Program Evaluation for Accreditation

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Program evaluation in preparation for accreditation provides opportunities for the identification of program strengths, weaknesses, and improvement potential. In the present study, naturalistic inquiry, an evaluation methodology responsive to the concerns of persons with a stake in the program, was successfully used in preparation for the accreditation of an occupational therapy program. The experiences of undergraduate students who implemented the program evaluation as part of an honors elective course describe the process, outcomes, benefits, and problems associated with the use of naturalistic inquiry as a responsive program evaluation.

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models in which judgment was an integral part of evaluation and in which the evaluator was the judge were developed (Guba & Lincoln, 1987). These evaluation models—decision-oriented, effects-oriented, and neomeasurement—are still used today. As a result of the equality movement of the 1970s, evaluation models that focused on the claims, concerns, and issues raised by various stakeholder audiences developed, including responsive evaluation (Stake, 1987), utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 1980, 1987), adversarial evaluation (Wolf, 1987), and naturalistic evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1987).

Method

To prepare for accreditation, the occupational therapy faculty and staff at Indiana University in Indianapolis began to work through the American Occupational Therapy Association’s (1987) self-study guidelines, collecting quantitative data that provided objective measurements of the program’s efficacy. These data included such course materials as syllabi, tests, and course evaluations completed by students. Annual faculty meetings that critically examined and attempted to improve the curriculum documented the faculty’s efforts at program evaluation. A comprehensive program evaluation responsive to stakeholders outside the institution, however, was lacking. To remedy this situation, a program evaluation using naturalistic inquiry, or constructivist methodology, was undertaken. In this methodology, the concerns and values of those with a stake in the occupational therapy program served as organizers for data collection and analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Time consumption, a disadvantage of naturalistic inquiry, necessitated the involvement of many persons to collect and make sense of data from stakeholders. With slightly less than 1 year to complete a program evaluation before accreditation, I decided to teach senior occupational therapy students enrolled in an honors elective course to use naturalistic inquiry to conduct the evaluation. Five students elected to participate in the course and complete the program evaluation with the assistance of two faculty members experienced in naturalistic inquiry.

In a 2-week seminar, the five students learned conventional and alternative research paradigms, the history of program evaluation in education, and the contributions and weaknesses of each evaluation methodology. They learned about the accreditation of occupational therapy programs, naturalistic inquiry, and the program evaluation they were about to undertake. Naturalistic inquiry, as a qualitative research methodology, is conducted in a natural environment with the use of observation, interview, and document review. As data are collected, they are analyzed to provide direction for further data collection to enhance understanding of the research question or program being evaluated. Respondents provide information, are informed of other respondents’ viewpoints, and further contribute to understanding the evaluation through the hermeneutic process of negotiated understanding. Prolonged engagement with respondents, persistent observation in the natural environment, the inquirer’s review of the data with the respondents (member checking), and the creation of an audit trail referencing all data to their sources enhance the trustworthiness of the data to be reported (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Meyers, 1989).

Completion of the program evaluation provided the students with opportunities to better understand research. Their preparation of requests to conduct inquiries with subjects heightened their awareness of the protection of subjects in research. Each student also prepared a grant application for funding of his or her inquiry by the university honors program. The Institutional Review Board approved the inquiry, and the honors program granted the amount of money each student requested. The students were thus prepared to begin their inquiries armed with skills, funds, and approval and encouragement from the institution and the occupational therapy program (see Figure 1).

The mission of the occupational therapy program at Indiana University is to prepare therapists for practice in the state of Indiana. Stakeholders for this program evaluation were identified as therapists who had graduated from the program within 5 years and supervisors and employers of recent graduates located throughout the state. The five student inquirers were provided with lists of all facilities in the state that were known to employ occupational therapists, but they were not limited to the lists for the selection of respondents. They endeavored to include as many stakeholders and different practice environments as possible.

Each student inquirer contacted a potential respondent, explained the purpose and the methodology of the program evaluation, and asked permission to conduct an inquiry in the respondent’s place of employment. During the first visit, the student inquirer had the respondent sign a consent form, which assured confidentiality in the evaluation report; observed the environment and activities in which the respondent engaged; and conducted an interview focusing on three initial questions: “What is or should be the purpose of the occupational therapy education program?” “What are the assets or weaknesses of the program?” and “What suggestions do you have that might improve the program?” At the end of the interview, the student inquirer reviewed with the respondent his or her session notes to ensure the accuracy of
the data collected. This process is called member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To enhance understanding and search for divergent ideas about the occupational therapy program, the student inquirer sought respondents who might construct reality differently than previous respondents. Each student inquirer had a different number of respondents, different environments in which occupational therapists were employed, and different types of practices reflective of the region of the state in which the evaluation was conducted.

Each respondent’s construction of the functions, assets, and weaknesses of the occupational therapy program along with his or her recommendations for improvements were meshed with the other respondents’ constructions to create a joint construction reflective of each respondent’s ideas. Any discrepancies were used to elaborate on some of the salient factors that emerged, in order to answer the three initial questions posed about the program. The substantial agreement among the respondents led to the emergence of themes. The student inquirers focused on expanding knowledge about each of these themes, such as the content of specific courses to reflect practice and continuing education opportunities for clinicians. The repetition of themes or the discrepancies that emerged throughout the evaluation provided the basis for categorizing the data collected.

Throughout the summer, the student inquirers periodically met with the faculty members for peer debriefings. These sessions allowed the student inquirers to discuss emerging themes and problems encountered either in collecting data or in making sense of what had been collected and to receive suggestions and support for continued inquiries. When the fall semester commenced, the five student inquirers had large quantities of data, which were coded for an audit trail so that each statement or idea could be referenced. These data then needed to be compiled into written reports. Because the student inquirers had transferred data from initial sources to index cards, with a new card for each idea or respondent’s quote, the index cards were perused and sorted to provide the best categories for the written reports.

The evaluation reports were written sporadically throughout the fall semester. Some of the student inquirers returned to respondents for clarification or enhancement of some points. Academic responsibilities also slowed the progression of the evaluation reports. As each rough draft was completed, it was mailed to each respondent, accompanied by a letter requesting agreement with the report or clarification of any points. Each student inquirer received confirmation of agreement with his or her report from the respondents, along with many positive comments about the report and the experience of having been involved in the program evaluation. The reports were put in their final form and included audit trails referencing each statement or idea to its source document. The reports, raw data on notepaper and index cards, and each student inquirer’s activity log were submitted to the evaluation coordinator so that an audit process could be undertaken as an additional verification of the trustworthiness of the evaluation results.

**Results**

The case reports prepared by each student identified regional needs of occupational therapists throughout the state. The nature of practice influenced recommendations for the occupational therapy program’s improvement as well as those aspects of the program that the respondents identified as very good. The specific results had relevance only to the stakeholders of the occupational therapy program. The faculty received valuable feedback that could be used to improve their courses and the respondents appreciated the fact that what they needed in the clinics was being attended to by the school. The five student inquirers
presented the results of their program evaluation to their classmates during a research class. The senior students who had not participated in the program evaluation were interested in the data collected and adequately prepared for practice based on the comments from clinicians and supervisors in practice throughout the state. Faculty members had the opportunity to read an executive summary prepared for the accreditation team as well as each student inquirer's complete report. The specific quotes from clinicians, supervisors, and employers of occupational therapists provided valuable information regarding ideas for future improvement in the program, so as to make it more responsive to practice needs within the state of Indiana. It was clear to those reading the reports that the information provided by this program evaluation would not have been available through other forms of program evaluation.

Discussion

The evaluation described in the present study empowered stakeholders of the occupational therapy program to raise issues and concerns that they considered important to the future of the program. The student inquirers found the experience of participating in undergraduate research valuable and plan to use naturalistic inquiry for future research or evaluation. All participants appreciated the openness of the methodology that allowed respondents to contribute to the understanding of the evaluand without preestablished areas of concern in the form of surveys. This process also created goodwill between clinical and academic stakeholders of the program. The accreditation team found the evaluation to be useful in their own inquiry of the occupational therapy program.

Despite the favorable outcomes of this program evaluation, there were some weaknesses that must be addressed in future evaluations using naturalistic inquiry methodology. The respondents participating in the evaluation must include faculty and consumers of occupational therapy services. Their participation would provide increased knowledge regarding the efficacy of the program and valuable ideas for improvements. The program evaluation required a lot of time, which not all students may be willing to commit. Program evaluation should be a continuous process, but since another accreditation process will not be forthcoming for several years, students may have less interest in this as a focus of inquiry. Finally, the research funding through the honors program lightened the financial burden the student inquirers had to assume for phone calls and travel to collect data. Without some funding mechanism for long-distance data collection, the cost may be prohibitive for most students.

Overall, the benefits of program evaluation far outweighed the disadvantages. This was a unique opportunity to use a new program evaluation methodology, engage undergraduate students in funded research activity, and increase communication among providers and consumers of the occupational therapy program.

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References


