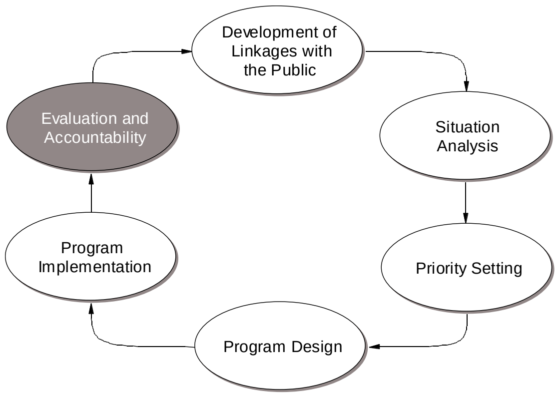
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY — COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE



Evaluation and Accountability

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Evaluation can be described as a systematic process for judging the value or worth of something (Worthen, Sanders, and Fitzpatrick, 1997). In general, evaluation involves establishing ***criteria***, collecting ***evidence***, and making a ***judgment***. A specific type of evaluation called ***program evaluation*** focuses on assessing either the quality and/or effectiveness of a program.

Earlier in this series of publications we defined a program as a sequence of intentional actions and events organized in a manner that they result in valued outcomes for a clearly defined audience. Program evaluation can focus either on the actions and events which comprise the program or the outcomes they produce.

Process Evaluation versus Outcome Evaluation

As we expand our understanding of evaluation, it is important to make a distinction between two broad types of evaluation. One type of evaluation focuses on evaluating how the program was implemented. The other focuses on documenting the results. These two types of evaluation are discussed in more detail below.

- **Process Evaluation** focuses on how the program was implemented. It often provides us with important information about how the program might be improved. For example, we may want to know if the learning experiences provided were appropriate for the target audience. Did the event promotional materials reach the right audience? Were the handouts appropriate or add to the learning experience? If not, what changes are needed to make the educational event more successful? Process evaluation helps answer those questions. Process evaluation can be a catalyst for continual learning and growth.

- **Outcome Evaluation** focuses on documenting program results – the “impact” of programs. Outcome evaluation helps us determine how individuals, groups, and communities are different as a result of what we did. It examines the change that our efforts produced. Criteria for outcome evaluation are often embedded in the outcome statements found in a program’s logic model. The initial (KOSA, intermediate Practice), and long-term (SEEC) outcomes define what success looks like.

Recent attention to documenting program results has caused some people to view outcome evaluation as being more valuable than process evaluation. Yet, many stakeholders want or need information produced by process evaluation. For example, a parent contemplating sending a child to summer camp may want to know about youth-counselor ratios, the quality of facilities, or the reactions of previous campers to the program. Such information is produced primarily by process evaluation.

Process and outcome evaluations serve different purposes, but *both* are essential. Suppose an outcome evaluation tells us that our efforts fell short of achieving the desired results. In such a case, process evaluation might tell us why. Conversely, process evaluation may also help us identify approaches, strategies, processes, and actions that contributed to a program's success. In essence, outcome and process evaluation are inextricably intertwined.

Deciding What to Evaluate

Before moving forward with evaluation activities, a decision needs to be made regarding what to evaluate. Unfortunately, deciding what to evaluate can sometimes be more difficult than actually conducting the evaluation.

Obviously, there are many things about a program that could be evaluated. If we focus on examining the process by which the program was delivered, what elements of that process should be examined? If we decide to evaluate whether or not the desired outcomes were achieved, what level of outcome does it make sense to measure?

Revisiting the Program Logic Model

The first step in deciding what to evaluate is to revisit the program logic model that was developed for the program. Since the program logic model graphically depicts how a program is ***supposed*** to operate, it will likely stimulate some thought about what should be evaluated.

Either by yourself, with the design team, or with a small group of people, review the logic model for the program and make notes of items you feel should be examined. For example, you may want to know if printed materials were appropriate for the target audience. After looking at the desired outcomes for the program, you may decide that you are interested in finding out if the learning which occurred in the program participants translated into behavioral changes. Continue reviewing the logic model until you have developed a list of perhaps a half dozen evaluation questions.

It is unlikely that all of the questions on the list will ultimately be answered. Some things are too costly to evaluate. Some are too time consuming. Some things we simply don't know how to evaluate. Consequently, the goal of evaluation is to provide maximally useful information given the setting and constraints within which the program operates. What is actually evaluated is based on ***what makes sense*** for a particular program. One important consideration in deciding what ultimately gets evaluated is stakeholder needs for information.

Stakeholder Needs for Information

A stakeholder can be defined as anyone who has a ***stake*** or interest in your efforts. In general, stakeholders want to know if your efforts merit their endorsement, investment, or involvement. Stakeholders need information from you that helps them make that assessment. Some typical stakeholder groups include the County Extension Council, funders, administrators, collaborators, elected officials, volunteers, business leaders, and potential program participants. You are also a stakeholder with certain information needs. Every program or community effort will have its own set of stakeholders.

It is important to note that stakeholders may use different criteria to determine what constitutes a high quality or successful effort. Some stakeholders want to know if the funds devoted to your effort were used in an appropriate manner. Another stakeholder group may want to know the characteristics of the people who participated in the program. Still other stakeholders many want specific information about how those people benefited from their involvement.

It is often beneficial to make a list of the key stakeholders for a particular program. Then identify the specific information needs of each stakeholder. Compare the list of information needs to the list of evaluation questions generated earlier. Focus your evaluation on the questions which, when answered, provide stakeholders with information useful to them.

The Evaluation Plan

It is important to recognize that evaluation activities actually begin in the design phase of program development. Soon after the logic model is developed it is time to start developing an evaluation plan for the program. An evaluation plan is developed for each evaluation question. For each evaluation ***question***, an ***indicator***, a ***method***, and a ***timeline*** are specified.

- Evaluation ***questions*** determine the focus of an evaluation. They identify what it is we want to learn through our evaluation activities. Evaluation questions can be written for both process and outcome evaluations. Below is a plausible evaluation question for a program which encourages physical activity.

  Did previously inactive program participants become physically active as a result of their participation in the program?

- ***Indicators*** are the specific things that we look at to determine the answers to our evaluation questions. They tend to define how success will be measured. While knowledge of a particular subject may be a desired outcome, a score on a standardized test may be an indicator of knowledge. In the example above, one could conceive of many different indicators of physical activity. Below is one example.

  Participants will be considered physically active if they achieve a minimum of 30 minutes of sustained physical activity per day at least five days a week for eight weeks.

- ***Methods*** include the procedures, techniques, and processes used to measure the indicators as defined. Some popular evaluation methods include tests, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, activity logs, and observation. Evaluation methods can be quantitative or qualitative in nature. Quantitative methods produce data which can be expressed numerically. Qualitative methods are used gather data that is not easily quantifiable. . Here is a sample description of a method used to record physical activity. (For more information on a variety of evaluation methods go to http://www.ca.uky.edu/agpsd/soregion.htm)

  Program participants first complete a baseline assessment of physical activity. Upon commencement of their activity regimen, participants begin recording physical activity in a daily log. A follow-up questionnaire is administered at the end of the program.

- The ***timeline*** states when evaluation activities will occur. For example, some data collection activities need to take place while the program is being conducted. Tests of knowledge may be administered at the conclusion of instructional activities. But a follow-up questionnaire of behavior may need to be mailed to participants six-weeks after the program has ended. Here's an example of an item which may appear on the evaluation timeline for a physical activity program.

  The follow-up questionnaire will be administered eight weeks after the baseline assessment of physical activity is completed.

Communicating Evaluation Results

Earlier in this publication we discussed how stakeholder information needs influence what we choose to evaluate. But our responsibility to stakeholders does not end with conducting the evaluation. We must then figure out how to best get the results of our evaluation into the hands of the people who need it.

One important stakeholder group which must not be overlooked is the County Extension Council (CEC). Early in the program development process, the CEC was involved in identifying critical issues which Extension might address through its programming efforts. Program plans are a contract, of sorts, with the people of the county to deliver programming relevant to those issues. We must make sure that we complete the program development cycle by providing appropriate feedback to the people who sanctioned our work. By doing so we further strengthen our linkages with the public.

The method you choose for getting information to stakeholders will vary according to stakeholder needs. Some stakeholders will want a brief written summary of accomplishments. Others may want a more detailed report. Still others may prefer an oral presentation

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