

## QUESTION #18: HOW CAN LAC PROGRAMS AND SERVICES BE EVALUATED?

*A conversation with David Gerkin*

There are many ways to evaluate LAC programs and services, but before we begin to ex-

plore some of the methods, I think it is important to discuss the benefits of evaluation.

*That sounds reasonable. What are some of the benefits?*

Some benefits include justifying your program's existence and improving its chances of continuation and expansion, or at least maintenance, of financial, material, and human resources. Reports to your college administrators can be quite helpful in maintaining or increasing your resource allocation. Be sure to demonstrate effective use of resources, indicating increasing numbers of students utilizing your services, and showing the need for additional resources.

Another benefit of evaluation is program improvement: learning what works and what does not, what you are doing well, and what

needs improvement. For example, you can gather data to help determine if your marketing efforts are bringing students into your programs, if tutors are having an impact on students' learning and growth, if students are satisfied with their interaction with particular tutors, and if your tutor training program is having an effect on how your tutors work with students.

In addition, what we learn from our evaluation can help us make better decisions about our programs and services, and, in fact, one of the reasons for undertaking evaluation is to help with decision making.

*I know my college's administrators like to see reports with numbers, but I think some of my program's best data is anecdotal: students' comments about how our program has helped them to be successful students. Is this a useful way of evaluating our program?*

Absolutely! When combined with reports indicating numbers of students using services, anecdotal data can bring the numbers to life

and make the reports more meaningful and powerful.

*This has all been quite interesting, but let's get back to my original question; how can I evaluate my programs and services?*

If you are asking how you can gather the data, some possibilities include formal or informal instruments such as questionnaires calling for written responses in the form of open-ended questions and/or forced choice ques-

tions, surveys on Scantron forms, questionnaires using rating scales such as the Likert scale, computer programs that help you gather and organize data, brainstorming sessions, and reflective journaling.

*That gives me some methods to use, but the question that occurs to me now is, "What data should I gather?"*

Some of your choices are statistics of usage, which can include: the number of users of your services, number of contacts with your center, and demographic information on users of your services. Other data could include

evaluation of tutors by users and supervisors, of program effectiveness by users and tutors, of tutor training by tutors, of program quality by staff, of staff by manager, and of manager by staff.

*You have mentioned evaluation of various aspects of programs and services by users of services, tutors, staff, and managers. Are there others who should be asked to evaluate my program? What about faculty?*

Yes, faculty evaluation of your programs and services can be very useful. Faculty input and feedback can help you build a program that supports what faculty are doing in the classroom and provides more relevant instructional support to students. In addition to strengthening your program, asking for faculty insights and constructive criticism can help you improve communication and collaboration with them that can be crucial to the success of your program.

I have found asking faculty for information regarding awareness and ratings of my programs and services helpful. I have also solicited input regarding which services they have recommended and/or would recommend to students.

*We've talked about the who, what, and how of evaluation, what we haven't covered is when.*

Most programs are asked to produce an annual report, but I would suggest utilizing end of term and ongoing evaluations as well. Of course, some of the data from your end of term and ongoing evaluations will probably end up in your annual report, but I think it is beneficial to analyze and reflect on the data you are collecting on a regular basis.

A specific example of an ongoing evaluation used in our center is a three-part carbon form on which students evaluate tutors. This

Outside consultants may also be asked to evaluate your program. A colleague from another institution may be invited to visit your program and provide an evaluation with a fresh perspective. These evaluations can be arranged as a trade: you evaluate your colleague's program, and she, in turn, evaluates yours. An outside consultant can pose as a student and interact with your staff to get an honest sense of what a student's experience is like.

Evaluations from an outsider's view can give you very useful feedback that you would never get from someone close to your organization.

provides not only a rating of the tutor, but, often, excellent anecdotal data in the comment section that I used to supplement my statistical reports. The students are not asked to identify themselves on the form and are instructed to place the completed forms in a closed container in the hope that anonymity will provide us with more honest responses. These ongoing evaluations provide us with timely feedback on tutor performance to reinforce positive behavior and deal appropriately with any concerns or potential problems.

A final word on annual reports. Many administrators appreciate a short, concise annual report; for example, a one-page report with bullets highlighting major accomplishments and

improvements. When presenting this to the president, dean, or other administrator, have the supporting details and complete reports available in case questions arise.

*Now that I've gathered all this data, how do I compile it so I can analyze and reflect on it, report it, and use it to inform my decision making?*

Depending on the hardware and software available to you, options include entering data into a database to organize it and create reports. You can use Scantron forms that feed data into a database and allow you to print reports with charts and graphs. Use word processing software to compile summaries of writ-

ten responses, and use a spreadsheet to calculate percentages of user demographics and usage statistics. Your institutional researcher on your campus can be an invaluable resource in providing you with help in designing data gathering instruments, compiling and analyzing data, and formatting reports.

#### ADDITIONAL READINGS

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David M. Gerkin was born in Fitchburg, Massachusetts on November 15, 1956 and has resided in Phoenix, Arizona since 1963. He received his elementary education in Fitchburg and Phoenix and graduated from Moon Valley High School in 1974. He received an Associate of Arts degree in 1990 from Scottsdale Community College and an Associate of General Studies degree with high honors from Paradise Valley Community College in 1991. Mr. Gerkin began attending Ottawa University in the fall of 1992 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Adult Education in 1994. He received his Master of Arts in Counseling from Ottawa University in 1995. He received the Professional Staff Employee of the Year Award in 1993 from Paradise Valley Community College when he was employed as a Learning Technician in the Learning Assistance Center. Mr. Gerkin currently holds the position of Director of the Learning Support Center at Paradise Valley Community College. His professional areas of interest include tutor training, learning styles, study strategies, leadership development, and the transformation of post-secondary institutions into learning centered organizations. He is a guitar player, singer, and songwriter and enjoys spending time with his wife Aimée, his two teenage sons, Kyle and Noah, and his newborn son, Samuel.