

Teaching Evaluation: A Student-Run Consulting Firm

Nicole Cundiff
University of Alaska Fairbanks

Joel Nadler
*Southern Illinois University
Carbondale*

Shauna Scribner
Southwestern Illinois College

Applied Research Consultants (ARC) is a graduate student run consulting firm that provides experience to students in evaluation and consultation. An overview of this program has been compiled in order to serve as a model of a graduate training practicum that could be applied to similar programs or aid in the development of such programs. Key performance aspects are described in detail to assist in implementation by departments in various higher education programs.

Teaching Evaluation: A Student Run Consulting Firm

A consulting practicum for graduate students is rare in advanced education, but it is highly needed in order to develop students into professionals in the field of evaluation (Belli, 2001; Morris, 1992; Trevisan, 2002). According to Shadish, Cook, and Leviton, we can evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of anything, "including evaluation itself" (1991, p. 19). Graduate students need the opportunity to participate in evaluative work to be able to gain valuable knowledge and real-life experience. Cole (1995) claims there is a need for improvement in instructional teaching with respect to research methodology, and this could be improved by involving students in a practicum that gives them the hands on experience they need.

There are similarities and differences between research and evaluation. Russ-Eft and Preskill (2001) identified commonalities in multiple definitions of evaluation. Evaluation is a systematic planned activity involving the collection of data regarding societal issues in general and, more specifically, individual programs for the purpose of direct use in enhancing knowledge and decision making, as opposed to general research that examines questions that are not necessarily applied to programs. Russ-Eft and Preskill list three core differences between research and evaluation: evaluation is 1) initiated for a different purpose, 2) conducted for a different audience and addresses clients' needs, and 3) communicated in a different way.

A strong training in systematic research methods, data management, and statistical techniques provides a skill base for conducting evaluation. However, research methods alone do not constitute the total skills needed to conduct evaluations. Training in evaluation requires a well-built base of research methodology combined with an understanding of the differences between research and evaluation. Practical experience is needed to master tailoring research to answer client based questions, to understand the reality of program

evaluation feasibility, and to communicate results to decision makers.

Experiential practicum in evaluation is necessary, and universities need to seek out additional ways to educate students in research and consulting (Chelimsky, 1997; Dallimore & Souza, 2002). Consulting is the communication process an evaluator takes with his or her clients, such as meeting with organizational leaders to get their interpretation of the program and its problems, and dissemination of evaluative information. Evaluators tend to adopt different forms of consulting practices based on their theoretical background and experiences (Shadish et al., 1991).

This paper reviews a student run consulting firm, Applied Research Consultants (ARC), in order to demonstrate how to incorporate an evaluation practicum in a higher education setting.

ARC directly involves students in the process of evaluation in a mentor supported environment. Evaluations from beginning to end are conducted by students, but all projects, from simple data collection to multi-year assignments, are subjected to quality control through departmental faculty as well as advanced students in the program. The main goal behind the program is providing experience to Master's and Ph.D. students in planning, managing, and conducting applied research and evaluation while using consulting practices. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide instructors and university department heads with a basic structure that could be utilized in order to implement similar practica.

Evident Practices

Dallimore and Souza (2002) presented a class design model that looks at teaching evaluation and consulting to graduate students with the emphasis on enhancing students' experiential learning. However, this design was made for a single-semester course, which is typically seen in student evaluation training. Typically such "advanced training" rarely lasts beyond the semester, and students in these programs generally

do not work from beginning to end on a project (Belli, 2001; Trevisan, 2004). Therefore, the time spent on evaluation training needs to be increased in order to encompass the skills necessary to be successful in this type of work.

Training graduate students with consulting experience tends to focus on conducting and interpreting statistical analyses or planning research designs. These training assignments generally do not provide instruction on measurement theories, construction of measures, or presentations at workshops (Belli, 2001). Further, previous research has pointed out areas where current graduate student evaluation practicum is weak (for a review of programs see Trevisan, 2004). While authors (Belli, 2001; Chelimsky, 1997; Morris, 2002; Preskill, 2000) have stressed the importance of practical experiences in training evaluation, Trevisan (2004) found only a few programs offering practical experience beyond single semester class projects.

The key components in teaching evaluation are theory, methodology, conceptualization, and practical experience (Levin-Rozalis & Rosenstein, 2003), and ARC facilitates the learning of all four of these components while also providing the additional practical experience recommended in the literature for advanced student training. For example, on any one project students consult with clients; develop a contract and budget; develop methodologies and measures; implement the study; gather, analyze, and interpret data; and present the information in written and oral reports. Previous research has pointed to the necessity of keeping the basic research design in mind when training graduate students in evaluation (Dallimore & Souza, 2002; Preskill, 2000). The typical progression in research methodology begins with problem identification through data collection, analysis, interpretation, and translation. The ARC program generally uses this type of progression while implementing research, but research design is not always necessary. For example, if a client seeks assistance after the data have already been collected, which frequently occurs (Belli, 2001; Nadler & Cundiff, 2000), the study is past the need for methodological design. To fully understand ARC and its effectiveness as an educational tool with the goal of increasing the knowledge base in graduate student practica, it is important to define the ARC practicum and represent how it works.

Structure of ARC

ARC is a graduate student run consulting firm, located in Southern Illinois University's Psychology Department. ARC's goals are supported by practical experience with clients and report writing, the most

often mentioned "gaps" between expectations in evaluative occupations and applicant skills when recruiters are hiring new evaluators (Dewey, Montrosse, Schroeter, Sullins, & Mattox, 2006). ARC's students are composed of graduate students in Applied Psychology; however, the program's structure could be extended to a variety of educational programs such as management, workforce education, or educational psychology. In fact, any program interested in investigating the effectiveness and efficacy of different programs, services, products, or organizations could use ARC as a model to develop an intensive program that would enhance students' skills and development in research and evaluation.

ARC provides many services to its customers such as measurement development, data collection and analysis, report writing, interviewing, and focus group assessments. These processes are all a part of program evaluation (Shadish et al., 1991). However, the evaluation's focus differs drastically depending on the needs of the clients. For instance, ARC has served as evaluator on a large grant in which students developed a needs assessment, created a logic model depicting the program, developed trainings, and created a research agenda that offered informative outcomes of the program. ARC has also served as a guide for a private company to become a research institution by providing key information about research intuitions and developing models to depict the strengths and weaknesses of the organization. These are just two examples of the types of work ARC has conducted in recent years, and there are many types of jobs and clients that are included in ARC's repertoire. Programs that are developed based on a model such as ARC should be encouraged to seek out clients both from inside and outside of the academic community.

What makes ARC's design different from other programs is that the students participate in the course for over two full years, which enhances experience by allowing them to follow projects extending across multiple semesters. This process is important in evaluation training, since "real world" consulting jobs tend to take anywhere from three months to many years. Students who are training for such work need to be able to work with clients and on a project for as long as the job entails.

ARC's Class

While the work in ARC is conducted by graduate students, they are supervised by a director who is traditionally a tenured professor at the university with other faculty serving as resources on an as-needed basis. The daily lives of the ARC associates are fragmented and have few stable patterns of work or activities. The "class" of ARC, led by the director,

meets for two hours weekly to keep everyone in the program up-to-date with projects and business related matters. Discussions range from simple administrative matters to thorough and complex think-tank sessions on methodology, theory, and client relations.

Students learn through assigned readings that cover evaluation concepts and through experiencing problems that come up while working with clients, such as communication issues.

Solving problems in a group meeting is a rare procedure of evaluation training. Most evaluation practica tend to solve problems by one-on-one meetings with faculty (Belli, 2001). However, presenting problems in a group setting allows for students to learn about the issues other members are facing and for students to give each other advice.

ARC Projects

Projects are also disseminated at class meetings where contact with prospective clients is arranged and given to a senior associate charged with leading the project. Once projects are assigned to an associate, the student assumes responsibility for project completion. The choice of leader for a project depends of the type of project and student availability. Typically projects are matched with students who have the skills and the experience to assess and manage the situation. Consideration of students' substantive interests is also assessed when assigning projects; while student input is an important factor in project leader choices the final decision lies with the faculty director.

The project leader has a team of associates who either volunteer to be on the project or are assigned to the project by the director. Volunteering usually occurs when students have interest in the project's area or they are interested in the methodological procedures that are being used for that project. For example, a student may be interested in working on an evaluation being conducted for a local hospital due to interest in the health field. Likewise, some students would volunteer for a project involving focus groups if they were interested in gaining experience in qualitative data collection procedures. While students are granted latitude in determining what projects they are on, the faculty director monitors the process to ensure each project is adequately staffed and each student gains experiences as needed.

The project leader then instructs his or her team on how to administer the evaluation by passing out assignments to the associates on the team and coordinating their efforts. The evaluation may involve developing a survey that would be used to conduct research on the evaluand or the object being evaluated. For instance, various measures may be devised to ascertain the effectiveness of a new program that is

directed at reducing childhood obesity. The leader may start construction of the survey by consulting with a client (usually directors of the programs or organizations), then team members would meet together in order to ensure the quality and thoroughness of the measure being developed. The team would also assist the project leader in constructing the survey to formats acceptable for mailing and/or on-line distribution. Projects go through different stages for each evaluation, since every evaluation is unique.

Tri-level Involvement

ARC is constructed based on three levels of student involvement. The first level is a shadowing period which allows students to directly observe the practices of the program without having the responsibility of working on projects. Experiential training often stops at this level of involvement in evaluation programs, which includes role playing, observing faculty conducting evaluations, and participating in class projects (Trevisan, 2004). ARC's second level of student involvement has students working as associates on projects and receiving guidance and instruction from senior associates in the program. Assistance from senior members is considered to be a vertical practicum, with advanced students training novice students. Intuitional knowledge is retained by processes and lessons learned that are passed down through the vertical practicum. The vertical practicum enables learning to be facilitated in the program and insures that time is not lost due to the relearning of simpler processes such as on-line survey development and database management. The vertical practicum promotes teaching students about leadership and organization; for more information on this subject see Nadler and Cundiff (2009).

The third and final level of ARC is where the program extends beyond a traditional training practicum in evaluation. Students, having completed the first two levels, then work as senior associates who are in charge of entire evaluation and consulting assignments as project leaders. At this level, student involvement includes all aspects of starting up, working on, and completing a consulting project. This can include, but is not limited to: contacting and meeting with clients, writing budgets and contracts, devising appropriate methodologies, collecting data, analyzing data, and writing and distributing reports. Once again, all of these activities are conducted within a safety net offered by faculty oversight.

The Students

There are usually 10-12 student associates in ARC per semester. These students are charged with running the organization. The position as an associate is usually

the first professional working experience for many of these students. For instance, some come into the program right out of their undergraduate careers, and they have reported being a little awed and fearful of the tasks before them. These students begin at the first level during the second semester of their Ph.D. program by shadowing projects. Since new students generally report anxiety about the level of responsibility and commitment that the program requires of them, it is important therefore to introduce students to such a practicum with care.

Other students have had some previous experience working in consulting or have advanced degrees which assist them in the process of entering into the program. The applied graduate program, of which ARC is an active part, balances each year's cohort with students straight out of undergraduate school with students having research or practical experience in evaluation. Both groups of students taken together create a dynamic evaluation group that is grounded in an applied research culture.

The Place

The ARC lab is a designated area where associates have 24 hour access to learn, teach, and conduct evaluations. The lab consists of a computer room, a conference room, a library, and a break room. There is a server dedicated to up-to-date technological programs that assist and protect the evaluators' work. Tasks such as compiling data, analyzing research, and gathering information across the country should be easily conducted with the resources located in these types of labs.

Supplies in the lab are readily available to the students and have been acquired over the 25 years that ARC has been running. Time in these types of programs is necessary to accumulate resources. Most resources are within reasonable price ranges, so start up costs should not be feared. Typically, what is needed to begin is space to work and hold meetings, computer and printer access, an internet server, statistical software, and guidance from faculty. Most of these resources will already be available in existing faculty graduate or undergraduate research labs. However, it is important to give such a program the feeling of being an independent firm, therefore setting dedicated space for training should be a priority. Additionally, research on consulting practica has found that usually programs such as these should have one to three invested faculty members to assist students with the practicum experience (Belli, 2001).

Generating Resources

Resources are an immediate concern for faculty and administrators whom are considering

implementation of a practicum that requires a full scale lab. However, such programs can be self-sustaining by primarily focusing on providing training for the students and not on income generation (Belli, 2001). In ARC, for instance, the income generated from the associates' work can all be invested back into the program. ARC charges \$40.00 per student work hour, with typical total project fees ranging from \$500 to \$5,000. ARC's fees are at the lower extreme of evaluation rates (Jarosewich, 2006), providing clients with an alternative to costly evaluation firms. ARC works internally within the university and with local businesses, and it usually brings in between \$35,000 to \$55,000 a year.

Generally the students involved in ARC decide, by a democratic voting process, how the income of the firm is spent. However, most of the income goes towards keeping the basic necessities of the organization running, such as having office and technology support and buying equipment. The profits from the business then go towards sending the students to an annual evaluation conference held by the American Evaluation Association (AEA), which is thought of as one of the more important aspects of the program by the students.

An internal grant funded by ARC is also available to students, whereby they are able to receive funding for professional development. This is another aspect of ARC that is unique when compared to other training practica: students actually work to bring money into the program and profits can directly benefit their personal research.

Process

ARC associates handle a variety of different types of research and evaluation procedures. In other words, the program specializes in survey design (paper and on-line) and dissemination, market research, program evaluation (general), focus group facilitation, in-depth interviews (cognitive and semi-structured), needs assessments, job analyses, performance appraisals, and personnel training, to name a few. However, job type (consultation and/or evaluation) typically depends on what clients need; therefore, students utilize their education from classes and prior ARC experience to facilitate quality work at half the price of competitors. The use of classroom knowledge in evaluation has its benefits, and the practice students gain from the consulting and evaluation tend to "reinforce theoretical material taught in core research course(s)" (Cole, 1995, p. 159).

Conclusion

Through a consulting/training practicum, ARC has the structure to support itself while providing appropriate evaluation experience to students. The way the program functions is fitting for academic institutions interested in educating graduate students,

whether at the master's or doctoral level, in consulting and evaluation. This review was intended to serve as a guide to fellow educators interested in effectively training graduate students in the evaluation field. Some issues have been documented on negative reactions towards such programs within university settings, such as departments receiving lower financial support due to less reported research hours from faculty who are devoted to directing the programs or issues involving ethical review boards (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). These concerns do not outweigh the positive effects of such programs though, exemplified in the amount of experience gained by the students and faculty involved.

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NICOLE L. CUNDIFF (Ph.D. 2010, Southern Illinois University Carbondale) is the director of the Northern Leadership Center and an assistant professor of management at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. She specializes in gender in leadership and organizational diversity. Nicole has published in venues such as the *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* and *Management Research Review*. She can be contacted through email at nlcundiff2@alaska.edu.

JOEL T. NADLER received his Ph.D. in applied psychology from Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) in 2010. Joel has accepted a position as an assistant professor of psychology at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). His research interests include stereotypes, implicit bias, and gender discrimination in the work place. He can be reached at jnadler@siu.edu.

SHAUNA SCRIBNER Dr. Scribner is Program Coordinator and full professor in the Department of Computer Aided Drafting at Southwestern Illinois College in Belleville, Illinois and visiting instructor in the Department of Workforce Education and Development at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois. Dr. Scribner can be reached at shauna.scribner@swic.edu.