



Graduate Students as Evaluation Consultants for Natural Resource Programs: A Service-Learning Success Story

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Introduction and Rationale

- Program evaluation and *photography*
 - Using common language and practical examples to teach others about evaluation



Introduction and Rationale

- Dwindling university budgets
 - Decisions about program value require data
 - State Extension Specialists less able to conduct face-to-face visits with agents and clientele
 - For Specialists with teaching and Extension appointments, leaving campus is challenging

Introduction and Rationale

- Graduate students enrolled in distance-delivered courses are often located statewide
 - Positioned to assist with local outreach efforts
- Employers emphasize the need for graduate students with skills in program development and evaluation (Dewey et al., 2008; King et al., 2001)

The Consultants

- Twenty-four Master's level graduate students
 - Enrolled in distance-delivered (synchronous) program evaluation course (11 weeks)
 - Seven weeks of training in participatory evaluation; four weeks of field consulting
 - 75% (n = 18) employed full-time as agriculture teachers or Extension agents

The Clients

- **Georgia Extension Programs**
 - Master Equine Program
 - Master Gardener Program
 - Master Naturalist Program
 - Rock Eagle 4-H Center Environ. Educ. Program
- **Community Organizations**
 - Sandy Creek Nature Center Youth Camp Program
 - Georgia Sea Turtle Center Conservation Program

Consulting Methods

1. Students trained in *participatory evaluation*
 - Continuous stakeholder involvement
 - Gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data
 - Communicating evaluation findings
2. Students grouped by geographic location and programming interest into 3-4 person teams and matched with local clientele

Consulting Methods

3. Student teams coordinated an initial face-to-face meeting with clientele to assess needs
4. Student teams developed an Evaluation Plan and Tip Sheets tailored to clientele needs
 - Created/revised program objectives
 - Analyzed and interpreted existing data
 - Developed innovative tools to collect data
 - Designed and administered pilot questionnaires with accompanying “data ready” spreadsheets

Consulting Methods

5. Clientele invited to attend a formal recommendations presentation on the University of Georgia Athens campus
6. Clientele given a thank you letter and hard copies of Evaluation Plans, Tip Sheets, and student-made data collection instruments

Success Stories

- Student Reflective Journals
 - “I’m starting to feel like an evaluation specialist...and it’s a little scary!”
 - Enhanced ability to communicate evaluation methods and findings using “common language”
 - Improved attitude toward **data** (collection, analysis, and interpretation)
- Program Clients
 - “They involved me every step of the way.”

Recommendations

- Discuss program evaluation-related needs with key stakeholders first (their ownership and continuous involvement is important)
 - Start communication at least two months before student consulting
- Check in with students at least once every week and clientele every two weeks

Recommendations

- Share guidelines with students for how they will be evaluated
 - Require regular student reflection (journaling)
 - Helpful formative evaluation data for the instructor
 - A vent for students to confidentially share difficulties
- Invite students, their clients, and college administration to consultant presentations
- **Be flexible and adaptive**

Future Plans

- Summer, 2010 clientele include:
 - **Georgia Aquarium** on-site and outreach programs
 - **Zoo Atlanta** on-site and outreach programs
 - **Georgia DNR Wildlife Education Center** programs
 - **4-H Center** counselor leadership programs
 - **Sandy Creek Nature Center** programs
 - **Georgia Sea Turtle Center** outreach programs