Fall 10
Evalu*a|t|e* CONDUIT
A newsletter for ATE projects and centers
EVALUATION RESOURCE CENTER *for advanced technological education*
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

OUR mission

Evalu|t|e is the evaluation resource center for the National Science Foundation's Advanced Technological Education program.

Our mission is to promote the goals of the ATE program by partnering with ATE projects and centers to

- strengthen the program's evaluation knowledge base
- expand the use of exemplary evaluation practices
- support the continuous improvement of technician education throughout the nation.

Evalua|t|e is operated by the Western Michigan University Evaluation Center.

Evalua|t|e is funded by the National Science Foundation under grant #0802245. The views expressed in this newsletter are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of NSF.

Fall 2010 *Conduit* editor: Lori Wingate

The PI-Evaluator Relationship

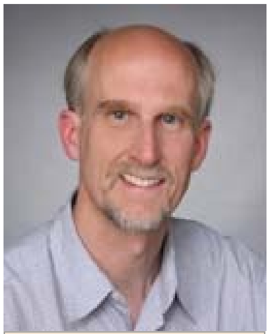
What is the key to a productive PI-evaluator relationship? Vera Zdravkovich and John Sener share their perspectives.

Vera Zdravkovich is a senior advisor and former PI for Cyber-WATCH.

PI Perspective

Building a relationship of mutual trust, respect, and effective communication with your evaluator is essential to the success of an ATE grant. The evaluator also needs to have a sense of ownership and pride in the evaluation's contribution to a center and its accomplishments. How does one accomplish this?

When I assumed the leadership of CyberWATCH, a highly successful ATE center now in its fifth year, which focuses on cybersecurity, I did not know our external evaluator, John Sener. We built a very effective relationship over the years by inviting him to every meeting of the leadership team, advisory board, and entire consortium – not as a silent observer, but an active member with suggestions for improvement and potential changes. This active participation was essential to building our effective and productive relationship. I consulted with him frequently on the best approach to specific problems/issues. He reviews all publications/reports for accuracy and veracity and provides input, ideas, and suggestions for all new project activities. Developing a collegial and synergistic relationship brings results.



John Sener of Sener Knowledge LLC is the external evaluator for CyberWATCH.

External Evaluator Perspective

Besides seconding what Vera has said, I would add that the relationship between external evaluator and PI reflects the project staff's attitudes toward the evaluation process itself. Project evaluation should not be seen as an onerous requirement, but rather as an opportunity to help you determine, document, and appreciate the significance of your project, its accomplishments, and its capacity to evolve. So value evaluation by valuing the PI-external evaluator relationship.

Start building your relationship by getting your evaluator involved early in the project process – during the proposal stage is best. This also gives the evaluator and PI a chance to become familiar with each other's working styles and other key attributes. During the project, think of your evaluator as a resource – someone who can offer a fresh perspective or help the project team see the big picture and avoid getting bogged down in the details. Also treat your evaluator as an integral member of your project team; in long-term projects, your external evaluator will become an important source of the project's "institutional memory."

In this issue

EVALUATION terminology

Process Evaluation

"Process" has special connotations in the various technical fields in which ATE folks work. In the evaluation domain, process includes all the things you ***do*** as part of your project—everything involved in the project's implementation, including its content. Process evaluation is the assessment of those aspects of the project. It's important to evaluate process as well as impact, as poor processes are unlikely to yield impressive results.

Impact Evaluation

Impacts go by a lot of labels. At the proposal stage, they might be your goals and objectives. At the end of your project, they're results, outcomes, or achievements. Essentially, impacts are what others directly or indirectly ***get*** out of what you do in your project (e.g., skills, knowledge, or abilities they didn't have before) and what they do with it. Impact evaluation involves assessing what *changed* because of your project. It requires careful analysis of the potential reasons for observed changes so you can make a strong case that it was your intervention and not something else that the caused the impact.

Special thanks to Cynthia Phillips and Lisa Wyatt Knowlton, our new external evaluators, for the helpful ***do*** *v.* ***get*** *distinction.*

REAL QUESTIONS

How do we pick up the pieces of a broken evaluation?

REAL ANSWERS

Take a deep breath. Take stock. Move on.

Evaluations may break down for any number of reasons. A common culprit is poor communication between the evaluator and the project staff. Misunderstandings about what was to be done, by whom, and/or by when; underestimation or lack of agreement about the time and resources needed for an evaluation task; and failure to properly define the boundaries of the evaluation can lead to mistrust, disappointment, and, in the end, very little useful evaluation output.

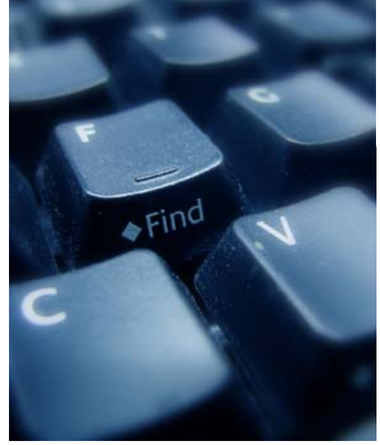
We all know an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Our next webinar on Getting Started With Your Evaluation (see page 4) will focus on how to safeguard your evaluation against these pitfalls. But once the damage is done, here are steps you can take to pick up the pieces and move on.

If you've lost your evaluator, take stock of the information you have that can be used for evaluative purposes before going out to find another evaluator. For example, do you have records on how many students you've served? Faculty? Those kinds of numbers are good to have and you can use them to document the growth of your project over time. And if you have (or can get) their contact information, you can pass it on to your new evaluator for follow-up data collection. If you weren't able to get any baseline data from your students/participants before the evaluation breakdown, the retrospective pretest-posttest method is a way to measure change over time that doesn't require original baseline data (see the University of Wisconsin Extension's Evaluation Quick Tips #27-30 at www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/resources/).

If you have ongoing evaluation tasks like end-of-course/workshop surveys, have someone, (e.g., a staff person or short-term consultant) take on that responsibility as soon as possible so you don't miss key data collection opportunities. Follow the procedures and use the forms already in place. Those data can be turned over to your new evaluator when the time comes.

If the evaluator is noncommunicative and has data that you need, e-mail, call, and write to him or her requesting the data, which by nature of the evaluator-client relationship, *you own*. (This requires specific steps and assurances if respondents were promised confidentiality. Check out the 6/29/10 entry in the American Evaluation Association's 365 Tip-A-Day blog at aea365.org.) If these attempts fail, consult your institution's legal counsel for next steps.

If your evaluator is still on board, but just isn't meeting your needs, first review the evaluation's status in detail—what is going well and what isn't. Clearly identify these elements, especially the shortcomings and nature of changes that must occur to serve your needs. Then call a face-to-face or phone meeting to review your findings and work out an action plan for getting things back on course. If you're already experiencing communication problems, a real-time conversation is preferable over e-mail, because written text is easy to misinterpret, exacerbating existing tensions and misunderstandings. Build into your ongoing efforts mechanisms for maintaining communication. This should not be burden to you or your evaluator, but provide assurance that the evaluation work is appropriate and timely.



Featured Resource
Directory of ATE Evaluators

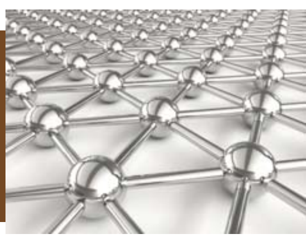
"I need an evaluator, how do I find one?" This is probably the most common question we get about ATE evaluation. We've just created a new resource to help ATE PIs with that very issue. The new directory of ATE evaluators is intended to help ATE PIs and skilled evaluators connect with one another. The database-driven directory allows for searching by keyword, location, educational context, disciplinary focus, and other variables.

Please note the inclusion of an evaluator in the directory does not constitute endorsement by Evalua|t|e or the National Science Foundation. We encourage ATE PIs to interview potential evaluators, review work samples, and check references before making a final decision.

It will take some time to populate the directory as we work to get the word out about it. The American Evaluation Association's evaluator directory is another good resource for locating evaluators in your area (click on "Find an Evaluator" at www.eval.org).

In developing the directory registration form, we received feedback from several ATE PIs and evaluators. We welcome additional input on how to make the directory as useful as possible. We want to make it easier for PIs to locate evaluators and for evaluators to let prospective clients know about their experience and expertise as it relates to ATE. Send comments to Peggie Weeks at peggie.weeks@wmich.edu.

To add your name to the directory or search for an evaluator, go to evalu-ate.org/community



Building an ATE Evaluation Community of Practice

Peggie Weeks introduces our new ATE Evaluation Community of Practice Advisory Group.

"Communities of practice," according to Etienne Wenger—undisputed expert on the topic, "are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." (To learn more, go to www.ewenger.com.) Evalua|t|e is committed to building an evaluation community of practice among ATE staff, evaluators, and other stakeholders.

We have enlisted a talented group of ATE people to help us to build and support an ATE Evaluation Community of Practice (CoP):

- Phil Centonze, evaluator for the FLATE
- Dan Davidchik, internal evaluator for Project SHINE, Shaping High-Quality Integrated Nebraska Education
- Bill Doherty, evaluator for CompTechS
- Joyce LaTulippe, co-PI for BATEC
- Candiya Mann, evaluator for the MATE Center
- Jane Ostrander, PI for Scenario-Based Learning + Destination: PBL
- Sharon Saunders, evaluator for Meeting 21st Century Cybersecurity Needs Through ATE

This distinguished group of advisors have agreed to guide our work in developing an ATE evaluation community of practice, serve as Evalua|t|e's ambassadors in the ATE community, provide insight about the community's wants and needs in terms of resources and support, and provide leadership to the ATE evaluation community. We are most fortunate to have these seven dedicated individuals on board to provide sound advice to the Evalua|t|e team.

We hope that you will share your thoughts and insights with them at the ATE PI conference and/or our ATE evaluation listserv.

To learn more about our Community of Practice advisors or to join our listserv, go to evalu-ate.org/community

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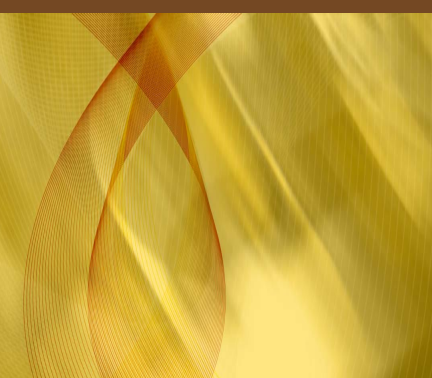

www.evalu-ate.org

Upcoming Webinars

Getting Started with Your Evaluation

Wednesday, November 17, 1-2:30 PM ET

Congratulations on your new ATE grant! This webinar will give you the information and advice you need to get your evaluation started off on the right track. We'll cover issues like what should be included in your working agreement with your evaluator, how to integrate internal and external evaluations, obtaining human subjects research approvals, and what should be included in evaluation reports and who should receive them. Veteran ATE PIs Elaine Craft and Dennis Faber will be online to answer questions and talk about their first-hand experiences with ATE evaluation.

To register for a webinar, go to evalu-ate.org/events

Making Sense of Your Evaluation Data

Wednesday, January 19, 1-2:30 PM ET

Sometimes what seemed crystal-clear when the evaluation of your grant was being planned gets a little fuzzy once the data are actually in. Whether you have some evaluation data in hand or are still in the planning stage, this webinar will help you figure out what do with it—whether ratings, rankings, checked boxes, open-ended comments, interviews transcripts, grades, or website data. We'll address how to select analytic procedures, how to interpret the results, and what to do next. We'll focus on how to go beyond simply describing the data to making sense of it so that it informs you about how well your project is doing and how you can improve your work. Expert evaluation methodologist and director of WMU's interdisciplinary Ph.D. program in evaluation Dr. Chris Coryn will be a guest presenter.

All Evalua|t|e webinars are hosted by our friends at MATEC | www.matecnetworks.org