



I've Been Thinking about... Program Evaluation

How can we improve evaluation to get a true measure of effectiveness?

By Martha Golensky

We've been talking about the best ways to measure service outcomes for as long as I can remember, in a career going back some 30 years, and little has changed: All parties agree on the importance of obtaining data that show which practices are most effective, but there's less unanimity on how to go about it. A recent thread on a listserv made me realize we still haven't solved the key problems.

The thread began when a consultant to nonprofits asked what's being done to analyze program outcomes. In response, a university student just back from a conference on volunteerism noted how little he'd learned about the effects of the dollars and time spent to alleviate social ills, mainly because the emphasis had been on the value of the services from the perspective of donors or service deliverers rather than recipients. An academic then offered an overview of research she and others have been doing on performance evaluation, the titles of which confirmed that most of it is dictated by organizational leaders and donors, with little to no input from those ostensibly benefiting from the programs.

Having been a nonprofit CEO, I do appreciate the competing demands on executive directors from various stakeholders, particularly the many funders for whom outcome data have become the holy grail of effectiveness. With so much on one's plate, it's tempting to concentrate on concrete services that are easier to quantify. Yet, this of-

ten means giving short shrift to our reason for being—qualitative results like improved self-esteem or decision-making ability. It isn't that these outcomes can't be measured. It just takes more effort to identify the right descriptors for the hoped-for changes.

Why is applied research still undervalued in many colleges and universities?

Despite the challenges, we need to do a better job of understanding recipients' needs—that is, the concerns for which they're seeking help, along with their response to the services offered and, most important, what impact the services have had on their lives. Some organizations have adopted the collaborative approach known as *empowerment evaluation*, which recognizes consumers as the primary interest group; clients are trained in evaluation practices so they can help decide what will be measured, the methods used, and so forth.

A logical place to seek assistance is at your local college or university, but even here practitioners need to be clearer in communicating what they hope to learn and what they can offer, to tap into the strengths each can bring to program evaluation. One problem is that the tenure/promotion system rewards faculty more for pure research than for applied research. To change this dynamic will require influencing the mindset of those in charge of the reward system by demonstrating that doing good for the community is also good for the institution.

As a great believer in collective action, I think faculty members and nonprofit managers can work together toward this common goal through already established groups (the state association of nonprofits, for example) as well as task forces set up for this purpose. Enlightened funders such as the Kellogg and Mott Foundations (which support projects that build on existing knowledge to improve the quality of life for all) might be open to providing the wherewithal for a well-defined joint undertaking.

Let's try harder to find a practical solution to make program evaluation more productive for everybody! ■

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