Using Findings to Make Decisions

Preconference workshop at the 2011 ATE PI conference

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0802245. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

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According to Merriam-Webster, "findings" are simply "the results of an investigation." An evaluation finding, therefore, is any information generated by evaluation activities. Findings may be simple statements of fact, such as the number of participants served or their reported level of satisfaction. Or they may be complex statements that relate performance to pre-established standards or that explicitly relate aspects of an intervention to particular effects.

Formative evaluation is done for the purpose of identifying ways a project can be improved while it is underway. In order for evaluation findings to inform decisions that actually lead to positive change, evaluators and project staff need to establish useful measures and set aside time to reflect on findings and discuss their implications for how the project is being conducted.

5 THINGS IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT USING EVALUATION FINDINGS TO MAKE DECISIONS

1. **Before you make decision based on evaluation findings, make sure the information is sound.** If sampling, measures, and/or analysis were poorly executed or biased, then the findings won't enable good decision making.

2. **It is useful to have a rubric to aid in the interpretation of and reflection on results.** It is important to develop rubrics so that there are benchmarks for the project to help define "how good is good." Rubrics are best created at the start of the project, with input from an array of stakeholders. The number of categories can vary.

   Example Performance Standards Rubric:
   Activity: Faculty are trained
   Indicator: Percentage of targeted faculty that completes training

   Performance Standards Rubric

Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
75% or more	50%-74%	25%-49%	Less than 25%

3. **It is important to keep an eye out for unintended consequences and, if any are observed, to consider the implications.** These may surface through conversations with stakeholders or by identifying unexpected patterns in data. Unintended consequences can include unanticipated impacts, side effects, or unintended beneficiaries. Unintended impacts can be positive or negative. Reflection on these can assist the staff in identifying how to maximize positive or minimize negative effects. For example, if a group is being served that wasn't targeted, then reflection could take place about whether it's best to continue serving this group or if doing so would draw resources away from intended beneficiaries.

4. **Once the findings are in place, the next step is inquiry. There is no formulaic method; following are some examples of inquiry into findings in order to make decisions:**
    - According to the targets we set for ourselves, our results are "excellent." Did we set our sights too low? Is there still room for improvement? What lessons can we share with others?
    - Data shows we are producing only adequate results. What can we change to increase our results?
    - Data shows we are producing poor results. This is certainly a surprise. Did we make erroneous assumptions? Did we have sufficient resources? What can we learn from this? Should we revise our activities? Our standards?
    - We're achieving good results with our participants, but we have high attrition. What we can do to retain participants? Are there patterns in the data that provide hints about why some people are leaving?
    - Qualitative feedback shows faculty are resentful of the time they're devoting to this project. How can we address this?
    - Three people said are materials are poorly designed. Is there some truth to this? Should we have someone external look at them to see if improvement is needed?
    - Have we thought through our measures well enough to make good decisions? Should we be measuring different things? Do we have a rubric, and if not, would it help to create one?
    - How certain are we that the results (good or bad) we're seeing are due to our project and not something else? What are some possible alternative explanations?

5. **It is essential that clear and timely communication is maintained between the evaluator and the project leadership and staff with respect to the selection of measures and inquiry into findings.** These need to be verified with all involved and need to be revisited on a regular basis

RESOURCES

EvaluATE: http://evalu-ate.org/

In particular, see the slides and recordings of their webinars on

- Evaluation Tools: http://evalu-ate.org/events/webinar_evaluation_tools/
- Claims + Evidence: http://evalu-ate.org/events/claims_evidence/

The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan: http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/

The Evaluation Center has guidebooks and useful checklists for many if not all aspects of evaluation. In particular, see

- Feedback Workshop Checklist: http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/evaluation-management/
- Utilization-Focused Evaluation Checklist: http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/evaluation-models/

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