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Evaluation Makes Educators Efficient and Effective

Much as some wish they were, resources aren't infinite in education. Maximizing resources at all levels must remain uppermost in mind for community college educators as they work to make initiatives successful.

Evaluation research is one approach that can help educators target resources where they will have the most impact. Proper evaluation research leads to the discovery of improvements in outcomes and resource allocation.



Cuyamaca College in San Diego County wanted to maximize its Guided Pathways outcomes under its new five-year STEM grant from the U.S. Department of Education within the Hispanic Serving Institutions Program. Directors and science instructors Laurie LeBlanc and Kathryn Nette turned to IEBC as its contract evaluator. “When Laurie and I were looking at what we wanted to do with the grant, we saw the (Guided) Pathways information and said, ‘Hey, these people are changing things, let’s talk to them,’” said Nette.

The instructors wanted to understand the drivers of its positive outcomes during program implementation, and not after, so they could take action on the findings to reduce the time required to navigate classes and transfer to a four-year degree program. “We will be able to know where our cohort students are as a whole and gauge whether our interventions are working,” said LeBlanc.

Jordan Horowitz, IEBC Vice President, brings his rich background in evaluation research to IEBC, including work as a senior project director in evaluation research at WestEd, a large educational research organization. “Working in education for so long, including having been in the classroom ourselves, helps IEBC to understand the context within which these programs are being implemented, and what’s possible,” said Horowitz.

While many education researchers believe they are well versed in evaluation research, Horowitz says it has a different set of skills and different purposes.

“Evaluation research is supposed to lead to actionable recommendations based on the findings, and includes making judgments about what’s happening,” explained Horowitz. He admits ‘judgment’ can be a loaded word, because it implies criticism, something many researchers never get comfortable

delivering. “On the receiving side, program administrators must accept findings even when they don’t validate current processes.”

As scientists, LeBlanc and Nette were eager to conduct the kind of analysis only evaluation research could provide them. “In the past we said ‘Well, this works, let’s do more of that.’ But now we can measure it. That’s part of the excitement of the project, we have those talented evaluators measuring and reporting back to us,” said LeBlanc. Although at an early stage, LeBlanc says “What we have gotten back is very encouraging and energizing.”

Under its STEM grant, Cuyamaca College hosted a summer boot camp as one of its first program activities. IEBC’s evaluation involved site visits, interviews with students and facilitators, and student written evaluations describing their experiences. Horowitz’s report included recommendations on leveraging program participation for prospective student recruitment, citing the program’s positive benefits.

“We were surprised how well it worked,” said LeBlanc. “(Students) were almost universally positive about the experience for themselves. The faculty mentors worked so hard, it was a shot in the arm.”

“Improving outreach and recruitment of Hispanic students into STEM fields is one of the goals of the overall project,” explained Horowitz. “That’s why we added this analysis to our findings. In evaluation research, work is driven by the program being evaluated per the program’s goals. It’s highly applied.

“We were very pleased with what we found, and we took care to be sure our findings were actionable, not just leaving administrators of the program hanging with ‘what does this mean?’” said Horowitz.

“Now, we have grant funding to get the data we need, and we have people to go to bat for us,” explained LeBlanc. “This is one of the things we’re most excited about; we’ll get data related to the classes and interventions we’ve implemented. We’re going to get it right away. It’s a new experience for us.

“If people have someone like IEBC to help them, I can’t imagine that anyone excited about what they teach wouldn’t want that support,” added LeBlanc.

Context and deep experience within the community college system is applied to IEBC’s approach to evaluation research. “Our recommendations are always within the realm of the possible, with an understanding of the structural, cultural, and policy implications of working within an educational institution, whether community colleges, four year universities, or K-12 districts,” said Horowitz. “We (at IEBC) know what it is to live in that world. Our recommendations are always tied to the way those systems operate. It makes our recommendations actionable and useful to our clients.”

Currently, Cuyamaca College is implementing multiple classroom and student support based programs in year two of its STEM grant. Horowitz says IEBC hopes to determine the impact of individual programs and services such as peer tutoring, the student study center, and special classroom initiatives, as well as the workload involved for faculty and support staff.

“Cuyamaca College is a very receptive partner, they want to know what is working and under what conditions and why. People often want you to prove their program effective, versus whether it IS effective,” said Horowitz.

Statewide efforts throughout the California Community College system such as the Student Success Initiative, Student Equity Initiative, and Guided Pathways are bringing literally millions of dollars to the classroom at each college in the next three years. Horowitz said colleges may be implementing programs that aren’t shown to have an impact, either positive or negative, on the issues they are trying to address.

“These are programs desperately in need of deeper understanding of whether they’re working or not,” said Horowitz. Otherwise, the limited resources educators are given to work with may not deliver on their promises to students.

Horowitz encourages programs to consider evaluation research at the proposal-writing and development stage when it can be folded into the budget and programs can be designed to integrate evaluation efforts. “We believe it’s important to have evaluation built in from the start, but it’s often not,” said Horowitz.

Can programs already in progress still work with IEBC? Yes, says Horowitz. “We have experience coming into programs already underway. We can still come in and meet them where they are at.”

Contact IEBC to explore the potential for evaluation research to maximize your funding resources and program design in these critically important student facing initiatives at info@iebcnow.org, or call us at 760-436-1477.

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