

“Evaluative Research”

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Introduction

Evaluation of the impact of a new program is an important aspect of many organizations. Finding that implementing a new way to evaluate donors or whether or not adding a return to work program is successful may be examples of program evaluation.

There is a design methodology called evaluative research that can help guide you as you design studies for future publication. As stated in Weiss (Weiss, 1998), evaluation is the “systematic assessment of the operation and/or the outcomes of a program or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvement of the program or policy” (pg 4).

Elements of Evaluation

Two questions that you may ask about a program may include if the program has the intended effect (What are the outcomes?) or is the program being delivered as it was originally constructed (What services are being delivered?). In these two questions, you may have several ways to evaluate the impact (the outcomes) and its effectiveness (process).

Outcomes refer to the results of the program. Were the services successful? Did those in a smoking cessation program stop smoking? Did those who attended an education program increase knowledge? Was attitude about organ donor awareness changed as a result of your program? Methods to measure outcomes are not too distant from those you would find in traditional research methodology. Measuring group differences or pre/post-testing are examples of ways to measure outcomes.

Process refers to the internal working of the program itself. Understanding the operations of the program and how it can be improved. Designing the evaluation of the process of the program requires thoughtful planning of what you want to examine. Examples may include monitoring staff time during the program to show cost savings or collecting surveys from different levels of staff to tease out problems with work efficiency. Qualitative studies can also be included. Each type of evaluation, whether outcome or process must be systematically developed to ensure the effects of the program are truly effects rather than opinion.

If I want to evaluate a program, do I need IRB review?

Be specific about the intent of your program. Every institution evaluates program success as a part of normal process and that is generally not considered research (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 1999). You will have to decide the direction that you want to take with your program evaluation summary.

Think first about the definition of research, and then the purpose of the program evaluation. Research is a systematic collection of data designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. Are you planning to increase generalizable knowledge or just improve the performance of your institution? Does your program test a new service against current service? Are you planning to publish your results in a peer reviewed scientific journal? Assuming that all program evaluation involves systematic investigation, determining whether it is research depends if it is designed to increase generalizable knowledge. If you want others to use this program, then it is research. If the results are developed in a manner that is intended only to assess and revise a specific program, then it is not research (Personal communication, May 2004).

IRB review depends on the intent of your program evaluation. If human subjects are involved and your primary goal is to increase generalizable knowledge, then your study may be considered research. Perhaps you did not intend at the outset to have a research study, but through your thorough systematic collection of data, you found compelling evidence that your program could be replicated in other settings and you want to share this with your professional colleagues. Call your IRB and investigate your responsibility to have human subjects oversight.

References:

Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (1999). Guidelines for defining public health research and public health non-research. Retrieved May 6, 2004, from www.cdc.gov/od/ads/opspoll1.htm

Weiss, C. H. (1998). *Evaluation: Methods for studying programs and policies* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.