A Developmental Approach to Program Evaluation: Knowing When to Measure Impact

By Karen Peterman, Ph.D.

Today's educators are under increasing pressure to account for their practices. Whether in the classroom, after-school programs, or television and other media, all educational programming must demonstrate impact. Although program developers want to know they have made a difference, it is not always clear *how* or *when* to measure the impact of a program.

I was trained as an experimental psychologist with a focus in child development. As a developmentalist, one spends a lot of time watching and waiting for one set of skills (crawling, for example) to develop into another (the ability to walk). The same is true of evaluation research; programs, like people, are dynamic, living, growing entities. And just as it would be inappropriate to measure the walking abilities of a child who had just learned to crawl, it is equally inappropriate to assess the full potential of a program (i.e., outcomes) that is still in its infancy.

CALDWELL.

"Ah, yes, the unanticipated outcome."

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Today, programs are increasingly evaluated before they are mature enough to provide meaningful outcomes data. But this doesn't have to be the case. Below, we present a developmental model for thinking about and measuring impact across a program's lifespan.

Developing Your Idea—Conception

In our experience, educational programs are designed by people with a passion for education and the hope of making a difference. We also believe (and most funders agree) that the most effective programs are developed through a *theory of change*.

Theories of change describe *how* and *why* (based on research and past experiences) a specific set of program activities will impact educational outcomes — they work backwards from the intended outcome to create a program that consists of activities that research has demonstrated should be effective. From there, project teams fill in the details to create a program that is all their own.

Program Development—Infancy

Whether or not your program is designed using theory of change, a *logic model* is a helpful tool to chart components such as program resources, the number of people you hope to reach and how, and the short and longer-term program outcomes.

Logic models are useful for starting you along the developmental path, keeping project development on track, and focusing formative evaluation efforts. Like programs, logic models are likely to develop and change over time.

Taking Your Program Out for a Spin—Adolescence

One of the most valuable ways to learn about a program is through *pilot testing*. Pilot tests are appropriate during a program's adolescence (around age two or three in "project years").

A pilot test is essentially a trial run of your program that allows you to learn about program implementation and impact simultaneously. Importantly, the term pilot test connotes to funders that your project is early in its development and thus should not yet be accountable for producing all of the desired outcomes. Like adolescence, the pilot test phase is a time of rapid growth and change – you learn a lot about your program and make informed decisions about exactly what you want your program to be when it "grows up."

Developing a Program's Identity—Adulthood

All programs develop their own identity over time. For example, a program may be defined by the use of specific materials for a set duration of time. As these characteristics are solidified, program implementation will become more prescriptive to ensure impact. It is at this point, and no sooner, that it makes sense to *measure program outcomes*. For some, this stage is years down the road. For others, funding requirements speed up the process. Regardless of when you move into this phase, the more responsive your program has been to previous evaluation efforts (formative evaluation and/or pilot testing), the better your outcomes will likely be.

A Final Note: Change is Good

No matter the age of your program, there will always be things to learn and changes to make. Inherent in each of these stages is the fact that your program is living and growing. Also inherent in this model is the idea that change is good – it indicates that you are learning and growing with your program to facilitate its development and success.

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