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# Role Sharing Between Evaluators and Stakeholders in Practice

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**Abstract:** In the past three decades, program evaluation has sought to more fully engage stakeholders in the evaluative process. But little information has been gathered from stakeholders about how they share in evaluation tasks and whether role sharing leads to confusion or tensions between the evaluator and the stakeholders. This article reports findings from surveys and interviews with 20 evaluator–project director (lead stakeholder) pairs to explore how they share each other's roles in practice. In this study, sharing roles between evaluators and project directors generally was the norm among study participants but varied by the orientation of the evaluator (academic, program, or client). For some, there was tension and confusion in the role sharing of evaluators and stakeholders, but it was typically resolved early on in the cases where evaluators bring strong communication skills to the project. Where these skills were not present, the tensions did not resolve consistently.

**Keywords:** *collaborative evaluation, developmental evaluation, and community-based evaluation*

In the past three decades, program evaluation has moved away from traditional “objective observation” and engaged stakeholders more fully in the evaluative process (Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991). New terms, such as participatory evaluation (Cousins & Earl, 1992) and collaborative evaluation (Bryk, 1983; Smith, 1983), have been coined to describe this shift. In a similar spirit, a number of scholars have argued for extending evaluation beyond the traditional tasks of evaluators and have pressed evaluators to participate more fully in project development and community development, expanding evaluators' engagement and obligations to their clients (Lincoln, 1991). These forms of evaluation include empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996) and developmental evaluation (Patton, 1994). The various viewpoints related to the preferred role of the evaluator and stakeholders along the continuum from collaborating to empowerment have sometimes sparked heated debate (Patton, 1998). As practicing evaluators, we wondered whether and to what extent this literature has resulted in a certain amount of role confusion and if this confusion creates tensions and challenges for evaluators, as suggested by others (Finne, Levin, & Nilssen, 1995; Patton, 1998).

Several important studies have sought to move away from theorizing to explore the various roles evaluators assume in practice. From the earliest of these studies (Shadish & Epstein, 1987), the focus has been on delineating the activities and challenges in day-to-day evaluation

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work in the context of the broader theory about what roles evaluators *should* take. In this way, the studies have helped set standards for evaluation practice as the discipline has developed (Ghere, King, Stevahn, & Minnema, 2006). Cousins, Donohue, and Bloom (1996) further developed this literature by asking evaluators about how much tension and frustration they experience in performing participatory evaluations—suggesting that opening the evaluator up to a participatory process may raise complex issues with which traditional evaluation did not need to contend. Christie (2003) examined the intersection between this theory and practice in a study that involved developing survey instruments for evaluators for the purpose of distinguishing among evaluators who take their cues from eight noted evaluation theorists. These are very valuable studies in the development of the discipline of evaluation. However, they are missing important aspects of how the role of the evaluator in the field is shaped: stakeholder preferences and the project context (Henry & Mark, 2003).

The constraints placed on the evaluator by his or her project context have been raised as critical to understanding evaluation practice and the link between theory and practice (Patton, 1998). Few studies examining role sharing between evaluators and stakeholders in practice have included information about the evaluators' project contexts. One such study (Cousins, 2001) surveys pairs of evaluators and program practitioners to explore the extent to which evaluator and program practitioners' reports about collaboration practices and beliefs about evaluation's impacts converge when a collaborative evaluation is carried out. The findings of that study generated significant scholarly activity developing the notion of process use—that one of the impacts of evaluation is in its ability to alter decision-making practices among project stakeholders (Cousins, 2007). However, as Cousins acknowledged in his 2001 article, examining the relationship between the evaluator and program practitioner over time would potentially add a great deal to understanding how collaborative evaluation is carried out.

The current study offers a modest attempt to examine the way roles are shared over the life of a project. We ask how the evaluator and project director (the lead stakeholders of the project being evaluated) define and negotiate their own and each others' roles and the degree to which there is tension and confusion in clarifying the role making process. To ask these questions, we interviewed and surveyed 20 evaluator–project director pairs beginning to work together on a large, multiyear project. The surveys were conducted at the beginning of the project; the interviews took place at three time points—the early phase, the middle phase, and the final phase of the project.

There is extreme variety in the kinds of community projects that involve evaluation; potentially, each project context could identify a different sort of role sharing as optimal. Thus, we chose to examine these questions by recruiting evaluator–project director pairs from a single, large, national initiative, the National Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SSHS) Initiative. SSHS provides funding and technical assistance to local school districts. It is intended to support the development of local school- and community-based projects that (a) promote healthy child development and (b) create a school environment that is safe, disciplined, and drug free. Although each school district's project is unique, all SSHS projects share similar goals. Twenty local SSHS evaluator–project director pairs were interviewed three times over 3 years after completing a survey focusing on role sharing.

## Method

The study sample is composed of 20 evaluator–project director pairs recruited from the SSHS sites initially funded in either 2003 or 2004. Both the evaluator and the project director had to be willing to participate for the site to participate. The project was exempted from

institutional review board (IRB) oversight by the IRB of Children's Memorial Research Center.

The decision to focus on the SSHS project director as the lead stakeholder was made because of the project director's unique role in the SSHS sites. Once SSHS funding is achieved, school districts must hire a project director as their first task. All funding and program decisions henceforth are made under the leadership of the project director. Thus, the project director is a central figure for the SSHS evaluators and often the gatekeeper to all other project stakeholders.

In the fall of 2004, 19 of the evaluators and all 20 of the project directors in our study groups completed a survey about the role of the evaluator in their local projects (one evaluator did not respond to the survey but participated in the interviews). The initial proposal the site submitted for funding was reviewed to provide the research team adequate background information to carry out the interviews. All 20 evaluators and their corresponding project directors were interviewed by telephone at three points in time—in the 1st year of their projects, about halfway through the projects, and during the projects' last year. This allowed us to examine how evaluation tasks developed over time.

Finally, it is helpful to note that there is a specific type of terminology used by SSHS to describe the levels of intervention being enacted in each site. *Local project* is a term that refers to the funded sites' combined effort. *Local program* refers to smaller programs that are funded by or facilitated by the local project. For example, a local project's goal may be to initiate and sustain system-level change among the many agencies that serve youth in the community. A local program's main goal might be to reduce truancy, increase school-based mental health services, or implement a parental education program. The project director and evaluator are assigned to the local project, but they implement and facilitate many local programs to reach the project's goals.

## Preliminary Data Collection and Instrument Development

A review of the literature on role sharing provided a framework for specifying evaluator and project director tasks in each phase of the project—conceptualization, implementation, program refinement, outcomes sharing, and sustainability. We also examined the data collection instrument developed by Cousins et al. (1996), which explored the level of collaboration as reported by the evaluator. From this review, we developed an outline of the survey and the interview protocols for both the evaluators and the project directors.

Before data collection began, we convened three focus groups at the SSHS national conference in April 2004. One focus group included project directors (9 project directors participated) and two focus groups involved evaluators (19 evaluators in total); these project directors and evaluators were drawn from local SSHS sites initially funded in 2002 and thus were not eligible for our study. The goal of the focus groups was to explore the issues affecting the role of the evaluator. We used the focus group findings to refine our theoretical framework and our data collection tools.

Based on the focus group findings, portions of the evaluator and project director surveys were redesigned to more specifically examine what kind of role sharing takes place in different phases of the project. The survey listed 12 tasks that typically are the responsibility of the evaluator and 2 that typically are the responsibility of the project director. Evaluators and project directors were asked to indicate, on a scale of 1 to 9, if the task is the sole responsibility of the project director (score of 1), if the task is completely shared between the project director and the evaluator (score of 5), if the task is the sole responsibility of the evaluator (score

of 9), or if there is some other level of sharing. A list of tasks typically performed by project directors over the life of the project was also developed. The focus group findings suggested that these tasks generally “belonged” to the project directors, so that a different set of answer categories would be necessary. Both groups were asked how often the evaluators performed each of these tasks (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*).

The interviews were designed to focus on the extent to which the evaluator participated in project development and the extent to which the project director and other stakeholders participated in evaluation. After querying the participants about their professional background, the background of the community, and the nature of the local project, the interviews focused on how the evaluation plan was developed and the role of the evaluator in project management decisions. The second and third round surveys added a number of questions about sustainability planning.

### Three Types of Evaluators

The SSHS evaluator group in our study is very heterogeneous in terms of background and in terms of their own assessments of their role in the SSHS local projects. It became clear that much of the variability in role sharing was associated with these different backgrounds and expectations. Qualitative data from the first round of evaluator interviews were used to develop what we term three evaluator “orientations,” characteristics that appear to shape how the evaluators share their role. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of each evaluator orientation.

Our three orientations fit classifications used by Shadish and Epstein (1987), with one notable difference. The third category, “client-oriented” evaluators, was not included in Shadish and Epstein’s classification. Their “service” evaluator category matches our “program-oriented” category fairly well. Our “academically-oriented” evaluator is very similar to their academic type of evaluator. It is worth noting that none of the three orientations fit any one evaluator perfectly. Rather, all evaluators in each group share several of the characteristics of the group and fit better together than they do with other evaluators.

#### Academically-Oriented Evaluators

Of the 20 evaluators interviewed for this project, 6 appear to think of their careers and skill sets more as traditional academic researchers than as evaluators per se. Academically-oriented evaluators expressed *a commitment to a field of study* (psychology, anthropology, health care utilization, statistics) as a frame of reference in supporting the work of their project sites. None of them raised theories or literature on evaluation as their point of departure or as a need for professional development. Most of these evaluators are *university based*. All of the evaluators that are based in a university are part of a research center that focuses on school-based, community-based, or scholarship-to-service approaches.

These evaluators, or their research centers, had *close connections to the school districts* involved with the project prior to becoming the evaluator for the SSHS project. Either the evaluator or the research center participated in the grant writing for the SSHS project and had an ongoing planning role with the school district. One explicitly stated, “We’re not a hired evaluator. We are the architects, we’re the coarchitects.” Even so, these evaluators expressed feeling “*stretched*” by *community-based work*. They drew a sharp line between what they thought of as “real” research and evaluation and expressed concern or anxiety that the academic world did not value their current work. An evaluator who divides her time approximately

**Table 1**  
**Comparison Among Three Types of Evaluators**

Element	Academically Oriented	Program Oriented	Client Oriented
Academic orientation	Social and behavioral sciences	Evaluation	Administrative, community development
Methodological comfort	No discomfort with any method expressed (many resources for consultation and advice at the university)	Quantitative, though wanting more expertise (expressed feeling of being isolated and not having adequate consultative resources)	Qualitative, though wanting more quantitative
Data collection	Typically original	Both original and secondary	Mostly secondary
Involvement with proposal	Wrote evaluation portion, advised on evidence-based programs	Wrote evaluation portion, performed needs assessment	Wrote evaluation portion, engaged community partners, identified needs
Relationship to project director	Advisor: helped identify and press for evidence-based programs	Service: supported program implementation processes	Codirector: involved with day-to-day operations and decisions
Relationship to other stakeholders	Expert	Supporter and negotiator	Partner
View on their role in sustainability plan	Provide data, which will direct decision making	Work with partners to collect data that will convince them that sustainability is beneficial	Not clear; need for more grants
Primary anxieties on project	Stretched by real-world research; this work is not rewarded in an academic setting	Vastness of project	Power struggles with project director or partners
Primary audience of evaluation	Local leaders, federal initiative	Local leaders	Local leaders, federal initiative

50–50 between evaluation and other research activities stated, “I don’t intend to be a full-time evaluator. It is not valued at the university and not helpful for professional advancement.” But she also noted, “It is keeping me connected to this community, where I have been and can continue to do some work,” and “I have also gained understanding of parent education programs and the difficulties of implementing them.” At the same time, they enjoyed this work a great deal and expressed concern that “real” research may appear more rigorous but does not reflect the complexity of making progress in actual community settings—the implication is that “real” research often misses the point.

Academically-oriented evaluators expressed the point of view that their job is *to bring information to the local decision-making process*, whether in the form of literature reviews to identify evidence-based programs or in the form of evaluating local programs sufficiently to make sustainability decisions. The researchers were very involved with program selection or expressed concern that they were not enough involved (and that poor programs were chosen for implementation as a result). One stated, “We really play a role as a technical assistance provider as well because of our content interests.” They shared the expectation that the data collected by the project would steer sustainability efforts. These evaluators *collected their own data*. They appear to have relied minimally on local service agencies and used secondary or administrative data only for very narrow evaluation questions.

## Program-Oriented Evaluators

Program-oriented evaluators (6 of the 20 interviewed) see their primary role as one of service—to the community or to the stakeholders. They begin their evaluation inquiry by learning about the community and its goals and shaping their evaluation effort to support the community's attempt to reach its goals. Program-oriented evaluators describe themselves professionally *first and foremost as "evaluators."* They may have received formal training in behavioral or social science or other forms of research, but they are committed to evaluation as an independent form of inquiry. These are the only evaluators to cite literature in evaluation theory as they discussed the challenges they face in the project. The program-oriented evaluators are *not typically university based.* They tend to work more independently (or through a larger evaluation house) and get connected to the school district with the grant by word of mouth.

This group expressed the concern that *they would "go native"* and lose their objectivity as evaluators. But beside expressing that concern, they generally did not refuse further involvement with the project if it was requested by stakeholders. One commented,

I think probably the real challenge is trying to be objective given that I really do know people who are part of the program. I think evaluation is about making relationships and knowing people and then documenting what there is. But I also know evaluation can hurt people if the results don't come out the way those people expect.

This group of evaluators is clearly *oriented to the local policy makers as their prime audience.* They spoke frequently about their experiences meeting with school boards and advising administrators about local efforts to achieve sustainability. Speaking of the evaluation results, one evaluator stated, "I sometimes worry that [the findings are] not profound enough to convince the community that the types of things they're doing need to continue." The academically-oriented evaluators indicated that the data would lead to sustainability; the program-oriented evaluators reported using the data in a political negotiation process, often coaching policy makers and administrators about the nuts and bolts of sustainability. This group is not afraid to get involved with the messy issues of local politics, and many spoke at length about their role in resolving difficult political issues. Some talked about this as an area of professional growth: "It's political. I think I've probably developed more political finesse about how to frame things, how to present things, shape it to who is the audience, who is the target of this particular report or presentation."

Program-oriented evaluators were less involved with choosing interventions to adopt than the academically-oriented group. However, they were much more involved in supporting needs assessment and implementation—identifying problems, working through administrative barriers, and advising about service delivery difficulties. One reported, "We were not the architects, that's for sure. I guess 'consultant' is probably the best word for it. . . . Things are run by us a bit . . . [the project director is] clearly looking for some input *if we have it* [italics added]."

Not all of these evaluators have doctoral training. Many come from service professions (e.g., social work or school administration). *The experiential knowledge* of how evaluated programs and agencies work offsets what they admit are more narrow methodological resources. This group often discussed the need to expand their methodological sophistication through further professional development and consultation.

## Client-Oriented Evaluators

Client-oriented evaluators (8 of the 20 interviewed) are unique in that almost all of them live in or are professionally *connected to the community* that the SSHS project services. They

may be external evaluators in the sense that they are not directly employed by the school district holding the SSHS grant, but they are not external to the community.

Each of these evaluators has a different academic background, and they tended to be fairly far along in their careers (at least in the second half of their careers, sometimes at or near retirement). Some are previous school administrators, some are social workers, and some have a social or behavioral science background (generally not at the doctoral level). They all have professionally evolved to a point to which they identify themselves as evaluators. It is worth noting that a number of these evaluators have *no formal training in research or evaluation methods*.

A number of client-oriented evaluators were *project directors on similar projects earlier in their careers*. Their perspective on the SSHS project often appears to shift between the viewpoint of the evaluator and the project director.

I think that understanding and working as a program development person builds credibility because I understand what [the project director is] doing. I'm not just coming in and doing the research. . . . So I can straddle the need for rigor but also I have a commitment.

Most of these evaluators helped to write the SSHS grant proposal, perhaps taking more of a project director role in the proposal writing. Some of the academically-oriented and program-oriented evaluators helped write the initial proposal, but their role was generally restricted to the evaluation portion of the proposal, and their input into program selection generally focused on identifying evidence-based programs to meet local needs. Client-oriented evaluators may have written any part of the grant proposal—engaging community partners, identifying local needs, and developing program and evaluation options, suggesting that their *real role is one of a community leader*. An evaluator who was a former school administrator noted, “I think you have to be involved at least as much as I am. To get a feel for the program, I am walking through the building. I am there. They needed a principal last week; I volunteered.”

Given their fuller role in the proposal development, these evaluators tended to be more fully involved during the initial grant period. They may have helped hire initial project staff (including the project director), put initial programs into place, and negotiated among community partners. One was quite clear: “Well, of course, in the beginning when we were writing the grant, you know, I was the central player.” Another commented, “[My] involvement is based on [their] need.” One characterized it this way: “Initially, [the project director] would call me just about every day and e-mail, e-mail, e-mail. . . . I felt like I was doing two jobs, hers and mine . . .”

Client-oriented evaluators typically emphasized *secondary data*—data already collected by local organizations for other purposes as opposed to collection of original data solely for evaluation purposes. This was the only evaluator group that expressed a concern that the evaluation would tax the local service providers by asking for additional data. Several client-oriented evaluators also saw their role as more of a “data broker.” They would negotiate getting data from service providers and then subcontract with a university-affiliated researcher for analysis. When these evaluators expressed specialization in any form of data collection, it was with qualitative data. A few expressed a desire for more training in quantitative methods.

## Role Sharing and Evaluator Orientation

We used multiple methods to explore project director and evaluator role sharing. In general, from the preliminary focus groups, we learned that the complexity of the relationship

between evaluators and project directors and the peculiar dynamics of the project that constrained or facilitated the evaluation appear to result in subtle, carefully negotiated, and apparently *very productive* role sharing. We use survey and interview data from the evaluators and the project directors to explore this complex role sharing.

Tables 2 to 4 report role sharing from the survey data. The data are analyzed in pairs. Therefore, the one site that was missing an evaluator survey was dropped from the analysis, leaving a total of 38 respondents. Although the overall number of participants was small, the data meet the skewness and kurtosis test of normality. Hence, parametric procedures, such as ANOVA, are appropriate methods of analyzing the data (Tabachnick, 2001). To test statistical significance, ANOVA procedures were run on the means of survey items. Because the nature of the study is exploratory and based on a priori expectations, it is not necessary to adjust the statistical significance levels through post hoc multiple comparison procedures (Rothman, 1990). Statistical significance for such a small sample needs to be interpreted with care and some flexibility. We report *p* values that are marginal (under .15) as well as clearly significant (with a *p* value less than .05). We believe that the marginal differences warrant further examination, perhaps in a study with a larger sample size.

### Sharing the Evaluation Tasks

In each phase of evaluation, the orientation of the evaluator matters in how roles are shared in each phase of the projects (Table 2), but only slightly. The findings for the first two project phases are largely consistent with the evaluators interview findings. Academically-oriented evaluators report doing much more of their own data collection and are more comfortable with methodological issues. Client-oriented evaluators show the least comfort with different methods. A surprising finding is that client-oriented evaluators report playing a smaller role in formulating recommendations from the evaluation than other evaluators. Because these evaluators are deeply rooted in their communities and institutions, we would have expected them to see evaluation more definitively as a means of changing local systems to improve outcomes.

On the whole, project directors report that evaluation tasks are shared more than do the evaluators. In particular, project directors report having more responsibility for designing evaluation methods, developing data collection instruments, analyzing data, and formulating recommendations from the evaluation than evaluators report them having. Despite these differences in reporting, evaluator–project director pairs tend to vary together. For example, where academically-oriented evaluators report more involvement in a task than the other evaluators, the academically-oriented evaluators’ project directors tend to agree.

Finally, Table 2 totals the scores for all 12 items in the table and includes the results of the ANOVA for the total score. The total score measures an overall assessment of the exclusiveness of the evaluators’ purview over evaluation. There is no difference in the total scores for the three types of evaluators or project directors.

The evaluator and project director interviews focused on how decisions were made about the direction of the evaluation. There are two main themes that emerged from the interviews—the first having to do with evaluators and project directors getting to know the project and each others’ role and the second having to do with the communication skills of the evaluator.

Evaluators often spoke about the time it took for them to get their bearings in the project. This generally involved reading through the grant proposal (if they were not already involved), reviewing the logic model, and meeting with the project director over a period of time. For the project directors, the learning about evaluation was more complex. One project director remarked, “[One of the barriers to moving more quickly with the evaluation] is my inability to fully grasp what the evaluator is talking about.” Later in the project, this difficulty

**Table 2**  
**Evaluator and Project Director Views About Their Roles in Evaluation**  
**Activities, by Current Role Characterization**

<i>1 = sole responsibility of the project director, 9 = sole responsibility of the evaluator</i>	Academically Oriented <i>M</i>	Program Oriented <i>M</i>	Client Oriented <i>M</i>
<b>I. Pre-data collection</b>			
Defining the goals of the evaluation*			
Evaluators	6.0	6.5	5.9
Project directors	6.5	5.7	5.0
Defining the main research questions of the evaluation			
Evaluators	6.3	6.2	6.1
Project directors	6.7	6.5	5.9
Designing evaluation methods			
Evaluators	7.8	7.7	7.3
Project directors	7.5	7.5	7.0
Developing data collection instruments			
Evaluators	8.2	7.8	7.7
Project directors	7.7	7.3	7.4
<b>II. Data collection and analysis</b>			
Collecting data and information***			
Evaluators	8.0	6.2	6.6
Project directors	7.5	6.0	7.0
Processing and preparing data for analysis			
Evaluators	8.7	8.5	8.4
Project directors	8.5	8.3	8.2
Analyzing data			
Evaluators	8.7	8.3	8.4
Project directors	7.7	7.8	7.7
Interpreting results			
Evaluators	7.2	6.8	7.0
Project directors	6.2	7.2	6.9
<b>III. Sharing findings</b>			
Identifying appropriate audiences for the findings			
Evaluators	4.5	5.2	4.7
Project directors	5.3	4.5	4.4
Preparing reports for dissemination			
Evaluators	7.3	6.5	5.9
Project directors	5.8	5.8	6.3
Formulating recommendations from the study***			
Evaluators	6.0	6.2	4.9
Project directors	5.7	5.2	4.6
Disseminating results and recommendations to intended users or audiences			
Evaluators	5.2	4.2	3.9
Project directors	4.3	3.7	4.4
Sum of all items*			
Evaluators	83.8	80.5	76.7
Project directors	79.3	75.5	74.9

Note:  $N = 38$ .

Statistical significance for ANOVA test (main effects): \*Marginal finding,  $p < .15$ . \*\* $p < .10$ . \*\*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 3**  
**Evaluator and Project Director Views Regarding the Evaluator's Participation in the Project Activities**

	Academically Oriented <i>M</i>	Program Oriented <i>M</i>	Client Oriented <i>M</i>
<b>I. Leadership activities</b>			
Defining the goals of the local SSHS project (scale 1-9)***			
Evaluators	4.0	2.7	3.2
Project directors	4.5	2.2	3.3
Defining the goals of the programs supported by the local SSHS project (scale 1-9)****			
Evaluators	4.0	2.0	3.7
Project directors	4.2	1.8	3.4
Chairing management partner meetings (scale 1-5)			
Evaluators	1.7	2.3	2.0
Project directors	2.3	1.7	2.3
Facilitating local SSHS project management (scale 1-5)			
Evaluators	3.7	2.5	2.9
Project directors	2.8	2.3	2.3
<b>II. Implementation activities</b>			
Developing new programs for the local SSHS agencies (scale 1-5)***			
Evaluators	2.7	1.7	1.6
Project directors	2.3	1.7	1.4
Facilitating the planning process for local programs (scale 1-5)			
Evaluators	3.8	2.5	2.7
Project directors	3.2	2.7	3.0
Making decisions about program adjustments (scale 1-5)**			
Evaluators	3.5	2.0	3.1
Project directors	3.3	3.0	2.7
Helping prepare reports for the funder (scale 1-5)			
Evaluators	3.8	3.5	4.4
Project directors	3.8	3.5	3.4
<b>III. Stakeholder activities</b>			
Developing proposals for additional funding for local agencies (scale 1-5)			
Evaluators	3.0	2.2	2.6
Project directors	2.7	1.6	2.3
Educating project directors and partners about the role of evaluation (scale 1-5)			
Evaluators	4.3	3.6	3.6
Project directors	3.8	3.6	3.3
Sum of all items***			
Evaluators	41.2	31.3	37.6
Project directors	37.3	30.8	33.3

Note: *N* = 38. SSHS = National Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative.  
 Statistical significance for ANOVA test (main effects): \*Marginal finding, *p* < .15. \*\**p* < .10. \*\*\**p* < .05. \*\*\*\**p* < .01.

continued, "Evaluation is sort of a mystery to me. . . . But my understanding is coming along. My comfort level is coming along."

In the early phases of the project when most evaluation design issues are being settled, it is key that project directors learn enough about evaluation to understand whether the evaluator's recommendations fit the project and the needs of the stakeholders. Lack of adequate

**Table 4**  
**Evaluator and Project Director Views About the Impact of Evaluation Findings, by Current Role Characterization**

Impact You Expect Evaluation Findings to Have (1 = <i>no impact</i> , 5 = <i>substantial impact</i> )	Academically Oriented <i>M</i>	Program Oriented <i>M</i>	Client Oriented <i>M</i>
<b>I. Project and program development</b>			
Development of programs funded by this project			
Evaluators	3.7	2.7	3.4
Project directors	3.0	3.3	3.7
Development of local SSHS project			
Evaluators	3.5	2.5	3.4
Project directors	3.2	3.5	3.6
Development of national SSHS initiative****			
Evaluators	1.4	.8	1.9
Project directors	2.0	2.3	2.9
Improvement in the implementation of the local SSHS project**			
Evaluators	3.5	2.6	3.6
Project directors	3.0	3.4	3.7
<b>II. Sustainability</b>			
Sustainability of programs funded by local SSHS project*			
Evaluators	2.8	2.8	3.3
Project directors	3.0	3.2	3.6
Sustainability of local SSHS project***			
Evaluators	2.8	2.3	3.1
Project directors	3.2	3.3	3.7
Sustainability of national SSHS initiative****			
Evaluators	1.4	.8	2.1
Project directors	1.8	2.0	2.7
Expanded funding for other local needs			
Evaluators	2.7	2.2	2.1
Project directors	2.0	3.2	2.9
Further grant-making on behalf of the service population, school district, or local agencies			
Evaluators	3.5	3.4	3.7
Project directors	3.0	3.6	3.3
<b>III. Stakeholder activities</b>			
Attracting additional stakeholders into the local SSHS project***			
Evaluators	2.0	2.2	2.4
Project directors	2.3	3.3	3.1
Helping resolve local politically sensitive issues			
Evaluators	2.6	1.5	2.1
Project directors	1.8	2.5	2.1
Advocacy for service population			
Evaluators	3.0	1.6	3.4
Project directors	3.0	3.6	3.3
Sum of all items***			
Evaluators	32.0	25.3	34.7
Project directors	30.3	32.3	38.0

Note:  $N = 38$ . SSHS = National Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative.

Statistical significance for ANOVA test (main effects): \*Marginal finding,  $p < .15$ . \*\* $p < .10$ . \*\*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\*\* $p < .01$ .

understanding in this phase appeared to occur most frequently for project directors with academically-oriented evaluators; it may be that academically-oriented evaluators appeared to have the most methodological comfort, and their project directors were most uneasy about challenging them. For example, sometimes the project director wanted more of the evaluation to focus on outcomes but the evaluator wanted to focus on process, or vice versa. One project director put it this way:

The evaluation team does not always appreciate how much goes into parenting classes. I'm OK with softer, more process outcomes. But the evaluator wants hard outcomes too soon. The evaluator does not understand the culture and politics of our region.

Another project director remarked,

My hope was that we would be able to be more definitive in terms of [mental health] outcomes. The evaluator's perspective was, "We didn't really have the evaluation designed to speak to outcomes. It was only realistic that it would relate to [the process of implementation]."

As the projects proceeded to their final years, these disappointments did not go away for the project directors, and it was clear that they did not believe they had the knowledge to challenge the evaluator to change the evaluation plan. For example, the latter director concluded the discussion of the initial disagreement by stating, "It was probably a little idealistic on my part."

Evaluators who had good communication skills in the eyes of their project directors generally were able to bring their project directors into the process of planning the evaluation more effectively than did those without good communication skills. Furthermore, evaluators with good communication skills seemed able to respond creatively and iteratively to project directors' ideas and insights; evaluators with weaker skills seemed to have a more complicated relationship with the project director. Most of the program-oriented evaluators appeared to have good communication skills. Some but certainly not all academically-oriented evaluators and client-oriented evaluators appeared to have them as well. Strong communication skills result in project director confidence in the evaluation itself. One project director stated it this way:

I feel like I am a collaborative partner. [The evaluator] and I speak by e-mail or telephone at least once or twice a week. He keeps me up to speed and I give my two cents. . . . I trust him implicitly.

One project director gave this example of how conflicts were resolved with strong communication skills and how a collaborative approach allowed both the evaluator and the project director to get what they thought was most important from the evaluation:

[The evaluator] was looking more at analyzing environmental data, like has the number of suspensions decreased? . . . And I was looking more at impact, have we impacted kids' lives? . . . And ultimately, as time passed, we sort of implemented some of both.

Evaluators who were strong communicators at the beginning of the project fostered a higher level of satisfaction with the evaluation down the road. A negative example of this is seen with an evaluator who did not communicate well at the beginning of the project. The lack of engagement by the stakeholders at the beginning undermined how well the evaluation met the needs of the stakeholders and made it impossible to ascertain whether the appropriate methods were chosen by the evaluator. At the early phase of the project, the project director reported, "[Evaluators] have some passion about some things . . . and nonevaluators [think] 'What are you talking about?'" . . . There could have been some more effective communication on what

we, as nonevaluators, need to make decisions on.” At the end of the project, the communication problem undermined the entire evaluation because the evaluation had not been developed in a way to gain stakeholder support. When asked if the evaluation had met its goals, this project director indicated, “I’m not sure if it’s done what it’s supposed to do because I’m not sure what it was supposed to do [in the first place].”

Only a few cases resulted in such extreme undermining of the evaluation, but many of the project directors spoke of similar communication barriers that they themselves worked hard to overcome. For example, a project director reported,

[The project staff] wanted to go through all the possible designs and the positives and negatives related to them. . . . [The evaluator] speaks quickly and in quite a bit of evaluationese. We wanted to slow her down and understand these things. [The evaluator] brought in other folks from her agency. I learned not all [evaluators] speak like that.

Once the early communication disconnect was resolved, this evaluator was able to engage the stakeholders more fully in a collaborative process and to gain buy in on the evaluation plan. It was often the project director who sought to improve the evaluator’s communication skills. Not one evaluator with poor communication skills indicated this was one of their weaknesses or a barrier to their work. The evaluators taught the project director the principles of evaluation; the project director sought to create an environment where the communication failures of the evaluator could be overcome.

### Sharing the Project Leadership Tasks

Table 3 includes two types of items that characterize the evaluator’s role in tasks that are traditionally assigned to project directors. The first two items reflect the level of shared responsibility with the project director (using a scale of 1 to 9, with a higher score reflecting more exclusive responsibility of the evaluator). The rest of the items use a 5-point scale reflecting the frequency with which the evaluator performs each task (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *occasionally*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*). Both project directors and evaluators were asked to report about the evaluator’s activity level. The sum of the 10 items in the table is included at the bottom of the table.

The strongest finding in Table 3 is that program-oriented evaluators take a smaller role in project activities than do either of the other two types of evaluators. This finding shows in almost every item and in the table sum. Many times this smaller role is statistically significant or marginally so. Academically-oriented evaluators appear to be the most involved with project director tasks, with client-oriented evaluators falling between the two extremes. On average, academically-oriented evaluators report “often” or “always” being involved in facilitating local SSHS project management, facilitating the planning process for local programs, making decisions about program adjustments, helping prepare reports for the funder, and educating the project director and partners about the role of evaluation. Client-oriented evaluators, on average, report “often” or “always” being involved in defining the goals of the programs supported by the local SSHS project and helping prepare reports for the funder.

As with evaluator tasks, evaluator–project director pairs tend to agree with each other. Where one type of evaluator reports significant involvement in a certain project task, the project director typically agrees, although project directors generally report less involvement on the part of the evaluator than their evaluators do.

From the interviews, involvement with project direction tasks generally took two forms—advising the project director in private and/or being seen as a project leader by other stakeholders. In most cases, evaluators successfully developed “advice and consent” roles, in that project directors

would bring decisions they had to make to the evaluators to ask for guidance. For academically-oriented evaluators, advice and consent focused on the importance of making data-driven decisions and choosing evidence-based programs to implement. For the other evaluators, the advice seemed to be somewhat broader. Several project directors indicated that when they are making program adjustments, they want the evaluator there because he or she brings a certain amount of “intellectual capital,” to quote one. Another project director indicated that during the initial program development stage her evaluator “was absolutely the most valuable person in the cooperative.”

It is worth noting that this advisory role was not always adopted by the evaluators, although most gave substantial and ongoing advice. One project director reported her disappointment after returning from a national SSHS meeting on evaluation: “I heard what other evaluators are doing. They seem to be more hands-on, really knowing what is going on. . . . They seem to be right there, close by, accessible, very visible. I don’t have that.” There were only 2 project directors out of the 20 who reported that the evaluators were not involved at all with project development; these project directors were the only two who complained about the amount of funding the evaluator received, voicing strong concerns about lack of productivity. It appears that by not working proactively to show how the evaluation helps direct difficult program choices and not engaging the evaluation itself in ongoing project development, evaluators may draw their usefulness to the project into question.

The most frequent type of project leadership role evaluators were asked to participate in had to do with sharing evaluation findings and putting them in the community context for stakeholders. Some evaluators were much better at this than others; generally, the capacity to relate findings in a meaningful way varied with the evaluator’s overall communication skills (discussed above). However, the ability to communicate findings to a broad stakeholder audience is a specific kind of communication skill. One project director put the problem in very stark terms: “There are definitely some cultural and language barriers between evaluators and human beings.” Other project directors seemed to try to work with their evaluators to bring the evaluation findings into more human terms:

To be able to say, “There was this little 12-year-old girl whose brother died and whose father was an alcoholic and we were able to do thus and so [for her].” To be able to bring those stories out; that’s when we get the response.

Some project directors work with their evaluators to communicate outcome findings in more digestible ways, “like put everything on one PowerPoint slide instead of 10.”

Only a few project directors reported that other stakeholders valued the evaluation. These were stakeholders who were able to grasp the evaluation findings, generally partners who were leaders in schools and mental health agencies, organizations that rely on evaluation a great deal. For example, one project director reported,

During the meetings, it is not unusual for a partner to ask for information from the evaluator. They know what [the evaluator] is doing and will ask when it’s going to be available, or how they might effectively look at something.

Other stakeholders were less consistent in their understanding of evaluation. “It took some education. But I think [the stakeholders] relied on [the evaluator] and got to know what he was doing and why.” Clarifying the point further, “They couldn’t appreciate what you could know and what you couldn’t. And they couldn’t appreciate what was data, and what was perception, or my opinion.” Several project directors reported that their stakeholders were often “glassy-eyed” during evaluator reports.

## Views About the Impact of Evaluation

Evaluators of differing orientations, and their project directors, have differing expectations about the impact of the evaluation findings. Table 4 compares the three different orientations of evaluator on a number of items from the survey that asked about impact (scored 1 to 5, from *no impact* to *substantial impact*) and compares evaluators to project directors.

Somewhat expected based on previous findings reported in this article, program-oriented evaluators have a more constrained expectation when it comes to the impact of evaluation on local project development, sustainability, and stakeholder issues. Client-oriented evaluators have the most optimistic expectation, and academically-oriented evaluators follow them closely. Project directors tend also to be more optimistic than the evaluators, especially program-oriented evaluators.

Academically-oriented and client-oriented evaluators report being more optimistic than program-oriented evaluators about the impact of the evaluation on the national SSHS initiative and on the improved implementation of the local SSHS project. They are also more optimistic about the impact of evaluation on the sustainability of SSHS, both nationally and locally. When it comes to influencing stakeholder activities, the client-oriented evaluators are the most optimistic about the role of evaluation findings, reporting that they expect the findings to attract additional stakeholders and support advocacy efforts for the population served by SSHS.

Discussions about impact of the evaluation in the interviews focused on sustainability of programs supported by the project. Most but not all sites appeared to put effort into sustaining the project. Four of the six sites with academically-oriented evaluators, five of the six sites with program-oriented evaluators, and all eight of the sites with client-oriented evaluators had an explicit priority to try to sustain programs put in place by the SSHS project. Not all sites with a sustainability process, however, explicitly included their evaluator in the process.

There seem to be three levels of evaluator involvement in sustainability planning, each reflecting a different view about the impact of evaluation. The first level casts the evaluator as the sustainability leader. Project directors at three sites (two client oriented and one program oriented) described their evaluators as the “driving force” in sustainability planning. One project director described the leadership this way: “[The evaluator] was the person who kept bringing the sustainability issue to the forefront. [It was brought up by him] from Day 1 and throughout the entire 3 years. I think that was very valuable.” In the second level of involvement, the evaluator is a close advisor to the sustainability process, which is run by other stakeholders. Four of the project directors reported that their evaluator participated at this level (three client-oriented and one academically-oriented evaluator). These evaluators either worked one-on-one with the project director to make formal recommendations for sustaining the programs or worked with a broader group of stakeholders. Examples of types of advice range from identifying successful programs to thinking through how to reduce the cost of programs to make them more sustainable.

The final level of involvement in sustainability engages the evaluator in occasional sustainability questions. Although these projects had sustainability efforts, they did not appear to have a coherent process in place to plan for sustainability. Four project directors reported this sort of involvement (two client-oriented, one program-oriented, and one academically-oriented evaluator). These projects seemed to perform sustainability planning in a more reactive way. That is, they might sustain a piece that a stakeholder wants continued but not have a plan for whether to sustain all of the pieces. The evaluator’s role did not shift from whatever he or she was doing during the earlier phase project to the sustainability phase. Regular reports to partners continued but without an explicit emphasis on making decisions about what to sustain.

When project directors spoke about the sustainability process, they made few comments about the evaluator being an important part of it, though evaluation findings might have been an important consideration in sustainability decisions.

## Conclusion

The current study asks how the evaluator and project director (the lead stakeholder of the project being evaluated) share in each others' roles and the degree to which there is tension and confusion in clarifying the sharing process. By exploring these issues over time, we sought to provide insight into what appears to be a dynamic and complex process.

This study has a number of limitations that should be noted as one considers the implications of the findings. Our sample size is small; only 20 evaluator–project director pairs participated in the study. Limiting the sample to SSHS evaluators helped control some of the variation among the evaluation–project director pairs but also limits the generalizability of the findings. Even given these limitations, the study provides important insight into who performs community-based evaluation, how the different types of evaluators share their roles with stakeholders, and how they share in the roles of stakeholders. Further study is warranted to explore the extent to which the findings are applicable in other evaluation settings.

Few of the evaluators in this project explicitly avoided participating in project development, and almost all of them invited stakeholders to help make decisions about the evaluation design. Only one of the evaluators in this project could be labeled “traditional” and appeared to actively seek a clear separation between the evaluation and the project. Most of the other evaluators, rather than explicitly adopting a position of being a “collaborative,” “participatory,” or “developmental” evaluator, seemed to expect the line between the evaluation and project development to be blurry, without professing a theoretical point of view. Project directors, as well, indicated little discomfort with sharing roles. Three project directors questioned the evaluation's scientific rigor in light of this, but they also indicated that role sharing made the evaluation more useful to them.

Some evaluators were more comfortable with the blurred line than others. Academically-oriented evaluators were the most uncomfortable, although being uncomfortable did not mean they insisted on creating a clearer separation between project development and evaluation. Most of those who were uncomfortable took the discomfort as an indication that they had more to learn professionally. Other evaluators were very comfortable with the blurred line, particularly the program-oriented and the client-oriented evaluators. All of the evaluators who would be considered “developmental” by the standards of the literature (focused primarily on creating good programs through evaluation) were client-oriented evaluators.

Sharing roles between evaluators and project directors generally was the norm in this group and typically brought great satisfaction to both parties. Clearly, there was tension and confusion in the role sharing of evaluators and stakeholders, but it was typically resolved early on in the cases where evaluators bring strong communication skills to the project. Where these skills were not present, the tensions did not resolve consistently.

Thus, it is not only important that an evaluator make the commitment to engage stakeholders in the evaluation, it is also important for the evaluator to work proactively toward this end by shaping his or her approach to the stakeholders in such a way as to make them comfortable in sharing evaluation tasks. For instance, the learning curve for stakeholders tends to be longer than the learning curve for evaluators on most projects (evaluators know more about project development than project directors know about evaluation). Proactive and assertive communication and education about evaluation design choices appear to reduce the potential

for conflict, increase collaboration in the evaluation design process, increase buy in to the evaluation procedures and findings, and increase the sense that the evaluator is an important member of the project team. Ineffective communication means not only that the evaluation will be difficult to implement but also that its findings will not be considered useful and valid by the stakeholders. Communication skills are also key in enabling the evaluator to take a fuller role in project decision making. Evaluators who struggled with communication were not as readily invited to participate in decision-making processes, such as sustainability planning. They also were not frequently seen as full partners by the wider group of stakeholders.

Finally, methodological flexibility appears to be prized by project directors. Evaluators who began the project committed to performing outcomes assessment often were asked to shift to more process assessments, or vice versa. Evaluators who could make that switch, or at least find a compromise with their project directors, provided an evaluation that was perceived as more salient to their project directors. Academically-oriented evaluators, although they were not always the most flexible, clearly had resources in their home institutions to help them meet a very wide range of methodological needs. Evaluators identified as client oriented appeared to struggle with methodological issues the most.

Role sharing looks different depending on the orientation of the evaluator. Each orientation brings with it a different mix of what parts of the roles are shared and of how sharing happens. Client-oriented evaluators are more likely to be fully engaged with the community and to take a full role in sustainability, although they report the least comfort with methodological skills. Many do not perform their own data collection. Academically-oriented evaluators are strong methodologically but tend to be less engaged in one of the most important tasks from the perspective of stakeholders—sustaining successful and useful programs. Program-oriented evaluators, to generalize, seem to be a mix of the other two orientations. They are strong methodologically, but they do not often have the university-based resources that the academically-oriented evaluators do. They are very comfortable with becoming a leader in local debates about sustainability and project development but do not have the long-term community contacts to ensure that their efforts will be truly effective. They are the most consistent group when it comes to having strong communication skills.

In this study, we identified three different evaluator orientations and substantial variation in role sharing and in how stakeholders view the processes of role sharing and evaluation. Even with the variation in the ways role sharing is done, only a handful of project directors questioned the usefulness of the evaluation for their projects. Those project directors who questioned the value of evaluation did not have evaluator participation in project design and management. Clearly, each evaluator orientation brings with it its own strengths and weaknesses. However, all three of the evaluator orientations resulted in positive and rich evaluations of the local SSHS projects from the perspectives of the project directors and evaluators.

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