The Art of Evaluation

Transforming the Research Process into a Creative Journey

By Suzanne Callahan, CFRE

IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME. IN PUSHING TO MEET A GRANT DEADLINE, YOU REACH THE END OF THE FUNDING GUIDELINES, ONLY TO read the dreaded words: "Describe how you will evaluate this project's success. State your measurable goals and the ways in which you will meet them." Y ou anxiously ponder this dilemma with your staff, asking them: "What do you think the funder wants us to say? What should we claim that we will do? And what does evaluation really mean, anyway?" Well intentioned, you all sit down together and craft what sounds like impressive language about the ways you are going to evaluate your program. You use words like "track," "monitor," "surveys," and maybe even "qualitative" and "quantitative." You are not quite sure what these terms mean, but they sound appropriate and might increase your chances of getting the grant. You then submit the proposal, quickly forget it all, and move on to your next deadline.

And then comes the real whammy: *You get the grant*. So now, in addition to implementing the project—which may layer new or additional work onto your staff—you actually have to conduct the evaluation. You review the proposal to remember what your organization actually said it would do to evaluate the newly funded project. You breath an apprehensive sigh trying to recall just why you committed to evaluation, and how in the world you are going to pull it off with everything else you have going on. Suddenly evaluation feels burdensome, difficult, and expensive. You begin to question if and why you need to evaluate.

This dilemma is all too common for arts organizations. The term evaluation is heard so often and appears in most funding guidelines. In order to be competitive for grants, arts organizations feel obligated to conduct evaluations. Yet, there is limited understanding of what the term really means. This is logical, since evaluation is a relatively new undertaking for most arts organizations, whose limitations in budget and staff already challenge their ability to implement existing programs, create and tour new work, hold annual conferences, and sell tickets, let alone train or hire staff in this entirely new technical programmatic area.

The purpose of this three-part article is to help take the mystery and fear out of program evaluation. Understanding the underlying purpose and concepts of program evaluation can shed light on the ways in which it can help your organization. When linked early on with careful and thoughtful planning, program evaluation can empower you to think in integrated, informed, and effective ways about your organization's current and future programs. In so doing, evaluation shifts from being a burdensome, and sometimes intimidating requirement of funders, to a useful tool for shaping, developing, assessing, and learning about programs. Once informed, you can take control of the evaluation process, rather than it owning you.

As you read this three-part interactive guide, which will be included in the Winter/Spring, Spring, and Summer *Journals*, I encourage you to consider the ways in which the information presented relates to your own organization, experience, and existing programs. Part I dispels several myths about evaluation which I hear repeatedly from arts organizations. It discusses the role of

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planning as an integral part of evaluation, and the multiple uses of evaluation; and provides guidance on beginning to plan and budget for an evaluation and selecting outside consultants. In the sidebars you will find resources for further study, and a guide for selecting outside assistance with your evaluation. Part II, which will appear in the next *Journal*, provides an overview of planning and designing evaluations, including formulating basic research questions. It explains the technical aspects and terminology that one often hears in discussions about evaluation. Part III, which will appear in the Summer *Journal*, will talk about analyzing and reporting the findings from an evaluation. It will also include the perspectives of select funders and address anxieties that sometimes occur, such as reporting unexpected findings to staff, Board and funders.

1. Dispelling Some Myths about Program Evaluation

In discussions with practitioners in the arts field, I have heard a number of misconceptions about evaluation. Because grasping what evaluation *is* involves understanding what it is *not,* first let's dispel several commonly believed myths.

Myth 1. The purpose of program evaluation is really to satisfy funders. Its main function is to justify grants and generate final reports at the end of grant periods. Arts organizations should try to determine what funders want and promise to deliver it.

While this is partially true, adhering to this belief limits the usefulness and relevance of evaluation. It is true that evaluations can provide great content and justification for fundraising. Reporting back to funders about the impact and activities that their funding supported lets them—as well as you—know that their money was well-spent. However, program evaluation should serve as a complementary, ongoing tool to monitor and improve programs. Beginning the evaluation process at the end of the cycle limits its usefulness, and decreases its potential for improving programs:

Evaluation, to be practical and worth its cost, should not only assess program results but also identify ways to improve the program evaluated … When program evaluation is used only for external accountability purposes and does not help managers improve their programs, the results are often not worth the cost of the evaluation.

—Wholey, Hatry, and Newcomer, editors
Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation

First and foremost, program evaluation goes hand in hand with planning, and staff should integrate both processes as ongoing functions. Arts organizations sometimes misinterpret this basic premise: a useful program evaluation relates directly to your mission, goals, and programs and measures your success. As discussed in section three, effective evaluations serve multiple functions and can address and improve numerous aspects of programs including marketing, personnel, and program design.

Myth 2. Program Evaluation is easy and can be conducted solely by staff.

Myth 3. Program Evaluation is difficult, costly and can only be done by experts.

The real truth lies about halfway in between these two statements. It is desirable, even mandatory, for staff to integrate evaluation as part of their planning and workload, but there are limitations to what can be done internally without the help of expert, trained assistance. Section four of this article distinguishes between in-house versus external evaluations and when and how to secure outside assistance.

2. The Vital Role of Planning in Ensuring the Evaluation's Success

The time to think about evaluation is at the inception of a program, not at its end. The key is to continually ask and answer all important questions at the beginning and throughout your program process (which can mean at the inception of the program, or a new school year [season], or a new program cycle.) The way to choose an important question is to ask yourself, "What will we know from answering this question that we don't know now, and how will we use this information to make important decisions?" These key questions are answered on an ongoing basis so that every month or every quarter you have new information on how well you are doing versus how well you had hoped to do. Then you can make the adjustments necessary to continue your journey.

—Allison Fine, Executive Director, Innovation Network NIDR Forum, 1997

Making decisions early on about how to evaluate a program and integrating it as an ongoing process provides effective tools to monitor progress. When combined with thoughtful planning, program evaluation provides a process for an arts organization to articulate and value its programs. As a staff or Board member, it allows you to realize the difference that your investment makes to your artists, constituents, and community, as well as to funders. If you are investing in creating and implementing a program, what do you wish to get out of it? Arts organizations should strive to design and conduct evaluations that provide relevant information that benefits their staff, programs, and constituents, and that informs and influences progress.

Your organization invests extensive human and other resources in its operations. Consider the range of resources, or **inputs**, involved in programs. Planning and developing programs involves artistic directors, curators, Board members and other staff. Creating new work involves choreographers, composers, performers, designers, and technical staff. Acquiring funding requires the time and resources of development staff to research, plan, approach, and report to funders. The finance staff develops and monitors budgets, the marketing staff reaches new and existing audiences, and the education staff plans and develops outreach activities. Then, there is overhead and equipment, and Board time. Add in other artists and community partners, and freelance assistance with writing, graphics, production, and other areas. What about the interns—who finds and supervises them? Considering the extent and cost of all these inputs, wouldn't it be helpful to know what a difference your programs make, and ways you might improve them, for all involved?

In planning and evaluation, having active involvement from each group of **stakeholders**—or those that have a stake, or vested interest—helps to ensure the program's success. Stakeholders include some or all of the groups described above, depending on the project. Having their active involvement ensures that your planning is relevant to the people on whom your program depends, and increases their sense of ownership in your effort.

It is vital to the success of your effort that your program be demand driven. You must have the input of the people who are most affected by your outputs at the table—not in the back of your mind and not in the back room, but physically around the same table as your Board members, volunteers, and staff. In particular, you must plan with the

development people and program people working in concert (I know that in many small organizations these are one in the same people—but in this case don't forget to use both sides of your brain).

—Allison Fine, Executive Director, Innovation Network NIDR Forum, 1997

3. The Multiple Uses of Evaluation

There's an added benefit in evaluating early on and throughout a program's life cycle. Since evaluating programs prompts arts organizations to obtain information that they otherwise would not seek, often the research and findings can—and should—overlap with other areas such as marketing, audience development, and partnership building. As part of its planning and evaluation process for the Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Fund Audiences for the Performing Arts Network (APAN), the Washington Performing Arts Society conducted focus groups and surveys of its audience members. While this research fulfilled planning / evaluation requirements, it also provided WPAS with new information that informed program design.

Audience Development. WPAS found that audiences desire more information about artists and art forms prior to and during events. Staff used this information to create a new education/marketing publication, *Insights*, which is distributed in advance of and at performances in order to educate audiences—so far the response has been positive, including feedback from the artists themselves.

Market Research. Evaluations may require audience surveys. Gathering information about demographics and performance habits can inform marketing plans. For WPAS, the focus groups provided information about audiences' behavior patterns and the factors that encourage them to, and discourage them from, attending performances.

Partnership Building. When working in partnership with other organizations, the evaluation process can help arts organizations to collectively determine their strengths and weaknesses. Out of their APAN evaluation, WPAS and its partners[1] developed a frank and thoughtful list of Best Practices for Successful Collaborations which it has shared with other presenters and funders. This list constructively presents successes and also lessons learned throughout the collaborative process. The value of this tool is that it was developed from those most directly involved in the partnership, and who will continue working together in the future.

Impact of Programs on Constituents and Staff. Finally, staff can utilize evaluation to assess and document the importance and impact of the work they do every day. In its focus groups, WPAS learned that audience members appreciated seeing their staff at performances, and remember the efforts on the part of staff to exchange tickets and respond to phone calls. In addition, hearing from constituents that a new program truly made a difference can motivate staff's job performance. In evaluating another WPAS program called *Tappin' Tigers,* a new in-school tap dance residency,

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we extensively interviewed students, parents, teachers, and artists involved, and gathered a wealth of surprising evidence. Not only had students learned tap dance and history, but this new program had improved children's discipline, their behavior at home,

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[1] The APAN grant was awarded to WPAS, who is working with eight local partners: the Dance Place, Freestyle Union, George Washington University's Lisner Auditorium, GALA Hispanic Theatre, Howard University, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of African American Culture, and Woolly Mammoth Theater

and their academic participation. The program also fostered a wonderful sense of belonging to a special group, of being a "star." One boy is now known as (tap dance virtuoso) "Savion" at his local barbershop, and a parent said that she had "never seen her child's eyes light up like this before." Having this kind of detailed feedback was useful to the education staff, who said that "we can do our jobs every day and assume things are going okay, but having this kind of information makes us realize that we are successful in ways that we otherwise would not know."

4. Beginning the Evaluation Process

Understanding Internal versus External Evaluation. It is important to distinguish between the kinds of evaluations that can be completed internally by staff versus those that require expert assistance, for the type of evaluation undertaken affects both your organizational capacity and budget. In cases where organizations lack the time or resources to design formal studies, conducting a limited survey of members, staff, or audiences may prove helpful. Interns can help collect and record the data as long as staff carefully trains them and supervises the process. Holding individual or group interviews with your administrative staff or performers at the end of a season can help to clarify what went well and what didn't. Conducting such research will produce information to inform and improve your operations. Staff can decide upon some basic questions and gather useful information that supports or tests assumptions about its programs. In fact, Kim Chan, director of dance and new performance at WPAS, created the above-mentioned Best Practices from asking questions of APAN partners and encouraging a useful, ongoing dialogue for all who participated in the partnership, as based on their individual and collective experience. It did not require an expensive survey or computer analysis, but it clearly required commitment, motivation, and openness on the part of staff to examine and improve their working relationships.

However, the caveat for smaller, in-house studies is that they cannot be used to draw substantial conclusions or make major decisions, because the research is too limited in scope and sophistication. At a given point, program evaluation requires expert assistance to ensure that its design, methodology, data collection and analysis are sound and valid. This is particularly true in instances where organizations are considering changing their policies or budget priorities based on the results of the evaluation. The validity of large-scale evaluations hinges on an empirical process of asking the right questions of the right people, of analyzing the information using scientifically valid procedures, and generating useful, clear reports that are tailored for the reader(s) who will rely on them for decision-making and policy development. Such a process requires a firm grounding in research methodology and statistical analysis.

The Drawbacks of Limited Research. The most common problem that occurs in evaluation, particularly for the novice or under-skilled researcher, is the tendency to draw conclusions, and recommend or make changes, too quickly and easily based on limited information. Once a bit of research has been done, there is a tendency for those involved in the study to feel "smart" and "insightful." This can be a dangerous place because one risks the possibility of drawing conclusions, and recommending changes that held true for a limited sample of participants studied, but not for the entire

population of those served by your program. The bottom line is, in considering organizational or policy change, if you base a decision on an incorrect conclusion from an evaluation, what might it cost your organization?

Selecting Outside Assistance. Since Part I of this article provides an overview of a complex topic of program evaluation, it may leave the reader with numerous questions about selecting consultants that can design effective evaluations. When considering consultant assistance, it is crucial to select someone who is trained in research methods, statistics, and quantitative and qualitative analysis.

To aid in this process, a list of questions to ask potential consultants, along with guidelines for responses, appears below. In addition, you may seek guidance from local universities that provide academic training in evaluation within their programs in public administration or management. Professors can serve as excellent resources and may even assist with identifying graduate students with the necessary skills. If your organization plans to conduct evaluation on an ongoing basis, you may consider providing training for a staff member in research methods and statistics, so that a significant amount of the work could be done internally.

Questions to Ask When Selecting Consultants for Evaluation*

In selecting outside consultants, it is imperative to obtain qualified, expert assistance. The following questions can serve as a guide in assessing their skill level and compatibility.

What is the consultant's formal training in research methods, statistics, and quantitative and qualitative analysis?	Consultant should have attended a formal program through a university or other training institute. Can the evaluator determine and conduct appropriate statistics? Does the evaluator understand research methods?
What is the consultant's experience in conducting arts-related evaluations and working with arts organizations?	Can the evaluator translate program needs into evaluation questions? Does the evaluator understand programs in the arts field?
What is the consultant's working style?	Candidate's style should feel comfortable to you. Is the evaluator sensitive to your needs for information? Do you feel good about the way you and the evaluator communicate? Does the evaluator give you options and let **you** make the final decision?
Can the consultant furnish examples of past evaluations?	Yes. Candidate should provide a final report from another evaluation. Are evaluation reports understandable and professional looking?
Can the consultant furnish references from past clients?	Be sure to call at least two of them. Do past clients speak highly of the evaluator? Would past clients use the evaluator again? Does the evaluator deliver products and services on time and within budget?
Does consultant have experience working in a statistical software such as SPSS or SAS?	Candidate should have first-hand experience with a statistical software package. Be careful of those who subcontract this function, as it may indicate limits in their understanding of statistical analysis, which is a critical part of the research process.
In past evaluations the evaluation conducted, how did the consultant control for non-response bias?	The candidate should suggest measures where they went out of their way to reach respondents who did not initially volunteer to participate in the study.

** Incorporates questions from SPEC Associates, Detroit, Michigan*

Budgeting. The cost of evaluation can vary broadly, depending on the type and scope of the study. An internal survey can be conducted and analyzed for minimal amounts of money, particularly if interns or volunteers are involved in collecting the data. Hiring outside consultants can vary from around $5,000 for designing and administering a survey to as much as $60,000 for a year-long extensive study with multiple instruments and numerous respondents. Consultants should be able to provide detailed budgets that explain these costs; while such fees seem high, the research process and related analysis and reporting are labor intensive.

Whether small or large, conducted internally or commissioned from consultants, staff can and should be closely involved in any evaluation. Your participation and ownership is critical to its success and you should understand and approve all aspects of the evaluation design.

Conclusion

The art of evaluation involves creating a design and gathering information that is appropriate for a specific situation and particular policymaking context. In art there is no single, ideal standard. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and the evaluation beholders include a variety of stakeholders: decision makers, policy makers, funders, program managers, staff, program participants, and the general public. Any given design is necessarily an interplay of resources, practicalities, methodological choices, creativity, and personal judgments by the people involved.

—Michael Quinn Patton
Center for the Study of Evaluation, Los Angeles
How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation, 1987

Program evaluation can effect positive change, improve programs, and help arts organizations understand the value of their efforts and the impact of their hard work. I invite you to immerse and invest your passions, talents, and skills into this creative journey.

In the next *Journal*...

Part II of this article, appearing in the Spring *Journal*, will address the more technical aspects of program evaluation, such as defining success and measurable goals, formulating research questions, and understanding the sampling process and the types of instruments. It will explain the differences between quantitative versus qualitative data, and evaluation versus documentation.

Part III, which will appear in the *Summer* Journal, will talk about analyzing and reporting the findings from an evaluation. It will also include insights from experienced arts funders.

A more extensive monograph about program evaluation for use by the arts field will be produced in the near future. Contact Suzanne Callahan for details at

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After being a dancer and national arts funder for many years, Suzanne Callahan founded Callahan Consulting for the Arts in Washington, DC in 1995, which helps artists and arts organizations to realize their vision through an interactive, comprehensive system of strategic planning, resource development, program evaluation, and meeting facilitation. *Her acknowledgments go to Anthony Tapia, senior director of cultural participation programs for the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, for input in this article, and to her associate Monique Nowicki*

Resources

While the resources below provide an overview, it is highly recommended that those interested in conducting ongoing program evaluation attend courses in research methods and statistics, which are available at most colleges and universities.

Innovation Network. The nonprofit organization InnoNet maintains a website of evaluation resources. Parts of the site are under construction during the spring of 1999, but you can still visit it at www.inetwork.org or call 202-728-0727 for more information.

"Planning for Success: Success is a Journey, Not a Destination." Allison Fine, MS. NIDR Forum, January 1997. This article addresses the importance of planning in developing and evaluating programs.

Gray, Sandra Trice and Associates, with Independent Sector. Evaluation with Power. 1998: Jossey Bass, San Francisco. A book on conducting "coevaluation," or ongoing evaluation of programs to increase effectiveness, empowerment and excellence. Includes guidelines on selecting and working with consultants.

Singleton, Royce A., with Bruce C. and Margaret Miller Straigs. Approaches to Social Science Research. 1988: Oxford University Press, New York. A basic textbook on research methods and statistics.

Wholey, Joseph S., Harry P. Hatry, and Kathryn E. Newcomer, eds. Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Inc., 1994. This handbook provides suggestions about evaluation that are likely to provide useful and reliable information at an affordable cost. Chapter authors are some of the foremost experts in the evaluation field.

For an entire catalog of books, journals and software related to program evaluation and research methods, contact: Sage Publications, tel: 805/499-9774; website: sagepub.com.