It's about the plan: how to ensure that your program evaluation gives you the results you need

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Abstract

This presentation discussed a year-long evaluation of the College Outreach Program (COP) at the University of California, San Diego Libraries. We discussed our evaluation process from creating an evaluation plan to designing the evaluation tools and analyzing the resulting data. While results and next steps were presented, the focus of the presentation was on the *process* used to create the evaluation. The COP evaluators spent six months clarifying evaluation questions, identifying stakeholders, selecting methods, and designing instruments. The time spent planning the evaluation, although lengthy, proved to be invaluable as it provided focus and ensured that results could be used to make a decision about future outreach activities. This presentation highlighted the importance of having an evaluation plan and provided steps that one can take to evaluate a program at one's institution.

Introduction

One of the authors was first introduced to evaluation planning while taking a course at San Diego State University. She worked on a project for real clients that were trying to evaluate the effectiveness of their outreach to teach parents about the importance of nutrition and exercise so that they could help their children make good lifestyle choices. It was during this project that she saw the value of applying this process to qualitative evaluation.

As librarians are painfully aware, outreach is very difficult to measure since it often lacks hard numbers; instead, evaluations rely on qualitative measures. The process we described helps develop a focused evaluation that will yield actionable data.

Evaluation Findings

The presenters were part of a committee that conducted an evaluation of the College Outreach Program (COP), a pilot program promoting library services and resources to UC San Diego (UCSD) first- and second-year undergraduates. The program was structured so that each of UCSD's six colleges was assigned a "College Outreach Liaison" – a librarian who was tasked with communicating with the students through their Student Affairs office and college Provost. After the third year of the pilot program, the group designed and conducted this evaluation to answer two questions:

1. Is the implementation of the program consistent with the goals specified in the Project Plan?

2. Does the current structure of the Program work well for stakeholders?

Five stakeholder groups were identified and invited to participate in an online survey via SurveyMonkey. These groups, listed below, represented college administrative staff, library staff and undergraduate students that were either part of or impacted by the COP. Each of the online surveys asked the participants about their opinions of the Program (as it relates to the specific group) and recommendations for improvement and/or change. Responses from all groups were generally positive and favored the College Outreach Program.

- *Colleges' Staff* valued having one person to contact in the libraries.
- *Students* surveyed remember getting information about the UCSD Libraries during their orientation in a variety of ways.
- *Provosts* appreciated the program as a way to make their students aware of library services.
- *Library Public Service Heads* favored the program, but had concerns about resources to sustain it, particularly staff resources.
- *College Outreach Liaisons* believed there is value in an outreach program to new freshman and transfer students. Many of their concerns had to do with the structure, sustainability, and support of the Program.

Currently, the UCSD Libraries are undergoing a strategic planning process and will consider this report to help administrators decide if providing outreach to this group of students is a priority.

Benefits of Planning

*Clarity***.** The detailed structure of the evaluation plan forces you to be very clear about what you are trying to accomplish. The process provides a road map to follow in conducting your program evaluation.

Improved outcome. Following the steps in this method, from examining the purpose of your program, to defining the stakeholders, to developing the evaluation questions and then making sure the survey instruments ask what is needed to answer those questions, will lead to an improved evaluation outcome.

The final report is easier to write. Having taken the time to lay out the detailed evaluation plan, you have already written portions you will need for the final evaluation report.

It keeps you focused. Having the goals of the evaluation firmly defined can help to keep you focused when analyzing the data and making recommendations.

Considerations

Lead time. Planning our evaluation took about six months. Doing the evaluation took another six months. You'll want to apply the process to a somewhat substantial research question.

The process is rigorous. You may encounter impatience from your team members. Perseverance and strong leadership are helpful.

Beware of "analysis paralysis." Don't over analyze. Keep consulting the plan and use it to refocus if necessary. Remember, the goal is to answer the evaluation questions. While peripheral data may be interesting, strongly consider its value for your report if it doesn't answer your evaluation questions.

Parts of the Evaluation Plan

1. *Description* provides the context a reader will need to understand what and why the evaluation is being conducted. This section should be short, but include all pertinent details.

2. *Purpose* includes the broad evaluation questions to be answered.

3. *Stakeholders* should be identified. Include why they are important to the study. It may be useful to describe them in a table:

Stakeholder	Description of Group	Potential contributions to the process
• Stakeholder/group • Stakeholder/group • Stakeholder/group	Brief description of group or stakeholder	Why are you including this group or stakeholder?

4. *Limitations* are factors that may impact the evaluation (e.g. time, resources, access to key stakeholders, etc.)

5. *Evaluation Questions/Issues Table* breaks the broad evaluation questions into sub-questions that will focus your evaluation. Be sure to also identify the stakeholders that will provide answers to the questions.

Evaluation Question	Sub-Questions	Stakeholders
Broad question from *Purpose* section.	Questions that will help you answer the broad question.	Stakeholder group(s) that will provide the answer to the question.

6. *Questions/Procedures Table* (see following page) identifies the source and type of information required to answer each broad question. It also includes a brief description of the data collection strategy (e.g. interviews, surveys, etc.).

Evaluation Question	Information Required	Source of Information	Data Collection Strategy
Broad question from *Purpose* section.	List the types of information you will need to answer this question. Some examples include specific reports or comments from stakeholder groups.	Where will you get the information? List the stakeholder groups here.	How do you plan on collecting the data? Include your methods here (e.g. interviews, surveys, focus groups, etc.)

7. *Management Plan* provides a general timeline for the evaluation. It includes information about the task and person responsible for completing it. Remember, this is a guideline and can be changed a little throughout the project.

Conclusion

This process can provide structure and focus to an evaluation project. It can be time consuming so it should be applied to a larger project. All presentation documents and a template to begin an evaluation using this process is available online at http://sites.google.com/site/evaluationplan/.