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

Nick Fuhrman, Assistant Professor
University of Georgia
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