

Challenges to program evaluation?

A beginners guide

What is evaluation

This is the first in a set of handouts on the challenges to program evaluation. This is about one of the major challenges in program evaluation:

Getting answers

Programs often have questions about the outcomes of the program, for example:

- Does the program have an effect? That is, does the program cause a specific outcome?

However, evaluations sometimes cannot answer these questions. An evaluation may not be able to determine whether a program had an effect, whether it was the program that causes the outcome.

Generally, to determine whether a program causes an outcome, some comparison group is needed, often people who are eligible for a program but who don't participate.

If there are no comparison groups, then it is difficult, if not impossible, to clearly determine whether the program had an effect.

Produced by

Gene Shackman, Ph.D.
The Global Social Change Research Project
<http://gsociology.icaap.org/>
Free Resources for Methods in Program Evaluation
<http://gsociology.icaap.org/methods>

What is evaluation

Other methods, such as case studies or observations, may show whether it is reasonable to suppose the program caused the outcome, but cannot clearly show cause.

If the evaluation cannot say whether the program caused an outcome, then there are other questions. For example:

- What happened to people in the program.

The evaluation just describes what happened to people in the program, without drawing any conclusions about whether the program caused the outcome.

For example, an evaluation might say “Most people in the job training program got jobs.”

Other questions about the program might be, for example,

- How well is the program working?
- Is the program reaching everyone?

For these questions, the focus is on how the program works, how well, whether it is doing what the program thinks it should be doing, whether it is doing anything it should not be doing, and similar questions.

The goal of the evaluation is getting the program to work better.

What is evaluation

Copyright by Gene Shackman, October 2009.

Some usual legal disclaimers:

This handout can be freely distributed without need for permission, provided it is distributed as is. Distribution for any commercial purpose is strictly forbidden. This handout cannot be sold under any circumstances.

This handout is only for education purposes. It does not represent any guidelines, recommendations or requirements about how to do program evaluation. The only purpose is to provide the general public, consumers, students, and evaluators with information about things that may go into evaluations, so that evaluation may be better understood, and evaluators and clients might work better together to get more out of their evaluation.

In my work on this handout, I do not represent or speak for any organization. I prepared this on my own time, at home, and was not supported by any organization.

Materials on web sites listed in this handout do not necessarily reflect my opinions, nor do I assume any responsibility for the content provided at these web sites. This handout only lists web sites with legal content. Listing a website is not necessarily endorsement of any services or organization. The sites are only listed because they have some freely available information. I also do not have any financial relationships with any site or organization listed on this handout.

I also benefited greatly from feedback from folks on various email lists, and I thank them all!

The most recent version of this handout is always at
<http://gsociology.icaap.org/methods/>