Evaluation Research

Note:
Some of the material on these slides is derived from the Centers for Disease Control
Definitions

Evaluation research, sometimes called program evaluation, refers to a research purpose rather than a specific method.

This purpose is to evaluate the impact of social interventions such as new teaching methods, innovations in parole, and a host of others.

Evaluation research is a form of applied research—it is intended to have some real-world effect.
Many methods, like surveys and experiments can be used in evaluation research.

In recent years, the field of evaluation research has become an increasingly popular and active research specialty, as reflected in textbooks, courses, and projects.
Research vs. Evaluation

- Production of generalizable knowledge
- Researcher-derived questions
- Paradigm stance
- More controlled setting
- Clearer role
- Often published
- Clearer allegiance

- Knowledge intended for use
- Program- or funder-derived questions
- Judgmental quality
- Action setting
- Role conflicts more likely
- Often not published
- Multiple allegiances
“Research seeks to prove, evaluation seeks to improve…”

M.Q. Patton
Surveillance & Monitoring vs. Program Evaluation

- Surveillance - tracks diseases, problems, or risky behaviors
- Monitoring - tracks changes in program outcomes over time
- Evaluation - seeks to understand specifically why these changes occur
Topics Appropriate to Evaluation Research

Evaluation research is appropriate whenever some social intervention occurs or is planned.

Social intervention is an action taken within a social context for the purpose of producing some intended result.

In its simplest sense, evaluation research is the process of determining whether a social intervention has produced the intended result.

The topics appropriate for evaluation research are limitless.

The questions appropriate for evaluation research are of great practical significance: jobs, programs, and investments as well as values and beliefs.
What Can be Evaluated?

- Direct service interventions
- Community mobilization efforts
- Research initiatives
- Surveillance & monitoring systems
- Policy development activities
- Problem/crisis investigations
- Client Assessments
- Communication systems
- Infrastructure-building
- Training and educational services & staff qualifications
- Administrative systems
When to Conduct Evaluation?

The stage of program development influences the reason for program evaluation.
Why Evaluate Programs?

- **To gain insight** about a program and its operations – to see where we are going and where we are coming from, and to find out what works and what doesn’t.

- **To improve practice** – to modify or adapt practice to enhance the success of activities.

- **To assess effects** – to see how well we are meeting objectives and goals, how the program benefits the community, and to provide evidence of effectiveness.

- **To build capacity** - increase funding, enhance skills, strengthen accountability.
Steps in Program Evaluation

- Step 1: Engage Stakeholders
- Step 2: Describe the Program
- Step 3: Focus the Evaluation Design
- Step 4: Gather Credible Evidence
- Step 5: Justify Conclusion
- Step 6: Ensure Use & Share Lessons Learned
Identifying Stakeholders

Who are the stakeholders?
- Persons involved in program operations
- Persons served or affected by the program
- Intended users of evaluation findings

What is their interest in the program?
- Do they support the program?
- Are they skeptical about or antagonistic toward the program?
Identifying Stakeholders

- Persons Involved in Program Operations
  - Staff and Partners
- Persons affected or served by the program
  - Clients, their families and social networks, providers and community groups
- Intended users of the evaluation findings
  - Policy makers, managers, administrators, advocates, funders, and others

Be Sure to Include both Supporters and Skeptics!
Engaging Stakeholders

Stakeholders should be involved in…

- Describing program activities, context, and priorities
- Defining problems
- Selecting evaluation questions and methods
- Serving as data sources
- Defining what constitutes the “proof” of success
- Interpreting findings
- Disseminating information
- Implementing results
Working with Stakeholders

Identify stakeholders for your program
- Those involved in program operations
- Persons served or affected by the program
- Intended users of evaluation findings

Think about which ones you need most for…
- Credibility
- Implementation
- Advocacy
- Funding

List ways to keep them engaged
Formulating the Problem: Issues of Measurement

Problem: What is the purpose of the intervention to be evaluated?

This question often produces vague results.

A common problem is measuring the “unmeasurable.”

Evaluation research is a matter of finding out whether something is there or not there, whether something happened or did not happen.

To conduct evaluation research, we must be able to operationalize, observe, and measure.
What is the outcome, or the *response variable*?

- If a social program is intended to accomplish something, we must be able to measure that something.

- It is essential to achieve agreements on definitions in advance.

- In some cases you may find that the definitions of a problem and a sufficient solution are defined by law or by agency regulations; if so you must be aware of such specifications and accommodate them.
Operationalizing Success/Failure

Potentially one of the most taxing aspects of evaluation research is determining whether the program under review succeeded or failed. Definitions of “success” and “failure” can be rather difficult.
Cost-Benefit Analysis

How much does the program cost in relation to what it returns in benefits?

- If the benefits outweigh the cost, keep the program going.
- If the reverse, change it or ‘junk it’.
- Unfortunately this is not an appropriate analysis to make if thinking only in terms of money.

Ultimately, the criteria of success and failure are often a matter of agreement.

The people responsible for the program may commit themselves in advance to a particular outcome that will be regarded as an indication of success.
Measurement in Evaluation

Researchers must take measurement quite seriously in evaluation research, carefully determining all the variables to be measured and getting appropriate measures for each.

Such decisions are often not purely scientific ones.

Evaluation researchers often must work out their measurement strategy with the people responsible for the program being evaluated.

There is also a significant political aspect.
Additional Issues

The Social Context

- Evaluation research has a special propensity for running into problems.
  - Logistical problems
  - Ethical problems
Implications

Three important reasons why the implications of the evaluation research results are not always put into practice.

• The implications may not always be presented in a way that the non-researchers can understand.

• Evaluation results sometimes contradict deeply held beliefs

• Vested interests in the programs underway