

Learning for All:

The Value of Field Experience in Training a New Generation of Program Evaluators



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Professionals in various fields have the opportunity to train in real-life situations before they take on a job by themselves. Doctors-in-training do residencies and aspiring teachers take student teacher positions to gain skills that prepare them for their future roles. In program evaluation, however, preservice training usually focuses on course work oriented to research design and methods. After completing these studies, evaluators go off to conduct evaluations guided primarily by their technical knowledge. [Candice Bocala](#), a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and a program evaluator herself, had a different idea. She designed a course to broaden the scope of traditional classes by focusing on evaluative inquiry and improvement science. In addition, her course exposes students to on-the-ground experiences to develop evaluation plans with partner organizations. The results of [Bocala's approach](#) are remarkable: The six-week field experience boosts learning for everyone involved. Not only do students gain theoretical knowledge and practical skills, but their efforts with nonprofit organizations also yield opportunities for program staff to reformulate and refine aspects of their work.

This article summarizes the benefits of the field experience from the partnership of Bocala's students with three organizations: the Brain Building in Progress campaign, the Somerville Family Learning Collaborative, and Boston After School & Beyond. Harvard Family Research Project had an opportunity to speak with program administrators as well as with students working with their organizations. The lessons for practice described below are about the elements of the interaction between the students, whom we will call *student consultants*, and the partner organizations that propelled their learning. The lessons highlight the dialogical, collaborative, and transformative work that went on.

What Student Consultants Did to Strengthen Evaluation Practice

As student consultants came in into the organizations to support evaluation efforts, they facilitated organizational learning through different strategies. More specifically, student consultants:

1. Offered a fresh perspective that helped organizations reflect on what they do

All organizations interviewed highlighted the benefits of having someone come into the organization and offer a different perspective. Being removed from the day-to-day operations enabled the student consultants to offer a detached perspective on how programs were working and conceiving their evaluation plans. As program staff and graduate students engaged in ongoing dialogue about program activities and intended goals, two generative processes were activated: (1) program staff embarked on a self-reflective process that pushed them to look inward in order to articulate their program to the “outsiders” and (2) as the student consultants shared their understanding of the program and raised questions, staff learned how their program was being perceived by a third party, and what pieces might be or might not be fitting together.

Katie Tosh, the director of Measurement and Outreach at Boston After School & Beyond, explained: “The students gave us a really fresh perspective on our work, and it was very helpful for us to see how we were perceived. It was also a learning experience for our staff to discuss our work in this way. It was a great kind of thinking and brainstorming process for our team— to talk about our work to others and to get that fresh perspective.”

Sarah Davila, who oversees the Somerville Family Learning Collaborative along with Nomi Davidson, also commented: “We were used to looking at our program from OUR perspective. But having those outside eyes really helped us see it in a new way. The student consultants’ perspective, their questions, and their technical knowledge helped us understand what we do in a different way.”

2. Raised important questions to identify key assumptions

The student consultants raised questions that led organizations to think in new or deeper ways about a particular issue already on their radar. Tosh, at Boston After School & Beyond, recalled: “The students raised questions of scale and sustainability that were very important for us as we transition out of demonstration pilots into broader-reaching initiatives. They helped us realize we were assuming that the best practices we’re trying to have our program partners adopt and implement lead to changes that would maintain themselves if funding disappeared, and that they would become integrated parts in the program operations.” These questions about scale and sustainability became even more central as they continued to move forward with their program design and evaluation efforts.

Similarly, Sunindiya Bhalla, senior director of Community Impact at the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, who manages the Brain Building in Progress campaign, explained how their evaluation consultants helped them realize an important issue with the evaluation tools they were planning to use: “One of the things that was really uncovered by the two students consulting with us was that we were asking leading questions in some of our evaluation tools, and that we needed to incorporate more open-ended questions instead that would really get us better information.” Thus, whether the focus was on specific technical details or larger programmatic and strategic matters, the student consultants and their questions revealed important issues these organizations needed to address.

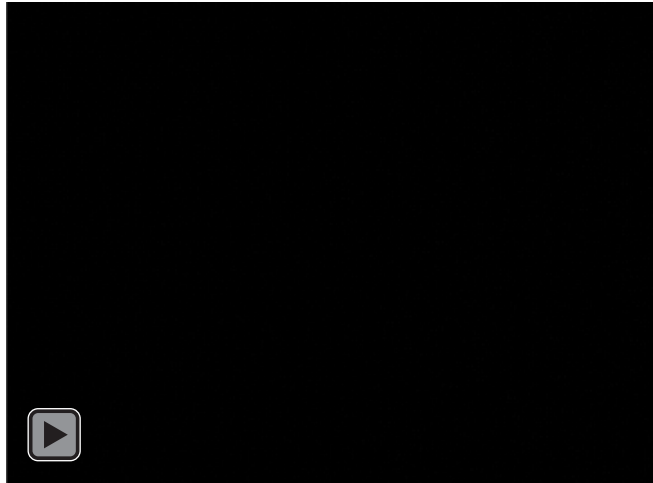
3. Enhanced a sense of capacity and focus on evaluation

Often, organizations experience limited internal resources or technical capacity to plan and conduct their own evaluations. The support that the student consultants offered helped organizations feel more empowered to conduct program evaluation and to maintain a focus on it. Bhalla from the Building Brain in Progress campaign shared: “I speak for myself, but many nonprofit organizations don’t have the resources or capacity to do evaluation, and working with the student consultants was incredibly helpful; they really kind of laid it out for us.” Having a road map for their campaign evaluation provided Bhalla and her team a sense of direction to eventually determine whether their campaign was working.

Davila at the Somerville Family Learning Collaborative said: “Working with the student consultants worked well for us because it forced us to spend the time doing this evaluation work, and we kept it on the front burner because we made a commitment to them. If we said we were going to do a meeting, we did the meeting. They also helped us as we organized our evaluation plan for next year. It made us more focused in our future planning. So it wasn’t only the fact that

we ended up developing a logic model but also the projection to a future evaluation plan. We are now putting together a multiyear plan and thinking about specific tools and methods.”

Babe Liberman, one of the student consultants who worked with the Boston After School & Beyond, summarized what she learned about how external evaluators can contribute to organizational learning:



What Organizations Did to Facilitate the Field Experience

The organizations benefited from the student consultants’ roles but they also contributed to the training of these consultants. As organizations welcomed the student consultants, program staff made a commitment to facilitate the student consultants’ field experience and its alignment with the organizations’ needs. These are the steps the organizations took:

1. Invested time and energy to prepare for and do the joint work

All program administrators interviewed agreed that a great deal of thinking and planning on the part of the organization was necessary for the work of the student consultant to be meaningful: “We had been doing some thinking about how to evaluate our work already. At that time, we were concerned about reducing the data collection burden to the programs we fund, while at the same time having enough information to help us answer our main questions about our campaign impact. We had to get a sense of our general evaluation questions and identify some of our challenges before the students came in, so that we could communicate to them our strategic thinking. We wanted them to develop recommendations that would fit our needs,” stated Bhalla from the Brain Building in Progress campaign.

Once the student consultants came onboard, program staff got them up to speed. Staff “distilled” the information that was pertinent. Tosh from Boston After School & Beyond said, “In orienting the student consultants to our work, we had to distill information to them in a way that would be useful. We considered the balance between communicating the higher-level thinking of the organization and our broad goals while at the same time talking to them in depth about what

the initiatives look like on the ground. So we had to describe our work to them at different levels.”

It was clear to all three organizations that the reflective and collaborative work that they did with the student consultants took a significant amount of time. They advise any organization interested in engaging in this kind of work to allocate enough time to it and to commit to the process, as they all found it extremely valuable.

2. Communicated with students to enable them to develop a working understanding of the organization

Program staff engaged in ongoing conversations with students to help them gain a good understanding of the organizations. Students needed to become familiar with the organization, its context, and culture in order to offer effective and applicable input on their evaluation plans. Tosh from Boston After School & Beyond described how this was done at her organization: “We wanted the student consultants to dive in and talk to the staff about their work, and see what they thought our work was leading toward. It took a lot of conversations with a lot of our staff. We’re a staff of seven full-time employees, and also have a couple part-time employees and interns. The student consultants were able to talk to half of our staff, and then to a few of our stakeholders, through our partner organizations. Talking to many different people involved with the work gave them a good sense of our approach.”

Bhalla from the Brain Building in Progress campaign remembered how the student consultants were able to develop fitting evaluation recommendations thanks to their immersion in the program: “The student consultants did a lot of information gathering in order to truly understand this campaign. I thought their final product was amazing! I think what made that possible was that they got a feel of the culture of the program.”

3. Engaged in the joint work and kept an open mind

Program evaluation is an inquiry. In the work the student consultants and organizations did together, there were ample opportunities for raising difficult questions, identifying inconsistencies, and uncovering alternative perspectives on what programs can and should think about. Aspects of this process may not be comfortable for program staff, who might feel that their work is being questioned. Keeping the end product in mind can help increase the chances for having a sustained commitment to the process, and that is exactly what the organizations did in this case. As Bhalla from the Brain Building in Progress campaign put it: “The biggest piece of advice I have for other programs is to take the time to think through the difficult questions and be open-minded if you’re going to involve external consultants. Be open-minded to any different opinion they might have, because it could be really important for you in obtaining the impact that you want to have.”

Anairis Hinojosa, one of the student consultants working with the Brain Building in Progress campaign, reflected on the challenge that engaging in this kind of work represents for organizations. As we asked Hinojosa what one of the main take-aways from her experience in Bocala’s class was, she replied:



How Student Consultants and Partner Organizations Collaborate to Improve Evaluation Training and Practice

What student consultants did:

- ❖ Offered a fresh perspective that helped organizations reflect on what they do;
- ❖ Raised important questions to identify key assumptions;
- ❖ Enhanced a sense of capacity and focus on evaluation; and
- ❖ Communicated with program staff to develop a working understanding of the organization.

What partner organizations did:

- ❖ Invested time and energy to prepare for and do the joint work;
- ❖ Engaged in the joint work while keeping an open mind;
- ❖ Provided “distilled” information that balances the big picture and program details; and
- ❖ Communicated regularly with student consultants, including feedback on their final papers.

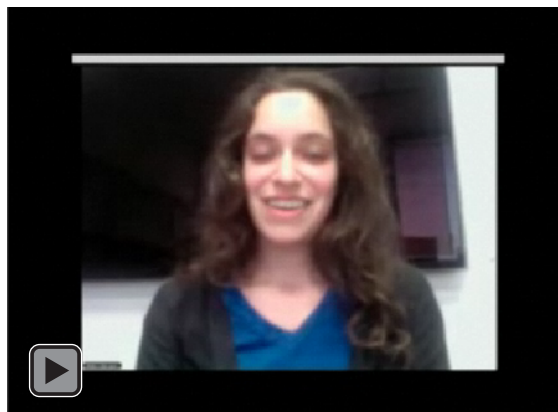
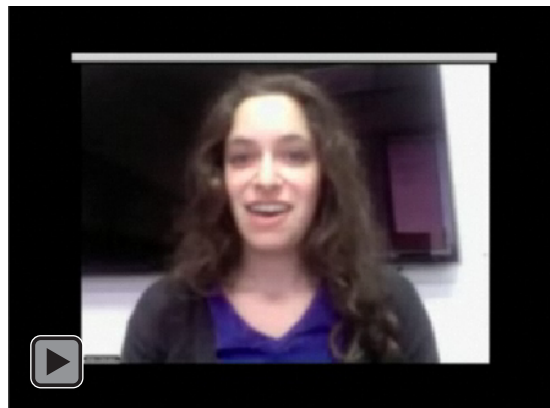
Bocala's Evaluation Course: A Model That Inspires Innovation

The [Learning from Practice: Evaluation and Improvement Science](#) course is innovative. Its theoretical framing, as well as the field experience it uses as a core pedagogical approach, enrich learning opportunities beyond the classroom walls. Bocala not only teaches program evaluation this way, but she practices what she preaches. Her course itself is an evaluative inquiry. Periodically, she engages with students in dialogue about how they are experiencing the course and how they suggest it can be improved. As adjustments get implemented, they examine whether their methods are working and then continue the evaluation cycle. This is improvement science in action!

The evidence provided in this article speaks to the value of integrating the following components in the training of future program evaluators:

- A framing of program evaluation as an ongoing and iterative inquiry that focuses on what, how, and why programs do what they do.
- Field experiences that makes learning meaningful and practical for students and at the same time boosts organizational learning for organizations.
- Opportunities for dialogical, collaborative, and transformative work in partnership between student consultants and organizations.

Babe Liberman speaks to the value of taking a class with a focus on formative program evaluation and improvement science and how she plans to use what she learned in her future work:



Faculty interested in training the next generation of program evaluators can use Bocala's approach as an inspiration for developing new ways to improve the training of future evaluators.

As you reflect on the ideas described in this article, we are looking to you to share your program evaluation course syllabi, or any other materials and experiences that will continue to illuminate this work.

Please email us to fine@gse.harvard.edu with your contributions. Thank you!

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