PEQA Competencies
PReliminary Results Brief

For the Summit Group, February, 2016

# Purpose

The current study was conducted to help better understand what makes an effective program evaluation or quality assurance (PEQA) specialist in state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies. About 6 years ago, we asked members of the fledgling Summit Group to give us their input on the characteristics that program evaluators need to be effective. Since that time, the Summit Group membership has grown appreciably, as has the sophistication of the PEQA processes within the field. Our research team was interested in identifying the most influential competencies for program evaluators in today’s state VR agencies as well as looking at how these competencies have changed since the earlier, pilot investigation.

## Framework

There remains a significant gap in understanding the most important competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) for PEQA specialists’ effectiveness. Stevahn, King, Ghere, and Minnema (2005) contend that the identification of competencies can lead to improved training for new and experienced professionals, enhanced reflective practice, and advancement of research on evaluation. When applied to the field of VR, there is the potential to inform efforts in professionalization, targeted skill development, and self-guided learning. This may ensure qualified, competent, and confident program evaluators facilitate continuous improvement with the goal of better services and program outcomes for people with disabilities.

## Methods

A mixed methods approach was used to investigate: a) contemporary perspectives on the most important competencies for PEQA specialists in state VR agencies and b) perceptions regarding the relative importance of the six competency categories self-identified as the most important to PEQA specialists during the pilot study. The contemporary perspectives on important competencies were identified by asking “What are the top five competencies that are most important for a successful state VR agency program evaluator (you can enter a phrase or describe elements of each competency in a few sentences)?” We used a qualitative, constant comparative method to analyze input for this question (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998) and followed these steps: (1) examination of the responses, (2) categorization and coding of patterns, (3) comparing later segments to earlier patterns, and (4) refining the themes through multiple examination iterations. The perceptions of relative importance were measured quantitatively by having respondents rank the six pilot competencies according to their importance. Significant differences between mean weighted scores were evaluated using paired sample t-tests at the alpha = .05 level.

## Participants

We had 64 respondents to the survey, with 43 completing the entire survey. Of those, approximately 81% were state VR agency employees; 54% general, 11% blind, and 34% combined. These respondents averaged about 16 years in the field of rehabilitation and about 6 years within the PEQA specialist role.

# Preliminary Results and Discussion

As a first objective, we examined the relative important of the six self-identified competency categories which were derived from our earlier pilot study. The following lists the competencies ranked by their perceived importance from most important to least important:

1) **Data analysis and interpretation** (average weighted score of 4.50, SD = 1.29)

2) **Knowledge of the state-federal VR system** (average weighted score of 3.98, 1.93)

3) **Interpersonal skills, effective communication, and translation** (average weighted score of 3.86, SD = 1.63)

4) **Judgements and recommendations** (average weighted score of 3.43, SD = 1.36)

5) **Objectivity** (average weighted score of 3.07, SD = 1.67)

6) **Report writing and presentation** (average weighted score of 2.12, SD = 1.28)

Further analysis of these differences in weighted mean scores shows that the report writing and presentation competency was significantly lower than all of the other competency scores, suggesting that this category is different from the rest and may not be important enough to be considered a core competency. Similarly, the top two competencies categories (data analysis and interpretations and knowledge of the state-federal VR system) were significantly higher than the two lowest categories (objectivity and report writing and presentation), which may indicate the need for further consideration of whether objectivity is an appropriate fit as a core competency.

As a second objective, we tried to identify contemporary perspectives on which competencies were deemed most important for effective PEQA specialists. The preliminary thematic analysis results reinforced the earlier pilot results in a few key competencies, but also revealed recognizable shifts in perceptions and emphasis. The knowledge of the state-federal VR system remained a principle element of an effective PEQA specialist. This factor includes knowledge of federal and state laws and regulations, agency policies, the organization and systems with the agency, and underlying VR principles.

The highest number of individual qualitative data responses were related to data analysis and interpretation signaling that this is likely a key core competency. This competency area includes knowledge of quantitative and qualitative methods, technical data analysis skills, as well as the ability to interpret and derive meaning from a variety of sources. The responses revealed an evolution of this need to have greater focus on knowledge of research and program evaluation methodology. Correspondingly, respondents also described the need for individuals to have a level of program evaluation foundational knowledge to properly put these methods into practice.

Interpersonal skills, effective communication, and translation was again a notable theme and included skills in interacting with others, effectively working with teams, translating and communicating information, and working in a political framework. Responses describing presentation and writing skills were sometimes blended with interpersonal and communication response such that it is possible that they represent are larger general combined theme. If you consider that the quantitative results showed report writing and presentation was not as highly valued as the other competencies, this supports this need area being eliminated or subsumed by interpersonal skills, effective communication, and translation.

There was a pronounced new theme which emerged from the analysis of the qualitative input which we have labeled project management. This competency was characterized by a variety of work management skills such as organizational skills, time management, accuracy and attention to detail, and supervision of personnel. Additionally, there was another less pronounced new theme that we labeled critical thinking. This included abilities like creativity, analytical thinking, problem-solving, and investigative nature.

## Conclusion

The results from the current study indicated a strengthening of some of the prominent core competencies which have been previously found, namely data analysis, and interpretation; knowledge of the state-federal VR system; and interpersonal skills, effective communication, and translation. The results also suggest a reshaping of these domains with greater emphasis of program evaluation methodology and theory, as well as a less pronounced emphasis on objectivity and report writing and presentation. Finally, the results yielded the discovery of new themes (project management and critical thinking) which may reflect a contemporary evolution of the PEQA specialist role within state VR agencies. As some respondents noted, we expect changes to the PEQA context in state VR as new legislation and regulations are implemented. This may further the evolution of the PEQA specialist role as they navigate this new landscape.

**Thank you**

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Sincerely, authors Scott Sabella, Darlene Groomes, Matthew Markve, and Michael Shoemaker

**References**

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