The US Department of Labor awarded Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) grants to community colleges to implement innovative career pathways training programs.

Rather than relying on traditional government-funded implementation study methods, both Hezel Associates, LLC and Social Policy Research Associates incorporated aspects of Michael Quinn Patton’s developmental evaluation (DE) approach to evaluations of these grants.

Here we explore the benefits of applying DE concepts—particularly related to shifting the evaluator’s role to that of a “critical friend” and using “reflective practice” in evaluation products—in government-funded projects.

**The “Critical Friend” Role and Needs**

- Movement from objective, outside observer to “critical friend” embedded in the program’s management team
- Willingness on both sides to use this approach
- Enough budget to attend all key meetings and trainings, review necessary documents, and provide desired support
- Maintenance of trust by not airing “dirty laundry” outside of management team
- Fidelity to the timeline for both program and grant structures

**Key Factors and Benefits of the “Critical Friend”**

- Access to critical decision-making moments
  - Attending all important meetings and trainings enables the observation of key programmatic decisions in real-time
  - **SUGGESTION:** Explain to the management team that documenting these moments will enable other innovative programs to learn from their approach
- Opportunity to develop strong trust and credibility
  - Being a consistent presence and offering useful, timely feedback builds trust with the client
  - **SUGGESTION:** Offer to advise on implementation matters where you have expertise; this develops credibility before you have a full understanding of program details
- Ability to incorporate “reflective practice” and to provide flexible, timely feedback
  - Budgeting time to offer opinions on topics normally outside the evaluator’s scope and offering insight gained from participation in program discussions leads to useful feedback
  - **SUGGESTION:** Rather than writing stand reports, provide frequent, brief feedback

**“Critical Friend” Challenges & Potential Solutions**

- Critical feedback may damage the client relationship
  - Emphasize that critical feedback is for learning purposes
  - In reports, ensure findings are accurate, and use diplomatic language
- A more generous budget is needed to attend meetings and trainings and to provide timely feedback
  - Rethink deliverables to be less time-consuming
  - Consider alternative formats, like PowerPoint presentations and “reflective practice”

**Reflective Practice**

- Formally facilitated feedback to debrief program activities, discuss findings, share experiences and perspectives, capture lessons learned, and formulate ideas for future project activities and processes
- Incorporating dialogue of findings with traditional deliverables
- Continuous cycle of data collection, analysis, feedback, discussion, and change

**Key Factors of Reflective Practice**

- Supplementary reports
  - Additional reporting beyond the single formative and summative reports required by the funding source
  - Examples: annual/quarterly interim reports, progress updates, data summaries, short-term recommendations
- Regularly scheduled in-person or teleconference meetings to review evaluation data collections
- Evaluators or “critical friends” provide real-time interpretations of findings to guide collaborative discussions of next steps in development

**Benefits and Challenges of Reflective Practice**

**Benefits**

- Answers short-term questions; findings quickly turned around for program development
- Answers longer-term questions to be used for program improvement
- Increases the utility of evaluation efforts

**Challenges**

- Maintaining regular participation of staff in the reflective process
- Inflexibility for change within government grant structures
- Fidelity to the timeline for both program and evaluation activities

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Given the current emphasis on collaboration and innovation in federal grant programs like TAACCCT, having the skills as an evaluator to navigate a “critical friend” relationship with embedded elements of reflective practice is beneficial to grantees while still satisfying grant evaluation requirements. This method provides real-time feedback, allowing grantees to make strategic adjustments so they can continually develop, as well as improve, their programs.