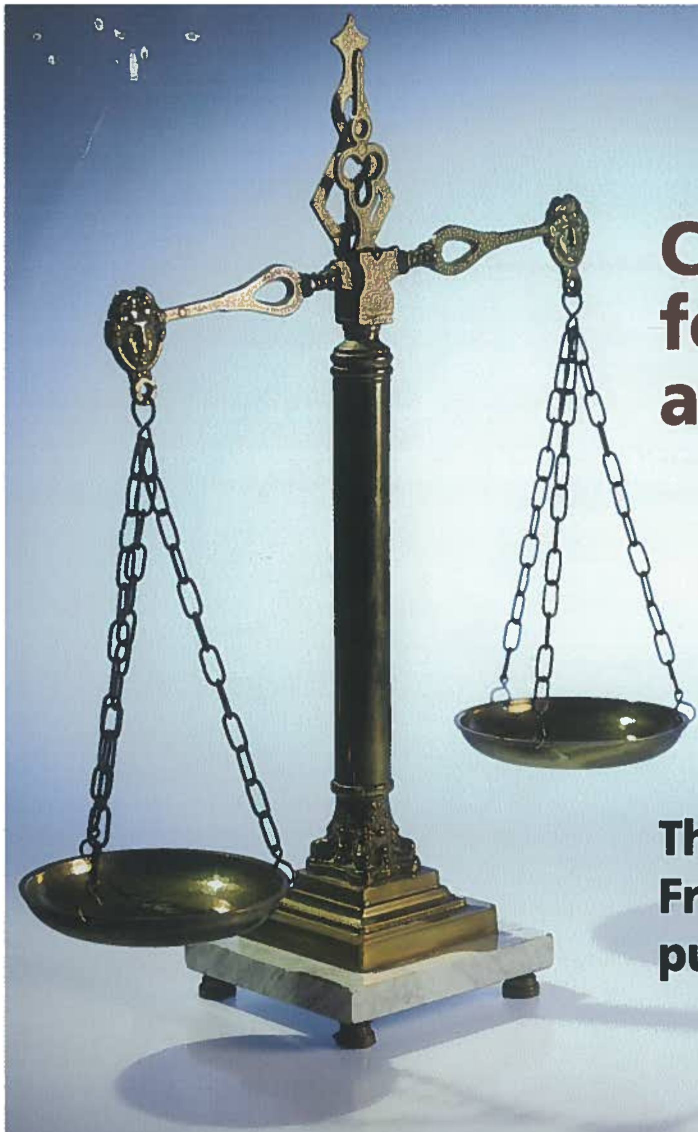

Conducting an Evaluation for Recreation Programs and Services

The evaluation cycle: From determining the evaluation purpose to reporting results

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Much of the conversation of late is centered on the challenging public and economic conditions and has us discussing techniques for becoming more creative with service input/output process in order to obtain and/or maintain stable funding resources, as well as protect programs and jobs. Protecting our profession and the services we provide to the public can often be challenging when there is a lack of understanding about "what we do" as a profession beyond ***fun and games.*** Many of us have found ourselves in the position of explaining or defending our profession as it relates to the underlying positive outcomes of services, particularly, those outcomes that are inherently difficult to observe or count.

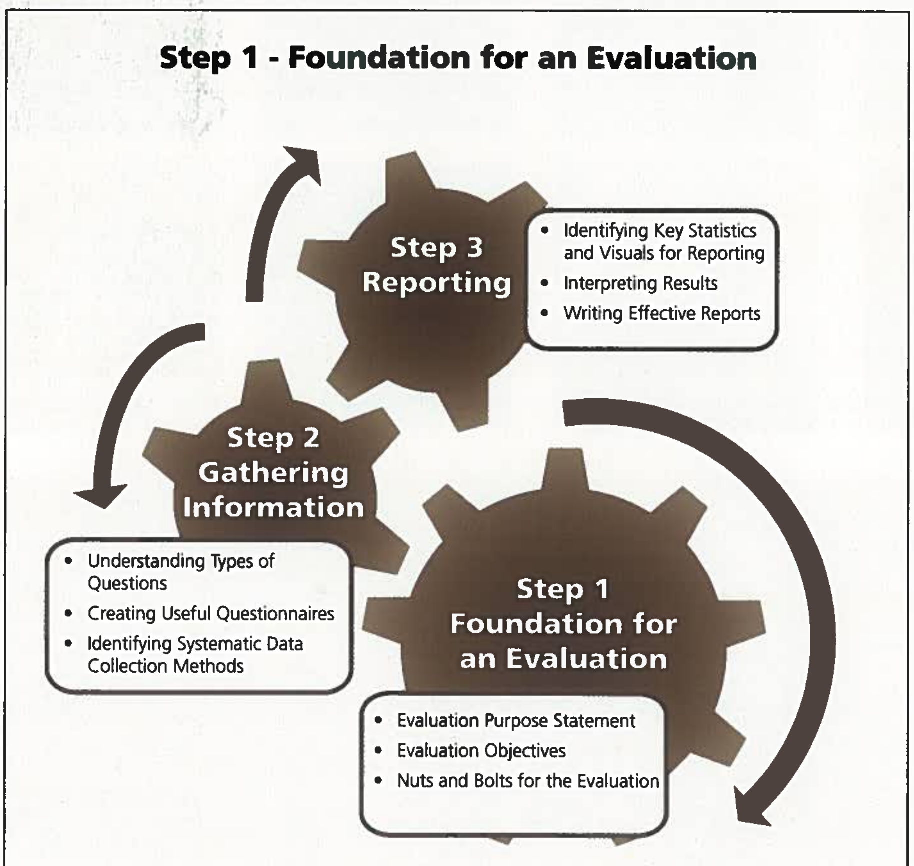
While it's easy to count the number of police and fire responses and to calculate scores on standardized achievement tests in our public schools, it is more challenging to quantify the development of self-confidence in a 10-year-old attending a 6-week baseball clinic or independent living skills in an 83-year-old participating in activities at a community senior center. Consequently, in order to vie for public dollars and resources, we need to be able to move beyond trying to ***explain*** or ***defend*** what we do to actually ***providing evidence*** for what we do as a public service.

Understanding this challenge was evident in the premise behind the VIP Action Plan – to create a strategic model for the systematic programming of services that provides a method for demonstrating the effectiveness of the "who/what" by evaluating measurable program objectives that flow directly from the agency mission. It is this evaluation component (also found in other types of public, goal oriented management models, such as Management by Objectives and Mission-Driven Government) that "connects" what you *want* to do (the agency vision) to what you say you do (the agency mission), to what you *actually* do (demonstrated outcomes and benefits of services and programs).

This article is the first in a series of three that explore the art of evaluation. The series will present an overview for creating, conducting, and connecting the formal process (steps) of an evaluation. In this first article, we will address the importance of carefully developing the foundation for an evaluation through clearly defining the ***evaluation purpose and evaluation objectives*** (as they relate to intentional programming) that will set the base for creating a quality evaluation tool and meaningful reporting. Article two will discuss how to turn measurable objectives into useful questionnaires and systematically collect data from program participants. The final article will help complete the evaluation cycle through identifying key statistics and determining how to interpret and report results that clearly relate back to the evaluation purpose and objectives.

The information in these articles comes from authors' experience designing, conducting and reporting on evaluations, teaching college level evaluation courses, and is based on the three components of an evaluation discussed in Henderson and Bialeschki's text "*Evaluating leisure services: Making enlightened decisions.*"

Evaluations are conducted for multiple reasons. We may need to make strategic decisions about fund allocation, apply for a grant, or determine whether to continue a program or service. Evaluations are about making decisions, and generally the goal of an evaluation is to "determine 'what is' compared to 'what should be'" (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002, p. 3). The first step in an evaluation is to identify the purpose. This is reflected in an overall purpose statement. It is important to note that if the evaluation project cannot be narrowed down to a single purpose statement, you may be trying to do too much at once. Evaluation is intended to be ongoing, taken on one small piece at a time.



The Purpose Statement

The purpose statement should be in the form of a **one-sentence declarative purpose statement**. For example:

- "The purpose of this evaluation is to determine ..."
- "The purpose of this evaluation is to identify ..."
- "The purpose of this evaluation is to examine..."

Each step in the evaluation process is built upon this first step of creating an evaluation purpose statement. As simple and elementary as this step may look, the process of determining the evaluation purpose is sometimes not as easy as it seems, particularly if there are no clear objectives for the program to evaluate, if it is difficult to identify problem areas with the program, or if there seems to be too many reasons to evaluate the program. It will be important to identify any of these types of issues when determining the purpose for your evaluation.

Once any of those issues have been identified, the best starting point for constructing the evaluation purpose statement is from the "intentionality" behind the program that is based on specific program outcomes. For example, let's say you are running a summer day camp program for youth that has been intentionally designed to include the four specific outcomes: 1) ***skill development;*** 2) ***increased self-esteem;*** 3) ***stronger friendships;*** and 4) ***improved outdoor awareness.*** When creating the evaluation purpose statement, you will consider all four of these outcomes as they pertain to one narrowed down purpose: to determine outcomes. Therefore, the evaluation purpose statement would read as follows:

> ***The purpose of this evaluation is to determine whether the intended outcomes for participants in the summer camp program are being achieved.***

Note: Everything that follows in the evaluation process, from creating objectives to making decisions and recommendations, will relate to the evaluation purpose.

The Evaluation Objectives

The objectives for the evaluation should connect DIRECTLY to the evaluation purpose statement. They should reflect three important components: 1) objective should be clearly written so that questions on a questionnaire (or any other type of evaluation tool) can be easily constructed based on the content in the objective, 2) each objective must pertain directly to the purpose of the evaluation, and 3) when writing an objective it must incorporate "measurable" components that will allow you to discuss information gathered (results) as it pertains to the purpose of the evaluation.

Objectives should include three measurable components that will allow you to identify the **"WHAT"** (what are they doing), the **"WHO"** (who is doing the "what") and **"WHEN"** (timeframes). Importantly, a good objective should be written in such a way that it can be "flipped" around to become a question. The answer to this question (by way of the results) is then discussed in the report writing of the evaluation. Look at the following four examples of evaluation objectives and how they can be flipped around to allow for discussion in report writing. Again, considering the "big picture" is important during this first step in the process because incorporating these three components will allow you to effectively discuss the **"WHY"** and **"HOW"** in your report writing. Below are two examples of evaluation objectives and how they can be flipped around to create a "workable" question that will be discussed in subsequent report writing.

Objective: Determine if participants of the "Go 60" Program improved their physical health (i.e. strength, mobility, cardio, flexibility) by the end of the program.

Flipped Question: Did participants of the 6 "Go 60" Program improve their physical health (i.e. strength, mobility, cardio, flexibility) by the end of the program?

Objective: Identify reasons why registration for the summer teen dance program has decreased in enrollment numbers.

Flipped Question: What reasons were identified for the decreased enrollment numbers for the summer teen dance program?

Based on the example purpose statement above, there would be (at least) one measurable objective for each of the intended program outcomes (*skill development, increased self-esteem, stronger friendships, and improved outdoor awareness*). Therefore, the evaluation objectives would read as follows:

Evaluation Objective 1: *To identify reported improvements in specific outdoor skills among the youth participants in the summer camp program.*

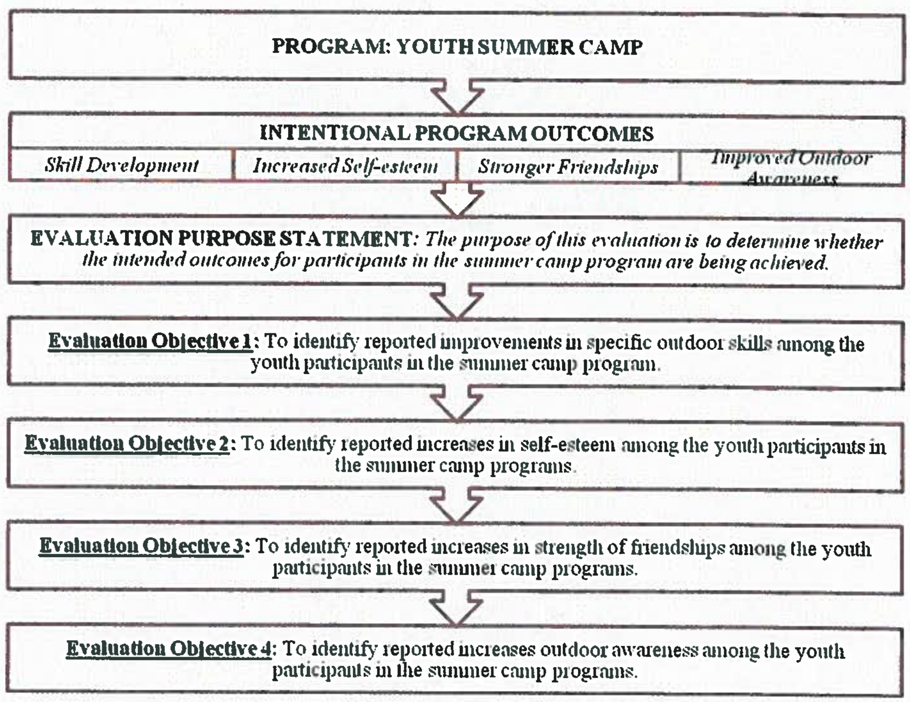
Evaluation Objective 2: *To identify reported increases in self-esteem among the youth participants in the summer camp programs.*

Evaluation Objective 3: *To identify reported increases in strength of friendships among the youth participants in the summer camp programs.*

Evaluation Objective 4: *To identify reported increases outdoor awareness among the youth participants in the summer camp programs.*

Note: Sometimes there may be a need to create more than one objective for an outcome (this will depend on the objective), but if there are more than three objectives per outcome, you may be over-reaching. A way to test this is to keep checking back to the purpose of the evaluation and simply asking "what do we need to know?" or "why are we conducting this evaluation?" Again, doing this may appear to be quite an elementary task, but doing so will keep you focused. There are three "big picture" considerations to remember during this first stage of the evaluation that will influence the other two subsequent steps in the evaluation process and may become problematic if not addressed when creating the objectives.

1. The intent of an evaluation is to gather information that will help determine the direction for a particular program or service. When thinking about writing an evaluation objective, often "less is more" IF the objectives (and questions on a questionnaire that directly measure those objectives) are written correctly and follow directly from the evaluation purpose. Consequently, you only need a few objectives (2-4) to be able to gather useful information that will allow for effective reporting without adding extra work for you and your respondents.
2. Consider the respondents time when creating a questionnaire. Questionnaires should be construct-



ed in a way that will minimize the time the respondent has to complete the questionnaire, and every effort should be made to accommodate the process for them, including thinking about how many questions they will need to answer (the time it will take to answer each question on the questionnaire). The more objectives for an evaluation, the more questions on the questionnaire, and accordingly, the more time it will take for the respondents to fill out the questionnaire.

3. Time is money. As mentioned, the more objectives you have and the more questions needed to measure each objective, (often we need more than one question to measure one objective). It is important to consider the time it will take to work with the information (data) once it is gathered, including data entry, analysis, interpreting data, and importantly writing the results in a way that coherently discusses each objective. Minimizing work and being more efficient is an important consideration when we look at the big picture of the evaluation process. When writing objectives, consider the time (and money) it will take to complete the analysis and writing step of the evaluation process. There will be more discussion about these three "big picture" considerations in the second article of this series.

Nuts and Bolts for the Evaluation Foundation

After the evaluation purpose and objectives are completed, finish up by coordinating the "nuts and bolts" of the evaluation, some of which will include:

- **Resources:** identify all resources needed for all steps in the evaluation (e.g. funding; stakeholders - who would have a vested interest in the results of the evaluation; available staff to create, implement, analyze, and write the evaluation; materials, equipment, supplies, computer programs for creating, analyzing, and reporting, etc.; participant incentives; so forth).
- **Sampling:** determine the evaluation respondents (i.e. the sample population), the best time to sample these respondents, and determine what type of sampling procedures that will be needed (including the type of sampling procedure – such as "random sampling" - dates, times, locations, number of completed questionnaires needed, what staff will be needed to administer the questionnaire, and so forth).
- **Background:** most often it is prudent to conduct some research regarding the "background" of the subject (or topic) of the evaluation. With some reporting, there is a brief review of the literature required, for examples when applying for grants. Background work might include reviewing previous reports or evaluations conducted on a program (statistics, narratives, etc.), personal interviews with "key" people involved in the program, and a review of the literature.

Putting the Pieces Together

When putting together the first step for the evaluation, it is helpful to create some type of "working" graph, table or chart (e.g. PERT Chart) that will help you illustrate the connections among the pieces of the evaluation process. For both Step 2 (creating a questionnaire) and Step 3 (working with results and report writing), you will be able to have this chart as an easy reference that will allow you to stay on track and within a systematic process. In the following two articles of this series, we will continue to add to the chart on page 22 as we bring together the steps of the cycle of evaluation.

Reference

Henderson, K.A. & Bialeschki, M.D. (2002). Evaluating Leisure Services: Making Enlightened Decisions (second edition). State College, PA: Venture.