

Celebrating Success

An Evaluation Primer

Why Evaluate?

If you Google “evaluation,” you will find hundreds of definitions, general and clinical. One of the most direct and effective is from vocabulary.com, which defines evaluation as “an appraisal of something to determine its worth or fitness.”¹ Every day, we perform evaluations and act on our assessments. They can be reflexive and mundane, as when (even subconsciously) we think, “So many designer coffees...the one I want will have espresso without caffeine, be iced, and have nondairy cream and flavoring. So I’ll order the decaf iced coconut-milk mocha macchiato,” or quite formal, as when we experience an annual evaluation by our boss to determine how effective our job performance has been. Instinctively or formally, an evaluation includes goals and objectives, a plan of action, and an outcome.

An effective formal evaluation enables you to celebrate your successes and learn from mistakes.

A Deeper Look

You evaluate because there are lots of practical and useful benefits. There are the traditional reasons people evaluate programs—to demonstrate programmatic success or to better understand how or why something works—but there are also lots of other benefits to evaluation. There are other benefits to evaluation that go beyond the direct results. For example, information you collect through an evaluation (such as participant testimonials) might be used to market the program or create a public relations piece.

Objective: Learn about evaluation basics and how to create effectively evaluate programs efficiently and easily
Audience: Adult
Materials: Not required
Time Needed: Variable

Traditional Reasons

Gain knowledge: Understand how or why something works or doesn’t.

Improve program: Identify program needs and ways that you can improve your program.

Demonstrate success: Measure the success of a program (however “success” is defined).

¹ <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/evaluation>

Other Benefits of Evaluation

- Participants feel more included if their experiences are reflected in, and influence, a program.
- Documentation can be used to create recruitment/marketing tools.
- Documentation can be used for program visibility/promotions.
- Results can be used when applying for additional funding.

Types of Evaluation

Formative evaluation that takes place **throughout a program or project**. The results of formative evaluation are applied during the program to make it better. You do it along the way and revise your programs as you go.

Summative evaluation summarizes the success of a project once completed. Data might be collected throughout, but the evaluation focuses on the **end result** and doesn't inform the process.

Note that formative and summative evaluation aren't mutually exclusive. For example, a summative evaluation at the end of a program might be used as a formative evaluation to make improvements to the program the next time it's offered.

Types of Data and Assessment

Documentation is any information you collect that tells you how a program is working.

This can include information collected through traditional evaluations (quantitative or qualitative) or it can include things that participants do, create, or say.

Data is the information you get from the documentation you collect.

You can collect documentation without analyzing it for data. For example, youth participating in a summer science program may create posters on their research projects to share with family and friends. Photos of those poster boards document student work, but the posters might also be used to assess how well students understood and applied the scientific method by looking at how they structured their hypothesis, the data they collected, and how it was analyzed and interpreted.

Quantitative data: numbers or other things that can be counted or quantified. The “what” of the situation. Collected through Likert Scale surveys, yes/no answers, percentage assignments, etc.

Qualitative data: things that are not quantified, such as how people feel or what they believe—the how and why of a situation. Collected through interviews, focus groups, case studies, etc.

Note that some data can be both qualitative and quantitative. For example, you may interview a group of students on how they feel about conservation; the feelings themselves are qualitative as they cannot be counted, but you can report quantitative results by, for example, counting the number of students who thought conservation was important and reporting that number.

Assessment is a way of knowing whether your goals for participant outcomes (whatever they are) have been met.

Traditional assessments are not part of the program; participants recognize traditional assessments as separate from program activities. They can be qualitative or quantitative.

Embedded assessments are things that participants do or create during a program, but that also illustrate something about what participants are getting out of the program or activity. These things are not called out specifically as evaluation activities, but serve programmatic as well as evaluation goals.

Authentic assessments focus on documenting program outcomes that are significant and meaningful, and show accomplishments and skills **relevant to the student, parents, and community outside the classroom or program site**. So, in addition to documenting the projects' impact on students' awareness and knowledge of climate change, Connect hopes to document the more qualitative impact on students' understanding and capacity to act on community-driven benefits through harvesting practices, water quality issues, or other issues of immediate relevance to the community.

Note that types of assessment are not mutually exclusive. The type of assessment you choose will depend on the program and goals, not all programs use all kinds of assessment. Our Connect case studies will be made up primarily of authentic assessment supported by qualitative documentation collected during program activities (you could call it “embedded authentic assessment” if you wanted to). Individual programs might choose use surveys or interviews to understand the impacts of their programs.

Evaluation Components

The **challenge** is the problem or situation you are trying to address with your program.

Goals are what you want to achieve. You have to decide what you want to achieve before you can determine whether you got there. You can have goals for individual activities, programs, or entire projects. For example, a goal for an activity might be for each participant to share a personal story about how climate change has impacted his or her life.

A goal for a program might be for participants to become climate ambassadors in their community. Goals are usually high level; for example, the overall goal of Connect is to increase knowledge, leadership, and engagement in climate action among diverse communities by building on local assets to connect community life to climate change and climate action.

Inputs are what you bring to the table—the resources you need to run the program, including human, cultural, and financial.

Actions/activities are what you do to reach your goals.

Outputs/measures are how you know whether or not you have met your goals; for example, “my program is successful if 75 percent of participants graduate from a four-year college” or “participants are more willing to talk to other people about climate change.” Measures can be either quantitative or qualitative.

Impacts are related to the original challenge or situation you hoped to address with your program. The impacts are what you hope will happen if you meet your goals. For example, if Connect is successful in increasing

knowledge, leadership, and engagement in climate action among diverse communities, one impact might be that those communities create and implement climate action plan and so are better prepared to respond to locally relevant impacts of climate change (flooding, for example).

Instruments are the things you use to collect your data. They can be the kinds of things we traditionally use for assessment, like surveys or focus groups, or they can be less traditional documentation of participants' actions, like the product of a poster campaign.