

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONDUCTING PROGRAM EVALUATION



Evaluate no program before its time. The degree to which program services are established is important: program “age and stage” help determine an evaluation approach. Young programs should focus more on start-up concerns such as recruitment, implementation, and staff training. Observe the program in action, interview key stakeholders, conduct focus groups with participants, and use pre/post measures to determine whether the current style of implementation appears to be leading to positive outcomes. Older, more stable programs can begin to tackle more complex outcome evaluations. For example, Girls Inc. discovered that it was less than optimal to evaluate WILL POWER/WON’T POWER while continuing to develop and refine the curriculum. Director of Research Dr. Heather Johnston Nicholson reports, “Girls Inc. now prefers to conduct experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations later in the life of a program—when the program has been implemented many times, girls like it and most affiliates offer it, the curriculum is published, and the training design is well established.”

Address evaluation as an integral component of program planning right from the start.

It is important to meet early on with evaluators to discuss what the program is trying to accomplish and determine which goals and outcomes are most critical to the program’s success. For example, in most 4-H and Extension programs, the evaluator is at the same land-grant university and serves as part of the project team. When evaluators do not get brought in early enough, they can feel like third parties and may have difficulty grasping the context and full scope of the program they are attempting to evaluate. It is important for all members of the program team to have an evaluation mindset.

Ideally, design multi-site evaluations so that the exact same program is being conducted in all the sites. According to CS² evaluator Patricia O’Driscoll, “It is much easier when you are comparing apples to apples. A program like CS² looks very different in each of the four sites, so it’s been complex to evaluate the overall impact.” Similarly, Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. encountered major obstacles when attempting to evaluate 17 very different *P.A.V.E.* programs. In fact, a survey instrument that had been designed for use across sites was deemed unusable in many of the sites.

Before embarking on a new evaluation project, both national and local organizations should ensure that they have the capacity to implement the project as designed.

National organizations should select strong local partners who have the capacity to manage the rigors of an experimental or quasi-experimental research design.

When undertaking a complex outcomes evaluation, make sure you have strong and independent evaluation expertise. Girls Inc.'s Director of Research Dr. Heather Johnston Nicholson recommends hiring an outside evaluator even when you have strong internal research capacity. External evaluators bring additional expertise and objectivity to the project.

Consider replicating a program with proven evaluation results. For example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reviews and promotes programs that have been proven to prevent or reduce substance abuse. Both ACROSS AGES and FAST have been designated as model programs by SAMHSA; as a result, they are now being replicated in many sites throughout the nation.

Maintain quality assurance when replicating a research-based program. According to FAST evaluator Dr. Bettina Friese, “What so often happens is the second these programs get implemented in the real world, they don’t work anymore. FAST has set up a system where we constantly monitor and make sure that the program is being implemented with fidelity.” Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) has faced a similar challenge with the ongoing implementation of PROJECT LEARN. BGCA Vice President, Carter Savage, has observed that local staff sometimes get trained on PROJECT LEARN then—with great eagerness and good intentions—go back to their Clubs and deliver the program in a manner that is quite different from the original model. In those situations, it is hard to determine whether the adaptation is effective, because it is not the program model that was evaluated. For this reason, sites that are participating in the BGCA evaluations or that receive funding from BGCA, are monitored to ensure program fidelity.

Use positive evaluation results as a marketing opportunity. As shown repeatedly in the case studies, being able to offer a program that is already undergoing a significant evaluation, or has already documented outcomes for youth, greatly enhances an organization’s reputation, as well as its ability to attract collaborations and funding. After the evaluation of WILL POWER/WON’T POWER, Girls Inc. of Metro Dallas expanded its operation at many levels, including gaining an entrée into area schools. When local Girl Scout councils began implementing *P.A.V.E.*, they were no longer seen by potential partners as just the “cookie ladies.” Similarly, Dr. Steven Schinke reports that the evaluation of PROJECT LEARN created more favorable publicity for Boys and Girls Clubs of America than any of the other research projects he had overseen.



Build time into your evaluation for human subject approval, when needed. L.I.F.E. evaluator Dr. Elizabeth Dunn encountered significant delays in trying to get approval to do research with human subjects at the Potosi Correctional Center. This normally time-consuming process became even more complicated because incarcerated persons are a different category of human subject than children and youth. It is critical to plan carefully for this approval process and to build adequate time into the project.

Use information learned from an evaluation to improve the program.

The JUMP-START program used focus groups, interviews, and written participant surveys to find out what was working and what could be done differently in the future. This approach also gave youth a voice and a sense of ownership.

Fine-tune evaluation methods and instruments so they are appropriate for particular youth audiences.

This can be a challenging task, especially when young people have special needs. SEEDS TO SUCCESS evaluators and staff at Rutgers Cooperative Research & Extension (RCRE) made a special effort to find or adapt assessment tools—such as the SCANS Skills and Competencies Checklist—that require youth to perform a set of skills rather than take a written test.

Provide additional support for qualitative evaluation that allows organizations to learn from other collaborative efforts.

While many different stakeholders, including funders, strongly encourage collaboration, they rarely allocate sufficient resources to evaluate those efforts. According to CS² evaluator Patricia O’Driscoll, “This level of evaluation takes time, and there is not necessarily a linear correlation to student outcomes. I see a lot of partnering going on, but not a lot of sharing of how things were done, what worked, and what didn’t work.”

Follow up with program participants for as long as possible. In the PROJECT LEARN evaluation, there was little impact on attendance until the final months of the evaluation. Two and one half years into the intervention, non-Boys and Girls Club participants began missing an increasing number of school days; furthermore, this happened at a point in their lives when they were older and facing tough decisions about issues such as sex and drugs.

Think of evaluation as a continuous process that is never complete. In 2000—15 years after the original project—Girls Inc. entered into an even more sophisticated random assignment study of WILL POWER/WON’T POWER and other components of the comprehensive Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy Project. According to Girls Inc. Director of Research Dr. Heather Johnston Nicholson, “Our affiliates loved being able to quote the evaluation report *Truth, Trust and Technology*, but by 1999 they were telling us that was old news. The new study, *Girls Shape the Future*, is being implemented with five affiliates in Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, and Texas. Mathematica Policy Research has been hired as the independent evaluator. *Girls Shape the Future* will be completed in 2010, having followed some 800 girls from middle school through the 11th grade to see if early intervention can help them stay in school and avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.”

