

# OPERATIONAL ISSUES IN CHILD WELFARE TRAINING GRANTS MANAGEMENT

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Each fiscal year, Congress appropriates funds for special child welfare training projects, including pre-service traineeships for students who agree to work in public child welfare agencies. These funds, authorized under title IV-B, section 426(a)(1)(C) of the Social Security Act (the Act), are awarded to public and other non-profit institutions of higher learning.

Section 426 discretionary grant program is designed to accomplish two important objectives. First, the traineeship grants are used to recruit undergraduate and graduate social work students for employment in public child welfare agencies—an objective similar to that of the title IV-E training funds, authorized under section 474(a)(3) of the Act. Second, it focuses on the development of training curricula in areas specified in the federal funding announcements. Each funding cycle identifies different priority areas based on training needs considered essential to strengthen knowledge and practice skills for effective implementation of title IV-E programs. In past announcements, priorities focused on interdisciplinary training, use of child welfare data in making management and supervisory decisions, kinship care, supervisory training, cultural competence to work with Tribal families, and child-focused intervention.

Since the program's inception, the majority of these grants have been awarded to schools of social work. The Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, administers this program. These grant awards mandate partnership with state and local child welfare agencies in all phases of the projects. Zlotnik (2001) has provided an excellent review of partnership issues and federal funding sources for child welfare staff training.

As a former Federal Project Officer (FPO) of these grants, I have gained a few insights related to the operational issues that affect grantees' management of section 426 training grants. However, the degree to which these operational issues affect the implementation process may vary, depending on a grantee's prior experience with such programs. This article will describe the grant management issues (which I have seen to be common to all grantees) and offer some solutions. These issues revolve around: (1) the project start date, (2) involvement of deans and directors in pre- and post-grant award process, (3) coordination with state/local child welfare agencies, (4) project funds management, and (5) evaluation of training effectiveness.

## PROJECT START DATE

Successful applicants are informed of ACF's decision by September 30, specifying September 29 as the date for accessing federal funds. These dates are inherently prone to project start-up delays for several reasons. By April or May, the social work faculty or grant project director has already been assigned a teaching load and now must assume additional responsibilities. This requires juggling teaching assignments; grant management, and other ongoing tasks. For example, further delays have occurred when the university grant office failed to immediately inform the project director of the grant award. In one instance, the social work faculty learned of the grant award from an external source—three months after the award letter. It is therefore important for the social work faculty to contact the Children's Bureau soon after the grant award date to determine the status of the application.

In traineeship grants, by September 30, the time the university is notified of the grant award, the possibility of selecting social work students for the fall semester is limited or nonexistent because the students have already enrolled in courses, paid the tuition for the semester, and may have declared their major field of interest. To avert further delays, several steps can be taken. As soon as the project director learns of the award, the selection process could be initiated immediately [and

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during each following semesters] announcing the availability of traineeship grants, the selection criteria, and the application deadline. In these projects, grantees tend to limit eligibility for traineeships to the existing pool of social work students. However, to effectively meet the project goal, and to target the potential student population for such awards, eligibility should be expanded to include public and Tribal child welfare agency staff and other university students who may meet the required course criteria to enter the undergraduate or graduate social work degree programs.

In curriculum development projects, the project director should take immediate steps to reevaluate the management plan and the teaching responsibilities for the next semester and begin to build an infrastructure to implement the project tasks. Any changes considered necessary in the project tasks, management time lines, or the project director must be submitted to ACF in writing for federal approval. The proposed revisions must adhere to the scope of work as written and approved for federal funding.

For multiple reasons, delays in implementing section 426 training projects occur regularly. As a result, at the end of the fiscal year, grantees may find that they have not fully utilized federal funds approved for use during that period. In this situation, a request may be submitted in writing to “carry-over” the unexpended portion of the federal funds to the next fiscal year. At the end of the project period, which is generally three years from the award date, grantees may also find that they are unable to complete all tasks before the end of the project period. In this case, the grantee has the option to apply for a “no-cost extension.” In such cases, the FPO and the ACF Grants Management Specialist (GMS) must approve in writing requests to “carry-over” funds from one year to the next if the grantee has not expended all the federal funds approved for the fiscal year. The grantees must submit such requests in writing, after determining the amount of federal funds not spent, with an explanation of how the unexpended funds will be used. The funds must be used to complete unfinished activities from the prior year, and not to supplement the current year. Similarly, the FPO and the GMS must approve in writing requests for “no-cost extension” of projects. These requests must also be submitted in writing at least 30 days prior to the project

period end date, with a justification for such a request. The reasons for such a request must be: (1) to complete tasks that are within the scope of the project, and (2) to complete the project tasks using the remainder of federal funds. Requests for new federal funds will not be granted.

#### INVOLVEMENT OF DEANS AND DIRECTORS

During each project year, a section 426 grant generates approximately \$100,000–\$150,000 for curriculum projects and \$75,000 for traineeship grants. The federal portion of the grant invariably includes staff salaries and benefits, travel costs, equipment, and other expenses. In curriculum projects, a grantee is required to provide at least 25% of the total cost of activities to be conducted under the grant. In traineeship projects, no matching funds are required for the portion of the budget that pays for traineeships; a minimum of three fourths of the total federal funds must be used for traineeships. However, grantees must provide at least 25% matching funds for the cost of grant activities other than traineeships. The total approved cost of activities is the sum of the ACF share and the non-federal university share, which can be met by cash or in-kind contributions.

Social work faculty who respond to federal funding announcements, rightfully perceive section 426 training grants as an exciting opportunity to participate in a national federal initiative to build and strengthen child welfare training curricula and the workforce. However, most social work faculty applicants work independently, with little or no active involvement of the deans and directors who make academic and administrative decisions. This observation does not mean to suggest that there is no departmental or university-sponsored project-office approval of the application; what is difficult to gauge from the application is the post-award commitment and ongoing support for the project from these entities. It is essential that the social work program as a whole be aware of the application initiative and the potential impact of the grant on the departmental work and its resources, if approved for federal funding.

The availability of annual federal funds therefore adds a new dimension to the social work program decisions. It requires reconfiguration of faculty assignments, reassessment of the departmental budget, and creative use of doctoral and graduate students to participate in

the project tasks. It is generally observed that an academic overload for the faculty project director significantly influences the quality and timeliness of the project tasks and products. Active involvement of deans and directors in the decisions in such matters is therefore crucial to the successful implementation of section 426 projects.

#### COORDINATION WITH STATE CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES

Coordination with state child welfare agencies is required in section 426 projects. The basis of this requirement is articulated in title IV-B, section 420(a) of the Act, which requires cooperation with “. . . state public welfare agencies in establishing, extending, and strengthening child welfare services. . . .” Applicants are required to discuss how they will coordinate efforts with state and local agencies, providing evidence of interagency agreements. The Children’s Bureau considers this university-state partnership vital to fostering a well-trained workforce, and critical to developing curricula that provide knowledge, values, skills, and competencies necessary to achieve titles IV-B and IV-E program goals.

This grantee-agency partnership is to be exercised in all phases of the project. In traineeship projects, the selection of the agency workers for the traineeship grants requires coordination with the state and local child welfare agencies. Social work program traineeship students, who must seek employment in these public agencies, require commitment from the state/local agencies to hire them. Furthermore, the tasks of developing, testing, and evaluating training content also necessitate involvement of the state agency partners, if such training is to be relevant to child welfare program tasks and functions.

It is generally observed that the level of coordination with state partners depends significantly on the social work program’s relationship with the state agency. In several instances, projects experienced delays as a result of limited or absence of a working relationship with state agencies. In some instances, grantees had to move their project sites to another state or a new location because the promised support dissipated. Successful and meaningful university–state partnerships require an ongoing coordination strategy

to fulfill social work education and research goals, and not just to be created for the purposes of section 426 projects. It is recognized that while some 426 grants have been instrumental in developing state–university partnerships, unanticipated personnel changes in both venues can create delays, which, however, can be overcome with renewed partnership efforts.

#### PROJECT FUNDS MANAGEMENT

The project start date of September 29 corresponds with the federal fiscal year start date, indicating the availability of federal funds. The federally approved line item budget shows the maximum amount of federal dollars a grantee can claim under each category of personnel, travel, equipment, supplies, other costs, and contractual services. However, as the project progresses, the project director may find that the approved budget needs to be revised and the monies shifted from one category to another to reallocate resources to complete revised tasks. In this case, the request for budget revision and justification must be submitted in writing and approved by the FPO and the ACF Grants Management Specialist (GMS). Budget revisions cannot exceed the federal grant amount originally approved for the fiscal or budget year.

Requests for budget revisions in the middle of the fiscal year are common and frequent. Delays in the project start date, resulting in task implementation delays, invariably result in setbacks in the use of project funds. The majority of such requests indicate problems in the timely use of federal funds or failures to report funds expended to date. Problems are also evident where there is insufficient coordination between the project director and the university grants office, which must submit the expenditure report every six months to ACF. At times these fiscal reports do not reflect actual expenditures because the project director failed to submit to the university grants office the costs (federal and non-federal) of the project activities completed during the reporting period. Efficient management of federal funds in accordance with the approved annual budget particularly demonstrates the effectiveness with which a project is being managed. Project directors therefore must learn to adhere to the invoice deadlines and submit accurate expenditure reports for tasks completed during the reporting period.

## EVALUATION OF TRAINING EFFECTIVENESS

In recent years, the Children's Bureau has required grantees to evaluate the effectiveness of the training curriculum. In traineeship grants, the final report must provide a description of the curriculum and field placements used to develop knowledge, values, and skills necessary to assist children and families in public child welfare agencies. These grantees must further provide evidence of compliance with the provisions of section 429 of the Act, including a strategy to track the employment status of the graduates who benefited from traineeships.

Whereas the traineeship grants require descriptive statements, greater rigor is expected in training curriculum evaluations. These expectations are tied to the assumptions that the knowledge, values, and skills contents of the training curriculum are relevant to developing specific competencies outlined for each priority area. Furthermore, the training, when field-tested, would result in required competencies that are specific and task-oriented.

To identify the evaluation methodologies used in the curriculum development projects, fifteen final reports were reviewed. These projects constitute approximately 50% of the grants awarded in 1997 and 1998 for curriculum development. At the time this article was prepared, reports for the remaining projects were not available at the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, which plans to incorporate information on section 426 grants in the Clearinghouse collection, accessible through the online Clearinghouse Documents Database at [www.childwelfaretraining.org](http://www.childwelfaretraining.org).

The review was conducted primarily to identify the type of approach used by the grantees to evaluate the effectiveness of the training curricula. No judgments were made regarding the evaluation design used or the findings. Considerable variation was observed in the evaluation strategies, which proved to be an elusive issue for the majority of the grantees. A few used independent evaluators, others involved social work faculty to conduct evaluations.

The majority of the grantees evaluated training effectiveness using pre- and posttests; post-training test data was used in a few projects. In some projects, focus groups, interviews, and follow-up survey methods were used to supplement pre- and posttest data. The data

collection instruments were either open- or closed-ended questionnaires. Self-assessment by the trainees was the major approach to data collection. Opinions were sought regarding the training contents and change in attitudes in using prescribed skills. Training effectiveness was primarily evaluated in terms of acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Two evaluations principally focused on assessing whether training changed practice behavior.

Findings varied as well. Five projects that used pre- and posttests noted significant differences in areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the trainees. Four projects that used the same approach found small or no gains in knowledge or skills areas. In one project, a survey of the "intervention" group that received training and the "comparison" group that did not, found no significant difference between the two groups' knowledge, skills, and practice behavior. In the absence of an explanation, it was difficult to determine the intervening variable that produced the "no difference" findings. In five projects, "perceptions" and opinions were used to determine whether the trainees "liked" the training contents and approach; the findings were generally favorable. Five projects found significant changes in the trainees' attitudes that resulted in improved practice behavior.

It was difficult to determine from the majority of the project reports reviewed when the training evaluation was actually formulated and initiated. This task was difficult considering very few final project reports fully explained the evaluation design, including the hypotheses, operational definitions, and the basis for selecting the data collection approach. To objectively analyze the operational issues in this area, it is also important to consider what is to be accomplished within the project period. These tasks involve the development of the curriculum contents, pretesting the relevancy of the training, and evaluating training effectiveness for developing priority-specific competencies.

Several operational issues surfaced during the grant monitoring process. The major issue revolved around unequal distribution of time for curriculum building, pretesting, and evaluation, resulting in a time crunch for the pretesting and evaluation tasks. It appeared that each task was addressed as a discrete project component rather than as interrelated tasks. In

this regard, the universally acknowledged conceptual framework for curriculum evaluation requires the development of an evaluation design in tandem with the tasks of curriculum development and the pretesting of the training contents for its effectiveness. Other factors that were seen to be contributing to insufficient focus on training evaluation were prior experience of the grantees in section 426 projects, the academic work load of the project director, change in project directors, and the university–state partnership disconnects in the implementation of each phase of the project.

Attention to issues of project staff time, budget and resource allocation for each task, and concurrent planning of curriculum building, pretesting, and evaluation tasks should facilitate the completion of each project task that yields quality results.

## CONCLUSION

In discretionary grant programs, grantees have total autonomy in project management and evaluation. In recent years, section 426 grantees have made significant contributions in developing training curricula relevant to child welfare practice. Traineeship grants have succeeded in increasing the number of public child welfare agency staff with social work degrees.

Efforts continue in schools of social work to measure social work knowledge, values, and skills. However, the evaluation of training curricula in the context of section 426 grants will require focus on whether the training content and the training approach are successful in developing specific competency outcomes. Competencies are more than acquisition of knowledge and skills. The proof of competence can only be demonstrated by evidence of change in practice behavior, further demonstrated in positive outcomes for children and families—an area that now needs greater attention in view of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, which mandates safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and families.

Social work practitioners have argued that quality of practice is affected by multiple factors such as staff training, educational backgrounds, quality of supervi-

sion, caseload sizes, salaries and other variables. This is a valid argument. However, section 426 grants provide a unique opportunity to evaluate training curriculum effectiveness that is specific and definable in terms of the type of knowledge and skills needed to develop competencies stipulated in the priority areas for which the grantees receive federal funds.

Social work research needs increased focus on developing evaluation designs and measurement techniques to assess not just knowledge, values, and skills. Differential approaches to assessing each of these components of practice also requires a critical look to determine whether the indicators and the data collection approaches are consistent with what is being measured. The focus also must be on how knowledge, values, and skills transform into competent practice. Attention to evidence-based practice in social work needs to gain momentum. In the editorial on the subject of evidence-based practice, Witkin and Harrison (2001) emphasized the need for social workers to build expertise in how to evaluate research design, methodology, and analysis so that they do not accept on faith others' judgment about best practices. Training effectiveness must also be evidence-based, which will require social work's commitment to developing evaluation designs and using field-tested data collection instruments that focus on competent practice behavior and positive outcomes for children and families who are served in the public child welfare system.

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