Data Collection Methods for Evaluation: Document Review

This brief describes document review as a data collection method for evaluation. It includes a basic overview of document review; when to use it; how to plan and conduct it; and its advantages and disadvantages.

What is document review?

Document review is a way of collecting data by reviewing existing documents. The documents may be internal to a program or organization (such as records of what components of an asthma management program were implemented in schools) or may be external (such as records of emergency room visits by students served by an asthma management program). Documents may be hard copy or electronic and may include reports, program logs, performance ratings, funding proposals, meeting minutes, newsletters, and marketing materials.

When should you use document review for evaluation?

- **To gather background information**. Reviewing existing documents helps you understand the history, philosophy, and operation of the program you are evaluating and the organization in which it operates.
- **To determine if implementation of the program reflects program plans**. The review of program documents may reveal a difference between formal statements of program purpose and the actual program implementation. It is important to determine if such a difference exists and to clarify the program intent before moving forward with the evaluation.
- **When you need information to help you develop other data collection tools for evaluation.** Reviewing existing documents to

better understand the program and organization you are evaluating will help you formulate questions for interviews, questionnaires, or focus groups or develop an observation guide.
- **When you need data to answer *what* and *how many* evaluation questions**. Reviewing program documents is useful for answering basic evaluation questions related to the number and type of participants, number and type of program personnel, and program costs.

How do you plan and conduct document reviews?

- **Assess existing documents.** Find out what types of documents exist and determine which ones you think will answer your evaluation questions.
- **Secure access to the documents you have identified through your assessment.** Certain documents may require the permission of others before being released for review and analysis. You may need to work with legal experts in your agency to understand what limitations you may face and how they can help you access documents you will need for your evaluation.
- **Ensure confidentiality.** Confidentiality is always an important consideration when collecting data for evaluation. If you need to review documents that involve confidential data about individuals, develop a system that ensures confidentiality of individual-level data. Developing these processes and guidelines may also help you in securing access to sensitive or confidential documents.

- **Compile the documents relevant to your evaluation.** Once you have secured access to the documents you need to answer your evaluation questions, compile the documents. It is important that you limit your review to only those documents that answer your evaluation questions.
- **Understand how and why the documents were produced.** You will need to talk to the people who know something about the documents you are compiling to better understand the context for which they were developed. This is critical to gathering usable information for your evaluation.
- **Determine the accuracy of the documents.** Determining the accuracy of the documents may involve comparing the documents that contain similar information, checking the documents against other data you have collected, and speaking with people who were involved in the development of the documents.
- **Summarize the information from documents reviewed.** Create a data collection form to summarize data gleaned from your document reviews. You may want to include on the form the type of document you are reviewing; a way to reference each document; and information that answers each applicable evaluation question. You will use the form to help you compile and analyze your evaluation findings.

What are the advantages of document review?

- Relatively inexpensive
- Good source of background information
- Unobtrusive
- Provides a behind-the-scenes look at a program that may not be directly observable
- May bring up issues not noted by other means

What are the disadvantages of document review?

- Information may be inapplicable, disorganized, unavailable, or out of date
- Could be biased because of selective survival of information
- Information may be incomplete or inaccurate
- Can be time consuming to collect, review, and analyze many documents

Resources

Administration for Families and Children. *Outcomes Measurement.* Department of Health and Human Services. Available at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/ccf/about_ccf/gbk_om/om_gbk_dcm.html

Lusthaus C, Adrien M, Anderson G, Carden F. *Enhancing Organizational Performance: A Toolbox for Self Assessment.* International Development Research Centre. 1999. Available at http://www.idrc.ca/openebooks/870-8/#page_31

Evaluation and Civic Activism Curriculum. *Module 3: Data Collection Methods and Evaluation Tools.* Social Policy Research Associates. Available at http://www.evaluationtools.org/files/Guidelines%20for%20Document%20Review.pdf

Evaluation Handbook. W.K. Kellogg Foundation. January 1998. Available at http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub770.pdf