Identifying Questions: Program Theory and Needs Assessment

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Presentation Outline

- Class logistics update
- Conceptual overview
- Program theory
- Evaluative questions
- Break (~1:30)
- Needs assessment
- Literature review
Conceptual Overview

“To evaluate [is] to assess the merit or worth of something against criteria and standards.” RLF p. 70 (Quoting Fournier 1995)

1. Select criteria/metrics
2. Establish standards
3. Measure performance against standards
4. Judge merit
Program Theory

- If X (program) then Y (change in condition or outcome)
- Justification for program
  - Often based on assumptions about human behavior and institutions
  - Often questionable
- Critical guide to program evaluation
Logic Model of Program Theory

Intervention (Lower Class Size)

Condition A (Personal Attention)
Condition B (Less Disruption)

Confound A (Highly Motivated Teachers)
Confound B (High SES Students)

Outcome (Student Achievement)
Asking the Right Questions

- Appropriate - Useful
  - What should change?
  - What needs to change?
  - What is expected to change?
  - By how much?

- Answerable - Valid
  - Resource availability (data, $, staff, time)
  - Workable design

- Sources
  - Program theory
  - Literature review
  - Statute and stakeholders
Research Questions

- Statutory Mandates
- Evaluator Expertise
- Program Theory
- Research Questions

Stakeholder Concerns

Dotted arrows indicate influence or relationship without a direct link.
The Evaluation Hierarchy

1. Assessment of the Need for the Program
2. Assessment of the Program Design and Theory
3. Assessment of the Program Process and Implementation
4. Assessment of Program Outcome/Impact
5. Assessment of Program Cost/Efficiency
Program Failure

- Implementation failure
  - Lack of intervention “fidelity”
  - Insufficient time, clients, resources

- Program theory failure
  - Intervention implemented with fidelity
  - Evaluation design and resources adequate
  - Evaluation implemented with fidelity
  - Expected results not observed
Formulating and Assessing Program Theory: The DC OSP

- Overview of the Opportunity Scholarship Program
- Program Theory: Choice → Better school → Better outcomes
- Program definition
  - Dominant: market intervention
  - Recessive: social intervention
- Realization/reassessment
- Adjustment
Questions So Far?
Break

- Back in 15 minutes
Needs Assessment

Detailed description of the problem motivating the program -- inherency

1. Problem definition
2. Problem scope/severity
3. Intervention targets
4. Client needs
5. Needs continue/worsen absent intervention
Problem Definition:  Necessity is the Mother of Invention

- Some condition falls short of a reasonable standard – e.g. drug use
- Recognized by influencials (politicians, academics, media, citizens)
- Defined through political process
- Nature of definition shapes preferred program response
Problem Scope/Severity

- Harder than you think
- Prone to political manipulation
- Visible problems $\rightarrow$ over-estimate, invisible problems $\rightarrow$ under-estimate
- Systematic and objective measurement crucial
- E.g. high school graduation rates
Intervention Targets

- Individuals, groups, communities, or institutions with needs to be addressed by an intervention
- Direct or indirect continuum
  - Population at risk
  - Population in need
- At some point does it cease to be targeting?
- Challenges of recruitment
Client Needs

- Backward map causality of status quo
- Qualitative investigation
- Expert opinion
- Ideally points to specific programmatic intervention
Continuation of Needs: “Something’s Happening Reg!”

- Wolf’s Iron Law of Social Need: People forecast worsening conditions absent social action.
- We rarely view problems as likely to resolve themselves (e.g., global warming).
- We rarely expect plateaus.
The Hockey Stick

Magnitude of Need/Problem

Past  Present  Future
Literature Review

1. How to look
2. What to seek
Literature Review 1a: A Tour Through the Library

1. Card catalog subject headings
2. Shelf browsing
3. References (librarian, abstracts, etc.)
4. Recent key journals
5. Government documents
6. “Consider the value of a computer search”
Literature Review 1b: Networked Search

1. Your own expertise
2. Other prominent experts
3. “Snowball” approach
4. Watch for overlap/saturation
Literature Review 1c: Arthur Levine versus Google

- **Networked searches**
  - Benefits: efficient, common, quality focus
  - Drawbacks: narrow scope, “group-think”

- **Systematic searches**
  - Benefits: efficient, broad scope, “outside-the-box”
  - Drawbacks: mislabeling, prioritizing/discerning, “group-think”

- Are they really that different?
Literature Review 2: What to Seek

1. Research “topic”
2. Promising programs within topic
3. Appropriate evaluative questions
   1. Linked to program theory
   2. Answerable
4. Methodological challenges and solutions
5. Reasonable standards and criteria
6. Details on program context
Literature Review: When to Stop

When you can write with confidence about all aspects of the program – theory, evaluation method, context, your review is complete.
Questions/Discussion?