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Serving the public and non-profit sectors through independent program evaluation, applied research, and technical assistance.

EVALUATION BRIEF

Reporting and Presenting Evaluation Findings[1]

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Introduction

During and after an evaluation study, evaluators face the task of communicating the findings. Even when they have mountains of data and eagerly awaiting stakeholders, skillful evaluators will carefully plan the reporting and presentation of results, keeping in mind the evaluation's audience(s) and the nature of the findings. Whether and how a program is adopted, modified, or sustained often depends on how the evaluation results are conveyed and interpreted. Moreover, the manner in which the outcomes of a program are communicated affects future judgments regarding the overall merits of the program, and the subsequent state of knowledge in the child welfare field regarding effective interventions.

There are several factors to consider when reporting and presenting evaluation results to various audiences. The first task is to identify the nature of the audience(s) that are interested in the evaluation's findings. In short, *who* is expecting results from your study? Depending on the audience, your next task is to decide *what* to present. Are they expecting a straightforward report, or will your audience also require interpretations and recommendations? Interpretations may be especially useful when study findings are complex, subtle, or not immediately meaningful to non-evaluators. Decisions regarding the content and interpretation of evaluation findings will depend in part on the number, nature, and knowledge level of the primary evaluation audiences. The third task involves planning the form in which evaluation findings will be conveyed; in other words, *how* will you present your findings? The overarching issue for this third question involves choosing the most effective visual, aural, and written techniques for conveying complex information in a simple and convincing manner. This brief provides suggestions for addressing all three of these essential questions regarding who, what, and how to report and present evaluation findings.

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Who is Your Audience?

There are a number of people who may care about your evaluation results, including government officials, funding agencies, academics, program managers and staff, program participants, partnering organizations, and other stakeholders in the community or your organization. Knowing your audience affects how you interpret, communicate, and present findings, which in turn influences how the information is used. The primary rule is to stay focused on the primary intended users of your evaluation's findings and the ways in which they are likely to use these findings. Exhibit 1, adapted from Worthen, Sanders and Fitzpatrick (1987), highlights several categories of potential evaluation consumers and the ways in which each commonly uses evaluation information.

Exhibit 1 – Evaluation Consumer Checklist

Audience	Types of Use				
	To Make Policy	To Make Operational Decisions	To Provide Input	To React	To Inform or for General Interest
Funding agencies/sponsors	X		X	X	
Governing boards	X		X	X	
Agency managers/ administrators	X	X	X	X	
Other agencies	X	X		X	
Potential program adopters	X	X			
Program staff		X	X	X	
Program participants			X	X	X
General public, community members				X	X
Community/opinion leaders	X		X	X	
Program opponents			X	X	
Professional/academic colleagues & associations			X	X	X
Information dissemination networks					X

It is never too early to consider the needs and interests of various evaluation audiences. Some common types of audiences, and the aspects of the content and presentation of evaluation findings that may be of most importance to them, are summarized below.

- **Funders, Agency Administrators, and Governing Boards**

  Program funders, agency administrators, and governing boards are typically interested in a high-level overview of key findings, with access to all in-depth analyses on an as-needed basis. They will generally want time to react to the "gist" of the results and to provide input regarding the content and format of future public presentations. Written reports geared toward these audiences need to be aesthetically pleasing; begin with an executive summary of the purpose, methods, and results of the evaluation, along with key recommendations and include all of the methodological and analytical details, usually as appendices to the body of the document. Oral presentations need to focus on the highlights of the results and include pleasing graphics that are easy to read and interpret.

- **Legislators and Judges**

  The information needs of these stakeholders are similar to those of funders and agency administrators but with an emphasis on the implications of the evaluation for public policy, the benefits or costs of a new program to taxpayers, or interpretations of the law. Legislators will expect information that informs new legislation or changes to existing laws and policies, while judges will want to understand the evaluation's applied implications for current or pending legal cases.

- **Middle Managers and Potential Program Adopters in Other Agencies**

  These groups will often want more detailed evaluation findings because of their roles in managing the daily operations of organizations or in making decisions regarding the introduction of new services or modifications to existing programs. They will be especially interested in results that have implications for programmatic procedures, organizational culture, staff expectations and performance, and client outcomes. They will also want information about program costs with respect to training, supplies, logistics, and personnel.

- **Supervisors and Front-Line Workers**

  These stakeholders will expect detailed information regarding the implications of an evaluation's findings on day-to-day casework practices, program modifications, work flow, interactions with program participants, and the coordination of work tasks among their organizational colleagues. These audiences will especially benefit from concrete examples and recommendations that they can put into immediate practice.

- **Program Participants and Community Members**

  In the case of evaluations that use an empowerment approach (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005) or a participatory action research methodology (McIntyre, 2008), it is highly likely that program participants and community stakeholders will review the results and provide input and recommendations. Even with evaluations that employ more traditional research approaches, these groups will appreciate the opportunity to learn about and understand the evaluation's results. Information for these audiences should be presented in pleasing formats that are easy to understand but that honor the experience and insight they bring to the discourse around new programs and their impact on vulnerable communities.

- **Academics and Members of Professional Associations and Dissemination Networks**

  Academics and members of academic and professional organizations will have a special interest in the more technical aspects of an evaluation; in this regard they will place particular emphasis on an evaluation's research design, data collection methods, analytical techniques, and the accuracy and validity of findings. The timeliness and contributions of the evaluation to the evidence base of relevant academic and professional fields are also prime considerations for these groups.

What are the Findings?

Interpretation

While evaluators must apply rigor in selecting a research design and remain as objective as possible in analyzing the results, there are personal and perceptual aspects to interpreting the meaning of program findings. Consequently, it is important to distinguish between *analysis* and *interpretation* in the presentation of evaluation findings (Patton, 2008). Specifically, the difference between a fact and its interpretation is not always clear, especially among non-researchers who may be prone to jump to unwarranted conclusions. For example, whereas sound evidence has documented clear differences in rates of premarital pregnancy across various ethnic groups, the causes underlying these differences are unclear and remain a subject of controversy.

To avoid such misunderstandings, evaluators need to educate evaluation consumers about the research process, particularly those who have limited formal training in the social sciences. When quantitative and qualitative data are presented, evaluators should carefully explain what was measured, how it was measured, and the context in which the phenomena of interest were measured and analyzed. It is important to stress that despite the most thorough efforts to maintain accuracy and precision, data will always have limitations such as varying degrees of statistical error, limited generalizability, and unclear causal relationships. For example, did a study use a rigorous randomized controlled trial with clearly observable outcomes to test a program's effectiveness, or did it simply employ a survey to ascertain participants' opinions about program effectiveness? An honest discussion about research methods is needed to minimize the misinterpretation of results.

Judging Effectiveness

When interpreting results, it is also critical to help audiences understand what amount of change can be associated with different judgments about program effectiveness. For example, a ten-percent change in an outcome may be a cause for celebration for some stakeholders, whereas the same magnitude of change may disappoint others. Virtually all forms of data analysis are comparative in some way, with the challenge lying in the selection of the appropriate basis of comparison. Patton (2008) highlights a variety of options for placing an evaluation's findings in context and making comparative judgments about a program's effectiveness. Specifically, a program's outcomes could be compared to:

- Selected programs that are structured in the same way, contain similar components, address related issues or problems, or involve comparable types of participants
- The same program that was delivered the previous year or at some other time frame
- A representative or random sample of similar programs
- A purposive sample of special programs of interest or of those having difficulty
- The stated goals of the program
- Participants' goals for themselves
- External standards of desirability developed for a profession, such as basic licensing or accreditation standards

- Benchmarks for program performance
- Subjective judgments of program staff or other stakeholders regarding desired outcomes.

Even when data are analyzed and presented in their proper context, evaluators may face the task of managing claims about a program's effectiveness. Evaluation audiences will naturally draw conclusions about the meaning and implications of program findings, and it often is the job of the evaluator to facilitate this process and ensure that the statements that emerge about a program's effectiveness are as accurate and balanced as possible. As described by Patton (2008), evaluators can guide this discussion by framing claims in terms of their strength (how rigorous is the evidence supporting the claims?) and their importance (how consequential and significant are the claims for participants, the organization, society, etc.?). The risk of inaccurate or unjustified claims emerging from an evaluation can be minimized by communicating results clearly and by stressing the distinction between evaluation findings and the interpretations and recommendations that ensue from them.

Communicating Negative Findings

Some evaluations inevitably conclude with null or even negative findings. Although difficult, professional ethics necessitate the presentation of unwelcome findings as fully and accurately as possible. Several guidelines can be helpful when communicating bad news about a program. First, begin by presenting any program strengths or promising outcomes that were observed as part of the evaluation, as it is often easier to start a difficult conversation on a positive note. Second, avoid surprising stakeholders; share potentially negative findings as soon as they emerge so that primary evaluation audiences are not blind-sided by a final report or the public release of unexpected results. It can also be helpful to share bad news orally, which is more discrete and often easier for people to accept than written information. However, negative findings should be included in reports and other written documents in a straightforward and factual manner. Take care to portray the findings as useful knowledge that facilitates program development and improvement rather than as final and immutable judgments regarding a program's merits and the competence of its implementers. Finally, allow your audience time to digest, explain, and react to negative findings, and incorporate the content of this discussion, as well as any contextual or mitigating explanations of the results that are offered, into the final report.

Making Recommendations

While some evaluation audiences may only expect evaluators to share their analyses and present the results in context, other primary stakeholders (such as funders and agency administrators) may ask for program and policy recommendations that ensue from the results. In this regard it is imperative to clarify primary users' expectations regarding recommendations at the outset of the evaluation effort. When recommendations are requested, evaluators should consider the following key guidelines:

- Be sure that the recommendations clearly follow from and can be supported by the evaluation results.
- Create and differentiate between categories of recommendations (e.g., immediate, long-term).
- Present multiple options rather than just one course of action.

- Ask evaluation stakeholders to consider the risks and benefits of implementing the recommendations as well as the risks and benefits of *not* implementing them.
- Focus on actions that are within the control of the intended users, taking care to exercise political and cultural sensitivity.

How are the Findings Presented?

The effective communication and application of evaluation results depend as much on the format in which they are conveyed as the actual content of the findings themselves. Written documents, oral presentations, and graphic representations of data are the most common formats, the selection of which depends on the evaluator's audience and their expectations. Regardless of the format, the overarching goals for communicating evaluation findings are clarity and simplicity; the underlying analysis may be complex, but the interpretation and presentation of results should be as simple, straightforward, and understandable as possible. For all presentation formats, a useful maxim is to strive for the *simplest presentation that can handle the facts* (Patton, 2008).

Written Documents

Written documents constitute the traditional format by which evaluators convey information regarding the goals, methods, and results of an evaluation. Primary evaluation users often expect a detailed final report, which is described below, along with other written options that may be considered depending on the needs and interests of other evaluation audiences.

- **The Detailed Final Report** is the official document that records all the fine points of an evaluation undertaking. This report should include a table of contents along with an executive summary and separate chapters that describe the program/intervention under study; the research hypotheses and methodology (including the data analysis plan and rationale for the selected research approach); results (including tables and graphs); conclusions, implications, and recommendations (if requested); and references and ancillary materials such as appendices. Even if few read the detailed report, it remains available as the authoritative record of all methodological and analytical decisions and serves as a reference for any future questions that may arise. Although often formal in tone, a final report can be made more interesting by including examples, anecdotes, and illustrations.

- **An Executive or Management Summary** is a shorter version of the full report that focuses primarily on major evaluation findings and recommendations. While it often precedes a full detailed report, an executive summary can also be a stand-alone document that is available to a wide range of audiences. Management summaries often present information at a high level for a target audience of organizational executives, funders, and legislators, with a particular focus on information that guides programmatic decision making. These documents incorporate graphics and other visually compelling presentation techniques to illustrate key results, and while complex findings may be summarized, they generally avoid jargon and highly technical terms.

- **Policy Briefs and White Papers** place greater emphasis on the policy implications of an evaluation, and like executive and management summaries are often targeted at agency managers, executives, and legislators. In addition, these documents may present and compare findings from one or more evaluations to corroborate the case for a particular policy solution or legislative action. Policy briefs are typically shorter (2 to 5 pages), whereas white papers explore an issue in greater depth and are therefore often longer (commonly 10 to 20 pages in length).

- **Journal Articles** are usually geared toward academics or professionals in a particular field, although they may also be of interest to funders and policy makers. Articles place particular emphasis on the accuracy, validity, and general credibility of a study's findings. Their focus is often less on drawing conclusions or making decisions regarding a particular program than on building the knowledge base in a given field regarding similar programs and practices. A journal article typically includes four sections: (1) an introduction that provides the theoretical foundation for the article by summarizing and identifying gaps in the literature most relevant to the intervention in question, and by presenting the research hypotheses or questions that guided the study; (2) a methods section that describes the overarching research methodology and the specific research tools and analytical methods there were used, as well as information regarding the reliability and validity of any existing or new assessment instruments; (3) a results section that presents findings both in text form and through tables and figures as appropriate; and (4) a discussion section that summarizes key findings and highlights the study's limitations and implications, as well as directions for future research. Detailed references to all cited sources are presented at the end of the article. The formatting of an article depends on the requirements of each journal and the relevant field of study. Because journal space is often limited, a manuscript limit of 20 to 30 pages is common.

- **Monographs** are similar to journal articles in style but are typically more detailed and examine evaluation findings in the context of a broader research area or policy issue. In addition, a monograph may be based on a longitudinal study that has many facets or has occurred over so many years that a full discussion is difficult to accommodate in a standard journal article. Alternatively, a monograph may consist of a thorough review of the extant research regarding a specific topic. Monographs are generally longer than journal articles (75 to 150 pages is typical) and may be published as a special journal issue or as a stand-alone document by universities and academic or professional organizations.

- **Newsletter Articles** can be used to summarize results in a monthly or quarterly newsletter published by the organization that conducted, funded, or otherwise sponsored an evaluation. They typically highlight key findings, particularly those that have the greatest relevance to the organization's clients or internal operations, and like newspaper articles typically range between 800 and 2,000 words.

- **Press Releases** consist of a few brief paragraphs about an evaluation or research project and includes a key contact who can provide more detailed information about the study. It rarely exceeds one page and may appear in a variety of media formats, including newspapers, Websites, blogs, and magazines.

- **Brochures** often have a marketing focus and therefore emphasize the attractive presentation of data and brief text that highlights a program's benefits and positive outcomes. Primary audiences for brochures include agency leaders who are interested in adopting a program, potential program participants, and community organizations and members seeking information regarding the program's potential impact and relevance to them. To ensure that they are clear and culturally sensitive, brochures distributed to prospective participants or community members should be written in these audiences' primary language using text that is appropriate for their average literacy level, and include images that reflect their characteristics and diversity.

Oral Presentations

As with written documents, oral presentations are most effective when evaluators tailor them to the needs, characteristics, and expectations of the evaluation's key audiences. Presentations often accompany written documents and provide a public forum for discussion and reaction to an evaluation. As such, they work best when didactic delivery is kept to a minimum and essential information is presented as clearly and simply as possible. While Microsoft® PowerPoint remains a widely-used presentation platform, new visual platforms such as Prezi are gaining adherents (Anderson-Williams, 2012). Oral presentations generally fall into one of three categories, depending on the primary audience:

- **Executive:** The audiences for these presentations are often comprised of agency executives and board members, funders, legislators, politicians, judges, and other key decision makers. Presentation content should be kept as simple as possible, with an emphasis on graphics and pleasing aesthetics.

- **Programmatic:** These presentations focus on the needs of middle managers, supervisors, and front-line staff, as well as personnel from other organizations who are interested in adopting or adapting the intervention of interest. As such, presentations for these audiences are often more detailed and focus on findings regarding the implementation of specific program components, staff activities and performance, and participant outcomes. This audience may also include program participants and community members that are directly affected by the program and have an interest in understanding its benefits or any unintended consequences, and in providing feedback regarding possible improvements. Presentations to these groups should pay particular attention to factors such as the audience's primary language, ethnicity, and literacy levels to ensure that they are both clear and culturally sensitive. To promote effective communication and the credibility of evaluation findings, it can be helpful in these contexts to involve program participants or members of the cultural communities that comprise the audience in making presentations.

- **Academic:** Academic audiences will often expect more detailed information about the research methods, analyses, and results of an evaluation, including the rationale for using a particular research methodology and full disclosure of any problems encountered during the data collection and analysis process. While less interesting and relevant to most other audiences, academics use this information to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the study and the resulting conclusions.

When tailoring an oral presentation to a given audience, evaluators must also consider how information volume and delivery technique influence the audience's comprehension and level of engagement. Regardless of the software platform or other visual aids used, a cardinal rule is that a presentation should not include the entire text of a talk; rather, the purpose of visual aids is to support an oral presentation and emphasize important points. When using software programs such as Microsoft® PowerPoint and Prezi, the following tips are helpful in preparing and delivering successful presentations:

- Each slide should illustrate one or at most three ideas, and each idea should be comprehensible in 20 seconds or less.

- Letters should be large (24-point font or larger) and in a legible font such as Calibri, Century Gothic, Trebuchet, and Sans Serif fonts that include Helvetica, Arial, and Verdana.

- Avoid mixing too many font formats (e.g., italics, underline, and bold), which can contribute to visual messiness. Whatever format you choose, keep it consistent for a professional and streamlined presentation.

- Do not crowd the slide; include a maximum of 7 words per line and 7 lines per slide, particularly for executive and programmatic presentations.

- Choose slide headings that convey and reinforce data findings.

- Select presentation colors that maximize visual interest without being distracting. If the slides are black and white, use a white font on a black background for greater visibility. If the slides are in color, use light font colors such as white and yellow on a dark background such as dark blue (Duarte, 2008). Use complementary colors (i.e., colors that create the greatest contrast and reinforce one another) whenever possible.

- Use techniques to attract attention to key findings, such as:

  - Highlighter functions to make text appear marked by a highlighter pen
  - Circle numbers in red (which can also be done in real time with a laser pointer)
  - Custom animation effects to control the timing and appearance of findings (e.g., data that appears by "ascending" or "growing").

- Employ photographs to emphasize key messages and convey complex ideas powerfully and simply. When selecting photographs, ensure that they are appropriate for both the subject of the presentation and the audience. Several websites offer free photos:

  - www.freerangestock.com
  - www.morguefile.com
  - www.stockvault.net
  - http://www.sxc.hu/
  - www.flickr.com

For effective and engaging oral delivery during presentations, consider these tips:

- Use a remote to change slides.
- Move around the room.
- Incorporate stories to create and maintain interest.
- Ask questions periodically of the audience or take informal polls to increase engagement.
- Supply handouts to accompany your presentation so audience members are not preoccupied with note-taking.

- Identify up to three key messages that you want audiences to “take home”; create a “story outline” for your presentation around these points, refer to them frequently, and conclude by summarizing them.

Numerous online and print resources are available to assist with the creation and delivery of effective oral presentations, including:

- *Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery* (Reynolds, 2011)
- *Slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations* (Duarte, 2008)
- Ignite online Webinars (offered through the American Evaluation Association)
- Websites such as http://www.speakingaboutpresenting.com/.

Quantitative and Qualitative Representations of Data

In both written documents and oral presentations, evaluators can assist audiences with understanding and interpreting findings through the use of visual aids and case examples. Visual representations are particularly useful for presenting quantitative data in a manner that helps evaluation stakeholders comprehend, remember, and apply key findings. Graphs are perhaps the most common method of visual presentation, with the choice of format depending on the nature of the data presented:

- **Pie Charts** are useful for showing the size of parts relative to a whole, such as the proportions of a population divided among various demographic groups or the allocation of an organization’s budget to different departments.
- **Line Graphs** are effective for illustrating change over time, as in the case of a time series or survival analysis.
- **Column and Bar Graphs** are helpful for presenting means and percentages, especially when illustrating differences between two or more groups or time periods.

Graphs can be developed using numerous software programs such as the Microsoft® Office packages of Excel, PowerPoint, and Word; Tableau®; the R Project for Statistical Software (http://www.r-project.org); and Adobe® Photoshop Elements. The primary factors in choosing a program include the purpose of the presentation and the nature of the data. Regardless of which program is selected, keep these tips in mind when developing graphs and other visual presentations of data:

- Use simple, appropriate chart titles.
- Remove unnecessary lines, legends, or axis titles.
- Consider which labels are important to include while keeping the overall chart simple.
- Keep scales consistent when presenting multiple graphs.
- Delete extra lines and borders around charts and legends.
- Avoid 3-D charts, which can be confusing and difficult to interpret.
- Use colors and patterns that can be printed in black and white (e.g., for handouts) and still be meaningful.

Case examples and other forms of qualitative data can be a useful way to highlight and put a “human face” on evaluation findings. Examples of effective methods for presenting qualitative data include excerpts from a larger report or direct quotes from program participants; offsetting this information in text boxes or report margins can be particularly impactful. In oral presentations, traditional slides can be supplemented with video and audio clips of programs in action and participant testimonials (recorded or live). In addition, software programs such as Wordle™ can be used to create "word clouds" that illustrate the relative prominence of words or concepts that appear more frequently in interview notes and other qualitative data sources.

Conclusion

Regardless of the robustness of a research design and the quality of the data that are collected, an evaluation will only be as persuasive and useful as the means that are employed to communicate and present the resulting findings. In essence, evaluators must tell a compelling and convincing "story" about a program using data to develop the plot and flesh out the characters, and their knowledge and skill as storytellers will affect their success in this endeavor. As outlined in this brief, critical elements for effective evaluation reporting include a clear understanding of the primary audiences for the evaluation and of their respective interests and information needs; strategies to help these audiences interpret and make judgments regarding evaluation findings, including negative or unexpected findings and recommendations; and techniques for communicating results in written and oral formats that maximize their impact and utility. No one set of methods will guarantee that evaluation findings are understood and used, but in their entirety the principles outlined here will serve evaluation professionals well in a wide range of programmatic and organizational contexts.

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