Reading 3: Evaluating and Drawing Conclusions

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Introduction

The library's value, impact, and benefit can only be experienced and judged by customers.\[1\]

In this final week of the course we'll discuss how to tabulate, interpret, and present program results. We will also consider how frequently we should evaluate our programs.

Libraries conduct evaluations for many reasons, including:

- To verify the accomplishment of their goals, objectives, and projected outcomes
- To measure the results and benefits of their services
- To identify service weaknesses that need to be improved
- To monitor the progress of a long-term service or program
- To produce data that can be used to promote library services within the community
- To compare services in order to decide which should and should not be continued
- To decide which services should be replicated elsewhere
- Because the funding body requires regular evaluation

Regardless of why various data are collected, no evaluation is complete until those data are analyzed and reported to all interested parties.

To help you understand how to tabulate, interpret, and present results—the final steps of the evaluation process—I have created feedback data for our hypothetical "Music of the 1960s: Rock's Golden Era" lecture and film series. Please refer to Week 3 Handout: Sample Data Sheet as we wrap-up this Evaluating Results course. You will find the Sample Data Sheet in the Week 3 section of the Supplementary Material page.

Endnotes

\[1\] Peter Hernon and Ellen Altman, Embracing Change for Continuous Improvement (americanlibrariesmagazine.org/features/01132010/embracing-change-continuous-improvement), American Libraries (January/February 2010), p. 55.
When to Conduct Evaluations

Many library programs involve single events, such as day-long book festivals or celebrations of a particular occasion, like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. Library staff tend to measure the success of these types of programs by tallying attendance (i.e., counting outputs) and/or administering a participant survey. Evaluation that occurs after a service is delivered is called **summative**—that is, the evaluation sums up what the program accomplished. All library programs should end in a summative evaluation.

Not all library programs occur as one-time events, however. In fact, many of our programs represent long-term service commitments to our community. Evaluation that occurs while a service is being delivered is called **formative**. This type of evaluation is undertaken specifically to monitor the program's progress and to see if changes are needed. Say you decide to create a career center to help unemployed mid-life adults find jobs and/or re-purpose their skills. Rather than waiting to survey participants once a year, you should seek continuous user input to make sure the center is actually meeting patron needs. If it's not, then the center's goals, objectives, and anticipated outcomes should be revisited. Formative evaluation can help your program stay on target. After all, if problems aren't caught early on then no one will use your service.
Data Tabulation and Triangulation

Once the data are collected, it's time to organize the results. The first step is *tabulation*—that is, tallying totals and identifying patterns revealed through participant feedback. As we learned in November during the Community Assessment course, surveys are relatively easy to tabulate, while focus groups are more complex. Survey results can be either counted by hand or compiled through an online tool, like SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang. Focus group data require transcription and coding.[2]

Output numbers are generally collected manually—for example, counting the number of people attending a library-sponsored event—or are tallied automatically by a computer (e.g., circulation statistics). Tabulation of outputs includes organizing the numbers into various categories. Our Sample Data Sheet includes three output data sets: attendance, circulation of materials, and library card registrations. The number of events (six, total) in our hypothetical series is also an output.

The process of tabulating observations is slightly more complicated because, like focus group data, observation notes require transcription and organization into relevant themes. The Sample Data Sheet divides our observations into four overall themes: event leaders' knowledge and presentation skills, appropriateness of venue, audience interaction and engagement, and general impressions. These data sets can now be used to help validate the findings of other program data, thus establishing triangulation, a critical step in the analysis process.

*Triangulation*, as you'll recall, occurs when the data you've collected complement each other, therefore confirming that your collection methods were valid. For example, do our observations of the rock-n-roll lecture/film series confirm that it was as engaging as the results of the participant survey say it was? If so, then you've achieved triangulation and can be reasonably confident that people enjoyed the program. If, however, your observation notes describe a bored-looking audience—contradicting the otherwise positive survey responses—then you have not achieved triangulation and so must now investigate the reasons for the discrepancy.

When evaluative results contradict each other, the Kellogg Foundation, which funds many library-related grant projects, recommends that you ask these questions:[3]

- **Do these results make sense?**
  Did participants respond as expected or is their feedback totally unrelated to what you thought you were asking? Are participant responses contradictory? If they are, then perhaps you used faulty feedback instruments or methodologies.

- **How do you explain unexpected findings?**
  Were you expecting a certain result but ended up with something altogether different? Could it be you don't know your community as well as you think you do? Or maybe participants fell victim to the "halo effect," where they praise an experience or service
even when it doesn't meet their needs. This, of course, is why it's important to use more than one method of program evaluation.

- **Do your data categories make sense?**
  Are there problems with the way you tabulated and organized your findings? Perhaps the data categories don't jive and so are difficult to compare. For instance, enjoyment of a program doesn't necessarily guarantee that attendees learned anything new. Or perhaps you misinterpreted a studious audience for one that looked bored and so assumed that participants disliked the program. This is yet another good justification for using more than one evaluation technique.

- **Did you miss other indicators of success or lack of success?**
  Did you fail to take other important variables into account? For example, if attendance was low, was this a reflection of a poorly planned program or just the result of bad weather?

- **Did your methods of evaluation distort the program's results?**
  Did you use the best techniques for evaluating this particular program? Did your methods somehow taint participants' input?

If triangulation is impossible and/or it's obvious that your evaluation plan had major flaws, you may have to jettison all but the most reliable data, drawing whatever conclusions are possible from limited input. Be sure to mention any evaluation problems in your final report.

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**Endnotes**

[2] For a more detailed discussion of survey and focus group tabulation, please refer to Week 3 of the *Community Assessment* course.

Drawing Conclusions and Evaluation

After tabulating—and hopefully triangulating—your findings, the next step is to draw conclusions by analyzing patterns in the data collected. Based on the resulting evidence, your conclusions should describe what you believe happened during and because of your program. Evaluation then occurs when you compare your conclusions to the expectations stated in the program’s goal(s), objectives, and projected outcomes. By comparing the actual results of the program to what you originally hoped to accomplish, you are evaluating whether or not the program was successful and effective.

In our hypothetical scenario, we set the following objectives and outcomes for our rock-n-roll lecture/film series:

**Objective 1:** By September 1, 2011, 20 mid-life adults will register for library cards after attending the "Music of the 1960s: Rock's Golden Era" lecture/film series.

**Objective 2:** Between June 1 and September 1, 2011, a total 150 baby boomers will attend one or more screenings during the library's "Music of the 1960s: Rock's Golden Era" lecture/film series.

**Outcome 1:** 50% of mid-life adults will indicate that they have an enhanced appreciation for local cultural activities as a result of attending the "Music of the 1960s: Rock's Golden Era" lecture/film series.

**Outcome 2:** 40% of the mid-life adults who attend the "Music of the 1960s: Rock's Golden Era" lecture/film series will indicate that they learned at least one new fact about '60s rock-n-roll.

The program is now over and all feedback has been tabulated on our Sample Data Sheet. Comparing our findings to our objectives, we see that even though 163 mid-life adults ended up attending the series, very few (only seven) registered for library cards. We successfully exceeded our estimated attendance, but we failed to register many new library cardholders. So what happened? Investigating these data further, we discover that most of the series participants were already library users, thus resulting in low card registration—an important revelation not only about the program, but also a possible clue about the library’s poor outreach efforts. Since the purpose of program evaluation is to improve services as needed, we resolve to do a much better job of attracting non-users to future library functions.

OK, so now we know how successful—or unsuccessful—we were at accomplishing our
objectives. What about the benefits of our program? Did participants experience positive change as a result of attending our rock-n-roll series? Thanks to our well-constructed survey, we discover that 57% of mid-life attendees who participated in the series indeed learned something new, plus a majority (51%) now says they have a better appreciation for cultural events in town. Our evaluation shows that we were able to affect positive outcomes through our rock-n-roll program—hooray!

The next step is to share these results with our stakeholders and other interested parties.
Sharing Results

Program evaluations can be presented in a variety of formats, depending on the audience and the purpose of the report. The Kellogg Foundation advises that there are numerous ways to present program results:[4]

- A thoroughly researched internal document detailing the success (or failure) of the program, including recommendations for the future. Such a report might be shared with your library board or other governing body, especially if you are seeking further funding or wish to make major changes to a long-term service.

- Brief executive summaries aimed at keeping stakeholder groups in the loop. Content should be shaped by the information needs of the specific audience.

- A media release or article to share your program results with the community at large. The purpose might be to not only inform the public about successful programs, but also to create support for the library in general.

- Oral presentations to stakeholders and other interested parties. These, too, are a good way to advocate on behalf of the library as well as solicit funds for future programs.

- Professionally-designed brochures that provide visual proof, through graphics and charts, of the program’s success. Compact brochures can be easily distributed at community events and to individual stakeholders.

- A short video about the program, posted on the library’s website—and even on YouTube—for all the world to see! Check-out the Roseville Public Library’s and Sunnyvale Public Library’s excellent TLA50 videos.

- Quarterly or six-month progress (formative) and/or year-end (summative) reports required by governing bodies or funders. Although these might seem rather pro forma, a good manager uses this type of reporting opportunity to seriously consider how well the program is meeting the community’s needs and whether changes should be made.

- Conference presentations where you share your program secrets with other library professionals so they can replicate your success.

Regardless of the format, always maximize the effect of your program results by:

- Knowing your stakeholder audience and what information they need to make decisions about your program.

- Presenting findings in terms your audience will understand. A great example of this is OCLC’s report, How Libraries Stack Up: 2010, which compares total public library visits (1.4 billion) to movie (1.3 billion) and sporting event attendance (218 million).

- Using evaluation findings to support your argument(s), especially when recommending further action.

- Providing concise information through use of abstracts, short paragraphs, and bullet points for quick reading.

- Using graphics, type size, and different fonts to highlight important points.
• Avoiding jargon, especially when sharing evaluation data with non-library folks.

For more tips on creating effective evaluation reports, please re-read the “Sharing Findings” section in Week 3 of the Community Assessment course.

Endnotes
Final Words of Advice

Research has shown that, for all their program expertise, libraries spend very little effort evaluating their services. What limited evaluation they do tends to be mostly quantitative, counting the number of people who attend library events and use library materials. For many libraries, the greater the number, the greater the success—minor attention is paid to analyzing the meaning behind those numbers and to measuring the benefits derived from using the library. Some might say this is one of the reasons why public libraries are taken for granted and so misunderstood today.

I encourage you all to evaluate not only the outputs of your daily efforts, but also the outcomes. Many of us love to tell others that libraries change lives. There's no more important time than right now to demonstrate—through evaluating and sharing program results!—that this is indeed true.

Here are some final words of advice as you launch your TLA50 programs:[5]

- **Don't avoid conducting an evaluation just because it seems too hard to do.** It's not! A short survey, for example, combined with observation and output statistics can yield all kinds of valuable data to help you make decisions about current and future baby boomer services.

- **Don't worry about creating the perfect evaluation plan.** It's far more important to do something than to wait until every last detail is tested.

- **Be sure to include a human element in your evaluation report.** Statistics and hard data are critical, but so is anecdotal evidence provided through observation and user interviews. Decision-makers may like numbers, but everyone else relates to stories.

- **Report failures as well as successes.** As illustrated in our hypothetical scenario, we can learn a lot about our services when we analyze our shortcomings.

- **And finally, don't just shelve your evaluation report after your program ends.** Instead, use what you've learned to gain stakeholder support and bring positive changes to the library.

Best wishes on providing successful and effective TLA50 programs to your baby boomer communities!

**What to Do Next:** Complete at least one of the [Week 3 Assignment Options](http://elearn.infopeople.org/mod/book/print.php?id=3387).

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**Endnotes**