



## **CC3: Lessons Learned From the Evaluation of Three Comprehensive Centers**

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Paper presented at the 2008  
Annual Meeting of the American  
Evaluation Association  
Denver, Colorado

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Bradley, K.L., D'Brot, J., Cowley, K. S., Good, K., Finch, N., & Hixson, N. (2008). *CC3: Lessons Learned From the Evaluation of Three Comprehensive Centers*. Charleston, WV: Edvantia.

This publication was prepared by Edvantia staff for presentation at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the American Evaluation Association. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Comprehensive Center grant recipients cited within the document or Edvantia.

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## **CC3: Lessons Learned From the Evaluation of Three Comprehensive Centers**

This paper presents information about a tool devised by three evaluation teams at one organization—Edvantia. The tool—a set of five context continua—grew out of work conducted by the teams, who were assigned to three evaluation contracts. All of the contracts were for the same type of federally funded program, but their contexts differed significantly. Working in a collegial community of practice, the evaluators examined the similarities and differences and identified a tool to help them think about effective ways to design and conduct their evaluations. Here, they define the tool and present specific applications from their work.

### **Background**

The Edvantia evaluation teams used a pragmatic approach to their evaluation designs of federally supported technical assistance centers, known as comprehensive centers (CCs). Although pragmatism is a utilization-focused approach in which evaluation questions drive the methods, one must first understand the context, situation, and factors specific to an evaluand before selecting the most appropriate evaluation methodologies. The evaluators faced a multitude of choices about how to evaluate the three CCs. While some evaluators approach evaluands with designs rooted in theory (e.g., feminist, functional, critical, qualitative, quantitative), others utilize a pragmatic approach to design that incorporates theoretically based methodologies.

The evaluators of the three CCs explored a number of these options when designing evaluations tailored to each CC. They ultimately decided, independently, on a pragmatic approach to their evaluation designs. That is, the evaluators designed evaluations that were rooted in practice and were reinforced with methodologically sound principles. This preference for pragmatism was grounded in a desire to address the practical application of evaluation, which can be addressed by considering Datta's (1997) four overarching questions:

- (1) Can relevant evaluation questions be answered?
- (2) Can one successfully carry out the design given project constraints?
- (3) Is the level of breadth vs. depth optimized in the evaluation design?
- (4) Are the results usable?

Pragmatic researchers believe the research question is of utmost importance and should drive the research or evaluation methodology (Mertens, 2005). Patton (2002) contends that pragmatism requires study quality to be judged by “its intended purposes, available resources, procedures followed, and results obtained, all within a particular context and for a specific audience” (p. 21). Such a philosophy frees researchers and evaluators from narrow, limiting methodological allegiances and rigid orthodoxy and, according to Patton, promotes practicality, methodological appropriateness, and situational responsiveness.

The Edvantia CC evaluators propose that, as a part of developing that design, evaluators should consider the evaluand’s position on five continua: (1) *geographic*—the geographic distance between evaluation and program personnel, (2) *evaluator involvement*—the degree to which evaluators define themselves as part of the evaluand’s community, (3) *organizational level of evaluation integration*—the integration of evaluation at the onset of a project, (4) *client resources*—resources the client possesses that support the evaluation, and (5) *evaluation resources*—resources the evaluator possesses that support the evaluation.

## **Contribution to Evaluation Body of Knowledge**

Providing a thorough and equitable evaluation is an essential component of any technical assistance (TA) effort. Because Edvantia serves as the evaluator for three regional comprehensive centers, each of which is situated within a distinct context, Edvantia's evaluators are uniquely positioned to contribute to the knowledge base on evaluation practices and use of findings related to technical assistance in general and comprehensive centers in particular. Specifically, the experience of Edvantia evaluators reveals that varying levels of geographic proximity, evaluator involvement, organizational level of evaluation integration, client resources, and evaluator resources present unique challenges to evaluation practice.

This paper contributes to the body of evaluation knowledge in several ways. First, many organizations conduct evaluations that exhibit varying levels of involvement and physical distance between evaluators and clients. For example, some organizations serve as internal evaluators to their clients while external evaluators from other organizations assess internal evaluation efforts. Other organizations provide both internal and external evaluation services. Additionally, evaluators may not be in the same geographic location as the clients they serve. Edvantia employs evaluators who work under all of these conditions. Such variation impacts the degree of subjectivity and objectivity that evaluators bring to their work. Information about the challenges encountered and organizational lessons learned by Edvantia evaluators applies to a variety of evaluation organizations.

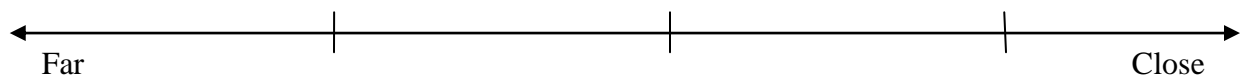
Second, it is important to understand that the five continua discussed in this paper impact evaluation practice—that is, how evaluators address the Program Evaluation Standards of utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994). For example, depending on the position an evaluation occupies on a continuum, the way

evaluators meet utility standards—such as identifying stakeholders and selecting information scope—can vary greatly. Feasibility standards such as cost effectiveness, propriety standards such as human interactions, and accuracy standards such as context analysis are also affected. Because not all evaluations fall on the same points on these five continua, and because all evaluators aim to produce high-quality work—in part by adhering to standards of utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy—a shared knowledge base is necessary.

### **Examination of the Five Context Continua**

Here we present descriptions of the five continua, along with examples of how varying positions on a continuum might impact evaluation practice. The section concludes with a review of the evaluation practice literature as it relates to the continua.

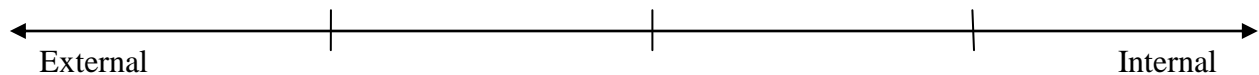
#### **The Continuum of Geographic Proximity**



Geographic proximity is often among the first characteristics one thinks of when considering a working relationship with a client. Certainly, it is important to take into account whether an evaluator is close to or far from the client. While the geographic proximity initially appears to be a simple characteristic, it has important implications for evaluation practice. Depending on the degree of communication or on-site presence needed, and on the distance between the two entities, evaluator interaction and associated costs can vary dramatically. For example, if a mixed-method evaluation were being conducted in which multiple rounds of observation data collection, focus group interviews, knowledge test administrations, and stakeholder interviews were conducted, the way in which evaluators focus their time, money, and efforts would differ if they were 20 miles vs. 2,000 miles away. Communication is also affected

by geographic proximity, but considering that so much communication occurs electronically—even among people housed in the same physical space—day-to-day communication may not be the primary concern. Rather, developing a relationship between evaluator and client that fosters trust and open communication may require extra vigilance and attention if a distance barrier exists.

### **The Continuum of Evaluator Involvement**



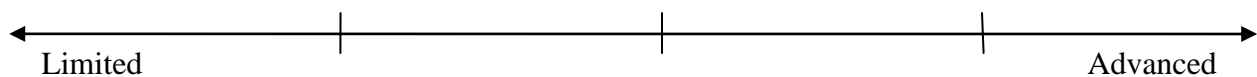
In the case of evaluator involvement, it is important to identify, but not necessarily distinguish between, whether an evaluator is fulfilling the role of an internal or external evaluator. These labels do not always affect how one conducts evaluation. Rather, the distinction may help evaluators reflect on the ethical and professional dilemmas created by each situation. Traditionally, internal evaluators function as critical friends who work with program staff to facilitate program improvement through self-reflection and formative evaluation. Conversely, external evaluators attempt to be objective about measuring the impact of a program through summative evaluation, yet they must become familiar with the program.

It is important to acknowledge that beyond the traditional work roles that internal and external evaluators fulfill, evaluation practices often differ depending on whether evaluators define themselves as part of the community, or evaluand, with which they work. That is, “external evaluators are oriented to a diverse array of communities, including, but not limited to, the professional evaluation community, their academic discipline, employers, funding agencies, local business communities” (Mathison, 1999, p. 28). An internal evaluator, on the other hand, may define the community “first and foremost by the organization within which she is working,

as well as the discipline or product context of which that organization is part” (Mathison, 1999, p. 28). These distinctions may assist evaluators to navigate difficult ethical scenarios.

Today an evaluator may have difficulty drawing a distinct line between internal and external evaluator functions while trying to respond to client needs and deliver customized services. Identifying an evaluator’s position on the involvement continuum may help to refocus the evaluator’s perspective on the best way to offer a suite of services while staying true to the overall purpose of the evaluation. For example, an evaluator may be contracted to conduct an external evaluation, but may participate in traditionally internal evaluation tasks in order to better understand the program, inform the summative evaluation, or provide substantive feedback to the client to ensure program success. Those tasks can put the evaluator into a somewhat internal evaluation role, where the evaluator must remember to maintain objectivity when developing summative reports for the external evaluation. That is, an external evaluator who looks to gain substantial insight into the process or program should take care not to become an advocate or opponent of the client.

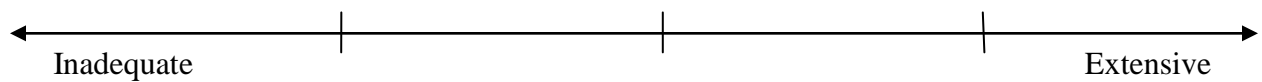
### **The Continuum of Organizational Level of Evaluation Integration**



The organization’s level of evaluation integration refers to the extent to which an organization integrates internal, external, or both kinds of evaluation from the onset of a project. The continuum ranges from limited to advanced. Often, the integration of evaluation in a project symbolizes the priority a client places on the program evaluation. For example, if a client possesses a limited level of organizational evaluation integration, it is up to the evaluator to ensure that the program has adequate funds or resources in place to conduct an evaluation

proportional to the program's scope of work. At times, an evaluator may need to create buy-in among stakeholders to obtain the necessary data to inform the evaluation. Although one would think an advanced degree of evaluation integration would be a better alternative, an evaluator may contend with entrenched ideas about evaluation, and these may pose barriers to convincing a client to take a different approach.

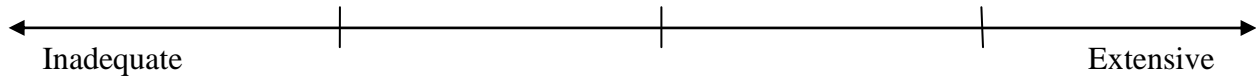
### **The Continuum of Client Resources**



The client resources continuum represents a holistic and generalized view of the resources that support an evaluation of a program from the client's perspective, and the resources can range from inadequate to extensive. The continuum provides a snapshot that helps the evaluator consider the various types of resources that could affect evaluation practice, including, but not limited to, monetary allocation for the evaluation, full-time equivalents (FTEs) available for evaluation (i.e., evaluation staff), key project personnel, availability of project staff, technological support for electronic communication, formal policies that guide evaluation, and/or informal guidelines that support evaluation and accountability.

If a client possessed an inadequate amount of resources to support the evaluation, program staff would need to work with evaluators to determine the most crucial elements to study. On-site data collection and collaboration may suffer, which would entail a need to compensate for lost communication possibilities. It is also important to note that identifying a client's position on this continuum depends on both possession of resources and the appropriate *allocation* of resources. A client may possess seemingly abundant resources, but if they are not allocated appropriately to the evaluation, the evaluation will suffer.

## The Continuum of Evaluator Resources



The evaluator resource continuum also represents a holistic and generalized view of the resources that support evaluation from the evaluator's perspective; these also ranging from inadequate to extensive. While client resources are often the first to come to mind as impediments or supports to evaluation, an evaluator's own resources cannot be overlooked. This continuum includes, but is not limited to, professional networks of other experienced evaluators, the number of personnel available for a given FTE allocation (e.g., 2 vs. 10 staff members splitting a 2.0 FTE allocation), a match between the technological resources of the evaluator and the client, policies that allow evaluators to include travel in their budgets, formal policies that support quality assurance of products and reports, and/or informal policies that encourage collaboration among evaluation staff .

For example, an evaluator who is positioned on the far right point of the continuum may employ a large number of evaluators, have access to various professional networks, and use several forms of electronic communication, all of which will affect evaluation practice. That is, by employing a large number of evaluators, the evaluating organization has the option of spreading the client's FTE allocation across multiple staff members, thus ensuring that evaluators draw on various perspectives, skill sets, and ideas. These evaluators may also consult with other experts in the field through professional networks to familiarize themselves with cutting-edge approaches and best practices in the field. Finally, using multiple forms of electronic communication may benefit client-evaluator interaction by providing an opportunity for electronic document sharing, real-time document editing, Web conferencing, and/or

otherwise maintaining electronic communications. A careful examination of where an evaluator's resources fall on this continuum may help in developing a realistic scope of work, brokering additional connections to increase the rigor of the evaluation, or supplementing any shortcomings that may exist among evaluation staff.

### **The Continua and Existing Literature**

The five context continua described above may be useful to consider when planning for an evaluation. While the existing literature mentions the importance of context in determining evaluation practices, rarely does it describe explicitly the various conditions one might encounter and the ways in which practice might be influenced (Fitzpatrick, 2004). It could be argued that the continua we propose are “common sense” considerations and are therefore implicit in evaluation planning processes. Nonetheless, we think that careful consideration of where the evaluator or evaluand lie on the continua will help ensure that evaluations are planned and conducted in light of the challenges and opportunities that may be present with the given set of circumstances. For example, by acknowledging the monetary or human resources available for the evaluation (i.e., placement on the Evaluator Resources and Client Resources continua), an evaluator can select an approach to conducting as methodologically sound an evaluation as possible (Bamberger, Rugh, Church, & Fort, 2004).

Typically the evaluation literature has not categorized evaluation ideas or concepts into continua, but instead has proposed dichotomies. For example, evaluation methodologies are usually characterized as quantitative or qualitative, and the role of evaluation has been divided and categorized into internal and external and formative and summative.

By definition, an external evaluation is conducted by an evaluator outside of the organization and an internal evaluation is conducted by an evaluator within the organization

(Mathison, 2005; Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994). We suggest that situations are seldom so unambiguous. A typical distinction offered in the literature is that the internal evaluator conducts formative evaluation and the external evaluator conducts summative evaluation. Given this paradigm, a dichotomy indeed exists. However, in our evaluation of the three CCs, we find ourselves operating sometimes as internal evaluators although we are external to the project. Therefore, we have come to think of internal and external evaluation as being situated on a continuum. Fitzpatrick (2004) shares this view, arguing that there is “often blur in [external and internal evaluation] practice.” Further, Fitzpatrick states that even when an evaluator is external to the client, prior relationships with the client can influence the current evaluation. Worthen and Sanders (1987) also support the notion that a combination of the two approaches can be advantageous. For example, internal evaluators might design an evaluation and gather data; then external evaluators could be contracted to help with tasks where biases could occur, such as instrument development, drawing conclusions from the data, or other aspects of implementing the evaluation.

A precursor to our approach is present in Morell’s work (2000). Morell suggests that project staff may be highly or minimally involved in evaluating their project (but again, this is a dichotomy). Morell’s use of these terms refers to the involvement of program staff in conducting the evaluation. This is, in a sense, a type of evaluation capacity building. However, the use being applied here does not really get at the a priori identification of the organization’s evaluation capacity to inform the development of an evaluation customized to the situational context and the needs of the client. Huffman, Thomas, and Lawrenz (2008) do offer a continuum of evaluation capacity building. However, theirs is a continuum of methods for developing evaluation integration capacity, rather than a definition of where the organization is along the continuum.

## **Applying the Continua: CC3 Evaluations**

Examples of how the five context continua apply to each of the three CC evaluations follow. We provide contextual information about each CC, discuss the positioning of each CC on the five continua and a rationale for those positions, and conclude with the implications for evaluation practice.

We introduce this section with contextual information about the Comprehensive Center program and Edvantia's history of evaluating CCs. This information will be useful in understanding how the CCs are structured and the scope of their work, as well as the evaluation expertise and experience of Edvantia.

### **Overview of Comprehensive Centers**

In 2005, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) (2008) awarded discretionary grants to establish comprehensive centers (CCs) to help low-performing schools and districts close achievement gaps and meet the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Section 203 of Title II of the Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002 (TA Act) authorized ED to establish not fewer than 20 comprehensive technical assistance centers to provide technical assistance to state departments of education (SEAs) to benefit school districts and schools, especially those in need of improvement. In September 2005, awards were made to establish 16 regional CCs and five content CCs focusing on key educational issues. Three (3) of the 16 regional CCs that were funded are subjects of this paper: the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center (ARCC) at Edvantia, the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center (MACC) located at The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (GW-CEEE), and the Florida and the Islands Comprehensive Center (FLICC) operated by Educational Testing Service (ETS) (ARCC, 2008; FLICC, 2008; MACC, 2008).

Each regional center is charged with providing training and technical assistance in the implementation and administration of programs authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and in the use of scientifically valid teaching methods and assessment tools in mathematics, science, reading and language arts, English language acquisition, and educational technology. The centers are also responsible for facilitating communication among education experts, school officials, teachers, parents, and librarians. In addition, each regional center is charged with disseminating information and reports on improving academic achievement, closing achievement gaps, and sustaining school improvement to schools, teachers, parents, and policymakers.

### **How Edvantia's History of Operating a CC Supported the CC Evaluation Work**

Prior to being awarded the ARCC contract in October 2005, Edvantia (formerly AEL) had held the Region IV Comprehensive Center since it was first awarded in the fall of 1995. The Region IV CC was one of 15 CCs funded by ED between 1995 and 2005, and it provided services to SEAs, districts, and schools across six states (Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia).

Concurrently with operating a CC, Edvantia was building on its evaluation experience to develop an evaluation unit that possesses sophisticated practical and theoretical knowledge of what evaluation looks like, why organizations do it, and how important evaluation can be to the success of a program or organization. Edvantia has operated its own internal evaluation unit for at least 2 decades. Operating numerous federal contracts and grants since 1966, including three comprehensive center contracts, has helped the organization develop the capability to perform the type of evaluation and reporting required for large federal contracts that deliver technical assistance.

## **Applying the Continua**

To take this discussion from the theoretical to the practical, we offer this explanation of how the continua were applied to the comprehensive center contracts we are evaluating. Edvantia has held the ARCC contract since October 2005 and has provided evaluation services for MACC and FLICC since 2005 and 2006, respectively. We provide contextual descriptions of the three centers and describe how Edvantia evaluators determined the evaluands positions' on the five continua.

### **Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center**

The following section provides a description of the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center (ARCC) and describes Edvantia's positioning of the ARCC evaluation on five continua. ARCC is operated by Edvantia and it serves SEAs in Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia from headquarters in Charleston, West Virginia.

#### *Context*

ARCC has defined its overarching goal to be delivering high-quality, evidence-based, relevant, and useful technical assistance to SEAs; when implemented, this technical assistance results in enhanced student achievement and improved school and district adequate yearly progress (AYP) status.

In addition to a core group of staff who are either employees of or consultants to Edvantia, ARCC includes five partner organizations that work collaboratively to deliver technical assistance services to the five states in the ARCC service region. ARCC assigns a liaison to each state to assess state contexts and ensure that ARCC technical assistance is timely, explicitly addresses state needs, and is likely to affect positive change. Ideally, each liaison

resides in the state to which he or she is assigned and is visible and accessible to that state's department of education.

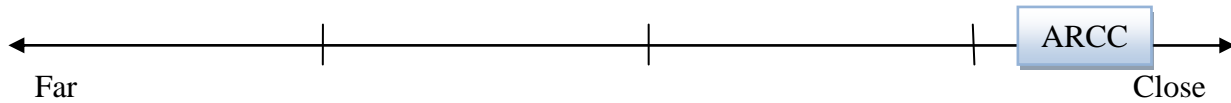
Evaluation of ARCC is conducted by a combination of external and internal evaluators. This hybrid approach ensures that evaluation is both objective and sensitive, as well as comprehensive and integral, to ARCC operations. ARCC internal evaluators work closely with the state liaisons to develop yearly state and regional evaluation plans that align to each state's project goals and objectives. Data gathered through multiple sources are used to inform ARCC program staff of the status of project implementation and progress toward achieving state and regional objectives. Meta-evaluations performed by external evaluators provide ARCC evaluators with critical feedback that is incorporated to improve internal project evaluation.

#### *Positions on Continua*

The following section details where ARCC falls on each of the five continua. ARCC's positioning has an impact on the overall development of the evaluation, how well the evaluation is able to be implemented as planned, and ways evaluators perform their responsibilities. These positions on the continua can either support or impede evaluation efforts.

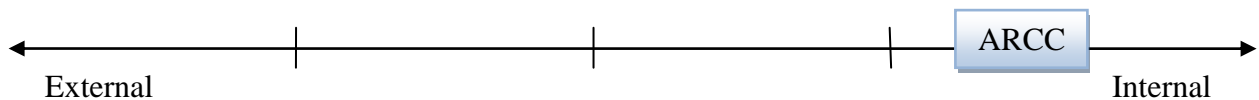
**Geographic proximity.** As shown in Figure 1a, ARCC is positioned toward the right hand (*close*) side of the Geographic Proximity Continuum. Generally speaking, ARCC evaluators are likely to be "close" to those they serve. For example, of the five Edvantia evaluators who have portions of their time assigned to ARCC, three are based in the Charleston office, where ARCC has its headquarters. This puts them in the same geographic location with the majority of ARCC project staff. However, two of the evaluators, including the director of ARCC evaluation, telecommute from offices outside of West Virginia, and one of these is outside the ARCC region. In addition, within the ARCC organizational structure, the evaluators

work most closely with the state liaisons, and most of the liaisons live in the states to which they are assigned and do not work in the Charleston office.



**Figure 1a. ARCC Geographic Proximity**

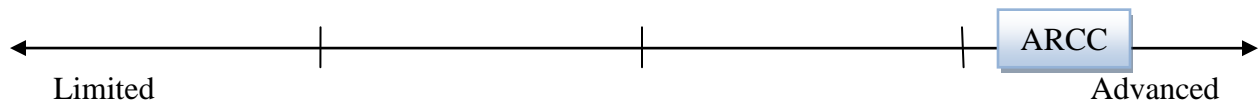
**Evaluator involvement.** ARCC is positioned toward the right hand (*internal*) side of the Evaluator Involvement Continuum, shown in Figure 1b. ARCC evaluators are internal to the parent organization, Edvantia, and are integrally involved with all aspects of the evaluation, including formative and summative efforts. Internal evaluators are responsible for designing and implementing evaluation plans and producing reports. ARCC external evaluators are contracted on an annual basis to provide an outside, objective perspective of selected ARCC activities (e.g., attending on-site and virtual events, conducting interviews with staff and partners). In addition, ARCC internal evaluators have relied on the external evaluators to conduct an annual meta-evaluation.



**Figure 1b. ARCC Evaluator Involvement**

**Organizational level of evaluation integration.** On this continuum, ARCC appears on the right side (*advanced*), as shown in Figure 1c. A comprehensive, theory-based, three-level evaluation plan was included as a part of Edvantia’s proposal to win the ARCC contract, and this plan has been enacted as an integral part of ARCC operations. Because ARCC exists within an organization that has its own longstanding evaluation unit, there is a high degree of understanding of the purpose and importance of evaluation, a culture that might be less

developed in organizations that do not have evaluators on staff. An additional factor contributing to the high level of evaluation integration is Edvantia’s past experience as manager of two Region IV Comprehensive Center contracts. The Region IV Comprehensive Center, like the ARCC, approached evaluation as a core component of the program. Thus, there has been little need to build the evaluation capacity of ARCC staff. Instead, efforts are devoted to helping internal staff, contracted staff, and partners understand the role of evaluation at various project levels, thus ensuring data collection for purposes of federal reporting and disseminating evaluation results to relevant staff. This is less capacity building than it is communication about evaluation requirements and progress.



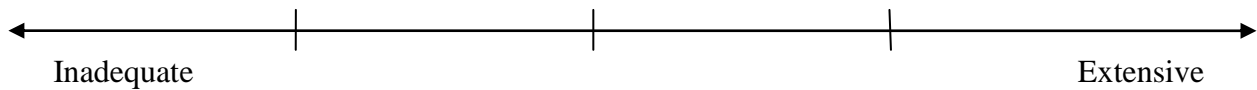
**Figure 1c. ARCC Organizational Level of Evaluation Integration**

**Client resources.** ARCC would be placed on the right hand side (*extensive*) of the Client Resources Continuum, shown in Figure 1d, because the program supports the evaluation with sufficient resources. Two such vital resources include the budget allocations and available technology.

Evidence of the importance ARCC places on evaluation includes staffing allocations. As noted earlier, five Edvantia evaluators are assigned to the ARCC. Altogether these five individuals represent 2.65 full-time equivalents (FTEs) for evaluation. ARCC evaluators are supported with an additional 0.2 FTE from an Edvantia staff member to perform clerical tasks. The contract with the external evaluators is another human resource devoted to ARCC evaluation. Approximately 5% of ARCC’s overall budget is allocated to evaluation-related

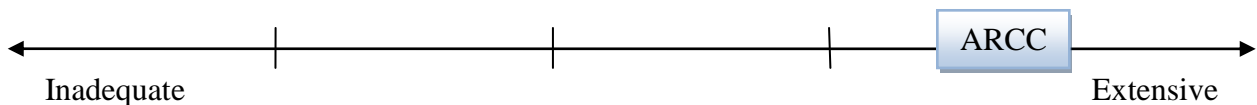
human resources. Other costs for ARCC evaluation, such as evaluation-related travel and supplies, are all supported through the ARCC general budget.

Through its parent organization, ARCC is able to access and make use of extensive technology resources to support the evaluation. For example, the Edvantia evaluation unit has purchased online survey software. Further, ARCC uses a Web-based technology application (Wimba) to support meetings and has a sophisticated Web portal that is used by ARCC to support program activities.



**Figure 1d. ARCC Client Resources**

**Evaluator resources.** ARCC lands on the right hand side (*extensive*) of the Evaluator Resources Continuum, as shown in Figure 1e, because ARCC evaluators have access to extensive resources. With the evaluators situated within ARCC (i.e., internal and not an outside contract), evaluators generally have access to the same resources that other ARCC staff at Edvantia do. Because they are treated in the budget as ARCC staff, evaluators have the opportunity to take part in one professional conference each year. ARCC evaluators are also members of the research and evaluation unit at Edvantia and therefore have access to a larger group of evaluation colleagues with whom they can network and share experiences.



**Figure 1e. ARCC Evaluator Resources**

*Evaluation Practice*

Although ARCC falls on the right-hand sides of the five continua, a circumstance which could be considered ideal, there are a number of challenges and lessons to be learned that can inform our practice.

**Geographic proximity.** When it comes to evaluation, communication can be an internal organizational challenge. Because much of the ARCC evaluation focuses on state-level initiatives, with state liaisons playing a pivotal role, it is vitally important for ARCC evaluators to maintain contact with state liaisons. Equally important is educating the state liaisons (who have tended to be external consultants) about the significance of evaluation, to gain their support and cooperation.

Four of the five state liaisons work from home offices in the states where they provide ARCC services. It is therefore unlikely that evaluators and project staff will be able to engage in the informal, ad hoc conversations that are more likely to occur when all staff are co-located. In addition, the liaisons are contracted staff. In other words, they may not share the same understandings of evaluation as do ARCC staff who are employees of the parent organization, Edvantia. State liaisons are often in the field as they work with state education staff and such schedules limit daily or even weekly communication with evaluators. E-mail is used frequently between evaluators and liaisons but at some points it is more efficient and effective to have synchronous and interactive phone conversations. To facilitate communication between ARCC program and evaluation staff, monthly telephone calls are scheduled.

**Evaluator involvement.** ARCC takes a very traditional approach to external and internal evaluation. Our external evaluators are external in every sense of the word (e.g., geographic distance, external to the organization, not evaluating any other CCs). As a result, although objectivity is established, the external evaluators have needed to establish a knowledge base

about the overall CC program and ARCC work in particular. Annually, the external evaluators have conducted telephone interviews with ARCC staff and partners. Such a data collection method is well suited for external evaluation, as respondents may be more open and honest than if the internal evaluators were conducting the interviews.

However, with the internal evaluators conducting the majority of the evaluation, there remains a need to ensure that the evaluation is conducted fairly, objectively, and without bias. As a check on our attentiveness to The Program Evaluation Standards, the external evaluators conduct an annual meta-evaluation following the completion of the annual evaluation report. The meta-evaluation report has been instrumental to helping ARCC evaluators refine the evaluation for the upcoming year.

**Organization level of evaluation integration.** Evidence of the integration of evaluation into ARCC is apparent in a variety of ways. Evaluators are included in monthly staff work group meetings and quarterly meetings with ARCC staff and partners. The ARCC Director of Evaluation serves as a member of the ARCC Leadership Team. Evaluators glean input from staff as annual state and regional evaluation plans are developed, and they solicit and receive feedback from staff as instruments are developed. Staff are requested to review evaluation reports for accuracy, and evaluators share evaluation reports throughout the year with staff and leadership. Conclusions and recommendations shared by the evaluators with staff and leadership are discussed and considered. All of these activities, which help to build staff buy-in as well as knowledge and understanding of evaluation, increase the likelihood of evaluation use.

**Client resources.** Relative to evaluator allotments to the other two CCs, the FTEs devoted to ARCC evaluation are high. As a result, ARCC evaluators are able to conduct a comprehensive overall evaluation of ARCC and to design and implement evaluations for each of

the initiatives occurring in the five states and across the region. Nonetheless, some constraints remain. The budget is not endless and we have to be prudent with what is available. For example, although we would ideally be able to conduct direct observations of many activities or in-depth case studies, we need to consider cost-conscious ways to get our evaluation questions answered.

ARCC uses technology to support and facilitate its work, which benefits evaluators' efforts. ARCC hosts monthly Web-based work group meetings with program staff and evaluators, and quarterly Web-based meetings with program staff, evaluators, and partners. ARCC evaluators are active participants in these informational and networking meetings, routinely sharing evaluation information. ARCC also has a sophisticated Web portal featuring an activity tracking system that allows evaluators to generate a number of reports based on data entered by staff. In addition, the online software system purchased by Edvantia enables ARCC evaluators to conduct surveys via the Web.

**Evaluation resources.** As noted earlier, the number of evaluation staff assigned to ARCC enables the implementation of a comprehensive evaluation. The other advantage of having a robust evaluation team is that assignments can be made based on the strengths and experiences evaluators possess.

ARCC evaluators have accessible, supportive, and knowledgeable evaluation colleagues as well as access to electronic evaluation-related resources. In terms of available professional development opportunities, research and evaluation unit staff members conduct monthly Brown Bag professional development sessions on evaluation-related topics or methodologies, and the organization supports attendance at national professional conferences. We are also members of professional associations and research and evaluation Listservs that provide other growth opportunities. Additionally, Edvantia has membership to various online databases and resources.

Evaluators of the three CCs, as a subset of the research and evaluation unit, constitute another support network. The CC evaluators share lessons learned across the evaluations, a practice aided by the fact that three of the five ARCC evaluators also work on the FLICC and/or MACC evaluations.

### **Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center**

The following section provide a contextual description of the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center (MACC) at the George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence (GW-CEEE) and describe Edvantia's positioning of the MACC evaluation on five continua. MACC serves SEAs in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, and is headquartered in Arlington, Virginia.

#### *Context*

MACC is also one of 16 regional comprehensive centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED). MACC's primary mission is to build the capacity of SEAs to implement No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In October 2005, Edvantia was selected as a subcontractor for MACC to provide evaluation services.

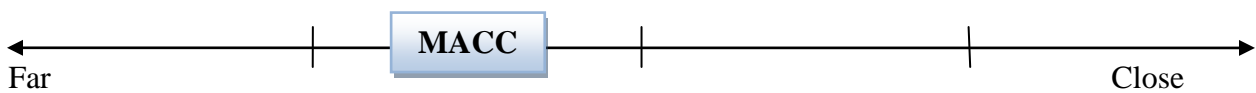
The MACC evaluation has two main purposes: (1) to collect, analyze, and present valid and reliable data on MACC's achievement of program goals, objectives, and outcomes (i.e., summative evaluation); and (2) to provide MACC staff with useful information to monitor progress of their projects, help them identify challenges, and make informed programmatic adjustments (i.e., formative evaluation). MACC views evaluation as an ongoing and integral component of program planning and implementation, intended to help determine the merit, or value, of MACC's work.

There are seven components to the MACC evaluation design: evaluation questions, goals, objectives, outcomes, performance measures, data collection, and data analysis. This design calls for collecting data from multiple sources to provide a more comprehensive description of MACC’s work and the outcomes of its efforts in meeting MACC goals. The evaluation relies on both internal and external examinations of project activities, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data; and where possible, data are triangulated.

*Positions on Continua*

The following section illustrates MACC’s positions on each of the five continua. MACC’s position on each continuum impacts the evaluation practices. For example, adequate fiscal and structural supports enable MACC evaluators to provide services in the sufficient to extensive range.

**Geographic proximity.** An evaluation coordinator from MACC is housed in its Arlington, Virginia office, while all other evaluators are employed by Edvantia in Charleston, West Virginia (one as a telecommuter). This positions MACC near the center of the continuum of geographic proximity and gives the evaluators a unique perspective that differs from both ARCC and FLICC. See Figure 2a.



**Figure 2a. MACC Geographic Proximity**

**Evaluator involvement.** Evaluator involvement is described as the role (i.e., internal, external, or both) that the evaluator plays in a given evaluation. While some practitioners have made explicit and mutually exclusive definitions of internal and external evaluators, the MACC evaluation team posits that, by maintaining clear distinctions in their respective

roles/assignments, the team can provide both internal and external evaluation services to MACC. Because the organization that operates the MACC contract has only one person with evaluation skills available for MACC work, applying internal and external evaluation tasks to the Edvantia evaluators enables the team to conduct activities that fulfill the program’s evaluation needs. This decision positions the MACC evaluation near the center on the continuum of evaluator involvement. See Figure 2b.



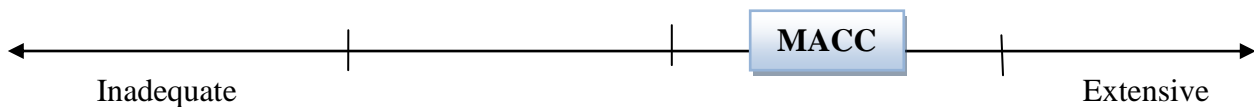
**Figure 2b. MACC Evaluator Involvement**

**Organizational level of evaluation integration.** The organizational level of evaluation integration is the degree to which an organization integrates internal and/or external evaluation from the onset of the project. Identifying the MACC evaluation’s position on this continuum is important because it directly affects evaluation practice, often with regard to how evaluation must be made compelling for clients which includes both MACC staff and SEA staff. Prior to October 2005, GW-CEEE operated a regional comprehensive center (Region III Comprehensive Center); however, few evaluators were assigned to the former center. With the award of the new iteration of CCs in October 2005, MACC hired an evaluation coordinator and Edvantia evaluators were involved with MACC from the outset of this contract. Because MACC understands the value of evaluation and employs an internal evaluation coordinator at its central office, we see MACC being near the center of the continuum of organizational level of evaluation integration. See Figure 2c.



**Figure 2c. MACC Organizational Level of Evaluation Integration**

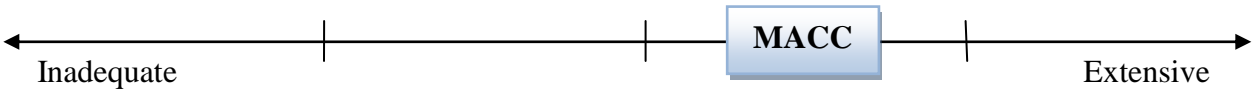
**Client resources.** MACC has devoted approximately 1.85 FTE to evaluation staff across MACC and Edvantia. Edvantia MACC evaluators receive approximately 6% of MACC’s total awarded budget to conduct internal and external evaluation activities. This poses minor fiscal constraints to the MACC evaluation; however, MACC leaders have policies in place that are very supportive of the MACC evaluation, and engage in very specific actions that support evaluation practice. For example, at most quarterly meetings, evaluation staff give presentations, and evaluation staff participate in monthly state team conference calls. MACC leaders are also cognizant of the important role evaluation plays. All of these factors combine to put MACC between the center and far right on the continuum of client resources. See Figure 2d.



**Figure 2d. MACC Client Resources**

**Evaluator resources.** MACC evaluators have adequate access to technology through the use of online Web-based meeting resources, Web-based survey tools, and other structural resources to provide a responsive, multimethod evaluation for MACC. The scope of MACC’s evaluation is broad and MACC evaluators bring approximately 40 years of combined experience to the table. Edvantia evaluators also have access to knowledge and skills from two other CCs (ARCC and FLICC) when monthly Edvantia CC evaluation staff meetings are held and CC evaluation practice is discussed. Edvantia evaluators have adequate to extensive resources to

devote to evaluation. Therefore, the MACC evaluation occupies a position between the center and far right on the continuum of evaluator resources. See Figure 2e.



**Figure 2e. MACC Evaluator Resources**

### *Evaluation Practice*

By virtue of its positions on these five continua, the MACC evaluation requires specific evaluation practices. The following section describes the practices that have been adopted by MACC evaluators in an effort to provide a tailored and effective evaluation within unique contextual factors.

**Geographic proximity.** Edvantia evaluators must maintain different types of communication, including quarterly face-to-face meetings and three to four additional face-to-face meetings throughout the program year, monthly evaluation team conference calls, monthly state team conference calls or monthly state team meetings (depending on physical location of internal evaluators), and individual phone and e-mail communications as needed. The purposes for using these multiple methods of communication include keeping evaluators up-to-date on project activities/changes; keeping MACC staff up-to-date on evaluation strategies/activities; ensuring buy-in to the evaluation; and ensuring that evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations are useful and implemented.

**Evaluator involvement.** Because they are providing both internal and external evaluation services, Edvantia MACC evaluators must ensure that there is a clear distinction between their internal and external roles. Those roles were established early on and continue to

be revisited during each program year. The structure provides each state with an assigned internal evaluator, and MACC's regional work is evaluated by a single external evaluator.

As previously noted, some evaluation practitioners maintain that internal and external evaluators must always perform mutually exclusive and distinct roles when examining a given evaluand (i.e., they perform formative and summative roles, respectively). Instead of maintaining this traditional distinction, the MACC evaluation team saw an opportunity to develop a more pragmatic approach. The team utilizes its internal evaluation staff to gather state-level data that contribute to a broad overview of the CC's progress toward meeting primarily summative goals and outcomes. To complement these activities, external evaluation staff focus sharply on specific projects to gather additional evidence of the Center's efficacy in meeting summative and formative goals. The MACC team finds that performing both roles provides a unique perspective and an ability to develop deeper insights into the work that MACC does.

**Organizational level of evaluation integration.** With only one evaluation staff person on site at MACC, Edvantia evaluators focus on modeling and building evaluation capacity among other MACC staff as they roll out evaluation services. This is accomplished most often via in-person meetings with MACC leaders when evaluation plans are discussed and developed. In addition, internal evaluators attend monthly meetings with state teams at MACC (either via conference call or in person) to help keep evaluation at the forefront of project activities.

**Client resources.** The level of fiscal and human resources allocated to the MACC evaluation greatly impacts evaluation practice—most specifically, the selection of appropriate data collection strategies. While evaluators recognize the need for rigorous methods and data source triangulation, we also attempt to balance these needs with our client's resources. Utilizing

electronically mediated data collection strategies (e.g., Web-based surveys, telephone interviews) is one method we employ to navigate this issue.

**Evaluator resources.** MACC evaluators occupy the middle of the evaluator resources continuum. While the MACC evaluation staff has only 1.85 FTE, that time is divided among four staff members who bring a variety of ideas, experiences, and views about evaluation. This provides for a robust culture of collective inquiry in which evaluators can discuss the most appropriate courses of action in the face of a variety of contextual factors. Evaluators have further expanded their professional network to include evaluation staff from other CCs. MACC evaluation staff take part in monthly meetings with other CC evaluators to share ideas and learn best practices.

In sum, MACC's positions on the continua certainly impact how evaluation is practiced. We have used these continua as a lens through which to better understand our client's organizational context, and we have been able to create and sustain a more tailored, effective, and relevant evaluation for our client. Additional outcomes include a stronger relationship with the client and increased evaluation integration on the part of MACC staff.

### **Florida and the Islands Comprehensive Center**

The following section describes Edvantia's pragmatic and utilization-focused evaluation of the Florida and the Islands Comprehensive Center (FLICC). Specifically, we examine contextual variables that affect evaluation practice.

#### *Context*

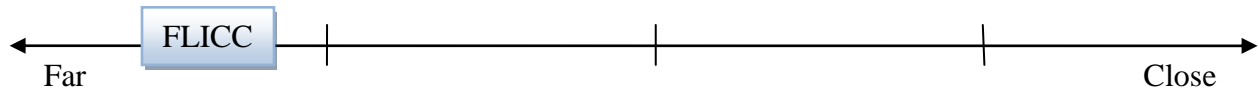
FLICC is headquartered in Tampa, Florida, and its primary mission is to help low-performing districts and schools close achievement gaps and meet the goals of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. FLICC serves the states/territories of Florida, Puerto Rico, and the

U.S. Virgin Islands. Based on an examination of numerous contextual factors, FLICC evaluators designed a pragmatic, utilization-focused evaluation approach (Patton, 2002). The resulting evaluation was designed to address three main purposes. First, evaluators designed the evaluation to include data collection procedures that enable FLICC to contribute to the national evaluation of the comprehensive center program and to federal performance measures. Second, FLICC evaluators measure the extent to which FLICC objectives are achieved and the quality, utility, and relevance of services to clients. Third, FLICC evaluators assess individual technical assistance projects to provide formative feedback for program improvement.

### *Positions on Continua*

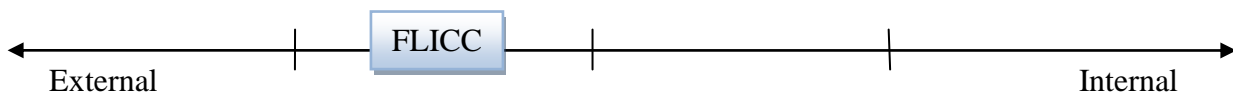
The following section describes FLICC's positions on the five continua described above. FLICC's positions on these five continua define, in part, the parameters within which evaluators must conduct their evaluation. Where an evaluand falls on each continuum may highlight both facilitators and barriers to effective evaluation. For example, the lack of technological expertise may inhibit use of particular communication strategies, such as Web-based meetings or document sharing, between the evaluator and the evaluand. It follows that evaluators must use situation-specific best practices determined through a careful consideration of the context to offer a relevant and useful evaluation.

**Geographic proximity.** All FLICC evaluators are located in Charleston, West Virginia, approximately 850 miles from the central FLICC office in Tampa, Florida. Furthermore, FLICC's activities in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are even more distant from evaluation staff. This presents unique challenges to evaluators as they work to maintain a responsive and timely evaluation. As you can see in Figure 3a, this situation puts the FLICC evaluation close to the left side (*far*) on the continuum.



**Figure 3a. FLICC Geographic Proximity**

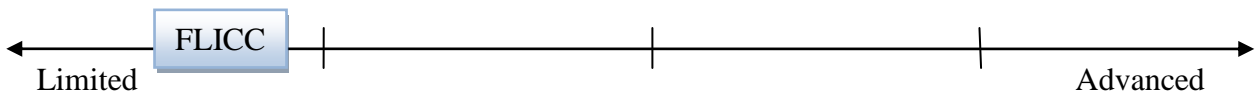
**Evaluator involvement.** Evaluator involvement describes the role the evaluator plays in the evaluation. Edvantia evaluators function contractually as external evaluators, but also perform tasks traditionally completed by internal evaluators (e.g., reflection of institutional practices, formative evaluation). This places evaluators in an ethically challenging position where they must be both subjective and objective, respectively, in their formative and summative roles. Figure 3b shows the FLICC evaluation as being to the left side (*external*) of the midpoint on the continuum.



**Figure 3b. FLICC Evaluator Involvement**

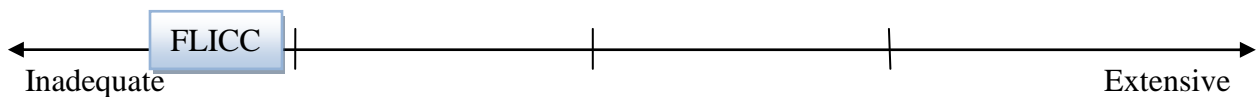
**Organizational level of evaluation integration.** The organizational level of evaluation integration is the degree to which an organization integrates internal, external, or both kinds of evaluation from the onset of the project. Edvantia evaluators note that this can directly affect evaluation practice, especially with regard to whether clients must be convinced that evaluation is worthwhile. Prior to October 2005, ETS, the FLICC contractor, operated an earlier regional comprehensive center. With the award of the new iteration of CCs in October 2005, FLICC hired an evaluator, then offered the evaluation subcontract to Edvantia in December 2006. FLICC integrated evaluation to a limited extent at the onset of the contract. Since Edvantia was hired, FLICC evaluators have worked toward building evaluation capacity among FLICC staff through a variety of practices and activities. Figure 3c shows the FLICC evaluation to have a limited

level of evaluation integration, which is designated by its position near the left end of the continuum.



**Figure 3c. FLICC Organizational Level of Evaluation Integration**

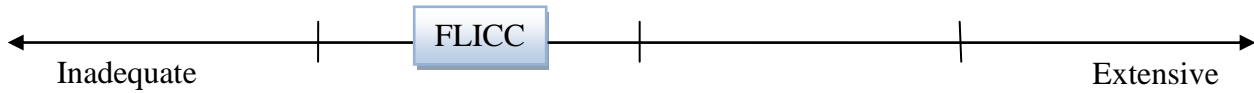
**Client resources.** FLICC devotes approximately .4 FTE to external evaluation. FLICC evaluators receive roughly 3% of the average comprehensive center budget to conduct the annual evaluation. This presents serious resource constraints on the evaluation. FLICC evaluators do, however, have access to 6 to 10 project leads (i.e., managers), which helps evaluation staff glean information about the comprehensive center through the managers' particular initiatives. Nonetheless, evaluators struggle to conduct a comprehensive evaluation with limited budget resources. As Figure 3d shows, FLICC is close to the left side (*inadequate*) on the Client Resources continuum.



**Figure 3d. FLICC Client Resources**

**Evaluator resources.** FLICC evaluators possess the technological and structural resources to provide a responsive and tailored evaluation of FLICC. Evaluators also have access to a support network of experienced CC evaluators to use as resources. However, there are less than ideal personnel resources to conduct such a large-scale evaluation. That is, FLICC evaluators are allotted .4 FTE compared to 1.85 for MACC and 2.65 for ARCC. This places

FLICC evaluators slightly lower on the continuum of evaluator resources than ARCC and MACC evaluators, as shown in Figure 3e.



**Figure 3e. FLICC Evaluator Resources**

### *Evaluation Practice*

Edvantia evaluators serve as FLICC’s external evaluators, but fulfill some roles traditionally held by internal evaluators. As such, there are various implications for practice that are revisited throughout the program year.

**Geographic proximity.** Geographic proximity has an immediate effect on evaluation practice. FLICC evaluators must maintain different types of communication, including quarterly face-to-face meetings, monthly phone calls with the comprehensive center director, monthly conference calls with specific state/territory project leads/managers, and individual phone and e-mail communications as needed. Given the distance between evaluator and evaluand, FLICC evaluators are often dependent on electronic communications to keep abreast of project progress and changes. This impersonal form of electronic communication can pose challenges to maintaining high-quality relationships. Evaluators maintain a monthly telephone call with the CC director and attempt to maximize the substance of these conversations, discussing upcoming evaluation activities, budget status, and revisions to evaluation plans. Additionally, evaluators engage in regular electronic communication with project leads and other CC staff to ensure that the evaluation meets client needs. In addition, evaluators carefully manage resources to ensure that the budget can support at least some face-to-face interaction.

**Evaluator involvement.** Whether a client contracts with evaluators to operate internally or externally poses implications for evaluation practice. Edvantia’s FLICC evaluators are contracted as external evaluators, however, FLICC does not have any staff dedicated to the internal evaluation. Therefore, we have adopted some internal evaluation roles, such as providing formative feedback to refine programs. This allows evaluators to be more involved with FLICC program staff, thus building trust, but poses challenges as we attempt to be objective in our evaluation.

As part of the internal role, evaluators build FLICC evaluation capacity by helping staff members develop logical, internally consistent work plans that include elements conducive to summative evaluation (i.e., outcomes, outputs, inputs, processes, activities, project objectives). These, in turn, inform the summative evaluation by establishing specific and measurable outcomes. As external evaluators, we maintain distance and provide objective feedback on the comprehensive center’s progress toward meeting its broader organizational goals and objectives. We do so by independently collecting data from the comprehensive center’s clients and communicating those findings to the center’s funders (via ED 524B and Annual Evaluation Reports). In our role as external evaluators who also perform some internal evaluation tasks, our perspective must be impartial in our evaluation, but also sensitive to project context.

**Organizational level of evaluation integration.** The degree to which a client integrates evaluation from the onset of the project affects evaluation practice significantly. When the level of integration is low, the evaluator must ensure that the client understands the value of evaluation. Because FLICC is close to the left side (*limited*) on the integration continuum, evaluators focus on two primary tasks pertaining to evaluation integration: (1) garnering buy-in from program staff and (2) building evaluation capacity. FLICC evaluators focus on building

evaluation capacity because it is likely to generate more complete management plans with specific and measurable outcomes and to help ensure that project staff cooperate with and support evaluation activities. Evaluators have educated comprehensive center staff about the components of evaluation and how effective evaluation can benefit their programs. We have actively engaged clients in our work to promote buy-in and build client evaluation capacity. Our ultimate goal is to have clients integrate evaluation into their day-to-day work because they value it, not because it is required of them.

To convey the importance of evaluation and identify client needs, FLICC evaluators initially worked with project leads/managers to refine individual management plans. Evaluators began by helping project leads understand the gaps in their program management plans. Evaluators emphasized specificity and worked with FLICC staff to develop programmatic logic models. As a result, program staff began to identify pathways through which they could conduct formative assessment of their programs. Following the initial work with project leads/managers, FLICC evaluators conducted an on-site evaluation-capacity-building workshop to address the importance of continued program evaluation. By engaging in collaborative hands-on work to improve the quality of management plans, project staff were better able to integrate evaluation into their project designs.

**Client resources.** FLICC occupies the lower end of the evaluation resource continuum. This is not to say that the comprehensive center lacks resources for evaluation or that its staff do not value evaluation. Rather, limited funding means program leaders cannot allocate a significant portion to evaluation. Comparatively, FLICC evaluators operate with the smallest budget of the three comprehensive center evaluations conducted by Edvantia. This limits the amount of time any one evaluator can spend on the project. The constrained FTE allocation and budget inhibit

the amount of on-site data collection and face-to-face interaction possible between the evaluator and client. To counterbalance the limited resources for travel and staff time, FLICC evaluators try to maximize electronic communications to maintain a constant presence and stay informed about program and contextual changes. Because of the resource constraints, we also collect data primarily through electronic means.

**Evaluator resources.** FLICC evaluators fall on the upper end of the evaluator resources continuum. That is, FLICC evaluators possess technological and structural resources within their organization that support the effective evaluation of FLICC. For example, evaluators have access to teleconferencing and video conferencing technology. Further, the evaluation contract includes an allocation for travel to ensure evaluators are present for at least one face-to-face meeting per project year. Through the evaluator's parent organization, Edvantia, staff have access to and interact with a support network of experienced CC evaluators. FLICC evaluators, along with MACC and ARCC evaluators, participate in monthly comprehensive center evaluation team meetings to discuss challenges, innovative approaches, and the status of our evaluations. These meetings provide FLICC evaluators access to other experts in the field who engage in similar work, thus bolstering their position on the continuum of evaluator resources. Although only .4 FTE is allotted for the evaluation of FLICC, the evaluation staff includes two evaluators to ensure that a more diverse set of ideas, approaches, skill sets, and perspectives are available to FLICC program staff.

### **Overall Synthesis**

Based on our experiences with the CC evaluations and their positions along the five context continua, we offer several observations. Although some are specific to the three CC evaluations, we believe they have potential for application in other settings. We also reflect on

professional growth for Edvantia evaluators and on the value of these continua for other evaluators.

### **Observations About the CC Evaluations**

First, the ARCC evaluation seems to be the most consistently highly rated of the three comprehensive centers and exhibits the least variation among continua ratings. All five ratings for ARCC are positioned toward the right-hand side. The MACC evaluation is placed more centrally on the five continua, with ratings fluctuating from just below to just above the midpoint. The FLICC evaluation ratings are closer to the left sides of the continua.

Second, we see that evaluation practice and use differ depending on a comprehensive center's position on each continuum. In effect, the context impacts, even drives, evaluation practice. For example, geographic proximity, along with client and evaluator resources, plays a major role in the type and frequency of communications between evaluation and project staff. While ARCC and MACC evaluators have opportunities for formal and informal face-to-face conversations and/or meetings with project staff, FLICC evaluators rely more heavily on electronic communications such as phone or e-mail, with only minimal in-person interactions each year.

Evaluation capacity is a third area that is strongly influenced by the five continua. By necessity, FLICC evaluators devote more time and energy to building project staff understanding and commitment to evaluation than do MACC or ARCC evaluators. Similarly, MACC has emphasized building capacity to a larger degree than ARCC, given the limited availability of in-house evaluation staff at MACC.

Fourth, we see that the data collection strategies used in these evaluations do not vary as much as other practices, because there are programmatic factors common to all (i.e., reducing

respondent burden, having the same charge as comprehensive centers). All three evaluation plans strive for in-person data collection from key stakeholders to the extent possible and supplement those in-person activities with paper and on-line surveying, telephone interviewing, and extant data sources to achieve the most robust evaluation possible.

Fifth, and similarly, all three CC evaluation plans focus on both formative and summative data. Formative data help project staff make refinements and adjustments when necessary, and summative data help staff document progress on goals/objectives and whether outcomes were achieved. All three CCs have federal performance measures for which they are accountable. Further, all three CCs include both project-level and broader organization-level evaluation components. The organization-level evaluation focuses on the overall performance of the CC and contributes to the national CC evaluation being undertaken by a third party. The project-level evaluation focuses on individual projects, whether organized by states and/or topics. The comprehensive center evaluations differ more at the project level because not every CC conducts a comprehensive evaluation of every project, due to project magnitude and/or budget constraints.

Finally, it appears that the evaluation teams, using pragmatic approaches, met the practical application criteria for evaluation as summarized in Datta's (1997) four key questions. Evaluators have been able to answer specific evaluation questions identified for each of the three comprehensive centers, have been able to successfully carry out the evaluation designs within the project constraints, have optimized the breadth vs. depth within each specific comprehensive center context, and have generated usable results for each comprehensive center.

### **Professional Growth for Edvantia Evaluators**

These observations learned are valuable for CC evaluators independently and collectively as they carry out their work. Our own evaluation capacity has been strengthened through

collaborative sharing, reflection, and planning. (Of the six Edvantia evaluators assigned to CC evaluations, four are involved in evaluating two of the three comprehensive centers.) Through monthly evaluation team meetings of evaluators from all three CCs, we have been able to build collegiality and collaboration among evaluators, apply learnings to our work, and increase our understanding of the similarities and differences across CCs. In addition, at a corporate level, such collaboration has fostered a more seamless flow of administrative processes such as quality assurance, reporting timelines, and Institutional Review Board reviews.

### **Value of the Context Continua to Other Evaluators**

We think that the lessons we have learned may be useful in other project contexts. For example, lessons gleaned from three individual comprehensive center evaluations could lead to a deeper understanding of how to structure an evaluation plan for a national-level initiative with multiple awardees or sites. Similarly, we believe that examining context through the five continua can inform evaluation practice with other evaluands. In fact, given how this knowledge would be applicable to evaluators in general, we recommend that consideration of context should be an ongoing component of any evaluation. Attending to contextual circumstances and seeking input from a community of collegial peers are practices that facilitate a tailored, responsive, and relevant evaluation.

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