GOODMAN RESEARCH GROUP, INC.
PERSPECTIVES
Evaluation and Research News From Cambridge MA Spring/Summer 2003

greetings from the **president**

This year marks the 15th anniversary of Goodman Research Group, Inc. I began the firm as a one-person operation and it has grown to a full-service company, offering research, evaluation and consultation to clients from many fields.

Over the years, a number of people have asked why we didn't specialize more in a particular content area, such as media, child development, or health education. The answer is that we made a deliberate decision, early on, to explore evaluation across a wide range of fields. The breadth of projects at GRG has really contributed to the richness of our work, as it allows us to bring multiple perspectives to our clients' projects. While what each client experiences is unique to their field and situation, the evaluation issues are really quite similar across organizations and disciplines.

Regardless of the type of organization or program, the discipline, or the context in which a client operates, there are common threads in the process and the evaluator-client relationship. For example, there are certain features of the evaluator-client relationship that, when present, tend to produce higher quality evaluations:

- the client is able to articulate realistic goals and objectives (see the conversation with Colleen Manning on page 3)
- the organization has the capacity to work with an evaluator and use evaluation findings
- there is a clear understanding of where the evaluation fits into the client's organizational structure

GRG has been extremely fortunate in the clients who have found their way to us. The number of organizations seeking us out for all facets of evaluation research has increased steadily over the years. Moreover, our clients continue to challenge us with projects of escalating scope and complexity. We love it when we are pushed to find new approaches, when we have a chance to combine our expertise in new ways to solve unique challenges, and when we devise customized mixtures of traditional and state-of-the-art data collection and analysis. We derive great satisfaction when clients engage with us in an open and dynamic exchange of ideas, similar to the energizing cross-talk we foster in our own office.

Speaking of our office, GRG has an extremely talented staff and consultants (whom you will meet in this and future newsletters). They bring to their work not only outstanding academic credentials and experience but also a passion for the exploration of ideas and possibilities. All of GRG's staff embody the organization's commitment to fresh thinking, dynamic collaboration that honors research objectivity, respect for the individuality of clients' needs, and a willingness to go the extra mile to find the right solution for the challenge at hand. We want to learn all that we can about the real world environment in which our clients' projects exist, so that we can carry out the most meaningful evaluations and make recommendations that will enhance and refine their work in progress.

At the same time, we aim to deepen our clients' understanding of evaluation, as we work with them, step-by-step throughout the life of their projects. From our perspective, connection with clients is not merely a contractual arrangement; it is a relationship we see extending beyond the start and end dates of any specific project.

That, in essence, is what this newsletter is about. We view it as a vehicle for extending our relationship with you, our clients and prospective clients. It is an opportunity to tell you about our ongoing work, share insights and advice that may help you in your day-to-day project management, and include you in our celebrations of milestones. We hope you find this communication both interesting and helpful. And if you have any suggestions for topics you'd like to see covered, I hope you'll give us a call or send us a message.

Irene F. Goodman

Irene F. Goodman, Ed.D.
Founder and President

Goodman Research Group
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Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG) is a Cambridge, MA-based research firm specializing in evaluation of programs, materials, and services for clients in the education, not-for-profit, corporate, and government sectors.

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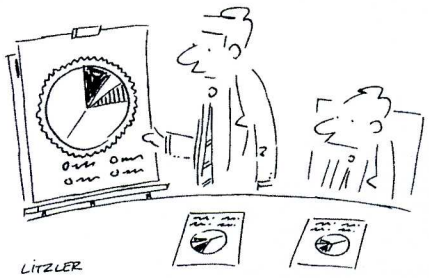

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"The secret to a crowd-pleasing pie chart is the crust."

Recent Evaluation Projects

EGG the arts show

Project/Challenges: A summative evaluation for program funder, Pew Charitable Trusts, of a PBS television series about American artists and cultural institutions. The evaluation assessed EGG's impact on viewers' attitudes toward and participation in the arts. Primary challenges were to find appropriate methods to measure impacts on behaviors and provide results useful to both the funder and the program producer, WNET in New York.

GRG's Approach: GRG recruited 30 PBS viewers in each of four national markets to view representative episodes and complete extensive written pre- and post-viewing surveys. In each market, a subsample also participated in focus group discussions. Additionally, attendees at six national exhibits of work featured on EGG were interviewed to determine whether the series had prompted them to attend. *"We felt it was critical to get information that could be statistically analyzed,"* says GRG project manager, Elizabeth Bachrach. *"Having people tell you they learned a lot from a program is not as credible as being able to combine their words with statistical evidence of changed attitudes and behaviors."*

Results: GRG was able to provide strong evidence that EGG broadened viewers' definitions of art, increased their interest in art in general, and prompted more participation in arts events. Obtaining solid input from research participants also enabled GRG to suggest several ways to extend the EGG programming concept. *"GRG was very flexible in the way they designed their research,"* says Suzanne McMurphy, former Program Officer at Pew Charitable Trusts, *"and extremely responsive to our ideas and our needs."*

RIFNet

Project/Challenges: An ongoing evaluation of a five-year distance-learning initiative, funded by the U.S. Education Department's Star Schools program. RIFNet provides professional development training to the volunteer coordinators of Reading is Fundamental (RIF) programs nationwide. The key challenge in Year 3 of this project was working with RIFNet to optimize the format and distribution of training programs supplied to coordinators. GRG research indicated that RIF coordinators found the one-hour, interactive satellite programs provided by RIFNet difficult to access and hard to fit into their schedules. Explaining this problem to the client was a delicate task, which, according to RIFNet executive director, Nancy Blanton, was handled with sensitivity by GRG project manager Russell Faux. *"When things are not working,"* she explains, *"it helps to get that information in a way that is not only clear and concise, but also offers some hope."*

GRG's Approach: GRG suggested replacing the satellite programs with direct mailings of half-hour video programs that coordinators could view at their convenience. Once this was done, pre- and post-viewing tests were administered at 25 sites to determine how much viewers actually learned from the videos.

Results: The site studies revealed that coordinators enjoyed the programs and gained knowledge from them, particularly when the material covered related closely to their work and work setting. Insights of this kind, which help RIF to understand and communicate with its volunteer coordinators, are the most valuable outcome of the evaluation process, says Faux.

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Where Are You Headed?
A Conversation about Goal Definition

Colleen Manning, GRG's Director of Research, oversees the research quality of all GRG projects. Since joining GRG in 1993, she has managed more than 30 evaluations of educational programs. Below, Ms. Manning shares some of her observations regarding the significance of well-defined goals for both the operation and evaluation of programs.

Why are well-defined program goals so important?

Goals provide an important reference point, guiding a program's direction and serving as a safeguard against taking on too much or becoming distracted from the primary purpose. Well-defined goals also help programs operate more efficiently, for instance by helping to build consensus among program staff about what they are doing. Moreover, unless goals have been clearly set, you can't really answer the question of whether a program is working. If no goals exist, or if they are vague, there is no benchmark for success.

Do programs often operate without clear goals?

It is not uncommon for a program to lack written goal statements and, when written goals do exist, they frequently need clarifying. Often they are not specific enough or are stated in vague terms that cannot be measured. Sometimes they are statements that describe the program's activities or process rather than the intended results. In other instances, they are not consonant with the program's planned activities, or are unrealistic. I have found this to be true of programs ranging from small community-based programs to large, multi-site, government-funded programs.

How can one tell if goals are appropriate and properly structured?

Some of the key characteristics of well-defined goals are:

- They refer to some sort of change (between a current state and an intended state).
- Each goal refers to only one change or intended outcome.
- They can be measured.
- They are specific.
- They are realistic.

Why do so many organizations find it difficult to formulate specific, measurable goals?

There are several reasons. First, program administrators are most concerned with what they have to do to bring their programs to life. When they start their programs, their intended outcomes are often a long way off, and so it is not surprising that the program goals might not be revisited until demands for accountability bring an evaluator into the picture. Second, program people are (understandably) concerned with pleasing funders, and this may distract them from more critical thinking about what they are really trying to accomplish, or are capable of accomplishing. Third, I think one of the best ways to inform solid goals is to conduct a thorough needs assessment before the fact, and this takes time and money that organizations often cannot afford.

Don't unforseen events sometimes make changes of direction unavoidable?

Of course. Programs operate in the real world and they respond to real world conditions. What should happen when shifts occur, but often doesn't in the absence of an evaluator on the scene, is that someone should say, "Let's go back and look at how this change affects the goal statements and clarify them."

If finding time and money for formal needs assessment is a problem, what can program planners do?

Provided they have the capacity, an organization can do a lot on its own without having to call on a professional evaluator. One useful strategy is to spend some time talking to all the possible levels of stakeholders, including those who might fund the initiative, those who might implement it, and those who might benefit from it. This can help an organization to better define and understand the problem they're responding to, how amenable it is to change, and what sorts of changes are most likely to have an impact.

Input from funders who have sponsored similar implementations can also be particularly helpful, because they have probably been the consumers of evaluations that yielded some valuable lessons. In fact, reports done for the government are public property and often easily accessible. The www.ed.gov web site, for example, has an evaluation section where you can access reports.

Is it becoming more difficult to successfully compete for funding without measurable goals?

Proof of results is becoming more important. Funders are likely to be skeptical about a program's efficacy, if the results can't be measured. There are still funders who define success in less quantitative terms, but they are in the minority.

So any time and effort invested in goal setting is worthwhile?

While setting goals may sound relatively straightforward, it's often a challenging and time-consuming task. Program directors should feel really good about any extra efforts they undertake to ensure well-defined goals. It is an important first step in guiding the program in the right direction from the start, and is surely well worth the effort.

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In Brief...

Women's Experiences in College Engineering (WECE). In spring 2002, GRG completed a major longitudinal evaluation funded by the National Science Foundation and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. This was the first national, cross-institutional research study of how support activities (including Women in Engineering programs) and institutional and personal factors affect women's persistence in engineering majors. GRG conducted three annual web-based, computer adaptive surveys of female engineering undergraduates at 53 universities, for a total sample of 25,000 women. Those data were augmented by web-based surveys of engineering faculty and administrators and site visits to 10 universities. The full report and the Executive Summary are available for purchase at www.grginc.com/reportsandpubs.html.

The American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) Space Show, *The Search for Life: Are We Alone?* GRG performed an evaluation of this show, produced by AMNH with support from NASA. A team of GRG researchers collected data from over 900 visitors, representing both pre- and post-viewers. A follow-up survey was mailed to subsets of these respondent groups. The evaluation documented knowledge gain, as well as increased interest in astronomy and outer space and appreciation for the wonders of the night sky.

Learn More

No-Cost Evaluation References

W.K. Kellogg Foundation's *Evaluation Handbook*
Written primarily for project directors, this handbook provides a substantial framework for understanding the relevance and usefulness of program evaluation.
www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub770.pdf

National Science Foundation's *User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation: Science, Mathematics, Engineering, and Technology Education*
A solid user's manual on evaluation. Explains both what can be accomplished and the process, including quantitative and qualitative methods, examples of project evaluations, and how to select an evaluator.
www.ehr.nsf.gov/RED/EVAL/handbook/handbook.htm

Institute of Museum and Library Services' *Perspectives on Outcome Based Evaluation for Libraries and Museums*
A publication containing several articles about the importance of measuring outcomes based on program goals. While written for museums and libraries, it offers good suggestions for any program that serves the public.
www.imls.gov/pubs/pdf/pubobe.pdf