

SECTION II: ONSITE EVALUATION GUIDELINES AND PROCEDURES

Bob Stake observed over fifteen years ago:

The shortage of procedures for making systematic observations of educational activities is particularly dismaying because the site visit is a widely used evaluation method. When a large-scale program is under way at some distant place, the most common way to evaluate it is to appoint a small number of respected persons to go there and inspect it. This method receives a proper share of criticism. It is evident that the program staff works hard to make the operation atypically handsome during the visit and the visitors grasp at the slimmest shred of evidence for something to report. Despite these defects, the method of site visits deserves its eminence because it is designed for the most sensitive instruments available: experienced and insightful men. Furthermore, it is capable of quick adaptation to local circumstances [13, pp. 192-193].

What was true then is still true today, on two counts. First, site visits remain one of the most useful evaluation techniques available for judging the worth of programs, projects, and processes, as well as providing input to project managers that can be used to improve the quality of the program. Secondly, there remains a shortage of available procedural guidelines for use by those responsible for planning and implementing such a program of site visits. Although there is a fair amount of literature dealing with the conduct or philosophy of accreditation site visits and their use in evaluation [14-16], this literature focuses primarily on particular accreditation agency requirements and procedures tailored to meet these requirements. Consequently, these writings are not particularly relevant to designing and conducting onsite evaluations of projects of the nature described in this book.

Based on experience with designing, implementing, and monitoring programs of site visits to various funding programs in multiple states, this section provides a description of procedures and processes necessary to operate a high-quality system of onsite evaluations and gives examples of many of the materials that can serve as a foundation for creating a similar system for any specific program. The value of the procedural guidelines in this section is attested to

by their impact on the programs for which they were designed and to which they were applied. For example, the Utah Title IV program (where many of these materials were first used) showed steady progress in terms of accomplishing the goals of the funding agency during the three-year period in which the onsite evaluations were conducted. In fact, the resultant evaluation system was selected by federal officials as one of two exemplary statewide Title IV evaluation systems. Furthermore, the threat and aversiveness that staff of individual projects so frequently associate with onsite evaluations was reduced dramatically by the particular procedures used in this system. As a result, project directors expressed increasingly positive attitudes towards evaluation in general and suggested that the particular onsite evaluation procedures tend to play an important instructional function in addition to the more typical accountability function associated with such evaluation activities.

What was true in these projects is probably also true for onsite evaluations of many other educational and social services programs and projects operated under guidelines which are rigorous and/or technical in nature. In short, the better the onsite evaluation, the more likely it is that projects will succeed in meeting the objectives for which they were funded.

It does not necessarily follow, however, that merely conducting onsite evaluations automatically results in improved programs. If one major purpose of onsite evaluation visits (indeed, all evaluation) is to determine worth in order to differentiate among effective and ineffective programs and procedures, then it seems that the processes and methodologies used in the conduct of many onsite evaluations are failing. For example, in an evaluation study of the Colorado state administration of ESEA Title III, it was noted that no Title III project in Colorado had ever been terminated as a result of an onsite visit [17]. Two alternative hypotheses obviously emerge. Either all projects were above average and worthy of continuation, or the Title III onsite evaluation procedures being used failed to differentiate good projects from the bad projects that should have been terminated. Somehow, the latter conclusion seems more plausible.

Similar patterns of non-functional, non-discriminating onsite evaluations have occurred and continue to be prevalent in many onsite evaluation systems. Closer analysis reveals that such failures frequently stem from poor onsite procedures that produce unreliable and invalid information. Perhaps the greatest single factor that contributes to the abundance of abysmal evaluations is the widely shared misconception that any educated person can do an onsite evaluation, since it requires only that a competent professional spend time onsite, examining the program of interest, and thereafter report on the program's quality and effectiveness. This innocence is nearly as rampant as the naivete' that leads many to believe they are experts on educational matters simply because they survived twelve years of schooling in the elementary and secondary schools.

This problem is further exacerbated by the commonly held (and erroneous) notion that the person familiar with the content or substance of the program need know little or nothing of evaluation techniques, per se, to be an effective onsite evaluator. Such notions have been debunked elsewhere [18] and will not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that "onsite

strolls" of content specialists have resulted in such broadspread misapplication of the professional judgment approach to evaluation as to render such an approach suspect, on its face, to many professional evaluators.

In this context, the importance of guidelines that will help improve and standardize onsite evaluation procedures should be obvious. They will also go far toward streamlining onsite visits and making them as non-disruptive as possible, thus helping to reduce the resentment which so often accompanies clumsily handled and intrusive onsite visits.

PURPOSE AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS SECTION

This section includes a variety of procedures that can be used by individual onsite evaluators or by funding agencies charged with the responsibility for arranging or conducting onsite evaluation. The section is subdivided into three chapters, which deal with the following general topics:

- Chapter 5: Various uses and functions of onsite evaluations
- Chapter 6: Considerations and activities preceding the onsite visit
- Chapter 7: Conducting, reporting, and evaluating onsite evaluations