Tip Sheet

Asking Useful Evaluation Questions
Dr. Bernadette Wright & Dr. Ladel Lewis, July 23, 2014

So What?

“So what?” is a question that any effective evaluation must answer. Unlike some purely theoretical studies that researchers might conduct to satisfy their own curiosity or add trivial facts to a field, evaluations must center on their purpose of providing information that decision-makers can use for planning and action. The American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles note, the “primary aim” of evaluators is to provide “the best possible information that might bear on the value of whatever is being evaluated.”

Funders often want to see certain measures of effectiveness and impact to show how projects are worth their investment. However, your staff and leadership team and stakeholders may require different information for planning and decision-making. In conversations with stakeholders, a few considerations can help you identify questions that will lead to useful findings:

■ What questions do you think are especially important to address?
■ How do we plan to use the findings? Who else might use them and how?
■ What if we find the answer we expected? What if we find no evidence?

Related studies and initiatives are another source for identifying questions that your evaluation might answer that could enable you to become a national model. What do we know from what others have done? What are the knowledge gaps and recommendations for future research that your evaluation might fill?

An agreed-upon program description and logic model showing how your idea will work is another source of potential questions. Which of your activities and strategies are based on well-researched effective practices? Which parts are new and have not been tested before? What are the areas of uncertainty?

Your available data, time, and budget will determine what questions you can answer in a meaningful way. For example, if you want to better understand the problem you are addressing, a large national survey or literature synthesis may provide the data you need. For assessing effective strategies and effects of a new initiative in your neighborhood, a case study would be better. To measure long-term effects, you will need longitudinal data collected over several years.

The flowchart on the following page will help you decide if a question would be useful to answer.

“... [E]valuators aspire to construct and provide the best possible information that might bear on the value of whatever is being evaluated.”

Flowchart for Choosing Useful Evaluation Questions

Is it a question that funders, staff, or other stakeholders say they need answered?

- No: Evaluations cost money and time, so focus on producing answers that people can use to improve your program.

Yes

Does your program theory/logic model support your hypothesis?

- No: Ensure that your theory is complete and realistic and that theory supports your hypothesis.

Yes

Is it an unanswered question that researchers/others in your field say needs answering?

- No: Avoid re-inventing the wheel and re-testing what others have already adequately tested.

Yes

Can we answer the question with available data, time, and budget?

- No: Consider recommending the question as a topic for future study.

Yes

Address the question, and share your results to increase your positive impact!

If you have any questions or would like assistance, contact us at:
info@meaningfulevidence.com
Your success is our goal!