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And the Program Goes On, But Should It?

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And the Program Goes On, But Should It?

Abstract

Assessing a program involves asking why a program operates in a certain way. Learn how to evaluate your city's programs and use the information to improve them.

Keywords

programs, needs assessment, urban impact analysis, cost effectiveness

Disciplines

Urban Studies and Planning

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And the Program Goes on, but Should it?

A food distribution program, a community sidewalk policy, or a new approach to nuisance abatement – each program is implemented with the hope that it will make a positive impact. However, often programs or policies that seem like a good idea or seem to be working may be maintained without further consideration. Rather than continuing to support programs and policies ‘just because,’ program evaluation offers a systematic approach to intentionally examine a program or policy’s design, implementation or outcomes to inform decision-making. Evaluation methods can include quantitative (using numbers and statistics) and qualitative (using language and text) approaches to help better understand a program and its functioning.

A good first place to start with evaluation is considering the stakeholders, the people interested in a particular program or policy. You might consider funders, staff, recipients and other community partners – the various perspectives of each of these groups should be considered when planning an evaluation. Stakeholders are critical for planning the evaluation and ensuring that the evaluation results will be used – an evaluation report that simply sits in a binder on a shelf has little value.

The next step is to consider the overall purpose of the evaluation – what is it that you want to know? Program evaluation covers five domains - and stakeholders (community members, program staff, program recipients and city leaders) should carefully consider which domain is most appropriate at different time points for a given program. In the following, each of the domains is described briefly, and questions within each domain are offered as a starting point for consideration.

Needs Assessment

You might not think about a needs assessment as a type of evaluation – but the systematic assessment of the need for a program is a type of evaluation. This might be most useful before a program is planned in your community – key questions to consider might include: what is the scope of the problem we are seeing? How many people does this issue impact? Or what are the unique aspects of my community as it relates to this need?

Assessment of Program Theory

The essential idea of assessing program theory is checking whether the underlying ideas driving a program make sense. Sometimes this is not clearly stated for a program but is simply part of what is understood as the idea behind a program. For example, a nuisance abatement program might operate from a theory that sending a letter prior to having city staff address a weed problem will lead to homeowners taking action. Assessing a program theory involves asking why a program operates in a certain way -why do we do this thing this way? What do we expect to happen when we do this? Does this make sense?

Process Evaluation

Any program or policy must be implemented in some way. Process evaluation is concerned with how a program or policy is implemented and improving implementation. Questions that are important to consider in process evaluation include things like who is participating in the program? Are we delivering the program in the way that we had planned? Does participation in the program change based on where we host our events or the time of day?

Impact Evaluation

Impact evaluation is an assessment of the effect of a program – most simply described as answering the question of whether a program or policy works or accomplishes change.

Impact evaluation requires careful attention to the study design to provide the best estimate of the program effect. In almost all cases, a solid impact evaluation design requires comparing a group of participants who have participated in a program or policy with a group of participants who have not. Impact evaluation provides a way to examine the question that many stakeholders are most interested in, but it is crucial to consider “right-sizing” this type of evaluation. A full-scale randomized controlled trial might be the best way to determine whether a program has an effect, but it also might be time-consuming and expensive. For a smaller-scale program, this might mean considering less robust evaluation designs. Returning to the particular interest of stakeholders and the overall purpose of the evaluation is important - considering whether there are evaluation designs that can provide a reasonable estimate of program effect for the size and scale of the program or policy of interest.

Cost Efficacy or Cost-effectiveness

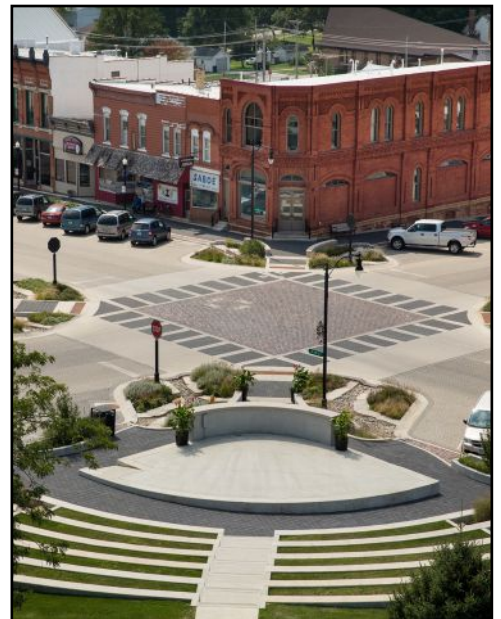
Cost efficacy or cost-effectiveness studies are a final type of evaluation – where program impact is established and weighed against the costs of a program. A critical thing to note here is that to conduct a cost-efficacy or cost-effectiveness study; you must already have established an estimate of the program impact.

Programs and policies are frequently developed and continue to be supported without further consideration. Program stakeholders, including funders and managers, can encourage program evaluation to systematically examine program implementation and impact as a way to improve programs and invest time and funding in programs that have a potential impact.

References: Rossi, Peter H., et al. *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach*. Eighth edition, SAGE, 2019. ●



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