

# Community-Based Program Evaluation: Implications for Program Developers

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**N**ationwide, Extension works to improve the quality of life for children, youth, and their families through a multitude of programs aimed at a variety of social concerns, including illiteracy, unwanted pregnancy, poverty, family violence, and substance abuse. Many of these programs advocate for comprehensive, asset-based, collaborative services.

As Extension programming moves from deficit-based program models which focus on what people do not possess to identifying and mobilizing strengths, the difficulties and dilemmas related to documenting program effectiveness remain. In many cases, the research that would lead to such documentation is viewed as an obstacle rather than an asset. This paper highlights key issues pertaining to evaluation of community-based programs for children, youth, and families; discusses challenges common to Extension educators and program evaluators; and cites common misunderstandings of the evaluation process.

## Key Evaluation Issues

### Ongoing Process

Evaluation is most effective when viewed as an on-going learning process (Gray, 1993). In an ever-changing, resource-limited environment, the need for evaluation goes deeper than program improvement, quality, and effectiveness. It ensures the sustainability and survival of programs. The broad-based organizational learning

that results from evaluation allows the organization to assess its progress and make changes to better achieve its mission.

### Management Tool

Too often evaluation is viewed as research rather than a means to improve management processes and procedures. The process of evaluation, asking questions, gathering data to answer the questions, and making decisions based on the answers, improves programs and ensures that they are meeting organizational objectives. Evaluation works for the organization.

### Systematic Approach

Internal processes not apparent to service recipients or those outside the organization underlie most community-based programs. Valid evaluation must attend to internal processes and observable outcomes. It must evaluate the effectiveness of programs and services, as well as the internal systems that support them.

### Developmental Evaluation

Rather than a single event or a periodic report card, evaluation is a developmental process. The developmental process approach provides a long-range view and places project development and evaluation into an interactive cycle, such as program planning, implementation, evaluation, learning, and back to program planning (Johnson, 1993).

### **Collaborative Evaluation**

Evaluation requires collaboration within the organization and with external partners. Effective evaluations are conducted in collaboration with many others, including program participants and service recipients, program staff and supervisors, advisory boards, and other program partners. The evaluator works as facilitator, engaging program staff and partners in assessment (Patton, 1994). Implicit in this collaboration is continuous feedback that provides findings for immediate use.

### **No Need for Mystery**

Since evaluations are more effective when ownership is broad-based, methods must be user-friendly and accessible. Full disclosure of evaluation processes to all involved in the program is important. Although this approach takes the mystery out of evaluation, it maximizes the expertise needed to understand the program and change or maintain it (Shaw & Weiss, 1995).

### **Vertical and Horizontal Complexity**

Comprehensive community-based initiatives and their supporting component systems are particularly difficult to evaluate because they are complex, broad-based, multi-dimensional, interactive, multi-system interventions (Connell et al., 1995). In many communities interaction occurs across systems, as well as between levels within systems. Program complexity is horizontal and vertical, resulting in uncertainty about what to measure within and between systems. In addition, it is not well known where and how interventions result in change, as social science is only beginning to identify the forces that influence change in children, youth, and adults.

### **Contextual Factors**

A host of political, economic, demographic, and geographic factors bears directly on the success

of community-based programs and the programs have little power to affect those factors. These uncontrollables must be recognized so they are not mistaken for program limitations.

### **False Dichotomies in Design**

As with all research, there are differing opinions about which methods are scientific. Mistakenly, various methods are labeled either “scientific” or “soft.” In the instance of evaluation, this argument often centers on the use of control/comparison groups. Effective evaluation is multi-method and appropriate to the program under scrutiny. There are many examples in which the control group design adds little to the understanding of program success and may even be misleading (Levitan, 1992). There also are cases in which program evaluation can best be obtained through the use of a comparison group. No matter what methods are used, determining whether changes in children, youth, families, and communities are the direct result of the intervention remains a challenge.



### **Evaluation is Intervention**

Evaluations have greater validity when those involved recognize their own impact on the program. One of the great myths of social and behavioral research is that it is objective. However, because measurements and tests originate in the mind of the evaluator or researcher, they reflect the worldview of that researcher and may approximate something more absolute or valid. Applied evaluation is a research situation in which the investigator becomes involved with the object of the study. Of necessity, evaluators often become entrenched in the program and thus become part of the intervention.

Evaluation itself is an intervention. Programs change as evaluators “take the pulse” of program policies and practices. As evaluations unfold, those involved in the program respond in ways that accommodate the evaluations. Survey contents, for example, provide cues about what programs should be accomplishing and procedures that should be followed. Scheduled site visits also signal that certain program activities should be accelerated. It is important to



recognize the intervention nature of evaluation. Recognized and accepted, the evaluation intervention can be accounted for in tracking the effectiveness of programs. In process evaluations, the evaluation itself is a desired intervention; it may be a powerful tool in achieving program goals (Perloff, 1979).

### **Useful Evaluations**

As applied research, evaluation results must be tied to program needs and evaluation approaches should be in response to an agreed-upon set of goals. Customer-centered evaluations tend to increase the probability that findings will be used (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994).

### **Flexibility**

Although a flexible evaluation approach is a concern to evaluators who prefer a quantitative, strict control group design, programs themselves are usually flexible (ever-changing and emergent) and thus valid evaluation must be as well. This is especially true with complex, multi-site programs. Effective evaluation is a mix of art and science, and as such must use the most exact tools available in creative and emergent ways (Rossi & Freeman, 1993).

### **Individualized Approaches**

Substantial diversity exists in large-scale program efforts that cut across communities, states, and regions. More often than not, the “same” intervention has varying results. For that reason, evaluation designs and practices must allow for variations and be prepared to take more individualized approaches. The validity of an evaluation is enhanced as methods and approaches are matched to field situations (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994).

## Identify and Understand the Intervention

Often the intended intervention of a program is ill-matched to the actual intervention. In these cases, the measures used in evaluation are designed to assess something other than the actual intervention. Therefore, evaluation results may have little use. A first step to overcoming this pitfall is clarifying program goals and the activities that support those goals. Since a major goal of evaluation is addressing “merit” (Scriven, 1991), understanding the actual intervention the program contains is a significant matter.

## Specify Realistic Outcomes

While programs may be intended to accomplish great and grand things for people and their communities, programmers must be realistic about what their interventions can accomplish. When goals far outrun activities, programs

appear to fail when in fact they are only failing to meet unrealistic goals. A broad sense of mission is important, but program goals and objectives must be precise to inform the evaluation process (Pietrzak et al., 1990).

## Conclusion

The sustainability of programming for children, youth, and family relies on accountability—documenting program impact on the intended audience, assessing outcomes, improving the program through a continuous process of providing immediate feedback to stakeholders, and developing the capacity of staff to institutionalize a self-assessment process.

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