



# ACET, Inc.

## Action Consulting and Evaluation Team

Fall 2007 Newsletter

Issue 19

*Dear friends,*

Over the last five years, ACET has produced quarterly newsletters mailed to approximately 200 members of the community. Newsletters included updates about ACET, its clients, and an evaluation or research topic. Earlier this summer, a brief survey was mailed to all our readers and an online version was posted on our website. We were fortunate to receive 48 responses to our survey. Key findings from the survey include:



- ◆ The majority (90%) of the respondents read the newsletter and found the newsletter topics appropriate (54%) or somewhat appropriate (40%) for their field of study or work.
- ◆ Suggestions for future topics were as varied as our readers and included: more information about ACET projects; obstacles implementing an evaluation; specific topics in education (i.e., new charter school info, early childhood issues and parent involvement, ways to address cultural biases in assessments, evaluations that are untraditional and progressive); topics on methodology; and capacity building - role of evaluators in promoting evaluation use.
- ◆ Other comments: “articles were critically well written,” “this is a great public service and I love the photos,” and “keep doing what you’re doing.”

Overall, we were pleased with the feedback and encouragement offered. For a complete report of our Newsletter Survey please visit our website at <http://www.acetinc.com/Newsletters.htm>. Please stay tuned for future issues!

### *Conferences!*

This summer ACET staff were hard at work attending conferences and continuing their education:

Stella SiWan Zimmerman, the President of ACET, was one of 30 attendees selected from a pool of 250+ applicants to attend a 5-day workshop on building stronger quasi-experimental designs. The conference, funded by the Spencer Foundation, was led by two pioneers in quasi-experimental designs: William Shadish and Thomas Cook. Most of the attendees were faculty members or research staff from universities, school districts, or research institutions. Topics included analysis of regression discontinuity designs, add-on options using interrupted time series, propensity score adjustment methods, and pattern matching.



Kirsten Rewey, the Research and Evaluation Associate at ACET, attended a workshop on effective construction and use of graphics and tables. The workshop was held in Minneapolis and taught by Edward Tufte, a Professor Emeritus at Yale University. Dr. Tufte emphasized the importance of maximizing the usability and interactivity of tables and graphics. Kirsten was thrilled to have attended this workshop and now has a collection of Dr. Tufte’s four seminal books.

Additional staff development opportunities included attendance at the American Evaluation Association – Center for Disease Control joint conference in Atlanta, GA. Our staff attended several sessions including “evaluating culturally tailored health communications,” “gender issues in global evaluation,” and “theory-driven evaluation.”

## Focus Groups: Four Common Questions

Nicole P. Cueno – ACET Summer Intern

*One of my responsibilities as an intern was to review and summarize the results of the newsletter survey. One suggestion was to include more qualitative articles, such as the one that follows.*

During evaluation planning, ACET staff often encounter a number of questions from clients in using focus groups as a method to gather information about a program. The focus of this article is to address four commonly asked questions:

### Should we incorporate focus groups as a method to gather feedback?

Focus groups are often an important evaluation method. Data from a focus group discussion are much more information-rich than quantitative (numbers) data because they contain opinions and contextual information that rarely emerge through other data collection methods.



### How many focus groups should we conduct?

One focus group can cost thousands of dollars depending on the amount of planning, the location, recruiting, types of analysis, and other factors. The cost makes the decision of *how many* focus groups to conduct quite a difficult choice. Experts in qualitative research methods often recommend 3 to 4 groups per targeted sub-group (i.e., if the target is on a diversity initiative, 3 to 4 groups should be conducted within each ethnic/racial group). The rationale for this approach is to obtain “information saturation,” or the point at which the focus group moderator could anticipate what focus group participants will say. Experts believe that once information saturation is reached, the data is both accurate and consistent.

### Do we need to have everyone who participated in the program be represented in the groups?

Not every program participant needs to be in a focus group. If, however, there are targeted sub-groups who may be discussing substantially different sets of experiences, these groups should be represented in a subset of focus groups. When differences in experience surrounding the topic of discussion are present in a focus group, the opinion-sharing that makes focus groups so useful may be inhibited. Therefore, recruitment and focus group assignment should include attention to the existence of targeted sub-groups. If these exist, they should be represented in planned subsets.

### Our budget will only accommodate one focus group; is that okay?

Many clients ACET has worked with have limited budget and staff time such that conducting 3 to 4 focus groups per targeted sub-group would significantly strain the client’s available resources. If the client is limited to only one focus group, the composition of participants is critical because widely discrepant experiences may lead to inconsistent results. An evaluator must therefore work diligently to insure focus group composition does not skew the results. Even if the experiences of participants are fairly similar, the evaluator must cautiously examine the potential for bias. If skewed results cannot be avoided, other data collection options like surveys with open-ended questions should be considered. Although open-ended survey questions are less rich than focus group questions, one can still learn a great deal from the responses.

Resources:

Calder, B. J. (1977). Focus groups and the nature of qualitative marketing research. *Journal of Marketing Research*, (14) 3, 353-364.  
Krueger, R.A., Casey, M.A. (2000). *Focus groups* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.): *A practical guide for applied research*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks.  
Davies, M. A. (2002). Designing choice experiments using focus groups: results from an Aberdeen case study. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, (3)3. Retrieved July 27, 2007 from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-02/3-02davieslaing-e.htm>.

- ◆ Do the words “research” and “evaluation” cause fear and trembling?
- ◆ Has your “database” got you down?
- ◆ Is the sword of ‘accountability’ dangling overhead?
- ◆ Who you gonna call?



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