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Lessons Learned from Evaluating a Five-Year Community Partnership Project*

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ABSTRACT

Looking back over a five-year Community Partnership grant, the practicing sociologists who evaluated the project note some important lessons learned from the experience. Problems discussed in this paper include difficulties with the collection of timely baseline data, transition in evaluation teams and its effects on the research design, data collection strategies that produce varied pictures of program effects, problems in using extant data, and other issues in evaluating a community-wide intervention. Recommendations are made to address these issues and a case is made for using qualitative as well as quantitative methods in community evaluation projects.

Practicing sociologists intervene with substance abuse and other community problems in many ways. Sociologists can direct programs that attempt to prevent and treat substance abuse and they can direct programs designed to invigorate a community. In addition, as practitioners, sociologists may be called upon to provide data to project directors to improve the operation of their interventions. As evaluators, soci-

*The author is deeply indebted to two colleagues who are outstanding practicing sociologists and program evaluators: W. David Watts and Mary Lou Bell. Both played significant roles in evaluating this project and in helping to formulate the ideas presented in this paper.

ologists can guide the course of community interventions through needs assessments and process evaluations; they can measure the effects of different community strategies through outcome and impact evaluation; they can describe the rich contextual background of community efforts through qualitative strategies; and they can impact future programming through social policy efforts. Each of these roles is essential to the design and management of successful community interventions.

Community change is the focus of a program within the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. CSAP has a cadre of grantees called Community Partnerships that are five-year collaborative efforts. They aim to reduce substance abuse and attenuating problems through community empowerment efforts. More specifically, these grants are designed to bring about an important shift in communities, a shift away from the notion of government doing for people and toward empowering citizens to do for themselves. One such Community Partnership in Texas is currently being evaluated by a team of practicing sociologists. This paper is based on lessons learned from their experiences. These lessons are important for practitioners, as they may substantially improve the design and implementation of community evaluation efforts.

The evaluation of this community project was comprehensive in that it used both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Each technique offered different types of information and each served to assess the program in different ways. Each also posed different problems for the evaluation design. The quantitative evaluation of this project relied on a series of community and student substance abuse surveys. That information was collected at different times with different populations using slightly different methodologies and, not surprisingly, produced different results. The qualitative evaluation effort was conducted at one point in time in the five-year project. At that time, the evaluators conducted focus groups, in-depth individual interviews, community observations and document reviews. The qualitative findings that emerged from these efforts, while rich in supportive and formative detail, could not be generalized to other projects and were limited to the specific point in time of the field work. The lessons discussed below have been derived from both evaluation strategies.

Lesson 1. The first activity of any Community Partnership initiative must be the collection of quality baseline data in order to later measure program effectiveness.

In order to capture the effect of the entire intervention on a community, it is important to conduct assessments prior to the initial activities. Usually a five-year community grant begins with a great deal of fanfare. Press releases, media events, and other "kick off" activities raise the community's consciousness about changes needed and raise expectations about people's ability to achieve change. Much important work of a grant takes place within the first months of the initiative. Members from the community are likely to have met to create a vision for the community and to learn more about community problems and to "brainstorm" and investigate strategies to solve these problems. Within the first few months, community members may have developed action teams and publicized their activities. Enthusiasm, awareness, activity and expectations are high during the first year. It is essential, therefore, that pre-assessments come before this time in order to capture the important effects of these early activities. This is often particularly difficult when funding comes from grants because funds cannot be encumbered, nor contracts let, before the official start date of the grant.

Granting agencies that expect quality evaluation can do much to insure that timely evaluation efforts occur. In their Requests for Proposals (RFPs), funding agencies can recommend the possible use of selected instruments and supply samples of some in the RFPs. This will give program evaluators a "leg up" in designing pre-assessments. This may also help granting agencies to conduct more meaningful meta-analyses across program sites when programs have ended. If the granting agency encourages project directors to begin pre-program evaluations just after start-up, but before other grant activities began, and provide immediate technical assistance and support for these efforts, this might insure more accurate baseline data across programs.

More information must be provided to project directors on the nature of program evaluation. In the proposal development phase, project directors need to know how to select effective program evaluators and how to review an evaluation proposal. Once the project is funded, project directors must have clear guidelines on how to monitor their program's evaluation. In addition, they should know the usual sequence of tasks for program evaluation and how, and when, to get technical assistance. Finally, the link between the granting agency and the program's evalu-

ators needs to be strengthened to insure that evaluators are receiving what they need from the granting agency in terms of information, technical assistance, and monitoring.

Not only are the practical exigencies of grant award and program start-up important for quantitative baseline data, they also impact the collection of qualitative data. At start-up, the evaluators must visit the community and collect qualitative baseline data on an array of topics. For example, qualitative data on community leadership might be based on questions such as “Who are the key leaders in the community? What are their perceptions about community problems? What barriers do they see to change in the community? Are they willing to participate in the change efforts?” Sometime after these initial interviews and observations, the evaluators might document how these leaders participated in the work of the Partnership.

What occurred in Texas: The announcement of this grant received a great deal of press in the community. News reports carried stories of previous student surveys about substance abuse and raised general awareness of the problem. Within six weeks of the grant announcement, there was a retreat with 100 members of the community meeting for three days at a local camp to develop a vision for their community and plan strategies for the five-year project. The retreat was filmed and within a year, a video of the event played frequently on a local cable station. All of these events occurred within the first year of the grant and greatly raised the consciousness of the community about the problem of community substance abuse.

The high visibility first-year events were followed in the middle of the second year with a community survey that was intended to provide “baseline” data to measure program effectiveness. The survey was developed and implemented by a well-respected research organization at a major state university, however, because it came fifteen months after the program was initiated, it provided skewed baseline data. For example, the evaluator’s report of the baseline data indicated that the total past year prevalence for alcohol within the community was 53 percent, well below the 69 percent reported nationally (Texas A & M 1992). Most likely, the flurry of activity of the Drug Task Force and its high visibility in the community in the first fifteen months of the grant had an effect on lowering the alcohol use in the community. Or, these events may have made respondents less willing to report use. The project director believed that these baseline prevalence figures were low. She recognized that any subsequent survey would most likely show an in-

crease in alcohol use despite the program's best efforts, and she was correct.

What also occurred in Texas was that no qualitative data were collected at the beginning of the program. Instead, the second evaluation team collected qualitative data when they came on board two years after the program began. The data they collected provided an overview of program activities, leadership, and community response at that particular moment. If qualitative baseline data had been gathered from the onset, there might have been an explanation for the alcohol use rates that were uncovered later through the quantitative community survey. Comments by the community members and leaders would have provided greater insight into what had happened over the course of the intervention.

Lesson 2. Substantial effort must be made to document the research design and to preserve data over the course of the intervention because five-year projects frequently experience a turnover in evaluators.

It is commonplace on a five-year grant that the project's final evaluation report is written by an evaluator who was not on the starting team. When turnover occurs, continuity in evaluating the project often suffers and elements of the evaluation design including instruments and key data may be lost to the project. New evaluators may assume that data, instruments, design, and memory about the program's evaluation will survive the transition through the staff, but the staff's priority is work in the community and they may have little insight into, or recollection of, the details of the evaluation plan.

In some cases, it may be impossible to provide for a seamless transition of evaluators, but in many instances with some planning and effort, important information about the evaluation design and the data can be preserved. Project directors might contract with the departing evaluator to insure that information, records, instruments, and data are transmitted to the new evaluator. During this transition, the new evaluator should document the research design in as much detail as possible before the initial evaluator departs the scene.

Problems with turnover in evaluators can be circumvented partly by the granting agency as well. They can provide new project directors with information about what documents, reports, information on research design, and raw data should be retained by the program. All data collected by the evaluator should be carefully labeled and stored on disk with accompanying instruments and a code book, and a copy of these should be housed at the program site and retained with program records.

Not only is it necessary to provide as much of a seamless transition as possible when there is a change in evaluators, there are occasions when substantial improvements need to be made to the evaluation design either from the clients' or the funding agencies' points of view. The failure to include a qualitative dimension to the initial evaluation design can substantially impact not only the transition between evaluation teams but the effectiveness of the evaluation overall.

What happened in Texas: All of the raw data from the first community and school surveys were lost to the new evaluators. All that remained were reports that included frequencies, tables, and instruments. Sampling strategies were also lost and the new evaluators were not sure of the geographic area used for the neighborhood survey since this was not included in the report. Without the original data, statistical tests were cumbersome and limited. Without sampling strategies, comparisons of some neighborhood data could not be made. While substantial program funding went into these efforts, the net return was disappointing to the program and the evaluators.

The project director believed that the story of the intervention was not being told in the numbers. She specifically asked for a way to communicate the success of her program and the initiatives that were developing in the community. The simplest way to provide a rich level of detail to tell the Partnership's story was with a qualitative design. While this dimension was added to the evaluation design in the third year of the project, the data produced from this effort could not be tracked from the beginning of the project because a qualitative approach was not incorporated in the initial design.

Lesson 3. A single research methodology can provide rich data for evaluating a program, but who you select to measure and the timing of your evaluation efforts may give you substantially different pictures of program effects. A variety of evaluation approaches is essential for community projects.

In most Community Partnerships, three approaches to outcome evaluation are commonplace: (a) quantitative data are gathered through surveys (usually student/school surveys and community/household surveys) and other standardized and unstandardized instruments, (b) extant data are collected through various community archival sources, and (c) both quantitative and qualitative data are gathered through individual and group interviews. Also important are process evaluation data that can be very useful to

the program. Data from these evaluations can be arrayed and interpreted in ways that are useful to the program staff in their neighborhood presentations, newsletters and other community media. Each of these data sets becomes a "snap shot" of the community and may reflect the effects of the grant initiative. They may, however, reflect events of the moment that are independent of the work of the grant. Evaluators must be aware of what is happening in the community at the time of the "snap shot" in order to interpret results. They must also vary their data gathering approaches to provide as accurate a picture as possible of program effects. Granting agencies and program directors should carefully monitor evaluation plans to insure that there are a variety of measures used at various points in time for both process and outcome evaluation.

The clinician's role is to facilitate the intervention for community improvement. To do this best, the clinician must use a variety of evaluation techniques. This approach is critical to the mission of the project. By using only a single methodology that provides a narrow focus into the reality of what is happening in the community, practitioners not only limit the effectiveness of the evaluation design but they may also be limiting the intervention itself. Interventions are strengthened and programs are more likely to reach their goals when high quality, formative evaluation data are provided to the project director and staff in the early stages of the intervention. These data are essential for shaping the program so that it achieves its goals.

What happened in Texas: The second team of evaluators began working with the Partnership in the third year of the grant. Because a great deal of the work of this community project was targeted to developing neighborhood leadership, the second team of evaluators began by interviewing residents of the targeted neighborhoods. The evaluators documented the ways in which leadership had developed and how the neighborhood had changed since the Partnership began. According to some fifty interviewees, the grant activities had a very positive effect on the neighborhoods. Residents believed that they had acquired new skills in community problem-solving and that their efforts had produced some remarkable effects in their neighborhoods. Residents in one area reported that they planned to take a former crack house in their neighborhood and turn it into a community center. Drug dealing was no longer tolerated in the neighborhoods, there was a close working relationship with community policing, neighborhood clean-up was underway, and the local park was safe for their children (Ellis and Watts 1995).

Two years later, the evaluators implemented a telephone survey of the community and the targeted neighborhood in order to assess program effects. Since the survey would measure incidence and prevalence of drug use in addition to other community issues, the survey was conducted in the same month (three years later) as the pre-assessment in order to make data from both assessments as comparable as possible. Respondents to the survey were residents selected from a random sample of households from the targeted neighborhood. Respondents were asked how they perceived their neighborhood. Over a fifth (21 percent) of them believed that there was less drug dealing in their neighborhood over the past three years.¹ The majority of respondents (61 percent) also thought that the Drug Task Force/Community Partnership was effective or extremely effective in its work. However, many residents painted a bleak picture of neighborhood safety and other issues: 22 percent believed that the neighborhood was less safe now than it was three years earlier and nearly one in three residents (30 percent) felt it was a worse place to live (Ellis and Bell 1996).

The evaluators were perplexed that many of the survey findings were inconsistent with the interview data collected two years earlier. They discussed the findings with staff and the community's steering committee, and came to realize that the more recent negative perceptions from the neighborhood telephone survey were likely due to the timing of the survey. At the time of the survey, neighborhood morale was at a low ebb. The city seemed to be waffling on their agreement to provide funds to renovate the community center, and four years of neighborhood efforts appeared to be wasted. The earlier sense of empowerment that evaluators had heard in interviews had turned to frustration and anger that was captured in the community survey.

Some time after the survey, two important events occurred in the neighborhood. The neighborhood decided to incorporate and become a 501 (c) (3) in order to find their own funds to build a community center, and then the city came forward and pledged the funds for the community center. Plans to tear down the abandoned building developed so that the city could build a new community center on the site. Today, feelings are running high in the neighborhood because of this important victory. Had the community survey occurred some months later than it did, responses of these neighborhood residents might well have reflected these positive changes.

Under any circumstances, measuring program outcomes is difficult. In community grants, this is particularly difficult because events of the hour may affect residents' perceptions of their community and their

evaluation of program efforts. To circumvent this, program evaluators must use a variety of measures at various points in time in order to craft the most accurate portrait of a community and its change efforts. They must be aware of community history and current events in order to accurately interpret findings. While both a community and school survey were used in this project at specific points in time, the methodology did not provide an opportunity for neighborhoods to tell their stories in detail. Open-ended qualitative techniques would have provided additional and detailed accounts from community members about how the neighborhood was changing—a process often characterized by “ups and downs.” Neighbors would have told stories of taking back their park from drug dealers and seizing control of a bar that was a hub of drug distribution, prostitution and violence. They would have told stories about the work of community police and pointed proudly to their neighborhood’s heroic police officer. The quantitative survey methodology missed these important stories and the rich details of a changing neighborhood.

Lesson 4. Often evaluators of community programs propose to use extant data from community agencies and organizations in order to measure program effects, however, use of these data may be based on faulty causal assumptions.

Community substance abuse prevention programs may hypothesize that as their program becomes successful there will be a decline in the number of D.W.I.s or M.I.P.s (Minor in Possession) given by police to underage drinkers. The problem with these indicators is that program success *might* be better indicated by rates going in the opposite direction from those hypothesized. For example, the norm of a community may be for police to look the other way when stopping drivers who appeared intoxicated. Similarly, students might report that when stopped with alcohol in their car, the police either confiscate the alcohol or pour it out and tell the students to go home without giving M.I.P.s. So, success in training police on prevention efforts may mean an initial rise in D.W.I.s and M.I.P.s which indicates the problem is being addressed.

What happened in Texas: In the year prior to the grant, the Drug Task Force began raising community awareness about alcohol and other drug issues. Then, in the first year of the grant, community participants were trained to collect data on community risk factors and they were encouraged to look at changes in these indicators over time to document the work of the Partnership. As community members became bet-

ter educated on prevention issues, they acknowledged in interviews that a rise in D.W.I.s or M.I.P.s in the community—at least in the short run -- might reflect more effective law enforcement and program success. In fact, review of police department's statistics seem to reflect a shift in enforcement practices. Between 1989 and 1990 when the Drug Task Force began in the community, the number of D.W.I.s doubled (from 100 to 205) and arrests for public drunkenness went from 696 to 773 (F.B.I. Uniform Crime Statistics 1985-1992). The Drug Task Force and community policing had a close working relationship in 1989, and even shared office space at that time. It seems likely then that enforcement of D.W.I. and public intoxication laws would be strengthened and this is clearly reflected in the statistics.

Again, the use of qualitative methodologies is essential to understanding why police shifted in their enforcement efforts. Without qualitative data gathered over the course of the project, the rise in statistics becomes a challenge for the project director and evaluators to explain. Without these data, the explanation may simply be conjecture.

Because it is somewhat difficult to predict what goals a community will set for itself, sometimes data, not initially thought to be important, become a truer reflection of Partnership efforts. For example, the city's Housing and Urban Development Department provided data on the number of housing units renovated, the number of abandoned units that were removed, and city clean-up and weed control efforts. These were services needed by the neighborhoods as they began their self-improvement programs, and they were indicators that the Partnership was working to improve the quality of life in targeted neighborhoods.

Lesson 5. Community Partnerships need to rethink the nature of their interventions and evaluation efforts. Rather than broad-based interventions and global evaluations, Partnerships might target interventions more precisely and evaluate on a smaller scale to measure program effectiveness.

Community Partnerships tend to have very broad-based goals, and as such their efforts may be “diluted” because they are not more precisely targeted nor more intensely focused. If intervention efforts are targeted and focused, if there are timely pre- and post-program measures using comparison groups within the community, then causal inferences can be made. These are essential to clearly understanding program effects.

What happened in Texas: When interventions were targeted and evaluation efforts were focused on these efforts, real differences occurred and were detected through the evaluation design. In particular, two focused Partnership interventions demonstrated positive effects: alcohol use by students and cocaine use in a targeted neighborhood.

One targeted intervention occurred when the Partnership collaborated with the Independent School District. Because a two-year Drug Free Schools and Communities grant coincided with the first two years of the Partnership grant, staff of both grants collaborated on many events. Pre-assessment of students occurred prior to the start of either of the grants. Then, all school personnel participated in prevention training for two years and new programs were put into place in the schools. The post-program assessment of students in grades 7-12 demonstrated that lifetime, past school year, and last month use of alcohol (the targeted drug of choice) declined significantly for students in the community from 1990 to 1995 (Ellis and Bell 1995).

In the targeted neighborhoods, reduction of illicit drug dealing was a goal established by the residents. Organizing, demonstrating, "taking back" the neighborhood park, developing a close association with their community policing officers, working with Housing and Urban Development to tear down abandoned houses, all produced positive effects. As a result, in the targeted neighborhood, lifetime prevalence of cocaine (a drug of choice) went from 9 percent to 5 percent in a three-year period.

Recently the Partnership began another focused intervention. The Partnership sought and received state funding for needed family services on the south side, the most economically disadvantaged area of the city. Two important goals of this grant (now in its first year) are to facilitate families' access to community health and mental health services and to encourage more parents to volunteer for community and school efforts. The program is focusing on families with children in two elementary schools. The staff is currently working with the evaluators to conduct a door-to-door survey of families in the neighborhood to assess their needs and to find better ways to deliver services. By concentrating on the families of just two schools in the area, program efforts will more likely be successful and meaningful evaluation can occur.

More targeted interventions are easier to measure both quantitatively and qualitatively. From the qualitative point of view, more focused information can be gathered over time from informants. Qualitative data are also useful to project directors as they design and modify their pro-

grams. In other ways, these data are useful to policy makers and funding agencies. Policy makers are looking for clear evidence of successful interventions to justify expenditures. Legislators are looking for interventions that are broad-based and impact large populations. Funding agencies are looking for effective programs that justify continued appropriations. While quantitative evaluations can produce important findings, these findings may not address the policy concerns of legislators or funding agencies. It is through qualitative methodologies, particularly case studies, that practitioners can provide rich information about community interventions and outcomes. While limited in generalizability, if qualitative methods are supplemented by quantitative techniques, then evaluators and project directors can most effectively describe community interventions and outcomes.

It is likely that the most notable effects of this particular Texas Community Partnership were documented by observation and the collection of process data. Under the leadership of a creative project director and her staff, the Partnership has grown in terms of individual members and community organizations. This growth is essential to changing community norms. Secondly, because of staff and neighborhood efforts, the Partnership will continue after the CSAP grant ends. The Partnership has been successful in winning three other state, federal, and foundation grants. One neighborhood has become a private non-profit corporation and has begun to look for support for their activities. Other neighborhoods will likely follow suit. The Partnership has found and used funds and volunteers from a broad range of organizations. Perhaps one of the most important effects of Community Partnerships is demonstrated when neighborhoods can marshal volunteers and attract resources to achieve neighborhood goals. Real change in communities may take years to effect. By building an infrastructure with an effective organization, committed volunteers and ongoing resources, this partnership is demonstrating how to “stay the course” and will likely be effective in promoting lasting community change.

Summary

A five-year evaluation effort with a Texas Community Partnership has provided evaluators with quantitative and qualitative data on program effects and some new insights into effective program evaluation. From their experience, some problems in community evaluation meth-

odology are evident. The sociological practitioners who evaluated this project offer suggestions from their experiences (a) there is a need to structure funded projects so that timely baseline data is collected in order to more accurately measure program effects; (b) in addition, safeguards should be instituted so that turnover in evaluators will not jeopardize the evaluation design; (c) different data gathering strategies and timing of these strategies greatly affect the picture that evaluators develop of a program at various points in time; (d) frequently, community programs use extant or archival data to assess program effectiveness and the selection of these may be based on incorrect assumptions and may provide little useful insight into program effects; (e) finally, Community Partnerships might be better served to more precisely target their interventions to enhance their effectiveness in the community.

NOTES

1. To the question, "compared to three years ago, has drug dealing changed in your neighborhood? Is there more, about the same, or less drug dealing; or doesn't it exist?" Respondents answered in the following way: 21% said less, 16% about the same, 13% said more, 32% did not know enough to answer, and 18% said, "drug dealing does not exist."

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