Community Research Institute

Empowering communities with quality research and data

Nonprofits and Data: A How-To Series

4 Using Data to Evaluate Progress in Meeting Goals

Johnson Center
at Grand Valley State University

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

This report was written by the Community Research Institute (CRI) at Grand Valley State University. CRI provides innovative applied research to West Michigan communities. CRI gathers, analyzes, interprets and shares national and local data through partnerships with nonprofit and neighborhood groups, and assists local and regional nonprofit leaders with decision making, grant writing, and program evaluation. This research makes a difference through a distinctly valuable blend of university rigor and community relevance.

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For additional information visit our website at www.cridata.org or contact us directly by calling (616)331-7585.

Nonprofits and Data: A How-To Series is available to download at no cost at www.cridata.org/publications.

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INTRODUCTION

This How-To Series is designed to demonstrate six ways in which data can be used to enhance the work of nonprofit organizations and community groups. These include using data to:

1. Support Grant Applications and Other Funding Opportunities
2. Monitor Trends & Identify Emerging Problems
3. Disseminate Information to Engage Community and Policymakers
4. **Evaluate Progress in Meeting Goals**
5. Establish Priorities and Plan Programs
6. Characterize Disparities Across Sub Populations/Communities

The information contained within each guide has been developed by combining our community knowledge with that of a variety of evaluation and data experts. More specifically, within each series installment, you will find an introduction to the topic, guidelines for using data to achieve the specified outcome, good practices and pitfalls with corresponding examples, and resources to find data.

WHY USE DATA TO EVALUATE PROGRESS IN MEETING GOALS?

What is evaluation?
Evaluation is a process that a group uses to measure the progress it is making towards meeting its goals. Evaluation not only measures results but is "a means of organizational learning - a way for the organization to assess its progress and change in ways that lead to greater achievement of its mission."[1] The Innovation Network, Inc. defines evaluation as "the systematic collection of information…that enables stakeholders to better understand the program, improve its effectiveness, and/or make decisions about future programming."[2]

What is evaluation data?
Evaluation data is the evidence used to measure one's progress towards meeting goals. Evaluation data provides the information needed to create a well-rounded picture of the program. Data collected about short-, intermediate-, and long-term achievements provides objective, quantitative indicators of success or needed improvement.[3] This data helps groups answer questions from three primary evaluation categories:

1. What did we do?
2. How well did we do it?
3. What impact did we make?[2]

Why evaluate?
Evaluation has become a norm for most nonprofits. As funding from public and private sources shrinks, competition for that support increases. This fact has encouraged nonprofits to show evidence of their effectiveness and proof that they are fulfilling their mission efficiently and responsibly.[4] A study sponsored by the Aspen Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that increasingly, charities are expanding their view of evaluation from merely requirements by grant makers to learning opportunities that result in enhancement of their mission.[5]

The data collected through evaluation will help in many ways, including to:

- Gain a better understanding of their program/organization;
- Test the hypothesis upon which the program has been designed;
- Provide convincing information to tell their program/organization's story;
- Demonstrate accountability of funding dollars;
- Share results to inform the larger community; and
- Raise additional funding to support their efforts.[2]

GUIDELINES FOR USING DATA TO EVALUATE PROGRESS IN MEETING GOALS

The commercial world produces a constant flow of data on sales, profitability, and market shares that clearly shows if a business is accomplishing its purpose in successful ways. It is more difficult for nonprofits to routinely show if "society values what it produces." Only evaluation data can provide this useful information.[6]

Part I – Before You Get Started

Determine the purpose of your evaluation.

Clearly understanding the purpose of your evaluation effort helps to guarantee that the end result will meet your needs. Evaluating progress in meeting goals can have various purposes, many of which are listed in the "*Why evaluate?*" section on the previous page. Determining the purpose will help you identify an appropriate evaluator and figure out who needs to be involved in the process.

Involve your stakeholders.

The evaluation process is most successful and the data is most often used when an organizational culture has been created that is supportive of evaluation efforts. The evaluation environment must not pose a risk to participants and should encourage examination into why something was a success or failure without fear of punitive consequences.

When evaluation is truly supported by the organization, it will get "buy-in" from all those affected by the evaluation process. It is the individuals with the most invested in a program who will be able to provide key knowledge that can lead to the program's success and/or improvement. Involving multiple stakeholders in the evaluation process increases a sense of ownership and investment in both the process and use of results and helps the recommendations to be embraced by a larger constituency. It will "help ensure that the evaluation is manageable, used to improve programs, and perceived as credible within the organization."[4]

Who are your stakeholders?

- Staff and administrators
- Volunteers
- Board members
- Funders
- Project participants or customers
- Collaborating agencies
- Community representatives

Answer a few questions.

Before getting started, determine the answers to a few questions:

- Who will use the evaluation results you collect?
- How will they be using the collected results?
- What information will they likely want?

- Are you more interested in evaluating outcomes, process, or both?

Part 2 – Developing Good Questions

In order to collect the right information to evaluate progress in meeting goals, you need to ask good questions. Ask yourself, "What information needs to be gathered that will help me better understand the implementation and impact of my program or organization?" Remember to keep your list only to those "must-know" questions that will have the biggest impact on what you are evaluating.[2]

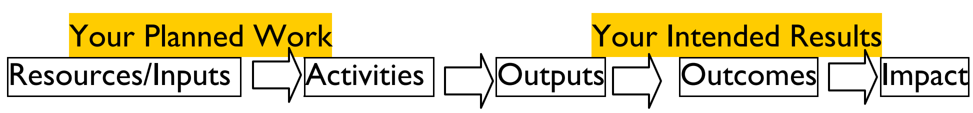
"Good questions" in an evaluation are:

- ✓ "appropriate and relevant to a situation, need, or concern
- ✓ meaningful to the success of the organization
- ✓ those you really want answers to – no matter what
- ✓ have answers that are credible and useful
- ✓ encourage collaboration with others
- ✓ trigger creativity, adaptation and flexible thinking."[1]

Logic Models

A logic model is a tool used to describe how your project works and identify the links between resources you put into a program, planned program activities, and expected outcomes is a logic model. A logic model helps you develop "good questions" by showing what an organization or program is intended to achieve and how outcomes at various stages lead to the desired results. Spending the time to develop good evaluation questions using a logic model will save time and money.

Figure 1: Five Basic Logic Model Components[7]



There are five basic logic model components. (See Figure 1.) The *resources/inputs* and the *activities* describe your planned work. The *outputs*, *outcomes*, and *impact* describe your intended results. The logic model helps you create focused questions for each component. Having the right questions will help you gather the most useful data.

> For more information about developing **Logic Models**, check out these free online resources:
>
> - Logic Model Builder by Innovation Network at www.innonet.org
> - Logic Model Development Guide by W.K. Kellogg Foundation at www.wkkf.org

S.M.A.R.T. Indicators

When creating programs and subsequent evaluation processes, it is important to determine specific outcome and impact measures for the program's intended results. These *indicators* are "the evidence or information that will tell you whether your program is achieving its intended outcomes."[2] The most useful indicators for evaluating progress in meeting goals are S.M.A.R.T. They are:

S- Specific in terms of the results to be achieved;
M- Measurable;
A- Action-oriented;
R- Realistic; and
T- Time-bound.[7]

Indicators should identify the amount of change that will show success, who will be measured, what specific behavior or condition you will measure, and by when the change will occur.[2]

For example…

SMART indicators may look like the following:

- 75% of participants will complete a one-page resume within two months of beginning the program.
- In two years, the mentoring program will show a 20% increase in the number of youth in a relationship with a trained adult mentor.
- The community crime prevention program will reduce the number of reported car thefts by 10% over the next 12 months.

Part 3 – Data Collection

Once you have determined what questions you want your evaluation to answer and have developed some S.M.A.R.T. indicators of success, you can shape your choice of evaluation methods accordingly. In order to collect reliable answers to your questions, it is important for the evaluation to use data collection methods that are consistent and thoughtful. Experts suggest collecting information from an assortment of sources and perspectives and using various methods of data collection.[8] The goal, though, is to "minimize the number" of collection methods while "maximizing the amount" of information you collect.[2]

Data Collection Methods and Sources

Sources of evaluation data may include:

- Face-to-face interviews
- Questionnaires/surveys
- Telephone interviews
- Files, records, documents
- Focus groups
- Observation

When choosing the best sources and methods to collect evaluation data, consider the following:

- ✓ Choose methods that will provide the most valuable information and give you what is needed to make decisions.

- ✓ Consider which methods will create the least amount of disruption to your program and clients.
- ✓ Use methods that fit your time frame, resources, skill level, and budget for both data collection and analysis.
- ✓ Think about which methods will help others provide the information you desire while considering cultural appropriateness and other contextual issues.
- ✓ Choose methods that will provide data that is credible, accurate, and useful.[1,2]

Part 4 – Sharing and Using Data

After the evaluation data is collected, it is time to share and use the results. Often the tendency is to rush to conclusions. Before you summarize your findings, take time to reflect on the information collected and your original purpose for the evaluation. Summarize your collected information in various ways, quantifying when possible, and using themes backed by purposeful but anonymous quotes.[1]

Steps for Sharing and Using the Results

1. Summarize the results.
2. Share your findings.
3. Make decisions and conduct planning based on results.
4. Communicate your plans.
5. Respond to other's reactions to the findings.[1]

Many people within the organization are potential users of the evaluation data, from executive directors, to board members and staff. The data will be used most often if the evaluation reports and summaries are shared throughout the organization so all potential users are aware of the evaluation findings.[9]

PITFALLS AND GOOD PRACTICES

Using data wisely is important when evaluating progress in meeting goals. Below is a list of several pitfalls to avoid as well as related good practices to keep in mind when planning and implementing your evaluation process. These tips were developed from concepts provided by numerous expert sources in evaluation practice. After many of the pitfalls and practices, an example is provided to illustrate its potential use.

GATHER THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF DATA

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Gather a large amount of data about a broad array of evaluation topics.	Collect only data with a specific purpose in the evaluation process.

Putting it to use...

It is important to collect only the data that will provide critical information to meet your evaluation goals. You cannot and do not need to evaluate everything. Doing so will lead to an overload of data. In your initial evaluation plan, determine what data you need and its specific purpose. This will enable your evaluation efforts to gather the greatest amount of information with the least amount of effort and the highest quality of results.

For example…

Not every program within an organization needs a rigorous evaluation process. Allison Fine, executive director of Innovation Network, a Washington based national nonprofit group that helps charities conduct evaluations, suggests looking at your strategic plan to see what is emphasized by organizational goals and priorities. "Maybe your after-school math and science program is the focus this year because it's so important to your plan, and so it's less important to look at your rec program," she says. "You can look at that a year from now. It can be overwhelming – it's important to start with bite-size pieces people are going to be successful with."[5]

ASSESS THE ACCURACY AND COMPARABILITY OF DATA

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Data sources and definitions are not assessed.	Definitions and collection methods of all data elements are assessed for accuracy and comparability.

Putting it to use…

In order to assess the accuracy and comparability of evaluation data, it is important to know how the data elements were collected and defined. This is especially important when collecting data from other sites, agencies other than your own, or data which was obtained over several years during which the collection procedures may have changed.[10]

For example…

One example is the use of school dropout rates as an element of evaluation data. The method used to calculate school drop out rates differ from one school system to the next. Here are a few definitions you may find:

- Ratio of the number of students graduating in a given year divided by the number of students entering at the beginning of the year.
- The number graduating in a given year divided by the number who entered as freshman four years earlier.
- Schools may or may not take into account the number of students who transferred into or out of the school system.
- Schools may count General Educational Development (GED) students in different ways or those students that graduate earlier or later than their class.

Whatever the definition used, when making comparisons across years or school systems, it is important to use consistent and comparable data.[10]

FOR ADDITIONAL EDUCATION DATA, VISIT WWW.CRIDATA.ORG OR WWW.SCHOOLMATTERS.COM

BUILD QUALITY CONTROL INTO DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Quality control of data collection methods is overlooked.	Quality control is given specific attention when designing data collection methods for evaluation purposes.

Putting it to use…

The quality of the methods used to collect evaluation data is a key issue when measuring progress towards meeting goals. The editors of the Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation give four suggestions for building quality control into your data collection process.

1. Carefully train everyone who will be involved in the data collection process.
2. Confirm data collected by triangulating responses with those from other respondents and other sources.
3. Before beginning the data collection process, pretest the instruments to be used.
4. Check the wording in all evaluation instruments for vagueness and bias.[11]

RESPECT THE CONSTITUENTS SERVED BY THE PROGRAM OR ORGANIZATION

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Collection of evaluation data is imposed upon the community served.	Collection of evaluation data is implemented in a way that respects those served and associated with the program or organization.

Putting it to use...

All evaluation efforts need to respect those associated with or served by the program or organization being evaluated. The process of measuring progress towards reaching goals should never be "done to" a community but rather draw on the understanding and experience of those most involved.[2]

Evaluation with Power suggests avoiding common pitfalls by considering your respondents' (1) experience, (2) language proficiency, (3) access to information, (4) and motivation for providing feedback.[1]

For example…

What is the primary language of your target population? Are your client satisfaction surveys printed in English and Spanish, for example? Or, what is the educational attainment level of your clientele? Will a mailed survey be difficult for some to understand, thus decreasing your response rate?

FOR ADDITIONAL DEMOGRAPHIC DATA, VISIT WWW.CRIDATA.ORG OR HTTP://FACTFINDER.CENSUS.GOV

SEEK INPUT FROM VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES

Possible Pitfall	**Good Practice**
Data collection is based on questions developed by one or two people (often the evaluator and/or funder.)	Data collection is based on questions that have been determined after seeking input from various perspectives.

Putting it to use…

In order to gain a full picture of what is to be evaluated, gather input from as many viewpoints as possible. Different stakeholders will provide perspectives on differing evaluation questions. Gathering a variety of viewpoints also helps decrease bias by guaranteeing that the data gathered represents more than just your opinions and ideas. As you create your list of evaluation questions and use it to determine data to be collected, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation suggests talking with the following potential sources:

- Project Director: Provides the "big picture."
- Staff/Volunteers: Have the inside scoop on day-to-day operations.
- Clientele: Source for direct affects of project.
- Board of Directors/Advisory Boards/Other Leadership: Provide questions that will help in decision making.
- Community Leaders: Offer insight on underlying conditions or issues in the community.
- Collaborating Organizations: Propose additional insight for data collection.
- Project Proposal and Other Documents: Provide background details.
- Content-Relevant Literature and Expert Consultants: Suggest a relevant backdrop for developing questions.
- Similar Programs/Projects: Source for comparison data and information gathering.[12]

RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO "FUDGE" THE DATA

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Shape data to emphasize positive results about your organization or program.	Be prepared to see evaluation data that points out program strengths and weaknesses.

Putting it to use…

Although it may be tempting to "fudge" or shape evaluation data to emphasize areas where results show strengths, Mary Wambach, executive director of the Access Center of San Diego says, "If you ask for input, be ready for the good, the bad, the ugly, and sometimes, the unexpected responses."[5] Evaluating progress towards meeting your goals not only provides necessary insight into your program but often identifies unmet needs.

For example…

The Access Center, an independent-living center that advocates for people with disabilities, administered an evaluation survey to its clients in 2000. Their evaluation results showed that while recreation opportunities were of great value to residents, it was a missing service at the center. This prompted the organization to obtain funding to provide these opportunities at one of its locations. After further evaluation, they found that they not only filled an unmet need, but those that participated experienced health benefits including weight loss and lowered body fat.[5]

FOR ADDITIONAL HEALTH DATA VISIT WWW.CRIDATA.ORG OR WWW.MICHIGAN.GOV/MDCH

ACKNOWLEDGE APPROPRIATE IMPACT OF PROGRAM

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Assuming and claiming evaluation results that show greater impact than is actual.	Be careful to report accurate impact based on evaluation data.

Putting it to use…

When analyzing and interpreting data collected from evaluation processes, be sure to only report on the appropriate population or geographic area affected by your interventions. Also, be sure to acknowledge other factors that may have contributed to the changes reported in your evaluation data. It is dangerous to assume that your program is the only cause of positive change documented in your results. Be aware of other factors that may be responsible for the seen changes in your population or community. [12]

For example…

It may be misleading to claim that the impact your program had on a small group of participants is representative of other similar programs or interventions across the country or that your program alone produced change in the larger community.

When a newly formed neighborhood watch group saw a 50% drop in larceny in their neighborhood during the first 12 months of their existence, they quickly reported that the decrease in crime was due to their efforts. In fact, the drop in larceny was most likely impacted by the new neighborhood watch group *and* a 30% increase in the amount of time law enforcement officers were patrolling the neighborhood during the same 12 month period.

FOR ADDITIONAL CRIME DATA VISIT WWW.CRIDATA.ORG OR WWW.FBI.GOV/UCR/UCR.HTM

WHERE TO BEGIN FINDING DATA

The Community Research Institute (CRI) is working to develop a data sharehouse for the Greater Grand Rapids community. The concept or purpose of a data sharehouse is to develop a single integrated system that can support one-stop data shopping.

To begin exploring community data, visit our website at www.cridata.org. There you will find county, city, and neighborhood level data. Examples include:

- Demographic information on topics such as, population counts, poverty rates, race, housing and education from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census.
- Crime, housing, and voting data from the City of Grand Rapids.
- Data on regional trends including topics such as: Healthy Youth, Healthy Seniors, Education, Civic Engagement, and Community & Economic Development, Arts & Culture, Poverty, and Philanthropy.
- Various reports on topics that include: the status of women in the workplace, barriers to success for entry level healthcare workers, tobacco and smoking cessation programs, violence in Kent County, employee training needs and practices, communities of support for the aging population, and the working poor.

It should be noted that CRI has more data than we can fit on our website. If after reviewing our website, you haven't found what you're looking for contact Gustavo Rotondaro, GIS/Information Specialist for CRI, for additional data.

For more information on using data to support evaluation work, please contact Korrie Ottenwess, Research Manager for the Community Research Institute, at:

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Web:	**www.cridata.org**

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