

Program Evaluation 101 (part I)

What is program evaluation?

Patton (1997) defines program evaluation as “The systematic collection and analysis of information about program activities, characteristics, and outcomes to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness and/or inform decisions about future programming.”

He explains that program evaluation:

- 1) Includes the systematic collection and analysis of information
- 2) Focuses on a broad range of topics (accessibility, comprehensiveness, integration, cost, efficiency, effectiveness)
- 3) Is designed for a variety of uses (management, accountability, planning).

What can program evaluation information tell us?

Before committing human resources, time and money to conducting a program evaluation it is important to determine how the information gathered will benefit the agency/organization. Program evaluation can provide insights regarding:

- The impact that the program is having upon clients and other key stakeholders;
- Whether or not the program is achieving its intended goals;
- What is “working well” and what “needs to be strengthened” within the program;
- How effectively and/or efficiently programs are operating;
- Current or emerging factors that could potential undermine the success of the program.

How can program evaluation information be used?

Sadly, program evaluation information is often underutilized by agencies/organizations. Many think that program evaluation is done at the request of the funder. Both internal and external stakeholders can use program evaluation information effectively in order to:

Provide a “clear picture” of the program

A program evaluation can help provide clarity in describing the program, defining its scope and outcomes. This description can be used in preparing proposals for funding and in-kind support, marketing, etc.

Support decision-making about the program

Program evaluation data can inform decisions about the target audiences, clients, and/or potential partners. It can also provide evidence for expanding or downsizing a program. This information can be useful to front-line workers, management and, in some cases, governing bodies.

Clarify alignment of the program with the agency’s/organization’s strategic direction

Over time, a program offered by an agency/organization may become “out of sync” with the entity’s strategic direction. Program evaluations can help determine the whether a program “fits” with the mission, mandate, and objectives of the host agency/organization.

Assess quality and support continuous improvement

Program evaluations provide an opportunity to measure the quality of programs and/or services, ideally from the perspective of multiple stakeholders. This information can be used to establish performance measures that will support continuous improvement.

Determine the relative costs and benefits of program models

Program evaluations offer an opportunity to review the best possible use of resources to achieve intended program outcomes. Decisions about alternative approaches to program delivery, clients served, etc. can be made based on data collected as part of the program evaluation.

Demonstrate accountability

While there is a general appreciation of the importance of being accountable for the use of funds in the delivery of programs and services, accountability for program results is of equal importance. Those providing resources to programs (funds or in-kind) can reasonably expect that these resources will be used effectively and efficiently for the intended purpose. Program evaluations can provide evidence of the appropriate stewardship of resources and the impact on those served.

Qualitative versus quantitative?

Quantitative research methods were originally developed in the natural sciences to study natural phenomena. Qualitative research methods originated in the social sciences and enable researchers to study social and cultural phenomena.

Quantitative research methods can help researchers measure levels of activity, achievement and success. It can also be used to quantify change. Qualitative research methods are designed to help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live. Although most researchers use either quantitative or qualitative research methods, some researchers have suggested combining one or more research methods in a single study (called triangulation).

What type of evaluation is needed?

Programs require different types of evaluations depending on the intended use of the information.

Program planning

Research may be undertaken to inform a decision about whether to modify an existing program or develop a new program in response to community needs. In this situation, a needs assessment may more specifically define this need and clarify how a program intervention would address it. A needs assessment will usually include a review of existing social indicator data. Opinions of key informants and experts on this need might also be sought. Perspectives from participants in related programs or program participants should be included as part of data collection.

Program design

Once the need for a program is confirmed, the process of program design is the next logical step. An evaluability assessment will help clarify the issue and/or problem that the program is to address and the best approaches/methods to do so. The construction of a program logic model is a key element in an evaluability assessment. The logic model helps clarify available resources, program goals/objectives and activities, and the changes that will occur as a result of this program. Many parties that provide funding for programs require a program logic model as part of the grant application or proposal submission process.

Process evaluation

A process evaluation is of use to those internal to the agency/organization. It requires gathering and analyzing data that will inform program operation and implementation. The key focus is addressing questions of efficiency and productivity in program/service delivery. A process evaluation can identify baseline data that then can be used to monitor performance over time. Data will be drawn from multiple sources with an emphasis on quantifiable measures.

Outcome evaluation

Many providers of programs/services in the nonprofit sector are familiar with outcome evaluation. Outcomes are impacts (hopefully positive) on those people who the organization wants to benefit from the intervention, program or service. The key focus is addressing questions of program effectiveness and success. Data will be drawn from many sources and is typically a blend of quantitative and qualitative measures.

References

Patton, M.Q. (1997). *Utilization focused evaluation: The new century text*. (3rd Ed.). Beverly Hills, CA : Sage Pub

Acknowledgement

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