

# V: Evaluation and Assessment

Our culture is increasingly interested in outcomes and accountability. From Wall Street to the school board, leaders demand information about the effectiveness and efficiency of all aspects of work. Funders, in particular, now require assurance that their investment in a venture is yielding results and that the parties involved have responsibly deployed financial and human resources. In response, nonprofit organization and school administrators have scrambled to learn how to develop, design, and implement program evaluations, or to find the funds to engage an outside evaluator.

A decade ago, anecdotal reports on a program's effectiveness were acceptable. After an artist's visit, teachers, principals, and students were asked to fill out questionnaires, which the arts organization studied to find out if the students had enjoyed the visit and if they seemed to have learned something. Today, we need a much more sophisticated process. Both funders and educators expect that all organizations will conduct outcome-based evaluations that provide benchmarks for measuring success at regular intervals. Instead of simply looking back at a project once it is over to determine whether it was successful, outcome-based evaluation builds reflection into the process throughout the project, in the form of ongoing assessments of program activities. Successful evaluations, whether performed internally or by an outside consultant, integrate the evaluation process into the program itself.

Reports based on assessment tools such as tests and interviews and on overall project evaluation will reveal a program's areas of greatest strength and areas that still need refinement. They also provide valuable information for building a base of advocates and supporters.

# Definitions of Terms

*Evaluation*, according to Michael Quinn Patton, is the thoughtful, systematic collection and analysis of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs, for use by specific people, to reduce anxieties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions regarding those programs.

*Participatory evaluation* involves trained evaluation personnel working with key partnership team members responsible for the program. Seasoned evaluators and seasoned program staff together design, conduct, and use the results of a program evaluation. They also train other participants to conduct their own evaluations.

*Outcomes* are the benefits to the participants, the impact the partnership has on the students. An outcome may be defined as a change in behavior, skill, knowledge, or attitude that occurs as a result of the partnership activities. Improvement of teaching practices and changes in the cultures of the CSA and the school are also outcomes. Examples of outcomes include:

- Students and their families demonstrating an increased interest in art.
- The public school administration becoming more aware of the intrinsic value of arts learning.

*Indicators* are conditions that demonstrate whether change has occurred. Outcomes should be *quantified* by identifying indicators, which are concrete, objective phenomena indicating that a specific change has taken place. To be useful, indicators must be countable and/or observable evidence of change. Here are two examples:

- Sixty students and their families (52 percent) attended at least two art exhibits during the life of the project, as compared with 18 students and their families in the previous year.
- A full-time music teacher was added to the public school faculty.

*Assessment* refers to the process of measuring specific outcomes. Assessment vehicles may include test performance; teacher, student, and artist journals; videotapes of students in process and during performances and exhibits; attendance records; and reports from parents.

- *Qualitative assessment (or evaluation) methods* include observations and group or one-on-one interviews.
- *Quantitative assessment (or evaluation) methods* are surveys or questionnaires about aspects of the program that can be measured.

## A Word About Assessment

The arts education community fought many battles for the adoption of standards for education in the arts. Having achieved that goal, we must now work equally hard to develop measures of accountability. Any hope of making your arts partnership a line item in a public school's or district's operating budget depends on having instruments to measure success in a way that meets the district's needs and expectations. Long-term, school-funded arts partnerships require concrete evidence that they help improve teaching and learning. School boards are interested in improved student attendance, achievement of the learning standards, increased class participation, improved classroom behavior, and a decrease in student suspensions and dropouts. They also want relevant information regarding teacher performance, professional development activities, and increased parental and community support.

Historically, ongoing student assessment, in the form of continuous one-on-one lessons, peer-to-peer critique, or adjudicated performances, has been an integral part of learning an arts discipline. Consequently, arts partnerships are in a position to broaden the definition of what constitutes evidence of student achievement in the arts, and in other

subject areas as well. To do so, the partnership must provide assessment tools to gather relevant information, process the resulting data, and present it in a form that the school can include in its own reporting mechanisms.

Assessment has demonstrated to the New York City Opera and Martin Luther King Jr. High School staffs that students in participating classes are more deeply engaged in learning. Teacher attitudes and practices have also changed considerably. Whereas in the past teachers had to be recruited into the arts program, increased interest has created a pool of willing teachers from whom the partnership can select participants.

Arts Connection notes that schools and principals use the assessment report as a way of disseminating information to members of the school staff who are not involved in the program. Jackie Quay, of Spectra+ at the Fitton Center for Creative Arts in Hamilton, Ohio, stresses the value of assessment reporting as a tool for advocacy. She says, “It is important to keep in mind the politics of arts in education—that is, to determine what about student learning can be shown to political entities.” In today’s atmosphere of high-stakes testing, where schools feel pressure to be accountable for test scores, Spectra+ recognizes that there is also a political need for assessment and realizes that it is up to the CSA to provide data demonstrating that the arts do have an impact on student learning, “not only in the arts [themselves] but also in other academic areas.”

Spectra+ performs both qualitative and quantitative assessments to test proficiency, creative thinking, and art appreciation and is looking for applications to general education. Quay emphasizes, however, that this focus does not devalue the arts as discrete subjects.

Although assessment is still a developing science, it appears to be most effective when it is part of the work process and when it helps teachers know whether they are successful at their jobs. As assessment becomes an integral part of the partnership process, new questions emerge as partners learn what information is most important and how to get that information. Most importantly, partners learn how

## The Uses of Evaluation: New York City Opera

The New York City Opera was confronted by a very specific problem at the Martin Luther King Jr. High School. The district superintendent had made it clear that if the program did not have an impact on New York State Regents test scores, he did not want it in the school.

However, the program's effect on Regents scores was only one piece of a larger assessment process. For its own reasons, NYCO employed a variety of assessment tools, including substantive evaluations conducted with the teachers and teaching artists, student journals and portfolios, and student performance work. They also used a classroom observation rubric that examined how well the teacher and teaching artist worked as a team and the degree to which the students were engaged.

to use the information to continue to modify and improve their collaboration, in order to best serve the children.

# Outcome-Based Evaluation

We hear a great deal about “outcome-based” evaluation, without necessarily being certain of what that means. This description is adapted from *Outcome-Based Evaluation: A Working Model for Arts Projects*, from the Guidelines of the National Endowment for the Arts (available at <http://www.nea.gov/grants/apply/out/faq.html#4>).

Outcome-based evaluation is a systematic way to determine if a project has achieved its goals. This organized approach helps organizations establish clear project benefits (outcomes), identify ways to measure the project benefits (indicators), and clarify for whom the project's benefits are designed.

Conducting this type of evaluation and reporting on the results offers many benefits:

- It gives you information that will enable you demonstrate concretely how important your project is to everyone with an interest in the partnership—both stakeholders and the general public.
- By enabling you to describe the benefits and impact of the project in very specific terms, it puts the partnership—and the partners—in a better position to request funding.
- When specified outcomes and indicators are documented and available, you can target modifications and improvements in the program exactly where needed. Needs and expectations are clear to both staff and stakeholders.

There is no denying that evaluation is time-consuming, and indeed it is often jettisoned when human or financial resources are limited. It is wise to anticipate the extra time and resources evaluation will require and include them in the partnership budget and work plan. Another helpful approach is to focus on just a few very important outcomes and ways to measure them. In this way you can begin the effort while minimizing cost. Sometimes organizations draw upon the resources of colleges or universities to help carry out the evaluation, even integrating them into the partnership itself. Assuming that the parties agree about what will be evaluated, this can be a very workable solution.

If you still find the idea of evaluation a bit overwhelming, bear in mind that outcome-based evaluation is not formal research. It is a management tool that will help you know whether the partnership is achieving its intended results. Outcome-based evaluation does not have to involve statistical analysis and scientific research designs. It does not have to be complicated.

## Designing an Evaluation Process

Much of the following guidance is based on the work of Anita M. Baker, Ed.D., who demystified the subject during the Partners in Excellence Institute. It is particularly useful for partners wishing to perform an in-house evaluation, but also provides a framework for discussion with potential outside evaluators.

### NYCO continued

At the end of the year, the students in the partnership program scored 60–80 percent on the Regents exams, while the mean Regents score for the school was closer to 20 percent. This result enabled NYCO to satisfy the superintendent and to proceed with the program as planned.

At the same time, NYCO's own evaluation enabled them to make modifications that improved the program. They learned, for example, which singers were more effective in the classroom and what changes to make in their approach. This case demonstrates both the political and the pedagogical value of evaluation.

## Overall Considerations for Designing the Evaluation Process

- Questions or issues to be addressed
- Strategies that will be used
- Which people will undertake the activities
- When the activities will be concluded
- Who will receive the products of the evaluation and how they will be used

## Determining Outcomes and Indicators

Deciding on outcomes and indicators requires that the project's ultimate purpose has been carefully thought out and described. During the planning stages, you should have answered the question "If we are truly successful with this project, what will the results look like for the people we have served?" Your answer stated the changes that would happen as a result of the project. Those changes now become the intended outcomes for purposes of evaluation.

## Formulating the Questions

The questions to be addressed constitute the basis of any evaluation process. They clarify what will and will not be evaluated. If the evaluation is to be of use, the answers to these questions must be carefully specified and agreed upon in advance.

The essential questions are:

- What are we evaluating?
- Why are we evaluating it?
- How are we evaluating it?

The following criteria are useful for selecting good evaluation questions:

- Data can be brought to bear on the question.
- There is more than one possible answer to the question. The phrasing of the question does not predetermine the findings.
- The identified decision makers want and need information to help them address the question. They know how the information will be used internally and, where appropriate, externally.
- Most of the questions are aimed at changeable aspects of programmatic activity.

Choosing the methodologies for the evaluation depends upon the evaluation questions, the time frame, and the available human and financial resources. In developing evaluation and assessment tools, it is wise to work in cooperation with representatives of all your stakeholder groups, including students (see next section also). It is critical that everyone understands what will be evaluated or assessed, what methods will be employed, and what the partnership intends to do with the results. If this level of understanding is not established at the outset, you run a much greater chance that fear, confusion, and disappointment will ensue.

For example, one participant in the Partners in Excellence Conference described a situation in which university-based evaluators and teaching artists disagreed on what should be evaluated. While the program personnel wanted to measure and document what they had been able to accomplish artistically with a group of mentally and emotionally challenged high-school students, the evaluators measured an entirely different set of skills and attitudes. The result was frustration and a report that had little practical use.

## Formulating Your Report

When reporting the results of the evaluation, it is often helpful to consider what each set of stakeholders wants to know about the results of the partnership. Each partner's board, the local community, and the funders may want similar information, but this does not mean that one report will satisfy everyone. Consider what will be most important to each group, and in what style it should be presented.

In general, the evaluation report should include the following information:

- Inputs (what we used)
- Activities and services (what we did)
- Outputs (what we produced)
- Outcomes (what we achieved)

Interpreting the data resulting from assessments requires great care. Test results, for example, may not be a direct result of the arts learning only. New curriculum in other subjects, altered schedules, or just about any other change in the school environment can contribute to increases or decreases in test scores. It is equally likely that arts programs create an environment where students, artists, and teachers are working together and bringing new skills into test preparation. For example, at the Martin Luther King Jr. High School, the teachers used skills such as improvisation to help students learn and retain material. Maureen Nobile, Arts Access Director at Martin Luther King Jr., recommends that organizations avoid using standardized evaluation tools, except to help them find their own solutions, because these tools lack specificity.

# Working with Your Stakeholders

Your stakeholders have a vested interest in the results of your evaluation. They may include:

- Programmatic decision makers (administrators, curriculum coordinators)
- People involved in the program, to whatever degree (students, teachers, artists, parents, funders)
- Outsiders interested in the program (arts council, local businesses, civic organizations, other arts organizations)

An effective antidote to being caught between these potentially competing interests is to engage the stakeholders in the evaluation process. In deciding whom to invite to participate, select people who:

- Represent the various constituencies that have a stake in the evaluation and its use
- Have the authority and power to use the evaluation findings in decision making
- Believe that the evaluation is worth doing and care about how the results are used
- Are willing to commit time to the evaluation process

The advantages of involving stakeholders are many:

- Meetings that include stakeholders provide excellent opportunities for differing viewpoints to be heard and for data collection.
- Because the process is participatory, the results of the evaluation are more likely to be used.

## Two Contrasting Experiences

At the Partners in Excellence Conference, Rina Shere, then Executive Director of the Institute for Arts and Humanities Education (IAHE), described two of their experiences with outside evaluators.

In the first case, IAHE hired a large research firm to conduct student assessment and program evaluation of their Interarts Program. The firm used their customary methodology, with input from IAHE. The IAHE staff held training symposia with the artists so they could help determine the focus of the evaluation—a necessary step, since many of the artists were not accustomed to articulating outcomes. As a result, the artists began to deepen their evaluation questions and better define the outcomes they wanted to achieve. However, the length of the project was limited, and there was insufficient time for planned videotaping of lessons, so the evaluation ended up focusing on the production of art rather than on assessment of aesthetic learning—an unsatisfactory result for IAHE.

- An environment of openness reduces suspicions and fears that the evaluation will become a statement of the organization's worth. Rather, all understand that it is a tool for managing the project and an indicator of what specific measures may be required to make the project more successful.
- An open forum composed of various stakeholders makes it difficult to suppress tough questions or negative findings.
- There is also an advantage for the evaluator, who has an opportunity to observe the interactions among various stakeholders.
- Working together engenders a sense of shared responsibility, reducing the perception that the evaluator is out to find fault with the project.
- Finally, new ideas often emerge out of the dynamics of group interaction, as participants become sensitized to the multiple perspectives on the project. The group may even continue to function after the evaluation is completed.

## Hiring an Outside Evaluator

Performing an internal evaluation may at first seem the most cost-effective approach, but the extra time and effort that staff members will spend on the process is itself a very real cost. Ultimately, you may decide to commission an outside evaluator. Don't think of the evaluation as competing for program funds. Build its cost into the partnership budget or fund it as a separate project. A rule of thumb is to allocate 10 to 20 per-

cent of the total partnership budget for evaluation. Independent consultants, evaluation consulting firms, or universities with graduate programs that include training or projects in program evaluation can provide these services.

## Finding an Outside Evaluator

If you decide to hire an outside evaluator, be sure to identify someone with extensive experience reviewing programs for non-profit organizations. Equally important is a basic knowledge of the subject area to be evaluated. Do not underestimate the need for a good fit. Your organization should be comfortable with the evaluator's personal style. Be sure to check references from sources you trust. One of the best ways to identify the right evaluator for your project is to issue a Request for Proposal (RFP) and compare the responses. Some essential questions to ask a prospective evaluator are:

- What evaluation questions would guide your effort?
- What strategies would you use to address the evaluation questions? (Be specific about how you would collect data, involve staff, and measure outcomes.)
- What timeline will the evaluation operate on?
- Who will conduct the work and what relevant experience do they have? (Identify key evaluation personnel and clarify their level of involvement; attach resumes.)
- How and when will the findings be communicated?
- How will the financial resources be used? Include professional time, travel, and other direct and indirect costs.

### Two Experiences continued

By contrast, IAHE's Family Arts and Creativity program worked with an outside evaluator who was an integral part of the project. There was an ongoing exchange of information from the start, so the evaluator knew what IAHE was looking for. She worked with staff members on designing questionnaires, rubrics, and surveys. Questionnaires were given to the artist-teacher teams, parents, and students. (The word most frequently cited by parents and to describe the program was "fun"—an important quality when you are trying to draw people closer to the arts.) Parents and students were especially pleased to be asked their opinion; one student commented, "No one ever asked what I thought before." Evaluation became part of the reflection process, and IAHE got the information it needed. Strengths and weaknesses were clearly defined, particularly in the area of professional development, and modifications were made accordingly.

# So Let's Make Music Together ...

As you embark on the adventure that is an arts education partnership, we wish you joy and success. David E. Myers closed the Partners in Excellence Institute with the following passage from Margaret Wheatley's book *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. Her inspiring words are a fitting conclusion to this handbook as well.

This quantum world demands that we be present together, and be willing to improvise. We agree on the melody, tempo, and key, and then we play. We listen carefully, we communicate constantly, and suddenly, there is music, possibilities beyond anything we imagined. The music comes from somewhere else, from a unified whole we have accessed among ourselves, a relationship that transcends our false sense of separateness. When the music appears, we can't help but be amazed and grateful.