Evaluating Volunteer Programs
Chris Boleman
Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist

In addition to evaluating the volunteers themselves, volunteer administrators must also evaluate their programs and services. Program evaluation communicates the value that the agency places on its resources, staff, and clientele. Audiences that benefit from program evaluation include the program staff, advisory boards, funding organizations, and the general public.

Important Definitions & Concepts

Evaluation is defined as the collection and use of information to make decisions about an educational program (Cronbach, 1963, p. 672).

In addition to evaluation, there are several other terms that need to be defined for clarification. These terms include:

Objective – A measurable, specific, and operationalized statement detailing the desired accomplishments of a program. An example objective would be:

- To know the steps of working with the media if a foreign animal disease is found in the county.

This objective identifies clearly the expectations of the learner when the learning experience is complete.

Outcome – changes in adaptive behavior and role status that are a result of the educational treatment. In other words, the outcome of the objective written above is whether or not the target audience can in fact meet the objective.

Impact – whether the program made a difference compared to not having a program. Impact should be measured at the end of the program and includes an analysis of all the objectives that were supposed to be addressed in the educational program.

Formative - ongoing evaluation during the process. Allows you to make corrections in midstream. Formative evaluation is a method of judging the worth of a program while it is forming or happening. This type of evaluation focuses on the process. (Bhola 1990.)

Summative - evaluation of results of a program. Is conducted at the end of the program/project/year. This method judges the worth of a program after its
activities have been completed. The outcome is what is important in this type of evaluation. (Bhola 1990.)

**Levels of Client Change**
The goal of most programs is to create some type of improvement in conditions or change in the agency's clientele. The two most common types of client change are “learning” and “application.” We either want clients to gain some new knowledge or apply that knowledge to improving their lives. Within these two, there are more specific client change levels, which are listed below.

**Learning**
- **Knowledge** - learned information or accepted advice; it also includes varying levels of comprehension.
- **Skills** - individuals’ mental and physical abilities to use new and/or alternative processes.
- **Attitudes/Beliefs** - individuals’ beliefs, opinions, feelings and perspectives.

**Application**
- **Behavior Change** - changes or benefits for participants. Behavior change typically happens after a learning change has occurred. In other words, after a participant developed a skill, they may change their behavior if they deem it necessary.
- **Best Practice** - participant decides to adopt a new practice in place of a current practice.
- **New Technology** - participant adoption of innovations.

Deciding which level to select as the program’s goal is one of the most challenging decisions the educator faces. It is important to analyze these six levels of change before choosing. Where does the educator want the audience to be at the end of the educational program? The key to knowing the answer to that question is to know where the target audience is.

The first step in change is knowledge. Therefore, if the educator is developing a program with a new audience that has no background in the issue that is being addressed, it is best to start with knowledge. Later, the educator can move to skill development or behavior change. However, if the audience already has a knowledge base of the issue being addressed, then it may make more sense to change the audience at a higher level than knowledge. If this is the case, then the educator should select a behavior change or best practice adoption.
Common Evaluation Strategies.

Knowledge.

Questions that measure knowledge gained ask what participants know, are aware of, or understand. The most effective approach to measuring knowledge is a pretest / post test design that asks specific questions before and after the program.

The pretest / post test involves developing what essentially looks and functions like a traditional test of knowledge in a school setting. Response categories using this approach include true/false, multiple-choice, and fill in the correct response. There are right and wrong answers associated with each question. Some examples include:

- Recruitment is an essential part of volunteer administration. (true - false)
- In the strategic planning process, who is the primary audience for Outside-In Planning?
  a) society
  b) employees
  c) businesses
  d) none of the above

- The ______________________ is an effective way to make pooled judgments or decisions in groups which meet face-to-face.

Skills.

Measuring skills acquisition through a questionnaire can be done, but is challenging, indirect, and relies on participant self-perception. For example:

- I learned enough at this workshop to successfully develop a volunteer model for my organization.
  Strongly Agree   Agree   Uncertain   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

- I am confident that I can apply the skills I learned today to help teach youth public speaking.
  Strongly Agree   Agree   Uncertain   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

Skills acquisition is more accurately measured through instructor observation or an assessment of a participant actually demonstrating the skill. The measure might be dichotomous (i.e., success/fail) or a skills level on a scale. To do this, a
checklist can be created to ensure that each individual is being evaluated for the same skill.

Remember, a participant can learn a skill but never use it. If the goal of your program is solely to teach a skill, then measure for that, not for behavior change.

Best Practice.

Best practices are behavior changes that typically happen after knowledge is gained or a skill acquired and, in light of being newly equipped, a best practice is deemed as necessary or desirable. Questions dealing with best practice ask people about what they have done in the past, what they are doing now, or what they plan to do in the future. For example:

As a result of this Extension event, have you trained your volunteers using this information?

As a result of this Extension event, do you plan to train your volunteers?

There are two important points to remember in asking about best practice. First, phrase the question such that, to the greatest extent possible, the focus is education as the potential cause of the best practice adoption. A program participant can change behavior but it may or may not be because of the educational event. One or more intervening factors, such as reading an article in a trade publication or the advice of a neighbor, may have played a role in convincing the participant to actually change.

To help control for this, preface the question with something similar to, “As a result of the Extension-sponsored event, did you adopt the best practice...” or make it clear in the questionnaire instructions that you are asking about what happened as a result of the educational program. The probability of intervening factors causing behavior change (rather than the educational event) will be greater for some events than others.

Second, often adoption of best practice is not immediate. It takes time to happen. Therefore, it may be preferable in terms of measuring impact to ask about best practice adoptions months after the conclusion of an event (longer-term post) – to give the participant time to adopt the desired behavior. The exception may be a program delivered over the course of several months. By the end of the program, some best practice adoptions may be possible and expected.
If the educator administers an immediate post-event evaluation (i.e. as the event concludes) and adoption of best practices is not expected at that point, asking about intent or plans to change is an option.

In addition to the open-ended questions, selection boxes may also be used to measure best practice. One example is below.

As a result of the workshop, which of the following practices (if any) have you implemented to build character in youth? (select all that apply)

- Character Education
  - Trustworthiness
  - Respect
  - Responsibility
  - Fairness
  - Caring
  - Citizenship

A final evaluation example to measure best practices is a retrospective post (sometimes referred to as a post then pre. IT IS ONLY ADMINISTERED AT THE END OF THE PROGRAM. It asks individuals to think back and evaluate themselves before they began the program and then where they are now after the program. An example of this is below.

**For each statement listed below, circle yes or no based on what you did BEFORE you participated in the program, then circle yes or no based on what you did AFTER the program.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management Practices</th>
<th>BEFORE</th>
<th>AFTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Devise a strategy for implementing the L.E.A.D. model with your organization</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use this information to develop more effective teams to develop and respond to a task</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the generational gaps information to motivate your organization</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**References:**

© volunteer.tamu.edu
Module 5, Lesson 2
Page 5 of 6
Cronbach L. J. (1963). Course improvement through evaluation. Teachers College Record, 64, 672-683.

