

Much like lumber, data serves as the “raw materials” from which you build your evaluation. Before you can begin construction, you must obtain these materials. Data collection is like sending your crew out into the field with blueprints and tools in hand to gather your materials and build your house. Once you have completed the plans for the collection of evaluation data, the time comes to put those plans into action. Data collection involves administering instruments, gathering responses, and organizing responses before analysis. See “Data Collection” in the reference section for more information.

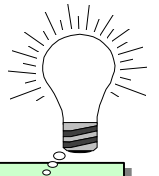
Chapter 4 Data Collection- Gathering the Raw Materials

Have Knowledgeable and Interested Data Collectors

Many people are likely to be involved in collecting the data you need. If possible, involve them in the planning process. With or without that level of involvement, you will have greater success if you educate those involved in data collection about the reasons and benefits of evaluation in the program and about their important role in the evaluation. The logistics of data collection, everything from where forms are obtained to what to do with them when complete, should be clear and in writing. Data collection training should occur early in the year. For members, this may mean that information about objectives and evaluation is part of orientation or other initial training. For partners and other agency staff, this may mean including it in initial discussions and formalizing their role in your partner contract or memorandum of understanding. As part of this process, you will discover what additional training may be needed to outfit successful data collectors.

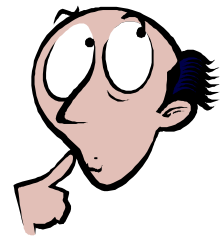
Consider This:

Members are a valuable resource in data collection; however, it may not be appropriate to use members to collect certain types of data (e.g., satisfaction with member service). Always consider whether the individual you plan to use to collect your data is the most impartial person available.



Tip: Do not wait until the end.

A good evaluation effort rarely means collecting information one time. Most likely your plan calls for collecting data right from the start of your program year. Keep a “tickler” system to inform you and others involved of upcoming data collection needs. Trying to reconstruct data or find appropriate respondents after the fact can be difficult and often leads to poor results. The tickler system also applies to aggregating data. Aggregate smaller amounts of information more often instead of waiting until the end of a quarter or program year.





Tip: Make sure your data collection processes contain a system for separating individuals who have received a lot of service from those who have received little or none.

The amount of service provided by your program may vary from individual to individual. This means that it will be important to keep track of program attendance or service provision through sign-in sheets or attendance logs.

Redesign when Things Are Not Working

While the recommendations in this toolkit are provided to maximize your success at program evaluation, they do not guarantee that your experience will be trouble-free. This is particularly true at the data collection stage and especially true of programs with new components. Despite all your anticipation and planning, you may discover that implementation is not going exactly according to the blueprint. So what do you do?

First, recognize that the problems you are having are normal and instructional. They may be with logistics (e.g., you have a mail-back survey and are receiving very few responses), with personnel (e.g., Joe Member's team does not correctly fill out the logs), or with the instruments themselves (e.g., a key interview question is being consistently misinterpreted). It is important to identify issues early and determine the actual source of the problem. Second, be flexible. You will not want to retool your evaluation plan constantly throughout the year, because this will lead to virtually incomparable and useless data. However, it is far better to "fix" the part of evaluation that has gone awry than to proceed with bad evaluation for the sake of consistency.



Consider This:

Sometimes data are available only on set schedules. To avoid planning your data collection for times when data may be unavailable, involve personnel as early in your evaluation planning as possible. For example, school report card grades may be released only twice a year.



Tip: Plan to integrate the instrument with the service.

Some instruments, such as goal setting logs, journals, and rubrics can be a part of the activity provided by the programs.

Consider This:

Confidentiality is an important issue in planning for the use of existing data. You may or may not be able to collect existing data, depending on your relationship with the host agency and the rules enforced at the host agency. For sensitive information, it may be necessary to collect data for groups of participants (e.g., the number of fights at the school rather than the number of fights involving your students), anonymous information, or information identified with a code name or number. If it appears you will experience serious roadblocks in accessing the desired data, revisit your evaluation plan and choose new indicators of success.



Tip: Take advantage of captive audiences.
Collect data immediately before, during, or following your program activity.

Share Information with Stakeholders

People want to know that the service they provide counts for something. So, share the results of your data collection effort with those involved, including clients, members, community leaders, beneficiaries, collaborating organizations, and the Corporation for National Service. You will find that this goes a long way in maintaining the enthusiasm of your data collectors. How you do this can be formal or informal depending on the nature of your program, the number of people involved, and resources available. As you set up your system, remember to keep people informed about the evaluation results, successes, and challenges. For example, use newsletters, information flyers, or stories with statistics.



