

ADAPTING EVALUATION TO SERVE THE DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF A NEWLY FUNDED MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH CENTER

The Southeastern Coastal Center for Agricultural Health and Safety (SCCAHS) houses six multidisciplinary research projects and 10 pilot projects, and serves a multi-state region. A developmental evaluation framework was used to respond to the complex environment surrounding agricultural health and safety in the Southeast. This approach aimed to (1) engage external stakeholders in guiding the center's research and outreach trajectories; (2) support center research teams in a co-creation process to develop logic models and tailored indicators; and (3) provide timely and feedback within the center to address communications gaps identified by the evaluation program.

WHY DOES EVALUATION MATTER?

Federal agencies fund research centers on a variety of topics, and an evaluation component is normally required. The role of an evaluation program is to emphasize accountability, especially in the case of federal agencies that need to demonstrate that the activities facilitated by their programs are meeting stakeholder interests, and that their programs are achieving desired impacts (American Evaluation Association, 2016).

This study outlines the evaluation approach taken by the Southeastern Coastal Center for Agricultural Health and Safety (SCCAHS) to synthesize the different projects within the center by defining and connecting center goals, facilitating connections and encouraging communication with internal and external stakeholders, and incorporating stakeholder needs and insights into center projects.

HOW WAS IT DONE?

SCCAHS used a transparent box paradigm and a developmental evaluation approach to identify center processes and activities. This approach includes eight essential principles:

(1) developmental purpose, (2) evaluation rigor, (3) utilization focus, (4) innovation niche, (5) complexity perspective, (6) systems thinking, (7) co-creation and (8) timely feedback.

As work began across the center, timeliness, leadership expectations and work plans evolved in the Research, Planning and Evaluation, and



EVALUATION identifies if the activities being facilitated are meeting stakeholder interests, and achieving their desired impact

EIGHT ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION:

-  **DEVELOPMENTAL PURPOSE**
-  **EVALUATION RIGOR**
-  **UTILIZATION FOCUS**
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-  **COMPLEXITY PERSPECTIVE**
-  **SYSTEMS THINKING**
-  **CO-CREATION**
-  **TIMELY FEEDBACK**

Outreach Cores. The evaluation program co-created logic models for each research project and core to describe the dynamic, interrelated, complex functions of the center. Thus, the SCCAHS evaluation plan used elements of developmental evaluation by applying an evaluation perspective in all stages of the project, from discussions to decision making, allowing the evaluation process to adapt despite non-linear processes and continuing innovations within the center and its projects.

The evaluation program also created an organizational plan and a service utilization plan. The organizational plan built upon the plan submitted in the grant proposal, but was expanded to clarify roles and responsibilities outlined in the proposal's specific aims. It also outlined how center cores interact with each other, as well as with external advisory boards. The service

ORGANIZATIONAL PLAN



The organizational plan required all center cores to be connected, work together and communicate about all work and projects.

utilization plan outlined how the center's teams were expected to interact with each other and with external stakeholders, and included contingencies to plan for unanticipated results.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The center's evaluation program set out to infuse developmental evaluation principles in the normal evaluation tasks of collecting, monitoring and evaluating data from teams within the center and providing critical feedback to help projects maintain focus and efficiency. As the center progressed, the value of this evaluation approach became evident. Using these principles allowed the center to be better equipped to incorporate multiple and sometimes conflicting stakeholder perspectives, adapt to changing leadership roles and fill identified communications gaps.

Based upon the results of this study, developmental evaluation principles work well when put into practice in the context of a federally funded regional research centers. Using information gathered from other similar disciplined centers and feedback from stakeholders as a basis, practicing co-creation in the development of project- and center-level logic models, as well as in the development of indicators and the system of data collection is recommended. It is critical that the evaluation systems are able to adapt to the challenges and evolution of centers as they develop in the real world.

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