I’m different. I do not have an accounting degree. I do not have an audit background. The legislative agency I work for has no auditors on staff. My masters is in public policy (actually called public affairs, but who is quibbling. In this day and age, public affairs may have a different connotation.) So, why am I leading an organization of evaluators made up mostly of folks with an audit background?

First of all, “I am he, as you are me, and we are all together.” For those who don’t recognize it, that is a Beatles quote. We all do evaluations of programs, functions or entire agencies to provide our legislatures with information on the efficiency and effectiveness of what they have created in law. We all provide the oversight of agencies that the Legislature cannot otherwise perform.

As Deputy Director of Texas’ Sunset Commission staff, I work for the Sunset Commission, an arm of the Texas Legislature. We have five senators, five representatives and two public members on the Commission. The staff evaluates the agencies assigned by law, and recommends continuance (or not). If to be continued, we evaluate the agency and its functions, identify problems and propose solutions. If the Commission likes our ideas, they vote to package them into legislation that continues and improves an agency.

Does that sound much different than what you do? In some cases, I’m sure it does. Some of our colleagues rarely, if ever, propose statutory changes. If you propose legislation, finding a legislator to champion the bill through a session can be difficult.

One of the primary differences in our work is the amount Sunset, as well as a few other evaluation agencies across the country, get into policy recommendations. I have heard somewhat heated debates at our fall conferences over whether program evaluation includes policy evaluation. Ultimately, why does it matter?

Each of our organizations does the work requested of us by legislatures and state law. If a legislature expects policy evaluation, we, as employees of the legislature provide it. In the summary of our recently released report on Texas’ criminal justice agencies, we state:

“For the Sunset review to be meaningful, it had to include consideration of TDCJ’s ability to divert offenders from prison and to rehabilitate those in prison to better prepare them for life in society.”

That one consideration led to recommendations for appropriation of significant additional funds to TDCJ for offender treatment and rehabilitation programs proven to reduce recidivism. Appropriation of new funding is definitely a policy matter, usually outside of the type of recommendation we make, but necessary in this case. We are meeting the information needs of our commission and the legislature as a whole.

Does this work mean we are not doing program evaluation? I bet some of you just said yes. But think about whether we are all serving our legislatures by providing the level of evaluation they request and need. My message is that we should encourage all evaluators to participate in NLPES, encourage diversity in every
way, and keep an open door and a darn big tent. If you know of legislative staff in your states that have not been involved in NLPES because they do policy evaluation, please let them know about our work and encourage their participation.

Let’s change subjects. Your NLPES executive committee will be focusing on several efforts this year, some new and some old. On the new front, NLPES has a new subcommittee called Professional Development Opportunities (PDO). The PDO is looking to make professional development programs available to colleagues that do not or cannot attend the NLPES fall training conference or the NCSL Annual Meeting. We, along with other NCSL staff sections, are assessing various technologies and types of programs that would be most useful to you. If you have experience or knowledge in this area, please contact James Barber, the PDO chair. We need all the help we can get. The PDO is made up of people like you, busy, and with limited experience in distance training. Please contact James and help out if you can.

On the old business front, the Executive Committee is revamping some of the NLPES awards and awards criteria. Look for some key differences next spring when the awards proposals roll out. One other item of note is we are taking a hard look at our website to make it more user friendly and to set out a process to ensure that updates are timely. If you have opinions and ideas about the website, please contact Rakesh Mohan who chairs the Communications and Technology subcommittee. Our contact information can hopefully be found by going to the NLPES homepage and clicking on the first “featured link”.

I’ve gone from waxing on about our differences and similarities to the more mundane information about the NLPES Executive Committee. Sorry about the mundane part. I hope to make future columns focus on big picture issues and ideas that affect our work and let us think about the future of our organizations. Wish me luck.

Learning Opportunities at the 2006 NCSL Annual Meeting

Bob Boerner (NLPES Liaison, NCSL)

This year’s NCSL Annual Meeting and Exhibition, held in Nashville, Tennessee, from August 15-18, offered famous Southern hospitality, a tour of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Hall of Fame Park, a concert with LeAnn Rimes at the Tennessee Legislative Plaza and informative training sessions. The NCSL Annual Meeting gathered together legislative leaders, lawmakers, staff members and policy experts. NCSL’s “Strong States Strong Nation” offered over 160 sessions on the hottest topics. Frederick W. Smith, chairman and CEO of Federal Express Corporation, was the opening plenary speaker.

Members and officers of the NLPES Executive Committee met twice during the week to discuss upcoming events for the staff section, including planning of the 2006 NLPES Fall Training Conference in Park City, Utah. Ken Levine, Deputy Director, Texas Sunset Advisory Commission, was named the new Chair of NLPES on August 17.

Gary VanLandingham, Director of the Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, was one of the featured speakers on the “Are We Meeting the Needs of the Legislature?” session held on August 15. Other speakers at the session were Senator Irma Hunter Brown, Arkansas; Senator Roy Herron, Tennessee and John Keel, State Auditor, Texas. The staff section also offered one other session, “The ABC’s of K-12 Education Funding.”

At the NLPES Annual Business Meeting and Luncheon, Joe Lawhon, Chair of the NLPES Awards Committee, presented awards to the Idaho Office of Performance Evaluations for the 2006 NLPES Excellence in Evaluation Award and to the Virginia Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission for the 2006 NLPES Excellence in Research Methods Award. A total of 17 offices were presented 2006 NLPES Recognition of Impact certificates. The recipient of the 2006 NLPES Outstanding Achievement Award was Don Bezruki, Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau (retired).

Seventeen Offices Awarded Certificates of Impact

During the NCSL Annual Meeting, NLPES awarded Certificates of Impact to the evaluation/audit offices in the following states: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Kansas, Michigan, Nebraska, New Mexico, Tennessee, Texas (Sunset), Utah, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.
Don Bezruki Recognized for Contributions

Don began his career with the Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau as an entry-level analyst in 1978 and nine years later became the bureau's program evaluation director. For many years, he was very active in NCSL affairs. Don served as the NLPES Newsletter editor, member on the Executive Committee from 1987 through 1993, and he served as its Chair. Don also served as the staff chair on the former Assembly on the Legislature Commerce and Economic Development Committee and the Criminal Justice Committee. Don served on several NCSL task forces, joining other NCSL members for trips to South Africa and Europe to identify mechanisms that will assist other countries in improving legislative oversight. He is a Legislative Staff Management Institute (LSMI) graduate. Don was active in other organizations. He served as the President of the Madison Chapter of American Society of Public Administration, a member of American Evaluation Association where he contributed an article and served on the Editorial Advisory Board. In his career, he participated on NCSL peer reviews of two states and two National State Auditors Association peer reviews. Don recently left the Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau after twenty-seven years to explore new horizons. NLPES thanks Don for his past leadership and wishes him well in his future endeavors.

Idaho Office of Performance Evaluations and Virginia JLARC Receive Awards

During the 2006 NCSL Annual Meeting in Nashville, NLPES recognized two offices for their outstanding work. The Idaho Office of Performance Evaluations was selected as the winner of the 2006 NLPES Excellence in Evaluation Award. The Excellence Award was given for the Office's cumulative work for calendar years 2002 through 2005. During this period, the Office issued audits covering such topics as the school finance, pupil transportation, the Idaho School for the Deaf and Blind, and performance measurement. In addition, the Office has actively participated in numerous NLPES activities. NLPES congratulates the Idaho Office of Performance Evaluations for a job well done!

The Virginia Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission was selected as the winner of the 2006 NLPES Excellence in Research Methods Award. The Excellence in Research Methods Award was issued for the Office's work in conducting the audit entitled “Self Sufficiency Among Social Services Clients in Virginia.” The report used multiple sources of data to construct a comprehensive, longitudinal profile of nearly 15,000 social services clients. This report analyzed changes in self-sufficiency, compared to both standard measures of economic well being and a new metric, developed by the office, to analyze the degree to which clients rely on governmental assistance. NLPES congratulates the Virginia JLARC for a job well done!

Praise for Program Evaluation

From “The Thicket” at NCSL

Legislative staff in general and program evaluation offices in particular don’t often receive the kind of praise that Rakesh Mohan, director of Idaho’s Office of Program Evaluations, received in an Associated Press story. The story quotes Idaho house assistant majority leader Mike Moyle as saying, “Rakesh is one of the best things that ever happened to the state of Idaho.” Speaker Bruce Newcomb says, “Rakesh, he is just a fantastic individual, and he’s so smart, and he knows how government works.” NCSL’s Karl Kurtz said that he has known staff who have worked for three different legislatures, but Rakesh may hold the record: before moving to Idaho, he worked for the Washington, Louisiana and Kansas legislatures.
Fall Training Conference: “Performance Evaluation: Achieving Peak Performance”

“Achieving Peak Performance” was the title of the Fall Training Conference hosted by the Utah Office of the Legislative Auditor General. The 2006 fall conference was sponsored by the National Legislative Program Evaluation Society on September 27-30, 2006. Legislative staff from thirty states participated in the conference as well as staff from state agencies, local governments, the federal government, universities and private consultants.


The conference participants had many opportunities to network with their colleagues from other states starting with the opening reception held Wednesday evening at the Marriott Park City Hotel. The Friday afternoon networking activities of fly-fishing, golfing, ice skating, horseback riding, sightseeing and shopping culminated in a reception and dinner at the Utah Olympic Park. Participants were given a tour of the Olympic Park, and an opportunity to ride on the zip line and participate in the museum tour. Following dinner, participants enjoyed watching the spectacular Flying Aces Aerial Show.

The success of the training conference was reflected in the very positive evaluation of the conference by attendees. Our thanks to Utah Legislative Auditor General John Schaff, Tim Osterstock, Wayne Kidd, DeAnna Herring and his other staff members for all their hard work in hosting the 2006 fall training conference.

Office Happenings

Georgia
The Performance Audit Division of the Georgia Department of Audits welcomed eight new staff: Chequetta Allen, Rene Bartholomew, Melissa Earnest, Stephanie Gaines, Kinah Malone, Ian McCann, Melody Pugh, and Tamika Stubbs.

Minnesota
John Patterson left the Legislative Auditor’s Office after nearly ten years with the office, taking a job with the Minnesota Department of Human Services. Also, Adrienne Howard resigned after six years with the office, moving back to her home state of Alabama.

Mississippi
The Joint Legislative PEER Committee welcomed two new evaluators—Matthew Holmes and Jennifer Sebren.

Montana
Jim Pellegreni will be retiring from the Montana Legislative Audit Division on December 31. Jim plans on continuing to develop and teach seminars and spend time doing evaluation and “home” projects.

Nebraska
Martha Carter has recently been appointed to the newly created position of Legislative Auditor for the Legislative Research Division of the Legislative Audit and Research Office.

Texas
Craig Kinton, a retiree of the Texas State Auditor’s Office, is now the City Auditor for the City of Dallas.