

Notes From the Field
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WV Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being

Qualitative Research Team
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Announcements and Progress Reports

1. *Research Team Membership.* As of this quarter, Anne Swedberg is leaving us to join the PRC as a full-time evaluation staff member. Tracy Wasinger, a faculty member at the University of Charleston and doctoral student at Marshall University Graduate College, has joined the research team.
2. *Eyes on the Process.* The manuscript about the SPF SIG planning year has been revised and is now under review with the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*.
3. *RLO Presentation.* In January the research team spoke at the final, statewide RLO held in Charleston. In a presentation featured in the meeting's opening session, we shared a preliminary analysis of our ongoing research on the RLOs (see attached RLO Presentation). Also, we used the opportunity to collect additional data by distributing an open-ended survey asking participants what they had initially expected from the RLOs, what actually happened in the RLOs, what they learned from them, and what they would suggest to those planning RLOs in the future. Survey data were sorted into categories by question and then analyzed quickly so that results could be shared with PRC staff gearing up for a second year of RLOs. (see attached "Final RLO" document)
4. *Appalachian Studies Association Presentation.* At the end of March, partner Jean Ambrose and PRC director Wayne Coombs joined the research team in making a presentation at the annual meeting of the Appalachian Studies Association in Maryville, Tennessee. The presentation, "Ethnography and Program Evaluation: Strange Bedfellows or a Marriage Made in Heaven," was well-received by a small but appreciative audience.
5. *American Educational Studies Association Proposal.* We submitted a proposal to present a paper, "Regional Learning Opportunities: A Study of Place-based Learning among Adults in Appalachia," at the annual meeting of the American Educational Studies Association in fall, 2007.
6. *Data Collection.* In addition to the items above, we continued to generate new observation and interview data related to SPF-SIG work. In total, we made over 15 observations and conducted six interviews during this quarter.

Regional Learning Opportunities

Our understanding of the RLOs continues to deepen and expand as we generate additional data – especially from people who now have the benefit of hindsight—as they reflect on the program. In prior writing about the RLOs, we discussed participant learning—about needs assessment, logic models, and other parts of the formal curriculum, as well as about the processes that seemed to enable that learning – for example the between and across-county networking that has been so successful. Data from this quarter continue to provide evidence of considerable learning - on the part of PRC staff who designed and implemented the program as well as on the part of community participants. There are numerous examples of this in the attached RLO survey report.

Also, in past reports we highlighted the variations that exist across counties and individuals – variations that explain why the same RLO curriculum might be experienced as a wonderful learning opportunity by some and a “waste of time” by others. Data from this quarter (surveys completed at the final RLO session in January as well as new interviews with individuals who had extensive experience with the RLOs) continue to show that variations – in regional and local contexts, as well as in the skills, knowledge, and experience of individuals—are an important factor in assessing the success of the RLOs.

At this point, we are inclined to say that there are mixed results for the first year RLOs. While noting that it was a strong effort based on considerable forethought and planning, one person close to the effort gave it an overall grade of C+. Data from this quarter provide an opportunity to explore questions about the depth and meaningfulness of the learning that took place as a result of the RLOs.

It was brought to our attention that quite a few county prevention plans included strategies that did not match the county-level data. For one participant involved with implementing the RLOs, these mismatches suggest that participants did not really learn or understand the RLO content, particularly content related to data-based logic models wherein community needs are assessed and then strategies and plans are developed around those specific needs. She said, “People didn’t learn. They attended and [memorized], but they didn’t learn.” Analysis of this is ongoing, but several ideas/issues that are popping up across our observation and interview data about the RLOs may provide insights into how the RLOs could result in deeper, more meaningful learning.

Perhaps the strongest, most consistent finding is that the *networking* opportunities provided by the RLOs were beneficial and should be incorporated into future programs of this nature. As is noted in the attached RLO survey report, many project directors spoke unequivocally about the “great networking” within and between counties – networking that enabled participants to “learn from each other and help each other.”

However, participants were not uniformly satisfied with other aspects of the program. Many thought RLOs should provide *more guidance*. There seems to have been

unevenness in the extent to which RLOs were well-organized, focused sessions with clarity about the “big picture” as well as about specific grant-related expectations. Some noted that samples of the products that were requested would have been helpful.

Also, participants would like *more substance* in the RLOs, about topics such as prevention, coalition-building, logic models, and evaluation. Some of the concerns expressed pertained to the extent to which RLO presenters (primarily Community Development Specialists – CDSs) had the capacity, in terms of knowledge and skills, to facilitate learning about some topics. Others stressed the lack of preparation time for RLO presenters. Finally, some attributed difficulties in this arena to CDSs not participating in RLO planning and development as fully as might have been expected, to a discomfort with a non-traditional teaching/learning model, or both.

There may be confusion here between the notion of facilitating communities of learners, where everyone (including the “teacher”) is learning together, and the idea that even facilitators who are learning (in the learning community fashion) need to have a basic level of familiarity and comfort with the content. Research in pedagogy (for example, by John Dewey and others in progressive education) suggests this is not an either/or equation as much as both/and. In other words, both content knowledge *and* facilitation skills are needed to maximize learning. Since the CDSs are the staff members responsible for the on-site implementation of the RLOs, more attention may need to be given to making sure they have what they need to feel comfortable and be successful in both arenas.

Another issue that emerged was a desire for *more feedback*, especially for project directors who wanted more timely formative feedback from people who really know their county’s situation. They also suggested *tweaking the logistics* (meeting times and places, length and organization of meetings) and *tailoring the programs* to fit county needs. As one participant explained, “The main thing is to get more control to the counties about what’s going to be in those [RLOs] and about the timing of them and all those kind of things.”

There is a great deal to be gained from identifying and examining these kinds of concerns and suggestions. They are not presented here to contradict our earlier comments about the RLOs as an effective community development strategy, but to provide SPF SIG participants feedback from this first attempt at statewide, community-based learning and capacity-development, feedback that may be useful in efforts to strengthen year-two RLOs and similar future efforts.

County Implementation Grants

There is confusion and concern about SPF SIG county implementation grants. One concern pertains to the short funding period for the first implementation grants. While the seven-month period was determined in order to synchronize fiscal calendars, it leaves counties with a very short implementation time, especially since it is not clear that future

years' funding is assured with adequate progress in the first "year" or whether counties will have to compete anew for the funding each year. Also, there is concern that the amounts of the grants may be too small to actually "drive the [substance abuse] numbers down" and could become even smaller if counties with partial funding this "year" receive full/er funding next year.

These concerns about the SPF SIG county grants – the small size of some awards, and the fact that multi-year funding is not in place – are addressed (in general terms) in current grant-making literature. A 2007, data-based report issued by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy calls for changes in the way grants are awarded to community-based non-profits. The report stresses the need for adequate funding, including funds for general operating expenses, and notes that "chronic under-funding, particularly of administrative and core operating support . . . is crippling small community-based and other non-profit organizations." (7) In addition to calling for more grant support for core operating expenses, the report calls for "multi-year support," so that less time is wasted on applying and doing paperwork for grants and more time can be spent actually accomplishing organizational goals. These two factors, lack of adequate support for operating costs and lack of multi-year funding, were identified as key obstacles for the sustainability of community-based, non-profit groups and the initiatives they undertake.

Prevention Resource Center Role

The PRC holds a unique role in facilitating this collaborative social reform, a large-scale project with the potential to strengthen the prevention network throughout the state of West Virginia. As staff to the state-level partnership (WV Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being) that functions as the advisory body for the SPF SIG, and as home to the network of 16 field staff (Community Development Specialists – CDSs) who provide community-level technical assistance and support throughout the state's 55 counties, the PRC must conduct business according to the expectations of the federal and state governments, of state agencies, of community-based organizations, and of local partnerships and coalitions. Often these groups do not share the same understandings, norms, or needs. However, PRC staff must communicate with and be accountable to all these different groups while administering the SPF SIG.

As the PRC translates the needs and expectations of different groups back and forth to each other, the organization continues to work towards establishing and communicating clear messages. These messages seem clear in some areas and fuzzy in others. For example, the main goal of the SPF SIG is "to drive the numbers down," as director Wayne Coombs has stated. And by now, the SPF SIG's data-driven process that includes the five overlapping steps of "Assessment, Capacity-building, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation" is familiar to those in the PRC as well as to project directors statewide, whose prevention plans were structured around this framework.

At the same time, many unanswered questions remain on the road to "driving the numbers down," in part because SAMHSA/CSAP has not finalized its own expectations

for the SPF SIG. As Mike Lowther (Director, Division of State Programs, SAMHSA/CSAP) has said, “We’re building this car while we’re driving it.” As a result, when community participants press the PRC for answers to questions about specifics like timelines – “When will we have access to the cross-site evaluation form we must fill out?” –often the answer remains, “We don’t know. It’s still under construction.” From the federal level on down, the SPF SIG is still “under construction” on many levels.

Thus, the PRC’s ability to bring people onto the “same page,” to figure out who takes the lead in certain situations, to establish and communicate clear messages, and to operate in a timely fashion has been compromised at times. Questions like, “Is this a task for the state-wide partnership to undertake or the staff of the PRC?” or “How does the administrative staff best support the field staff in this situation?” require a great deal of good faith to arrive at a workable solution. Tight timelines that push the PRC to make last-minute decisions as well as the need to protect confidentiality of certain kinds of decisions (for example, in connection to funding decisions) have at times resulted in some participants feeling left out or overlooked, which runs the risk of eroding the networks of trust that enable the PRC to shuttle between and among competing needs.

The challenges the PRC faces include figuring out how to establish boundaries on a large-scale project that continues to grow by leaps and bounds, as well as how to balance the demands of staffing needed for a state-wide, collaborative change effort against the internal “wear and tear” this effort can create. Like a weight-bearing joint in the body, the PRC functions at the points of connection, operating at the intersections of multiple agencies, groups, and individuals. These are stressful locations and not surprisingly, periodic tensions flare up around them. One of the challenges the PRC faces as an organization is to find ways to continue to provide technical assistance and support to the statewide project without diminishing its own capacity.

Reference

Cohen, R. (2007). A call to action: Organizing to increase the effectiveness and impact of foundation grantmaking. Report for the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.

