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THE STATUS OF EVALUATION IN ACA ACCREDITED CAMPING PROGRAMS

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The purpose of this descriptive evaluation project was to determine the current status of evaluation in American Camping Association accredited camps. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from a systematic random sample of camps. The results showed that camp directors placed emphasis on evaluations for helping them improve various aspects of the camp related to staff, program, facilities, and/or administration.

KEYWORDS: *organized camping, evaluation, qualitative data, quantitative data, criteria*

In reality, nothing runs perfectly all the time. Tools are needed to evaluate how to improve camps and outdoor education facilities. Although many professionals run excellent camping programs, supervise outstanding staff, and have organizationally sound agencies or businesses, improvement through evaluation is always possible. The purpose of this descriptive evaluation project was to determine the current status of evaluation in American Camping Association accredited camps and to describe how evaluation was conducted in camps. A secondary purpose was to examine the data obtained from qualitative and quantitative instruments and processes.

Evaluation describes all strategies and techniques used to determine the value and worth of programs, facilities, staff, or organization and administrative procedures (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993). For purposes of this paper, evaluation refers primarily to formal procedures for evaluation and assessment. The focus of assessment and evaluation is on improving effectiveness and efficiency in the conduct of all aspects of camp including program, staff, facilities, and administration (Lundegren & Farrell, 1985).

The underlying premise for this study was that evaluation consists of three dimensions: criteria, data, and judgment (Hender-

son & Bialeschki, 1993). *Criteria* refer to the standards or the ideals upon which something is being evaluated. Questions of what and why are asked in this dimension. *Data* are the systematic pieces of information or facts that are collected related to the criteria and refer to who, where, when, and how. Data for evaluation may be collected in qualitative or quantitative forms. *Judgment* is the determination of the value or worth of something based on the data collected from the previously determined criteria. This judgment dimension is known as the "so what." All three must be used for an effective evaluation system to exist.

Method

Questionnaires were sent to directors of 200 camps accredited by the American Camping Association (ACA). A systematic sampling technique was used, with every 10th camp being drawn from the list of 2000 ACA Accredited Camps. A number drawn from the table of random numbers was selected for the starting point. Half of the questionnaires were designed to collect quantitative data with pre-designed responses to questions. The other half were open-ended questions about evaluation designed to obtain qualitative data in the words of the respondents. Every other name drawn received either a qualitative or a quantitative

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questionnaire. Although the primary purpose of this research was to develop a baseline about the status of evaluation in the camping field, the use of two instruments provided an in-depth way to examine the data.

Two questionnaires were developed based on the determination of criteria, data, and judgment, which corresponded to the who, why, what, when, where, how, and so what of evaluation described previously. One questionnaire, referred to as QN, was designed to collect quantitative data in the form of yes/no responses and Likert scales. The second questionnaire, called the QL instrument, consisted of the same 14 questions, but they were asked in an open-ended format. For example, both QN and QL asked "How frequently do you evaluate the staff, facilities, administration, and camp programs?" For the QN, a Likert scale consisting of "not at all, just before ACA visits, whenever we feel it is needed, yearly, and more than once a year," was provided, whereas the response was left open on the QL questionnaire.

Questionnaires were mailed in December, 1992, and a follow-up reminder letter and second questionnaire were sent to non-respondents two weeks later. A 54% (n=54) response rate was received for the QN and 31% (n=31) for the QL. Responses included a total of 45 agency camps (29 QN and 16 QL), 11 religiously affiliated (8 QN and 3 QL), and 29 independent camps (17 QN and 12 QL). Examples of agency camps include YMCA and Girl Scout camps. Religiously affiliated camps were associated with a particular church denomination. Independent camps, also called private camps, are generally profit-oriented and were not associated with any parent body. These response rates compared to the proportionate number of camps of these affiliations that are accredited by ACA. Day camps were operated by 39 camps, resident camps by 69 camps, and conference/retreat centers by 19 camps who responded to the questionnaires. The response rate was not high, particularly for the QL questionnaire. We can offer no explanation for this relatively low response rate except that evaluation may not be an important concern of camp directors and the

timing during December may not have been as conducive to responses as other times.

The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively by using the Statistical Package for the Social Science X (SPSS-X), and the qualitative data were summarized using a qualitative content analysis. Only descriptive statistics were computed, because the purpose was to describe the status of evaluation in camps. The content analysis method included reading the responses, coding the questions to reflect the variety of responses, developing response groupings, and then rereading the responses to assure that all data could be fit into similar codes. Both sets of data were then used to describe the status of evaluation and to provide additional descriptions of the results.

The results of this status survey will be presented by describing the quantitative and qualitative responses according to the dimensions (criteria, data, judgment) listed earlier. A comparison of the two data sets also will be described. Recommendations will be offered for what camp directors might consider when conducting future evaluations of their camps.

Criteria—What to Evaluate

Ideally each camp director should have a formal evaluation plan for addressing four primary aspects of camp: staff, program, facilities, and administration (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993). In this study, all camps indicated some type of evaluation process ranging from highly structured procedures to fairly informal processes. A note of caution is warranted, because the term "formal evaluation system" may have been misunderstood. All camps accredited by ACA have gone through a formal evaluation system with required accreditation visits to score standards, but some directors may not have acknowledged this action as evaluation. Further, even though two of the camps said they had no formal system, the respondents went on to answer the remainder of the questionnaire indicating that some type of system was in place.

Criteria—When to Evaluate

The timing and frequency of evaluation are important. Evaluation can consume large amounts of time if done as thoroughly and as frequently as ideally conceived. Thus, a system may need to be developed to assist in the evaluation process. Camp directors indicated on the QN that they were evaluating aspects of their camps regularly. Fifty-three percent of the QN camps indicated that seasonal staff were evaluated more than once annually, with an additional 45% at least yearly, giving a total of 98% of the camps evaluating seasonal staff at least once a year. Permanent staff were evaluated a little less often, but 91% said this evaluation was done at least yearly. Administrative procedures were evaluated at least yearly by 89% of the camps, although 31% said they did it more than once a year. Facilities were evaluated once or more per year by 92% of the camps. Finally, programs were evaluated yearly by 40% and more than once by 58%, for a total of at least 98% evaluating at least once a year. In just one case did a camp indicate that evaluation occurred only before the ACA accreditation visit that happens once every three years.

The QL data provided some additional insights about frequency of evaluation. Seasonal staff evaluations were a major priority for many of the camps that completed the questionnaire. Several camps indicated that they evaluated seasonal staff at least twice during the summer and often every two weeks. For example, one agency resident camp said, "Seasonal staff are evaluated twice during the summer. The mid-summer evaluation is completed with the staff member and immediate supervisor. The final evaluation is completed with the supervisor...and administrative staff."

Another agency camp director responsible for all three types of camps (day, resident, and conference center) stated:

Staff and administration are evaluated yearly. Budgets are prepared by the director, shared with the advisory committee, submitted to the President, submitted to the finance committee and approved by the Board. Facilities are inspected by our Risk Management office

and the State Health Dept. yearly. Promotional materials are reviewed by our communications and marketing departments. Camp programs are evaluated by the director, staff, advisory board, President, and Risk Management office.

Other evaluations were more informal in nature, as indicated by this statement from an agency day camp director: "Informal evaluations are conducted with staff/campers—suggestions are always looked at for improving, conditions, staffing, facilities, etc." An independent resident camp and conference center director stated, "We have a Board of Trustees with a strategic planning committee that looks on a regular cycle at all aspects of our operation...."

For the camp directors who responded to the surveys, some type of systematic evaluation procedure seemed to be in place, although it varied greatly from camp to camp and differed depending upon what aspect of the camp was actually being evaluated.

Criteria—Who Does the Evaluating

Another consideration for the process of evaluation is to determine who should be involved in the evaluation. As would be expected, the major responsibility for evaluation fell upon the director in most cases. Table 1 shows a summary from the QN data of what was evaluated and who was responsible for the process.

The QL questionnaires confirmed the predominant role of the camp director or the camp administrator in conducting evaluations. In several cases, it was evident that the person actually conducting the evaluations might be a staff member or some other committee, but that the director was ultimately responsible for the evaluation. Outside evaluators were described as government agencies such as the State Department of Social Services, Department of Fish and Wildlife, County Fire Department, or State Department of Labor, to name a few. In one case, a camp director considered the ACA to be an outside evaluator. In all these camps, however, the camp director was still responsible for setting up the evaluation visit and coordination.

EVALUATION IN CAMPING PROGRAMS

TABLE I
Responsibility for Camp Evaluations

Who	Percent Evaluated				
	Seasonal Staff	Permanent Staff	Admin.	Facilities	Program
No one	0	2	2	0	0
Outside Evaluator	0	9	14	6	0
Director	52	77	50	37	25
Other Staff (Program, etc.)	19	2	4	8	6
Director with Other Staff	25	2	18	37	57
Director with Outside Evaluator	4	7	12	12	12

N=54

Other respondents indicated how the evaluation duties were shared. One independent camp director, for example, indicated that the responsibilities of evaluation were split three ways between "the Board, the Executive Director, and the Director of Camping." Another agency resident camp responded, "All participants and staff (both paid and volunteer) have a voice in the evaluation process. The agency staff and the Property Committee are responsible for the compilation of evaluations and direction-setting process."

Criteria—The Why of Evaluations

The two major reasons given in textbooks for evaluation are accountability and decision-making (e.g., Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993; Lundegren & Farrell, 1985). The QN data indicated that improving camp and planning were the major reasons to conduct evaluations with less concern given to accountability. The reasons for evaluating that showed the most variability of importance were "accountability" and "to show costs and benefits," which indicated that these reasons are of mixed importance among the camp directors (see Table 2).

An analysis of the QL data showed some similar reasons emerging for evaluation, but the descriptions that were used by the respondents may help in understanding the importance of the QN data. In general, the notion of improving all aspects of the camp program was evident in the responses.

The actual word "improve" was used in descriptions such as "site improvement and maintenance" and "to assist all in improving performance," as well as other statements implying improvement such as "to revise policies," "to recognize the need for change when and where it may occur," and "to determine new ideas for programs." Related to improvement, the exact words "to see how we are doing" were used. Other phrases that seemed to relate to this theme were "to find the winners among staff and programs," "to see if we're hitting the mark," "to assess what our campers enjoy/don't enjoy," "to learn what is successful, popular, and productive," "to find our strong points and our weak points," "to monitor quality," and "quality control."

Further related to improvement was a notion of using evaluation for feedback and as a way to listen to staff, campers, and parents. "To get the user's perspective" was mentioned, along with "to develop a friendly relationship with girls, parent, and staff" and "improve communication."

Staff evaluation and reasons for evaluating were mentioned by a number of the directors. Reasons for evaluating staff related to the ideas of determining the level of staff performance, helping staff grow, and making decisions about re-employment. One agency resident camp director said:

Staff evaluations are twofold. The mid-summer evaluation helps each individual to know where they are at and their

TABLE 2
Reasons for Conducting Evaluations in Camps

Reason	Percentage			
	Not Important (1)	Minor Importance (2)	Important (3)	Very Important (4)
Mean				
3.9 To improve camp	0	2	10	88
3.7 To get feedback from campers, staff, and parents	0	4	23	74
3.7 To plan for the coming year	0	2	24	74
3.6 To improve the training of staff	0	4	31	65
3.6 To determine value of programs and activities	0	4	32	64
3.5 To determine if goals/objectives are met	0	6	36	58
3.4 For budgeting purposes	2	9	40	49
3.4 As a rationale for future action	0	11	40	49
3.4 To determine reasons for success and failure	0	9	38	53
3.3 To evaluate for risk management purposes	2	15	34	49
2.9 To weigh benefits against costs of program	7	28	26	38
2.8 To show accountability to agency or business	6	33	31	29

N=54

performance level. If changes are needed it gives the individual time to correct if necessary. The final evaluation tells us if we want to re-employ or not....

Although accountability may have been implied, only one director mentioned it directly in the QL comments. This agency resident camp director said, "For program, to make sure that we have a safe and valuable product for our consumers. For facilities, to ensure that we are in compliance with ACA, county, and state regulations."

Data—How (Methods) for Evaluations

According to the directors, most evaluation data are collected through questionnaires, interviews, and observations. Data may be analyzed by using descriptive statistical procedures such as percentages or means, qualitative analysis, or intuitive processes ("eyeballing") for summarizing. Camp directors on the QN indicated that 94% of the camps used questionnaires, 77% used interviews, and 94% used observations. Three-fourths of the directors indicated that

they did not use any statistical techniques in analyzing data.

The QL data provided more information about the methods of evaluation, although the responses seemed to be highly variable. As in the case of the QN data, the respondents indicated that questionnaires were their major form of data collection. Observations and checklists were also mentioned. One camp used follow-up calls to group leaders after the camp sessions were over.

The QL data indicated that confusion surrounded the use of statistical analyses in camp evaluations. A difference existed between the QL and QN responses to the open-ended question about analysis techniques. Only about one-third of the QL respondents said they did nothing with statistics, compared to three-fourths of the QN responses. Directors responding to the QL assumed a more sophisticated approach was needed beyond descriptive (i. e., means, medians, frequencies, percentages) statistics. For example one director responded, "None [no statistics done]—other than computing per-

centage responses." The analysis of the budget, however, was mentioned as a form of statistical analysis in the QL data. Tabulating results using percentages was the most common method of compiling evaluations. Several directors said they looked at the responses on a trends basis. One director said that no statistics were used: "[I] just read it! (Probably should, but who has time.)" In general it seemed that elementary statistics were used by camp directors for evaluation, but they did not necessarily perceive their analyses as statistical.

Judgment—Using Results (The So What)

The best evaluation criteria and data collection will be of no value unless used for decision-making and/or accountability. No matter how the data are analyzed, judgments will need to be made. If no changes are going to be made or if no one is ever going to see the results of the evaluation, evaluations should not be done (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993).

The QN camp directors were asked, "After an evaluation is conducted, what do you do with the results?" Ninety-two percent discussed the results with staff/administration, 15% discussed with campers, 19% discussed with parents, and 54% discussed with board members. Almost all camp directors said they reviewed the results and used them as needed, and 48% said they shared them with other camp professionals. Only half of the camp directors wrote reports and summaries.

The responses to the open-ended questions, "After an evaluation is conducted, what do you do with the results?" and "How are the results of your evaluations distributed or communicated?" yielded a variety of responses. Some of the responses related to the purpose of the evaluation, e.g., "used it to improve camp next year." Other directors talked about compiling written reports that were shared with key personnel, other agencies, staff at meetings, Boards, or camp committees. From a staff perspective, camp directors mentioned putting evaluations in staff files. Several agency camps, primarily, discussed sending a written report of summer camp statistical summaries to the

membership for use as a public relations tool and as a way to describe planning for the next year. At least two camp directors mentioned using parent comments, if positive, in brochures and promotional materials. One camp director indicated that nothing was done "if they [the evaluations] indicate we're 'on board.' If an area of concern surfaces, it would be taken for discussion to either the Advisory Committee, and/or our Board."

Qualifications for Doing Evaluations

Evaluation is not something one can learn by reading an article, going to a three-hour workshop, or reading a book. Each time an evaluation is done, something can be learned about how to do subsequent evaluations better (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993). Thus, an evaluation system will often evolve based on the expertise of the staff. We were interested in ascertaining how camp personnel had gotten evaluation expertise and the type of additional continuing education that would be helpful.

In the QN part of this study, 17% of the camp directors said they had no previous training in doing evaluations, 75% said they learned by doing, 40% had had some relevant coursework, and 47% had attended a workshop on evaluation done by ACA or some other group.

Directors were also asked to indicate their level of knowledge as low, medium, or high concerning particular elements of evaluation. The average score of the camp directors for all areas was in the medium to low levels. The area of least expertise was statistics. Determining what questions to ask was the area of most knowledge.

The responses to the QL concerning where evaluators received training was similar to the QN data. "No formal training, just common sense" was expressed by several camp directors. One independent resident director stated, "A camp director who has experienced 'camp life' first hand needs no formal education or training to be able to evaluate the quality of a counselor's performance." Personal experience, often combined with training from the agency or ACA was mentioned through such statements as

“years in camping,” “experience has been the best teacher,” and “I worked in one of the best YMCA camps in the country and learned from the directors.” Several directors mentioned formal coursework they had had in business, physical education, education, and recreation as important training.

The responses to the QL questions about the information needed to do evaluations better in the future yielded more specific responses than the QN questionnaire. The major concern related to developing good forms (i.e., questionnaires) to use in evaluation. Related to this idea, several directors indicated they would like to see forms that could be duplicated for use. Some of the comments included, “What a formal suggested evaluation should look like!,” “assistance with better evaluation forms,” “new examples of forms used to gather data—additional ideas on analyzing,” “how to make up evaluations, how to phrase questions,” “specific examples of worded questions and why they are worded the way they are,” and “ideas from other camps.”

Several directors said they would like more information on tabulating results and computer programs specifically designed for evaluations. A religiously affiliated resident and conference center director, for example, asked a poignant question in regard to the value of evaluations, “I feel like if our campers are returning year after year [and] we are keeping our beds full, we must be doing OK. Is that not a good enough evaluation?”

Examining the Qualitative and Quantitative Data

Although a secondary purpose of this descriptive project about the status of evaluation in accredited camping programs, the examination of the qualitative and quantitative data offered a few insights. Directors responded at a higher rate to the quantitative questionnaires (54% for QN and 31% for QL), probably because the QN was quicker and easier to complete, as time did not have to be taken to write out answers. Assuming that the sample that completed the QN was representative of camp directors in accredited camps, a baseline of information was obtained about evaluation in camps. Al-

though the baseline exists, the information garnered from the QL provided a way to understand the interpretation of the questions, as well as provided a framework for understanding the meaning of some of the ideas. The conclusions reached from the two sets of data were similar except where noted. The two data sets provided an opportunity to explore the status of evaluation from both a breadth and depth perspective.

Conclusions

This study has provided an indication of the current status of evaluation in accredited camps in the United States. Several conclusions can be drawn. First, camp directors seemed to place emphasis on evaluations for helping them improve various aspects of the camp especially related to staff and program. Second, evaluation systems were broad, as directors examine all the aspects of camp that require evaluations. This breadth of possibilities made evaluation appear to be a time consuming and sometimes daunting task. Third, it was the camp director or camp administrator who had the ultimate responsibility for evaluation in most situations. Fourth, variety existed in how evaluation results were tabulated and used. The potential for statistical information seemed to be confusing to directors. Fifth, most directors indicated that more could be learned about evaluation and that a number of ways existed to get that information.

Recommendations

As a result of this study and other guidelines available about conducting evaluations (e.g., Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993; Lundegren & Farrell, 1985), several recommendations can be made:

1. Evaluation in camps ought to include systematic formal processes as well as informal day to day evaluations.
2. Evaluation ought to incorporate aspects of why, how, when, where, who, and so what into any system designed.
3. The primary purpose of evaluation ought to reflect how to improve aspects of the camp whether pertaining to staff, facilities, administration, or program.

4. Developing good evaluation systems is a process that can be enhanced by formal education, in-service and professional development training, and by personal experience.
5. Opportunities for increased understanding about statistical procedures needs to be available for camp evaluators. These experiences should be designed to increase the familiarity with qualitative as well as quantitative analyses and interpretation processes.

Evaluation has become recognized as an important component of the success of any organization. For professionals in camping, the evaluation process is critical for improving programs, facilities, staff, and administrative procedures for the present and in the future. For many of us, the information from

sound evaluations can help us justify our programs, provide needed facts to our public, and show a commitment to improvement. As we continue to strive for greater recognition of the role of camping in the lives of our participants, evaluation could become the mechanism for supporting our assertions about the positive values of camping. Through appropriate evaluation processes and the wise use of results, we may indeed promote better camping for all.

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