

Evaluation Overview

Performing a program evaluation and a volunteer review at the same time can be an opportunity to reflect on the obvious connection between a volunteer's experience and a program's effectiveness in supporting its volunteers. In addition, a volunteer's experience is often a strong indicator of the quality of a learner's experience. Gauging volunteer satisfaction through scheduled review sessions helps in evaluating whether or not a program is meeting its goals, serving its learners, and supporting paid staff.

Getting volunteer feedback on a program can provide insight on:

- how a program is meeting its goals
- achievements and successes of learners, teachers, volunteers
- how those affected by the program (including volunteers, learners, staff, administration, and board) feel about it
- improvements needed
- whether or not to continue a program
- ideas for future funding
- program direction and goal-setting
- how to correct problems

In addition, when volunteers participate in an evaluation process, it can increase their investment in the program and help them think in terms of its long-term viability and survival. Volunteers can also help greatly in communicating program results to various constituents, including funders, the public, other program volunteers, and agency staff and board.

Determining What to Evaluate

Performance Indicators

- Have the objectives/goals/standards/ plans of the program been met?
- What is the progress of the program?
- Is the program still relevant and/or important to the agency?
- Is the allocation of resources such as people, money, facilities, and equipment appropriate?

Some Useful Tools

- Performance goals
- A volunteer program evaluation form to be filled out by volunteers
- Volunteer hours log
- Guidelines developed by your organization for measuring the accomplishment of its goals

Who Evaluates?

All staff may be involved in the process of evaluation. The volunteer coordinator, however, usually initiates it. Establishing a small exploratory committee can be a way to:

- decide if an evaluation should be done
- determine why it should be done
- determine how the findings will be used
- consider the time, money, volunteer and staff support that is needed
- recommend who should and/or might be involved in conducting the evaluation
- determine appropriate methods for evaluation; consider alternative methods; consider cost of all methods

Literacy volunteer programs reach a wide circle of people – learners, teachers and volunteers, agency staff, and decision/policy makers. The feelings and opinions of all of these groups should be represented in the evaluation. To help ensure objectivity, it is also helpful to involve outsiders who have no vested interest on the program. The exploratory committee could become the nucleus for the evaluation committee.

When to Evaluate

Because each literacy program is unique, evaluation can be conducted at any time as deemed appropriate by your organization. Some programs, such as one-to-one tutoring programs, may choose to do an evaluation early in the program and on a regular basis thereafter. Other programs may need to operate for six months or more before enough meaningful information can be gathered to make an evaluation worthwhile.

A key question:

How can we get the best possible measure of long-term benefits in programs that have their most important effects over the long run?

One approach: keep a record of behavioral change on a regular and ongoing basis.

How to Evaluate

Good program planning and clear objectives up front are key components of a strong evaluation.

Here are some things to consider as you plan your program and its evaluation:

- Build evaluation into the program as it is being developed.
- Evaluation should be as objective as possible.
- An evaluation of a program activity is not valid and cannot be complete without giving some consideration to the performance of the providers of the service.
- Build an evaluation process that generates only the information, facts, and statistics needed to measure the program objectives. Keep it lean, reliable, and simple.
- Time and funds may be constraints. Search for ways to remove these barriers.

Informal evaluation techniques:

- Ask volunteers informal evaluation questions on an ongoing basis

- Seek feedback from other staff in the program
- Read reports from volunteers
- Review program records kept by volunteers and staff (statistics, the day's activities, accomplishments, obstacles encountered, people contacted)
- Keep a diary/daily logbook
- Observe

Formal evaluation techniques:

- Surveys
- Questionnaires
- Impartial interviews
- Ratings
- Compilation of program statistics: simple data collection sheets
- Outside consultant

How to Use Evaluation Results

The evaluation process ends by compiling and summarizing findings. The findings lead to recommendations, which become part of planning for the future.

Evaluation is only worthwhile if program leaders and staff are committed to taking action on resulting recommendations.

Some steps to follow:

- Evaluation results should be shared with those who helped evaluate.
- Results should be discussed with the appropriate people (*see above section: who evaluates?*)
- You should be prepared to make changes in your program based on the results of your evaluation. Be sure to correct, strengthen, discontinue, expand, enlarge, and/or refocus your program as needed.

Focus on what is best for the client.

- Those involved in the evaluation, and perhaps others, should create a plan to respond to issues identified in the evaluation. The plan should be results-oriented. Be sure to build future evaluation into your new program plans.
- Ask: will the plan improve program performance?
- The same people that generate the action should implement the plan