Chapter III
Implementation of the Evaluation

According to the *Standards for Conduct and Evaluation of Activities Carried Out by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) for Evaluation of Recipients of Grants, Cooperative Agreements, and Contracts*, peer review panels are charged with considering relevant information about the recipient's performance and making judgments about that performance, using the evaluation criteria specified. Each peer reviewer then prepares a report based on their own assessment of the quality of the project according to the evaluation criteria. After each peer reviewer has independently evaluated the program, the panel may be convened to discuss the strengths and weaknesses identified. Each reviewer may then choose to re-evaluate the program and make appropriate changes to the written report.

This chapter describes the evaluation process as it was implemented in the Interim Evaluation of the Regional Educational Laboratories. The review process began with the development of individual evaluation plan for each of the 10 Labs using the standard framework described in Chapter I. Once a plan was approved by ED, DIR obtained advance materials from the Lab for distribution to the peer reviewers prior to the on-site visit. Evaluation site visits were conducted in April and May. During each visit, panel members had an opportunity to interview Lab staff, partners, and clients and review additional data sources not included in the advance materials. At the end of the visit, each peer reviewer was expected to submit an individual evaluation report. Following each visit, the panel chair prepared a synthesis report highlighting the findings of the panel members. All reports were shared with the Lab, who was then given the opportunity to submit a written response. (For a summary of selected findings from each of the Lab evaluations see Volume I. The actual evaluation reports and Lab responses are compiled in Volumes III through XII.) In the following sections, each step in the evaluation process will be discussed in further detail.

A. Development of Individual Evaluation Plans

While the Interim Evaluation was designed to assess Laboratory performance in the first three years of the current contract period, it was neither reasonable nor feasible for panelists to review all of the work initiated by the Lab in that timeframe. Instead, a sample of products and services were selected for review. Using the standard framework developed for this evaluation, DIR worked collaboratively with ED and the Labs to develop an individual plan that included data sources that were representative of the work conducted by the Lab under the REL contract. Each evaluation plan included three clusters of data sources: (1) signature works, (2) selected inventory items, and (3) Lab operations. The process used to develop the plan and select the data sources to be reviewed is detailed below.

<u>Signature Works.</u> To provide peer reviewers with an in-depth understanding of some of the major programs of work at a Lab, each Lab was asked to nominate five or six signature works (e.g., major products, strategic thrusts, or service packages) that best exemplified their work in the past three years. DIR provided the Labs with instructions on nominating signature works, including guidance on what constituted a signature work (Appendix IV). Standard

nomination forms were also included that requested specific information about the work being nominated. Among the information requested was:

- the estimated amount of resources in $ and staff or as a % of the REL contract allocated to this work over the course of the current contract
- the source and amount of funding other than the REL contract, if applicable
- the current stage of development
- the specific REL tasks that have been billed for this work
- the years in which the signature work was conducted (1996, 1997, 1998)
- the relationship to the Laboratory's specialty area, if applicable

In addition to this information, Labs were asked to provide a brief description of the work, including the major components of the work, the target audience, the goals and objectives, the relationship to the work described in the technical proposal, and the functional areas that the work encompassed (i.e., R&D, Field Services, Strategic Alliances).

When nominating signature works, the Laboratories were encouraged to consider which of the illustrative pieces from the current contract period best exemplified the work of the Lab across contract tasks. Each nominated signature work was not required to address all contract tasks, nor did each nominated piece need to address the specialty area. However, it was anticipated that nominated works would cross multiple contract tasks, and one or more of the nominated pieces was expected to pertain to the specialty area. Labs were also reminded that sufficient data sources should be available to enable peer reviewers to address the evaluation questions and indicators included in the framework. When considering possible data sources, Labs were instructed that printed and electronic materials/data source(s) should be readily available for duplication and must be provided to panelists prior to arriving on-site. In exceptional circumstances, peer reviewers were able to review certain documents and materials on-site. However, the majority of time on-site was devoted to in-depth interviews, group interviews, and face-to-face contact with Laboratory staff. Local site visits to observe activities or interview users or partners were also conducted in some cases.

Although signature works could be at various stages of development, Labs were instructed that at least one of the works nominated and selected for review had to be developed beyond the design stage and be currently "in the field" (e.g., implemented as a pilot project, disseminated broadly, part of a scale up effort). This did not mean that the work had to be completed; rather, it meant that the work was being implemented in the field at some level with some number of users. Labs were further instructed that the bulk of the work for the nominated signature items should have been conducted in this contract period. While it was possible that initial work on a project had been completed in a previous contract period or plans for a project called for additional work to continue into a subsequent contract period, this did not preclude that signature work from nomination. However, only those portions of work accomplished in the current contract period were eligible for review.

With the input of ED, including the OERI Program Officer for each Laboratory, DIR selected two signature works for inclusion in the individual Laboratory evaluation plan. When selecting signature works, DIR was guided by several factors. Collectively, the works selected had to:

- Represent the major functional areas of a Lab (i.e., R&D, field services, and strategic alliances)
- Include at least one work being implemented in the field
- Represent the specialty area, if possible
- Have adequate, yet manageable data sources available for review

The selection process was conducted to intentionally avoid inclusion of multiple works within a single content area. When selecting works for review, DIR also considered the level of effort identified by the Laboratory in relationship to the development of the signature work and the priority ranking assigned to the nominations by the Lab.

Once the initial selections were made, DIR worked collaboratively with the Labs to identify the appropriate data sources for review of the signature works. In addition to hard copy and electronic materials, on-site interviews and observations were considered as potential data sources. For each selected signature work, the Lab was asked to provide sufficient data and materials to allow the peer reviewers to address the evaluation questions without being overwhelmed by the volume of information supplied.

In all cases, the Lab's top priority was selected from the nominated signature works. Further, eight of the 10 Labs had their specialty area represented within the selected signature works. For those who did not, items were selected from the inventory to demonstrate the Lab's work in the assigned specialty area. Overall, the selected signature works accounted for between two percent and 27 percent of the REL budget.

Selected Inventory Items. In addition to the selected signature works, the individual evaluation plan included a sample of other programs, products, and services produced by the Lab. This review of other outputs was intended to provide peer reviewers with a broader base upon which to gauge the totality of activities of the Lab under the REL contract. To help identify the universe of possible items for review, each Laboratory was asked to prepare an inventory of the major tangible products developed or activities and services conducted during the first three years of the current contract period (i.e., December, 1995-December, 1998).

DIR provided guidance to the Labs on developing their inventory, along with a standard format.[1] Labs were advised that the inventory should include tangible items such as conferences hosted, technical seminars, major products, and evaluation reports. The inventory should include specific items from the nominated signature works as well as other major products, services, and programs. The inventory was not designed to be a log of every product, service, and/or program developed or provided in the first three years of the contract. However, it was intended to be complete enough to capture the depth and range of ongoing work at the Laboratory. It should be noted that the inventory document itself was designated as a "data source" for peer reviewers.

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[1] A complete specimen of the documents can be found in the Comprehensive Evaluation Plan, a deliverable submitted to the U.S. Department of Education on February 1, 1999.

After selecting the signature works, DIR, in collaboration with ED and the Labs, purposefully selected items from the inventory. Collectively, these items were meant to:

- Provide added depth to the overall evaluation of Laboratory products, programs, services and complement the other work that was reviewed
- Provide breadth to the evaluation by filling in gaps not covered by the selected signature works and Laboratory operations

Additional factors that were taken into consideration in selecting inventory items included:

- Representation across current contract years
- Coverage of a variety of presentation medium (e.g. conferences, workshops, monographs, curriculum, web-based instruction, videos, etc.)
- Quantity of usage or dissemination

Selected inventory items did not duplicate the data sources included in the selected signature works or the Laboratory operations materials. It should be noted, however, that the items sampled may have been part of the other nominated signature works that were not selected.

<u>Laboratory Operations</u>. Labs were asked to identify data sources that reflect how work is accomplished at the organizational level. In addition to the data sources mandated by the *Standards* (e.g., original contract proposal, contract modifications, quarterly reports, annual plans and updates), Labs were asked to supply data and materials on organizational structure, funding allocations, needs assessment processes, quality assurance mechanisms, and self-evaluations. In cases where a document was produced on an annual basis, or more frequently, the most recent document was often selected as an example of the kind of information available for review.

To assist peer reviewers, the Labs were asked to complete a data matrix that mapped the selected data sources back to the evaluation questions. This provided panelists with a quick reference sheet detailing which data sources would be helpful in answering each of the evaluation questions. In most cases, each data source was mapped to more than one question.

B. Advance Materials

When the individual evaluation plans were approved by ED, the Labs were asked to supply multiple copies of the data sources listed in the plan. These materials were received by DIR, where they were reviewed, amended if needed (i.e., reduced in volume), and distributed to the panelists for review prior to the evaluation site visit. In addition to the products and materials provided by the Labs, peer reviewers also received a briefing booklet prepared by DIR. The briefing booklet included a copy of the individual Lab evaluation plan, an agenda for the site visit, a list of site visit participants, review worksheets, the data matrix, a format for the evaluation report, and the inventory of products and services prepared by the Lab. The briefing booklet also contained handouts prepared by the Lab for the brief presentation made as part of Training Session #3.

Advance materials were shipped to the peer reviewers approximately two weeks prior to the scheduled site visit and prior to Training Session #3. The contents of the shipment were reviewed briefly during the final training session to ensure that all panel members had received the same materials. Peer reviewers were expected to review the set of advance materials prior to the site visit and submit any questions or additional data requests to the panel chair one week before the visit. The Labs kindly agreed to provide an additional set of these same materials on-site so that peer reviewers would not be required to bring the often voluminous package along with them on the visit.

C. Evaluation Site Visits

The Interim Evaluation of the Regional Educational Laboratories consisted of a review of hard copy and electronic materials prior to arrival on-site and additional data collection, including in-depth interviews, group interviews, and staff presentations conducted on-site. Local site visits to observe activities and interview partners and customers were also conducted in some cases. The time spent on-site was intended to give panel members an opportunity to meet with key Laboratory staff and speak with individuals (in person or by teleconference) who are consumers of the Lab's services (e.g., teachers, administrators, parents), as well as Laboratory partners and collaborators. The on-site review was expected to provide reviewers with a much richer understanding of the Laboratory than could be gleaned from reviewing products, programs, or reports alone.

As soon as the individual evaluation plans were approved, DIR worked with each Laboratory to develop an agenda to enable the peer reviewers to gain on-site information in an organized and systematic manner. Peer review panelists spent five days at the Laboratory site. Approximately half of that time was spent conducting Laboratory data collection. During the remaining time, peer reviewers met as a group to discuss their impressions and findings and to draft their independent evaluation reports.

Although the visit agendas differed across Labs, a fairly standard schedule was followed on most visits:

<u>Monday:</u>

- The site visit began on Monday morning with a DIR orientation session held at the hotel. During this session, peer reviewers had an opportunity to finally meet one another face-to-face and to raise any lingering questions about the evaluation framework or the reporting process. DIR also used this as an opportunity to review procedural issues, confidentiality, or other areas needing further clarification.
- Following this session, the panel proceeded to the Lab for introductions and an informal kick-off lunch.
- The remainder of Monday afternoon was typically focused on the organizational structure and management of the Lab. Interviews with Board members were often conducted on this first day.

<u>Tuesday and Wednesday:</u>

- Tuesday and Wednesday mornings were devoted to each of the selected signature works. Interviews were conducted with key staff responsible for conducting or producing components of the selected signature works. Telephone or in-person interviews with a sample of users of products or services identified in the signature works were also conducted. Similar interviews with the Lab's partners were also scheduled. In a limited number of cases, observations or visits to local sites were made to illustrate the implementation of various components of the signature works

- Afternoons and evenings were left open to allow the peer reviewers time to meet as a group to discuss their preliminary findings and begin drafting their evaluation reports. These briefing sessions were facilitated by the panel chair and were designed to provide an opportunity for discussion among panelists to gain greater clarity on issues and to share information. These sessions also allowed the panel to identify issues that needed to be addressed further by Laboratory staff, prior to the completion of report writing by the panelists.

Thursday:

- Thursday morning was generally designed to be flexible, including brief presentations by Lab staff related to other inventory items and selected additional areas of the Lab work. This time was also to be used by the panel to conduct additional interviews with Lab staff or to follow-up on issues raised earlier in the visit that needed clarification. In some cases, the panel chose to use this time to work on their reports. In such cases, the informal presentations that were anticipated to be covered on Thursday morning were incorporate elsewhere into the agenda. Again the afternoon was left free to allow time for report writing.

Friday:

- Around noon on Friday, the panel conducted an exit interview with the Lab Director and other key staff. This session was designed to bring an element of closure to the on-site evaluation process and to give an indication of the preliminary findings included in the written reports of panelists. This session was not intended as a time for the Laboratory to respond to the report or to question the findings of specific panelists, as the opportunity for written response was provided at a different juncture.

DIR staff were on-site during the entire visit to provide logistical support and to answer any procedural questions the panelists may have. Further logistical support was provided by the Labs, who generously provided a resource room for the panel to work in. In this room, panelists often found a computer for web-site browsing, a printer, and an extra set of the advance materials.

D. Evaluation Report Process

According to the *Standards*, each peer reviewer is expected to prepare an independent report on his or her assessment of the quality of the work reviewed according to the evaluation criteria. In addition to identifying the strengths at each Lab, the *Standards* specify that, "*The report of the interim assessment must include any recommendations the peer reviewer may have for improving the recipient's performance.*"

To facilitate the review process and ensure consistency across peer reviewers and Labs, DIR developed review worksheets and a standard reporting format to be used by panel members in their individual evaluation of the Laboratory. Each of these documents is discussed in further detail below.

Review Worksheets. To guide the evaluation process, review worksheets were designed to organize reviewer comments on Laboratory materials in response to the evaluation questions and indicators. For a sample worksheet, see Appendix V. The worksheets included sections for general comments, strengths, areas of needed improvement, recommendations for improvement, and site visit issues (e.g., additional data needed). The forms included a three-point Likert scale (from “Below Expectations” to “Exceeds Expectations”) within each area of work for each of the evaluation questions.

The worksheets were designed to organize reviewer comments with respect to each of the eight evaluation questions and to serve as a basis for writing the written report. The worksheets were structured to enable the reviewer to address the evaluation questions and corresponding indicators, and provide documentation to support findings in order that the data sources did not have to be revisited when preparing the written report. While not required to complete these worksheets, peer reviewers were encouraged to use them as a way to document their notes both prior to the site visit, as well as on-site.

Report Format. DIR developed a standard report format (see Appendix VI) for the individual evaluations to enhance uniformity and overall readability of the reports, as well as to facilitate synthesis by the panel chair. Each reviewer was provided with an electronic version of the report template to ensure that the resulting reports were consistent in format. The report format was designed to address each of the evaluation questions, with reviewers identifying particular strengths, areas of needed improvement, and recommendations for improvement in each area. The report format also called for the panelist’s evaluation of Laboratory performance overall.

Reviewers were instructed to address each of the evaluation questions and provide supporting narrative, citing specific examples from the work reviewed. Each individual report should reflect an independent evaluation by the panelist and conclude with a summary of the reviewer’s overall evaluation of the Laboratory and a brief synopsis of the strengths, areas needing improvement, and recommendations for improvement. A writing sample was provided to peer reviewers to illustrate the level and type of detail that should be included in the report.

In addition to the individual evaluation reports prepared by each of the peer reviewers, the Interim Evaluation of the Regional Educational Laboratories also called for a synthesis report prepared by the panel chair. The objective of the synthesis report was not to provide a consensus, but rather to identify common themes and highlight the range of findings across reviewers. The synthesis report also provided a listing of the major recommendations for improvement suggested by the panel members. The synthesis report was designed to follow the same format as the individual evaluation reports. Written directions and a writing sample for the synthesis report were provided to each panel chair prior to the site visit and were reviewed in the panel chair training session.

Individual evaluation reports were due at the end of the site visit. Panelists were given approximately two weeks to make minor editorial changes and resubmit a final draft if they chose. A draft synthesis report was due two weeks after completion of the site visit. The draft synthesis report was distributed to all panel members for comment. The panel chair then submitted a final synthesis report to DIR, reflecting the feedback provided by panel members on the draft report. After DIR reviewed the reports for completeness and clarity, each Lab Director was sent a package containing the synthesis and individual reports for his or her respective Lab. The Lab was given approximately two weeks to review the reports and submit a written response for inclusion in the DIR final report.

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