

**Learning and Changing Through Service Unit Program Reviews:
An Empowerment Evaluation Approach to Improving First-Year
Programs**

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Abstract

Implementing evaluation approaches to improve first-year academic programs at large, public universities has many challenges given the diverse needs of internal and external stakeholders. This paper describes a program review process that employs an empowerment evaluation model. We propose that the empowerment evaluation approach results in on-going learning and change, achievement of critical learning outcomes and unit goals, and effective communication of evaluation findings. Additionally, we suggest that this approach results in genuine commitment to and support for institutional improvements. Authors describe examples of how the empowerment evaluation model was used to gather perspectives of multiple stakeholders and ensure legitimate advocacy for program changes.

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Introduction

Fundamental institutional and programmatic improvement requires developing agreed upon measures of program effectiveness, assessing them over time, communicating results to stakeholders, and using the results to make strategic and policy decisions at various higher education organizational levels (e.g., faculty councils, program management, administration, and governance). Comprehensive outcomes evaluation approaches can provide the kinds of evidence to enhance stakeholder understanding of when and how certain interventions are effective and guide organizational decision making. As such, results from outcomes evaluations can facilitate strategic academic programmatic change if stakeholders are indeed committed to such efforts. However, oftentimes genuine institutional learning and change is stymied by numerous opposing forces such emotional barriers, political obstacles, and managerial control imperatives (Seo, 2003). Additionally, research on implementing effective institutional change suggests that efforts to improve organizational functioning often do not lead to expected outcomes because of unintended negative reactions among individuals responsible for implementing improvements (e.g., Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Olson & Tetrick, 1988; Wanberg & Banas, 2000).

It is critical that institutional researchers responsible for carrying out assessment and evaluation activities pay attention to building active and constructive support for change. We propose that an empowerment evaluation approach to academic program review can result in successful, sustained program improvements. This paper will

describe how the process of self-study, reflective practice, and peer review can lead to transformational change within the context of first-year academic programs.

Program Reviews as an Empowerment Evaluation Approach

At our institution, academic program review is a collaborative process designed to gather the perspectives of respected colleagues in assessing and improving the quality of academic programs and units. The process involves students, faculty, community members, school and campus administrators, and external specialists in the discipline in (1) gathering information about a program (2) reviewing and analyzing this information during a site visit, (3) synthesizing all available information and making judgments about overall program quality and recommendations for improvement, and (4) following up to ensure that the unit is fully supported in its efforts to address the outcomes of the review.

During the program review process a comprehensive self-study is conducted by internal administrators, faculty, and staff associated with the program undergoing program review. Typically, units employ a “hybrid” model which incorporates objective data and participant perspectives (Craven, 1980, as cited in Black & Kline, 2002). Once the self-study is completed a written document is shared with an external review team (consisting of internal faculty members, external experts, and community members). It is notable that the internal academic program administrators select members of the external review team. Upon review of the self-study, a site visit is scheduled and members of the external review team meet with various stakeholders (faculty, staff, administrators, assessment personnel, institutional researchers, students, etc.). Subsequently, the review team provides recommendations for program improvements and follows-up to ascertain the degree to which recommendations have been successfully implemented. Thus,

program review is a process of critical self-reflection, information gathering, and gaining “external legitimacy” from selected experts in the discipline under review.

We propose that employing an empowerment evaluation model when conducting program reviews results in the interaction, dialogue, and collective critical inquiry necessary for genuine commitment and support for recommended changes. According to Fetterman and Eiler (2001):

Empowerment evaluation has an unambiguous value orientation -- it is designed to help people help themselves and improve their programs using a form of self-evaluation and reflection. Program participants -- including clients -- conduct their own evaluations; an outside evaluator often serves as a coach or facilitator... (p. 1).

Fetterman and Eiler assert that external evaluators add their perspectives as appropriate and they serve as critical evaluative friends. They also contend that empowerment evaluation provides institutional members with the opportunities to engage in reflective conversations and build meaningful relationships outside of their normal functional organizational relationships. Most importantly, empowerment evaluation “creates an institutional mechanism to transfer knowledge gained or created by the collective” (p. 26). Thus, program review conducted using an empowerment evaluation model seems like an effective method for creating and sustaining self-improvement as well as broader-based change.

Use of the Empowerment Evaluation/Program Review Improve First-Year Programs

Many academic units housing first-year academic programs can be under enormous pressure to demonstrate and improve the effectiveness of programs (Swing, 2001). As such, we have implemented qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively assess the impacts of dynamic and complex support programs. Program

reviews provide the kinds of in-depth process information necessary to inform practice and allow for a better understanding of when and how certain interventions are effective. They can also contribute to our efforts to effect broad-based change in improving the first-year of college and academic success outcomes.

In this section we present two concrete examples where an empowerment evaluation model was used when conducting program reviews and how the process resulted in meaningful support for transformational change.

New Student Orientation Program Review

Orientation is an integral component of our UC 's mission to provide a common gateway to the academic programs available to entering students. In accordance with this mission, new student orientation strives to coordinate existing university resources to help incoming students make more successful transitions. During orientation, faculty, staff, and students share in the responsibility for introducing new students to the university's supportive and challenging learning environment. Orientation is a full day program that serves approximately 5000 students yearly.

Quantitative and qualitative techniques were employed in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of orientation on student participants in preparation for the self-study. The primary purposes of the self-study are to: 1) determine if the current New Student Orientation program is meeting the needs of incoming students, 2) reassess the goals of orientation, and 3) understand the impacts of orientation on student participants' knowledge levels, attitudes, and behaviors (Hansen and Lowenkron, 2003). The outcomes assessment was designed so that results could be used to make data-driven decisions regarding the improvement of program goals and

implementation strategies. The research employed multiple measures to gain insight into the complex orientation process and its outcomes. The implementation of orientation requires the involvement of multiple departments and units across campus and thus, methodology was employed to ensure that multiple perspectives were taken into account during data collection. Focus groups and self-administered questionnaires were used to systematically collect the perceptions and opinions of multiple stakeholders (students, faculty, advisors, administrators, student affairs staff, and student mentors) (a detailed account of the self-study is available at

<http://uc.iupui.edu/uploadedFiles/Assessment/OrientationAssessment.pdf>).

Following the recommendations from the program review team, the following changes were implemented in the orientation program (Hansen, Lowenkron, Engler, Evenbeck, 2003):

- 1) An stronger focus on increasing the amount of interaction the students had with peers, university faculty, and staff during the program. The program's efforts to increase meaningful relationships with faculty and staff were done by informing the faculty and staff about this goal. Because these relationships must begin with the faculty, the program strongly encouraged the academic schools to consider what efforts their faculty and academic advisors could make to ensure that students felt as though they had made a meaningful connection with a university representative.

- 2) A new session presented by the Financial Aid office and the Career Center was also included in this year's program to educate students about paying for college. The program was implemented to address concern that students shared regarding their

need for more information about the cost of college, working during college, work study, and the services in the Career Center.

3) The goals of New Student Orientation were re-evaluated and orientation leaders developed a theoretical unpinning for the program. The following are the revised goals of orientation based on evaluation results and orientation literature:

Academic Integration:

- Students will be exposed to information related to the purpose of higher education, the expectation associated with higher education, and information that can be used and applied after orientation.
- Students will have the opportunity to begin building relationships with faculty, staff, and peers on campus.
- Students will receive information regarding their academic programs, services, and opportunities available to minimize their anxiety and build a support system for their learning.

Social Integration:

- Students will have the opportunity to make connections with other students.
- Students will feel supported and gain a general sense of familiarity with the surroundings.
- Students will understand the information about services, non-classroom-related activities, residence opportunities, safety, and technology.
- Students will feel welcomed and connected to IUPUI.

Self-Efficacy:

- Students will report they are comfortable in performing a variety of skills taught during the orientation program.
- Students will report that they feel prepared to meet the demands and expectations of college.
- Students will report they have the ability to make a successful transition to IUPUI. (Hansen, Lowenkron, Engler, Evenbeck, 2003, p.30)

The program review process also empowered the orientation unit director to implement the following changes: improved advising sessions, implemented a more efficient orientation process (e.g., organizing the program so there is less wait time, providing other mediums of information so the students do not feel so overwhelmed), distributed more information about campus life (campus sponsored events and activities),

provided students with information about critical academic supports (e.g., the Math Assistance Center). It is notable that the review process provided the unit with the expertise and external legitimacy to ensure that the program changes were successful. Thus, the unit director was able to gain campus wide support for notable program changes. Additionally the external review team provided strong support for additional resources to improve services for incoming students as they noted that “the current level of orientation staffing should be examined to determine if the expectations of the program staff are realistic. An important recommendation of the review team included the need to develop services and programming for transfer students. The Orientation Staff is in the process of creating a joint position with the Enrollment Center for the service of Intercampus Transfer students” (Engler, 2003, p. 1) (the full report can be found at <http://uc.iupui.edu/uploadedFiles/Assessment/OrientationReviewResponse.pdf>)

Learning Center Program Review

The programs offered by the Learning Center are designed to assist students in achieving academic success. The Center strives to improve academic success among students through academic support programs such as Supplemental Instruction, Structured Learning Assistance, the Resource Desk (where peer mentors are available to respond to various student inquiries and offer assistance), and tutoring. Student mentors are key components in helping their peers succeed. As such, student mentors are the cornerstone to the Learning Center’s success. The Learning Center’s programs are based on a belief that highly successful academic students can play an integral role in the academic development of their peers. Collaborative learning, role modeling, peer

interaction and peer support are all components of this process (Minglin, 2005). For this reason, much care is given to training mentors and providing continuous mentor support.

The Learning Center provides help to students through four different components: Structured Learning Assistance (SLA), Supplemental Instruction (SI), the Resource Desk, and a Tutoring Program. Structured Learning Assistance is a mandatory one hour per week directed study and practice session that is attached to high risk-for- failure gateway courses. SLA is centered on course content. Teaching study and learning skills is directed at the specific content a student is learning. Courses in the program include introductory Biology and Psychology courses. A Supplemental Instruction (SI) mentor “is a learning assistant who is content-competent in a particular subject. SI mentors assist other students in gaining a better understanding of the course content, and they help develop learning skills to enhance students’ academic experience. SI mentors demonstrate processes and methodologies of learning academic experience (i.e., learning strategies, note-taking skills, listening skills, test anxiety, etc.)” (Minglin 2005, p. 6). Resource mentors serve as listeners to student concerns and advocates for the university. They work one-on-one with individual students to assist them in understanding various academic supports that the university provides. The Tutoring Program offers tutor referrals for students in various classes. Students receive contact information about tutors who can help them at the Resource Desk located on the second floor of University College.

In an effort to demonstrate the effectiveness of the peer mentoring interventions, end-of semester grades for participants in the SI and SLA programs are compared to those of non-participating students in the respective courses. Past assessments have shown that participants in the Supplemental Instruction and Structured Learning Assistance

programs outperform non-participants in the programs. Additionally, the programs have been highly successful in improving the course DFW rate for participants to 22% as opposed to the 42% for non-participants.

Although the grade reports are effective in showing the value of the programs, the program review team agreed unanimously that the Center needs to define very clearly what it will use as measures of success (Doyle, Patton, Williams, Kremer, and Baker, 2005). The review team strongly encouraged the Center to redesign instruments to measure students' learning outcomes in addition to the current "satisfaction" questions. They suggested that the assessment questions should also focus on learning how students receiving SLA achieve the following skills: studying effectively, preparing for tests, taking tests, taking better notes, and finding important information in a textbook. Thus, the unit director worked closely with faculty, mentors, and assessment directors to revise the current instruments.

There was universal agreement among the review team that that space was a critical problem preventing the expansion of academic support services. Currently, plans are being developed to replace furniture in the current space with lightweight easily movable tables and comfortable chairs. The review team felt that this arrangement would provide mentors or faculty members the flexibility to create a learning environment that fits their teaching style (Doyle, Patton, Williams, Kremer, and Baker, 2005).

The review team also recommended that the Center's director "work to develop professional relationships with interested faculty in all departments that offer gateway courses as a way to find support for the use of academic support services. The team sees having a faculty member who is involved with the training of mentors, especially in

training them how to facilitate the learning processes of the specific content area (i.e. how to learn chemistry) as a vital key to the success of the support service.” (Doyle, Patton, Williams, Kremer, and Baker, 2005, p. 7). In response to this recommendation, intentional strategies have been implemented to involve university faculty members not only with the training but the planning of mentors’ sessions and initiating more active lines of communication with mentors.

The team strongly asserted the following in terms of the SI program:

The Center should carefully review the value and impact the SI program is having on the academic success of students... given the student population enrolling in gateway classes and their need for a more required and structured academic support intervention. We feel strongly that the resources of dollars, time and space should not be allocated to SI. Supplemental instruction is an optional support program that works the best for above average motivated students who are in different courses, e.g. premed students taking anatomy. Traditional aged, first year students may often lack the metacognitive skills needed to recognize they need help in learning their content material. (Doyle, Patton, Williams, Kremer, and Baker, 2005, p. 7).

Based on this recommendation, the SI model has been replaced with an SLA model that focuses more on structured sessions with more policies for requiring students’ attendance.

One of the important outcomes of the formal review was the recognition and external validation of the quality of the peer mentors and exceptional leadership of the unit director. In fact, the review served as professional development opportunity for the unit director as reflected in the following communication:

The program review process gave me a unique perspective to actually give some intentional effort to the quality of the Learning Center programs. I know as a practitioner, it seems like we barely have time to keep our programs running, but it was a wonderful opportunity the university gave me to focus on my program more holistically and determine what courses of action to take in order for our unit to thrive in the future by allowing experts in the field to come to campus and actually view our operations first hand. The Learning Center has benefited greatly by implementing a majority of the recommendations the reviewers

suggested, which, in turn, has helped us become more in tune with the needs of our students (Minglin, e-mail communication, May 4, 2006).

In summary, these examples suggest that an empowerment evaluation model can result in meaningful support for transformational change. The program review of new student orientation led to a notable program changes in an effort to increase faculty-student and student-student interactions, and a radically different academic advising model. Additionally, the review of the learning center/peer mentoring program resulted in new perspectives on the benefits of peer mentoring campus-wide, more institutional support for program expansion, a redesign an the SI model, and the ability to secure resources to implement proposed improvements.

Conclusion

Using the program review process to improve first-year programs at large, public universities has many challenges given the complexity of organizational decision making and the diversity of perspectives. We propose that using an empowerment evaluation approach to conducting program reviews may result in campus-wide commitment and support for on-going program and institutional improvements. Implementing this approach is one strategy we have used to effectively communicate assessment findings, secure resources to implement proposed changes, ensure results are used to facilitate on-going learning and change, and to monitor progress toward achieving critical institutional and unit goals.

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