

## Introduction

Welcome to *Capturing Outcomes of Library Programs!* Over the next four weeks we'll read, discuss, and share ideas for a range of strategies for capturing program outcomes for all ages of library patrons. The goal at the end of the four weeks is for you to have the knowledge and confidence to articulate program goals, capture program outcomes aligned with those goals, and use those outcomes' findings to advocate for programming in the library.

Over the course of this first module, we'll explore four common types of program data and unpack the definition of program outcomes. From there, we'll explore step-by-step strategies for considering outcomes for both existing programs and programs that are new or in development. The final section of this reading will discuss the ways in which program outcomes can assist with program assessment—and, importantly, two ways in which program outcomes should *not* be used. Let's get started!



## Types of Data about Programs

When it comes to collecting and analyzing program data, and the act of evaluating programs in general, it is first useful to recognize that there are different types of data that can describe a program. Each of these types of data can be collected with varying levels of effort and time; in fact, most libraries already collect lots of data that would fall into the category of "outputs" data. There are four main types of data to describe programs: inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts.

### Inputs

Inputs are the resources that go into creating a program. Input data quantifies the amount of effort, time, and materials expended on a program. Examples of program inputs include:

- Money expended (on program supplies, guest speakers, program-specific equipment, additional staffing, training costs, etc.)
- Number of staff involved (may include volunteers, as well)
- Staff time involved (for program planning, implementation, training other staff, etc.; may also include volunteer time)

### Outputs

Outputs are the products of a program. Output data quantifies the level of services and materials provided by a program. Examples of program outputs include:

- Number of participants/attendees (most libraries collect these attendance statistics for all their programs as a matter of course; many state libraries ask libraries to report their event attendance each year)
- Number of total events offered (as in a program series consisting of multiple events)
- Number of artworks created (as in an art program; could be any product created in the program)
- Number of minutes spent reading/books read (as in reading club programs)
- Circulation

### Outcomes

Outcomes are the finite, measurable changes to a participant as a result, in whole or in part, of a program. Outcome data quantifies the effect a service has on the program's stated objectives. We'll explore the definition of outcomes further in the next chapter of this reading. Examples of program outcomes include:

- Change in participant's knowledge about the program topic
- Change in participant's enjoyment of reading
- Change in participant's skills



- Change in participant's attitude toward the program topic
- Change in participant's behavior
- Change in participant's confidence

## Impacts

Impacts are the broad effects of a program's outcomes, often for an individual participant over an extended period of time. Impact data quantifies the long-term effects of the program; it should be noted that long-term effects are not always measurable. Examples of program impacts include:

- Change in participant's job status
- Increase in participation in afterschool clubs
- Increase in development of pre-reading skills among participants

In differentiating between the different types of program data, it may be useful to think of the four types of data as existing on a timeline. Input data typically describes what happens *before* a program, while output data generally describes what happens *in* a program. Outcomes and impacts occur later on the data timeline, with outcomes typically describing what happens *immediately* or *shortly after* the program, and impacts describing what happens *significantly after* the program.

A single program may very well have measurable inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts. For example, consider a series of job skills workshop programs:

- Inputs
  - 10 hours staff time planning the workshops
  - 3 hours staff time recruiting participants and making reminder calls
  - 10 hours staff time teaching the workshops
  - \$30 for creating flyers for the workshops
- Outputs
  - 25 total attendees
  - 5 total workshops
  - 40 resumes and cover letters created in the workshops
- Outcomes
  - 88% of participants increased their job skills as a result of participating in one or more workshops
  - 96% of participants felt more confident in their potential as job applicants as a result of participating in one or more workshops
- Impacts
  - 15 participants (60%) successfully interviewed for and started a new job in the six months following the workshops

For a more detailed breakdown of different types of program data, including more examples, take a look at this resource from the Council on Library and Information Resources. One librarian's takeaways from the 2016 Research Institute for Public Libraries (RIPL) also includes a breakdown of the types of program data and their values in evaluation.

## What Are Program Outcomes?

As stated in the previous chapter, outcomes are the finite, measurable changes to a participant as a result, in whole or in part, of a program. More specifically, "program outcomes" refers to the change in a participants' attitude, behavior, confidence, knowledge, skills, or status as a result of participation in a program.

Let's unpack that definition in order to more thoroughly understand what is meant by "program outcomes."



**Change** - Outcomes refer to change. That is, something about the participant will be different at the end of a program than it was at the beginning of the program.

**Attitude** - A participant's feelings or disposition toward a particular topic, idea, or belief. For example, a child's attitude toward reading for pleasure, or a teen's feeling of being valued by the community.

**Behavior** - A participant's actions, or lack thereof, as they relate to a particular topic, idea, or held belief. For example, a parent's use of open-ended questions with their child, or a child's turn-taking.

**Confidence** - A participant's belief in their own capabilities. For example, a teen's belief that they can solve a coding challenge, or an adult's belief that they can successfully employ a cooking skill.

**Knowledge** - A participant's understanding and/or awareness of a topic, idea, or belief. For example, a child's awareness of how plants grow, or an adult's understanding of how to run for local political office.

**Skills** - A participant's abilities as related to a particular topic. For example, a teen's ability to practice self-care, or a child's ability to make an afterschool snack.

**Status** - A participant's position or standing within a defined system. For example, an adult's being CPR-certified, or a teen becoming a trained babysitter.

It is useful to recognize that there are different ways to recognize outcomes for any particular program. Sometimes it is possible to capture whether a change has taken place in the course of the program. For example, as a result of participating in a cake-decorating program, participants have increased their skills at decorating cakes. This outcome captures a discrete change in skills. Sometimes it is more realistic to capture participants' *intent* to change as a result of the program. For example, as a result of participating in an early literacy workshop, parents intend to read to their children more frequently. This outcome captures an intended change in behavior.

## Outcomes for Existing Programs

If you've never attempted to capture program outcomes before, it can be best to start experimenting by going through the process of collecting outcomes for existing programs. In theory, existing programs already have the necessary initial components for beginning the outcomes process: desired goals for the program and a sense of how to determine whether you're successful in meeting those program goals.



## Step-by-step Outcomes Strategy for Existing Programs

### **Step 1: Identify the program for which you'd like to collect outcomes.**

While it is technically possible to capture outcomes on any program, some programs are more suited to having relevant outcomes data than others. For example, active, facilitated programs tend to be the best candidates for outcomes evaluation. When the program structure is such that an instructor will impart knowledge and participants will practice it, the potential for outcomes is rich. On the other side of the coin, passive programs or those that include very little facilitation may be less ideal candidates for outcomes evaluation. Consider a musical performance at the library. While it's technically possible for a concert to elicit a change in participants, such a change is not necessarily easy to track nor is it the intent of the program. That brings us to the next step.

### **Step 2: Identify the desired goals of the program.**

More specifically, what effect/s do you hope to elicit on the program participants, especially with regard to their attitude, behavior, confidence, knowledge, skills, or status? For programs in which a change in knowledge is the desired goal, these goals are frequently already identified as "learning objectives." In fact, many library program creation processes require the program leader to consider and articulate their learning objectives for participants of the program. Programs for which learning objectives may not adequately describe the goals should still have them. For example, a program that is a celebration of *Star Wars* may have as a goal to encourage families to explore science together. It's important to note that all programs should have goals, even if they feel difficult to state. In some cases, if a program has been offered for a long time it can be difficult to articulate the program goals because staff offering the program have internalized them quite deeply. It is a fruitful exercise to identify goals of longstanding programs on a regular basis.

### **Step 3: Identify how you might reasonably measure success at achieving the desired program goals.**

This is the point at the beginning of the outcomes measurement process where it may be useful to do a short thought experiment to make sure that capturing outcomes is logistically feasible for your program. If you have a clear goal, is it measurable? More specifically, is it measurable in a manner



that is reasonable in terms of staff time and patron input needed to assess success? It's important to recognize that if your strategy for tracking success would include undue amounts of staff time and effort, would be invasive for program participants, or would cause participants to feel as though they are being tested on material from programs that are ostensibly free and for leisure, outcomes may not be appropriate for that program. Additionally, it may be reasonable to measure the success of some of your stated program goals but not all of them.

## Applying the Steps to a Real Library Program

### **Identify the program:**

Code Club (4th-8th graders meet once a month to learn new coding skills and apply them to challenges)

### **Identify the desired goals:**

1. Participants will learn the basics of computer programming.
2. Participants will increase their confidence in problem-solving.
3. Participants will create a social cohort of fellow coders.

### **Identify how to measure success at achieving the desired goals:**

1. We want to avoid the appearance of testing participants on what they've learned, so having skill checks is not ideal. We could potentially watch for instances in which one participant helps another to troubleshoot. The underlying assumption is that if a child can help a peer with a skill, that child has a firm grasp of the skill already. We could also potentially ask participants whether they feel they know more about programming as a result of the program, although surveying minors can be difficult.
2. We could ask participants whether they feel more confident approaching the coding challenges after participating in the program, although it remains difficult to survey minors reliably. We could observe the length of time that participants attempt a coding challenge before asking for help. If participants are willing to spend increasing amounts of time attempting their challenges, we can infer that they are likely feeling more confident in their own problem-solving abilities.
3. We could observe the types of relationships that develop among program participants, in particular whether it seems that any strongly-bonded groups emerge.

You can mentally repeat this exercise for any existing programs at your library.

## Outcomes for New and Developing Programs

As you become more familiar with outcomes measurement and the idea of outcomes goals, it becomes easier to think about outcomes at even the earliest stages of program development. It's possible—and in many cases quite useful—to keep outcomes in mind when determining whether and how to implement a new program.



### Step-by-step Outcomes Strategy for New Programs

#### **Step 1: Identify the area of need you hope to address with a program.**

Understanding areas of need may require combing through past program evaluation data, patron comment cards, community data and message boards, and asking library staff to think about the types of needs they've seen among patrons recently. It is good practice to always tie new programs to community needs. That is, offer a program because of the clear value it will add to the library or community, rather than because it sounds fun, a library staff member really wants to do it, or another library has already done it.

#### **Step 2: Translate that need into a program goal.**

In theory, this step should be rather straightforward. If you've learned from your discussions with computer lab staff that patrons have had an increasing number of questions about formatting resumes, you may develop a program with a goal of helping patrons to format and proofread their resumes and save them in a format that can be uploaded to online application sites.

#### **Step 3: Identify potential program activities that might support the program goal.**

In other words, plan the meat of the program. Having a program goal in mind before thinking about what specific activities the program will include can allow you to be more discerning in choosing the best possible activities for your specific goal/s—and will save you energy that might have gone into planning activities that didn't really add value to the program and its goals.

### Applying the Steps to a Real Library Program

Let's take a look at how these steps could be applied in considering a new library program.

#### **Identify the area of need:**

A report from the local high schools has indicated that middle school students are matriculating into their science classes without hands-on experience performing experiments, a skill that would be beneficial to the students. Opportunities for middle schoolers to perform hands-on science is the area of need.

**Translate the need into a program goal:**

Program participants will perform a complete experiment, using the scientific method, proper equipment, and safety tools in the course of each program.

**Identify potential program activities that support the program goal:**

- Include an experiment that can be completed within the length of a single program.
- When introducing the experiment of the program, have a discussion about how each step of the experiment relates to a step of the scientific method.
- Ensure that all participants have opportunities to handle and manipulate the equipment necessary for the experiment.

If you are new to the idea of outcomes in programs, it may take some practice to be able to walk through these steps in a manner that makes your program ideas feel feasible. Practice, practice, practice!



## Outcomes for Assessing Programs

Capturing outcomes of programs has many potential implications for helping you to assess the success and value of your programs. While there are many possible applications for program outcomes findings with regard to program assessment, three are most frequent:



### 1. **Program outcomes can help to gauge your success at meeting program goals.**

This application is likely the most obvious. If you create outcomes measurement strategies to determine how well you meet program goals, then naturally program outcomes will help you determine your success at meeting those goals. Gauging success, however, does not necessarily mean that you will modify a program based on your findings. You can do so; however, that's the second most common application of program outcomes.

### 2. **Program outcomes can help you to determine areas in which you could improve in order to better reach your program goals.**

When you're done collecting your program outcomes data and you see the areas in which you've been successful and areas in which you've been less so, you are equipped with a lens that shows you areas in which you could strengthen your program. If your conversation program for English language learners has outcomes showing participants are more knowledgeable and confident using English to use library services but are not as knowledgeable or confident using English to purchase foods at the grocery store, you can modify the program activities to have a greater focus on the area of need: vocabulary related to food and shopping.

### 3. **Program outcomes, with other program data, can help you to determine the best strategy for continuing a program in the future: whether to grow it, maintain it at its current level, modify your goals, or sunset the program.**

The program outcomes by themselves don't necessarily tell you a lot about how you should proceed with the program in a long-term sense. In considering the outcomes from one program alongside its other data, especially outputs, you can start to see whether you need to expand your program to a wider audience of participants; whether the program is just fine at its current level; or whether the program may have run its course and is ready to be inactive for a time. If multiple sessions of a program show that patrons are achieving program goals and attendance numbers are steady or growing, you may want to offer the program more frequently or at more locations. If patrons are achieving program goals but attendance is dwindling, perhaps it's prudent to take a break from the program for a cycle or two. If attendance is high but achievement of program goals is low, it could be a sign to either tweak the program activities or the program goals themselves. Talk to participants and see whether what you cover in the program matches with why they chose to attend in the first place.

## How outcomes findings should *not* be used:

1. Outcomes data should not be used to evaluate program leaders. Outcomes data demonstrates how effective the program material and activities were at achieving program goals, *not* how effective the staff member was who lead the program. If outcomes data show that the program was less than effective in meeting program goals, the program activities should be reconsidered and adapted—not the program leader.
2. Outcomes metrics should not be adapted to become the goals for the program in future. Economist Charles Goodhart, when discussing why turning economic measures into economic goals was a bad idea, said "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure." That same concept applies to library program outcomes. If the first time you offer a parenting program you find that 90% of participants felt more confident in their role as parents, that's relevant outcome data—so long as your goal was to help parents to feel more confident. If, on offering the program a second time, you have a goal to ensure that more than 90% of parents will feel more confident, then you have ceased to offer an effective program. When the outcomes measurement becomes the goal in and of itself, any stated program goals for the participants become secondary.

In considering how program outcomes assist in assessing programs, it has hopefully become clear that, as a rule of thumb, we want to go to the effort of collecting program outcomes only when we have a plan for how to use that information. We don't want to collect outcomes for outcomes sake; rather, we want to have a concrete use in mind for what we find. The *Library Journal* article Meaningful Measures | Assessment particularly explores how outcomes are vital in particular in our current library landscape, and the article links to some outcomes frameworks we'll explore later in this course.

## From Theory into Practice: Wrapping Up Week 1

Program outcomes can give you data on your programs that is incredibly valuable when considered alongside other types of program data and information. Program outcomes help us to see the real effects of our programs on the patrons who enjoy them, in particular as they relate to our goals in offering such programs to our communities in the first place. Capturing program outcomes provides programming staff the chance to see the changes they inspire in patrons' attitudes, behaviors, skills, and more.

After completing this week's reading, you should now be able to define outcomes and explain how they are different from program outputs. You should also now understand the value of program outcomes in program creation, implementation, and evaluation. This week's assignment options offer opportunities to reinforce this learning in the context of programs and community needs at your own library.

**What to Do Next:** Proceed to the Week 1 Assignment Options.