

Notes from the Field
SPF-SIG
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External Qualitative Evaluation Team
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Evaluation Team Activities

The team's proposal for a presentation at the Appalachian Studies Association annual conference in Tennessee has been accepted. The presentation entitled "Ethnography and Program Evaluation: Strange Bedfellows or a Marriage Made in Heaven?" will focus on the use of qualitative research methods for the purpose of program evaluation and will include members of the external qualitative evaluation team as well as SPF-SIG staff and a member of the state partnership.

Our "Eyes on the Process" article about the WV Partnership's formation and planning year was not accepted by the *Journal of Community Practice*. The team will begin research on another suitable journal for publication, perhaps one that is more specifically focused on prevention-related topics.

A new Marshall University doctoral student, Karen McComas, has joined the external evaluation team. Karen, who is an Associate Professor at Marshall University (Huntington campus) in the Communication Disorders program, will begin work with the team this quarter.

During the past quarter, Anne and Paula conducted three interviews, observed five County Prevention Partnership meetings, one Regional Learning Opportunity, one State-wide Debrief Meeting with Community Development Specialists, two county-based community activities sponsored by the SPF-SIG, and participated in the Share the Vision conference.

Current Quarter Update

Most of the data for this quarter were collected at the county/community level; therefore, most of the analysis will address issues related to that segment of the SPF-SIG project.

Hope versus doubt

We have observed a continued mixture of attitudes toward the present status and the future of the county-based SPF-SIG-related prevention efforts. In one instance we observed a growing sense of optimism and determination on the part of a Project Director who said that she was sure the host site "would continue to provide office space and she would work for them as a volunteer if need be" if they were not funded for a second year. She went on to say that the "coalition has

no intention of dissolving regardless of the [future of the] implementation grant.” She described her county’s SPF-SIG initiative as having “staying power.”

A contrasting attitude of doubtfulness was observed in an interview with a County Prevention Partnership member in another county. He suggested that his county partnership needed a greater degree of ownership on the part of the members and that they “really need to work on drawing in other people and [not] make it just us few people.” His sense was that the local partnership needed to have a “meeting of the minds, create a vision, or set some goals...so that people feel like they are a part of it.” He went on to say that he was “not sure we’re approaching it the right way.” In the midst of his doubt and concern that he didn’t “have the big picture,” he indicated that his involvement in the SPF-SIG process had been positive in the sense that it “raised [his] awareness level personally.”

Necessary Skills

Through observations across a variety of settings, it is evident that the skill sets of the people involved in the SPF-SIG initiative can have an impact on effectiveness at all levels. This is particularly apparent when it comes to the work of the Project Directors who arguably are the most important county-level participants. Reflecting on the role of the Project Director, one Community Development Specialist indicated that enthusiasm and/or pre-existing community connections are not enough to support a successful county-level SPF-SIG initiative. In a county coalition that she considered less successful than some others, she related that the Project Director “doesn’t have the ability to critically think about issues or lead the coalition in that type of exercise. [She] doesn’t seem to have the ability to create a cohesive, cooperative, critically thinking group.”

Observations across several different county coalitions support her statement by indicating that Project Directors who are driven, charismatic, organized, and have strong facilitation and interpersonal skills tend to be successful in organizing a coalition where folks work together and are committed. Interestingly, one Project Director said that she “didn’t realize the job had this social networking, bridging, building, human capacity component” when she came into it.

Relationships

Related to the issue of Project Director skills and their impact on local coalition success, the relationship between the Project Director and the Community Development Specialist seems to be relevant also. Again, variability exists across the regions and counties regarding this issue. For the most part, Project Directors viewed the Community Development Specialists as “wonderfully supportive” and “easy to work with.” But extremes seem to exist. In one case, a very close relationship between a PD and her CDS resulted in much of the work done by the county coalition being closely coordinated with the CDS. Observations of this county coalition indicated a committed membership who understood the issues and had a higher degree of ownership. Conversely, the opposite seems to be true in another county where little coordination is evident between the PD and the

CDS. In this case, a coalition member commented that “I’m not sure where we’re headed...[but I] think we need to step back and make sure everybody knows exactly what we’re doing.”

Regional Learning Opportunities

Our discussion of the Regional Learning Opportunities builds upon an earlier report on the RLOs submitted on August 30, 2006 by the external qualitative evaluation team and includes new data generated since that time. The format for this section of the quarterly report was borrowed from one used each month by Wayne Coombs and Monica McFarland with the Community Development Specialists to debrief their experiences concerning the monthly Regional Learning Opportunities being conducted throughout the state. The form is adapted from one created by Stephanie Nestlerode who is a consultant with Omega Point in Denver. The purpose of the Debrief Form and the associated discussion was to share the CDSs’ RLO experiences and perceptions with each other. Likewise, the purpose of this report is to join in the on-going dialogue about RLOs by responding to the same debriefing topics and questions used to guide the state-wide debriefing discussions. The format is intended to provide a structure for this section of the report as well as promote discussion for the purpose of deeper and fuller understanding of the RLOs as a means of community capacity development.

1. What were our beliefs going into the RLO process?

First and foremost we believed that the RLOs were going to be a major undertaking that would demand a great deal of nurturing which would translate to a lot of time and effort on the part of the PRC staff (Edison and community-based) which potentially could potentially strain the PRC as an organization.

We expected that there would be both an overt (formal) and a hidden (informal) curriculum that would include considerable opportunities for participants to actively engage in constructing knowledge. Every indication was that the RLO sessions would not be traditional teacher-centered, didactic sessions, but would involve active learning on the part of the project directors, county coalition members, and Community Development Specialists. We believed that after the first session or two the county participants would have a strong role in determining the content and format of the remaining RLO sessions. Related to this belief, we anticipated tensions/confusion because we observed that there was not a shared vision of the RLOs among PRC staff going into the initiative. Some staff talked about not envisioning “talking heads” lectures as the primary instructional approach while others talked about “delivering” the content.

We anticipated that there would be unevenness in the success of the RLOs across and within the regions.

2. What were our intentions concerning the RLOs?

Our intentions as the external evaluation team were to learn/find out what the RLOs meant to participants (both those designing and/or facilitating the RLOs and those from county coalitions) by understanding what they were learning, what they were concerned about, what they liked/disliked, and how they used what they were learning in their own communities

3. What were our actions concerning the RLOs?

We interviewed:

- PRC staff members (Edison-based and community-based) before the RLOs began; and,
- PRC staff members (Edison-based and community-based), Project Directors, and county coalitions members during the nine month RLO process.

We observed:

- a “think tank” meeting conducted by Wayne Coombs with community program leaders/facilitators concerning proposed RLO format and content;
- an average of two RLOs each month;
- monthly RLO Debrief Meetings with Community Development Specialists;
- County Prevention Partnership meetings in a variety of counties;
- community events sponsored by County Prevention Partnerships;
- SPF-SIG Staff and Focus meetings;
- PRC staff meetings;
- State Partnership meetings; and,
- work-group meetings that pertained to SPG-SIG.

We reviewed the following documents related to the RLOs:

- instructional materials distributed monthly at the RLO sessions;
- monthly RLO Debriefing Forms completed by CDSs from all four regions;
- materials distributed to county coalition members at their meetings where we observed;
- materials distributed at PRC staff and focus meetings;
- materials distributed at state partnership meetings; and,
- materials distributed at work-group meetings.

4. What were the outcomes of our work related to the RLOs?

We addressed RLO findings in four quarterly reports for the State Partnership and PRC staff (written and oral format), and in an RLO summary report submitted with the Year Two application to CSAP.

5. What did we learn about the RLO process?

Observation and interview data suggest that the RLOs are an effective community development strategy. In some cases, community members expressed concerns and suggested modifications to the process, but comments about the program were generally positive. Our own direct observations evidenced substantial learning about content and process. The RLOs provided opportunities for participants to learn – with and from each other – about prevention, assessment, coalition building, comprehensive planning and implementation (logic models), evidence-based programs, program evaluation, and grant funding. In addition to these formal content topics, RLO participants learned about the SPF-SIG grant itself (Years 1 and 2), about grants and grant-writing generally, and about their own counties – especially from the informational materials and the county-by-county data provided as part of the RLO sessions.

There is evidence that RLO participants engaged in networking and collaboration and learned from each other both within and across counties. In some cases, the networking and subsequent learning occurred beyond the usual community members and agencies by engaging people in recovery and well as young people in the process.

Data suggest that designing and implementing the RLOs was challenging because of the tremendous variability among the participants with regard to county size, skill/knowledge/experience levels, and prior levels of collaboration around prevention issues within participants' counties. Because of this, RLO content that was considered informative and helpful by some was considered “redundant” or “a waste of time by others.”

The self-reflexive and flexible nature of the RLO process has been a major ingredient in its success. The extensive system of on-going internal and external feedback on the RLOs was both qualitative and quantitative in nature. It included monthly debriefing meetings with Community Development Specialists, a full time qualitative evaluation staff member devoted to “telling the story” of what transpired in the county SPF-SIG initiatives, and monthly electronic evaluations assessing each aspect of the RLO. In addition, our team of external qualitative evaluators provided quarterly reports to the state partners that were used in a formative way to reflect on past efforts and to inform future ones.

From the CDSs' Point of View

The Community Development Specialists reflected regularly at their monthly debriefing meetings about the progress of the RLOs and factors that enabled and constrained their success and what they and the county participants were learning as part of the process. Although CDSs' reactions to the RLOs vacillated somewhat during the nine month period that we observed, several consistencies arose within their responses to and perceptions of the RLOs.

Timing. CDSs talked a great deal about timing issues related to the RLOs. They would have preferred to have received the material they needed to present at the RLOs earlier so that they could have more time to prepare for their presentations. They needed more time to become familiar with the information and seek additional training especially in cases when a particular topic was not an area of expertise for anyone on their respective team.

Trust. Eventually the concerns about timing were tempered by the CDSs' growing sense of trust in the PRC, the process itself, their fellow CDSs, and their own skills and abilities. At about the same time, CDS reported that RLO participants were getting comfortable with the process, excitement was building, and folks were buying into the data-driven process. But in July and August the tide turned somewhat when data began to indicate that the trust level of county participants was dampened by skepticism and a general negative feeling toward the PRC related to the new focus on Year Two funding. CDSs reported that some coalitions were losing momentum at this point.

Learning. Learning related to the RLOs occurred in a variety of ways and on many different levels. CDSs indicated a high degree of frustration at the beginning as they tried to determine their role in the learning process. Many CDSs indicated that they were more comfortable presenting information when they were the experts and had control of the content. As time went on, some CDSs continued to struggle with the idea that the RLOs were a non-traditional learning experience and they would be expected to deliver content or facilitate learning based on materials created by someone else. There also seemed to be a lack of broad-based consensus about the learning process related to the RLOs. One CDS spoke in terms of learning the material himself and then "sharing the knowledge," while other CDSs said "we can learn through exploring," "sometimes we need to struggle in order to learn," and "skepticism can motivate learning." One CDS even said that the process was overly didactic with "too many lectures" and some "zip needed [to be] added to the process."

CDSs were initially focused on learning that took place among the county coalition participants, but eventually they realized that they too were learning both personally and professionally as part of the process. They reported that the challenge of the diverse learning needs of the RLO participants improved their presentation and facilitation skills. They also indicated that the regional approach to the monthly RLOs improved the collaborative nature of their regional teams.

Co-learning. Some CDSs indicated a belief in co-learning as part of the RLO process and in most cases expressed a desire to learn along with their counties. In all regions there was a sense that participants had information and experience to share and that knowledge was being co-constructed through "networking" and "dialogue" among the RLO participants (staff and county-level people). One CDS advocated an additional co-learning opportunity by suggesting that the RLO

process be adjusted so that the project directors could assist with the design and implementation of the RLOs.

6. What questions do we still have related to the RLOs?

Questions about RLOs:

What will be the long-term impact of the RLO process? Will it be a “sustainable” effort? How do we define “sustainability?”

Will there be some community coalitions that will be able to continue without implementation funding? If so, what factors enable them to do so? How will they negotiate roadblocks they encounter?

What can we take away from the one-year RLO process and apply to future endeavors like this? What sort of “best practices” emerged from the process?

To what extent and in what ways will the Year Two RLOs be different as a result of the feedback on the Year One RLOs?

Questions about our Research Strategies:

To what extent did we accurately capture/understand participants’ RLO-related experiences (internal validity)?

Did we make good data collection choices as a way of getting it right? In other words, should we have spent our time observing things other than the RLO meetings and should we have spent our time interviewing people other than CDSs and Project Directors? Did we ask them the right questions?

To what extent did we clearly and fairly describe participants’ understandings? Were our reports balanced or did we over-emphasize the negative, the positive, one aspect over others?

In what ways, if any, were our reports helpful or harmful?

Did we spread ourselves too thin? Would our understanding be deeper and more valid if we had focused on, for example, only two regions instead of all four?

How do we measure “success” in relation to the RLOs?

What could we do better (as a research team) as we attempt to understand the second year of RLOs? Do we need to conduct more observations and/or interviews? Do we need to conduct different *kinds* of observations? Do we need to conduct interviews with different *kinds* of people? Do we need to ask different questions?

