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PUBLICATION DESIGN

TYPESETTING:
PM Publishing & Typographics, Inc.
Tallahassee, Florida

PRINTING:

Gandy Printers
Tallahassee, Florida

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Journal of the National Council of Educational Opportunity Associations

Volume 3, Issue 1

February, 1988

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The Journal of the National Council of Educational Opportunity Associations (ISSN 0889-8405) is the official journal of the Council. The Journal is published bi-annually in September and March. Members of the Council's affiliate associations may receive subscriptions through the Council's Publication Subscription Package at \$150.00 per year. This package includes the bi-monthly *Equality* newsletter, the bi-annual *NCEOA Journal*, and periodic monographs. Individual *NCEOA Journal* subscriptions are available for libraries at \$20.00 per year or \$10.00 for single issues. Send check or money order payable to NCEOA, to Ben C. McCune, Editor, *NCEOA Journal*, P.O. Box 91, Florida A&M University, Tallahassee, Florida 32307 (904/599-3055). **Manuscripts:** submit manuscripts to the editor according to the *Guidelines for Authors* in this issue. **Permissions:** copyrights owned by NCEOA. Reproduction of material in this publication is hereby authorized provided the use of the material is both noncommercial and educational and the number of copies does not exceed 100. **Advertising:** for information contact the Advertising Editor, Bernadine S. Chapman, Special Services Program, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115-2854, (815/753-0581). *Publishers wishing to have books reviewed for any issue of the Journal should submit two (2) copies to the editor.*

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Student Follow-Up: A Vital Component of Program Evaluation

By Ernest W. Brewer

Abstract

Conducting an effective follow-up study on program participants is one of the most important elements for program evaluation and is usually one of the most overlooked activities in administering a program. Follow-up is a valuable technique for objectively assessing the overall effectiveness of a program while at the same time providing information on the strengths and weaknesses of a program. A follow-up study can demonstrate a high degree of program accountability and credibility for continued local and federal support and provide the program with communicable results to share with those interested in the program.

The increasing demand for program accountability has been clearly stressed by the educational profession over the last couple of decades (Gelatt, 1977; Eckerson, 1971; Brewer & Cameron, 1981; Brewer & Nagy, 1982; and Jung, 1986). According to program officers in Washington, D.C., who oversee program operation and funding for the General Accounting Office (GAO), which often determines the fate of federally funded programs by presenting its own analysis of how effective programs are in meeting their initial objective, accountability becomes a must. To add more fuel to the fire of accountability, the enactment of the Gramm-Rudman-Holling Act to cut \$23 billion in 1988 from the U.S. deficit will further support the need for assessing how effective a program is in order to receive continuous Federal support while everything from federal defense to educational programs is on the chopping block. The value of success of programs within the educa-

tional system are constantly being questioned and should be a concern for all educational practitioners — not only program directors, but also deans, superintendents, teachers, professors, department heads, and counselors. A major component of program effectiveness assessment is to conduct at least an annual follow-up study on program participants. Neither program administrators or program officers do any major analysis of the federal efforts relative to program operations and program scope that has strong implications for accountability (Franklin, 1985; Pyecha, 1974; Brewer & Nagy, 1982; Brewer & Morgan, 1984; and Jung, 1986).

The purpose of this article is to help educational practitioners in the area of conducting follow-up studies. More specifically, this article is geared to assist staff members who are associated with Title IV of the Higher Education Act programs in the area of accountability. According to Glaser (1987), the federal government has spent over \$2.01 billion to fund the Special Programs for Disadvantaged Students over their funding history. With an annual budget of \$176,000,000, approximately 450,000 students are being served by 800 institutions of higher education (IHIEs) and 80 community agencies. Of the 880 institutions which administer these programs, only a small percentage of them perform an adequate follow-up study on their program participants. It is imperative that all programs meet their responsibility for assessing the effectiveness of their program by examining the extent to which student participation has enhanced the program's purpose and success.

Continued next page

“...attention to the quality of evaluation instruments is critical.”

Ernest Brewer is Associate Professor and Director of Federal Programs, College of Education, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Follow-Up Studies

Follow-up studies should be referenced to the objectives of the program and to the overall program evaluation plan. These studies should also be viewed as complementary to the assessment process rather than as a separate event. They are designed to gather information about program participants' shared experiences after they have already taken place. Hopke (1971) defines follow-up studies as a procedure to determine how individuals are developing in their placements. A broader purpose of follow-up studies is to determine the extent to which the program's objectives are being met and to make programmatic changes to effect greater program efficiency. Data from such studies contributes to program accountability and needed program improvement.

The primary reason for conducting follow-up studies is to assess the following dimensions of service effectiveness: how the program can improve in meeting the overall scope of the project; program effectiveness in identifying and meeting the actual needs of the participants; participant satisfaction with current career placement; adequacy of participants' guidance or training in the program; access to further financial aid, educational and occupational opportunities; and identification of personal and PSI difficulties of former program participants.

A follow-up study should be part of an evaluation process which reflects a program's on-going concern for former participants' continued success. Therefore, a follow-up study must be directed toward obtaining information that can and will be used, either in curriculum modification, program development or in the total evaluation process. Follow-up data can also be useful for providing direction and emphasis for guidance services and for creating positive public relations with the entire community. In addition to providing

feed-back to evaluation purposes, follow-up data is essential for justifying the addition of new program components and expanded services to meet changing student needs.

Usually follow-up studies provide necessary documentation which verifies program accountability. The follow-up data should be used effectively to ensure maximum program accountability. The analysis and interpretation of the information gathered can also demonstrate the program's cost effectiveness.

Basic Types of Follow-Up Studies

There are four basic types of follow-up studies that can generally be used by TRIO administrators. Their purposes are briefly described as follows:

- (1) *Baseline Study*: This study collects demographic information from all program participants during the program as a standard for referencing future studies.
- (2) *One-Year Study*: This study determines if program participants are still working in the area of their training and assesses their degree of upward mobility. Also useful is feedback on which parts of the program were most helpful. The questions asked in a one-year study should be carefully correlated with the questions asked in the baseline study.
- (3) *Three-Year Study*: This study focuses on patterns of geographical and upward mobility. It can also be used to identify individuals who desire additional training or education.
- (4) *Five-Year Study*: This study provides data for immediate and long-range curriculum planning, innovation, or change. The five-year study focuses on worker mobility patterns, extent of further education or training, and

particularly the skills identified by former participants as most useful in their studies or jobs (Norton, 1984).

Developing a Follow-Up Plan

An efficient and effective management plan should be written with input from the entire program staff. This plan will ensure effective management of the study. A well-conceived plan should address the following aspects of the follow-up study:

- (1) a general statement of purpose for the study
- (2) written objectives and/or goals for the study
- (3) budget items and estimated costs
- (4) scope and limitations of the study
- (5) identification of group(s) to be surveyed
- (6) specification of staff roles and specific performance tasks
- (7) activities schedule and timeline for completion
- (8) reporting procedures
- (9) plans for implementing the study's findings

The statement of purpose and objectives should be completed before anything else is done in planning for a follow-up study (Wentling and Lawson, 1975). An overall objective and subordinate objectives should be formulated for the study. For example, an overall objective could be stated as follows: "To determine the adequacy of the Upward Bound program in preparing program participants to enter postsecondary educational institutions." Several subordinate objectives that relate directly to the overall objective could be stated as follows: "To determine if academic and summer components are consonant with pre-college preparation; to determine how many Upward Bound participants entered PSIs which they were counseled to enter; to determine the retention rates of those who did enter a PSI; and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the program."

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After the objectives have been formulated and established, an instrument which will harmonize with stated objectives must be developed and/or identified.

In the planning stage, specific activities to implement the follow-up study should be assigned according to staff preferences and areas of expertise, including preparation, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and communication of the results.

Designing Instruments for Collecting Follow-Up Data

Developing or adapting instruments to collect follow-up information is a continuous process of determining specific information-gathering instrumentation, testing the instrumentation on a representative sampling of the total population, and refining the instruments for greater future efficiency. Since total program evaluation is affected by the information gathered, attention to the quality of evaluation instruments is critical.

The appearance of the instrument should be appealing. Wentling and Lawson (1975) suggest that the instrument should be duplicated on good quality colored paper. They indicate that research has shown that colored paper elicits up to a fifteen percent (15%) better response than plain white paper.

According to Sears (1985), an adequate questionnaire will reflect the following characteristics: clarity; logical organization in related categories and sub-categories; comprehensiveness of information elicited; and an uncluttered, functional format. It is recommended that the maximum word length for any one item on the instrument not exceed twenty words. Follow-up instrument items can be written in a rating, ranking, dichotomous response, multiple choice, or open-ended format.

It is imperative that direction be included on the follow-up instrument because it will affect the validity of the study. Written direc-

tions on the instrument should be brief; questions should be grouped according to different types of responses; and directions should be set off with bold or distinctive lettering.

The choice of the instrument and procedures for the follow-up study should be based on the following informational requirements:

- (1) What kinds of data are needed?
- (2) How much data are to be obtained?
- (3) What are the sources of data?
- (4) How much time is available?
- (5) What is the size of the group(s) to be studied?
- (6) How much money is available?
- (7) What is the availability and competency of the staff?

Available choices of instruments include a main questionnaire, personal and/or telephone interviews, or a combination of these methods.

Conducting the Follow-Up Study

There are two basic methods that may be used to conduct a follow-up study on former program participants — a mail survey or phone and/or personal interviews — depending on the purpose of the study and the nature of the information desired (Norton, 1984). Each method has advantages and disadvantages as follows:

Mail Survey

- can reach large numbers of former program participants.
- can result in a large number of non-respondents.
- the number of non-respondents can be reduced by:
 - (1) orientation to the follow-up survey process during the program.
 - (2) a cover letter that emphasizes the value of responses for future program improvements.

Phone or Personal-Visit Interview

- permit in-depth answers to questions.

- permit clarification of incomplete or ambiguous answers.
- require considerable staff time and program expense.
- permit practical use on a sampling or supplementary basis.

General considerations for either type or a combination of survey types should focus on the quality and nature of the information desired, and adequate funding and staff resources, including available time and level of staff experience. The *initial baseline phase* of a programmatic follow-up survey establishes a level of performance against which future program performance can be measured.

Regardless of which type of survey is conducted, an orderly procedure for conducting a follow-up study is presented in the following steps:

- (1) First mailing — "alert" card.
- (2) Second mailing — follow-up questionnaire, cover letter, and return envelope — stamped and addressed.
- (3) Third mailing — first thank-you reminder card.
- (4) Fourth mailing — second request follow-up questionnaire, second cover letter, and return envelope — stamped and addressed.
- (5) Fifth mailing — second thank-you reminder card.

A brief cover letter, which is included in steps 2 and 4, should indicate the purpose of the study, uses of the findings, importance of the study, a suggested date by which the form should be returned, and assurance of confidentiality. In conducting a telephone or personal survey, a structured interview form which uses a prepared script or interview guide should be arranged prior to gathering the information.

Again, a combination of information-gathering techniques should be used to ensure currency, accuracy, and comprehensiveness of the information collected.

Continued next page

“The optimum use of program follow-up data is to identify and implement the needed changes...”

Interpreting and Reporting Follow-Up Data

The interpretation of follow-up study data has important implications for the overall evaluation of a program. Objective and subjective interpretation of data require different methods of reporting, the former being factual in nature whereas the latter deals with opinions and attitudes. Objective data is a more solid basis for program recommendations; subjective data should be described but not interpreted. A basic rule for interpreting data is to confine your conclusions to low inference, factual data, and to avoid high-inference, subjective statements.

The follow-up report should consist of the following major sections: summary, which includes a statement of the report's purpose, procedures, conclusions, and recommendations; results; conclusions; implications and recommendations; and an appendix.

Using Follow-Up Data for Program Planning

The optimum use of program follow-up data is to identify and implement needed changes in order to improve inadequate program phases or components. The implementation phase entails interpreting and summarizing follow-up data, communicating it effectively to different audiences, and ensuring its inclusion in decision-making processes. In practical terms, survey data impacts on program planning in three phases as follows:

Formulating Recommendation for Program Change
The care with which recommenda-

tions are formulated greatly influences the nature of their reception:

- document the need for change
- provide a comprehensive rationale for change.

Communicating Survey

Findings and Recommendations

The selection of content and the format should be aimed at a specific audience:

- a detailed report for decision making.
- a general report for interested or supportive others.

Implementing the Recommendations

The success with which recommendations are implemented depends on the program director's commitment to carrying out as many data-based recommendations as possible. Some recommendations may have an obvious high priority, whereas others may require time or money to implement. Also involved are the efficient delegation of specific roles and tasks to appropriate staff members and the procurement of progress reports.

In Summary

Follow-up studies are a vital component of program evaluation.

“...everyone is so busy delivering services that no one stops to evaluate the outcomes of the program's participants.”

They help measure the program's success and provide the objective feedback for program modification and improvement. These studies also demonstrate a high degree of accountability and credibility. One major problem in conducting follow-up studies is that everyone is so busy delivering services that no one stops to evaluate the out-

comes of the program's participants. Follow-up activities and evaluation should be built into the overall operation of the program. Accountability is imperative in order to avoid the unjustifiable federal axe. Program improvement is a must if we are to meet the ever changing needs of our program participants. Program officers in Washington, D.C., the National Council of Educational Opportunity Association (NCEO), and legislators can use data derived from follow-up studies and program evaluation to support new and continuing legislation for our programs. In addition, the program which conducts an effective follow-up study has specific results to share with future students, parents, and taxpayers interested in quality and equality in education.

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