

# What is an Evaluation Question?

**And how should I go about developing one?**



This packet explains what is meant by the term “evaluation question,” describes three basic steps to developing evaluation questions, and provides several examples of process and impact/outcome questions.

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## What is an Evaluation Question?



**Evaluation questions are:** “A set of questions developed by the evaluator, evaluation sponsor, and other stakeholders; the questions define the issues the evaluation will investigate and are stated in terms such that they can be answered using methods available to the evaluator in a way useful to stakeholders” (Rossi, p. 443). In short, evaluation questions are what you want to know.

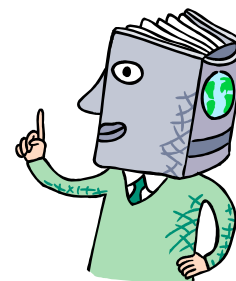
The way your evaluation questions are worded is extremely important: “These [evaluation questions] serve to focus the entire evaluation process and determine the type of information to collect, the strategy for gathering the information, and the appropriate analysis options” (Program and Project Evaluation, Center for Support of Teaching and Learning at Syracuse University).

### Three Steps to Developing Evaluation Questions

#### 1. Determine the purpose of the evaluation. Are you...

- Contributing new knowledge to the field? Examining innovative new services and approaches you have implemented? Providing data that helps shape policy and improve services? Fulfilling funder requirements (If you have multiple funders, are there ways the evaluation can respond to most/all interests)?
- Responding to what do your stakeholders want to know? Stakeholders might be: funders, staff, volunteers, managers, program participants, board of directors, collaboration organizations, community members and leaders. Try to get a good idea of everyone’s concerns and expectations before you decide on questions; it is to your advantage to get stakeholder input early on.

**2. Draft general evaluation questions.** Consider the “knowledge gaps.” What else do you need to know to improve services and respond to stakeholder interests? A good place to start is your program logic model, which links program goals to specific objectives and will help prioritize evaluation questions. You may want to think of questions in terms of process (service delivery) and impact/outcome (service benefits).



Examples of general **process** evaluation questions:

Does the program provide adequate opportunity for the desired outcomes to occur? Is the appropriate structure in place (e.g. staffing, physical setting, written policy and procedures, availability of services)? Are the activities designed to address the stated community need? Are the intended recipients receiving service? Are participants getting the appropriate dosage of service?

Examples of general **impact/outcome** evaluation questions:

What kinds of outcomes have been observed in participants after receiving services? Are these temporary or lasting outcomes? How much of the outcomes can be attributed to the services received? Are participants more likely than similar non-participants to demonstrate the desired change? Are there any unanticipated outcomes? What factors might explain why some participants do not experience the desired outcomes?

**3. Develop specific questions that are measurable.** After developing general questions, draft and refine several more specific questions that address the larger questions. For example, a general evaluation question for a mentoring program might ask: *What kinds of outcomes have been observed in youth participants who receive mentoring services for one year?* Specific questions that address youth outcomes might include: *Did mentored youth increase school attendance? Did their study habits improve? Did they avoid risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use? Did they become involved in volunteer activities at school or in the community?* These are specific questions about changes in behavior that can be observed and measured.

As you focus your questions, keep in mind ...

- Can the data you need be collected within your timeframe and budget?
- What are the ethical or political constraints to collect the type of data you want?
- Will the evaluation be institutionalized (i.e. implemented on some level beyond the initial required evaluation)? If yes, prioritize questions that will give you useful information to make ongoing management decisions.



## EXAMPLES of Evaluation Questions\*

Here are general evaluation questions in areas that programs may want to investigate. The first section contains process evaluation questions; the second, impact or outcome evaluation questions. Each general question contains a list of more specific questions that help to define the focus of the evaluation and determine the possible data sources and data collection methods. You may want to choose one or more of these areas, depending on your evaluation's focus and scope, and develop specific questions from there.



<b>I. Examples of PROCESS Evaluation Questions</b> <i>What do I want to know?</i>	<b>Possible Data Sources and Collection Methods</b> <i>How can I find out?</i>
<p><b>POPULATION SERVED: Is the program serving the appropriate population?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How many persons are receiving services?</li> <li>• Are members of the target population aware of the program?</li> <li>• Are the people for whom the service was intended accessing the services?</li> <li>• Are they receiving the proper amount, type, and quality of services?</li> <li>• Are there people accessing the services who should not be?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program records (e.g. intake and attendance information)</li> <li>• Interviews with key informants (leaders of the population, service providers)</li> <li>• Observations of service providers as they work with participants</li> <li>• Survey of a sample of the population</li> </ul>
<p><b>SERVICE QUALITY: Does the program provide quality service across all sites?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does program delivery differ from one site to another? If so, why, and what are the implications of this for beneficiaries?</li> <li>• Is program performance at some program sites or locales significantly better or poorer than at others?</li> <li>• Are participants satisfied with their interactions with program personnel and procedures?</li> <li>• Are participants satisfied with the services they receive?</li> <li>• Why do some participants drop out of the program early? How can we reduce attrition?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program records such as prior performance results</li> <li>• Site visits, observations of service providers as they work with participants</li> <li>• Surveys, interviews, or focus groups with participants; review of previous participant feedback.</li> </ul>

\* Rossi, Peter H., Howard E. Freeman, & Mark W. Lipsey (1999). *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach*, 6<sup>th</sup> Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

(Examples...continued from previous page)

<b>Examples of PROCESS Evaluation Questions</b> <i>What do I want to know?</i>	<b>Possible Data Sources and Collection Methods</b> <i>How can I find out?</i>
<p><b>MATERIAL RESOURCES: Does the program have sufficient resources to operate effectively and efficiently?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are program resources, facilities, and funding adequate to support important program functions?</li> <li>• Are program resources used effectively and efficiently?</li> <li>• Are program costs reasonable?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program records</li> <li>• Observations of service providers as they work with participants, interviews with staff</li> </ul>
<p><b>HUMAN RESOURCES: Are staffing/human resources functioning effectively and efficiently?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are necessary program functions being performed adequately?</li> <li>• Is program staffing sufficient in numbers and competencies for the functions that must be performed?</li> <li>• Is the program well organized? Do staff work well with each other?</li> <li>• Does the program coordinate effectively with the other programs and agencies with which it must interact?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Site visits, observations of service providers as they work with participants</li> <li>• Interviews with managers, staff, volunteers, other key providers</li> <li>• Review of program records (referrals, waiting lists, prior performance results)</li> </ul>
<p><b>COMPLIANCE: Does the program meet organizational and legal compliance and ethical standards?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the program in compliance with requirements imposed by its governing board, funding agencies, and higher-level administration?</li> <li>• Is the program in compliance with applicable professional and legal standards?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of program records and reports</li> <li>• Standards visits, observations of service providers as they work with participants</li> </ul>

(Examples...continued)

<b>II. Examples of IMPACT/OUTCOME Evaluation Questions</b> <i>What do I want to know?</i>	<b>Possible Data Sources and Collection Methods</b> <i>How can I find out?</i>
<p><b>IMPACT OF SERVICE: Did beneficiaries experience the desired change during their time with the program?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did beneficiaries enhance awareness or attitude, or improve knowledge or skills?</li> <li>• Did beneficiaries modify behavior, or express the intent to change behavior?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact assessments (e.g. pre-post tests)</li> <li>• Surveys and interviews with participants and other key stakeholders (e.g. caregiver, teacher, parent, employer, mentor)</li> </ul>
<p><b>PARTICIPANT STATUS AT COMPLETION OF SERVICE: Did the impact of the service on the beneficiary last beyond service delivery?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are participants' conditions, status, or functioning satisfactory in areas that the service addresses after service is completed?</li> <li>• Do participants retain satisfactory conditions, status, or functioning for an appropriate period after completion of services?</li> <li>• Do participants engage in appropriate follow-up behavior after service?</li> <li>• Why do some participants change and others do not?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of program records</li> <li>• Tests, observations, surveys, interviews with participants at time of completion and follow-up.</li> <li>• Interviews or surveys with other key stakeholders (e.g. caregiver, teacher, parent, employer, mentor)</li> </ul>
<p><b>EFFECTIVENESS OF SERVICE: Can beneficiary outcomes be attributed to the program service?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are participants more likely to show the desired outcomes than non-participants?</li> <li>• Is the desired outcome a result of the service or something else?</li> <li>• Are new participants likely to show the same outcomes?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiments or quasi-experiments that compare two or more groups; in experiments, these groups are randomly assigned.</li> </ul>

**Resources:**

- Program and Project Evaluation (2005), Center for Support of Teaching and Learning at Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.  
<http://cstl.syr.edu/cstl2/Home/Program%20and%20Project%20Evaluation/320000.htm>
- Rossi, Peter H., Howard E. Freeman, & Mark W. Lipsey (1999). Evaluation: A Systematic Approach, 6<sup>th</sup> Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Evaluation Toolkit, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, [www.wkkf.org](http://www.wkkf.org).

