

# CEAC Update

Collaborative for Evaluation and Assessment Capacity

Guiding Well-Informed Policy and Practice

Volume 1, Issue 3

April 2010

## Utilizing Evaluation Results: Two Perspectives, One Goal



The theme of this issue is utilization of evaluation. What does it mean for clients to fully utilize evaluation results? What can evaluators do to help ensure that the data they report is usable in the client's context? Since an evaluation effort is required for most grant-funded projects, evaluations are what

some would call a necessary burden. When the results are utilized to their fullest, evaluations can be a key to building capacity for growth and change.

In this issue, we include an interview with Dr. Nancy Bunt and Dr. Cindy Tananis, who discuss evaluation utilization from a client and an

evaluator perspective.

Dr. Bunt is the Principal Investigator of the Math Science Partnership of Western Pennsylvania. Dr. Bunt's years of first-hand experience with evaluation-related to K-12 school-based programs provides a perspective that can equally apply across various settings.

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### Evaluation Focus

***A conversation between client and evaluator: What does it mean to utilize evaluation results?***

Read more in  
**EVALUATION FOCUS** on this page!

## Evaluation Focus: A Conversation between Nancy Bunt and Cindy Tananis

The following is an interview of Drs. Nancy Bunt and Cindy Tananis. Dr.

Bunt is Principal Investigator of Southwest Pennsylvania Math Science Partnership, a major client of evaluation, and Dr. Tananis is Director of CEAC and a long-time evaluation practitioner.

### CEAC: What does it mean to utilize evaluation results?

**NB:** "To utilize" means that the project acts on the results. One action uses the results to inform the on-going work of a project, providing an essential feedback loop. An example is the CEAC evaluation of semi-annual events such as the Math & Science Collaborative (MSC) Network Connections conferences. CEAC developed an evaluation survey that is re-tailored for each conference,

with review in advance by our staff. It is distributed and collected at the event by our staff, and CEAC compiles and analyzes the data and provides a report to MSC. Findings from these surveys help us make changes for the next conference. Evaluation results can also be used to help a project tell others about its work. CEAC compiled an annual report for our Math Science Partnership (MSP), organizing multiple CEAC reports of different aspects of the work of the Partnership. As a cover document, CEAC developed a list of "lessons learned" across all of the reports and activities. This helped us focus on the big ideas generated across the more specific reports.

**CT:** Utilization takes many forms. At CEAC, we do more formative (looking at process

and progress as a project evolves), than summative (end-product) evaluation. We like to see clients connect evaluation findings to decision points in planning. Ideally, evaluation begins with the initial development of a program: asking what do we want to accomplish, how do we get there, and how will we know when we arrive? Evaluation and planning go hand in hand. To assure utilization from the beginning, evaluation activity has to be linked to the organization's need to know something more fully or to be able to judge current activity against expectations. When good evaluation planning is in place, utilization of findings tends to follow quite easily. The MSC/MSP project has a long history, since 1994, of using data to inform actions and decisions.

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## Feature Article *(continued from page 1)*

Dr. Cindy Tananis, the Director of CEAC, has over thirty years of evaluation experience in various settings, including K-12, higher education, and not-for-profit organizations. CEAC has conducted evaluations for the Math and Science Collaborative, parent of the Math Science Partnership, since 1994.

Dr. Tananis further provides some insight into what evaluators can and should consider when analyzing data and reporting results, in order to ensure that their efforts provide the most usable data for the client, specific to the client's unique context.

Evaluation scholars have been writing about utilizing evaluation results for decades. From theory-driven evaluation, which focuses on telling a program's success story, to utilization-focused evaluation, which focuses on the ways in which evaluation results are used by the client, researchers have suggested a number of factors that influence the use of evaluation results.

Below, we've included some resources that provide further insight into utilization-focused evaluation.

### Further Reading

Balthasar, A. (2006). The effects of institutional design on the utilization of evaluation: Evidenced using qualitative comparative analysis (QCA). *Evaluation*, 12(3), 353-371.

Heimlich, J.E. (2010). Environmental education evaluation: Reinterpreting education as a strategy for meeting mission. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 33(2), 180-185.

Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newberry Park, CA: Sage.

Patton, M.Q. (1997). *Utilization-focused evaluation: The new century text (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Taut, S.M. & Alkin, M.C. (2003). Program staff perceptions of barriers to evaluation implementation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 24(2), 213-226.

Weiss, C.H. (1977). *Using social research in public policy making*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

## Affiliate Spotlight

**Dr. Shula Nedley** joined CEAC as a Professional Affiliate in 2009. Dr. Nedley is currently the director fo Dr. Shula Nedley, Consulting. Dr. Nedley served as Director of the Bureau of Assessment and Accountability with the Pennsylvania Department of Education for four years. At the Department of Education, Dr. Nedley was responsible for Pennsylvania's assessment systems, including the PSSA, PASA, and ACCESS for ELLs, as well as Pennsylvania's accountability system.

## Ask CEAC!

### **CEAC** *How does my organization choose an evaluator?*

There are many factors to consider when making this decision. Issues like funding stream requirements, financial constraints, capacity within your organization, and how you intend to use the findings generated from the evaluation, will likely impact your decision.

If your funding source requires that you obtain external evaluation, then there are several resources you can turn to locate an

individual or center that might fit your needs. First, reach out to other organizations or programs with which you are affiliated, and ask them who they use. Often, referrals are a good place to start. Also, check your local universities for departments or centers dedicated to evaluation. A third resource is the American Evaluation Association. Their [website](#) has a database of evaluators that you can search. Evaluators and evaluation centers often come with areas of expertise, such as education, health, not-for-profit, evaluation, or capacity-building; therefore you may want to consider which area best describes

what it is that you/your organization does.

Once you have created a 'short-list' of evaluators to contact, you will want to articulate your needs and any constraints that you have. Evaluators will want to understand the program or initiative under evaluation, how you plan to use the evaluation findings as well as any requirements that your funders might impose.

**Ask CEAC!** *Send your evaluation and assessment questions to [ceac@pitt.edu](mailto:ceac@pitt.edu)*

## Evaluation Focus: A Conversation (continued from page 1)

*When evaluators are involved with an initiative at its conception...they provide a genuine resource.*

Working with clients like that makes evaluation really satisfying. Together you explore important questions, provide meaningful and relevant information, and impact decision-making in ways that benefit the client and stakeholders.

### **CEAC: What does utilization look like on the client's end?**

**NB:** We distribute reports of findings to our advisory groups, in this case, the MSP Cabinet and the MSC Steering Council, for discussion at their meetings. Discussion focuses on gleaned insights to inform future planning. For example, the length of breakout sessions and the importance of providing time for team interaction grew out of feedback garnered from the conference survey. In our MSP work, MSC submits the complete composite evaluation report (described above) to the National Science Foundation and U.S. Department of Education as part of

our annual reporting requirements. In addition, we share each of the composite reports with the Cabinet and MSC staff for discussion with the goal of strengthening the ongoing work. This past summer, the Cabinet held a retreat to consider the evaluation findings. In addition, MSC took the findings and interspersed them throughout the *MSC Journal*, including them with articles that described some of the activities in greater detail. Evaluation results are included and referenced in the project's presentations to national conferences, to add insight into shared experiences. In authoring articles, the evaluation results have been both directly included and at least referenced in articles about the initiative.

**CT:** Utilization from the client's perspective can mean numerous forms of distribution...but it doesn't stop there! As Nancy mentions in her response, the MSC characterizes dis-

semination by two processes, both distribution AND discussion. Sometimes clients think it is enough to simply distribute the findings, to get the report out to the right people in a timely fashion, and that is an important beginning. Without findings available when needed, there is no hope that they can be used to guide decisions. But, that is not enough. We know that adults learn through ample time to consider new information, integrate it and to reflect. That cycle is similar for utilization. We need to build in opportunities for people to read and consider findings, to consider the potential impact in practice and policy, and then to support deeper reflection on next steps and actions. This cycle of use is part of our responsibility as evaluators, in consort with clients, to make sure our evaluation efforts have an impact.

### **CEAC: What (evaluation aspects, techniques, communication, etc.) help a client to utilize evaluation results?**

**NB:** Access to draft evaluation documents, both surveys and first analysis, enables the project to ensure accuracy and to make sure we understand the evaluation activity, analysis, and findings as they are developed. Across time, we have been able to provide feedback to CEAC that helps us better use the reports; for instance, in compiling survey responses, it has been especially helpful to have open-ended comments categorized by themes and ordered in the sequence of frequency. We have established a long-term relationship with CEAC, so evaluators look at findings across years with us, helping to discern trends and the emerging big picture. When evaluators are involved with an initiative at its conception, as CEAC has been with the MSP, they provide a genuine resource that helps define the key questions to be explored, and therefore to provide context to interpret findings as they emerge.

**CT:** Nancy's examples speak to a number of pivotal points that influence utilization. Communication and planning are essential. Talking through expectations, timelines, decision points, reporting formats and processes, opportunities for the kind of consideration and reflection I mentioned earlier --- all of those, and more, are important. But at the core of all of it is the level of effective communication present in the evaluator-client relationship. Sometimes it is important to establish an evaluation feasibility assessment: Is the client (including processes, activities, initiatives, etc.) ready and able to be evaluated? If not, findings will not be very meaningful or relevant, regardless of how technically well-done the evaluation.

## Recent Publications and Events

**March:** CEAC staff presented a panel discussion at the annual conference of the Council for Graduate Students in Education at the University of Pittsburgh. Keith Trahan presented about the [MSP Learning Lab](#) project, Tracy Pelkowski presented about the [MSP Case Study](#) project, and Crystal Wang presented about the [Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council](#) project. Cindy Tananis provided closing comments.

**February:** Cara Ciminillo co-presented a poster with Dr. Thomas Cortina of Carnegie Mellon University, Principal Investigator of the [ACTIVATE](#) project, at a working meeting of the National Science Foundation iTest Summit in Washington, D.C.

**January:** Cindy Tananis and Keith Trahan presented at the [MSP Learning Network](#), 2010 Conference in Washington, D.C.

## Who we are

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## CEAC Up Close

CEAC welcomes Alaine Allen! Alaine is a doctoral student assisting CEAC with evaluation as fulfillment of Supervised Research requirements. A Pittsburgh native, Alaine is currently pursuing an Ed.D. from the University of Pittsburgh in Higher Education Management. In addition to her studies, Alaine is the director of the Pitt Engineering Career Access Program, a diversity initiative in the Swanson School of Engineering. Alaine's research interests involve identifying factors that enable ethnically underrepresented students to successfully transition from high school to college.

Join the conversation @

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Guiding well-informed policy and practice.

The Collaborative for Evaluation and Assessment Capacity (CEAC) addresses pressing evaluation and assessment needs by drawing on resources throughout the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education and the evaluation community at large. Through interdisciplinary and inter-agency collaboration, affiliates of CEAC work together to merge technical, evaluative, research design, statistical, and theoretical expertise to best address practical evaluation and assessment issues.

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