Evaluation Resource Center for Advanced Technological Education (EvaluATE)

Year 3 Brief Evaluation Report
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Introduction

Funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), EvaluATE is housed at The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University. The Evaluation Center has a rich history, stretching back nearly five decades, in promoting professional evaluation practice. In 1999, they solidified their relationship with the Advanced Technological Education (ATE) directorate of NSF through a grant to "assess the impact and effectiveness of the ATE program." This work included an annual status report of all ATE projects and centers—work that continues into EvaluATE's current funding cycle.

In 2008, EvaluATE became a formal, separate entity within The Evaluation Center with the award of a 4 year, $2M grant in 2008. In 2012 EvaluATE received a second award for a similar amount.

EvaluATE harnesses the evaluation expertise of the ATE community to achieve its mission "to strengthen the program's evaluation knowledge base, expand the use of exemplary evaluation practices, and support the continuous improvement of technician education throughout the nation."

Towards that end, EvaluATE's current goals are to:

- Ensure that all ATE PIs and evaluators know the essential elements of a credible and useful evaluation.
- Maintain a comprehensive collection of online resources for ATE evaluation.
- Strengthen and expand the network of ATE evaluation stakeholders.
- Gather, synthesize, and disseminate data about ATE program activities to advance knowledge about ATE/technician education.

The ultimate objective for EvaluATE is twofold: first, ensure consistency and rigor of evaluation practice; and second, ensure that project decision makers regularly use pertinent information gleaned from professional evaluation to improve projects by using evidence-based practices for enhancing technician education. EvaluATE's role is to ensure that "anyone with a question about the conduct or use of grant-level evaluation is no more than one person or one click away from a practical and relevant answer."

External Evaluation Overview

Because EvaluATE is involved in advancing evaluation practice, the center is intimately involved in the evaluation of its own work, but also recognizes the necessity and value of working with an external evaluator. As such, during the current funding cycle, The Rucks Group, LLC was contracted to provide external evaluation services. Both the internal and external evaluation efforts are unified by the following evaluative questions:

1. To what extent is EvaluATE reaching its intended audience?
2. What are users' perceptions of EvaluATE's quality and utility?
3. To what extent are EvaluATE materials being used?
4. To what extent has EvaluATE's work led to improved evaluation knowledge?
5. To what extent has EvaluATE's work led to changes in evaluation practice?

Evaluation Findings

There were two instruments that served as the primary vehicles for gathering evidence towards addressing the evaluation questions. Each instrument is described below.

1) Survey of EvaluATE's Constituents: A link to this web-based survey was sent to ATE project principal investigators (PIs), Co-PIs, and ATE internal and external evaluators. In addition, it was sent to all who had previously registered for an EvaluATE webinar or workshop. Overall, a total of 1029 individuals received a link to the survey and 369 (36%) responded. The survey was sent to 231 PIs, of which 96 (42%) completed the survey. Of the individuals who attended an EvaluATE event in 2014, 230[1], a total of 95 (41%) completed the survey.

   Among those who completed the survey, approximately 63% (n=232) were currently active with an ATE grant. The majority of active grant respondents were PIs (42%), while grant evaluators made up 17% of respondents. Other categories of respondents were Co-PIs (13%), other program staff (13%), grant writers (8%), and other roles (7%). Of those not involved with an ATE grant, about 22% (n=30) did plan on submitting a grant proposal in the near future.

   Results of this survey were used to address the five evaluative questions. Because the survey had been disseminated multiple times year, it was possible to identify and match individuals who had taken the survey at least two separate times and perform an analysis that looked at individual responses over time. This longitudinal analysis will be included in a later, fuller report.[2]

2) Validation of performance indicators: The external evaluators developed a method and process through which to validate the performance indicators that were used to measure project outcomes. The results of this process are not included in this brief report.

<u>To what extent has EvaluATE reached its intended audience?</u>

Sixty-three percent (n=232) of individual respondents reported that they are currently working on an ATE grant funded project, and of those who are not currently on an ATE project, 65% (n=108) report that they plan to submit an ATE proposal in the future. For those in the ATE community (currently on an ATE funded proposal), 83% are project staff (PI, co-PI, grant staff, or evaluator).

One measure of reach examines how many within the ATE community have used at least one resource within the past 12 months. With this definition in mind, the use of EvaluATE's materials within the ATE community appears to be strong. Results from the services survey suggest that within a 12-month period,

[1] According to EvaluATE's records, the total number of individuals who attended an event in 2014 was 245. Of that number seven individuals did not have a current active email on file and another eight individuals' emails either bounced or were associated with the opt-out option of surveymonkey. Together, the number of individuals who received the email who attended an event in 2014 was 230.

[2] A report a fuller report of the findings from the 2014 Constituency Survey is also under development.

approximately 94% of respondents within the ATE community used at least one resource.

What are users' perceptions of EvaluATE's quality and utility?

Overall, users within the target audience perceived the quality and utility of EvaluATE's resources as high. When asked to rate the overall quality of the EvaluATE resource that they accessed in the past 12 months, the majority of respondents rated the resources as "Good," "Very Good," or "Excellent" (see Figure 1). That is, consistently across the four resources identified, the responses were "Good" or above, with the modal response being "Very Good."

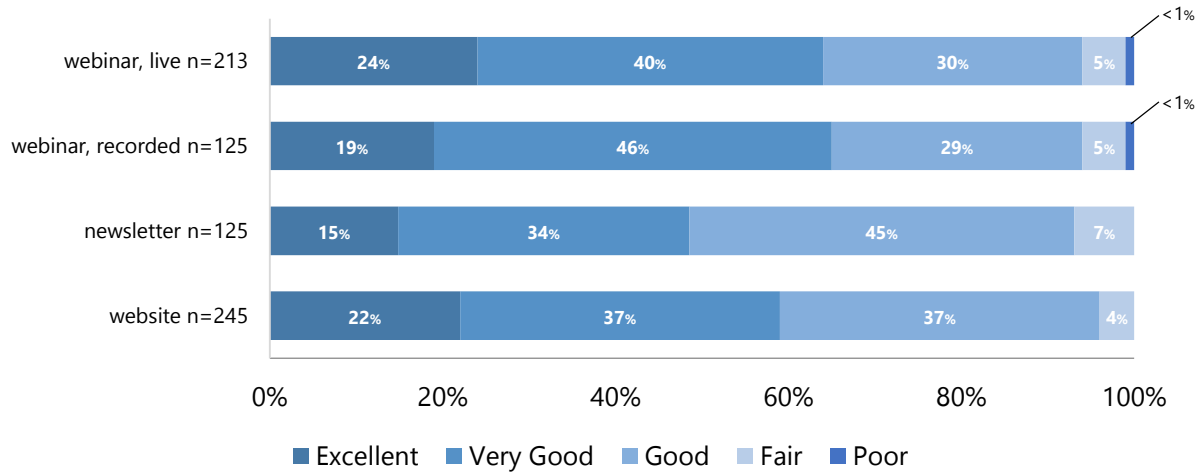

Figure 1. Reported perceived quality of EvaluATE products.

To what extent are EvaluATE's materials being used?

It is useful to make a distinction between reach, which was addressed in a previous evaluation question and the current evaluative question. Reach refers to the extent to which EvaluATE has "touched" their intended audience. However, frequency of use refers to how often the materials are being used. In essence, reach is a discrete measure of use, that is "used/not used," whereas frequency, at least conceptually, is more of a continuous measure of use.

While reach is high, frequency of use for each EvaluATE product is lower (see Figure 2). This finding is most pronounced for recorded webinars in that it is the least used resource, while the website and newsletter are used the most by the intended audience, with 75% reporting use of each of these two resources at least once.

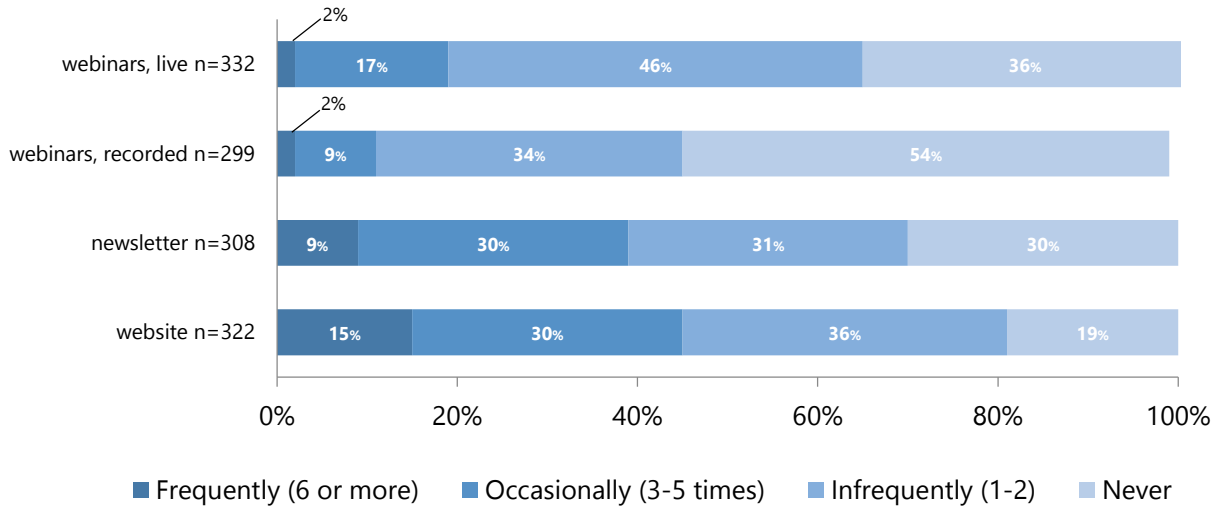

Figure 2. Reported frequency of use of live webinars, recorded webinars, newsletter, and the website in the last 12 months by the intended audience.

A common theme among respondents who used an EvaluATE resource was to use these resources to aid in evaluation practice. For instance:

- *I used [EvaluATE resources] to learn terminology and about logic models so I could better discuss our needs with our external evaluator.*
- *I save copies of EvaluATE powerpoint presentations and refer to them when developing grant concepts and describing evaluation methodology in grant proposals.*
- *I attended an EvaluATE workshop and gained tremendous amount of information that has guided me in developing evaluation plans and executing evaluation.*

<u>To what extent has EvaluATE's work led to improved evaluation knowledge?</u>

Consistent with EvaluATE's logic model, it is posited that a result of their work is increased evaluation knowledge. Evidence surrounding this and the evaluative question discussed in the next session has not traditionally been as compelling as the evidence surrounding other claims. As such, we made a concerted effort to more directly assess evaluation knowledge as well as evaluation practice.

A majority of those within the intended audience reported an increase in knowledge as a consequence of EvaluATE's resources. Overall, members of the intended audience indicated that use of EvaluATE resources improved their understanding and knowledge of evaluation-related concepts (see Figure 3).

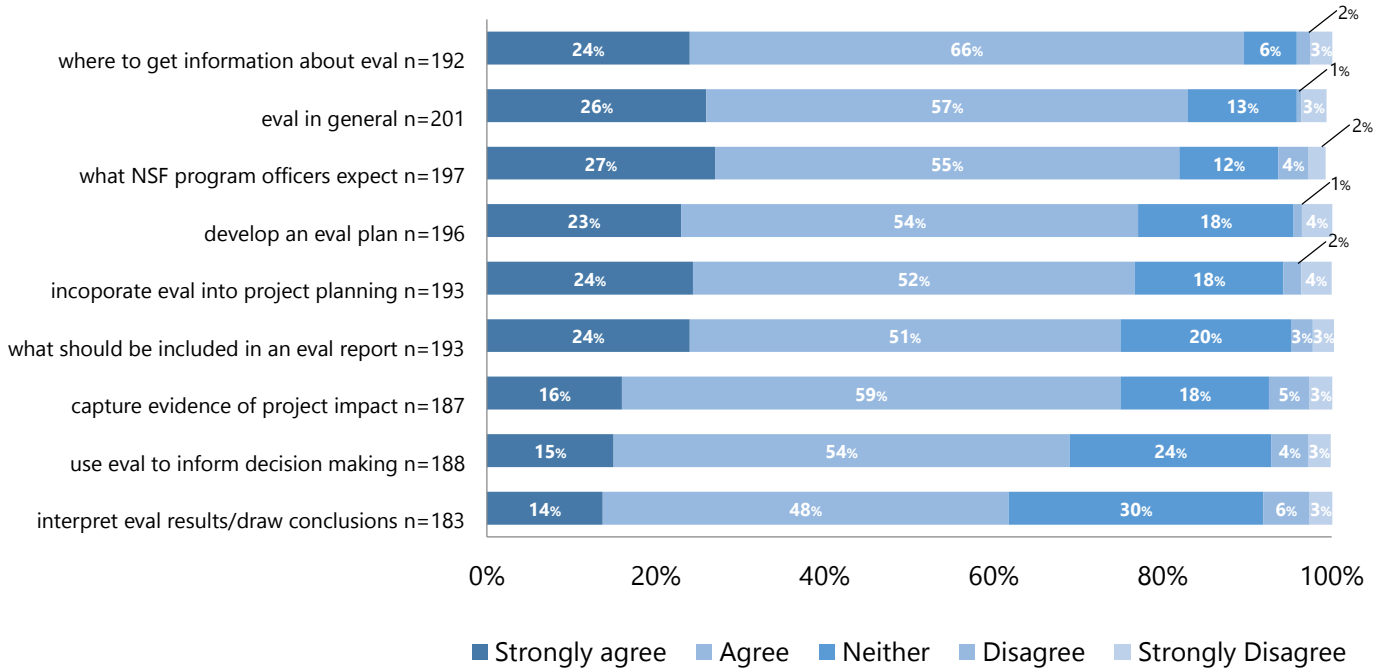

Figure 3. Reported extent of agreement with statements related to increases in evaluation knowledge.

To what extent has EvaluATE's work led to changes in evaluation practice?

Self-reported changes in respondents' comfort level with and ability to use evaluation were captured through the constituents survey when respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements that reflect some aspects of evaluation practice, for instance, their confidence in using evaluation, effectiveness in facilitating evaluation, and using evaluation information for program improvement. Increased agreement that EvaluATE resources helped them is used as a proxy for changed evaluation practices.

Again, a majority of respondents reported agreement that EvaluATE resources helped them to change evaluation practices, with the exception of having more conversations about evaluation outside of their ATE funded project, with 45% agreeing with this statement.

When asked "How has EvaluATE affected your knowledge, understanding, or practice of evaluation?" individuals provided the following responses:

- *In a very general manner it has improved my overall methods of collecting and analyzing data as it related specifically to evaluation.*
- *It has improved my knowledge and understanding of evaluation.*

- *I had basically no knowledge of evaluation prior to 2014. Now, all of my understanding is especially thanks to EvaluATE. The resources that they offer, especially the webinars are so valuable to my team.*
- *Had a good knowledge of evaluation before, so I haven't been looking to EvaluATE too much.*
- *It provides some additional information about evaluation, however, my PhD provided me with extensive knowledge and experience conducting evaluations.*

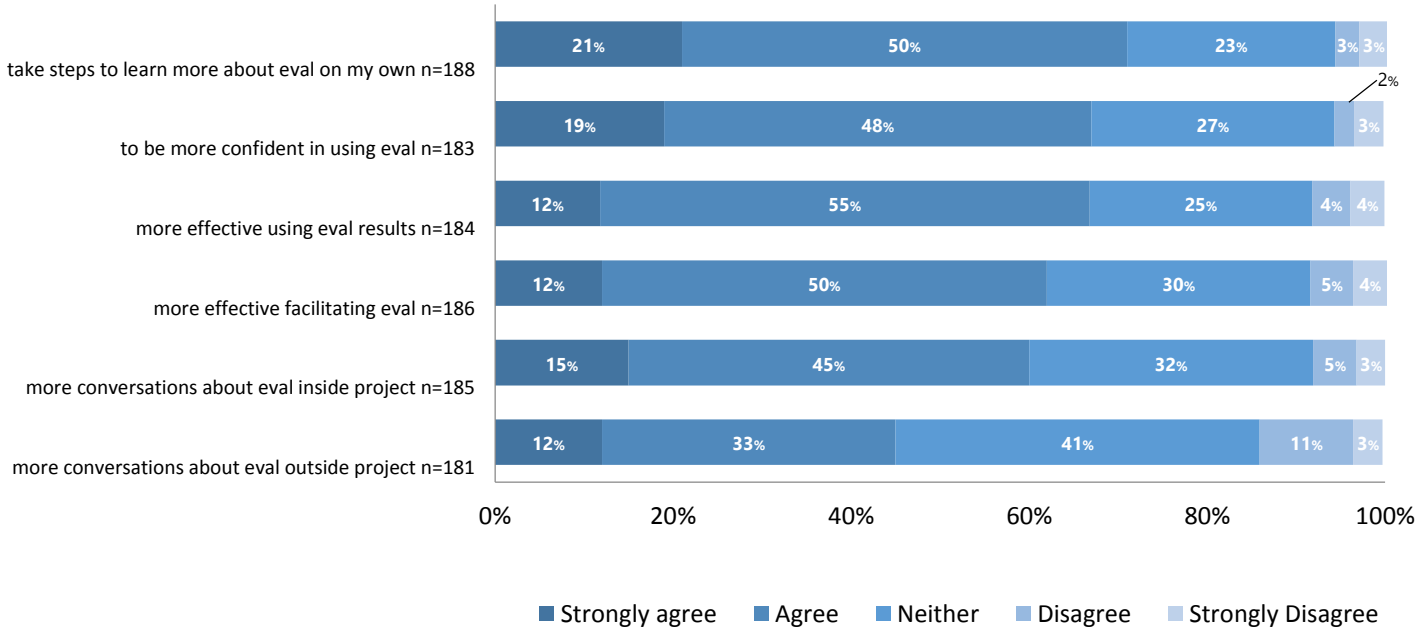

Figure 4. Reported extent of agreement with statements related to increases in evaluation practice.

Conclusions

Results of the most recent constituents' survey indicate that EvaluATE continues to be successful in reaching their intended audience for their resources, and that resource users perceive the resources to be of high quality. The newsletter and the website are the resources used most frequently, with recorded webinars being used less frequently. Respondents' reported that the resources have been useful in increasing their knowledge of evaluation principles, and their agreement with statements indicating that the resources have helped them become more knowledgeable and comfortable with evaluation suggest that EvaluATE is having success in changing evaluation practices.

The Rucks Group is a research and evaluation firm that gathers, analyzes, and interprets data to enable our clients to measure the impact of their work.

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