

Types of evaluation

Evaluation resources from Wilder Research

Most program evaluations focus on one or more of these dimensions:

- Needs Assessments: What is the current state of the community your program wants to serve?
- Satisfaction: How do key stakeholders experience your program?
- Implementation/Process: How is the program actually being put into practice?
- Outcomes: How does the program change participants? How does the program change the community?
- Return on Investment: What is the value of the program? Do the program benefits outweigh program costs?

The ideal evaluation has elements of multiple evaluation dimensions. For example, by combining measurement of outcomes with assessment of implementation and participant satisfaction, you will have richer opportunities to more fully understand how the project is making a difference.

Needs assessments

Assessments can also be critical in bringing significant issues to the attention of policy makers and the general public.

Needs assessments often address the following key areas:

- Current and future trends (Are things getting better or worse? What is on the horizon? Is the community prepared for these changes?)
- Resources (What are your community's assets? Do you have access to resources outside the community? Has the community fully mobilized these potential resources?)
- Weaknesses (What issues or problems are facing the community? What areas are most in need of improvement? Which pose the greatest threat?)
- Opportunities (Are you taking full advantage of current opportunities? What opportunities are likely to occur in the future?)

- External pressures (What regional, national, or global issues and trends are affecting the community? How are these likely to change in the future? Is the community prepared to deal with these issues?)

Why should community needs assessments be conducted?

Needs assessment is a systematic process of gathering, analyzing, and reporting information about the needs of your community and the capacities or strengths that are currently available to meet those needs. The goal is **not** to gather information for the sake of gathering information. The potential value of a **quality** needs assessment cannot be overstated. There are four primary benefits of conducting a needs assessment, including:

- **To create a common understanding of community issues.** Needs assessments help to ensure that individuals have a common information base from which to make decisions, rather than being limited by incomplete knowledge. Having a common understanding about community issues is an important part of building consensus, and working together to create solutions.
- **To create an information base for service delivery decisions.** Needs assessment allows you to make decisions about programs and services that are grounded in the needs, priorities and resources existing within the community. For example, an assessment can help you make decisions about expanding or modifying services. It can also help you consider alternative strategies for solving a problem or forging networks or alliances to address issues.
- **To get community involvement and support and establish joint ownership of change efforts.** Needs assessment can engage community members before decisions need to be made. Allowing residents, community organizations, businesses, schools, and others to be involved in the process may increase their investment in your program and promote effective partnerships. At a minimum, community members may be involved by providing information about their perceptions of a community. There are also benefits to including them in designing the assessment, collecting information, and using the results to guide service or community change.
- **To create a baseline picture of the community.** An assessment can create a baseline understanding of the current issues or resources facing a community. This baseline information can be used over time to identify changes and emerging issues if your goal is to promote community change. Baseline information will also be useful as you evaluate program effectiveness.

Satisfaction

This type of evaluation usually explores the satisfaction of the actual individuals who received services. However, in some cases, this examination will include other stakeholders, such as family members, referral sources, and collaborating partners. Issues often addressed in this component include characteristics of staff, quality of facilities and other materials, and benefits of the program. While having satisfied participants is not necessarily the same as having participants with successful outcomes, it can be a useful source of feedback for program staff. Here are some evaluation questions that would address satisfaction:

- How satisfied were participants with the outdoor learning activities?
- Do participants feel their mentor listens to their concerns and helps them solve problems?
- Did parents find the prevention materials handed out at the beginning of the program useful in talking to their children about ATOD issues?

Implementation/process

Process evaluation is a way to scrutinize your services and see new connections between the way that services are provided and the outcomes or satisfaction levels for participants. A process evaluation can look at any implementation issues that are important to you. Some examples:

- Are there certain characteristics that make people more or less likely to benefit from your program?
- How well do program services match the needs of your participants?
- Generally, how much service is delivered to participants? What kinds of service?
- How does the amount and type of service relate to differences in outcomes or satisfaction?
- Does your program have a defined point of completion, such as a certain time period or number of sessions, reaching a certain age, or accomplishing certain goals? If so, what percentage of participants successfully complete the program? What factors influence that?
- If you provide services in collaboration with other agencies or organizations, how are those partnerships working?

- What questions or concerns do staff members, participants, or other key stakeholders have about the way services are delivered?
- What challenges and barriers to service delivery have been encountered? How have you addressed those, and with what degree of success?
- Is the program being implemented according to plan (such as timeline, budget, staffing, and number of participants)?

Outcomes

Measuring outcomes is a way to document the actual impact of a program and to identify strategies for strengthening or refocusing services. Outcomes are any changes that, according to the underlying [theory of your program](#), can be reasonably expected as a result of your services.

For programs providing direct services to individuals, outcomes are typically changes in the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of those people. On the other hand, some programs might be working for change at the community level rather than individual level, such as reducing school-wide levels of youth smoking or changing public attitudes about youth leadership. Here are some examples of outcome evaluation questions:

- Did parents set guidelines for alcohol use in their family after they participated in the parent education class?
- Do middle school youth understand the effects of bullying after participation in the classroom exercises?
- Does engaging in culturally specific dances decrease the use of non-ceremonial tobacco among Native American youth?

Outcomes can be changes that you see over a period of time. Short-term outcomes are often demonstrated by an increase in knowledge or the learning of a new skill. Intermediate changes are more likely to be changes in behavior or practice. Long-term changes are the more global changes you can expect and hope for in a program. This level of change is often beyond the influence of the program alone, but is achievable when combined with other factors, such as personal or community readiness to change, a favorable political climate, or a multi-faceted approach to an issue.

Return on investment

Return on Investment (ROI), sometimes referred to as cost benefit analysis (CBA), can be very useful in demonstrating the value of a program. ROI analysis looks broadly at the costs of providing services compared to the program's potential or actual benefits. This type of information can be especially useful and impactful for legislators and other high ranking decision makers, as it places a financial value on your program. That being said, ROI involves complex analysis techniques and should only be done by a professional economist or analyst with specific experience with this type of work. Economists with this level of experience might be found at local universities, nonprofit research organizations, or consulting firms. If ROI is something you wish to pursue, here are a few key points that will become especially important as you begin this process.

- Be clear about what you will compare the effects of your program to (i.e., to no program at all? to an alternative intervention?)
- Include all in-kind donations and services when calculating the costs of your program.
- Recognize that a comprehensive ROI might include benefits (outcomes) not included or measured in your evaluation plan. You may have measured graduation rates, but it might be important to include future income as a benefit for a ROI calculation.
- It may be useful to provide a prospective ROI that uses conservative assumptions about unmeasured outcomes to provide perspective for a program.

Wrap Up

Consider different areas when designing an evaluation, including outcome, process, satisfaction and cost-benefit analysis. Often a sound evaluation combines these issues, such as examining outcomes along with participant satisfaction. After developing your logic model and identifying the different types of evaluation, you are ready to think about what specifically you want the evaluation to address. Evaluation questions are a useful way to guide the direction of the evaluation, and often very helpful in limiting your focus.

- Needs assessment is a systematic process of gathering, analyzing, and reporting information about the needs of your community and the capacities or strengths that are currently available to meet those needs. It can be a useful strategy to increase community buy-in on a particular issue and inform decisions.

- Consider assessing satisfaction of program participants, family members, referral sources, or other partners. While not demonstrating change in any targeted attitude or behavior, satisfaction does give important information about the willingness of people to use or work with your program.
- Process evaluation is a useful mechanism for describing the way in which your program works. Process evaluation might provide information on how to improve services for participants, increase the fidelity of program administration, or inform the development of other programs.
- Outcome evaluation is the most traditional form of evaluation. Outcome evaluation generally attempts to establish a change in knowledge, attitude or behavior of a targeted population.
- Return on Investment can demonstrate the relative costs and benefits of a program. While it can be an important way to measure the benefits of a program, ROI studies are complex and should usually be conducted by an economist or researcher with expertise in this type of evaluation.

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