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Evaluation of Interprofessional Education Programs

This column is the first in a series of discussions about evaluating interprofessional education programs.

Evaluating Interprofessional Education Programs

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In this brief space, I would like to provide some general guidelines for those of you who are planning to implement an interprofessional education program, or any program for that matter. I say planning to implement a program, because it is at this stage that you must be thinking about how you are going to evaluate it, not after the program has begun. One of the worst nightmares for any program evaluator is to have someone stop by his or her office with a stack of data and say “Can you tell me what I have here?” When this happens it is often extremely difficult to extract meaningful conclusions about the project. Therefore, it is critical to build your evaluation plan into your project plan.

There is no “one best way” to build an evaluation plan, but keep in mind that program evaluation is a systematic process. There is no mystery behind it. You want to know if your program has been successful in doing what it was supposed to do. What follows are some considerations to keep in mind as you plan your program. Before you begin, however, it is helpful to conduct a literature search. This literature search might uncover projects that are similar to yours. Finding such a project could provide valuable insights into how you would organize your project as well as providing you with ideas for its evaluation.

Once you have completed the literature search, the next step is to clearly identify your program goals. The operative term here is “clearly.” The goals of your program should be clear enough so that an outside individual, unfamiliar with your program, will be able to read them and know exactly what you are trying to do. These goals also must be measurable. This is critical. Goals that are clear, but not measurable, will not allow you to draw any meaningful conclusions about the success of your project, which defeats the whole purpose of an evaluation plan.

Once you have identified your measurable goals you need to determine appropriate outcome measures. These are the measures by which you will determine the success or failure of your program. What is it that your program intends to do? Are you interested in increasing satisfaction? Changing behavior? Increasing achievement? Changing attitudes? Improving understanding? Each of these will require a different approach to evaluation. Based on this decision, you can then identify an acceptable outcome. For example, if your goal is to change attitudes, what increment of change would be your minimal expectation for success? This level should be

your benchmark, since just any change in attitudes can’t legitimately be regarded as success.

Finally, you should develop your evaluation plan based on the time and resources at your disposal. In doing so you need to be pragmatic. Data collection and analysis can be expensive. If you have developed an ideal evaluation plan, you need to consider whether you have the time or expertise to carry out this ideal plan. If not, do you have the money to hire someone to do it? If the answer is “no” to both of these questions then you would need to move from an “ideal” evaluation to a “satisfactory” evaluation and do the best you can with the resources that you have.

Another consideration that is important, and often overlooked, is to make sure that your program is being carried out the way it was intended. This is also referred to as assessing program “fidelity.” For example, if you are planning to evaluate the success of a team based approach to problem solving, the important variable would be team behavior. In this case it would be important to assess whether participants are actually functioning as a team, based on a set of criteria, as opposed to a work group of individuals. Since the important comparison will be based on team behavior as opposed to work group behavior, if you don’t assess whether they are actually behaving as a team, then you could be measuring what is called “a non-event,” where you are really only assessing two work groups.

Finally, especially with longer term projects, you should consider conducting both formative and summative evaluations. A formative evaluation is an evaluation conducted in the middle of the project which assesses how your project is progressing and allows you to make any mid-course corrections that might be necessary. A summative evaluation is conducted at the end of the program to measure success. However, sometimes a summative evaluation can also serve as a formative evaluation. If your project has many smaller components, each of these summative evaluations can serve as formative evaluations of the larger project.

These are just a few of the suggestions to help make the evaluation of your program an effective one. As interprofessional approaches to health care become more and more common, it is even more important to provide educators and practitioners with solid evidence for their success. This can’t be done without a rigorous and well defined evaluation plan.