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Evaluating ATE regional centers is different from evaluating ATE projects. The focus is broader than just measuring the impact of program improvement, and many of the related challenges result from a regional center's characteristics as a longer-term (4-10 years) entity.

The 2011 ATE program solicitation says that "ATE regional centers focus on a particular technological field, have a clear, measurable impact on the workforce and economy in a logically defined geographic region, coordinate with local, regional, and statewide economic development strategic plans, and with other regional ATE centers if appropriate. They may have national impacts while sustaining relationships with local industry and economic development entities. Regional centers focus on a particular field of technology and have a clear, measurable impact on the workforce and economy in a logically defined geographic region. The center's activities should be coordinated with local, regional, and statewide economic development strategic plans, and, if appropriate, any other ATE funded center that is in a related technological field. Although a regional center may have national impacts, the mission, structure, activities, and products of a regional center should be carefully designed to fit the region's particular characteristics and needs in the relevant field of technology." This description points to some areas for evaluation.

WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT EVALUATING ATE REGIONAL CENTERS?

1. **ATE regional center programs are interstates, not (just) pipelines.** The pipeline (= students move in cohorts from matriculation to degree completion to employment on a relatively direct, uniform schedule) is important, but we need a different metaphor to evaluate **swirlers, stopouts, and stay-longers** (this session's handouts has details on this).
2. **ATE regional centers need more than the "pipeline narrative" to measure both program and project improvement.** Program improvement as defined by NSF is generally only a small part of a regional center's activities, which means discovering or developing new narratives to evaluate them.
3. **Think long term.** ATE regional centers are meant to be built for the long haul and sustainable in the long term. This has several important implications for evaluation:
4. The evaluator is the **breadcrumb person**: the one who makes the connection between the beginning and the present even as others lose sight of that.
5. Over time, **evaluators can become an important piece of the center's institutional memory** because of their unique project perspective.
6. **Success means growth**, so scope will creep and priorities will change over time, which means managing expectations about evaluation throughout the process.
7. **"External" is relative. Figure out and maintain appropriate transactional distance** between evaluator and PIs and other key stakeholders. This can also change over time as personnel and priorities change.
8. **The regional part:** Evaluations of regional centers need to look at connections, partner involvement, and impact. Relationships between center and region vary by project.

RESOURCES

ATE Program Solicitation 2011: <http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2011/nsf11692/nsf11692.htm>

ATE Projects Impact: <http://www.ateprojectimpact.org/>

ATE Centers Impact: <http://atecenters.org>

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