PLS 506 Program Evaluation

Exercise: Conducting an Evaluation of the D.A.R.E. Program

Part 1: Tailoring an Evaluation (50 minutes)

Goals of this exercise and role play:

- Apply the theories and concepts from the readings on tailoring evaluations to a real program

Background:

One of the most fundamental tasks for any evaluator is to determine the program theory or causal logic that underlies a program. This assignment will let you explore the theories and concepts underlying the task of developing a program theory. For this assignment, you should assume that you have been hired as the evaluation team to evaluate a local D.A.R.E. program. You will complete the following tasks in order. At the end of each task, the class will reconvene to share and discuss your findings and observations. Since your familiarity of the D.A.R.E. program likely varies, you should prepare for the assignment by familiarizing yourself by reviewing various materials that describe the program in favorable and critical terms:

- http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/darefs.pdf
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drug_Abuse_Resistance_Education
- http://www.dare.com/home/default.asp
- http://www.dare-oh.org/
- http://alcoholfacts.org/DARE.html
- http://www2.potsdam.edu/hansondj/Controversies/20060517101921.html:

You should also read the meta-analysis article by Ennett, et al. (1994) posted on the class website that reviews some of the previous evaluation findings for D.A.R.E..

Directions: 20 minutes

Since it is common for evaluators to be unfamiliar with the details on how a program works, the evaluation team should begin by interviewing the client(s) to find out how the program works. How would you approach this meeting? What would you want to find out? Assume you will have 1 hour for your initial meeting. Develop a list of the questions you will ask the client and the information you want to obtain before leaving the interview. Be prepared to share the answers to the following questions with the class.

- What questions would you want to ask your client?
- What practical considerations must be taken into account in tailoring your evaluation design (i.e., stakeholders, audience, and other constraints and limitations)?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages to using a consultant to conduct the evaluation?

Part 2: Evaluability Assessment (90 minutes)

Goals of this exercise and role play:

- Apply the theories and concepts from the readings on tailoring evaluations, program theory/logic models, and evaluability assessments to a real program

Directions: 60 minutes

In order to develop a research design, the evaluation team must have a basic understanding of the program and how it works. This requires understanding the social problem(s) addressed by the program and what it seeks to accomplish. Be sure you can define the problem in 1 – 2 sentences. You should also be able to identify describe the need for the program. You should then develop some understanding of what service(s) are provided and how these services are delivered to a set of targets. In other words, you need to ask the typical evaluation questions Rossi, et al. discuss on page 77 - 78. If the program is complicated and provides a range of services, evaluators often work with the client to see if there are ways to limit the scope of the evaluation in some way.

Once the evaluation team has some knowledge about how a program functions, it is important to consider the context that will shape the evaluation. This requires understanding the information that the clients would like from the evaluation. You also need to identify the potential stakeholders and determine what information from them is needed to evaluate the program. Who will be the audience for the evaluation findings? How might the data and results be used? Are there other political, social, ethical, or practical considerations that will shape your evaluation of the program?

Since we don't have a program representative from D.A.R.E for you to work with, for this task your evaluation team should make some inferences and assumptions about the answers to the following questions:

- What problem(s) does the program address?
- Who is the target of the program's services?
- How is the program delivered (i.e., resources, activities/services, and outputs)?
- What are the expected results (i.e., short term outcomes, intermediate outcomes, long term comes)?
- What are they hypothesized effects and relationships? In other words, how are the inputs supposed to result in changes in outputs or outcomes.

Be prepared to write a summary of your answers to the first 4 questions on the board**.**

Part 3: Logic Models (120 minutes)

Goals of this exercise and role play:

- Apply the theories and concepts from the readings on program theory/logic models and evaluability assessments to a real program

Directions: 90 minutes

Now that you have a working knowledge of the program and some idea how it works, the evaluation team should try to identify the program's specific goals and objectives that will be the focus of the evaluation. The evaluation team should develop a program theory or logic model for the intervention. In some cases, the program theory will be explicit, but in many cases the evaluation team must help the client uncover the program's implicit logic model. It is also possible that because the client will be so close to the program that they will have disagree with your conceptualization of the logic model because it necessarily simplifies the how the program works down to its essential elements.

Your goal in this task is formulate the logic model for the program – basically the theory and assumptions about how the program works. Logic models can be framed in terms of the theory of change that influences the program's design and plan for the program (theory approach models), connect the resources and activities with the program's short-and long-term outcomes (Outcomes approach models), or focus on the specifics of the implementation process (Activities approach model). All three approaches require answering a series of questions such as:

- What are the boundaries of the program?
- Who are its targets?
- What does the program hopes to achieve (e.g., goals, objectives, desired impacts)?
- What are program functions, components, and activities are utilized to achieve the desired results?
- What is the logic or sequence that links these functions, activities, and components?
- What is the causal logic that connects program activities with desired outcomes?
- Are these connections logical and plausible?
- Are there other exogenous factors that will influence the hypothesized cause and effect relationships?

Avoid striving for perfection. There is no one best logic model. It is also likely that some elements may be unknown, particularly given the constraints of this role-play. You should also avoid trying to be linear, the world is a complicated place and as you can see from the readings many logic models are quite complicated.

Be prepared to write a causal diagram describing the program theory that underlies the impacts to be studied. What are the independent and dependent variables underlying any hypothesized cause and effect relationships? Be sure to differentiate between those endogenous factors that the program addresses and the other exogenous causes of the underlying problem. You should also consider the antecedent variables (i.e., those the program starts out with like the characteristics of clients, geographic factors, economic or social factors) and the mediating variables (i.e., influences that emerge as the program unfolds such as economic downturns, new policies, new staff, etc.). Finally, as a program matures and changes over time, so too will the logic model. How does the maturity of the program influence its logic model?

By now, the evaluation team should have enough information to determine whether the program is evaluable. It is evaluable to the extent that:

- Program goals and performance criteria are well defined.
- Program goals are logical and plausible
- Relevant data can be obtained to assess performance towards these goals and objectives at a reasonable cost.
- Intended users of the evaluation results have agreed on how they will use the information.

While it is unlikely you can answer the last criteria at this point, you should be able to answer to the first three criteria. The evaluation team should determine whether the program is evaluable. You should also be able to answer the following questions:

- Distribute a copy of the logic model to the class
- Is your logic model a theory approach, outcomes approach, or activities approach model?
- If the program is evaluable, what changes in program design could facilitate its evaluation? If the program cannot be evaluated, what changes in program design are needed?
- If your team did evaluate the program, what information would be most useful? Who would benefit from the information? What practical constraints would you encounter?
- How would your relationship with the client influence your evaluation design and how you framed your findings?
- Do the parents of children in D.A.R.E. care if the previous evaluation findings show that the program’s effects are small? Should they care?