

An Introduction to Evaluation

Evaluation is the process of systematically collecting and analyzing data and using the results to answer questions about a program in order to improve the program's effectiveness and/or efficiency.

Common Evaluation Terms

Stakeholder: Anyone with a vested interest in the evaluation and/or program. This often includes program staff, members of agency or advisory boards, and program participants.

Formative evaluation: Evaluation processes which are predominantly used to inform program staff and improve a program. Formative evaluation data is often used to determine if the program is delivered as it was designed or intended, and how much progress has been made toward program goals. Formative evaluation is most useful while a program is being implemented.

Summative evaluation: Evaluation processes that are used to determine if a program was effective (had the desired outcomes or impact) or efficient. Summative evaluation data is often used to determine if the program should be adopted, expanded, or continued.

Logic model: A depiction of conditions, key processes, and activities that occur so the program can bring about change. The CIPP¹ logic model framework includes four parts:

Goals: the overarching objectives or purposes of the program, including the expected impact of the program on individuals, systems, or agencies;

Strategies: what the program will do to bring about the desired change(s), usually stated very broadly;

Outputs: the direct products of the program's activities such as counts of individual activities; and

Outcomes: the benefits of participating in the programs, often divided into time frames (e.g., direct, intermediate, and long-term). The long-term outcomes are very similar to the program's goals.

Evaluation plan: The blueprint of the formative or summative evaluation. Includes each evaluation question, the data source(s) used to answer the evaluation question, the appropriate method of analyzing the data, person(s) responsible for the data collection and/or analysis, and the time line (when the data will be collected and/or shared with the evaluator).

Quantitative data: Numerical data such as attendance, number of professional development hours completed, number of students enrolled, participant demographic data, etc. If it can be counted, it's numerical data.

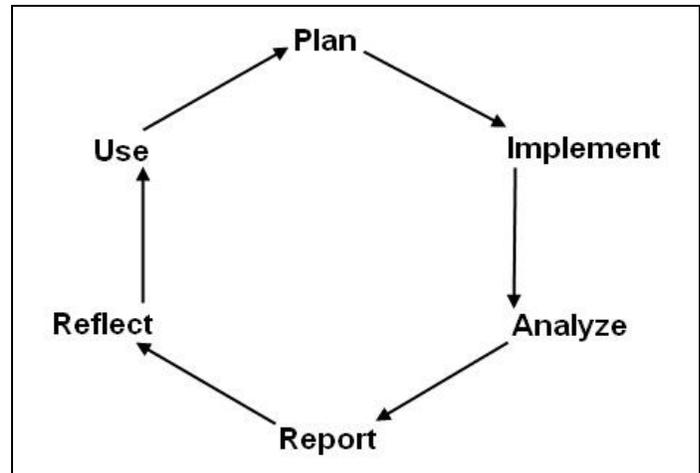
Qualitative data: Non-numerical data, such as responses during an interview or focus group, interpretive drawings, portfolios, responses to open-ended questions, etc.

Mixed methods approach: This is often a preferred approach in evaluation and refers to using both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data can be amassed for large groups of data, but provides little context for the numbers. Qualitative data is more time consuming and is generally used for smaller groups of data, but is data rich and contextualizes quantitative data.

Utilization-focused evaluation: In a utilization-focused evaluation, the emphasis is on producing evaluation results which program staff and stakeholders can use to maintain program strengths and address program challenges.

The Evaluation Cycle (see figure to the right)

1. **Plan:** Develop a logic model and an evaluation plan.
2. **Implement:** Collect data.
3. **Analyze:** Analyze data using technique matched to type of data.
4. **Report:** Summarize results of data analysis and describe results in a report.
5. **Reflect:** Review completed report and reflect on meaning of the results within the context of the program.
6. **Use:** Use the evaluation results to inform and guide adjustments or changes to the program and inform and guide adjustments or changes to the evaluation.



Common evaluation questions^{2, 3, 4, 5}

1. **Is evaluation about ‘judging’ the program or making a decision about whether it’s good or bad?**

There are some definitions of evaluation that include an element of judgment or determining the ‘value’ or ‘worth’ of a program, however other approaches emphasize using evaluation results for program improvement. (Both the formative and summative evaluators prefer a utilization-focused approach.)
2. **By spending time and resources on an evaluation, aren’t you just taking time and resources away from the program and/or participants?**

The overall goal of an evaluation is to enhance and improve a program so that it’s more effective and/or efficient. So by spending some time and resources on the evaluation, program services can be delivered to participants in a more cost effective manner thereby enhancing the program.
3. **Isn’t an evaluation just a burden on program staff?**

An efficient evaluation will take into consideration processes and data staff are already performing and build a data collection plan that is streamlined and has a minimal impact on staffs’ work load.
4. **What about negative evaluation results – won’t that make the program look bad and raise the risk of having the funding pulled?**

First, funders are aware that every program faces challenges, including unanticipated challenges and, as a result, funders know that a program’s evaluation may reveal neutral-to-negative results. Funders often report they are less interested in the “negative” evaluation results than in how staff maintain the program’s identified strengths and adapt the program to address the program’s challenges. Second, after completing an evaluation, staff typically prepare results to share with other funders to obtain *additional* funding.
5. **Isn’t evaluation the same as monitoring? Why do we have to do both?**

Program monitoring is determining if the program is in compliance with requirements. For example, if a program is being funded to provide hot meals to house-bound elderly adults, then program monitoring would be used to determine if the program actually *is* serving hot meals to house-bound elderly adults.

Program evaluation helps staff determine if their expected program outcomes were achieved. This may include a component of program monitoring, but is also a more encompassing task. For example, a formative evaluation of a program to provide hot meals to house-bound elderly adults might include the number of meals served, the number of each type of food prepared (e.g., starch, protein, fruit), how that meal tastes, and how future meals can be improved. In comparison, the summative evaluation of the same program might include the impact of the program on the overall health of the recipients so that decisions can be made to develop/enhance initiatives and programs that address healthy eating.

6. Isn't evaluation the same as research? Why are we doing research on the program?

The primary goal of an evaluation is to inform program staff and stakeholders about their program – strengths, challenges, gaps, etc. The primary goal of research is to share information about a program with others to expand the general knowledge base.

7. Will the external evaluators take control of the evaluation, and the program, away from program staff?

External evaluators have expertise in evaluation and research, but have little expertise in your program area. As a result, an external evaluator is more of a facilitator who will provide support, information, and guidance to develop an evaluation and expertise in the analysis of evaluation data and summarization of results.

References & Resources:

1. Fiore, T. (2009, March 24). *Center to Improve Project Performance*. OSEP TA&D Network Conference presentation.
2. Frechtling, J. (2002). *The 2002 user friendly handbook for project evaluation*. The National Science Foundation REC 99-12175. Retrieved from: <http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02057/nsf02057.pdf>
3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. (2010). *The program manager's guide to evaluation* (2nd ed.). Retrieved from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/other_research/pm_guide_eval/index.html
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1999). *Framework for program evaluation in public health*. MMWR 48(No. RR-11). Retrieved from: <ftp://ftp.cdc.gov/pub/Publications/mmwr/rr/rr4811.pdf>
5. Metz, A. (2007, October). *Why conduct a program evaluation? Five reasons why evaluation can help an out-of-school-time program*. Research to Results Brief (Child Trends publication 2007-31). Retrieved from: http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2007_10_01_RB_WhyProgEval.pdf
6. American Evaluation Association, <http://www.eval.org>