

FAILURE TO OVERCOME
A YOUTH PROGRAM NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE'S
RESISTANCE TO A CONTRACTED EVALUATION

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Resistance to evaluation is widespread, and with good reason. Shortcomings are likely to be made more apparent. Evaluators seem unlikely to understand the multiple purposes stakeholders have and the complexity of the situation and, except to managers, evaluators seem beholden to management perceptions and values. Power devolves to those appearing to hold critical information, whether or not they do. Everyone evaluates what is going on but to entrust a team of specialists is certainly not without risk.

We at CIRCE¹ were asked to evaluate the National Youth Sports Program, a federally-funded, summer program which had operated for thirty years on some 200 college and university campuses in the US. For five weeks each summer, over 60,000 youngsters aged 10-15 from low income families, were bused to campuses for instruction and experience in swimming, competitive sports, martial arts, recreation, with additional instruction in nutrition, career planning, drug education and community institutions.

The program was founded in 1968 by the National Collegiate Athletic Association as assistance primarily to urban youth. Over the years NYSP had enjoyed strong backing and continued funding by the US Congress.

Two NCAA officials came to our Center and explained their need for an independent review. The program was not apparently in trouble but, as a partnership locally with NCAA member institutions, could be better understood and possibly improved. We told them about the evaluation studies we did, giving examples of issues and previous reports. They provided us materials describing NYSP. They did not indicate criteria by which they should be considered successful.

They did not show much interest in the kinds of issues we thought worth studying, issues such as attitudes toward competitiveness and the nature of institutional partnerships at the local campus. With their encouragement, we designed (in four or five pages) a three-year study, focusing in successive years on the participating youth, the local campus staffs, and the national leadership and, after review by the NCAA's Advisory Committee on Youth Programs, a contract was signed. Funding for the first year was set at about \$100,000.

We created a core evaluation team of five and identified half a dozen others to assist. During the summer we made observations and gathered student questionnaire responses at 20 sites. We were favorably impressed with the quality of experience provided and how much was accomplished with modest federal funding. We were

intrigued by the effort to teach discipline, in some places and in some ways like an early-life Army boot camp. And we were troubled by the lack of a professionalized approach to staff training. The program had an internal evaluation operation, sending a specially trained visitor to each campus to check on compliance with national rules and to judge the quality of services for the youth.

It was a year of poor communication; perhaps we were negligent. After the one-year contract was signed, the director of NYSP, a staff member at NCAA national headquarters, encouraged us to call this a research study, not an evaluation, so as to distinguish it from internal evaluation, and asked that a member of the internal evaluation team join the CIRCE team as liaison to the Advisory Committee. We turned down that arrangement but added him as a member of our evaluation advisory group. The national director identified sites we should visit and wanted to arrange our visits, but we insisted on going to additional sites and making most of our own arrangements.

Troubles at one site, possibly more, occurred because of lack of agreement as to the nature and scope of the evaluation study. We resisted protective constraints the NYSP Advisory Committee posed, feeling that determination of quality of the program required some intrusive inquiry. We were reminded that a second year contract depended on limiting our study to questions the Committee wanted answered. In our brief prospectus of second year plans, we carefully indicated that we were only available for doing the kind of evaluation study already underway.

It is important to note that we were a mostly white evaluation team studying a program predominantly for black children. Late in the year, three of us made our first observation of an Advisory Committee gathering and were startled by the anger toward us. Their liaison person said we were poorly organized and had blundered with the questionnaires.² A Committee member said we were insensitive to project conditions, disrespectful, that our questionnaires were presumptuous, even racist. Several Board members indicated that we had been hired to gather research data for their use, but that we ignored their needs and failed to solicit their approval. I claimed we were following our usual methods, and abiding by the contract, which required scrutinizing their role in administration. We had solicited their comments but not their approval on many procedures and instruments but not all. We had pursued a list of potential concerns without telling them in advance specifically what the concerns were. At year's end, we drafted a 300-page progress report.³ After the Committee reviewed it, we were told the contract would not be renewed.

Although little substantive interest in the study was shown by the national director or Advisory Committee, we could have provided more design and progress information. We could have written a longer and more binding contract amplifying the nature of our work. Or perhaps we should have formalized our updated plan of work after we became better acquainted with the program. We could have been more timely and vigorous in arranging discussions with the Committee as to what we were doing. We did not consider this Committee our client but recognized it as the primary administrative force for the program. It is possible our failure to communicate and

subsequently our unwillingness to compromise put the program in jeopardy, and thus the benefits to many youngsters.

Complete and fully accurate explication of our work was not possible. Too many individuals were working on their own, observing at sites, interpreting survey responses, and trying to comprehend the program as a whole. It was not the first time we claimed that we and other evaluators lack the conceptual power : to describe any program completely, to recognize the full range of stakeholders, and to anticipate roles which change with the situation. Ethical behavior often can be improved by efforts to communicate, and appetites for communication may be sated, but serious incompleteness will remain. In this evaluation of the National Youth Sports Program, we offered less communication than the situation called for, partly based on our suspicion that if we told them what we were doing, they would obscure program weaknesses.

The Advisory Committee on Youth Programs. It was the responsibility of the Youth Programs Advisory Committee to oversee NYSP operations and to set policy for NYSP and other NCAA youth programs, assuring that they operate under an explicated philosophy of service to youth. Concentrating on the youth themselves during the first year, we only briefly observed the history and operations of this committee. We did not learn the real criteria for appointment to the committee, just the fact that each of the ten or so members had long previous experience with NYSP or represented the federal government or community organizations (a representation stipulated in early years).

We failed to learn the terms of office, apparently different from other NCAA committees. We only began to discover the contributions the committee had made to the continuing quality of this program. Knowing that mature projects are capable of pursuing similar goals in various ways, we made it apparent that we needed to examine what appeared to be a Committee concentration on its operating guidelines when the five NYSP objectives suggested broader view and responsibility.

Although we had a very small data base, at the end of the year we were coming to feel that too great a distance existed between governance of NYSP and the governance of NCAA. NCAA staff members were working closely, deferentially, with the Advisory Committee but the Advisory Committee appeared to be operating independently from other NCAA functions. The reasons we did not learn more about this issue were complex. We were not diligent enough in seeking and meticulous enough in sharing what other members of the evaluation team were learning about close supervision of the Advisory Committee and their internal evaluators. And then work was stopped before the study of policy got up to speed, so many requests for NYSP governance information went unfulfilled. It seemed important enough to us to present in several final report paragraphs the detail of our relationship with the Advisory Committee. ⁴

By contract, ours was an independent, external evaluation of NYSP, but the Committee immediately treated it as

a management information subcontractor. Noting that evaluation can be intrusive, and that some sites were vulnerable, our liaison person was instructed by the Committee to limit our data gathering to several more robust sites. He was told to prepare them for our visits. We indicated that we would also need to gather data at sites not so robust and not prepped for our observations. At least one of the sites where preparations were made for us, the local staff was not ready to provide the designed hour of each student cohort time for our survey. It, of course, was as much our responsibility to assure a proper readiness. At that site, unfortunately, we arrived with response sheets bearing the names of students for a different campus. To their suggestion that the students write their own names on the sheets, our team member responded that we needed accurate names for follow-up data in subsequent years, that there was danger that we might not be able to read the students' writing. This was heard as a slur on the children's competence : "You said our children can't read."⁵ The hosts were indignant and confrontational and complained to the National Office. We were not told about the incident at the time but told there had been problems administering our survey.

At our first opportunity to observe an Advisory Committee meeting, belatedly in October, the fifth month, we saw the committee reviewing site-by-site internal evaluation reports, vigorously confronting evaluators who asked leniency for campus projects they had turned in as non-compliant.

We found without warning the business meeting following opening with a review of our evaluation study. The liaison person began with the charge that there were serious problems in data gathering at the sites. One member responded saying that our survey was intrusive and racist. Two questions on use of cigarettes, items provided by the national Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse, were seen as intrusive and an item asking for a mother's opinion of NYSP participation was cited as an example of racism. The charges continued.

We were asked why we had not cleared the questions with the Committee (the liaison person had had the survey in draft form) but more important, we were asked why, since "we worked for them (the Committee)," we did not seek information that they could use. We did not respond adequately to these concerns, failing to justify the difference between research assistance and an external evaluation study. Our three team members concluded that some members of the committee had chosen indignation and intimidation as their working style.

We suggested that they should examine our draft report due in two months to see that we were doing what we had contracted to do and to see how our study of quality of the program, including its governance, would be useful to them. They indicated that continuation of the contract would depend on placing the liaison person on the team and responding to their research needs.

In this brief encounter and indirectly in other communications, we found the Advisory Committee behavior objectionable. There were many reasons to believe that they were sincerely committed to the youth population and confident in their ability to deliver a good program. They showed little interest in learning what we were trying

to do or the issues needing attention in an evaluation study, and doubted that our evaluation study should examine their role.

The question here is what can we learn from such an example about dealing with resistance to engaging in program evaluation. We noted at the beginning that there are rational reasons for objecting to evaluation, but we got no indication from the Committee of those concerns. They did identify faults in our work, but they seemed so little interested in what we had contracted to do that we concluded that they were persuaded that by overwhelming any exchange of ideas about the program, they could best protect it and maintain a needed authoritarian culture at the sites. It appeared to us that the Committee was acting, as members saw it, in the interests of NYSP. It was not apparent to us that we could do anything to persuade them that a somewhat dispassionate outsider review would acquaint them with useful knowledge that their internal evaluators were not providing.

But our encounter was brief and our views were colored by the fact that Committee members found us insensitive and our work of little value to them. In this case, power was not in the holding of critical information but in the ability to terminate a program which strayed from the Guidelines.

¹ CIRCE was founded as the Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation at the University of Illinois in 1963 by Tom Hastings. I am the current director.

²We were aware of blundering at one site.

³ Although neither the contract nor the client required it, we provided an ample supply of paperbound copies of a smooth version of the draft report: Evaluation of the National Youth Sports Program by Robert Stake, Lizanne DeStefano, Delwyn Harnisch, Kathryn Sloane and Rita Davis, 1997.

⁴ We requested official minutes of Advisory Committee meetings but received none.

⁵ We have detailed accounts of this incident from both points of view, plus later efforts to ameliorate the situation, ending in a statement by the Project Administrator that we would be welcome to return for further data gathering.