What Makes Evaluating Complexity Different?

WEBINAR | MARCH 11, 2015
Panelists

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We hope you enjoy today’s presentation

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Today’s slides will be available after the presentation on fsg.org
# Webinar agenda

1. About complexity and evaluation
2. Example: Challenge Scholars
3. Example: Building Healthy Communities
Thinking about complexity

Consider an initiative or program you are supporting and ask:

- Are there many components or parts?
- Is the issue you’re working on related to other issues or problems?
- Is the context continuously changing (e.g., culture, economy, politics, demographics)?
- Are relationships important to success?
- Do things change just as you’ve thought you’ve gotten a handle on them?
- Is there a straight path from implementation to outcomes – are the outcomes predictable?
- Is it taking place in multiple locations?
- Are many individuals and organizations involved? Across different sectors? Are there different definitions of success?
- Are all the outcomes known or knowable?
What we mean by “complexity”

Complex situations are characterized by high uncertainty and high social conflict… the outcomes of interventions aimed at solving problems under conditions of complexity are unpredictable. So many factors and variables are interacting, many of them not only unknown but unknowable, that there can be no recipe for success.

Michael Q. Patton, 2011, p.90
We act differently to address complex problems

Complex systems are:

- Nonlinear, always changing
- Unpredictable, never static
- Uncontrollable
- Highly connected and interdependent
- Emergent

Addressing complex problems requires:

- Pattern recognition
- Working with paradoxes
- Acting & learning at the same time
- Unique, evolving solutions
- Connections and relationships
Evaluations of complex initiatives, or within complex environments should:

1. Be **adaptive, flexible, and iterative**
2. **Describe the whole system**, including components and connections
3. **Strengthen feedback loops** and improve access to information
4. Pay attention to **context** and changes as they occur
5. Look for effective **principles of practice in action**
6. Identify **points of energy and influence**, momentum, and power
7. Focus on the nature of **relationships and interdependencies** within the system
8. Explain the **non-linear and multi-directional** relationships between the initiative and its outcomes
9. Watch for **patterns**, both one-off and repeating
Complexity is a source of innovation and adaptability supported by diversity and distributed problem solving.

We need to be more skilled at expecting, seeing, and responding to surprise...

Brenda Zimmerman, June 2014
Example: Challenge Scholars

Cris Kutzli, Grand Rapids Community Foundation

Srik Gopal, FSG
About the Challenge Scholars initiative

Challenge Scholars…

• Aims to increase the number of first generation, low-income students that **successfully complete a degree or high quality credential**

• Is a **partnership** between the Grand Rapids Community Foundation and Grand Rapids Public Schools, with many other stakeholders engaged

• Offers a scholarship upon graduating, as well as early supports:
  - Physical/behavioral health; human services
  - Instructional/academic support
  - College and career pathways
  - Family engagement
Guiding evaluation questions

1. How is a **college and career culture** emerging within the schools and broader West Side community?

2. How are **parents and families** being engaged as part of Challenge Scholars?

3. How are **students** becoming more college and career ready?

4. What does exemplary **teaching and learning** look like in a college and career culture?

5. How are the **community, businesses, and higher education** responding to Challenge Scholars?
Evaluation Design

The evaluation plan was **co-created** with the working group.

Evaluation Implementation

Data collection methods and sources were **prioritized** based on real time client needs.
Describe the whole system, including components and connections

Who are the various *actors*?

What is their *connection* to each other and to the key activities?
What we learned evaluating Challenge Scholars

• **Co-create**, iterate, rinse, repeat

• Find ways to have an “**ear**” to the ground

• Build **trust** between evaluators and the program team
Example: Building Healthy Communities

Mona Jhawar, The California Endowment

Katelyn Mack, FSG

health happens here
www.calendow.org
The California Endowment (TCE) is pursuing a multi-level policy and systems change strategy.

**Goals** include:

1. Community and environmental change
2. State and local policy and systems change
3. Increased community capacity
Guiding evaluation questions

1. To what extent and in what ways are **TCE structures and processes** affecting [our] ability to effectively provide oversight, management, and support? Enabling [us] to adapt and respond to [communities’ needs]? Affecting alignment between Healthy Communities and Healthy California?

2. To what extent and in what ways are **Healthy Communities and Healthy California efforts aligned and working together** to proactively address a specific issue, policy, or practice related to BHC goals?

3. What factors are supporting and hindering **power building among residents and youth** to advance BHC goals of policy and systems change?

4. To what extent and in what ways are the Hubs and other collaborative structures developing **effective partnerships** and **increasing community capacity** to influence policy and systems changes?

5. What **changes are being realized** at a local and state level as a result of the BHC work?
Pay attention to context and changes as they occur

Sacramento BHC Youth at Gabriel Brower Rally, 2011

Santa Ana Youth and Residents at City Council Meeting

Sources: FSG. (2013) South Sacramento BHC Case Study. The California Endowment.; Santa Ana BHC.
Look for effective principles of practice in action

We asked and examined...

How are collaboratives in BHC communities structured in ways that contribute to policy and systems change?

Rather than...

Do local collaborative structures adhere to a certain set of criteria or requirements that TCE has laid out?
What we learned evaluating Building Healthy Communities

- Include **diverse voices and perspectives** in the design and implementation of the evaluation

- Take (more) **time** to analyze and test findings, looking for alternate hypotheses

- Be **proactive** in discussing and using evaluation findings