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One of the most critical aspects of conducting an evaluation is obtaining data from individuals who are impacted by the processes, curriculum, or intervention being implemented. Unfortunately, as individuals have more and more demands placed on their time, it becomes increasingly difficult to obtain information from them. Therefore, the evaluator must “work smart” to obtain high quality data in the most efficient way possible.

HELPFUL HINTS

- 1. Reduce complexity for participants and yourself.** Keep instruments, interview questions, coding of respondents, and the overall process for collecting the data as simple as possible. Complicated processes are hard for participants to follow and are hard to administer, track, and monitor. Examine your evaluation plan and seek to simplify every task.
 - 2. Don't forget about the Institutional Review Board (IRB).** When working with a student population, permission needs to be granted to collect and report data. The permission is granted by an IRB. The IRB is a group of individuals charged by the institution with the task of reviewing research to ensure that the protocol and process complies with institution's regulations, professional codes of conduct, and the human-subjects provision of the Code of Federal Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects. Engage this group early.
 - 3. Embed data collection into the grant activities.** Whenever possible, include data collection as a “natural” part of the intervention being evaluated. For example, if students are in a classroom and you are evaluating curriculum, ask the instructor to administer pre- and post-tests. The students take the two tests as part of the instruction and do not see the pre-test as a separate “evaluation activity.” The same method should be used for collecting demographic information as well. Provide the PI with suggested points at which data can be collected. The more easily you integrate data collection into the activities and tasks of the grant, the more likely individuals are to provide information and content.
 - 4. Explain why you are asking for the data and what you are going to do with it.** People like to help but they also want to know why and how you intend to use the information they are give you The first step in that process is to provide a letter of informed consent. This letter informs each individual about what will occur during the research process and how you intend to use and report any data collected. This can be appended on the beginning of a survey. In all cases, give the individual the opportunity to “opt out” of the research process if they choose to do so. Also, you can't stop at the letter of informed consent. Take time to communicate several times with participants in the evaluation process. Sharing the results of the first round of evaluation can help encourage the participants the next time you are collecting data. Just be careful that the sharing of results doesn't bias the next data collection process.
 - 5. Conduct both formative and summative evaluation.** There are two ways to look at evaluation. One is as a method of helping to improve a process as it is occurring—this is formative evaluation. information gathered from the evaluation process is fed back to the PIs to improve what they are doing, the evaluator provides constructive criticism to the team. When the PIs and others participating in the evaluation understand how the data is going to be used to improve their work and not “punish” them, they are much more open to helping with the data collection. Too often, the PIs see an evaluator as an enforcement officer or an auditor picking out everything that is wrong. Work with the PI to establish that the evaluation process is meant to be helpful to them and is not “big brother.” Formative evaluation helps with this educational process. In summative feedback, the results are reported at the end of the process when the development or delivery is completed. The most helpful evaluation to the PI is the formative evaluation with actionable feedback.
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- 6. Follow-Up and Provide Incentives.** One of the ways you can help to increase response rates is to follow-up with nonresponders. This can involve email, formal letters, or even phone calls depending on the size of the group used in the evaluation. Also, focus on details. Even a small thing like using a person's name in the email rather than a generic opening can encourage responses. It can also be helpful to provide an incentive such as a random drawing for a book or iPad or some other item of interest. You need to be a little careful about incentives because you really want the focus to be on the data you are collecting and not on the respondents winning a "prize." But incentives can work. One common method is to provide food for focus groups; this is especially effective with students.

FATAL FLAWS

- 1. Asking for more data than you need.** Many times an evaluator creates an elaborate survey instrument or interview protocol because there are many interesting questions or data elements they would like to know. However, if the data being sought is not directly related to the outcomes of the grant you are evaluating, don't collect it. If you are not going to use the data, you should not waste anyone's time by asking for it. For example, if you are not going to fax the participants, don't collect their fax numbers.
- 2. Relying only on self-reported data.** People like to be helpful, especially when they are judging the tasks or activities of another. They tend to not want to be overly critical and, sometimes, this can skew evaluation results. One good way to counter this tendency is to seek other data in addition to survey or interview responses. Look for objective, external data sources such as student grades, standardized test scores, observation of activities within the classroom, and other forms of data that are not directly reported by the individuals. An evaluator can collect this data through observational techniques such as counting the number of times a certain activity occurs or observing certain behaviors.
- 3. Forgetting about pre-established evaluation data sources.** Closely related to Fatal Flaw 2 is to find existing evaluation processes and gather data from those processes. For example, most institutions have methods of evaluating courses already established. They have designed questions and data collection instruments and have a method for collecting and reporting the data. If possible, utilize some of that data. This saves having to collect the data and means that the individuals providing data don't have to complete two separate evaluation activities.
- 4. Forgetting about qualitative data.** Numbers are not the only source of information available to evaluators. Rich insights and inferences can be developed by recording qualitative information gained from observations or interviews. If data is collected systematically, it is not anecdotal. Create protocols for collecting qualitative data and use it to help fashion the results gathered from quantitative numbers. Often, when conducting an evaluation, insights learned from participants can help to provide useful suggestions during the formative evaluation process.
- 5. Writing poor questions.** Nothing hurts an evaluator's credibility or the ability to effectively provide constructive feedback as poorly written survey or interview questions. Avoid such common mistakes as asking two questions in one statement, being too vague in what you are requesting, and writing confusing or misleading questions. Respondents will become upset and may abruptly end participation if they feel the survey or interview questions are not well designed.
- 6. Disinterested Faculty.** One particularly difficult area of data collection is working with faculty who may not want to fully cooperate with the data gathering process. One thing that you can do is request a visit to a faculty meeting before you start data collection, that way you can explain to the faculty what you are doing and why it is valuable. Offering to share data and insights can also be a motivator for faculty. Additionally, try to make the process as unobtrusive as possible for the faculty member. If you can streamline the process, the faculty will be more willing to assist.

Remember: You are creating a picture of the success/failure of an activity, so you want the picture to be as rich and accurate as possible. You are not conducting scientific research. Use multiple data sources, qualitative and quantitative data, and don't be afraid to include insights and observations of individual participants.

RESOURCES

- Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2007). *Educational Research: An Introduction* (8th ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Yarbrough, D., Shulha, L. M., Hopson, R. K. (2011). *The Program Evaluation Standards: How to Assess Evaluations of Educational Programs* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.

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