

## The Process of Selling a Community Evaluation to a Community: Cumberland County's Experience

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### **Abstract:**

How to engage local program stakeholders meaningfully in evaluation is a continuing challenge for many community based program evaluators. Lessons learned from a Smart Start evaluation in North Carolina are offered.

### **Article:**

Community evaluations are increasingly on the agenda of many social service initiatives. Communities are being required to conduct or participate in community evaluations as part of a grant process or in order to provide evidence of a program's impact. Yet there remains little guidance from major grantors and government agencies as to what a community evaluation is. Thus, communities are interpreting "community" and "evaluation" in a myriad of modes. This chapter offers a description of one community's struggle to define, and finally embrace community evaluation.

### **Background**

The Cumberland County Partnership for Children (CCPFC) has been working to improve the lives of and opportunities for children in Cumberland County, North Carolina, since its inception in July 1993. The partnership assembled in response to Governor Jim Hunt's Smart Start initiative: a state-funded, comprehensive, community-based initiative to help all children and their families in North Carolina. Smart Start has targeted four core areas: high-quality early childhood education, child care accessibility, child care affordability, and health and family support. In its attempt to meet the diverse scope of Smart Start, the Cumberland County Partnership has blossomed into a dynamic and varied array of programs designed to provide services to children through age five and their families.

Smart Start is a diverse initiative with many complicated levels of accountability. It is also an initiative that must function within the constraints of uncertain funding cycles that have intermittent start-up periods (within the budget year) for each contracted program. In addition, according to Cumberland County Metro Visions' 1998 publication "1998 Community Benchmark Executive Summary," Cumberland County has an extremely high birthrate with strong out-migration. Given these tumultuous conditions, as a service entity the CCPFC has become a moving target.

### **Levels of Smart Start Accountability**

Due to the political nature of Smart Start in North Carolina, there existed three levels of evaluation accountability. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-Chapel Hill) was awarded the contract to evaluate at the state level. Its responsibility was to evaluate the impact of Smart Start in the state of North Carolina as a whole. Individual county or multicounty Smart Start Partnerships theoretically were responsible for measuring the Smart Start effects at the local county level. There were no stated requirements as to how each partnership should accomplish this task. Third, all Smart Start-funded projects were required to submit detailed project-specific evaluation plans with their proposals for funding. Regardless of these

multiple evaluation efforts or requirements, there remained only a vague understanding of what each community's responsibility for evaluation actually was. Often the county- and program-level evaluation requirements were ignored, with no adverse effects from the state-funding agency.

### **Living with Evaluation Fear**

During the first year of the evaluation, there was a great deal of resistance from Smart Start-funded programs in Cumberland County. Many of the program administrators had never previously participated in evaluation (outside of performance reviews) or designed an evaluation plan for their program. Most faced their CCPFC evaluation-mandated activities with fear and misunderstanding.

Previously this community had experienced the evaluation of the Fort Bragg Demonstration Project (FBDP). The evaluation process was perceived by many in the community as negative. Since many of the Smart Start stakeholders had been involved in some capacity with the FBDP, a similar result was feared for Smart Start if it engaged in any kind of evaluation. Although much has been written on the topic, the main lesson as it pertained to this community was that the Department of Defense did not re-fund the FBDP after the evaluation report. Therefore, the Smart Start board of directors felt that if evaluation was a requirement, it must be implemented, but they did so with much trepidation, discussion, and financial support.

Through conscientious and extensive training and technical assistance, the evaluation team has been able to garner the evaluation buy-in of Smart Start-funded programs, which is crucial in providing the outcomes and impact questions that are so often asked. Currently the same program administrators are embracing evaluation as the necessary and useful process that it can be. Moreover, these partners are voluntarily approaching CCPFC for technical assistance in writing goals, objectives, outcomes, and program-specific evaluation plans.

The CCPFC has embraced the operational aspect of evaluation since the first year of the evaluation of Smart Start. The partnership uses an outcome measurement model based on the logic model process to track inputs, activities, and outputs. A multilevel evaluation scheme has been implemented, including both process and outcome measures to examine success. The evaluation coordinator, in conjunction with the CCPFC evaluation team, is responsible for implementing the evaluation plan. The CCPFC board of directors and evaluation committee monitor evaluation efforts and report results to the CCPFC to ensure that the evaluation process meets all necessary guidelines. The evaluation plan is based on the goals of CCPFC and includes a wide range of measurement instruments and data sources (such as developmental inventories, parent inventories, and observation forms). Interim reports are provided periodically so that program staff may make use of feedback to adjust the program as necessary. A comprehensive evaluation report is prepared annually.

### **Phase One: Limited Community Needs Assessment**

The process of evaluation began for the community partnership with a needs assessment in the spring of 1994, which targeted four economically disadvantaged communities with door-to-door interviews. The goal of the needs assessment was traditional in that it attempted to ascertain the needs of a particular community. Although the Smart Start initiative targets all children, the needs assessment methodological selection process was designed to serve only poor children in Cumberland County. The report was submitted to the statewide administrating agency in December 1994. Within two months, the findings were also presented to the North Carolina governing board of the administrating agency, to little fanfare and understanding. No action was taken on the information, and no further discussion ensued. The general consensus among the partnership's board of directors and administrative staff was that they had completed the community evaluation mandate and that the findings indicated a need for Smart Start.

Then the statewide governing agency sent additional information to the local county partnership indicating that a single needs assessment did not constitute a community evaluation of the impact of Smart Start. The

agency did not, however, provide specific requirements for the completion of a comprehensive local-level evaluation. To attempt to fulfill this seemingly open-ended request, the second stage of the community evaluation process began, which involved hiring a part-time evaluator.

### **Phase Two: The Internal Evaluator**

UNC-Chapel Hill held the contract for the statewide evaluation. Because the university had data collection needs, the local partnership and the principal investigator of the state evaluation decided that a full-time evaluator-data collector would be shared. Dividing her time equally between the state and local organizations, the evaluator-data collector collected data for the state evaluation group and provided internal evaluation guidance to the local partnership. Because there was a limited understanding from the local partnership regarding what evaluation was, much less the duties of an evaluator, there was little guidance given and even less cooperation. The evaluator was seen as a necessary evil because this community was mandated to conduct a community evaluation. Neither the Cumberland County board of directors nor the state administration provided their communities with definitions or requirements of the evaluation. The internal evaluator attempted to hold joint board of director and administration meetings to begin discussion regarding the requirements and process of community evaluations, but there was little interest and limited participation.

Because of the community's lack of understanding regarding evaluation, the internal evaluator concentrated on activities that she could accomplish rather than the full breadth of what actually needed to be done. There were two main evaluation events that occurred during this period: an assessment of the partnership's goals and objectives and an assessment of the individually funded projects' accomplishments. The partnership's goals and objectives were comprehensively reviewed for attainability and measurability. As may be expected, many of the objectives were flawed on both counts. The CCPFC had, in an attempt to expedite service delivery, adopted the individual objectives of the funded programs as its objectives. Through the "goals and objectives review," it was discovered that the CCPFC retained objectives of programs that were no longer funded and with no means of accomplishing them. The recommendation from the internal evaluator was for the CCPFC and its board of directors to engage in a strategic planning session to redefine its goals and objectives.

The result of this task had a positive outcome: as the recommendation was implemented, it coincided with a new Smart Start grant application. The CCPFC held a strategic planning session involving both the board of directors and concerned members of the community, in which the internal evaluator and the 1994 community needs assessment evaluator presented information in understandable and user-friendly terms. Program monitoring information (given regardless of whether a specific project had met its goals and objectives) was also presented. The result was no change to the mission or goals, but the objectives were redefined to be slightly more attainable and measurable. There were over thirty-five new objectives.

### **Phase Three: The Evaluation Committee**

The board of directors and administration formed an evaluation committee to attempt to resolve the remaining questions about what a community evaluation should involve, to guide in the definition of community evaluation needs, and to oversee the evaluator. The evaluation committee, which consisted of a board member and selected community members, decided, with the support of the board of directors, to redevelop the evaluation as an individual contract and to request bids from outside evaluators. With no previous experience reviewing evaluation proposals, the committee invited a professor at North Carolina State University to review three evaluation proposals, and with her approval, Cumberland County selected the UNC proposal. When the proposal was accepted, the internal evaluator resigned that position and became part of the UNC-Chapel Hill evaluation team. The proposal consisted of an extensive outcomes-based evaluation and a transitory program-monitoring evaluation. The objective was to provide program-monitoring duties to UNC-Chapel Hill for the current year, while the CCPFC prepared to provide those duties in-house thereafter.

On the administrative side of the evaluation, all activities, written materials, memos, and reports had to be approved and edited by the local administration. The evaluation became personality and administration driven due to the limited understanding of evaluations by the local partnership, the board, and the funded programs. This does not imply that the evaluation held to the principles of a participatory evaluation model; it still reflected the micromanagement model. It should also be noted that approving any evaluation expenditures during this time was an exhaustive process to both the evaluation team and the committee because there was little understanding of evaluation costs.

The committee continues to struggle in defining its ultimate purpose and gaining skills to accomplish this task. It is important to remember that the evaluation committee consists of community laypeople who were asked to serve on the committee; their evaluation information base and expertise are very limited. We believe that asking a group of laypeople to review evaluation proposals and methodology can be counterproductive. Nevertheless, the committee remains in existence, although with a straggling attendance.

#### **Phase Four: Technical Assistance**

The fourth key factor in selling a community evaluation to this community was technical assistance. The importance of having provided comprehensive and frequent technical assistance to the board, administration, community, and individually funded programs cannot be overestimated. The evaluation team provides technical assistance at all levels.

There are four evaluation workshops required for all Smart Start-funded projects: writing measurable goals and objectives, writing a simple and attainable project-specific evaluation plan, gaining an understanding of the difference between outputs and outcomes, and documenting program successes and failures. In addition, all individually funded programs receive one-on-one technical assistance with the evaluation. At least two individual evaluation sessions are scheduled with all funded projects. One of the sessions centers on the project-specific evaluation report compiled from all evaluation and program-monitoring information gathered for the previous fiscal year. The report is reviewed by the program's administration and management, with a member of the evaluation team, a meeting during which the meaning and ways to use the information are discussed. The topic of the second one-on-one session depends on the needs of that funded project.

At the board of directors level, an evaluation report is given at every board meeting. This requirement has been implemented only since 1998 and has been very successful. A full update is given on evaluation activities as well as a synthesis of any evaluation reports and their findings. The evaluation reports are condensed into a PowerPoint presentation, lasting ten to fifteen minutes, by one of the members of the evaluation team and presented to the board of directors. This process has greatly increased the utilization and support of evaluation information.

After evaluation reports are presented to the board of directors, the CCPFC hosts community sessions to present the information contained within these reports. The information sessions are open to the public and advertised in the local newspaper. The goal is not only to inform the community about how Smart Start is doing in their county, but to educate them on the importance of collecting information.

It has been primarily through this major technical assistance effort that Cumberland County has begun to understand the importance of evaluation and begun to heal from previous disruptive evaluation efforts.

#### **Phase Five: The Present**

The CCPFC has moved from an agency that shelved all evaluation reports to one that values evaluation in all aspects of project and funding decision making. It has incorporated an extensive program-monitoring component, a needs-assessment component, an evaluation technical assistance component, and an outcomes

evaluation component. The board of directors in particular has been highly supportive of designing a comprehensive evaluation model that not only builds the capacity of the partnership to make sound outcomes-based funding decisions, but builds the capacity of the individually funded programs to conduct and use program monitoring and evaluation information.

The CCPFC has recently engaged in an extensive countywide needs assessment consisting of five hundred face-to-face interviews with families who had children up to five years of age from all zip codes in Cumberland County and nineteen topic focus groups with a total of two hundred participants. That information, along with a study investigating the complex relationship between working and child care, extant county data review, and program-monitoring information, was used in comprehensive multiday and multigroup strategic planning sessions. The result was a two-year strategic plan written in attainable and measurable terms.

The CCPFC has begun to implement an Evaluation Assistance and Program Monitoring Component (PETAC). PETAC will provide technical assistance to Smart Start-funded agencies in other counties in North Carolina that are interested in applying evaluation methodologies to their programming, to include general program evaluation services, technical assistance, and evaluation workshops.

### **Lessons Learned in Selling Community Evaluations**

For evaluators to “sell” the art and science of evaluation to those in community settings, several key lessons from the experiences presented here should be kept in mind. These lessons include the following:

- A community evaluation is a developmental process that cannot be rushed. The evaluators must develop an evaluation culture within the designated community.
- Garnering understanding and support of community evaluations will be greatly simplified if the stakeholders, participants, and funders of evaluation can gain a concrete understanding of the utility of evaluation information. The evaluator needs to include boards of directors, administrations, funded projects, other community stakeholders, and evaluation participants in all phases of the evaluation process.
- In order for community evaluations to be successful, there must be extensive technical assistance to teach the importance of evaluation to the community: what it is, how to do it, and how to use the information.
- The political, local, and state environment will heavily influence the support that community evaluations will get.
- Review the funding agencies’ past experience with evaluation.
- There are many blind alleys in conducting community evaluations, and they vary by community. Evaluators must expect them all to apply to their community evaluation and be pleasantly surprised if they do not.
- Always remember that not everyone will value evaluation, regardless of how much inclusion, empowerment, and technical assistance is provided.