

## **Introduction**

Before starting this paper, I referred to the Cambridge Dictionary of English to devise a working definition of “reflective analysis.” To *reflect* is to look back thoughtfully on an issue, and to *analyze* is to study or examine something in detail, in order to discover more about it. In looking back over the semester, I examined the topic of program evaluation and have chosen to frame it within the context of the Arts Council for Wyoming County (ACWC).

## **Background**

ACWC is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization founded in 1976 whose mission it is to enable unlimited opportunity for artists to create art, and for the community to engage in the arts. It strives to do this by: providing services to artists to foster their development; presenting programs to stimulate interaction between artists and the community; empowering other organizations to engage in artistic presentation; and promoting awareness and support of the arts through advocacy. The staff consists of three full-time employees: an Executive Director, a Program Director, and a Fund Raising Coordinator. ACWC also benefits from the services of a 93-year old part-time administrative worker whose salary is paid by the Green Thumb program, a provider of mature worker employment and training services.

ACWC owns the building in which its office, gallery, recital, and instruction space are located. Its annual budget is just under \$225,000 per year and, over the past four years, it has built up a tidy cash reserve. For many years ACWC has hummed along nicely, building its menu of programs and services conscientiously and (mostly) in response to constituent needs.

I have worked closely with this organization over the past 12 years, first as an employee from 1993-1997 and more recently as a member of the Board of Directors. For two years I led the board as its President.

### **ACWC's Current Evaluative Activities**

From this vantage point I can say with certainty that the organization currently conducts only two kinds of performance measurements: semiannual employee evaluations and year-end budget-to-actual assessments. No formal evaluation is ever made of its many programs and services. I'm calling this current organizational position "Point A." Regarding budgeting decisions for programs, the Board takes a "we've always done it this way" approach. Once a program has been established, it rarely is discontinued, if ever. I suspect this situation is typical in small organizations with limited human and financial resources, but this needn't be the case.

### **An Alternative Scenario**

If program evaluations were conducted regularly as a means by which to justify the continuance of those programs, the board would instead be able to say with confidence, "We've established that this program meets our mission in the most cost effective manner with the greatest possible impact on our community, and therefore deserves ongoing funding." This would be "Point B" and it begs the question, "How does the organization get here from there?"

To institutionalize regular program evaluation as part of ACWC's ongoing activities, several things would have to happen. First, the Program Director must outline the goals of each program, establish how those goals help ACWC meet its mission, and define short and long term measurable outcomes. Next, individual budgets for each program should be created so inputs could be calculated accurately. Program participants could be surveyed to determine if their expectations and needs were being adequately met. The survey and financial results

would be analyzed and reviewed. Finally, depending on whether the program achieved its goals the Board would make an informed decision about whether to appropriate funds for the program in a future year.

### **Why Bother?**

With limited resources, why should the staff and board add program evaluation to its plate?

What good would come of it?

I've learned that many positive outcomes can result from conducting program evaluations. In this case, these outcomes could include (a) improving the Board's awareness of its fiscal responsibility; (b) increasing accountability to ACWC's members and funders; (c) reminding staff that every activity must be measured against the mission; (d) institutionalizing the idea that programs should be undertaken only if they are expected to achieve established goals and fill identified needs within the community in an efficient, effective, mission-driven manner; (e) professionalizing ACWC and moving it toward becoming a high-performing organization; (f) creating data that could be used (if necessary) to justify ACWC's programming to funders; (g) helping improve the budgeting process; and (h) establishing a set of metrics with which ACWC could benchmark itself among peer organizations.

[This is an excellent summary.](#)

### **Other Beneficial Evaluation Techniques**

There are several other methods of evaluation that can help move an organization forward. I'll briefly discuss benchmarking and needs assessments.

According to information posted on the web site of the North Harris Montgomery Community College District in Woodlands, TX, a benchmark is "a standard of excellence or achievement

used to compare and measure similar things. It is a technique for identifying measurable successes of others and applying them to your own organization. It is not a means for duplicating, but a way of defining the best and moving beyond that standard to create your own exemplary system.”

Benchmarking can take several forms. For example, external benchmarking determines the performance of other, preferably world-class, organizations in your market while internal benchmarking studies the practices and performance within your organization.

In Financial Management (PAD 640) I learned that world-class organizations spend only 10-25% of their budgets on General and Administrative expenses with most of the remainder used to support programs and services. By comparison, ACWC spends nearly 50% of its budget on G&A. I suspect this is because it operates programs on a shoestring. Most of ACWC’s programs and services are conducted with a relatively small outlay of cash. For example, producing as many as ten gallery exhibits throughout the year costs less than \$1,000, and its weekly classic film series costs only \$1,500 per year. Individual program budgets that *included* G&A costs would help ACWC understand better if its budget ratios are in line with those of other small rural arts councils, through external benchmarking.

It’s difficult to compare organizations that use paid staff to those that rely on a fair amount of volunteer work, so your benchmarking idea is a good one.

I also learned that the costs associated with raising funds should be approximately 30% of total funds raised. A higher percentage means the organization is not using its assets as efficiently as it could. Again, individual budgets for fundraising events could be created, bottom line results reviewed, and fundraising efficiency measured against this external benchmark. In the future,

organizational goals could include benchmarking internally year-over-year to continually improve this ratio, whatever it turns out to be.

ACWC's Site Committee is championing a plan to make its second story accessibly to the physically handicapped. It is doing so largely because the organization's single largest funder, the New York State Council on the Arts, scours the applications it receives from funded organizations for proof of handicap accessibility (as a means by which to promote equal access across the state.) ACWC has obtained a member item grant to help pay for such a project and has begun working with an architect on an RFP for drawings. Yet a needs assessment has not been done. ACWC has no idea of the demographics or needs of the disability population in Wyoming County. A needs assessment might determine that the residents who would benefit most from greater accessibility are not physically handicapped, but visually or hearing impaired. This class taught me that a needs assessment must take place first so ACWC doesn't plunge itself headlong into an expensive project that is found later to have seriously missed its mark.

### **Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Experiences**

This is the second course I've taken from Dr. Saxton, whose pedagogical style I find fosters a real sense of community among students. We laugh a great deal in class. We ask a lot of questions. We learn almost without knowing it. Work on group projects is especially rewarding, particularly when one is lucky enough to work with top-notch students on a service learning project, as I was able to do **was** this semester.

### **Conclusion**

Before taking this course, I was confident that ACWC was doing a fine job delivering on its mission for the residents of Wyoming County. Yet now I find I want to analyze what we do, to help the board and staff better understand how to elevate ACWC's standard of excellence by

moving toward an outcomes-based model for programs and services, and by benchmarking both internally and externally.

In 2005 we will be revisiting our strategic plan to establish goals for the next three-year period. I intend to promote increased organizational effectiveness by insisting on a needs assessment around the handicap accessibility project. In addition, as a member of the Finance Committee, I will request individual program and fundraising budgets that will create the basis for evaluating the performance of these activities going forward.

I fully realize that change of this nature takes time and effort, and I expect my suggestions will be met with resistance from both board members and the staff. But the important lessons I take away from this course have fully prepared me to present a compelling case for instituting these (and other) organizational development activities using research and evaluation. I believe the Council, and any other organization I may work with in the future, will be stronger for it.

This is another excellent piece of work. You have really learned the core ideas of the class. And, more importantly, you have no problem with integrating them into coherent management solutions. The ACWC will be the stronger for it.

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