

Evaluation Research

The Frustrations . . .

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What is Evaluation Research?

- Evaluation research is applied research that is designed to assess the implementation of program goals and objectives of demonstration programs operated by public and private agencies. This is often done by measuring the performance outcomes of individuals involved in the program, although the unit of measurement may vary. These programs are usually funded by public sources.



The evaluation usually includes:

- (1) a “process evaluation” to examine the problems of project implementation (e.g., staffing, turnover, use of resources);
- (2) cost (benefit) savings analysis;
- (3) participant outcomes, such as reduced crime and/or drug use, employment, improved health and well-being of participants; and
- (4) the lessons learned from the program with recommendations for future programs of the type studied.

Can we do it well?

- "If we don't succeed, we run the risk of failure."

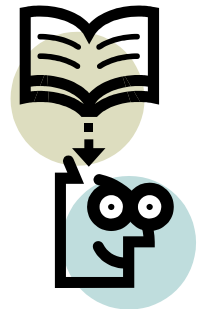
Bill Clinton, former President

Who's Frustrated?

- There are frustrations from many sides:
 - Agency personnel
 - Program staff and information systems staff and research staff (if any) and
 - Sometimes administrators/management and fiscal
 - Evaluators
 - Evaluation Director and/or administration
 - Field staff (data collection)

Our Discussion

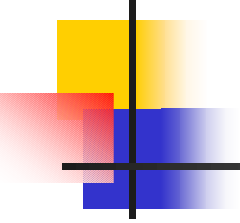
- The source & nature of these frustrations
 - How they are generated
 - Where they come from . . . their origins
- Methods of reducing frustrations
 - Must encompass entire time of project
 - Yield = good final product



What we will not do

- Not a guide to how to do evaluation research, although some key concerns are presented that may require further research
- Not a guide on how to run an agency, public or private, although many of the ideas and concerns are quite relevant to how demonstration programs are best managed and evaluated

Some Sources of Frustration

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- The psychological dynamics of professional prejudices
 - territoriality (turf, jargon, etc.),
 - acting out frustrations (stonewalling),
 - "effluent rolling down hill" phenomenon, and
 - the different languages (styles of communication) spoken by each discipline.

Professional Concerns

- “you couldn't possibly understand my agency or its (or my) needs.”
- language differences—the way we speak within our respective disciplines—can be as different as night and day from agency to agency
 - this can create a huge barrier to success.

" It's no exaggeration to say that the undecided could go one way or another"

George Bush, Former US President



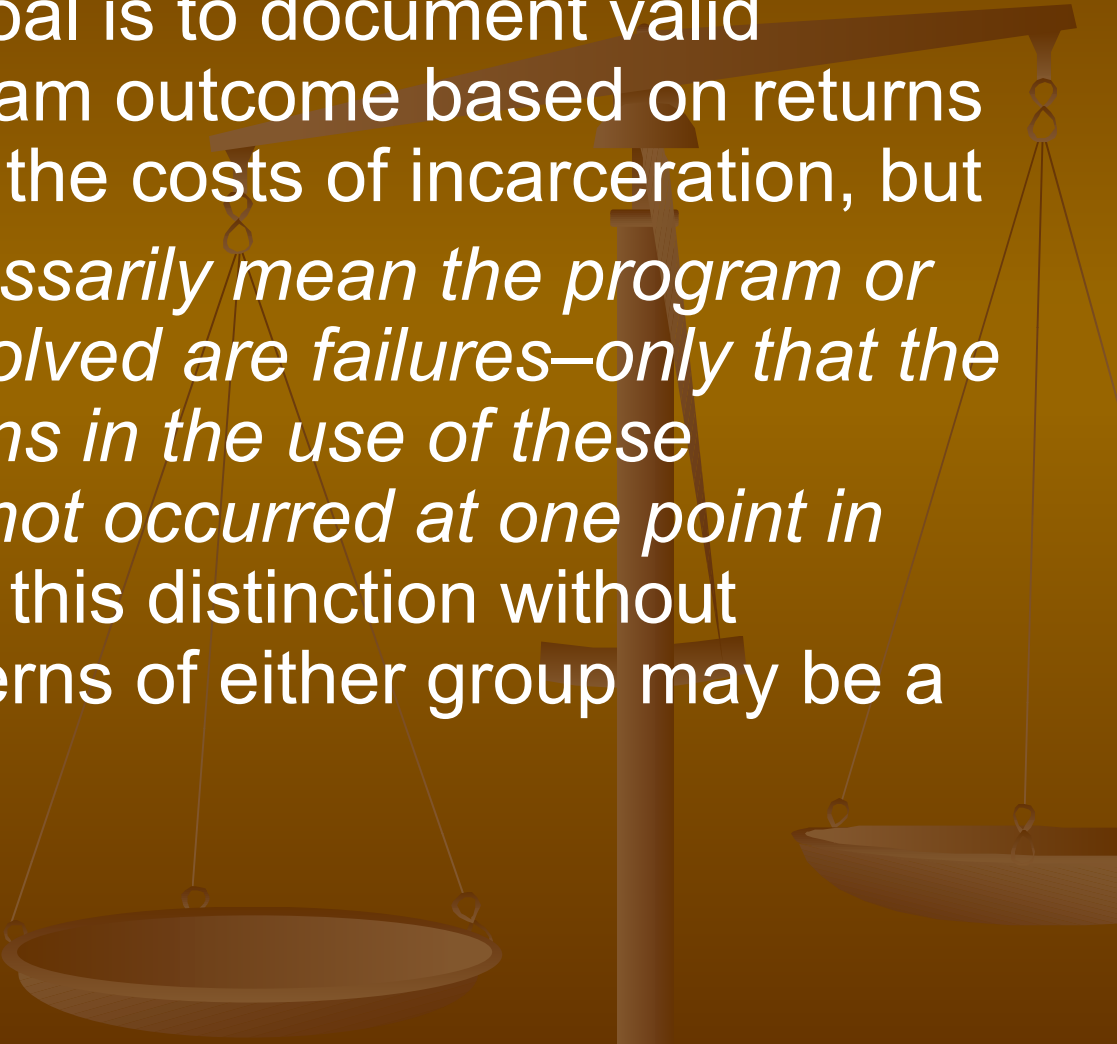
A “classic” example

- The distinction between the treatment goals of a program (success) and the research or evaluation goals of the evaluators (e.g., outcome) is important to making determinations about program success.
 - They are usually defined differently by each group

Mutual Understanding

- Goal is overall “reduction” of arrests, jail returns, dirty urines, etc.
 - If two days in jail, used as a sanction, can eliminate or avoid a one-month sentence, there has been a reduction of bad behavior. **Treatment staff** often *do not* see the short return as a negative outcome in terms of a return to jail or just time in jail, no matter what the cause—probation violation, dirty urine, or even a new arrest. **It is a step in the treatment process**, which can sometimes work in terms of the desired overall outcome.

What about the **EVALUATION GOAL?**

- If the evaluation goal is to document valid indicators of program outcome based on returns to jail or prison, or the costs of incarceration, but
 - *this does not necessarily mean the program or the individuals involved are failures—only that the expected reductions in the use of these alternatives have not occurred at one point in time.* How to keep this distinction without violating the concerns of either group may be a problem for both.
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The Answer?

- The answer, as noted above, is to clearly state the distinction for all parties and to document incidents in a way that will allow for both interpretations.
 - For example, a short term jail return, or “sanction,” may be recorded by evaluators as a program sanction, as opposed to a terminal jail term that put the person out of the program.
 - However, if the arrest or probation violation occurs after the person is considered out of the program, through either failure or completion, it can not be recorded by the evaluators as a program success to the funding entity.

Another example . . . data collection

Program managers sometimes do not communicate evaluation needs to their staff.

- AND, existing data processing systems often don't have what evaluators need --
 - Sometimes these systems fail to deliver what is required due to their unique function as a program tool or client tracking tool.
 - Sometimes managers do not know what is in the system and, therefore, *can't* make useful data available.



Problems of Multiple Systems

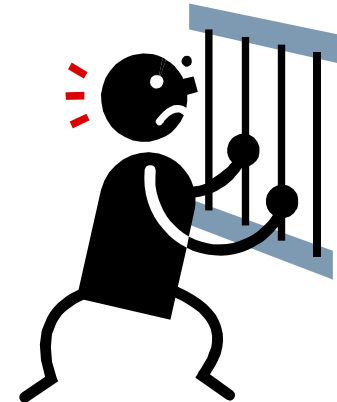
Sometimes data must be accumulated from *several* systems and aggregated into one data set.

This was the case in our SPAN program –
Mentally Ill Offender Crime Reduction Grant

Data on jail days were needed from the Jail Information Management System (JIMS) and tracking data from the DBH “SIMON” system.

AND . . .

- Criminal justice pre and post program data had to be accessed through the Sheriff's Department record system.
- They were the only ones authorized to access the system.



THEREFORE . . .

- The evaluator must be clear from the outset about what is truly available in relation to requirements of the project.
- AND, the evaluator must work out the details of access to those data.
 - Must start early because approvals can take months.

ALSO . . .

- Agency needs and capabilities must be considered
 - Some staff know research and evaluation and can be helpful, right up to providing some insights into the findings.
 - Other staff are not interested – some may even “fake” data just to “get it done.”
 - The program manager must be apprised of these concerns . . . the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Other frustrations

- Institutional Research Board clearances
 - Can be both agency boards and university boards to satisfy.
 - Delays can be caused when human subjects protections are not in place
 - Proper consent forms are needed, which sometimes need legal approval

How to prevent frustrations

The most important concern, however, relates to the *beginning* of the program/project:

- Having the evaluation team in at the beginning of the project to help with the overall design and define measures and outcome goals
 - All too often (most often?) the evaluators come in too late in the process
- Some ideas have been given already
 - Deciding on what is going to be measured, beginning with the proposal and leading to the actual data collection.



One way: working with staff

- Good communication with staff at all levels is critical
 - In person, at meetings, and with memos designed to clarify issues and concerns
 - Regular, scheduled meetings of project managers and evaluation staff are also necessary to clarifying important issues.

The Best Way: The Contract

- A contract must be written between the agency and the evaluators which specifies
 - The responsibilities of both parties
 - Exactly those data to be collected
 - Right down to the forms to be used and the specific elements in the data bases in question
 - When data are to be collected
 - For example, at some specific points in time
 - Who is to collect it
 - What sanctions exist for failure to deliver



We can reduce many kinds of frustration, but we can not stop other types of concerns about having evaluators on site

- Paranoia based on not knowing what the evaluators WANT must be understood.
 - Real fears exist about having individual job performance evaluated
 - **There are no benefits in evaluation for the program manager**
 - Most evaluations will find something “wrong.”
 - What if the program does not work?



Support Required

For these reasons the evaluation **MUST** have full support from the agency at the highest levels.

They must be willing to accept failed programs and/or work to improve them.

Without this support a sound evaluation of the program is not possible.

Evaluators Need Love Too

- The evaluation team must have support from its administration
 - The contract, again, is important
 - Good contract procedures must be in place to support the evaluators (payroll, etc.)



"The word "genius" isn't applicable in football. A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein,"

Joe Theisman, NFL football
quarterback & sports analyst.

. . . Nor is "genius" applicable to completing good evaluation research, if clear understandings are generated that support cooperation and an honest assessment of program outcomes.

