


Translating Complexity Into Effective Practice

BRIEF 02

The Ins and Outs of Evaluating
Technical Assistance

OMG CENTER FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING



The Ins and Outs of Evaluating Technical Assistance

IN LARGE-SCALE, COMPLICATED, AND OFTEN MESSY INITIATIVES AIMED AT SHIFTING LARGE SCALE SYSTEMS, POLICIES, OR PRACTICES, THE LINES BETWEEN TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND FORMATIVE EVALUATION CAN GET VERY MURKY VERY QUICKLY. FOR THE PAST 30 YEARS THE OMG CENTER HAS FOUND ITSELF SQUARELY IN THE CENTER OF THIS MURKINESS. IN THIS PIECE WE SHARE SOME OF THE LESSONS WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS AND GRANTEEES THROUGH STRUCTURED AND ACTIONABLE FEEDBACK PROCESSES.

Midway through its three-year initiative to reinvent developmental education at 16 community colleges across seven states, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation needed a better grasp of what was working and what wasn't.

So it turned to the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning and its partner DVP-Praxis Ltd. to conduct a rapid assessment. With about a year and a half left in the grant, the process was able to focus the foundation, the technical assistance providers, and the colleges on what could be accomplished in the remaining amount of time.

"It helped better align expectations among partners and identify concrete things that had to be done," says Kendall Guthrie, a lead senior program officer at the Gates Foundation.

It was that rapid assessment that summed up for Guthrie the unique niche that OMG has carved out in the field of evaluation, strategy, and capacity building.

"We look to them to provide us strategic advice with an evaluative lens," Guthrie adds.

Large-scale change in education—such as increasing the numbers of high school students who make a successful transition into college—requires the knowledge and expertise of many organizations. With so many partners involved, however, it becomes necessary to make sure funders, grantees, and technical assistance providers have a common understanding about the goals they are aiming for and who is responsible for which tasks.

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-BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION
PROGRAM OFFICER

OMG is proving to be a leader in keeping large-scale, national-level initiatives on track while at the same time offering feedback that helps technical assistance providers improve their effectiveness. The organization's skills have been especially critical in the success of several postsecondary access and success projects.

In addition to the Developmental Education Initiative, OMG has been hired as the technical assistance evaluator for three other Gates-funded efforts—Completion by Design, Community Partnership in Learning (CLIP) and Partners in Postsecondary Success (PPS). CLIP and PPS are actually part of a "portfolio" called Community Partnerships, which focuses on bringing multiple education, government and community partners together to increase college graduation rates.

OMG is also the technical assistance evaluator for the Citi Postsecondary Success Project—a five-year initiative funded by the Citi Foundation that aims to

create a college-going culture in a cohort of high schools in three cities and increase the percentage of low-income and first-generation students going to college.

Getting Off to a Good Start

Evaluation findings come after some work has been completed, but OMG also plays an important role in the early phases of the initiative, collaborating with the technical assistance teams they are hired to evaluate.

"They provided an incredible framework for thinking about the role of [technical assistance]," Guthrie says about the Completion by Design initiative, which is focused on increasing community college graduation rates. "It strengthened the grant right from the beginning."

Likewise, with the CLIP initiative, OMG guided the foundation and the National League of Cities—the technical assistance provider—toward setting measurable targets, and setting clear parameters of how the technical assistance would be assessed.

"We had all gotten into that grant with vague ideas about what we were doing," Guthrie says. "We knew what would be better for students in 15 years, but we needed to know what success looked like and what was practical and do-able in three years." Getting clear on what was do-able and the thinking through the technical assistance and evaluation supports needed to get there also helped build trust amongst the new partners.

At the beginning of the CPSP initiative, OMG led the partners through a process of developing a theory of change to guide the work in the three sites—San Francisco, Philadelphia and Miami-Dade. In CPSP, FHI 360 and the Public Education Network are providing assistance to the grantees, which are the local education funds in the three sites.

"It gave us a framework for measuring the progress over an extended period of time," says Daria Sheehan, a senior program officer at the Citi Foundation. She added that hiring OMG at the beginning of CPSP was in keeping with the Foundation's increased emphasis on results. "We've shifted the focus of our grant investments on the results our partners are striving to achieve and less on all of the things that they say they are going to do," she says.

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-DEPUTY DIRECTOR, OMG CENTER

Setting Clear Expectations

An evaluation of technical assistance starts with a framework. And that framework must be specific about the kinds of changes the funder can expect to see as a result of the provider’s technical assistance, says Meg Long, deputy director of OMG. “We build those frameworks together and we refine them over time,” she says.

OMG works in collaboration with funders and technical assistance providers. But Long and other OMG leaders also take several steps to make sure their role as evaluators is clearly understood and to let funders, technical assistance providers, and grantees know what they can expect over the course of the project. These include:

- Being clear about when they are collecting data for an evaluation and when they are just providing feedback or having what Long calls “troubleshooting conversations.”
- Being clear about when they are providing feedback to a technical assistance provider, how it will be delivered, and what they are expected to do with it. Is the feedback just a suggestion, or is it an action that the provider must make for the sake of the initiative?
- Being clear about how information will be shared and with whom. The standard practice is for the grantee site to be the first recipient of written feedback reports for fact-checking, then the technical assistance provider, and then the funder.

These steps are an important part of establishing trust between the partners and the evaluators.

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Ongoing Feedback

Once the “ground rules” about working with an evaluation partner are established, OMG doesn’t just sit back and wait until it’s time to release the evaluation. OMG staff members share ongoing feedback with the providers and step in when misunderstandings or other interpersonal issues get in the way of achieving the goals of the initiative.

“We’re not going to let a really bad situation spiral out of control,” Long says.

OMG also recognizes when an initiative demands additional opportunities for participants to communicate with each other and re-assess what they have accomplished and what they need to do next.

The Community Partnerships portfolio, for example, is as much about learning what it will take to see more students enter and complete college as it is implementing actual changes, explains Tania Tasse-Guillen, a senior project manager at OMG.

So OMG added some specific procedures and events to better understand what people are learning and how their understanding of the initiative has evolved.

First, ever since Community Partnerships was launched, OMG has conducted annual “update interviews” with the partners, focusing on the relationships and the communication practices between the partners. The interviews highlight what the partners expect to accomplish over the coming year and what they expect of each other, explains Tasse-Guillen. “We are always working on tracking what we believe we see happening and what we see as realistic and possible,” she adds.

Secondly, in the summer of 2011, OMG brought all of the partners together for a “theory of change refresh meeting,” which Tasse-Guillen described as a chance to ask whether “we need to change what we put on paper.” In this initiative especially, the theory of change has become a living document, Tasse-Guillen says.

“It was obvious to us that it needed to continue to be revised and updated,” she says, adding that another “refresh meeting” will be held before the end of the grant. Methods like these are especially

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-CITI FOUNDATION PROGRAM OFFICER

useful when turnover happens at either a foundation, or among the grantees or the technical assistance providers.

Building Capacity

OMG also focuses on developing strengths within organizations so they can make progress toward their goals. In the case of CPSP—in which the use of data to drive results is a key component—OMG has been a “consistent resource” in helping the local education funds determine what data was needed from the school districts and how best to use it, says Sheehan. In fact, OMG’s evaluation highlighted the finding that the capacity of local education funds to collect and analyze data needed to be strengthened.

Rochelle Nichols-Solomon, a senior program officer at FHI 360, says she appreciates how OMG has used both a “soft touch and a strong touch” in working with the local sites as well as in evaluating technical assistance. OMG’s reports, she says, are useful, thoughtful and “don’t sit on the shelf.”

A ‘Clear Voice’

OMG evaluators are also skilled at listening to multiple perspectives, gathering what seem to be unconnected pieces of information, and fitting those together into an easy-to-understand picture of how initiatives are progressing. Sheehan calls them the “clear voice in the room.”

OMG has “a real ability to communicate very clearly and succinctly what is going on and what has been achieved,” Sheehan says. “They understand what a funder needs to know and the level of detail they need to know.” Nichols-Solomon added that she appreciates the broader context that OMG is able to bring to the initiatives that they evaluate. “I value their expertise and their experience that allows us to build on what is known and not act like this is new,” she says. “We can get our heads in the weeds sometimes. You need someone outside to look at the bigger picture.”

LESSONS LEARNED

OMG’s experience in evaluating technical assistance provides some lessons that can guide future evaluations of the multiple partners involved in large-scale change:

- Clear and specific evaluation frameworks are necessary in order to manage and communicate expectations for all involved, particularly for the technical assistance partner to make sure that the lines between evaluation and assistance are explicitly clear.
- Develop an intentional process for revisiting the theory of change and evaluation frameworks. Whether in person or by phone, these discussions provide participants with a formal opportunity to assess how far they have come, where they need to go, and what they expect of others along the way. It also allows the evaluation and technical assistance teams to fine tune their strategies as necessary throughout the course of the initiative.
- Evaluators should be thoughtful about how much feedback to provide and with whom it should be shared. Develop a process for providing information to funders, technical assistance providers and grantees and stick to it. Remember to be explicit about noting when feedback requires explicit action and when it is just “food for thought”.

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