

# Theory-Driven Evaluation of the Work and Health Initiative: A Focus on Winning New Jobs

STEWART I. DONALDSON AND LAURA E. GOOLER

## WORK AND HEALTH INITIATIVE

The mission of the Work and Health Initiative funded by The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF) was to improve the health of Californians by funding employment-related interventions. Fundamental to this Initiative was the perspective that important relationships between work and health are shaped by an evolving California economy. The goals of the Initiative were to (1) understand the rapidly changing nature of work and its effects on the health of Californians; (2) increase access to high quality employment for all Californians; (3) improve conditions of work for employed Californians; and (4) expand the availability of worksite health programs and benefits.

To accomplish these goals, TCWF funded four programs comprised of over 40 partner organizations working together to improve the well-being of Californians through approaches related to employment (see [Donaldson & Weiss, 1998](#); [Donaldson, Gooler, & Weiss, 1988](#)). The Future of Work and Health (FWH) and the Health Insurance Policy Programs (HIPP) were expansive and comprehensive research programs designed to generate and disseminate knowledge of how the nature of work is being transformed and how that change will affect the health and well-being of Californians. In the HIPP, current statewide trends related to health and health insurance within California were examined through extensive survey research on an annual basis. In the FWH program, researchers throughout California examined the changing nature of work and health and identified some implications for improving working conditions and lowering employment risks.

The Initiative also included two fully operational demonstration programs in 17 sites throughout the state to assist both youth and adults in building job skills and finding employment. The WNJ program aimed to help workers regain employment lost due to downsizing, reengineering, and other factors driving rather dramatic changes in the California workplace, and thereby put an end to the adverse health consequences that most workers experience as a

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**Stewart I. Donaldson** • School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences, Claremont Graduate University, 123 E. Eighth Street, Claremont, CA 91711-3955, USA; Tel: (1) 909-621-8084; E-mail: [Stewart.Donaldson@cgu.edu](mailto:Stewart.Donaldson@cgu.edu).

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result of unemployment. Finally, the Computers in Our Future (CIOF) program aimed to enable youth and young adults from low-income communities to learn computer skills to improve their education and employment opportunities—thereby improving their own future health as well as the health and well-being of their families and communities.

### EVALUATION APPROACH

Systematic program evaluation was used to guide the strategic management of each program in the Initiative, as well as to inform the entire Initiative. Our evaluation team, Claremont Graduate University (CGU), was awarded the grant to evaluate the Initiative. Our role was to serve as an integrating, synthesizing force in evaluating goals, objectives, strategies, outcomes, and impact of the Initiative. We identified cross-cutting goals and synergies, worked to enhance these goals, and evaluated in an effort to maximize the overall impact of the Initiative. In addition, CGU developed evaluation systems that provided responsive evaluation data for each program. Those data were used to continually improve program effectiveness as well as to evaluate impact.

To ensure that the perspectives and problem-solving needs of those with a vested interest in the Initiative programs (e.g., TCWF, grantees, program administrators, staff, and program recipients), collectively known as stakeholders, were understood and addressed, the evaluation team adopted a participatory theory-driven evaluation approach (Donaldson, 2001, 2002). Key objectives of this approach were to empower stakeholders to be successful, facilitate continuous program learning, assist with ongoing problem solving efforts, and to facilitate improvement at as many levels as possible throughout the life of the Initiative (see Donaldson, 2002). Decisions about evaluation design, goal setting, data collection, program monitoring, data analysis, report development and dissemination were highly collaborative.

The participatory theory-driven approach rested on developing program theories for each program and using evaluation data to guide program development and implementation. Program theory was defined as a sensible and plausible model of how a program is presumed to reach its desired outcomes (see Donaldson, 2001). Each program theory was developed collaboratively and was based on the stakeholders' views and experiences, prior evaluation and research findings, and more general theoretical and empirical work related to the phenomena under investigation. Such frameworks provided a guiding model around which evaluation designs were developed to specifically answer key evaluation questions as rigorously as possible given the practical constraints of the evaluation context.

### Data Collection

Data collection efforts were based on the premise that no single data source is likely to be bias-free or a completely accurate representation of reality. In general, we followed the tenets of critical multiplism (Cook, 1985; Donaldson, 1995; Shadish, 1993). Evaluation plans were designed to specifically encourage each grantee to utilize multiple data collection strategies with different strengths and weaknesses. A special effort was made to understand cultural and language concerns so that the methodologies employed yielded accurate data. In addition to evaluating program outcomes, impact, and potential side effects, evaluative efforts were both formative (i.e., aimed at developing and improving programs from an early stage) and process-oriented (i.e., geared toward understanding how a program achieves what it does over time).

## **Formative Evaluation Tools**

To support continuous program improvement throughout the life of the Initiative, the CGU evaluation team:

- provided mid-year evaluation reports;
- facilitated mid-year conference calls to discuss program evaluation findings and recommendations with grantees and TCWF program officers;
- provided year end evaluation reports;
- facilitated year end conference calls to discuss program evaluation findings and recommendations with grantees and TCWF program officers; and
- provided grantees an opportunity to evaluate the TCWF program officers and CGU evaluators on an annual basis.

In addition, these efforts were supplemented with several interim evaluation reports and frequent communications with grantees and the TCWF program officers to provide timely feedback based on evaluation data collected throughout the year.

## **Summative Evaluation**

The CGU evaluation team collected and analyzed extensive quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to the impact of the Work Health Initiative (WHI). Approximately, 200 evaluation reports were written and provided to grantees and/or TCWF throughout the life of the Initiative. In an effort to determine the most useful format and content for the final summative evaluation report, CGU initiated several discussions with the Foundation. As a result of those discussions, CGU wrote the final report to conform to the following guidelines:

- the main purpose of the report was to provide a summary of evaluation findings and conclusions in a relatively brief manner;
- qualitative as well as quantitative findings were presented;
- the report reflects CGU's candid evaluation of the WHI from an external evaluation perspective, and does not necessarily reflect the views of the grantees or TCWF staff involved with the project; and
- the summative evaluation report was a confidential internal document presented to the Board of Directors of the Foundation.

At the request of the Foundation, CGU offered to provide copies of supporting documents, previous evaluation reports, data tables, or conducted additional data analyses to justify or expand upon findings and conclusions presented in the summative report. CGU also provided summative evaluation reports for each program to the appropriate grantees, and continues to produce and disseminate public documents describing key findings and lessons learned from the Work Health Initiative (e.g., [Donaldson & Gooler, 2002a, 2002b](#)).

## **WINNING NEW JOBS**

The evaluation designs and findings for each of the four programs and for the entire WHI are too complex and extensive to adequately describe in this summary. Therefore, we decided

to briefly summarize the design for one of the WHI programs, WNJ, as a way to illustrate theory-driven evaluation in practice.

### **Program Description**

The original mission of WNJ was to provide job search training to 10,000 unemployed and underemployed Californians over a 4-year funding period. This project was based on a theory-based intervention, JOBS, which was developed and initially tested via randomized trial in Michigan by the Michigan Prevention Research Center (MPRC; Price, vanRyan, & Vinokur, 1992; Vinokur, vanRyan, Gramlich, & Price, 1991; Vinokur, Price, Caplan, vanRyan, & Curran, 1995). To accomplish these goals, under the sponsorship of TCWF, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) subcontracted with MPRC and, together with TCWF, used systematic organizational readiness assessments to select three unique organizations in three diverse California communities to implement WNJ (cf. Donaldson, Gooler, & Weiss, 1988).

The core program theory used to guide the evaluation of WNJ is shown in Figure 1. Participants attended a 1-week, half-day workshop designed to improve job search self-confidence, job search skills, and problem solving strategies including inoculation against setbacks (i.e., expectations of setbacks). These skills and psychological factors were presumed to facilitate reemployment and improve mental health. Furthermore, the WNJ program was hypothesized to have impacts at multiple levels: Participant (e.g., increased job search self-efficacy and re-employment), organization (e.g., staff skill development, reputation enhancement), community (e.g., increased access to job search services), and the policy environment (e.g., financial support for the continuation of the program).

### **WNJ Evaluation Questions**

Using the core program theory shown in Figure 1, a rather extensive process consisting of several meetings, phone and electronic discussions, and document submission and revisions with program stakeholders was used to develop and prioritize evaluation questions. This same type of collaborative process was used to decide how to allocate resources for data collection. In summary, given resource and other practical constraints, compromises were required to decide which evaluation questions to answer and how to answer them. It is important to note that the final evaluation design did not focus on some of the hypothesized relationships (e.g., links to mental health outcomes).

The core evaluation questions included:

1. *Program Implementation*: Can the Michigan JOBS program be implemented in different types of service organizations in California? What does implementation look like? What are the key challenges and success factors to implementation?
2. *Program Service*: Whom are the sites serving (e.g., population characteristics of service recipients)? How many people are served at each site?
3. *Short-term Outcomes*: Does WNJ increase people's confidence in their ability to use their newly acquired/enhanced job seeking skills?
4. *Reemployment Outcomes*: Do people find employment? And, what does their employment situation look like?

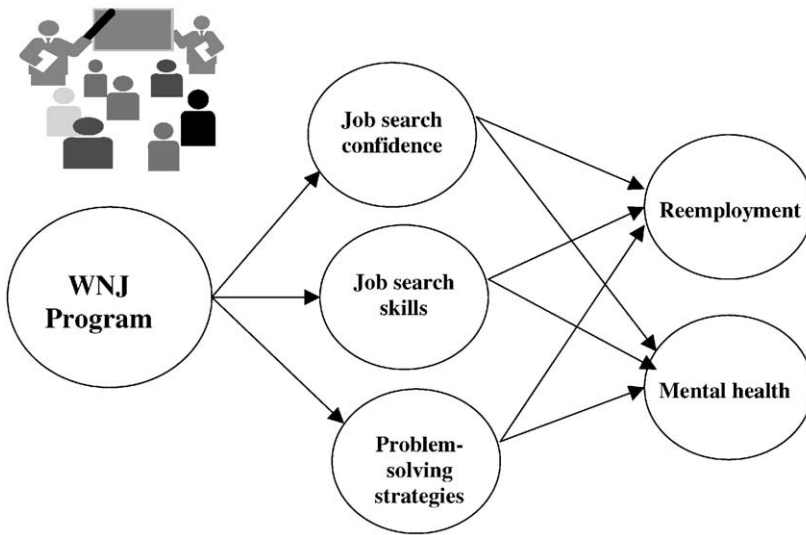


Figure 1. Winning New Jobs Program Theory.

5. *Program Sustainability and Replication:* Does WNJ generate resources for program sustainability beyond the life of the grant? Do other California organizations learn about and adopt the WNJ model?

### Data Collected to Answer WNJ Evaluation Questions

To address these questions, extensive standardized eligibility, demographic, pre-test, post-test, and employment follow-up data were collected at each site. Overall, data were collected for over 5,100 individuals, including eligibility, demographic and pre-test data for 4,960 individuals, post-test data for 3,684 individuals, and employment follow-up forms for 3,476 individuals who completed the workshop. These response rates were considered adequate for the nature of the program and types of analyses conducted. In addition to these data, various types of qualitative implementation and outcome data were collected. Further, databases tracking participants in other parts of the country and world were available for comparison purposes. This collection of databases was used for both formative and summative evaluation of the WNJ program.

### CONCLUSION

The specific findings, evaluative conclusions, considerations for future programming, and lessons learned from the WNJ program and the entire Work and Health Initiative (WHI) are presented in detail elsewhere (Donaldson & Gooler, 2001, 2002a, 2002b). This brief summary of the evaluation of WNJ and the WHI was intended to illustrate how participatory theory-driven evaluation can be used to improve and evaluate the impact of programs delivered in communities, a wide variety organizations, and typical “real world” evaluation settings. Furthermore, some of the key challenges and insights related to using theory-driven evaluation

in this project, as well as in modern evaluation practice more generally, are discussed in the following interview.

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