Developing a Collaborative Evaluation Toolkit to Work with Extension Audiences:
Economic Development and Carteret Catch

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Abstract  
This project used collaborative evaluation techniques to develop a model for delivering technical assistance to small-scale enterprises in North Carolina. Collaborative evaluation engages key stakeholders at all stages of the evaluation process to enhance their capacity to make data driven decisions. It has been successfully applied to a variety of programs, spanning education, social services, government, and agriculture. The project applied this evaluation approach to meet the marketing evaluation needs of an emerging Eastern North Carolina Local Seafood Promotion Organization, “Carteret Catch.” During the project, three surveys were developed and conducted to assess interest in locally caught seafood among consumers, restaurants, and retailers. The surveys and the methodologies to gather the information emerged in the course of the project through consultation with stakeholders. From this project it is proposed that an evaluation toolkit be developed, with a mind to developing a model that could serve as the basis for a curriculum to promote economic development for extension programs to serve other small-scale enterprises in the state.

Key Words: evaluation, survey development, marketing surveys
Introduction

This project used collaborative evaluation techniques (O’Sullivan, 2004; O’Sullivan & O’Sullivan, 1998) to develop a model for delivering technical assistance to small-scale enterprises in North Carolina. Collaborative evaluation engages key stakeholders at all stages of the evaluation process to enhance their capacity to make data driven decisions. It has been successfully applied to a variety of programs; spanning education, social services, government, and agriculture.

While collaborative evaluation is a term widely used in evaluation, its meaning varies considerably. Often used interchangeably with participatory and/or empowerment evaluation, the terms can be used to mean different things, which can be confusing. The Topical Interest Group, representing evaluators following this “participant-oriented” approach in the American Evaluation Association, have entitled themselves, “Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation.” They have made no formal attempt at defining and/or distinguishing among terms. Therefore, for the purposes of this presentation to reduce confusion, a collaborative evaluation approach is defined as an evaluation that actively engages program stakeholders as members of the evaluation team to the extent that they are able and willing. The work of O’Sullivan (2004) and Rodriguez-Campos (2005) best represent how such evaluations are planned and implemented.

From a broad, theoretical perspective, collaborative evaluation belongs on the use branch of evaluation theory as described by Alkin (2004a) in Evaluation Roots, sharing much in common with participatory evaluation (Cousins, 2004; Cousins & Earl, 1992, 1995; King, 1998, 2004), utilization-focused evaluation (Alkin, 2004b; Patton, 2004, 2008), and empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 2004, Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005). Consistent among these approaches are a strong appreciation for stakeholder involvement in evaluation and a desire for the evaluation results to be useful.

Collaborative evaluation distinguishes itself from these other approaches by its inclusion of all stakeholders as potential collaborators and the sliding-scale nature of that collaboration. There is not a set amount of collaboration or step-by-step directions about how the collaboration should proceed. Neither is there a set assumption about who has the ultimate authority in conducting the evaluation. The assumption is that collaboration with program staff and other stakeholders enhances the evaluation, and so collaborative evaluators seek this participation to the extent that program stakeholders are willing and able to become involved.

Prior to beginning an evaluation, levels of collaboration are explored and negotiated. The negotiation could lead to high levels of involvement in the evaluation by stakeholder to virtually no involvement by stakeholders. Ideally, the negotiation assesses stakeholders’ evaluation capacity and creates an evaluation plan that will allow for the collection of quality information to answer evaluation questions; it also hopes to enhance the evaluation expertise of participating stakeholders. This adds appreciable importance to the steps surrounding the initial clarification of an evaluation request.

Levels of decision-making power also are negotiable (within the confines of ethical evaluation procedures and guidelines (AEA, 2004)) with a collaborative evaluation approach, which is not true of the other approaches. Fetterman (2001) distinguished empowerment evaluation from participatory evaluation (as represented by Brunner and Guzman (1989)), using the dimension of stakeholder control with empowerment evaluation assuming greater stakeholder control than participatory. Later Fetterman (2005) likened the evaluator to a facilitator who coaches community member who are engaged in and in charge of the evaluation. For utilization-
focused evaluation, Patton (2008) portrays external evaluators as facilitators, collaborators, and resources, while participants are decision makers and evaluators. Cousins and Earl (1995), in contrast, maintain that with participatory evaluation, the external evaluator leads the evaluation.

The project applied the collaborative evaluation approach to meet the marketing evaluation needs of an emerging Eastern North Carolina Local Seafood Promotion Organization, “Carteret Catch,” with a mind to developing a model that could serve as the basis for a curriculum to promote economic development for extension programs to serve other small-scale enterprises in the state.

**Purpose & Objectives**

This project reflected active collaboration with community partners, associated with Carteret Community College (Economic Development Council and Small Business Center), North Carolina State University (Seafood Laboratory, Sea Grant, Center for Marine Sciences & Technology), Cooperative Extension at North Carolina A & T State University, North Carolina Department of Travel and Tourism, IBM Business Transformation Executive’s Office, NOAA Fisheries Service, Cape Lookout National Seashore, Core Sound Waterfront Museum, as well as local restaurants, seafood retailers, and fishermen. From the organization’s perspective, the development of this technical assistance model was seen as a necessary preliminary step toward creating new partnerships and enhancing existing collaboration between university, community, business, and non-profit partners.

This purpose of this paper is to present the steps involved in this collaborative project and to suggest a format and possible content elements of an evaluation tool kit, which could be used to apply this approach with other extension audiences. The evaluation tool kit strategy was successfully used by one of the authors to develop an evaluation resource for international outreach program that focused on school populations (O’Sullivan, Hudson, Jay, Anderson, Steiner, Muller, & Powers, 2006) The contents of that evaluation tool kit could be modified to reflect the needs of extension audiences, thereby providing an excellent resource for extension education programs.

**Methods, Data Sources, and Results**

Project activities included: meeting with the Carteret Catch Board to discuss their evaluation needs; identifying and surveying local restaurants about Carteret Catch; developing, distributing, and summarizing two consumer surveys about Carteret Catch; and sharing survey results with the Carteret Catch Board. After partners convened to detail out the evaluation plan, a three-stage collaborative evaluation study was implemented. The first stage involved targeting 66 Carteret County restaurants and 13 seafood retailers to survey their interest in participating in Carteret Catch, which yielded an overall 39.2% response rate. Survey results revealed that 64% of responding restaurants and 83% of responding seafood retailers were familiar with Carteret Catch. Initial survey results also identified locations interested in Carteret Catch that agreed to serve as collection sites for consumer surveys. To promote participation in the consumer surveys, restaurant and retail $5 incentives were offered to consumers who return completed surveys.

Consistent with the practice of collaborative evaluation, project partners guided specific implementation decisions. The initial strategy was to offer $5 off coupons, redeemable at Carteret restaurants and retailers, in exchange for completed surveys. Approximately 1,000 surveys were distributed at key locations throughout the community and at the 14 cooperating local restaurants with information pamphlets, bumper stickers, and advertisements in local print
media. Unfortunately, fewer than 15 were returned. In consultation with Carteret Catch and other project partners, the project sent out a second wave of surveys during the October 2007 North Carolina Seafood Festival, which was more successful and yielded 57 consumer responses. The vast majority (70.2%) of consumer respondents were residents of Carteret County. Survey results showed that 91% of respondents expected local seafood and restaurants and that 49% expected local seafood at retail seafood locations.

For the third stage of the collaborative evaluation, evaluators and stakeholders reviewed results from the previous surveys and decided to gather data from consumers again at the 2008 North Carolina Seafood Festival. This time the survey was administered to 339 consumers and assisted Carter Catch in reporting important data to their constituencies (Anderson, 2008). Overall, the collaborative evaluation efforts were positive, as reflected in the message from one of the key stakeholders received after the third survey:

I wanted to thank you for spending a weekend at the Festival conducting the consumer survey. That information will be extremely helpful in justifying further assistance to our fishermen sell more of their product to untapped markets within the state. …perhaps we can discuss conducting a workshop to disseminate these results to the rest of our industry. We have been contacted by a group of Brunswick County fishermen to help them develop their own branding program similar to Carteret Catch. So the concept of direct marketing has begun to resonate with the industry.

It is envisioned that the prototype of the Collaborative Evaluation Tool Kit for use with extension audiences will include the following elements: a) Managing Program Activities with Excel, Access, or Web-Based Reporting, b) Assessing Stakeholder Perspectives from written questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews, c) Summarizing Information, and d) Reporting Information. Data instruments, summaries, and reports used with the Carteret Catch project will serve as exemplars for the tool kit. These four aspects of evaluation are key to assisting program staff and others new to collaborative evaluation engage in data collection and analysis for program improvement.

Managing Program Activities with Excel, Access, or Web-Based Reporting

Quality evaluation is built on good record keeping. Programs need to understand the types of information they need to gather in order to report service statistics. Depending on the scope of their activities this may be managed in different ways. With limited activities to follow this might be managed using a spreadsheet program, such as Microsoft Excel. As program activities increase in complexity a hierarchical database, such as Microsoft Access may be the most useful. Finally, when programs have multiple sites or large geographic distances using web-based reporting systems to keep up with performance measures might be advisable. Examples of these record keeping systems assist programs in seeing how they can be set up for their purposes.

Assessing Stakeholder Perspectives from Surveys

Broadly seen, surveys include gathering participants’ opinions from written questionnaires, focus groups, and/or face-to-face interviews. Each of these data collection
strategies has prescribed practices that are useful to know. Similarly, selecting the sample of people to complete these surveys should be done in a thoughtful manner. The surveys used in Carteret Catch will serve as examples for this section.

**Summarizing Information**

Once data are collected, people often need assistance in understanding how to summarize that information in a meaningful way. The evaluation questions help frame the type of analyses to be conducted. At the same time, different types of data may require different data analysis approaches. Summaries of Carteret Catch survey data will be used to highlight different strategies to use.

**Reporting Information**

Reporting results is among the most challenging of evaluation tasks. This effort requires interpreting the data summaries and deciding how best to convey the information to the intended audience(s). Here examples of how information can be summarized greatly help in facilitating the reporting process. Once again the Carteret Catch examples will be used, this time to demonstrate reporting options.

**Educational Importance, Applications, and Conclusions**

Project activities directly contributed to the sustainability of the partner fishing association. Additionally during the project period, partners worked to chronicle the process and develop a model for delivering technical assistance to small-scale enterprises in North Carolina. Project partners were consulted as active partners in the model development. With the assistance of the Cooperative Extension program at North Carolina A & T State University and the NC Sea Grant, the developed model is in the process of being translated into a Collaborative Evaluation Toolkit that can be used by extension agents throughout the state and possibly shared with others across the U.S.; similarly other community colleges in the state and small business centers would be able to use the Toolkit.

**References**


