



Evaluator Spotlight

An interview with Allison Burke of LPC Consulting

Evaluators. A curious breed. How are they able to turn questions and mounds of data into valuable insights to guide programs? To answer that question, we thought it would be interesting to ask different evaluators what motivates them, how they go about their work, and their thoughts on evaluation. So from time to time, we'll feature an interview with one of the evaluators working with local projects.



Photo: LPC Consulting

Meet Allison Burke from LPC Consulting Associates, Inc. in Sacramento. Allison evaluates the SOL and ACT-UP tobacco projects for Public Health Foundation Enterprises and the Sacramento Chinese Community Center. She is also currently evaluating several drug prevention projects for the Fresno County Department of Behavioral Health-Substance Abuse Services, the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) TA Center, and corner store conversions, garden builds, harvest program, and education and outreach efforts in South Sacramento for the Healthy Food for All Project (funded through The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative). So she is one busy woman!

Allison, how did you get into evaluation?

In college (UC Davis) I double majored in communications and sociology. After graduation I worked as a program director for an educational company, and my favorite part of the job was figuring out what worked, what didn't, why some families stayed in the program, and why others left. So when I was searching for a new job, I knew I wanted to do something research related. I found a job with LPC Associates and I have worked there as an evaluator for 6.5 years. It's been a "learning on the job"



experience. Initially, by watching what my colleagues were doing and taking additional classes, I was able to enhance my evaluation skills. For example, I attended workshops my boss gave to clients about logic modeling, looked at past data collection tools and adapted them for new uses, paid attention to what data had been collected in the past, and monitored what methods work best in different situations. Plus, our team is very connected. We meet weekly to talk through what we are each working on, discuss challenges and solutions. It's a great place to work!

Do you find there is anything different about evaluation within tobacco control as compared to other types of evaluation?

In tobacco control, evaluation is especially used to inform project activities in an ongoing way. I find I use public opinion polls more often so that projects can collect data to inform and influence policymakers. Most of my other clients are direct service providers, so the work I do for them is more centered on program evaluation – trying to document activities and demonstrate impact.

As a result, I do a lot more process data collection and analysis to find out why and how things happened.

Do you have one particular evaluation method that you really enjoy using?

SurveyMonkey is a cool way to collect data because it's so simple. It is user friendly, allows skip logic that might not work as well with paper surveys, and can even suggest questions for you. I like that it will run basic analysis functions and generate charts and graphs from the data, but it also allows you to export your data set to SPSS or Microsoft Access for more advanced analysis when required.



Another great thing is that [online surveys as a method] can increase your response rate, especially for more sensitive questions or with participants, such as youth, who are more tech savvy and use computers a lot. The other thing I love is that it's constantly expanding what it can do for you. It seems like every time I go to the site, there's always a new feature.

What was one of your most memorable evaluation situations?

A few years ago I was working on a study of methamphetamine task forces across California – using case studies to document the history, how they got started, what activities they conduct, and the challenges they face. For this project, I traveled to different cities where the task forces operated and one in particular was way up in Northern California – a six hour drive. When I got there, a



member of the meth task force unexpectedly took me on a driving tour of the area. We went through some rather seedy areas, as she pointed out where the drug deals go down and where the meth labs are. Needless to say, it was a little nerve-wracking but it really gave me unique insights for the case study about what task forces are up against, the conditions they work in, and how the problem affects the community.

Photo from <http://www.stopmethaddiction.com>

What part of evaluation is most challenging (or least enjoyable) to you?

Analyzing large amounts of qualitative data, which can be especially difficult if you didn't collect it yourself. [Within tobacco control, often times it's important for project personnel to conduct the key informant interviews as a way to establish relationships with interviewees who may be policy gatekeepers or decision makers.] In doing the analysis, you have to sift through reams of information to find the key themes, and that can take a great amount of time and energy.

Somehow I have become the go-to person in the office for conducting this kind of data collection and analysis, so I have ended up doing even more of it than usual!

I start by grouping all the responses by question. Then I read through each batch and with different colored markers, I highlight themes that pop up a lot. For example, yellow = program successes and blue = challenges. At the same time I note any direct quotes that I might want to use to illustrate the theme. If you are getting responses that are all over the place, it's especially hard to come up with themes. I also tend to think that every statement is important, which makes it hard to summarize the data into THE most key messages.



If there was one thing you wish clients understood about evaluation, what would that be?



That evaluators are your friends! We are not there to check up on you or to penalize you but to help you improve your program efforts. **Advice: read the results and evaluation reports carefully.** There is so much information in there that can help inform your program. Reports can also be used to demonstrate your program's value to funders AND potential funders, to show what you are accomplishing and illustrate your project's sustainability. Make use of the data!