

KEY QUESTIONS FOR EVALUATION PLANNING

Evaluation is a critical part of effective program planning. There are many excellent models and guides for designing evaluations (see website lists on pages 5, 6 & 11 to access the CYFERNet's State Strengthening Guide and the Urban Institute's sample of logic models, for example). From talking with a variety of program managers and from my own years of experience as a program coordinator, I found myself following a simple pattern of questions in order to help create evaluation plans matched to program needs and questions. I took as inspiration a chart I learned in graduate school when designing my dissertation. It was called a "five-column worksheet" and was meant to lay out a research question in simple terms, list the sources of data, describe analytical techniques, briefly illustrate possible results and predict answers to ensure the answer matches the original question. The following steps can be found, in one form or another, in almost every evaluation book you might read. I have tried to put a "practical" spin on the questions to encourage program planners' insight into the immediate application for the answers. Going through all the questions before a program starts is also "best practices" modeling for including evaluation as part of program planning.

A typical experience for me when I have consultation meetings about evaluation is that people want a measure or a survey or ask for help with data analysis and a final report. The purpose of the first question is to remind us to begin at the beginning:

Step 1: "What's the Question?"

Define Purpose of Program and Audience of Evaluation

- Why are we doing the program? Why are we doing an evaluation?
- Who wants to know what we've done? Who will use the information?
- What's the point?
- What do we want to accomplish?

Step 1 is the most important step. It is often overlooked, skipped or glossed over. My preference is to use language that is easy to understand. (i.e., "How would I explain this to my grandmother?") Step 1 has two parts: What's the point and who cares? This step also involves getting agreement on the project or program. If you share your answers to this with others involved in the program or evaluation and ask for their input, you often discover that you're not speaking the same language or that you don't share the same expectations. Now is the time to discover that, not after the program and evaluation are finished.

Even if you think you're clear in your own head about "the question," trying to explain it to someone else challenges that clarity. It's good practice to communicate these ideas to others anyway, so Step 1 is not a waste of time to consider.

Step 2 involves some nitty gritty concepts related to Step 1.

Step 2: "What Information Will Help Answer the Question?"

Identify Target Outcomes/Impacts (changes in program participants, changes in system?) and Target Audience(s) of Program

- What are the desired results? * *Compared to what/whom?
- e.g., Social, Economic, Environmental, Political (program & policies), Cognitive (public opinion, awareness, knowledge, attitude, skills, aspirations), Health (quality of life?), Behavioral, etc.
- What do we want folks to DO, VALUE, FEEL, KNOW?

In Step 2, it's good to start with "common language" and keep asking "What does this word mean?" "What do I mean by that?" (This becomes really important to help with Step 4). This is the time to do or remind yourself of the literature review where Content and Theory become important. You can think of this as the groundwork or solid footing of evidence and ideas on which your program and evaluation are based.

When you ask "Compared to what?" you introduce the idea of control groups or comparison groups and evaluation design. This step is covered more thoroughly later (Steps 3 and 4), but it's not too soon to think through some of the initial points. Look back at your original question. Does it imply some sort of comparison? (e.g., "Participants will know how to identify and prevent date rape situations." Compared to what? Compared to what they knew when they started the program? Compared to people who didn't do the program?)

Now that you have an idea of "what" you're looking at, you need to think of "where" and "who" as sources of data:

Step 3: "Who or What will Provide the Data?"

Identify Sources of Data

- Who will we ask?
- Who can answer our questions and provide evidence?
- Where else can we get information (e.g., archival data)?
- What are human subjects/IRB requirements?

Step 3 is the time to begin thinking of the design of the evaluation. Who are the best, most logical sources for gathering information related to Step 2 topics of interest? You don't have to limit your sources to individuals. Sometimes someone else has already gathered the data and you just need to find out if you can access it. The sources of the data should match your question/goal/purpose for the project. For example, if your purpose is to increase learning in child participants in an after-school program, they are your first best source for data. Teachers and parents can also be good sources, but they are further from the child. Grade point average may or may not be a relevant source if, for example, your program focuses exclusively on hands-on science activities.

Step 3 is a place where you really start to see trade-off decisions. In the example above, you may not have the time or money to survey every student in a large program. Or you only have enough money to include parents OR teachers, not both. This is also the step to begin thinking about ethical issues such as the necessity for Human Subjects/Institutional Review Board procedures. If you think you will want to share anything of what you have learned about your program from the evaluation with other professionals (e.g., at state, regional or national meetings), you must go through this process.

For more information on the human subjects process at The University of Arizona, go to their website at http://vpr2.admin.arizona.edu/human_subjects/

Step 4: "How Will We Gather the Data?" Specify Measures (tools) and Sampling Design

- How will we know "it" when we see "it?"*
- How are we going to know if we were successful?
- Develop components of surveys
- Consider what data you might gather before, during, immediately after and "long" after the program
- Consider breadth/depth/accuracy needs when planning sampling design

*Combine previous research + commonsense conceptions to create an exhaustive list of all possible indicators and consider what "it" is NOT.

Now we start to get knee-deep into design issues. This is a point at which you may wish to involve a professional evaluator to help you make the best decisions for accuracy/cost trade-offs and to help design instruments for data collection. Step 4 is often the hardest and most time consuming step. The more rigorous your question, the more expertise and time it takes to develop instruments, pilot test, analyze data, etc. Step 4 is much easier if you're really clear on your question and if someone else has already done research/developed instruments that closely match your question. Frequently, this is the part program planners want first, although you can see how important the first three steps are to prepare for this part.

Once **a)** you have a fairly clear plan in mind, **b)** you know what questions you will ask of whom, and **c)** you're almost ready to start the process, it's time to double-check by anticipating possible outcomes of your results.

Step 5: What Might the Results Look Like? Imagine Actual Results

How are we going to report the data?

Step 5 is sometimes hard to do and some people are reticent to "hypothesize" or make these predictions because they're worried about biasing results. My point is that this is necessary to do before Step 6 and can save a misguided evaluation plan before it's too late. The rationale for including Step 5 and 6 comes from "famous" evaluation war stories such as the following: (An evaluator lamenting to another evaluator or a program coordinator lamenting to a co-worker) "You know we spent all that time on those surveys and entered all that data and wrote a really good report and then the "boss" (or board or whomever commissioned the evaluation) said it wasn't what they wanted to know!" How frustrating is that? Sage advice: check meaning and expectations all through the process. Step 5 and 6 are just logical extensions of that advice and can save you money and decrease your stress levels.

Step 6: "Will the Results Answer the Original Question?"

Imagine Possible Answers

- Make predictions in order to cross-check with steps 1-5
- Do these answers logically follow from the questions, issues, and procedures?
- Who will receive the report? Will it answer their questions?
- Will the results be defensible?
- What "threats" will damage the integrity of the data and the conclusions we want to draw?

Step 6 is often not done until final data is collected and entered and analyzed. By asking the question up front, you actively seek to ensure a match between methods and question/goal/purpose. See Step 5 discussion for rationale for both steps.

Step 7 is not always necessary, but will likely happen naturally once you've bothered to complete all the other Steps. The issues here might have already come up in other discussions, but this is a good time to get it all down on paper if you haven't already done so.

Step 7: Review Steps 1-6 Draft Implementation Plan

- We know where we want to go, so how do we get there?
- Who will gather the data? (Plan for buy-in ahead of time)
- Who will do the evaluation? (A team? An individual? An outside consultant?)
- What resources will be necessary to accomplish our goals? (e.g., Time, \$, People)

Step 7 is often necessary for preparing budgets for grant proposals, for example. If you've done all the other steps, this is your summary which you can present to others. They'll be very impressed, trust me.

Completion of these steps is time consuming, but the rewards are great:

1. *It makes the process/questions clearer both for the program planners and others.*
2. *It helps for budget clarity about what it REALLY takes to do a good evaluation that will answer the questions posed by the program.*
3. *It allows informed decision making if compromises/trade-offs need to be made.*
4. *Evaluation planning ideally is embedded in program planning.*

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