

Data collection

Evaluation resources from Wilder Research

In program evaluation, we usually rely on a combination of existing data and new data to help us answer our evaluation questions. Existing data refers to things like student survey data, police records, and other information collected from outside groups. New data are what you will have after you administer a survey or conduct a focus group. This document is intended to help guide you through the process of collecting new data.

When collecting new information, it is important to select an approach that is manageable and that will provide you with accurate information. There isn't one ideal way to gather information. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. It is important that you select a strategy that makes sense for your program. In this case, most of the strategies have been determined in advance by your evaluation consultants. Summaries of these strategies are included below:

Data collection methods

- **Surveys or questionnaires:** collecting information from respondents without direct contact. Paper versions of a survey may be handed out or mailed. You might also ask people to complete surveys electronically via email or internet.
- **Interviews:** collecting information verbally from informants, using a question and answer format. Interviews can be conducted in different ways, such as in person or over the phone. Interviews can be fairly unstructured, allowing you to be flexible in deciding what questions to ask or how to best ask the question, or can be tightly scripted, requiring you to ask questions the same way across respondents.
- **Focus groups:** conducting group interviews with a small group of participants or other informants at the same time.

Selecting instruments

Once you determine a method for collecting data, you must decide on what instrument to use. Often there are existing instruments available for purchase or public use. However, you may end up writing your own survey or interview questions. All of the instruments necessary to carry out this evaluation plan are provided for you. If you are interested in conducting additional data collection, talk with your Wilder consultant about how to find an existing instrument or design a new data collection tool to meet your needs.

Tips for collecting your own data

Administering a survey

There are several ways to administer a survey. In your work, you will likely use several methods, such as personally administering paper surveys at the end of a training session, mailing surveys to a group of parents, or sending online survey links via email to a group of community professionals. The particular method of administering the survey will dictate many specific considerations, and this detail is included in the individual protocols for each data collection activity. The following provides basic survey administration tips that will apply anytime you administer a survey.

Build buy-in

Be sure to explain the purpose of the survey, why it is important, and how the information will be used. You may also want to give participants information on how they can access survey results once the study is complete, as appropriate.

Creating buy-in can also help increase the number of people that respond to your survey. Sometimes it can be challenging to get people to complete surveys. Respondents might feel they are too busy, be uninterested, or feel that the survey is not important. While it is extremely unlikely that you will receive surveys from everyone that you invite to participate, it is important to collect surveys from as many people as possible. The lower your response rate, the more cautious you should be in interpreting your survey results. As your response rate declines, it becomes less likely that the opinions of your respondents will reflect the perceptions of your entire target population. Here are some tips to help increase your response rate:

- **Encourage participation.** Explain the purpose of the survey, why it is important, and how you will use the information.
- **Make it easy to return.** If the survey is being done by mail, provide a stamped addressed envelope for respondents to use to return the survey. If the survey is being done at your site, provide a clear and easy place to return the survey.
- **Allow enough time, but not too much, to complete the survey.** If the deadline is too far away, respondents may be more likely to forget to complete or return it. Depending on your target group, this may range from a few days to a few weeks.
- **Provide reminders.** Providing even a single reminder can increase the likelihood of someone completing a survey. If time allows, two to three reminders are better.

Reminders may be given multiple ways: email, phone calls, postcards, or through personal contact.

- **Offer incentives for participation.** It does not need to be large or expensive; a small gift certificate can be effective, or, depending on your audience, free participation in an event or a t-shirt may do the trick. If you do not have funding, consider seeking donations. Keep in mind that The Department of Human Services has established guidelines for using incentives. The guidelines promote using incentives as long as you do not use cash or provide gift certificates to any establishment that provides access to alcohol or tobacco products. If you have questions about what types of incentives would be appropriate, contact your Wilder consultant.

Consider consent

While you want to get as many participants as possible to participate in an evaluation, participation is always optional. Anyone who participates in an evaluation should be informed of any potential risks or benefits to participating, and in some cases this right should be guaranteed through informed consent. People should have the right to complete a survey, interview, or participate in a focus group willingly, and also should have the right to refuse to complete portions of any evaluation or interview. For more information about protecting the rights of respondents and when to use informed consent, see the Ethics section of this guide.

Ensure confidentiality

It is often desirable to keep surveys anonymous and avoid requesting information that might help you identify the respondent (e.g., name or social security number). If survey respondents do not need to provide this information, they may feel more comfortable giving honest information. However, there are a number of reasons you may need identifying information. You may want to connect survey data to other information, such as service records or background information about participants. If you are collecting surveys at two points in time (such as before and after the program), you may need to have a way to match surveys. You may also need to collect names in order to distribute incentives to those who completed surveys.

Collecting names or other identifying information does not need to be a deterrent for respondents, however. Often people are comfortable providing their names, so long as the reason for collecting that information has been explained to them.

Regardless of whether surveys are conducted anonymously or not, information that is provided should be kept private to the extent possible. Here are some ways to ensure confidentiality for participants and assure the integrity of your evaluation:

- Allow respondents to have a private way to return surveys, such as providing them with a sealed return envelope. Do not require respondents to hand their surveys directly to a staff person.
- If you anticipate that there may be situations in which you would violate confidentiality (such as in situations where you may be mandated to report youth substance abuse), explain that in advance to participants.
- Once you have received surveys, keep them stored in a safe and secure place where they will not be seen or read by others.
- Do not discuss the results of individual surveys with others, especially if that information will reveal the identity of the person who completed the survey.

Types of interviews

Interviews allow you to gather information from respondents by asking questions directly, rather than having them fill out a survey. Interviews can be done in person or over the phone. Interviews tend to be more time consuming and expensive than surveys, but they can also yield a better response rate. Interviews are most useful when you need in-depth information about people's experiences or when you want to be able to clarify questions or provide respondents with more information.

Interviews vary in their degree of structure and formality. Less formal interviews may be useful if you are exploring a broad topic or conducting interviews with very diverse participants. More structured interviews are most useful when it is important to collect consistent information across participants. Interviews generally fall somewhere along the following continuum:

- *Informal, conversational interview* – no predetermined questions are asked, in order to remain as open and adaptable as possible to the respondents' responses and priorities.
- *Semi-structured interview* – a guide is used to ensure that the same general areas of information are collected from each respondent. This provides more focus than the conversational approach, but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information.
- *Structured interview* – all respondents are asked exactly the same questions and provided the same set of response options. This format ensures that the same information is collected from each respondent, making it easier to analyze responses.

Conducting an interview

When interviews are structured or semi-structured, it is important that they be done consistently each time. If more than one person is going to be conducting the interviews, provide training in advance, including opportunities to conduct practice interviews.

Below are some tips for conducting successful interviews:

- **Make sure your initial contact is positive.** Clearly explain the purpose of the interview and how long the interview will take. Give the respondent an opportunity to ask questions and discuss any concerns they may have. It is okay to spend a little time making small talk before you start the interview. This will help you and the respondent get comfortable and build rapport.
- **Keep the conversation running smoothly.** Ask questions at a reasonable pace, and be sure to provide transitions between topics. Use active listening techniques (e.g., nodding your head, saying “uh huh” or “go on”) to help the respondent know you are engaged. If the respondent drifts off topic, ask follow-up questions to redirect the conversation.
- **Avoid bias.** When conducting multiple interviews, be sure to read the full question each time exactly as written. Always repeat the entire question when asked. Be careful not to express your own attitudes or opinions during the interview. For example, don’t show surprise, approval, or disapproval to anything the respondent says or does. Also, be careful not to seek clarification to a question in a way that might lead the respondent toward a particular answer. Although it is important to keep the conversation comfortable, be careful not to let it get too casual. Avoid sharing any personal information about yourself.
- **Probe for more information.** Interviews allow you to explore more topics in depth than in a typical survey. It is a good idea to use probing questions if the respondent provides an answer that is too general, vague, or otherwise incomplete. Common probes include, “Could you be more specific?” “Can you give me an example?” or “Could you explain that?” Probes should be asked in a neutral way, and should not lead a respondent toward a particular answer. Also, be sure your probe does not force them into answering uncomfortable questions.

■ **Probe examples:**

Survey question	Response	Good probe	Wrong!! Leading probe
What did you like best about the program?	I don't know.	Whatever you think is fine.	Didn't you like the staff?
How many classes did you participate in?	Oh, about 10 or 12 classes.	Would that be closer to 10 or to 12?	Interviewer writes 11.
How would you improve the program?	Everything!	Please be more specific?	You mean you didn't like anything?
What is your race or ethnicity?	Well, I'm a mixture.	A mixture?	Are you part Black or Hispanic?

Facilitating a focus group

Focus groups are another data collection technique to consider when you want more in-depth information from participants than what may be possible from surveys alone. With focus groups, you will not be able to cover as many questions as you might be able to from interviews. But by doing a focus group, you will benefit from hearing what a number of people have to say about a particular topic, and could also benefit from having participants interact with one another.

While most focus groups work best when they are organized and conducted by trained facilitators, anyone can conduct a successful focus group if they plan carefully, involve the right people, and ask the right questions. Here are some basic tips that may help you in your focus group planning:

- **Make sure that you clearly define the purpose of your focus group.** Without clearly defined goals and objectives, it will be difficult to ask the right questions and get the information you need.
- **Keep the number of questions that you ask – and the length of your focus group session – reasonable.** You can generally expect to thoroughly address 5 to 7 questions during a 1.5 hour focus group.
- **Don't make your group(s) too big or too small.** Most researchers find that focus groups work best with 6-10 participants.
- **Think carefully about who you want to include in your group(s).** Your participants should have an interest in the issue being discussed. They should also be comfortable sharing their opinions in a group.

- **Make it as easy as possible for people to participate.** Recruiting focus group participants can sometimes be difficult. Think about what motivates the group you are trying to reach. For example, it may help to provide transportation, child care, and refreshments. Some organizations also provide participants with cash incentives or gift cards.
- **If possible, try to have someone trained in facilitation lead your discussion.** If you can't afford a trained facilitator, try to find someone who can lead the discussion in a calm, friendly, and dispassionate manner. Remember, the facilitator should not express his or her own opinions or make judgments on the opinions of the participants.
- **Make sure that your facilitator sets some ground rules at the beginning of the discussion.** It is vital that participants feel comfortable, stay focused, and treat one another with respect. It is important to include confidentiality as a ground rule, so that everyone agrees that what is discussed in the focus group stays in the focus group.
- **Allow opportunities for each person to share information, rather than letting a few people dominate the conversation.** Some facilitators like to ask participants to write down some ideas before everyone starts to talk. This can help eliminate bias and bring out different viewpoints. The facilitator may want to call on people later in the discussion if they have not had a chance to express their thoughts.
- **Make sure that you accurately record what happens in the group.** Most researchers like to audio record their focus group sessions. Since audio recorders can malfunction, it is a good idea to have a designated note taker as well. Try not to rely on your facilitator to take detailed notes, since he or she will need to concentrate on leading the discussion.

Although it is not exhaustive, we hope this guide has provided you with useful information about gathering reliable data. Please contact your Wilder consultant if you have specific questions about any of the information included here, or if you would like more information about data collection in general. Good luck!

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