

EVALUATE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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Foundations and private funders, program developers, and program managers rightly concern themselves with the sustainability of the programs they support or implement. Program evaluation is an effective tool for gauging the short- or mid-term impact of a program, but it also has great potential for revealing whether a program will have long-term or sustainable impacts. In fact, an evaluation system and robust evaluation tools not only can measure but *can* support the long-term impacts of programs.

Over the last decade, several large, national-level foundations have allocated funding to build or support arts education programs that can survive the well-known challenges of budget shortfalls, lack of public support, and the national emphasis on reading and math as more urgent priorities. One of these programs is the Ford Foundation's *Arts and Education Reform* initiative, which began in 2005 and funded nine sites across the nation, with the goals of helping build sustainable programs of arts education and arts learning. The grantees of this initiative included school districts, nonprofit organizations, and one higher-education consortium in California. Evaluations of these programs have yielded some useful findings and practices.

The relevance of arts education to general education reform is a matter of debate. However, these evaluation findings are broadly relevant because they emerged in an area where sustainability is especially difficult to maintain. If we can find the keys to sustaining arts education, which is notoriously susceptible to budget cuts, narrowing curricula, and lack of broad public support, then we may have answers for sustaining all manner of programs.

Definition of Sustainability

In terms of public organizations or programs, sustainability is the characteristic of continuing over a period of time sufficient to have long-range impact on individuals, schools, or communities despite changes to the participating organizations or to the external environment. Sustainable impacts may even go beyond the life of the program.

This article distills learning from the Ford initiative along with other programs and more general knowledge from evaluation. It identifies a set of criteria for an evaluation or evaluation system that can not only measure sustainability but help ensure it. The article lists 14 steps that are essential to such a system. They appear roughly in the chronological order in which you might encounter them while constructing the evaluation system:

1. Develop a Theory of Change
2. Develop a Logic Model
3. Plan your Evaluation
4. Identify Sustainability Indicators
5. Plan for Usability of Evaluation Processes and Findings
6. Ensure Cultural Relevance
7. Evaluate Systemic Change
8. Take a Positive Approach
9. Design Usable Reports and Products
10. Build in Evaluation as Part of your Program
11. Make Evaluation Affordable
12. Use Innovative Technology
13. Create Capacity for Ongoing Evaluation
14. Build a Learning Community

1. DEVELOP A THEORY OF CHANGE

The set of assumptions or ideas about how a program's activities will lead to desired results is sometimes called its *theory of change*. Such a theory is important because it helps make the assumptions explicit, with the likelihood of ensuring greater ownership from school and community stakeholders. A theory of change can also test the assumptions through the evaluation process. Develop program theory in the initial stages of a program and ensure that it reflects what is already known about how similar programs have worked.

Evaluators can use their knowledge of previous programs or reviews of relevant research to help program funders and designers develop a theory of change. They can also help ensure that the theory becomes an integral part of the evaluation process.

For example, two major arts learning programs, the Chicago Arts Partners in Education and ArtsEdWashington, were guided by the theory that *arts-based leadership training will bring about greater support of arts programs by school principals*. This theory has been substantiated in both programs, as participating schools have continued to hire dedicated arts specialists through the leadership of their principals.

A useful source of information on the development of theory is the Theory of Change Community, <http://www.theoryofchange.org/>.

2. DEVELOP A LOGIC MODEL

The second step in ensuring sustainability is the development of a logic model based on your theory of change. Such a logic model is a more complete representation of the relationships within your program, for example, the connections between program activities and desired outcomes. A kind of program schematic or diagram, a logic model is usually a visual or graphic display consisting of columns or text boxes connected by arrows or lines.

A logic model is useful in helping a variety of stakeholders to understand the workings of the program. Moreover, it can focus the evaluation on every step of the program design, development, and implementation. This focus is important because a program is more likely to be sustainable if it recognizes, is aligned with, and meets the needs of the people it is designed to serve. You can ascertain this alignment through the continuous processes of evaluation.

Numerous examples from programs attest to the usefulness of logic models. The evaluation of Going Global, an international cultural exchange program funded by the U. S. Department of Education, benefitted from having the logic model serve as a comprehensive data collection inventory. Sources of information on logic models are plentiful. One good example is the W. K. Kellogg Foundation: <http://www.wkkf.org/knowledge-center/resources/2006/02/WK-Kellogg-Foundation-Logic-Model-Development-Guide.aspx>.

3. PLAN YOUR EVALUATION

While a logic model is useful in itself, the next essential step in ensuring sustainability is to develop an evaluation plan that is aligned with your overall program. Such a plan should specify the following critical evaluation components: indicators (observable or measurable phenomena that will provide evidence for evaluation conclusions), data sources, schedules or timelines for collecting the data, and assignments of personnel for the key tasks of collecting the data. The plan should also specify how the data will be analyzed and reported. It should include time and resources for the development of data collection instruments, if they are needed. Closely align the evaluation plan with your logic model; in this way, each can be modified as the program matures and new findings emerge.

Dallas' Big Thought, a Ford grantee, has benefitted from an extensive evaluation effort driven by a comprehensive and long-range evaluation plan. Notably, the evaluation plan itself has changed and expanded in response to ongoing findings.

A useful approach for planning an evaluation is the CIPP Model (Context, Input, Process, and Product) developed by Daniel Stufflebeam. A CIPP checklist can be found at http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/archive_checklists/cippchecklist_mar07.pdf.

4. IDENTIFY SUSTAINABILITY INDICATORS

In building out any evaluation plan, it is necessary to identify *indicators* that provide evidence of program impact. In order to design a sustainability evaluation, you should look additionally for indicators which, if present, are likely to ensure the program's long-term viability and impact.

Qualities of useful indicators: Indicators are useful when they are:

- Substantially and verifiably related to the construct they are supposed to indicate (e.g., as supported through research literature)
- Measurable or observable

The following sustainability indicators were present in Ford-funded programs:

- Durable and varied funding streams, as evidenced by number of sources and dollars (Big Thought)
- Development of a system of leadership and advocacy (Alameda County Alliance for Arts Learning Leadership)
- Research supporting the program's value (Arts for Academic Achievement, Minneapolis)

Definition of Indicator

An indicator is an observable phenomenon that provides reliable evidence of the attainment of something else (sometimes known as a construct) that often is not observable. For example, high achievement on a standardized test is often considered an indicator of learning.

5. PLAN FOR USABILITY OF EVALUATION PROCESSES AND FINDINGS

A key to evaluating for sustainability is ensuring that results and findings are usable, acceptable, and plausible. Work to ensure this usefulness at the inception of the program, rather than waiting until the end. Start by identifying all of the program *stakeholders* (literally anyone who has something at stake in the program). Then identify the information these stakeholders will want and need. In as broad and inclusive a process as possible, ask them what they need to know. Then plan the evaluation in a way that it will collect this information.

The Andes Exchange, a multi-year cultural interchange program between the Ohio Arts Council and Chile and funded by the U. S. Department of State, included this usability focus in the planning of both the program and the evaluation.

A useful source on usability is Michael Patton's Utilization-Focused Evaluation model: http://www.evaluationwiki.org/index.php/Michael_Quinn_Patton

6. ENSURE CULTURAL RELEVANCE

A corollary of usefulness is cultural relevance. Evaluations must be understandable and meaningful within the cultural worldviews and frameworks of all of the people involved in the program. This imperative underscores the necessity that all stakeholders must have a role in planning the evaluation and the identification of the evaluation goals or guiding questions.

Moreover, validate all data collection tools for cultural relevance, understanding that the meanings of words and concepts vary from one cultural group to another, and develop evaluation materials that are meaningful to the program stakeholders and community.

One of the Ford grantees (the Alameda County Alliance for Arts Learning Leadership) has made culturally responsive evaluation a critical component of its mission, engaging community stakeholders as vital participants in every stage. This goes to the basic step of asking people in the community, *What do you value the most? What do you want to learn about?* The result has been a deep sense of community involvement and caring about the project, and consequent high levels of support from community funders.

A useful source on culturally responsive evaluation comes from the National Science Foundation's *User-Friendly Handbook*: http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02057/nsf02057_5.pdf.

Sustainability is Relative

Former Ohio Arts Commission Executive Director Wayne Lawson tells the following story: "There are two families in Japan that make taiko drums. One family has been in the business for 300 years. An artist tells this story about how his family has just bought the side of this other mountain to grow the trees to make the taiko drums. And someone asked, 'When will the trees be ready for the drums?' He replied, 'In 200 years.' "

7. EVALUATE SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Systems by their nature are resistant of efforts to change them. This is in part what makes them systems. To bring about change, we need to think and act systemically. An evaluation must be systemic, as well. For example, one of the Ford grantees (Big Thought, a Dallas nonprofit) has engaged stakeholders at multiple levels—educators, school leaders, community members, and the business community, based on the recognition that all of these spheres are interconnected and that multiple levers must work together to leverage change.

For more on this topic, see my recent Artsblog post, "Evaluating for Pattern," at <http://blog.artsusa.org/2010/05/25/evaluating-for-pattern/>.

8. TAKE A POSITIVE APPROACH

Positive inquiry refers to an approach in social research that begins with a search for strengths, assets, and value instead of a search for deficits or problems. The advantage is that you are able to see whatever context you are evaluating—a community, a classroom, or an organization—as potentially rich with tools for change instead of impoverished and strewn with obstacles. This approach does not minimize or deny the existence of needs; it simply approaches the context from a standpoint of possible solutions. Evaluators can use tools such as Appreciative Inquiry and Asset Mapping for uncovering the positive in a program. Big Thought provides a remarkable example, conducting a broad-range community audit and asset map of neighborhood cultural assets.

The following sites provide useful overviews, examples, and tools for positive inquiry:

- The Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University: <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/>
- Appreciative Inquiry Commons: <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>
- Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship: <http://www.centerforpos.org/>

9. DESIGN USABLE REPORTS AND PRODUCTS

Many an evaluation report has sat on a shelf, largely unread and unused. To make results more usable and effective, report results in multiple reporting formats based on the needs of audiences. You might ask your stakeholders not only what information they need (see Step 5, above), but also *how they would like to receive it*. For other than technical audiences, avoid or explain jargon and use lay-friendly language. Explore ways to break large bits of information into manageable packages.

New technologies, including data dashboards (interactive displays that condense data sources into a few key metrics) and Prezis (three-dimensional presentations that allow zooming from an overview into micro levels of a program) complement existing technologies such as multimedia for expanding the range of written reports.

For more ideas, see the American Evaluation Association Topical Interest Group on Data Visualization and Reporting: <http://comm.eval.org/datavisualizationandreporting/DataVisualizationandReporting/Home/>.

10. BUILD IN EVALUATION AS PART OF YOUR PROGRAM

To foster sustainability, make evaluation an integral part of your program. This means that, where possible, the evaluator is part of the design team that develops the program. The evaluator can help ensure that many of the evaluation steps, such as data collection, become part of the program and do not take any time or resources away from the program itself. The evaluator's presence on the program team can also help develop a capacity for inquiry that can lead to a learning organization (see Step 14, below). Several Ford grantees, including Interchange (St. Louis) and Big Thought (Dallas) have provided such central roles for evaluators. A useful resource on the integration of evaluation into a program is Michael Patton's Developmental Evaluation model, summarized in *Evaluation Practice*, 1994: <https://www.abp.org/abpwebsite/r3p/pre-read/Patton.DevelopmentalEval.pdf>.

11. MAKE EVALUATION AFFORDABLE

It is vital to make evaluation affordable so that it supports the program, rather than drawing resources from it. The following are some key tactics:

- Take advantage of built-in opportunities for data collection and analysis (see preceding step)
- Assign staff to evaluation tasks that they can handle (for example, administering a survey) while reserving other tasks for outside consultants
- Seek help from a local university, if one is available. Often a faculty member can help in designing a useful evaluation plan, provided he or she has the needed training and expertise. Hire interns or graduate assistants, if possible.
- Use technology to reduce costs of travel. Going Global and the Andes Exchange, two international cultural exchange programs, depended heavily on technology for planning, data collection, and sharing of findings across multiple sites on four continents and in Pacific Oceania. (See also the following step.)

12. USE INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY

Take advantage of appropriate technology, not just to save resources but also to increase efficiency and effectiveness. Use online surveys as a way to avoid manual data entry. Conduct interviews via telephone to avoid extensive travel and the attendant costs. Explore social networking as an evaluation tool. Use telecommunications to collaborate, and take advantage of shareware to avoid high costs of software. Use some of the techniques identified in Step 9 (above) to communicate findings effectively.

Several examples and useful information on integrating technology are available from David Fetterman at his Empowerment Evaluation blog: <http://evaluation.blogspot.com/>.

13. CREATE CAPACITY FOR ONGOING EVALUATION

Evaluators are often hired to work with specific projects or programs that have a finite lifetime. But making evaluation into a tool for sustainability means that it becomes embedded in the culture of an organization. Leaders can help foster this culture of evaluation by hiring evaluators on an ongoing basis, either as consultants or internal staff. These internal evaluators can provide ongoing support along with training and technical assistance in designing, conducting, and using evaluation. Many foundations and other large nonprofits are moving toward the development of in-house evaluation capacity. This trend is indicative of the importance of evaluation as a tool for learning.

As a way of gauging your organization's ongoing capacity for evaluation, you might use a tool such as the Institutionalizing Evaluation Checklist from the University of Western Michigan Evaluation Center:

http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/archive_checklists/institutionalizingeval.pdf

14. BUILD A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Ultimately, the greatest benefit of effective evaluation is arguably that it affords you the opportunity to be part of a learning organization. This means that you actively direct change and improvement through knowledge generated out of question-driven systemic inquiry. On the surface, all cultural and educational organizations are knowledge entities: Many of their products and services are intellectual in nature. But if knowledge is also at the core of the organization's inner workings, it can drive future programming toward more sustainable ends.

How does this look on the ground? It involves posing powerful and engaging questions, seeking answers to these questions using the most appropriate tools, using the findings to make decisions, capturing knowledge in some form of database so that it can be reused, constantly reflecting on what you know, and communicating this knowledge among a broad and diverse network of stakeholders.

An example of an emerging learning community is the Los Angeles County Arts Commission's Arts for All, whose *Designing a Learning Community* offers a research-based tutorial/handbook and searchable database: <http://handbook.laartsed.org/home/index.ashx>.

For more information on learning communities, go to the following sources:

- Evaluation Exchange, Learning Organizations:
- <http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/learning-organizations>
- McKinsey & Company, Learning for Social Impact: <http://lsi.mckinsey.com/>

CONCLUSION

Evaluation is an important tool for gauging the immediate and intermediate impact of programs. As we have seen, however, it can also help measure and drive sustainability of programs and organizations. This article has suggested 14 steps along the program journey that can energize evaluation for this purpose. To learn more about evaluating for sustainability or to discuss your needs, contact the author at mike@mikesikes.com.

As a final process, you may want to rate your organization or program on the 14 criteria or steps with the following rating scale:

The Evaluating for Sustainability Rating Scale

Use the following scale to rate your Sustainability Evaluation progress.

- 1=Beginning. Minimal evidence of the component at this time.
- 2=Developing. Some evidence of the component, but inconsistent.
- 3=Applying. Consistent implementation of the component.
- 4=Embedded. The component is fully integrated throughout your work.

Component	1	2	3	4
Develop a theory of change				
Develop a logic model				
Develop an evaluation plan				
Identify sustainability indicators				
Plan for usability of evaluation processes and findings				
Ensure cultural relevance				
Evaluate systemic change				
Use positive inquiry				
Design usable reports and products				
Build in evaluation as part of your program				
Make evaluation affordable				
Use Innovative technology				
Create capacity for ongoing evaluation				
Build a learning community				