

Reflections on Indigenous Evaluation, a Native Perspective

Dr. Shelly Valdez, Native Pathways, 2004

In reflecting on past educational evaluations that target Native communities to those that exist today, most do not seriously make adaptations that include cultural background and Native ways of knowing, in their design, implementation, analyses or recommendations (National Science Foundation, 2002).

For many community based projects, alternative evaluation designs are necessary to document those natural elements that address and validate the natural way community change evolves. In particular, when working with indigenous communities, evaluators need to employ a conscious effort in approaching *community ways of knowing* and understanding, while providing a voice for community in the evaluation process. Unfortunately, evaluators that are not familiar with Native ways of knowing, often times find themselves disconnected from the shared knowledge of the group they are evaluating. Jolly (2002) points out that evaluators must have a fundamental awareness of cultural norms and experiences of the people who they are evaluating or working with, and develop an understanding of how those norms will play out in the context of evaluation. There are three major areas that evaluators need to be conscious of in evaluation of Native communities: context, experience and relationship.

In review of context, evaluators must be aware that there are 562 federally recognized tribes within the United States, and each of those tribes have their own distinctive cultural norms, traditions, philosophies and understandings. For the evaluation to sustain balance, evaluators must be willing to step beyond their comfort level to learn and understand the background of those Native communities they are working with. When considering community experience, the experiences of Native communities is very distinctive to the regions and environments they live in. These

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experiences are embedded with the past histories, within the present conditions of community subsistence, a continuance of culture that is from their world view, holistic. Evaluators must look at experience from a historical context to those experiences that will be generated by the evaluation process, and that will most likely impact community change. Relationship is the power of place, and without relationship there is no balance. Relationship must be seen as one of the key elements of an evaluation plan. In order to create balance and continuance of valid data, the evaluator must understand and nourish the importance of their relationship to community, and to the program they are evaluating, which must begin prior to executing evaluation methodologies. In regard to the three areas mentioned above, programs outreaching to Native communities, including funding agencies, must begin to rethink and consider their internal evaluation infrastructure when working with Native communities. Perhaps beginning with a conscious effort to explore the following:

- What should we be measuring and who should be measuring it?
- Who decides what is important about the outcomes?
- Are evaluations from this perspective informal or formal?
- Who evaluates, and with what instruments?

One factor that stands out when reviewing the above areas is the capacity and background of the evaluator. With this notion, possible recruitment of a Native person and/or community member is important to consider in the over-all evaluation plan. In reflecting on the National Science Foundation's (NSF) accountability to regulations set by congress (2002), they discovered that only a small number of evaluators were available to help with efforts on assessment of rural and minority programs, and of those

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few, very little represented minority groups. With this alarming news NSF held a meeting in 2002, which included participants representing Native programs and communities. As a result of this meeting, participants emphasized the need to create a mechanism for recruiting and building capacity of Native evaluators within the evaluation field. With NSF as one of the supporting agencies to jump start this effort, opportunities for engaging and employing Native community members as a part of the over-all evaluation processes is an encouraging reality for programs reaching out to Native communities. In addition, this type of effort transforms the way programs conceive evaluation plans and how data is collected.

There are many ways of collecting data that validate the accountability of programs from a management perspective to reaching the goals and objectives of funding agencies. At another level, program evaluations that pertain to Native communities need to include a conscious effort that includes data collection methodologies which reflect positive community impacts that assist communities to create a common language, strengthen community voice, and builds community leadership and capacity.

Some relevant methodologies appropriate for community based initiatives include mix method approaches that involve self-assessment; non-intrusive observations; small group and when appropriate, individual interviews; case studies; participatory and active engagement; and when appropriate video documentation. To a large degree, community-based evaluations seem to work best when the emphasis of evaluation is qualitative by nature, and includes some quantitative data collection aspects for specified activities, which vary from initiative to initiative. Additionally, coaching strategies seem favorable as a tool to be integrated through the evaluation process, because they seem to

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foster and encourage *relationship*, internal learning, peer learning, reflection, continuance of dialogue, and individual and community leadership. Informed and effective evaluation methods are the basis for receptive and balanced partnerships. Cultivating and nourishing this type of discourse in evaluation processes, mitigates the unfortunate histories that keep repeating themselves.

For many Native communities there still exist an invisible fear of mistrust that outside groups have historically created. Most of this fear stems from lack of communication, or misunderstandings between the evaluation/research processes. Perhaps revisiting paradigms, schools of thoughts and world views in order to provide effective vehicles (evaluation/research processes) that transform and transfer community leadership, create capacity for *public will* that ensures Native people that their voice is important and valid to the evaluation process would cultivate those positive partnerships that create the story of continuance.

Ensuring the people. "A good leader is one whose heart beats with the beat of their people (Bruchac, 2000). As a Native person and educational evaluator, I see this as a metaphor that allows us to be and feel conscious about words we articulate, about what we emphasize as important for our communities, about standing one's ground in speaking for the people, and taking that step that for so long Native people have succumbed to, and becoming influencers of change.

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