Introduction to Evaluation.

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What is evaluation?

The Canadian Evaluation Society (2015) has defined evaluation as "the systematic assessment of the design, implementation or results of an initiative for the purposes of learning or decision-making."

Any activities intended to achieve specific outcomes can be evaluated. This includes programs, projects, initiatives, interventions, policies, or strategies.

Evaluation aims to identify what works, for whom, in what respects, to what extent, in what contexts, and how (Pawson & Tilley, 2004).

When is evaluation appropriate?

The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (JCSEE) has identified five areas that should be considered before starting an evaluation (JCSEE, 2011; Gill et al., 2016). Before taking on an evaluation, you will want to ask yourself the following questions.

1. **Will it be useful?** – The evaluation should serve a practical purpose and only be done if the results will be useful.
2. **Is it feasible?** – The evaluation should be realistic, carefully considered, and cost effective.
3. **Can it be done properly?** – The evaluation should consider the welfare of those participating in the evaluation, both legally and ethically.
4. **Will it be accurate?** – The evaluation should provide adequate information to determine the value of the program being evaluated.
5. **Can it be done in a culturally appropriate way?** – The evaluator should demonstrate cultural competence on every level and acknowledge the cultural context in which the evaluation takes place. The evaluation should be documented in a culturally appropriate way to ensure stakeholders understand and accept the process and results.

Why evaluate?

Accountability:
Evaluation is one way to demonstrate the value of a program (Patton, 2008). Funding recipients are often held accountable for use of their funds.

Determining outcomes:
Evaluation can help determine the extent to which a program is successfully achieving its short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes.

Program improvement:
Evaluation can help identify areas that are not working as designed, or expected outcomes that are not being achieved. Management, staff, and program participants can provide recommendations for improvement in these areas (Patton, 2008), which may be implemented at any stage of the program.

What to evaluate?

The Health Quality Council of Alberta (2005) has identified six dimensions of quality to consider when planning a program evaluation:

Acceptability	Are services respectful and responsive to user needs, preferences, and expectations?
Accessibility	Are services obtained in the most suitable setting and within a reasonable time and distance?
Appropriateness	Are services relevant to user needs and are they based on accepted or evidence-based practice?
Effectiveness	Are services achieving desired outcomes?
Efficiency	Are resources being used optimally?
Safety	Is the program able to mitigate risks to avoid harmful results?

Limitations of evaluation

✘ Evaluation does not assess staff performance.

✘ Evaluation cannot tell you how to use the results and make improvements. To interpret the results and develop recommendations, you will likely need to consult with program management, staff, program participants, and other stakeholders.

✘ Evaluation results may lead to new knowledge or decisions about future programming, but it will not guarantee change to the program or organization (Boulmetis & Dutwin, 2011).

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