A Guide to Program Evaluation
What to expect and why it will be worth it.

Research for Action

Research for Action (RFA) is a non-profit organization engaged in educational research and reform. Founded in 1992, RFA works with educators, students, parents, and community members to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for all students. RFA work falls along a continuum of highly participatory research and evaluation to more traditional policy studies. RFA focuses on four areas: education reform, community participation in school reform, language and literacy practices in communities and schools, and students' perspectives on their education.

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A Guide to Program Evaluation

Undertaking an evaluation is an important step. It demonstrates your commitment to continuous improvement and your willingness to ask questions about how things are really going in your program. At Research for Action, our goal is to offer you good information about your efforts to improve public education. Over the years, Research for Action has collaborated with education networks, foundations, schools, museums and community groups to evaluate their efforts at strengthening public education. With each collaboration, we have gained a richer appreciation of the complexity of evaluation research and of the relationships necessary to making evaluations credible and useful.

In the following pages, we share what we've learned about evaluation and how it can benefit your program.

RESEARCH FOR ACTION'S APPROACH TO EVALUATION

Evaluation is a systematic inquiry into a program. It provides information for decision-making, problem-solving, and advancing program goals. Research for Action's evaluation approach incorporates distinctive features to help your organization move its mission forward.

VALUES

RFA staff brings knowledge of educational research to bear on knotty educational problems: for example, how to improve the educational opportunities and outcomes for those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/cultural difference, and ability/disability. RFA staff seeks to bridge the distance between evaluators and "the evaluated" and between research and practice. We also believe in promoting democratic participation in education by bringing together parents, teachers, students, administrators, community members, and policy makers to define important questions, evaluate data, and chart new directions based on findings. These values guide our research and our relationship with you.

THEORY

Theory guides our development of research questions and data analysis. We use existing literature to inform the framing of analytical questions. In our work on "what works for girls in middle school," the framework of girls *as active makers of meaning and agents in their own learning* pushed us to consider girls' strategies for negotiating school, not just what schools do to and for girls. Describing the multiple ways girls make sense of school offered teachers and parents a window into girls' experience and the possibility for designing interventions that speak to girls' experiences. It offered girls themselves an understanding of their behavior that emphasizes fluidity and dynamic interaction, not lockstep, static reaction.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION

RFA provides timely and useful information during the course of an evaluation, so that you can make mid-course corrections as needed. Formative evaluation differs from summative evaluations in which researchers judge a program successful or unsuccessful after the fact. Formative evaluation builds people's skills and knowledge by helping them recast issues and problems as challenges to discuss and address.

"Through the voices of youth and educators, RFA allows us to "hear" policy and practice as they are lived by urban youth and their educators."

–Michelle Fine
Professor and Education Activist, Graduate Center, C.U.N.Y.

COLLABORATION

Tapping into the knowledge of program "insiders" *and* "outsiders" to develop questions and design and implement evaluation research enriches a study's insights. We will work with your program's *"stakeholders,"* (staff, funders, program participants, and the general public) to identify important questions for the evaluation to address. Participating in an evaluation increases accountability among stakeholders as they discuss what they expect of the program and what they deem important enough to collect information about and hold one another responsible for. When program stakeholders have played a part in raising questions and conducting research and have seen the effort and care that go into an evaluation, they are more likely to make use of evaluation findings and recommendations.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research, an important methodology of anthropologists and sociologists, uses document analysis, interviewing, and participant observation in a program's natural setting to generate insights about:

- various stakeholders' perspectives on a program's goals and activities;

- how a program "fits" in the setting in which it operates;

- how a program is actually being implemented; and

- program effects that are ripe for measurement by quantitative methods.

Qualitative research describes what is actually happening and how people interpret and understand events. RFA researchers systematically document what we see and hear in order to make visible taken-for-granted daily interactions among people.

Although qualitative research is our primary methodology, we often collect and analyze quantitative data to enrich our research. It is widely accepted that both kinds of data have important contributions to make for understanding what is working, what is not, and why. RFA's evaluation approach surprises many people. They remember evaluation as a highly technical endeavor imposed on them by funders and carried out by experts with whom they had very little interaction. Typically they feel that they had no role in the process and were often disappointed in results that reached them too late to inform program adjustments. At RFA, we believe evaluation is key to improvement. It is a collaborative venture in which everyone learns.

"At its core, RFA's approach to evaluation is participatory and active, and presents an opportunity to learn new skills. Its reports don't collect dust on a shelf. They galvanize leadership for action."

–Rochelle Nichols-Solomon Board Member, Alliance Organizing Project

STAGES OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS

We have found it helpful to think about evaluation occurring in four phases: focusing the evaluation; collecting data; analyzing data; and reporting. However, these phases do not unfold in a linear manner; they overlap. Below, we discuss each of the four stages, explain what RFA staff will be doing during each phase, and describe the ways that you will be involved.

FOCUSING THE EVALUATION

During this stage, RFA will work with you to identify the evaluation's purpose, its primary stakeholders, and broad questions that will guide the research. Some evaluation purposes that have guided RFA's research include:

- to determine whether people have a common understanding of a program's goals and intentions.

- to raise questions about what people should be doing to put a program in place, identify benchmarks for implementation, and, in general, raise awareness about fidelity to a program model.

- to identify standards for a program's worth and develop indicators to be used in assessing a program's impact.

- to learn how the context of a program effects its implementation and outcomes.

- to assess program impact on people's beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behavior.

This is an important phase. The value of the evaluation's findings and insights depends on the significance and relevance of the questions asked.

Purposes and Audiences

Evaluation questions address the information needs of your program's stakeholders—staff, board, funders, and program participants. But it's not unusual for these groups to want to know different things about your program. For example in an after-school mentoring and tutoring program, program staff may want to know if they should change things about their program activities—when they are offered, how they are publicized, etc. Funders may want to know how the program is promoting goals the funder has for increasing community services in a neighborhood. Parents may want to know if their children are developing skills that will help them in the workplace. Teachers may want to know if the program is helping their students become more proficient and enthusiastic readers.

Determining the primary audience for the evaluation is important to getting you and RFA staff on the same page about the evaluation and ensuring your satisfaction with the evaluation's products. Although evaluations seldom have a single audience and purpose, it's important to identify a limited number. Otherwise, the resulting evaluation will lack focus and address too many questions superficially.

During the focusing stage, RFA staff will ask you many questions about your program's goals, current activities, and participants in an effort to identify what's important to examine at this moment in your program's development. Such questions will include:

- What kinds of decisions would you like to be able to make about your program?

- What activities are being implemented as part of this program?

- Who are the target groups for these activities and services?

- What do you think is happening and why?

- How might the evaluation results be used?

- What will you do if the results indicate a major need for change?

- Who is likely to be affected by the evaluation results? *

Different purposes, audiences, and questions call for different evaluation questions, sources of evidence, and data collection strategies. Shaping an evaluation involves trade-offs. RFA staff help identify what those trade-offs are so that together we can make good decisions about how to best use the funds you have available. This stage of the evaluation culminates in a research design that includes the broad research questions to be addressed; the data collection techniques to be used; and the sample of people and events/activities to be included in the research.

* Adapted from R. Torres, H. Preskill, and M. Pionte. *Evaluation Strategies for Communicating and Reporting,* Sage, 1996.

COLLECTING DATA

We will use several methods for collecting data for the evaluation of your program. Data collection methods depend on the overall research questions and issues of efficiency and validity.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Data collection often begins with assembling and reviewing documents important to your program. These include proposals for funding, timelines/calendars of activities, organizational charts, training and curriculum materials, press clippings, etc. These documents provide us with an overview of your program and the ways you are communicating about the program to various audiences.

INTERVIEWS

We conduct *individual interviews* of key informants—those who hold the big picture of the program and its context—program staff, program participants, and clients. In addition to individual interviews, we use *focus group interviews,* which are particularly productive during the initial stages of the research as we identify the salient issues. They are also helpful towards the end of a research effort for the purpose of verifying and elaborating preliminary findings. Finally, focus groups can generate more data, because some people (especially students) feel more comfortable and are more forthcoming in a group than they are in a one-on-one interview.

OBSERVATIONS

We observe meetings, professional development sessions, and events, and conduct observations in classrooms and schools to learn how program goals are enacted at that level. Each of these data collection techniques generates extensive fieldnotes. In fact, for every hour we spend in an interview or observation, we spend another hour writing up our fieldnotes.

"Having RFA evaluate the parents' work is great because it documents what we do. We have been able to use RFA's evaluation to show our school principals how our efforts can work to make schools better places."

–Lucy Ruiz, parent leader, Alliance Organizing Project

The most frequently asked questions of evaluators are "How many?" "How many teachers do you need to interview?" "How many schools do you need to visit?" Our answer, "It depends," is often frustrating to the people with whom we work. The decision depends on a number of factors related to purpose, audience, and size of the program, as well as time and resources.

SURVEYS AND OTHER QUANTITATIVE DATA

We often collect and use quantitative data in our evaluations. It is sometimes useful to include quantitative indicators of student learning in relation to qualitative research about the nature and quality of the instructional program in order to develop fuller explanations about what accounts for student achievement. Or we might use surveys to gauge the attitudes and perceptions of a broader sample than we are able to observe and interview.

For each of these methods, we develop instruments—document summary forms, interview and observation protocols, surveys, etc.— that guide researchers' data collection.

Considerable time goes into developing protocols that capture the data necessary to answer our broad research questions. During this stage of the research, we'll be calling on you to:

- help develop or review these research instruments for data collection;

- keep us informed of program happenings—what is going on that would be good for us to observe;

- help us with the many logistical arrangements involved in conducting fieldwork: connecting us to people important to your program; informing them about the evaluation—its purposes and what we will be doing; securing the clearances and permissions we need to conduct the research; and helping us to schedule interviews and observations.

Analyzing data

To analyze data, we review fieldnotes of interviews and observations, interview transcripts, and other documents both during and after field work. We begin by grouping data into categories that correspond to research questions. This allows us to identify themes and patterns in the data. Qualitative analysis also involves triangulation of the data to determine if themes recur in observations, interviews, document analysis, and survey research. When themes appear in several kinds of data, analytic validity is strengthened.

There are numerous analytic techniques available to qualitative researchers. While many people describe qualitative research findings as "anecdotal evidence," this is, in fact, a misnomer. Qualitative research findings are not random stories or anecdotes. They are generated through rigorous scrutiny of data that have been systematically collected.

RFA will engage you in developing interpretations of data. We may compile quotes related to salient themes and have you offer your assessment. Or we may develop short case studies or vignettes and work with you to draw lessons from them. Your knowledge of your program is an invaluable resource for verifying findings.

"This research has been professional development for me. I've learned about inquiry and reflection and what it takes for a group to learn together."

–Carol Rose
Professional Development Leader

REPORTING

RFA reports findings in a variety of formats. In the early stage of an evaluation, we will need to know what your reporting needs are and your timeline for reporting. This will vary, but some typical products include:

FINAL REPORTS
Usually written for an external audience, often a funder, the final report contains an executive summary; a description of the program being evaluated; an account of how the evaluation research was carried out; a presentation of major findings with data to support those findings; and a discussion of implications and recommendations. RFA will work with you to determine the kind of final report most appropriate for your needs. We will also negotiate a process in which you will review and respond to a draft of the final report.

INTERIM MEMOS
For multi-year projects, RFA writes interim memos, which report on our work during the course of a year, the hypotheses that we are pursuing based on preliminary fieldwork, new questions that are emerging, and, in some cases, preliminary findings. We meet with program staff and other stakeholders to discuss these memos as a way to sharpen our research questions, test our emerging interpretations, and chart future research plans. Program staff often use these meetings to reflect on where they have been and where they are going and to consider if the data point to early course corrections.

DATA SUMMARIES
At various points in a project, RFA may present data we have gathered to date. For example, we might present results from a survey administered during a summer professional development institute, a case study of a teacher who is a participant in your program, or a summary of a focus group interview. These summaries offer grist for reflection about your program. In each instance, we work with you to determine who should be at the session in which we discuss the data summaries.

Good communication

We will work with you to set up good communication processes between RFA staff and your program. Strong, open relationships are essential to the success of our work together.

Here are some questions for you to think about in terms of your organization and the evaluation.

- Who are your program's stakeholders? What do different stakeholders need to know about how the evaluation is proceeding? How will you keep them informed?

- Who will need to be introduced to RFA staff, and how will this happen?

- How will you ensure that RFA staff is up-to-date on program activities, changes in staff, etc.? How can the sharing of this information become part of your regular activities?

- Thinking about your program's calendar for the next six months to a year, when would it be useful to meet with RFA staff to talk about how the evaluation is proceeding and what are the preliminary findings?

- Have you built into your staff's roles and responsibilities the time they need to work with the RFA team to plan, help with logistical arrangements, participate in research activities, and meet to reflect on findings?

A team of RFA staff will be assigned to your evaluation. Our teams vary in size, depending upon the scope of the evaluation and its time frame. RFA team members bring different disciplinary perspectives to the evaluation research, and, to the greatest extent possible, we strive to assemble multi-racial/ethnic teams. Research Associates and Research Assistants comprise a team that works collaboratively. The Team Leader coordinates the team's work, manages the administrative and budget aspects of the evaluation, supervises the study, and is the primary contact for your organization. The Team Leader is a Research Associate, but may not be the only Research Associate working on the project. The RFA staff member who negotiated a letter of agreement and scope of work with you may not be the Team Leader, and, in some cases, may not be on the team working with your program.

RFA will need to know who will be our contact person in your organization and the other people in your organization who need to be involved. Clients have told us that evaluation takes more of their staff's time than they anticipated, and we'll need to work together to find efficient ways to collaborate. Even though it is often inconvenient to interrupt what you are doing to spend time reflecting on preliminary data, it will benefit your program work. It is often uncomfortable to surface problems, but ongoing assessment encourages improvement. Every organization has its own particular culture and internal communication structures. We'll need to share with one another how our organizations work and think together about implications for collaboration.

We look forward to learning with you!

APPENDIX

A short history of evaluation . . .

During the social legislation of the 1960s, policy makers called upon researchers to use the empirical methods of the social sciences to measure program effects. Evaluators used *experimental designs* (looking at the difference between groups who "received the treatment" and "control groups" who did not) to determine if projects were having the desired impact.

By the 1970s, problems with these methods were evident. Experimental designs offered no data about whether the "treatment" (program) had been provided in the ways that decision makers had intended, and so researchers were often at a loss to explain exactly what accounted for the impact (or lack of impact). Was it the program or other factors? Additionally, these studies did not shed light on how implementation of program treatments varied in different settings; for example, how quality of staff or a local setting's history shaped the course of a program.

Experimental designs provided little, if any, direction about how policy and program initiatives might be improved and evaluators were only able to provide findings well after a program was actually over. Finally, program staff and their clients raised questions about the ethics of denying services to eligible individuals who were randomly assigned to control groups.

To address these concerns, many evaluators have made significant changes in their practice. They have sought to:

- make evaluation more useful in ongoing decision-making;

- make evaluation a more inclusive process that involves diverse stake holders in asking questions about a program; and

- provide a richer picture of a program and its effects by using both quantitative and qualitative data.

OLD WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT EVALUATION*	**NEW WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT EVALUATION***
Evaluation is imposed on the organization from outside. It is complex and technical and must be done by outside experts.	Evaluation guides internal development and provides external accountability. It is a collaborative process among stakeholders as they seek to solve problems. Evaluation is everybody's job. Everyone asks questions and shares information.
Evaluation is quantitative; only statistics count.	Evaluation involves the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, so that it can capture the richness and complexity of program goals, implementation, and results.
Evaluation is seldom integrated into the organization's ongoing decision-making and planning functions.	Evaluation is an ongoing process that is connected to other organizational tasks. It is a valuable tool to help organizations carry out their missions.
There is a fear that unsatisfactory evaluation results will have negative consequences in the future.	Evaluation occurs in an environment where people can examine why something succeeds or fails without fear.

*Adapted from S.T. Gray (Eds). *A Vision of Evaluation,* Independent Sector, 1993.

Research for Action