management, money management, consumer skills), community development (small business start-up), and housing (home environment, household cleaning techniques). Specific educational program content is determined by the needs identified and prioritized by individual families and communities.

All county residents who receive welfare benefits are required to participate in EDUFAIM programming or they will be sanctioned (lose some portion of their welfare benefit over a defined time period). FAIM families first develop a Family Investment Agreement (FIA) in consultation with a FAIM case worker. Families indicate in this agreement the kinds of educational programs they need to help them move toward self-sufficiency.

EDUFAIM is carried out in communities by Family Empowerment Educators assisted by Program Aides indigenous to the low income population. These educators work intensively with families in one-on-one or small group settings. They work collaboratively with existing agencies in their communities and are supported at the state level by an interdisciplinary EDU-FAIM Team representing nine disciplines and state agency collaborators.

3. A theoretical foundation for the EDUFAIM evaluation process

The approach to the EDUFAIM evaluation was based upon a variety of sources (Aday, 1989; Patton, 1997) and experiences but draws heavily from the concepts and evaluation steps of McCaslin and Borden (1997). Theoretical models of evaluation are used to facilitate the development of a process that provides a framework where effective and purposeful evaluation can take place. Patton has reviewed numerous models such as goal-based evaluation, goal-free evaluation, connoisseurship studies, responsive evaluation, and his own model of utilization focused evaluation (Patton, 1990, 1997). The framework that is outlined in this manuscript does not succinctly fit into any of these models but is most related to goal-based and utilization-focused evaluation.

The proponents of the goal-oriented model have articulated that a goal or set of goals need to be developed at the start of the evaluation and the goal(s) drives the remainder of the evaluation process. Also, within this model the evaluator is seen as the primary figure rather than a player in determining important issues such as the evaluation objectives. The importance and the appropriateness of using goal-based research to identify what the evaluator is looking for has been communicated by a number of researchers (Aday, 1989; Rossi & Freeman, 1993; Rubinson & Neutens, 1987; Windsor, Baranowski, Clark & Cutter, 1994). In the EDUFAIM program, the evaluators clearly were the primary voice in this process. However, the process described in this manuscript also borrows ideas from Patton's utilization focused evaluation (Patton, 1997). Specifically, Patton discusses the need to use relevant "decision makers and information users" who will use the information to be involved with the key evaluation components such as the identification of the research questions or objectives to be addressed (Patton, 1990). In fact, he has indicated that evaluation is "too important to be left to evaluators" (Patton, 1997). In this case study all of the EDUFAIM staff and select administrators were involved in the development of the evaluation objectives. While the diversity of stakeholders and their involvement in the EDUFAIM process is less than what Patton would prescribe, the procedures and intent are similar.

Patton has also indicated that his model allows for the methods and data analysis to flow from the