

Evaluating Online Programs

Kathleen D. Kelsey

Oklahoma State University, USA

James R. Lindner

Texas A&M University, USA

Kim E. Dooley

Texas A&M University, USA

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND: USING BEST PRACTICES AS A STANDARD FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION

Systematic evaluation of distance-education programs is necessary for program improvement (formative) and accountability (summative). When evaluating distance-education programs, it is advisable to consult the best practices literature for determining the criteria and standards for quality programming in order to judge the merit and worth of the program under consideration.

The most frequently cited reference for best practices comes from the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (1997) (<http://www.wiche.edu/telecom/>), otherwise known as WICHE. Pennsylvania State University (PSU) (1998) published a document for designing distance-education programs that incorporate the literature base of best practices. WICHE and PSU offer principles for best practices in distance education in regard to curriculum and instruction, institutional context and commitment, and evaluation and assessment. General concerns with each category should be considered in developing an instrument for measuring quality in distance-education programs

(Law, Hawkes, & Murphy, 2002). These concerns are outlined in Table 1.

MAIN FOCUS: HOW DO WE EVALUATE?

Given the variety of distance-education programs available today, from offering one course to an entire degree program, program evaluators should not adopt a standardized instrument to use for evaluating programs. Rather, they should consider the best-practices literature as a guide to developing an evaluation plan that addresses the unique context and setting for their distance-education program (Law et al., 2002).

Best practices for distance education can be used as a gold standard for setting the criteria for evaluating distance-education programs. The underlying question to ask when designing an evaluation should be: Is this particular standard relevant to the program? If so, to what degree of quality should it be measured? Rubrics built upon best practices are helpful tools in developing criteria for measuring program impacts. Not every program will have every best practice, as not all practices are appropriate for all programs. The

Table 1. Considerations for measuring quality in a distance-education program

Consistency of program with institutional mission	Evaluators should look for evidence that offering distance education is in line with the institutional mission and is well supported with adequate budgets and support staff.
Provisions for program oversight and accountability	Academic and technical oversight should be obvious to evaluators.
Provision of student support	Evaluators should examine Web sites and other media to ensure that students have access to all the required contexts for learning online.
Implementation of evaluation and assessment measures	Evaluation is a critical component of an excellent distance education program and should not be an afterthought but rather incorporated into the planning phase of the program from inception.

evaluator's role is to make a salient argument for inclusion or exclusion of best practices given the uniqueness of each program.

Evaluation Models

A plethora of evaluation models are available to guide evaluation efforts. One model that has withstood the test of time is Stufflebeam's (1973) Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) model. According to the model, there are four distinct but interrelated phases of evaluation. The Context phase seeks to describe the program implementation environment and addresses these questions: Where is the program now? What are the program's needs? Where should the program be? The Input phase is focused on the resources required to operate the program and asks the question: What resources are required to get the program to where it should be? The Process phase is focused on how the program operates and the relationship between inputs and outputs and asks the question: How does the program achieve its goals? The Product phase is focused on outcomes and asks: Has the program achieved its goals and what are the outcomes?

Theory-driven evaluation (Chen, 1990) indirectly explains the context as the program's *implementation environment*, the input as the program's *treatment or cause*, the process as the program's *implementation environment* coupled with *intervening mechanisms*, and the product as the *outcomes or effects* of the program. Chen asks evaluators and program stakeholders to reflect on the cause-and-effect mechanisms for each program. What are the causal elements that drive behavior change (learning in the case of distance education) and what are the effects or outcomes of the program's treatments such as evidence of learning, student-produced products, and student-faculty relations?

Boulmetis and Dutwin (2000, p. 70) suggest a seven-step approach for conducting evaluation: 1) determine evaluation questions; 2) develop the evaluation design; 3) collect data; 4) analyze data; 5) draw conclusions from data; 6) make decisions on a program's efficiency, effectiveness, and impact; and 7) report to stakeholders. While this is a sound design, an evaluation that includes stakeholders in all steps will increase the likelihood that

the results will be eagerly received and acted upon by program planners and decision makers.

FUTURE TRENDS

Regardless of the evaluation model chosen for evaluating the program, stakeholders should remain at the center of all processes. Stakeholders are those people who care about the program, including students (beneficiaries), instructors, program planners, decision makers, technicians, and funders (agents). Another category of stakeholder that must not be forgotten consists of those who do not benefit from the program or are harmed by the program, such as students who are not admitted to the program (victims) or who have a dissatisfying experience with the program (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Including all stakeholders (beneficiaries, agents, and victims) in the design and implementation of a program evaluation is the first principle of evaluation practice (Bryk, 1983).

CONCLUSION: EVALUATION METHODS FOR COLLECTING CREDIBLE EVIDENCE

The purpose of any method is to collect *credible evidence* to document program activities, including the context, inputs, processes, and products. Information is used to make decisions for program improvement (formative) or accountability (summative). When seeking methods for the evaluation, consider what information is needed to make decisions about the program vs. the cost and ease of collecting information.

Ideally, a variety of methods should be used in combination with each other to get a complete picture (triangulation) of the program's inputs and outcomes. For example, using a student survey to determine student satisfaction with the program can be complemented with employer interviews seeking information about the quality of graduates and their preparedness for the workplace. McNamara (2004) suggested that evaluators use questionnaires, surveys, checklists, interviews, documentation review, observation, focus groups, and case studies for collecting evaluation data to triangulate evaluation findings and to learn about the program and areas in need of improvement.

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