Transitions

The IC TIG Strategic Planning Committee has held three meetings so far with a fourth coming up. After informative sub-committee work looking into strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and social, technological, economic and political factors affecting the TIG, we are starting to formulate goals and objectives.

Meanwhile, thank you to IC TIG proposal reviewers who looked at proposals for AEA 2014. Our TIG will be co-sponsoring several sessions with other TIGs, sometimes at their request and sometimes at ours. Smart move. This will get our TIG’s name out there more and is a way to continue to interest AEA members in the TIG. See page 4 of this newsletter for more.

How are you doing with your business? I’m wrapping up a sub-contract on a national evaluation and otherwise only have two small clients, one of whom is a repeat client (the best kind) for the third summer in a row. So I’m looking for contracts. I continue to try to develop my library evaluation/consulting niche and keep up my mainstay education-related market. Plus I’m trying to do more with computer mapping. And I’m exploring and trying to get up to speed on consulting possibilities in a new content area. All this is daunting and can be expensive!!

Which brings up “transitions.” As independent evaluators we transition from client to client, keeping some, finding others. We try to keep sharp to keep relevant. So we invest in learning and conferences. The field itself is transitioning. It is “professionalizing” with degrees available in evaluation and pushes in some fields (and Canada) to have only evaluators from recognized academic programs or certified evaluators eligible to bid or be hired. Meanwhile, retiring baby boomers wanting to keep active enter as independent consulting evaluators. Then there are the national trends – have you heard about the social impact bond and “pay for performance” approach going on in the non-profit world? If not, look into it. That puts us on notice that as independent consulting evaluators we must continually establish our worth, that we have some value to add or can make a good “return on investment”.

The IC TIG Strategic Plan will, I hope, continue to help the TIG “add value” to its members in the long term. We are thinking about ways to do this not only during the annual AEA conference but also between conferences. Please send ideas. See you at AEA 2014? Hope so.
Meet Don E. Dailey

Each quarter we will feature an IC TIG member in this newsletter. Send your suggestions for future interviewees to Loretta Kelley LKelley@kpacm.org

1. Please describe your independent consulting practice.
Currently I’m a 100% sole proprietor focused on program evaluation, needs assessments, building evaluation capacity, and providing support through group facilitation and writing. Located in Doylestown, PA just outside of Philadelphia, my primary focus is on education and social services, including both K-12 and higher education. Community planning and audience research are additional areas of interest.

2. What is your disciplinary background?
My Ph.D. is in Policy Development and Program Evaluation from a multidisciplinary program at Vanderbilt (Peabody) that included courses in program evaluation, research methods, public policy, economics, and education.

3. How long have you been evaluating, and how long have you been an independent consultant?
I’m brand new as an independent consultant, though I’ve been evaluating for over 20 years. I’ve served as both an external and internal evaluator. I was at American Institutes for Research (AIR) for several years where I served as a project director/PI, research methodologist, and expert in education on both research and TA projects. Recently I served as an internal evaluator at Princeton University where I helped develop mixed methods evaluation capacity for the Pace Center for Civic Engagement.

4. Are you primarily qualitative, primarily quantitative, mixed methods? Which do you prefer?
I’m mixed and mostly prefer mixed with a qualitative theme. Studying under quantitative leaders such as Mark Lipsey and Len Bickman gave me a very strong foundation for thinking and functioning as an evaluator/researcher. At the same time, when I discovered qualitative methods I really found me. At AIR I became a central resource for strengthening qualitative methodical capacity across projects. For my own projects as an independent consultant, I’m drawn to the utility and power of mixed methods.

5. What was your favorite evaluation experience?
My favorite experience was in Lexington, Virginia where I guided undergraduates at Washington and Lee University to conduct a needs assessment on poverty for the City Manager. He asked us to assess the prevalence of poverty and identify gaps in service. This occurred just as the economy collapsed in 2008 so it created a buzz and unique opportunities for working with the community to support grass roots policy changes. I equally enjoyed a national project sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, evaluating their education restructuring initiative in different communities across the country. That was a fun and exciting adventure.

6. What type of experience have you had that was less than ideal? Usually that involves a challenging client who is not conscious of or does not communicate their changing priorities, and has difficulty engaging in authentic problem-solving. This is part of the business.

7. Have you had any comical experiences?
One Sunday evening I arrived in Boston and settled into my hotel room to get ready for local site visits. As I was quietly reading, I heard a growing roar of people down the street. It was a strange sound to hear suddenly and I couldn’t imagine what it was. It then dawned on me that the Patriots had just won the Superbowl. The next day as I was making my way through the city I inadvertently became part of the parade for a few moments and enjoyed waving to people.

8. What do you like to do when you’re not evaluating?
I enjoy music and playing the violin-fiddle. Mostly I play folk waltzes, old-time string music and Irish fiddle, though I love all types of music, including jazz, world-folk, classical, and rock. I also enjoy poetry and reading. Exercising and exploring the outdoors has always been a source of joy for me. As is breakfast with my wife and friends, going to the movies, and loving our dogs.

9. Is there anything else you would like your peers to know about you?
I have my limitations, but am consistently described by others as thoughtful, resilient, insightful, and a smart researcher/writer. I enjoy collaborating on proposals, subcontracting work, or writing projects.
Water or Literacy?

Recently I worked as an evaluator in Afar, Ethiopia for Girlhub, a international partnership that invests in girls. I trained and supervised a research team with SenseMaker to collect 200 stories of girls in a vast randomized control trial for a project promoting literacy for girls. SenseMaker uses mixed methods and storytelling to describe the complexity of a social context and/or social/psychological experience. In 2012, I led the first pilot study of SenseMaker in the Oromia region of Ethiopia.

The Afar experience was an anthropologist’s heaven and an evaluator’s hell.

Heaven: The Afar have a tight communication system: Daagu. Every male who recognizes a traveler asks of him: Based on what you saw, what you heard, and what you know... the Daagu begins. No one lies during Daagu. One talks about the weather to inform others of droughts. A long conversation ensues about the purpose of the trip and the itinerary. The local then asks the traveler if he needs rest or food, and invites him to his home. Hell: Even when locals traveled on foot, and we drove two hours to the next location, villages often knew we were arriving and had already agreed on the official party line. The Afar decide promptly when to leave their village by consulting the stars. It’s bad luck to tell others. So if you scheduled interviews the day before, the next day the family could be gone. Other times, the whole village had migrated to the forest and part of the selected sample was lost.

Results? We had some overlap in data and everything took longer than planned, but we reached our goal of 200 stories and learned how to do better next time.

I had a personally transformative moment: I watched a seven-year-old girl carry a three-gallon jug of tainted water on her back, and a two-gallon one in her hand, under the scorching sun of 100 degrees in the Northern desert of Afar. This was the major reason girls weren’t in school: they fetched water for the family and cattle. Due to global warming, the desert is advancing, and distances to get water are increasing. I saw this while driving my car to a meeting a 15-minute walk away. It is so unjust that we don’t suffer directly for the consequences of our actions, but the most vulnerable of the world do. My actions are affecting people for whom water is a precious commodity.

For a video, see Girl Effect (cool video!)

Half a Dirty Dozen: Six Pitfalls to Avoid When Writing Evaluation Reports

The success of an independent consultant depends a great deal upon the quality of writing in evaluation reports. Unlike our colleagues who work in large organizations that require a particular style or collaboration with several writers, we produce our own reports—and they can make or break us. If the writing is straightforward and easy to read; if it reveals realities about the program that otherwise might be overlooked or misinterpreted; if it represents the evaluator as one who knows the program and can offer worthy suggestions for improvement, then it will serve the author as well as the readers. Writing is one of the chief tools in the independent consultant’s kit. The better we do it, the more successful we will be.

One way to improve our skill is to avoid “The Half a Dirty Dozen”—six pitfalls that plague inattentive writers. We’ll cover the first two in this issue and two each in later newsletters.

Acronyms. Those abbreviations used as verbal shorthand may be readily understood by program participants, but they can be monumental barriers to readers who are unfamiliar with the terms. For instance, a program I’m currently evaluating is a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) project. The acronym STEM is frequently used in educational circles and the general press and is therefore familiar to readers. However, the plethora of other acronyms used by participants—NGSS (Next Generation Science Standards), PLCs (Professional Learning Communities), SALs (Subject Area Leaders), to name just three—can be daunting. Think about readers such as school board members and community partners who might be not only confused but possibly offended when confronted with what to them are meaningless jumbles of letters. Solution: ALWAYS use the full name the first time, followed by the acronym in parentheses. In subsequent references, if there is any doubt about whether or not readers can recognize the abbreviation, use the full name either before or after the acronym.

Ungrounded recommendations. Recommendations to improve a program should emerge naturally from the findings of the study. Every recommendation should elicit an affirmative response from readers as they recall discussion of the findings that support the suggestion. Remedy: After finishing a report, let it sit for a few days. Then read it with fresh eyes. If you find that the discussion does not clearly reveal the need for every suggestion, either amplify the discussion or delete the ungrounded recommendation.
I invite ideas for topics that interest our members. Send any suggestions for future columns to me at gbarrington@barringtonresearchgrp.com.

**FAQs and What to Do About Them!**

**by Gail V. Barrington**

**Question: How much work is enough?**

**Answer:** There is no straightforward answer to this question, of course, but if you find that you are taking on more and more work just to cover your bills, and working longer and longer hours as a result, something has to give. It is time to take a fresh look at your business model.

Maybe you need more help, such as a research assistant to take on some of the more routine tasks. Perhaps you need another “you.” Why not sub-contract a colleague for some of the senior work? Are your expenses too high? Maybe your office costs have crept up from year to year. Is it time to relocate? Or have you simply fallen prey to the fallacy that your clients need you. Well, they may need someone, but it doesn’t have to be you. I know what it’s like to stay on too long—there’s is a lot of ego involved—but no one is irreplaceable. Maybe it’s time for a new challenge—for both of you.

Enough work is “enough” when you still have time for the other aspects of your life. If you find yourself spending less and less time on family commitments, personal activities, hobbies, or exercise, if you aren’t seeing your friends, or if you are passing up on social engagements because you have too much work to do, something needs to change.

Life has a lot to offer and work is only one part of it. It certainly is an important part and gives you a sense of purpose and satisfaction but it is the other parts of your life that feed the wellspring which makes you who you are. Your clients benefit if you are balanced, whole, and rested, so step back and take a look at how you are spending your time.

In addition to your business and evaluation career, how satisfied you are with these aspects of your life:

- Finances;
- Health;
- Family and friends;
- Romance;
- Personal growth;
- Fun and recreation;
- Physical environment?

Create a more balanced life. Your friends, family, and clients will be glad you did!

**Gail V. Barrington**


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**Visionary Evaluation: For a Sustainable, Equitable Future**

**Don’t Miss Eval 2014 in Denver!**

**What to Look Forward to this October in Denver?**

The IC TIG program this year promises to hit areas of interest that never die out, as well as some innovative turns to the evaluation practice of independent consultants.

**Presentations covering ways to navigate independent consulting:**

- Matthew Feldmann, Panel Chair, “Productive Evaluator/Client Relationships”
- Rachel Becker-Klein, “How Many Evaluators Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb?”
- Becky Stewart, Panel, “Remote work: What are Best Practices and Great Ideas to Manage Quality Data Collection from Afar?”

**A Roundtable exploring ways people enter evaluation:**

- Melanie Hicks, “The Accidental Evaluator”

**Practical, how-to sessions:**

- Kathryn EH Race, “Looking for Patterns in Data Obtained from Program-theory Model Based Evaluations”
- Matthew Von Hendy “Finding and Searching for RFPs: A Research Based Approach for Evaluators”
- Erika Lehmann & John Smith, “Project Management 101, or Confessions of a Formerly Disorganized Evaluator”
- Andrea Anderson-Hamilton & Sally Leiderman, “So, I’ve been invited to submit an evaluation proposal---now what?”

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