Section D: Collecting Evaluation Data

As you plan and focus your evaluation, you must also think about what kind of information you will need to answer your evaluation questions. Section D provides guidance for locating existing education data and collecting original data through interviews, surveys, and observations. Links to online resources are included to point you to more detailed treatments of the topics we identify.

As you consider your data collection options, keep in mind the following general principles:

- Try to collect data from more than one source to answer each of your evaluation questions. You might analyze assessment data for all of the students in your program and also conduct a focus group with selected students to find out what aspects of the program were most and least helpful. Or, you might survey students and parents to identify the ways in which the program impacted students.
- Collect a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative or numerical data are useful for discovering the magnitude of a phenomenon (e.g., outcomes, barriers, facilitators). Qualitative or narrative data can help you to better understand the phenomenon (e.g., who benefits most from a program, why a program works in one setting but not another, what additional support is needed to improve outcomes).
- Only collect data that can actually be used to evaluate your program. Asking for more information than you need taxes the people who are providing you with data in the short-run and taxes your own ability to analyze and use the information in the long-run. Always keep your evaluation questions front and center in order to stay focused on the information you really need.

D.1 Using Existing Data

Before you spend time collecting new information, become familiar with the kind of information that is already being collected and figure out how to access information that will be useful in the systematic evaluation of your program. In many cases, particularly with respect to program outcomes, you may find the answers to your questions among the wealth of education data that is already routinely collected at the school, district, and state levels. If the available data are not suitable to answer your evaluation questions, you may wish to modify your questions slightly in order to make use of available data. Here are two types of large-scale data collection efforts that may be useful.

- Migrant Student Information Exchange (MSIX) – MSIX is an OME initiative to enable states to share education and health data for migrant students. Consolidated student records include demographics, enrollment, assessment, and course history in every state where a migrant student has attended school. For more information, go to https://msix.ed.gov/msix/LocateAnAdmin?submit=d to find contact information for your state or district user administrators. See also http://reactsmsix.ed.gov/ for information about technical assistance and other support available to users of MSIX data.

- Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) – The Institute for Education Sciences (IES) in the U.S. Department of Education has awarded grants to 42 states to design, develop, and implement "P-20" longitudinal data collection systems that link preschool, K-12, and postsecondary education using unique state identifiers for every student. To find out whether your state has received an SLDS grant, go to: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/stateinfo.asp. To learn more about your state's progress in developing a P-20 data system, including creation of unique student identifiers, go to: http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/.

Note that the identification numbers in MSIX are different from the identifiers in statewide systems that cover all students. Learning more about both systems and contacting the people in your state who are responsible for them will help you figure out how to use them to compare Priority for Services (PFS) migrant students, other migrant students, and non-migrant students—statewide or in selected local project samples.

Other sources of information about existing data include:

- The school or district data specialist who inputs or uploads attendance, assessment, and other information to the state database
- The district grade-level or subject matter specialist who will know what, if any, benchmark assessments are administered in reading/language arts and mathematics and when they are administered
- The school computer lab manager who will know what, if any, learning software programs have built-in assessments that are routinely used by teachers at the school

D.2 Conducting Interviews

Interviews can provide in-depth information about how a program is working, the impact on participants, barriers to implementation, and program successes. There are several options for conducting interviews—with individuals (either face-to-face or by phone) and in focus groups.

- Face-to-face interviews are best in the case of sensitive subjects and should be conducted by someone with especially good interpersonal skills who knows how to put people at ease.
- Telephone interviews work well when systematic data collection is desirable, content is not too sensitive, and budgetary constraints prevent the interviewer from travelling to meet the interviewee (or vice versa).
- When you want to test out ideas or assess the extent of group consensus on a topic, a focus group interview can be a cost-efficient alternative to individual interviews. On the

other hand, a focus group is not an appropriate or effective method for collecting sensitive personal information.

Costs related to conducting different types of interviews include:

- The time needed to schedule individual and group interviews, especially in the case of focus group interviews
- In the case of individual interviews, especially telephone interviews, the time needed to re-schedule interviews with "no-shows"
- Time needed for documenting responses (e.g., transcribing notes or recordings), coding them according to themes or prominent ideas, and analyzing responses within thematic groups
- In the case of focus group interviews, the costs of renting space in a neutral location or familiar community place, and providing child care and refreshments as an incentive for participants to take part during their free time
- Time needed to actively recruit focus group participants and follow up to remind them of the date, time, and place where it will be held
- The cost of a second party to take notes and observe the dynamic in a focus group, so the focus group facilitator can concentrate on leading the conversation

For more information about conducting different types of interviews, review the following online resources:

- A good overview of face-to-face, telephone, and focus group interviews: The Community Tool Box, Chapter 3 Assessing Community Needs and Resources, Section 12. Conducting Interviews. A service of the Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas.
- Step-by-step instructions for setting up and conducting focus groups: The Community Tool Box, Chapter 3. Assessing Community Needs and Resources, Section 6. Conducting Focus Groups.

D.3 Administering Surveys

Surveys are generally a good way of getting specific information from a large group of people in a relatively short period of time. There are two types of questions used on surveys: close-ended and open-ended.

- Close-ended questions include a specific set of answers, or response options, from which survey respondents select the best one(s). Response items may include the points on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree…5 = strongly agree), a list of services offered ("check all services you have received"), and other types of answers that respondents simply check or circle. To be sure all possible answers are captured, close-ended questions may include a response for "Other (please specify): _______________."

- Open-ended survey questions require survey respondents to write answers in their own words. These types of questions are used when the possible response options are unknown, or when we want to know what respondents think without prompting them. For example, the question “How has your child benefited from the Summer Program?” could include a list of all the benefits we hope they received, but ideally we would leave the question open-ended in order to get the most accurate, unprompted answer.

All surveys require time to develop clear and concise questions that respondents will be motivated and able to answer.

- Use plain and simple language so your questions can be understood by the broadest range of people. If English is not the first language of your target population, translate the survey into their language.
- Open-ended survey questions should be used sparingly, only when absolutely necessary. Use interviews and other qualitative data collection methods to identify the range of answers to a question. Then use these answers as close-ended response options to your survey question.
- Stay focused on one idea at a time, avoiding double-barreled questions, such as, “Do you feel your child benefited from instruction and other support services provided by this MEP?” Because instruction and support services are different in nature, respondents may have different answers for each category of services. So, ask two questions instead: “Do you feel your children benefited from the instructional services provided by the MEP?” and “Do you feel your child benefited from MEP support services?”

Writing good survey questions is more involved than it looks, but the payoff in terms of data quality is worth taking the time to learn more. Here are a few resources that provide useful guidance on how to prepare good survey questions:

- For guidance on wording, formatting, and pretesting surveys, see:
  Taylor-Powell, E. (1998.) Questionnaire Design: Asking questions with a purpose. University of Wisconsin-Extension.

- For examples of “good and not so good” survey questions, go to:
  University of Wisconsin, Cooperative Extension, Program Development and Evaluation website on “Local Program Evaluation in Tobacco Control.”

Surveys can be administered in person, over the phone, by mail, or online. Your selection should be based on the method that is most likely to reach your target population without systematically excluding members of that population, and the costs associated with the method. For example:

- The cost of telephone surveys varies depending on the number of people you want to survey, whether you have staff who are trained and available to make the calls and whether you need to contract with a telephone survey center to make the calls. Similarly, the cost of mailed surveys varies depending on the number of people you want to survey, the cost of the initial mailing plus self-addressed and stamped envelopes, incentives to increase response rates, and mailed reminders. Because phone numbers and mailing addresses for migrant families change frequently, these methods may not be the best for reaching this target population.
- A wide variety of online survey tools makes it easier than ever to assemble and disseminate online surveys. See the idealware.org list of "A Few Good Online Survey Tools." The cost of these services may vary depending on the number of surveys you wish to collect, the number of questions in your survey, and the length of time you need to keep your survey open for responses. However, online surveys are only useful if you have accurate email addresses and the people you want to reach either own or regularly access the internet.
- The costs associated with administering surveys in person depend on whether respondents come to you (e.g., students on the last day of the program, parents attending a culminating event) or you go to them (e.g., stationed at a popular location, going door-to-door in the community). Given the limitations of other survey methods for reaching the target population, administering surveys in person may be the most effective way to collect survey data from migrant students and their families.

For more information about survey methods, planning and implementing surveys, plus sample survey materials, review:

Taylor-Powell, E & Hermann, C. (2000). Collecting Evaluation Data: Surveys. University of Wisconsin-Extension Cooperative Extension.

D.4 Observing Activities

An often overlooked way to collect evaluation information is to directly observe a program, activity, service, or meeting to decide for yourself whether things are going as planned or whether there is evidence of the desired outcomes. Costs associated with collecting observational data include training observers, traveling to observation sites, and time needed to document observations and analyze them.

Some important principles of conducting observations include:

- Scheduling observations at a time that is convenient and least intrusive for the people and activities you are observing.
- Developing a checklist or protocol to guide your observations and ensure that you look for key elements associated with high-quality implementation or desired outcomes.
- Training observers to recognize and document the same key elements of the program.

For more information about how to conduct observations, review:

Taylor-Powell, E & Steele, S. (2000). [Collecting Evaluation Data: Direct Observation](). University of Wisconsin-Extension Cooperative Extension.

D.5 Evaluation Matrix

An evaluation matrix is a useful tool for keeping track of the methods you are considering for collecting data. In its simplest form, a matrix displays evaluation questions in alignment with the data collection strategies that will be used to answer them. The example below (Table D.1) shows a simple evaluation matrix for the parent involvement program we used in the last section to illustrate the evaluation timeline.

Table D.1 Sample of a Simple Evaluation Matrix

Strategy: Provide parents of migrant students with a menu of support services to help them support their child's academic accomplishments.			
Evaluation Questions	**Parent focus group**	**Service Provider interviews**	**State test scores**
Implementation			
1. Are program staff trained to provide these services?		X	
2. Are program staff qualified to provide these services?		X	
3. What support services are most requested by parents?	X	X	
4. What support services are least requested by parents?	X		
5. Do services help parents support children academically?	X		
Results			
6. Do children whose parents participate in services perform better on the state reading test compared to a sample of migrant children whose parents did not participate?			X
7. Do children whose parents participate in services perform better on the state math test compared to a sample of migrant children whose parents did not participate?			X

In this example, staff members use a program strategy to frame the implementation and results evaluation questions, and then match these questions with data collection methods.

- Program staff members will offer the parents of migrant students a variety of services to make them more knowledgeable about how they can support their child's schooling and academic achievement. Having considered their data collection options and modest evaluation budget, they believe they can adequately address their evaluation questions using a combination of parent focus group(s), one-on-one interviews with service providers, and state test data.

- The matrix shows program staff members that they have at least one strategy for answering each of their questions. What remains is for them to decide who will conduct the focus groups and one-on-one interviews, what specific questions should be asked in those interview settings, and who at the school or district level can help them extract state test data for the children of program participants and a sample of other similar children whose parents did not participate.

The basic structure of the evaluation matrix can be as simple or complex as needed to help focus your Evaluation Plan. A more complex matrix might organize the evaluation questions by state performance targets, strategies, and related Measurable Program Outcomes. For the sake of simplicity you might set up a separate matrix for each performance target (see Table D.2).

Table D.2 Sample of a Complex Evaluation Matrix

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4">State performance target 1: All students will reach high standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading/language arts and math.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Strategy: Provide parents of migrant students with a menu of support services to help them support their child’s academic accomplishments.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">MPO 1a: Children whose parents attended the reading and homework support workshops will perform on average 10 points higher on the state reading test than children of non-participants.
MPO 1b: Children whose parents attended the math and homework support workshops will perform on average 10 points higher on the state math test than children of non-participants.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Evaluation Questions</td><td>Parent focus group</td><td>Service provider interviews</td><td>State test scores</td></tr>
<tr><td>Implementation</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>1. What support services are most requested by parents?</td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>2. What support services are least requested by parents?</td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>3. Are program staff trained to provide these services?</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>4. Are program staff qualified to provide these services?</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>5. Do services help parents support children academically?</td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Results</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>6. How much better do their children perform on the state reading test compared to a sample of children whose parents did not participate in the reading and homework support workshops?</td><td></td><td></td><td>X</td></tr>
<tr><td>7. How much better do their children perform on the state math test compared to a sample of children whose parents did not participate in the math and homework support workshops?</td><td></td><td></td><td>X</td></tr>
</table>

In *Appendix D.1*, you will find a simple evaluation matrix template and a complex evaluation matrix template, based on the examples above, that may be customized for your needs.

D.6 Summary of Key Points

- Try to collect data from more than one source to answer each evaluation question.
- Collect both quantitative and qualitative data.
- Before collect data, find out what data are already being collected and how these data might be used to answer your evaluation questions.
- When it is necessary to collect original data, interviews, surveys, and observations offer a wide variety of options for reaching your target population.
- Learn more about these and other data collection methods by accessing the online resources identified in this section of the *Program Evaluation Toolkit*.

D.7 More Online Resources

W. K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook. (2004)

For a more detailed overview of data collection methods, see Step 5: Determining Data-Collection Methods (pp. 70–84) and Step 6: Collecting Data (pp. 84–87).

Administration for Children and Families. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation, 2nd Edition*

For step-by-step considerations of data collection decisions and a sample data collection plan, see Chapter 7: How Do You Get the Information You Need for Your Evaluation? (pp. 63–76).

D.8 Reflection Questions

1. Have we accessed available sources to determine if the data we need is currently available?
2. Have we determined the best method for collecting existing and original data?
3. For interviews and surveys, have we created questions that will help us assess our program in an objective way?
4. Have we assessed the costs involved and have we planned for them?

D.9 Resources and Tools in Appendix D

Appendix D.1 Simple Evaluation Matrix Template
Appendix D.2 Complex Evaluation Matrix Template

Appendix D.1 Simple Evaluation Matrix Template

Evaluation Questions	Possible Data Collections Strategies						
Implementation							
1.							
2.							
3.							
4.							
5.							
6.							
Results							
7.							
8.							
9.							

Appendix D.2 Complex Evaluation Matrix Template

State Performance Target:							
Strategy:							
Measurable Program Outcome(s):							
Evaluation Questions	**Possible Data Collection Strategies**						
Implementation							
1.							
2.							
3.							
4.							
5.							
6.							
Results							
7.							
8.							
9.							