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ABSTRACT

Evaluation is an important component of intergenerational programs. This paper argues that the approach to evaluation for the 1990s and beyond should be two-fold: first, intergenerational programs of all types must emphasize the thoughtful, comprehensive planning of evaluation; second, the intergenerational field needs to strengthen evaluation in three specific areas. These are: (1) small, community-based programs need to design evaluations that describe who they are and what they do; (2) larger regional or national intergenerational programs developed to demonstrate solutions to social problems must focus on evaluating their impact based on clearly defined objectives related to these problems; and (3) the intergenerational field must strengthen its overall evaluation capacity by increasing evaluation skills of intergenerational professionals through the articulation of competencies and the provision of appropriate training. This two-fold approach builds from the rationale and basic components of evaluation of intergenerational programs suggested in the 1980s. The paper notes several factors shaping the context of intergenerational programs evaluation; discusses evaluation planning; and proposes directions for community-based programs, larger programs which address social problems, and professional competencies for program evaluators. (BT)

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INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAM EVALUATION FOR THE 1990s AND BEYOND

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"Intergenerational Program Evaluation for the 1990s and Beyond"

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"Intergenerational Program Evaluation for the 1990s and Beyond"

During the 1990s, evaluation has become an increasingly important component of intergenerational programs. Compared to a decade ago, funders more frequently ask for evidence that programs achieve their goals and objectives, intergenerational professionals seek more substantial information about program processes, and policy makers wish to understand the impact of intergenerational programs in more depth.

Given the increasing importance of evaluation, how should the intergenerational field approach evaluation as we move toward the year 2000? In this article I argue that the approach should be two-fold: First, intergenerational programs of all types must emphasize the thoughtful, comprehensive planning of evaluation. Given the changing political and funding environment, professionals at all levels must plan their evaluation proactively, weighing carefully what they wish to learn, considering the audience to which they will address their evaluation, and assigning clear roles and responsibilities.

Second, the intergenerational field needs to strengthen evaluation in three specific areas:

- The rapidly growing number of small, community-based programs need to design evaluations that describe in detail who they are and what they do, focus on measuring the

outcomes of one or two key objectives, and take advantage of previously developed instruments, including the attitude measures popular in the 1970s and 1980s.

- Larger regional or national intergenerational programs developed to demonstrate solutions to social problems must focus on evaluating their impact based on clearly defined objectives related to these problems.
- The intergenerational field must strengthen its overall evaluation capacity by increasing the evaluation skills of intergenerational professionals through the articulation of competencies and the provision of appropriate training.

This two-fold approach builds from the rationale and basic components of evaluation of intergenerational programs suggested in the 1980s (Bocian & Newman, 1989).

The Context

Several factors are now shaping the context for evaluation of intergenerational programs:

The rapid growth of the intergenerational field means that literally thousands of individuals, agencies, and organizations are currently conducting intergenerational programs. These programs vary in complexity, sophistication, and size. This growth means that many programmers are evaluating intergenerational efforts for the first time. Moreover, many intergenerational efforts are conducted by persons not regularly associated with the traditional intergenerational networks,

organizations, and leadership. The broadening of the field means new challenges to disseminating previously developed evaluation techniques, strategies, and materials.

Second, during the last decade intergenerational programs have been increasingly put forward as means to address the nation's social problems. This new role adds to these programs' more conventional functions such as changing attitudes (old to young and young to old), increasing self esteem and life satisfaction, and providing fulfilling social roles for older adults and nurturing for children and youth. Intergenerational programs are being used to help at-risk students achieve better grades, aid families in coping with illness, reduce neighborhood violence, increase retention of minority students in colleges and universities, fight drug and alcohol abuse in elementary and middle schools, and provide skilled workers in child care (See, for example, Freedman, 1988; Family Friends, 1993; Smith, T., Mack, C., & Tittnich, E., 1993).

Two beliefs drive the emphasis on intergenerational programs as solutions to social problems: 1) that older adults and youth offer unique, untapped resources to each other, and 2) that government and foundations are more likely to fund intergenerational problems that help to solve critical social problems than they are to support less targeted programs. For evaluators, the growing emphasis on intergenerational programs as solutions to social problems has meant that funders and other

stakeholders are often interested in outcomes that are not directly related to the older-younger relationship. Likewise, funders are often interested in only one of the two age-group constituencies. For example, state and federal education agencies who fund intergenerational programs typically want to know the impact of the program on students, but have little or no formal interest in its impact on older adults.

A third and more recent development important to evaluation of intergenerational programs has been the reshaping of the American political landscape. Funding for many programs that address the kinds of social problems listed above is being reduced. At the same time, discussion of entitlements has given new opportunity to the intergenerational conflict proponents to picture Americans as divided by age and age-related economic issues. In this context of leaner times and more scrutiny, intergenerational programs need to describe what they do with passion and accuracy, and demonstrate their positive impacts to a degree they have not had to in earlier eras. Overall, quality evaluation has become much more important to the well-being and future of the intergenerational field.

Given this context, the need for the intergenerational field to develop well-planned evaluation is clear. That planning should include the following steps:

Evaluation Planning

The development of an intergenerational program evaluation should parallel and interact with the planning and development of the program activities. Those responsible for programs of all kinds should step through a series of questions similar to the following:

"What do you want to know about your program?" -- Staff should list what they need to know to improve the program, to make it more effective, and to better understand its processes or impact. They should assume that the evaluation's primary purpose is to provide information that is useful to them and that meets their needs. They do not need to concern themselves at this initial point with what they "should" do or what others have done in other programs.

"Who is the audience(s) for the evaluation? How will they use the information you provide to them?" -- Most evaluations will have an audience beyond the immediate program staff. Among possible audiences are funders, boards of directors, supervisors, other groups interested in implementing intergenerational programs, the public, and program participants. Funders and other decision-makers may use the evaluation to judge whether or not the program continues, to recommend changes, or to increase or decrease funding. Before the program starts, staff should determine the primary audience for the evaluation and try to

determine how the evaluation will be used and what information is most valued by the audience.

"How do the requirements of the audience modify what you want to know?" In some cases the audience for the evaluation may have the same interests as the staff. In other cases, their interests may differ. For example, staff may want a great deal of information on a program's processes in order to modify what they do. A board or funder may be more interested in the impact of the program on one or more constituencies. A crucial -- although sometimes difficult -- function of the planning process is to prioritize what various groups wish to learn.

"What specific kinds of information do you need to tell you what you want to know?" -- Evaluations can gather a wide variety of information, in many forms. For some audiences, anecdotal or case history information may best summarize the program. For a public agency mandated to reduce teenage drug abuse, the information will likely be statistics on change in the level of drug usage. For many intergenerational programs, the community or the youth serving or elderly serving agencies may be most interested in changes in attitudes about the other group.

"How will you gather the information?" -- It is only at this point in the planning that those responsible for the evaluation should decide how to gather the information they need: questionnaires, interviews, existing statistics (standardized test scores, for example), observations, and so forth. Among the

options at this point are various existing instruments such as life satisfaction, self esteem, or attitudes on aging scales. However, all too often, persons developing programs put this as the first step before considering what they want to learn, what their audience wants, and what kind of information is most important.

"How will you report information?" -- During the planning process some attention should be given to how the evaluation will be conveyed to the audience and when it must be complete. Some audiences may prefer a simple oral presentation. In many cases, graphs, tables, and other illustrative material may be needed.

"What must you do with the information you gather so it can be reported clearly?" -- The information gathered in questionnaires, interviews, existing records, and so forth must be converted into a meaningful form. In some cases, special expertise may be required for statistical analysis. However, most audiences will prefer a clear, brief presentation to one that is highly complex or technical.

"What are the resources and constraints on the evaluation?" As the staff plans, they will need to consider what the program and its budget can devote to the evaluation. For example, how much staff time can be given over to the evaluation? What human resources are available -- does someone on the program or agency staff have experience in setting up a database to track participants? Does the agency or a partnering agency have someone

skilled in interviewing who can help with the evaluation?

Several constraints relate to the participants in intergenerational programs. For example, if the program includes very small children or very frail elderly, will they be able to complete certain kinds of instruments? If they will not be able to complete the instruments, what other options are available to gather needed data? Answers to these questions may modify the types of information gathered or the way in which information is gathered.

"Who is responsible for ___?" Finally, the staff planning the evaluation need to be just as precise about roles and responsibilities for the evaluation as they are about those for program activities. Before the intergenerational program begins, planners should state clearly who is responsible for overall planning and management; for selection or construction of instruments; for data gathering; for data coding, entry, and analysis; and for writing the evaluation report.

Conscious attention to the planning of intergenerational program evaluations is an important advance for the field. However, the complexity of the intergenerational field also means that specific directions are called for in several areas.

Proposed Directions

Community Based Programs

At Generations Together's National Intergenerational Training Institute, in training sessions at conferences, and through telephone calls from the field, practitioners from community-based programs have indicated increasing interest in evaluation of their own programs. At the same time, these program professionals frequently explain the constraints they face in developing and implementing evaluations and voice their frustration at evaluation designs more appropriate for larger institutions. From these conversations have emerged several possible directions for small intergenerational programs.

Programs should be sure to gather detailed descriptive information. Programmers often overlook the usefulness to the evaluation process of descriptive data. How many older adults/youth participate? Who are they (age, ethnicity, economic status)? How are they recruited? What activities do the young and old do together? How many hours per week do interactions occur? Answers to these specific questions can be supplemented with a running log or other qualitative methods to gather program highlights, problems and successes, and anecdotes. For many audiences, a detailed, focused description of the program, its activities, and its participants will suffice as an evaluation.

Programs should gather one or two vital measures of the program's impact on younger and older participants. Many programs

attempt to gather too much information. Staff and volunteers get overwhelmed in choosing and administering instruments or become discouraged as they face entering and analyzing huge amounts of data. In the end, little evaluation is accomplished. In a program's critical moments -- such as when a school superintendent wants evidence that demonstrates why an intergenerational program's funding should not be cut -- most programs need only a few key items of information. For example, in such a critical moment, participants' change in grades in several basic subjects may be all that is needed. The answers to a few open-ended questions about older adults' experience in a program which get read, summarized, and presented are worth far more than lengthy questionnaires or interviews that do not get transcribed or that produce information that does not get presented to an audience.

Finally, small, community-based programs should make use of existing instruments or questions from those instruments. For many programs, existing instruments can be an important component of an evaluation. Scales that measure attitudes toward aging, the self esteem of older adults, or other standardized instruments can provide convenient ways to measure change in participants (See for example, Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1961; Rosenberg, 1965; Seefeldt, 1989). Questionnaires constructed by other programs can also be adapted and modified for use by similar programs.

Programs Addressing Social Problems

Larger regional or national intergenerational programs developed as possible solutions to social problems face different evaluation issues than do smaller programs. In part, in this time of political change these larger programs bear the burden of demonstrating that intergenerational programs can provide efficient, humane solutions to pressing social problems.

Larger intergenerational programs must focus their evaluation efforts on a program's impact on social problems. In some regional or national intergenerational efforts, including many demonstration projects, the scope and sophistication of the evaluation effort does not match that of the program implementation. Many proposals for funding of intergenerational programs describe acute societal needs and anticipated program outcomes that will ameliorate these needs. The problems of poverty and at-risk children are among those frequently addressed. However, the evaluations of these very same programs frequently do not assess the program's impact in relation to the problems. Rather, many appear to utilize the measurement of attitudes toward youth or elderly and measures of self esteem and life satisfaction.

Programs must develop clearly defined objectives consistent with the stated problem. Agencies frequently find evaluation design difficult because they have not developed precise program objectives or outcomes. While a push for tight, measurable

objectives may go so far as to eventually detract from a program, the issue for most intergenerational programs is for project design teams to clearly state what they expect to change through their efforts and how they expect to do this. Lacking such a clear statement of outcomes, program staff are hard-pressed to develop rigorous evaluations that can demonstrate how a their program reduces social problems.

Professional Evaluation Competencies

More thorough planning at all levels and the focus on particular directions as outlined above can improve the intergenerational field's program evaluation. However, the planning and these new directions must be carried out by professionals from many types of agencies and organizations. The expansion of the intergenerational field has resulted in the increase in the number of professionals from many different backgrounds and with extremely diverse experience with intergenerational programs. The development and adaptation by the field of competencies related to evaluation can help to ensure quality across all programs.

Most intergenerational professionals do not need to develop in-depth skills in survey design, statistics, or other "technical" competencies. Rather, they need skills related to how to plan evaluations, how to develop program objectives, and how to assess and assign roles and responsibilities. The precise competencies in these areas need to be defined and widely

discussed. However, a limited number of persons in the field should develop skills in evaluation design, qualitative methods, statistics, questionnaire construction, and the like in specific relation to intergenerational programs.

Conclusions

The rapid growth in intergenerational programs, the intergenerational field's increasing commitment to solving social problems, and the recent prospect of more competition for funding and more public discussion of intergenerational conflict provide the context for considering evaluation of intergenerational programs. As the intergenerational program field continues to develop, the most important issue for professionals is the need for timely planning of every intergenerational program evaluation. Within the field three other compelling issues have emerged. The many small, community based programs face one set of issues including fuller use of descriptive material, focusing on a few impact measures, and using what others have developed. For a more limited number of programs that attempt to demonstrate the field's impact on social problems, the issue is primarily one of ensuring that objectives and evaluation measures acknowledge this commitment to social change. Finally, the field needs to develop competencies related to evaluation at several levels for its professionals.

This approach to evaluation in the 1990s will strengthen the field overall, will prepare more skilled professionals for the

future, and will help programs of all kinds meet more community needs in times of reduced human service funding. More important, strengthened evaluation will also result in better programs that ultimately benefit more fully the nation's older adults, children, and youth.

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