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ABSTRACT

The Hofstra University program in applied research and evaluation in psychology is described as an example of one model for training evaluators. The training of psychologists with a specialization in evaluation research is reviewed, and the pros and cons of evaluation research training within psychology are discussed. Several potential benefits of training psychologists in evaluation research are presented, such as: (1) the psychologist's professional identity remains within a discipline with recognized licensing and accreditation procedures; (2) an evaluator trained as a psychologist may have a broader range of marketable skills; and (3) training in evaluation research may increase the range of career opportunities for psychologists. One disadvantage of this training concerns the notion that evaluation research represents a body of knowledge which transcends any single discipline; the development of multidisciplinary inputs to reflect the contributions of other disciplines is suggested to overcome this problem. Additionally, other concerns of evaluation research training within psychology are addressed, and the Hofstra University program is described in detail.
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Training in Evaluation Research:
The Perspective From a Department of Psychology¹

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Running Head: Training in Evaluation

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Training In Evaluation Research :The Perspective From A Department of Psychology

There is an old Islamic tale which tells of three blind men who encounter an elephant for the first time. Each touches a part of the elephant and tries to convey to the others what this strange beast is like. One of them grabs the animal by the trunk and cries out that it resembles a large snake. Another touches the animal's underbelly and informs the others that it is really more like a whale. And the third blind man, who explores the animal by touching its legs, says that the other two are wrong; the animal is built like the pillars of Rome.

These days, evaluators seem a lot like that elephant in the story. To some, the elephant cum evaluator should be trained in a core discipline, such as psychology, sociology, or social work, with specialized training in evaluation research at either predoctoral or postdoctoral levels. To others, it is better to take an interdisciplinary approach toward dressing these elephants cum evaluators-to-be. Consequently there is wide diversity of training programs in evaluation research. These range from masters level programs in evaluation, such as at Hahnemann Medical College, to postdoctoral programs at Northwestern University and the University of California at San Francisco. There are interdisciplinary doctoral programs which offer evaluation training, such as the program in social ecology at the University of California at Irvine, and various programs which offer course work in evaluation methods in such areas as urban planning, public administration, public health, epidemiology, and educational research.

The American Psychological Association's graduate school handbook, Graduate Study in Psychology 1980-1981 (APA, 1979), lists six doctoral

programs in psychology which offer specialization in evaluation research or program evaluation. These universities include one in the northeast (Hofstra University), three from the midwest (University of Nebraska, Northwestern University, and St. Louis University), one from the south (Florida State University), and one from the far west (University of California at Berkeley).

The intent of this paper is not to make a proprietary claim for psychology to training rights in evaluation, nor to diminish the value of other training models. The fledgling profession of evaluation has yet to reach any consensus regarding such issues as training, accreditation, and licensure, and the perennial problem concerning the designation of roles appropriate to masters and doctoral level practitioners is not any clearer in evaluation than in psychology. Rather, the intent of this paper is to contribute to the continuing discussion of the various models of training future evaluators, and to review several of the pros and cons of training psychologists in this area of specialization at the predoctoral level. As a case in point, the Hofstra University program in Applied Research and Evaluation in Psychology will be described to provide a concrete example of this training model. Regarding training at the predoctoral level, it should be noted parenthetically that evaluation research has been exempt from the mandate that NIMH training grant support in the behavioral sciences be shifted from predoctoral to postdoctoral training. Apparently, the cry that there are too many Ph.D.'s "out there" does not yet apply to the developing field of evaluation.

Several Pros and Cons of Evaluation Research Training Within Psychology

Sechrest (1976) suggested that psychology represents a natural training discipline for evaluation research, given the traditional emphasis in psychology on research and quantitative methods. Sechrest notes that such psychologists as Donald Campbell have traditionally been in the forefront in developing alternative research methodologies to apply to field research problems. While it is true that evaluators often are called upon to evaluate programs in areas of service which are unfamiliar to them, Sechrest (1976), among others, recognizes the value of bringing a background of information in the particular area to bear on the evaluation task. Since mental health is perhaps the predominant area for utilization of evaluation, it stands to reason that evaluation researchers in mental health receive their training in a behavioral discipline, such as psychology, in which they will be exposed to principles which underlie program interventions.

One potential benefit in training psychologists in evaluation research is that their professional identity remains within a core discipline with its own recognized licensing and accreditation procedures. Although some have argued that evaluation research represents a new profession requiring its own professional identity and licensing, it remains that mental or physical health agencies often require training or licensure within a core health related discipline as a prerequisite for many positions. While in such states as New York, there has been recognition of evaluation research as an independent specialty, with career ladders for evaluation specialists and examinations in evaluation, this movement toward professionalization on a national scale is only in a nascent stage of development (Morell & Flaherty, 1978).

Another concern to be recognized is that the field of evaluation is particularly sensitive to political changes and budget considerations. While the prospects for government support of evaluation research remain bright in an otherwise cloudy fiscal picture for research, we must allow for the fact that a change in administrative policy could severely restrict the evaluation marketplace. An evaluator who is trained as a psychologist may have a broader range of marketable skills than one trained within a specialized degree program in evaluation research.

In the past several years attention has focused on the increasingly restrictive employment situation within academia. Astin (1976), for example, in reviewing the future prospects for psychologists in academia concluded that ". . . the development of new faculty positions is not expected to be anywhere near the rate of new doctorates. According to projections, the new doctorates will have to find alternates to the traditional academic careers pursued by doctorate holders in the past" (p. 76). Evaluation research has been recognized as one such innovative career opportunity for tomorrow's psychologists (Albee, 1976; Wortman, 1977), although present training models in psychology which emphasize laboratory-based experimental research fail to equip students with the evaluative skills necessary to conduct meaningful evaluation studies in the community (Sechrest, 1976). Similarly, Young and Morrow (1980) recognize that while "it is now apparent that the majority of Ph.D's in experimental psychology will not gain an academic position . . . (they) will be forced to seek employment in markets in which they may be unready or unable to compete" (p. 122). That is, unless they receive specialized training and field experience in evaluation methodologies.

Concerning the potential disadvantages of an evaluation training model within psychology, it must be recognized that evaluation research represents a body of knowledge which transcends any one discipline. The evaluator encounters a research vocabulary seldom discussed in traditional psychology training programs, including such terms as needs assessment, management information systems, cost-benefit analysis, performance measurement, etc. As psychology faculty, we may be responsible for teaching such material to our students, although our own training backgrounds may have been deficient in these areas. Of course it might be argued that our professional development as faculty should not have ended with the receipt of our graduate degrees. Many of us have acquired these evaluation skills through self-development, or perhaps through completing a post-doctoral fellowship in evaluation. However, there is certainly a need for additional continuing education in these areas. For instance, the local society of evaluators in the east, the Eastern Evaluation Research Society, sponsors courses in selected evaluation topics for professionals and is developing a more comprehensive continuing education program.

Another possibility to increase multidisciplinary input to a training program is to involve evaluation practitioners from diverse backgrounds as lecturers in special topics in program evaluation seminars. It is also possible to arrange for students to take advanced specialized courses in other departments, in computer applications or in cost accounting for example, although we should recognize that university departments often tend to be covetous of their own student's credit hours.

It should also be recognized that an evaluation research program may run the risk of concentrating too much of its efforts in methodology courses at the cost of severely limiting the content courses offered in various areas of psychology. It is conceivable that doctoral degrees in psychology will be awarded to students who have taken few if any content courses in psychology. Such degrees might better be described as degrees in applied methodology or evaluation rather than as degrees in psychology. In developing curriculum, it is necessary to consult with state licensing boards and educational accrediting agencies to determine that the program offers the requisite numbers of psychology courses in different areas to qualify for psychology standing, and to qualify its graduates for eligibility for psychology licensure.

A major concern in the development of doctoral studies within psychology in the area of evaluation research is the quality and feasibility of dissertation research. Traditional dissertation research in psychology has involved testing of theoretically relevant predictions of behavior under laboratory conditions in which strict experimental controls are possible. In applied settings, however, true experimental designs may not be feasible, or the dependent variables which can be measured may not adequately test the theoretical model. Most field investigations in the evaluation area tend to be correlational rather than experimental manipulations, and psychology departments need to examine their policies which govern dissertation research, to insure that students can conduct field investigations of scientific value, but which may not fit traditional experimental models. In our experience at Hofstra, dissertation students have conducted evaluation-related correlational studies, such as examining variables which predict job

satisfaction of mental health workers or of inmate's perceptions of the social environment of prison treatment settings, or of examining relationships between length of stay, recidivism, and the clinical course of schizophrenia. Other topic areas which are considered fertile ground for dissertation research include innovative applications and development of new or refined evaluation methodologies such as path analysis and time-series analysis.

The Hofstra University Doctoral Program in Applied Research and Evaluation

The purpose of the Hofstra program is to train psychologists for careers in research in applied settings. The program offers a Ph.D. in psychology with an emphasis on evaluation research. The curriculum is structured to include required courses in several key methodological areas, including courses in research design (experimental and quasi-experimental), univariate statistics, computer programming, multivariate statistics, survey and sampling techniques, psychometric theory, and program evaluation. Required content courses in psychology include learning, psychophysiology, perception and motivation, community psychology, organizational psychology, current psychological concepts, and social psychology. In addition, in recognition of the need for evaluation researchers to have a background of information in the content areas under study (Sechrest, 1976), a two semester course in clinical concepts for evaluation research (introduction to psychological assessment techniques and treatment approaches, issues in clinical research, etc.) is also required.

The major training device is a five semester research practicum sequence, since it is "in the field" where students are challenged to match their research skills with the specific problems that arise in applied research, such as the frequent difficulty in performing traditional true experimental designs. Practicum students are expected to spend two days (16 hours) per week under professional supervision at the practicum site for ten months each academic year, and also to attend a weekly internship class. In this class, experiences and on-site research problems are shared and discussed, trainees present and defend their research projects, and receive feedback and direction from their supervising faculty members. Through the practicum experience, the trainee gains valuable exposure to other important facets of evaluation, such as the politics of evaluation, program planning and budgeting, and perhaps most importantly, learning to effectively interact and communicate within a team structure.

Since the practicum program began seven years ago, more than 60 local agencies have participated as placement sites. These agencies have included mental and physical health services, social service and criminal justice agencies, and business, and institutional settings. At present, approximately two thirds of the placements are in the public sector, and one third in the private sector. Among these public sector agencies are the Pilgrim and Creedmoor Psychiatric Centers, the Long Island Research Institute, the Long Island and the New York City Regional Offices of the NYS Office of Mental Health, the NYS Division of Substance Abuse Services, North Shore University Hospital Department of Neuropsychology, and the Suffolk Developmental Center, among others. Among the placements in the private sector include the American Management Associations and Surveys and Audits, Inc.

One of the central problems faced by psychology students as they venture beyond the laboratory into community settings is learning to deal with the socio-political realities which affect the evaluation process. Trainees become immediately subject to the pressures of some administrators and agency staff to get data which supports the program's efforts. The evaluation researcher, whether student or professional, often walks the proverbial thin line between the unbiased scientific researcher and the public relations consultant (Windle & Neigher, 1978). Learning to anticipate and resolve such political pressures becomes a major focus for discussion in the practicum and program evaluation courses. Students learn to perform an "in-loop" assessment to determine hidden agendas in the agency, and to contract with administrators to provide an explicit understanding of their research obligations and responsibilities.

While research psychologists have traditionally been recruited to fill faculty ranks, the present and projected downturn in faculty hiring has led many research-oriented students to seek alternative career opportunities in more applied settings. Evaluation research represents one such opportunity, particularly when the research student has been provided the opportunity to develop evaluation skills and to participate during training in supervised research projects in field settings. Evaluators have traditionally represented a diversity of training backgrounds. It may well be that such variety in training efforts enriches the evaluation community by bringing together

professionals with a wider range of skills and ideas than might be the case if training efforts were more homogenously structured. This paper has focused on an approach within a department of psychology for training the psychologist cum evaluator, and it is hoped that it will further encourage discussion of various training models in this developing field.

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