ACER’s Evaluation Guide

Evaluation

To contribute to change, a program needs to be evaluated from the beginning. How do you know if a something is working? There is a greater chance to demonstrate success if you can show an improvement. You should be thinking of evaluating a program before the program begins.

Hints:
1. Plan the evaluation
2. Focus the evaluation to address key information needs
3. Keep it practical

The general steps to accomplish an outcomes-based evaluation include to:

1. Identify the major outcomes that you want to examine. You might reflect on your goals or objectives (the overall purpose of your partnership/program) and ask yourself what impact you will have/have had on your students as you work towards your goals. You need to also examine the activities the students are engaged in and whether they are meeting their goals.

Key evaluation questions: 3 or 5 questions

1. What are you doing?	Activities
2. What do you hope to achieve by these activities?	Goals
3. How can you measure this?	Measures

2. For each outcome, specify what observable measures, or indicators, will suggest that you're achieving that outcome. This is often the most important step in outcomes-based evaluation. However, it is often the most challenging and even confusing step, too, because you're suddenly going from a rather intangible concept to specific activities. One way of tackling this is to ask: “What behaviours would I need to see in order to know that the program has worked?”

3. Identify what information is needed to show these indicators, e.g. You willl need to know how many students went through the program or were not attending school in the beginning.

4. Decide how that information can be efficiently and realistically gathered.

5. Analyse the data and report the findings

Overview of Methods to Collect Information

The following table provides an overview of the major methods used for collecting data during evaluations.

Method	Overall Purpose	Advantages	Challenges
questionnaires, surveys, checklists	when you need to quickly and/or easily get lots of information from people in a non threatening way	-can complete anonymous -inexpensive to administer -easy to compare and analyse -administer to many people -can get lots of data -many sample questionnaires already exist	-might not get careful feedback -wording can bias responses -are impersonal -may need sampling expert - data tend not to be indepth
interviews	when you want to fully understand someone's impressions or experiences, or learn more about their answers to questionnaires	-get full range and depth of information -develops relationship with client -can be flexible with client	-can take much time -can be hard to analyse and compare -can be costly -interviewer can bias responses
documentation review	when you want an impression of how program operates without interrupting the program; is from review of applications, finances, memos, minutes, etc.	-get comprehensive and historical information -doesn't interrupt program or student's routine in program -information already exists -few biases about information	-often takes much time -information may be incomplete -need to be quite clear about what looking for -data restricted to what already exists
observation	to gather accurate information about how a program actually operates, particularly about processes	-view operations of a program as they are actually occurring -can adapt to events as they occur	-can be difficult to interpret seen behaviours -can be complex to categorize observations -can influence behaviours of program participants -can be expensive
focus groups	explore a topic in depth through group discussion, e.g., about reactions to an experience or suggestion, understanding common complaints, etc.; useful in evaluation and marketing	-quickly and reliably get common impressions -can be efficient way to get much range and depth of information in short time - can convey key information about programs	-can be hard to analyse responses -need good facilitator for safety and closure -difficult to schedule 6-8 people together, -does not allow generalisation
case studies	to fully understand or depict client's experiences in a program, and conduct comprehensive examination through cross comparison of cases	-fully depicts client's experience in program input, process and results -powerful means to portray program to outsiders	-usually quite time consuming to collect, organize and describe -represents depth of information, rather than breadth -limited capacity to generalise

Selecting Which Methods to Use

The overall goal in selecting evaluation method(s) is to get the most useful information to key decision makers in the most cost-effective and realistic fashion. Consider the following questions:

1. What information is needed to make current decisions about a partnership or program?

2. Of this information, how much can be collected and analysed in a low-cost and practical manner, e.g., using questionnaires, surveys and checklists?

3. How accurate will the information be (reference the above table for disadvantages of methods)?

4. Will the methods get all of the needed information?

5. What additional methods should and could be used if additional information is needed?

6. Will the information appear as credible to decision makers, stakeholders etc?

7. Will the nature of the audience conform to the methods, e.g., will they fill out questionnaires carefully, engage in interviews or focus groups, let you examine their documentations, etc.?

8. Who can administer the methods now or is training required?

9. How can the information be analysed?

The evaluator should use a combination of methods, for example, a questionnaire to quickly collect a great deal of information from a lot of people, and then interviews to get more in-depth information from certain respondents to the questionnaires. Perhaps case studies could then be used for more in-depth analysis of unique and notable cases, e.g., those who benefited or not from the program, those who quit the program, etc.

Questions related to your partnership

1. Have the goals you established at the beginning changed?
2. Are the goals beginning being met?
3. Are the goals linked to the activities and the needs of the students and the outcomes?
4. What outcomes can be measured?
5. How do you know if the partnership is effective?
6. How do you know which activities are effective?