Program Evaluation: Definitions and Uses

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What is Program Evaluation?

- A systematic assessment of how well a program is working, and why
- Applied research using objective measures and analysis to answer questions about performance
- Note: “Program” can be any activity, project, function, or policy that has an identifiable purpose or set of objectives
Relationship to Performance Measurement

- Performance measurement – Ongoing monitoring and reporting of program accomplishments and progress towards goals

- Program evaluations – Individual systematic studies that complement performance monitoring by exploring performance in more depth to inform program and policy decisions
Why conduct evaluations?

Provide feedback for:

- Program improvement – Answer questions about results and the processes that managers directly control to achieve results
- External accountability – Document efficiency, effectiveness, and value added to society
Evaluation / Management Cycle

**Planning/Decision Making**
- Identify Needs, Problems, Solutions, Refinements
- Conceptualize Program
- Formulate Evaluation Questions and Design

**Implementation**
- Actualize the Program Plan
- Collect Evaluation Data
- Analyze Data

**Evaluation Feedback**
- Feedback Evaluation Findings to Managers
- Refine Program

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What steps do evaluators use?

1. Conceptualize the program
2. Develop relevant and useful evaluation questions
3. Select appropriate evaluation approaches for each evaluation question
4. Collect data to answer evaluation questions
5. Analyze the data and draw conclusions
6. Communicate results and recommendations
Step 1. Conceptualize the program – using a program logic model

- Illustrate the program’s strategy for achieving its goals
- Tell the program’s story of what is supposed to happen
- Reflect stakeholders’ expectations
- Identify key features and causal relationships
What we do:
Conduct workshops
Deliver services
Develop products, curriculum, resources
Train Counsel
Assess Facilitate Partner Work with Media

Who we reach:
Participants Clients Agencies Decision-makers Customers Satisfaction

What the short term results are:
Learning Awareness Knowledge Attitudes Skills Opinions Aspirations Motivations

What the medium term results are:
Action Behavior Practice Decision-making Policies Social Action

What the ultimate impact(s) is:
Conditions Social Economic Civic Environmental

Situation
Needs and Assets
Symptoms versus problems
Stakeholder engagement

Priorities: Consider:
Mission Vision Values Mandates Resources Local Dynamics Collaborators Competitors Intended Outcomes

What we invest:
Staff Volunteers Time Money Research base Materials Equipment Technology Partners

Activities Participation
Inputs Outputs

Assumptions
External Factors

Evaluation
Focus - Collect Data – Analyze and Interpret - Report

Univ. of Wisconsin Extension Education
Step 2. Develop relevant and useful evaluation questions

Why are good questions important?

- Articulate the issues and concerns of stakeholders
- Posit how the program is expected to work and its intended achievements
- Frame the scope of the assessment
- Drive the evaluation design
Common evaluation questions asked at different stages of program development

- Early stage of program or new initiative within a program

- Mature, stable program with well-defined program model

- Are services delivered as intended to the targeted recipients? Is the program well-managed? (Process evaluation)

- Are desired program outcomes obtained? (Outcome evaluation)

- Did the program cause the desired impact? (Net impact evaluation)
Step 3. Select appropriate evaluation approach for each evaluation question

Criteria:

- Matches evaluation question
- Fits available resources – time and funds
- Data are available or can be acquired
- Appropriate to the program purpose and context
Process and Outcome Evaluations

Assess whether the program is operating as intended (Process), or achieving intended objectives (Outcome)

Compare program performance to goals or standards, e.g. statutory requirements, logic model or professional standards

Outcome evaluations are typically used with business-like enterprises with few if any alternative explanations for observed outcomes
Controlling for influence of external factors

- Identify forces external to the program and beyond its control that are expected to affect its outcomes (e.g., climate, economic conditions, actions by third parties)
- Use design elements that control for alternative explanations, and multiple indicators
- Build a strong argument
Randomized control-group impact evaluations

Assess whether the program produced the desired change in outcomes by:

- Comparing outcomes of those randomly assigned to participate with outcomes for those assigned not to participate

Typically used to assess impact of clearly defined interventions where coverage is limited and random assignment is practical and ethical
Where random assignment is not well-suited

Random assignment is not possible

- Entitlement programs; laws
- Broadcast media
- Negative events

...or is not practical

- Staff refuse to use
- Rare events or long time lags
- Broad, flexible policies
Example of a rigorous alternative: Interrupted time series design

Assess whether the program produced the desired change in outcomes by:

- Comparing multiple measures of the desired outcome before and after the intervention
- Statistically controlling for alternative causal explanations (external factors)

Typically used to assess laws and regulatory programs where everyone is affected at the same time
How do we determine the quality of an evaluation?

- Evaluation questions address important issues for program or policy decisions
- Objectives address stakeholders’ concerns
- Evaluation approach matches the questions
- Data are collected and analyzed according to professional standards
- Conclusions are built on strong logical arguments
For more information


- Lists of evaluation resources  [http://www.fedeval.net](http://www.fedeval.net)

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