Learning Exchange 4 to Focus on Lessons from Evaluation

Evaluating from Within: Q&A with SHIELDS’ Aaron Gardner

Semics project analyst Carol Almeda interviewed Aaron Gardner on his experiences as SHIELDS For Families’ internal evaluator, but he was already preparing for his next endeavor, leaving the agency for a position at the Riverside County Epidemiological Unit. However, Gardner felt that this interview was a way to synthesize and reflect on his experiences evaluating a CDI grantee.

How did you first get involved with SHIELDS?
I had previously been the project coordinator for a federally-funded behavioral study on gay male stimulant abusers, so after that ended, I began looking for a new position that would continue to utilize my experience in behavioral research. SHIELDS was looking for a Research Analyst to bring their program evaluation into house at about the same time. The rest is history.

How would you describe your role as an internal evaluator for SHIELDS?
To collect and analyze program data and present the analysis to program administrators in ways that can be useful to them in making management decisions about program effectiveness, direction and quality assurance. Also to help SHIELDS present their program to the outside world, such as funding agencies, consortia and Semics.

Could you discuss the framework and mechanics of the evaluation process which you did for SHIELDS? Did this apply to all the programs or to only the CDI?
I designed the project’s evaluation protocol - composed data collection instruments, researched and implemented standing measures and conducted all of the data entry and data analysis. My goal was to establish a pseudo-scientific evaluation - to collect enough data to establish program effectiveness without a controlled randomized trial. One of the advantages to internal evaluation was my ability to meet with the Child Development management team. This allowed a level of interaction and feedback that was essential to my process. I was concerned with trying to capture data that went beyond client satisfaction or pre/post tests. I wanted to capture behavioral change in the mothers and developmental skill advancement in the children through time while also collecting “dosing” information - how many or what kinds or how much classes, treatment, interaction did it take to see what might be called successful increases in parenting behaviors and/or developmental improvement.

What were the challenges you encountered as an internal evaluator?
Not having any colleagues to discuss things with. There is a richness there that was a challenge to try and duplicate alone. I would have liked to have someone with a strong biostatistics background to bounce ideas off of.

What were the lessons learned from your experience as an evaluator?
To use multiple techniques, and to be flexible. The evaluation design was always being altered as my understanding of the program increased. As laws in the original evaluation protocol became apparent I could never be overly invested in my design – the design or protocol was not sacrosanct. It needed to be flexible enough to make sure that it was always reflecting the work being done in the centers. This is also where multiple techniques come in handy.

From your point of view, what would you say is the “place” of the evaluator in this “order of things”?
My place at SHIELDS was as an integral part of the program team... to help the programs perform to their potential and to aid in recording and reporting the programs challenges and successes - working both as a cheerleader and as someone who will honestly point out successes - working both as a cheerleader and as someone who will honestly point out challenges.

The new cdilearningexchange.com is now a “members only” site that can serve as a venue for a continuous exchange of ideas, opinions, suggestions and solutions on any of the topics tackled in the Learning Exchange. It is now a new means of communicating with Semics staff and other grantees, as well as a resource of useful information. The website can be a valuable sounding board among fellow grantees about issues of concern or simply be a posting board for announcements.

However which way you use it, the new Learning Exchange website can be a valuable tool and resource. Semics staff will be available to help get you registered.
CDI Grantee Focus Group: Not Just Child’s Play

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Sans conducted its CDI grantee focus group on January 24 at Child Educational Center in La Cañada. Facilitated by Rhonda Scott, a consultant for Semics with extensive market research experience, the session featured representatives from five grantees engaging themselves in a discussion on the first two years of life focus primarily on interacting with the world through their senses and motor movements, rather than “thinking.” Though children are developmentally, they are most comfortable perfecting these capacities through “physical” activities.

“Play is the context in which children learn,” said Marilyn McGrath, head of Santa Monica College’s Professional Development Institute for Early Childhood Educators. “You want children to construct their own learning, and teachers can observe the child’s agenda.”

The participants shared the general consensus that in order to improve play as it exists now, there must be more training and education for providers, teachers, professionals and parents on the importance and validity of play for a child’s development and learning.

CDI staff and First 5 L.A. program officers met in the first of a series of meetings.

Notes from the Field: Client Satisfaction Survey

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valuating the CDI program is complex, especially with 54 diverse agencies involved. As Semics staff go into the field, different types of data collection are employed. One of which is the Client Satisfaction Survey, in which participant responses are documented anonymously. Semics project analyst Leo Castillo-Frausto shares with us some recent findings from his grantees.

CCIS (Pasadena Collaborative Literacy Project)

“I have always known the importance of early literacy, but I am glad to finally be around other people that recognize it too. Everyone has been enthusiastic about sharing their ideas and thoughts. That has been so helpful!” – Early childhood educator participant

Semics Goes to South Beaudry

Evaluators, Program Officers Meet

To foster communication, information and a mutual understanding of their roles on the CDI project, Semics staff met with the program officers from First 5 L.A.’s Grants Management department in the first of an ongoing series of meetings at First 5’s (former) headquarters in Downtown Los Angeles.

The initial “summit” took place on December 1, 2004 as both groups, forming three mixed teams, broke the ice with an interactive game of “CDI Jeopardy.” This poster-board version of the TV game show featured CDI-related categories with the responses being the names of grantees.
Challenges and Solutions as Common Ground at LE3

“Navigating Common Ground” was the theme of the third CDI Learning Exchange (LE3), at St. Anne’s in Los Angeles on October 1, 2004. This was the last in the initial cycle of Learning Exchanges covering the “Common Ground” shared by CDI grantees. LE3, attended by 76 representatives from 41 agencies, built on the two prior Exchanges with its emphasis on defining common challenges and searching together for viable solutions.

The morning’s program began with a team-building activity (see right) and a “taping” of CDI to Eye - a simulated talk show (see below) which featured grantees discussing their organizational challenges and solutions. The light-hearted format of the talk show led into a more focused discussion of challenges and solutions at each of the round tables (see page 4).

Following the talk show discussions, participants voluntarily shared their challenges and potential solutions. This fruitful discussion time was followed by a light lunch and a raffle. The event ended with participants gathering at locations around the room which represented aspects of the event that they gained the most from. Participants left LE3 energized by the opportunity to share their organizational struggles and receive encouraging feedback from other CDI grantees.

The inaugural Learning Exchange on March 19, 2004 was the first-ever gathering of grantees from all three funding cycles of First 5’s CDI program, plus staff from Semions and First 5 L.A.

Event Roundup

The construction project gave the grantees an opportunity to get to know each other on a more personal basis, providing the groundwork for sharing their organizational struggles with each other later in the morning.

“CDI to EYE” - LE3’s Morning Talk Show

The conference room at St. Anne’s transformed into a television studio as Amanda Bueno and Grant Power “hosted” CDI to Eye, a simulated talk show (complete with theme music, “applause” cue signs and even a “commercial break”) which highlighted the organizational challenges faced by three grantees and the solutions that each grantee had adopted to address these challenges.

The “guests” were St. Mary Medical Center’s Carol Bond, Friends of the Family’s Judy Ramos and Harbor-UCLA’s Alex Sosa. They sought to normalize the presence of obstacles to growth in the implementation of grant funding.

Sosa, who almost became a no-show after her car unfortunately broke down on the freeway earlier that morning, talked about some almost-harrowing challenges her agency’s Breastfeeding Peer Counseling Program underwent:

Originally conceived as an expansion of the WIC program, her program became a CDI project requiring data collection. However, the hospital regarded the expanded program as a service project with a research component and therefore were uninterested in the jurisdiction of the Health Information Privacy and Portability Act (HIPPA). Because of this change, program personnel are unable to access patients without securing prior approval from the hospital’s Internal Review Board. Overcoming this obstacle entails dealing with many layers of hospital personnel, each with a value-laden orientation towards breastfeeding.

To remedy this, program personnel built ongoing alliances with the hospital hierarchy. Breastfeeding workshops for nurses are conducted to reorient the values of this critical population who serve on the frontlines of the service delivery system. To encourage attendance of the workshops, project implementers negotiated with the Bureau of Registered Nursing to grant equivalent Continuing Education credits.

October’s Learning Exchange 3 kicked-off with a team-building icebreaker activity: constructing structures made out of marshmallows and uncooked spaghetti noodles. After some 15 minutes of teamwork, erects architectural and engineering skills (and in some cases, the unfortunate effects of gravity) among participants. The reigning champion was the Family Literacy table team, comprised of Judy Gomez and Denise Gee (WIC Program Public Health Foundation Enterprises), Fil Lujan and Susana Lopez (Monrovia Unified School District) and Shawn Kaplan (Child Care Information Services). They cooperated in designing and constructing a three-foot-high tower that walloped the forces of gravity, topped by a spaghetti noodle antenna stretching toward the sky. Each received a $5 Jamba Juice gift card as a prize.

Building the Getty Center... ...or is that the Spaghetti Center?

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**Event Roundup**

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**Agencies Share Organizational Challenges During Breakout Discussions**

Learning Exchange 3 participants had the opportunity to discuss their own organizational struggles and receive potential solutions from their discussion groups. Seated at tables organized by topics ranging from Child Care Quality Enhancement to Family Literacy to Early Childhood Education/Development to Improving Access to Healthcare, grantees wrote down their program-specific challenges on index cards, which were passed around the table, after which fellow participants wrote down their own solutions. For more detailed information on challenges faced by grantees and potential solutions offered, please visit www.cdilearningexchange.com, click on “The Forum” and register yourself online to access the table discussion information.

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**Grantees Meet, Overcome Challenges**

With issues ranging from facilities to the recruitment of children and parent program participants, at least three grantees present at LE3 have since experienced growth in meeting the challenges faced by their organizations. At the LE3 organizational challenges breakout session, representatives from 1736 Family Crisis Center discussed obstacles they encountered in the lack of adequate space for play equipment and of responsible monitors for parent-child play at their shelter.

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**Evaluating Semics: Grantees Comment on LE3**

At the close of Learning Exchange 3, participants were invited to fill out evaluation forms as a means of guiding Semics staff in the organization of future Learning Exchanges. Sixty-seven responses were garnered, the majority of them were “satisfied” to “very satisfied” with the morning’s program.

The breakout table discussions were the highlight of the morning’s program, according to the majority of attendees who responded. As one participant summed it up, “The breakout session was very useful, brainstorming on real issues can only improve our projects.” Another grantees expressed their appreciation for the grouping of grantees according to topics of interest.

Various participants valued each of the morning’s activities. One grantees praised the building activity that signaled the beginning of the program: “The pasta-marshmallow warm-up was fabulous.”

Another commented on the effectiveness of CDI to Eye: “The talk show was a great idea, a great attention catcher and a good way to learn about other programs.” Several others also viewed the talk show as an effective means for introducing the theme of LE3 and guiding the table discussions that followed it. As one guest stated, after the show had concluded, “people had an idea what to share and where things were headed.”

Along with the accolades, several of the attendees made suggestions for improving future Learning Exchanges. The majority of these participants recommended that more time be devoted to breakout discussions on common challenges faced by grantees, such as recruitment and retention of their target populations.

Participant-evaluators also made several helpful comments regarding the overall organization of the Learning Exchange. In the context of the table discussions, one grantees commented, “This day felt more relevant and useful than past Exchanges, continue to find ways to keep it relevant for all participants.” Another grantees commented on the importance of relating the theme of each Learning Exchange to the others that had come before, and following up on-site with the challenges and potential solutions discussed during LE3. A third grantees underlined the importance of assisting grantees in evaluating and improving the effectiveness of their programs in a “scarce funding world” so that they would continue to receive the grants necessary to keep their projects viable.

In response to these evaluations, Semics and First 5 L.A. staff adapted the content of Learning Exchange 4 to grantees’ expressed needs. Time will be set aside for updates on the challenges that grantees shared during LE3. Breakout discussions will play a major role in the activities of LE4, and participants will receive copies of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook to assist them in evaluating the effectiveness of their individual programs.

Commenting on the event as a whole, participants valued having the opportunity “to network with other CDI evaluators” and “to see different perspectives from other professionals” in their fields. This participant commended the overall organization of the program: “It was fun, serious, informative and ended on time.”
**Shining in the Community**

**South Central LAMP**

The Exchange is not only a source of news and information for CDI grantees, but also a forum for them to share their experiences. Mary Hofmann Henriques, executive director of South Central L.A. Ministry Project (LAMP) shares her first-hand experience of how her agency just provides services, but transforms a community.

LAMP’s programs serve recently-immigrated Latinas through parenting and English as a Second Language education. Most of them have not been able to focus on their education since dropping out of the 6th or 7th grade in their native Mexico or Guatemala. The LAMP Jr. Children’s program began to make it easier for parents to attend parenting and ESL classes, but we soon realized that the children who attended LAMP were not getting any other preschool experience. We are working to transform the LAMP Jr. program into a program that prepares children in South LA for kindergarten cognitively and socio-emotionally as well as the children who attend preschool in Beverly Hills. Our First 5 grant has helped us improve curriculum materials, program equipment, supplies and books as well as funds for staff development and training. Working with an evaluator, we are integrating new evaluation systems for the LAMP Jr. program as well as methods to measure integration with our adult programming. Our programs have been so successful over the past couple years that we are at our maximum enrollment, serving 130 families, including close to 300 children during the 2004-2005 program year. We even have 79 families on our waiting list for programs! Since our student retention program has been so successful this year, we have a few slots opening up to help those on the waiting list.

Through coordinated parenting, ESL and children’s programming, as well as special events like the annual Christmas party with Santa and Mrs. Claus, we work to empower families and build community. Parents are able to support their children’s growth and learning, and the community is safer as parents work to break the cycle of violence. As families get to know each other, they feel less isolated, helping to build community safety with families looking out for the children in the community. Over time, we work to build a community of empowered families who are able to access community resources and seek help when needed.

**Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic Conference**

On January 27 the Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic welcomed over 600 professionals in the mental health and child care fields to Because We Care: An Early Intervention Mental Health Services Conference, at the Burbank Hilton.

The clinic designed this intensive, day-long conference to share learning and training forum as well as an opportunity to bring together key leaders in the field of children’s mental health.

The conference also sought to reduce the impact of childhood trauma on children ages 0-5 by increasing participants understanding, knowledge and skills as they relate to evidence-based intervention approaches, models, treatment strategies and best practices.

This important conference gathered together mental health professionals, representatives from local and state government agencies, policy makers and parents who understand the high stakes involved in addressing the mental health needs of children, and that the treatment of mental disorders should be a major public health goal,” said keynote speaker Dr. David Satcher, former U.S. Surgeon General and present director of the National Center for Primary Care at the Morehouse School of Medicine. CDI Evaluation

CDI Evaluation gained mental health related knowledge and skills through specific HeadStart teaching as it relates to children’s ability to learn in a classroom environment. The specific workshops were designed to accommodate the innovative interaction with the children they teach, thus impacting the child’s experience of school. In addition, the clinic is working on establishing the Stepping Up to School Readiness program as an evidence-based service delivery model.

“Intervening early in a child’s life can prevent future emotional and behavioral problems, as well as greatly increase a child’s school readiness, yet current evidence shows that our families find themselves with little guidance or support during these critical years of early childhood, and training in early intervention is often limited or not easily accessible for mental health and child care providers,” said Elizabeth Pfomrn, executive director of the Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic.

**Profiles: The Value of Evaluation**

The Exchange asks two CDI program evaluators about their work and how their findings have made an impact on the grantees.

**Jeanne Dreysys**

(Independent)

Wilmington Community Clinic

This is my third year as an evaluator with the Wilmington Community Clinic’s First 5 project. I’ve spent the last 15 years providing formative and summative input to a variety of educational programs. My work with the Teaching American History project, a Literacy and Technology program, TreePeople’s Generation Earth and an Early Teen Pregnancy Prevention program has provided me with many varied research and evaluation experiences.

Over my three years of work with Wilmington Community Clinic’s leaders, we have moved toward a partnership approach where we review and analyze together how best to serve those in the program. We’ve become more adept at aligning the format, content and delivery of program components so that they more closely meet participants’ needs. Slowly, we have seen the project expand and look forward to another two years of working with our First 5 family.

**Patricia A. Yee**

(Vital Research)

SACAEYC

Vital Research was the evaluator of SCAEYC’s Accreditation Facilitation Project II from the start of their CDI Cycle III grant in October, 2003. We also helped to design and write the evaluation section of their proposal and began working with them at the end of their second year as a First 5 Child Care I grantee for Accreditation Facilitation Project I in May 2002. It is a pleasure to be associated with SCAEYC’s Accreditation Facilitation Project II (AFP II) in the important work it is doing to improve the quality of child care among Family Child Care Providers and Child Care Center Staff. We enjoy our ongoing relationship with the project staff.

The development of the evaluation project has been as important as the evaluation findings in helping to shape the AFP II. In a synergistic fashion, the collaboration between us and SCAEYC’s project coordinator to design the evaluation also helped to clarify the project components and activities. The instruments, data collection procedures, and timeline that were developed in conjunction with the evaluation helped to give substance to the project and the roles of the project staff, the Technical Assistant Specialists (TAS). The result was that evaluation became an integral part of the project’s delivery of services, providing continuous feedback on individual client progress that could be aggregated to the project level.

Our impact has helped to confirm that the AFP II is on track. At the same time, the findings from the evaluation have refined the core of the project and the staff and services that are provided to the clients.
Evaluators are often brought in after a program has been implemented. When this happens, evaluators need to quickly understand how it works and what is happening with the program. The program staff may spend most of their time re-explaining the program to evaluators, instead of focusing on the program. Ideally, evaluators should be involved before program initiation (preferably in the planning phase) to ensure that evaluation components are integrated in the design, and help program staff consider their rationale for the program. This way, program staff and key stakeholders can receive ongoing feedback as the program is being implemented and make changes as needed—allowing program staff to use evaluation for learning.

This allows the evaluators time to identify appropriate benchmarks, performance measures, and data sources as well as involve stakeholders in the evaluation design. In concert with its own stated commitment to commissioning evaluation that is useful and relevant, First 5 LA increasingly is trying to bring an evaluator team into an initiative before it starts. Key examples in recent times include the Partnership for Families (PF:Y) and Universal Pre-School (UPK). Commissioners are increasingly concerned that getting an evaluation only at the end of an initiative does not work for First 5 LA.

Based on previous experiences, the commissioners have realized that what is of value to them is timely feedback during an initiative, so they can be informed on how the initiative is going.

Although it started late, the CDI Initiative evaluation is nonetheless striving to compensate for the time lag and bring interim results to the attention of First 5 LA staff and commissioners so that “real time learning” can be culled from grantees’ experiences, and translated into improvements in First 5 LA’s program design and management practices even while the “last word” on CDI’s implementation (preferably before the program) has yet to come in.

The CDI Evaluation also has design components and conceptual foundations that can yield insights into the sources and nature of change in programs, service programs and communities that are key to understanding CDI’s effectiveness. For example, the CDI starts with its own logic model for change, is utilization-focused, and strives to incorporate both formative and summative evaluation methods.

For those not familiar with the evaluation lingo used previously, here are brief definitions of the evaluation terms:

- Utilization-focused: Evaluation that provides information that can be used by stakeholders to improve a program.
- Theory-driven: Evaluation that develops and uses a program theory or theory of change model. It maps out key stakeholders’ preconceived notions of how and why a program will work. It also helps evaluate process and outcomes as well as assess the choice of methods.

Understanding and demonstrating how program effectiveness will be achieved.

Process: Evaluation that focuses on the planning and implementation of a program. It lets us know whether the program works and why and whether it will work.

Outcome: Evaluation that assesses the short- and long-term results of a program as well as measure the changes brought about by the project. It lets us know whether or not the program is successful and why it is successful.

Evaluation Resources Online

- Grant Makers for Effective Organizations
- Conference 2000 Summary
- “Basic Guide to Program Evaluation” Management Assistance Program for Nonprofits
- “Basic Guide to Program Evaluation for Nonprofit Organizations with Very Limited Resources”

Provides guidance toward basic planning and implementation of an outcomes-based evaluation process, particularly for small nonprofits with very limited resources.

- “Evaluation Assistance” - Project Star
- “Taking Stock – A Practical Guide to Evaluating Your Own Programs” – Horizon Research, Inc.
- “Universal Pre-Schools – Measuring Outcomes: Designing evaluation plans, data collection, data analysis and reporting.”

- “A Comprehensive guide to decisions involved in the evaluation process.”
- “Project Star” -http://www.projectstar.org/star/AmeriCorps/ea_home.htm

Provides an overview of four steps in evaluation: framing the evaluation, defining goals, and objectives, finding evidence, making sense of the evidence.
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