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Introduction to the Special Issue: Drawing Content from an Emerging QA Community

Michael Millington

The 2008 Summit on Vocational Rehabilitation Program Evaluation marked the beginning of a developing community of practice around the larger concept of quality in vocational rehabilitation counseling. The original motivation that brought people together was inconsistency in the new RSA monitoring process. Directives to improve outcomes and accountability in the face of shrinking resources flowed down the hierarchy from federal to state and from state to newly minted program evaluation officers. These officers were pressed into service often with little knowledge of program evaluation and even less of quality assurance (QA). They were new to their jobs, isolated by their tasks, and eager to find security and direction in a peer group.

Don Uchida, director of the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation (USOR), initiated the organizational response. USOR representative Kyle Walker engaged the local Technical Assistance and Continuing Education Center (TACE Region 8), resulting in the cooperative development of the first Quality Assurance Summit. The work of expediting this event fell to Michael Shoemaker, USOR program planning and evaluation specialist, and Scott Sabella, the director of the Region 8 TACE center.

The 2008 Summit started out as an event, but quickly became an on-going pursuit based on the strength of the need expressed by its constituents. The event was well attended and enthusiastically received. Its theme centered around definition, as in “What is evaluation?” and “What are we supposed to be doing?” Experts from academia and private practice were called to speak to models while program evaluation specialists relayed their experiences and early insights in QA implementation. The National Clearinghouse of Rehabilitation Training Materials (NCRTM) joined the Summit initiative to provide an archive for these materials and to see to their dissemination. The organizers, speakers, and early attendees formed a loose alliance with a promise to build on early momentum. Two committees emerged to move the summit forward. The first was charged with organizing the 2009 Summit. The second was charged with building an online community of practice.

The contents of this special issue on QA arose out of the 2008 proceedings as the first cooperative venture of the community website. All of the first authors, except Fong Chan, spoke at the conference and their contributions here reflect the early foundational theme.

Leahy et al. define QA models and practice applications. The authors cast QA as a broad concept that contains and redefines program evaluation in a continuous improvement mode. To illustrate the range of possible interpretations of QA, the authors profile three models that increasingly approximate the statistical quality control that underlies business-based QA. Two ongoing applications of QA-inspired program evaluation are showcased. The reader is challenged to consider how evidence based practice is to be pursued in the development of a uniquely “VR” approach to QA and continuous improvement; one that embraces the complexities of the human service context.

Stensrud and Bruinekool address VR research needs from a QA perspective. The authors advocate for systematic QA protocols, empirically based best practice, research of best practice to establish evidence base, and using findings to shape clinical decision-making. They illustrate evolutionary nature of a true quality practice: Criteria beget standards; standards beget decision rules; decision rules beget value chains and through value chains our research is expressed through service. Rather than

try to reduce the complexity of the system by studying variables in isolation, the authors embrace complexity by studying systems *in situ*. Change in this model becomes an extension of research; dissemination of best practices becomes an essential component, not an afterthought. The health industry is used to illustrate how quality can be expressed in a service field and offered as a blueprint for VR plans.

Chan and his colleagues address the language of outcomes. The authors confront the challenge of researching complex systems by advocating for the use of an establish, articulated taxonomy of (ICF) measures that can be used to evaluate client need for service across the helping profession continuum and to track outcomes in both the short and long term, specific and global. It is a strong argument inasmuch as there is no model more universally applied, inclusive, or researched. Authors lay out the parameters of a strategy for developing a taxonomy for VR through a lengthy exposition of instruments linked to evaluative factors. We are left with a general sense of the enormity of crafting a research model based on this expansive constellation of variables.

Vandergoot et al. address the implications of QA on training. The authors interpret the now familiar continuous improvement process popularized by Deming through the perspective of training and performance management. With this model in mind, they trace the evolution of training in the field from its inception to the latest restructuring of the TACE Centers and the new impetus towards evidence based practice. They posit that all of the elements are present for such a quality-based performance management training system, but they suffer from fragmentation and lack of connection to the actual point of service. Integrating research, training, and operations across pre-service and continuing education contexts will be a monumental task with implications at every level of organization. Authors suggest turning to the QA system adopted by health care, and propose organizational partnerships as a central prerequisite to success. Applying continuous improvement strategies to the training process is the central theme here as elsewhere in this issue.

Millington and Schultz contemplate the context for change and fleshes out the challenges of interpreting a free market strategy in a compliance culture. The authors highlight some of the dysfunctional artifacts of organizational culture in a compliance context. They review different perspectives on conceptualizing organizational culture and offer suggestions on how to proceed in aligning culture with QA implementation.

As the inaugural product of the emerging QA community of practice, this set of articles represents a pragmatic assessment of QA application in VR and a framework for moving forward. It is a humble start with the potential for heroic change in the future. It marks the beginning, after years of discussion, of our entry into the quality movement. We have borrowed these quality concepts from the market-driven world of business management and begun to shape them to our own needs. We gloss over certain aspects of QA when it conflicts with our worldview. We bend other aspects beyond their intended definitions. But the seed of quality has taken root, and it has a community in which to grow.

In between the 2008 and 2009 Summit conferences, the emerging community of practice launched a website and initiated an on-going series of webinars on program evaluation and QA topics of interests. Both efforts have found their own means to continuous improvement through an increasingly engaged customer base. By the 2009 Summit in Denver, the theme and climate of the group had palpably changed. The role of expert had expanded to include many more practitioners. Content shifted from the theoretical to the concrete. Activities emphasized the sharing of experience and tools. Interest and commitment to the group and future events multiplied. Plans for the 2010 Summit are already underway, with processes in place to expand upon the national identity of the group. The community website is presently developing new platforms for disseminating the latest conference proceedings, live webinar events, and expanding networking capabilities.

It is within this community of practice that quality management will evolve. The vitality of this nascent community gives me hope for continued success. There will be stark existential conflicts faced in reconciling innovation, risk taking, and continuous improvement with a compliance-driven bureaucracy. We have yet to even address the implied concepts of lean production, process management, and the role of information system technology in implementing quality management. But we have a beachhead. The models introduced in Leahy's article will continue to expand and differentiate. The analysis of values streams will lead to more articulated, efficient, and effective practices. The establishment of a protocol that bridges current practice to a future evidence base will unite the scientist and practitioner in common cause. And professional training, with a centralized resource of expertise and best practice, networked for instance access to just-in-time knowledge, is already emerging from the Summit model.

This special issue is only a commentary on the VR profession's fight for relevancy in hard economic times. It suggests a response beyond stultifying fear to directed community action. It will be interesting, to say the least, to see if this commentary evolves into a manifesto for change in a unified field . . . or becomes a footnote on a failed movement. I say community will be the key, and that I will be counted among those who show up to do the hard work of building one.

About the Editor

Michael Millington, Ph.D., is the director of the National Clearinghouse of Rehabilitation Training Materials and assistant research professor at Utah State University. He currently writes on issues of developing communities of practice, social networks, and knowledge dissemination; and consults on issues of employment and vocational evaluation.

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