Outcome-Based Evaluation (OBE) for LSTA Projects

The Institute of Museum and Library Services prefers the use of OBE methods in evaluation of LSTA-funded projects. While OBE methods are not mandated by IMLS or by the South Carolina State Library, OBE is a very effective tool for project management and can result in cost savings as well as improving a library’s ability to seek and successfully administer other grant funding.

What is outcome-based evaluation (OBE)?
Outcome-based evaluation, sometimes called outcomes measurement, is a systemic way to determine if a program has achieved its goals. The organized process of developing an outcome-based program and a logic model (an evaluation plan) helps institutions to:

1. Articulate and establish clear program benefits (outcomes)
2. Identify ways to measure those program benefits (indicators)
3. Clarify the specific individuals or groups for which the program’s benefits are intended (target audience)
4. Design program services to reach that audience and achieve the desired results.

What is an "outcome" and how do you evaluate (measure) them?
An outcome is a benefit that occurs to participants of a program; when the benefits to many individuals are viewed together, they show the program’s impact. Typically, outcomes represent an achievement or a change in behavior, skills, knowledge, attitude, status or life condition of participants related to participation in a program.

In OBE, an outcome always focuses on what participants will say, think, know, feel, or be—not on mechanisms or processes which programs use to create their hoped-for results. Well-designed programs usually choose outcomes that participants would recognize as benefits to themselves. To simplify planning for evaluation, state the outcome you want to produce in simple, concrete, active terms.

Poor Outcome Statements

- Students will know how to use the Web
- Patrons will use the automated ILL system
- Users will have better health information
- Library staff will be trained in reference skills
- Democracy will flourish

Better Outcome Statements

- Students will demonstrate information literacy skills
- Patrons will report high satisfaction with the automated ILL service
- Patrons will make healthier life-style choices
• Library staff will provide faster, more accurate, and more complete answers to reference questions
• Visitors will register to vote

**What is the difference between outputs and outcomes?**
Outputs are measures of the volume of a program’s activity: products created or delivered, people served, activities and services carried out. Think of outputs as the "things" piece of evaluation. Outputs are almost always numbers.

*Examples of outputs:*
- 42 staff members will complete training
- 37 libraries will participate in reference training
- 4 workshops will be held
- Participants will receive 3 CEUs

*Examples of outcomes:*
- Library staff will provide faster, more accurate, and more complete answers to reference questions
- Customers will report high satisfaction with reference service

**How do I choose outcomes for my program?**
First, carefully think out and describe the purpose of the program. There is a reason for undertaking the tasks and offering the services. Most modern libraries don't build collections only to own them, or to go through the processes of cataloging, storing, and maintaining them. They develop collections to support the need of existing or anticipated users for information and education.

Ask, "why are we offering this program, what do we want to accomplish, and who do we want to benefit?" It may be helpful to ask staff, program partners, and other stakeholders, "if we are really successful with this program, what will the results look like for the people we served?" Equally important is knowing your audience, their needs and wants, and what your program can do to help them achieve their aims.

The answers to those questions should allow you to describe the changes or impact that you want to see as a result of the program. Those hoped-for changes are the intended program outcomes.

**What is an indicator?**
Indicators are the specific, observable, and measurable characteristics, actions, or conditions that demonstrate whether a desired achievement or change has happened. To measure outcomes accurately, indicators must be concrete, well-defined, and observable; usually they are also countable.
**Poor Indicators**

- The # and % of students who know how to use the Web
- Patrons will report high satisfaction with the automated ILL service
- Users will make healthier choices

**Better Indicators**

- The # and % of participating students who can bring up an Internet search engine, enter a topic in the search function, and bring up one example of the information being sought within 15 minutes
- The # and % of patrons who say they are "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the automated ILL service after using the service
- The # and % of users who report they made one or more life-style changes from a list of 10 key life-style health factors in the last six months

It’s easy to construct a good indicator if you use this format:

**Number and/or percent**

of a

**specific target population**

who

**report, demonstrate, exhibit**

a

**specific measurement or quantity of change**

in an

**attitude, skill, knowledge, behavior, status, or life condition**

within a

**specified timeframe and/or circumstance.**

- **Number and percent:** Both number and percent are usually specified to provide adequate information. If only two people participate in your program, after all, reporting that 50% of them benefited could be misleading. Examples: 30% of 150, 75% of 25.

- **Target audience:** The group of people the program hopes to affect. Effective programs keep the characteristics of the people they want to benefit clearly in mind. The more narrowly and specifically the group of people who are expected to
participate in a program can be described, the greater the likelihood that a program will be designed to actually reach them. Examples (low to high definition): Maryland residents, Baltimore high-school students, Howard County mothers at literacy level 1 or below.

- **Report, demonstrate, exhibit:** Note that all of these are active, observable behaviors or characteristics that don't depend on guesswork or interpretation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong></td>
<td>What someone feels or thinks about something; e.g., to like, to be satisfied, to value.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skill</strong></td>
<td>What someone can do; e.g., log on to a computer, format a word processed document, read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge</strong></td>
<td>What someone knows; e.g., the symptoms of diabetes, the state capitals, how to use a dictionary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavior</strong></td>
<td>How someone acts; e.g., listens to others in a group, reads to children, votes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Status</strong></td>
<td>Someone's social or professional condition; e.g., registered voter, high-school graduate, employed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life condition</strong></td>
<td>Someone's physical condition; e.g., non-smoker, overweight, cancer-free</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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- **Specified quantity and specified timeframe or circumstance:** This is the measurable part of an indicator. The project manager chooses a quantity of achievement or change that is enough to show the desired result happened, and the circumstances or timeframe in which the result will be demonstrated. Examples: three times per week, in 15 minutes or less, 6 months after the program ends, 4 or higher on a 5-point scale.

**What kinds of programs are best suited for OBE?**
Most programs can incorporate OBE as an effective and efficient management tool. Any program that intends to educate or train participants can be designed with outcomes at its core and can be evaluated using OBE concepts.

There are many examples of training initiatives. For example, technology training is offered to help library staff keep their computers running and online. The success of that program could be evaluated by looking for evidence that library staff who complete that training can solve basic, frequently-experienced computer problems such as a frozen screen - that would be a desired outcome that can be measured.

**How many program participants have to be evaluated, all or a sample?**
For many programs it is possible to evaluate the impact to all participants. Others will have access to only a sample of participants. This is often true, for example, of programs to provide digital resources - collections, exhibits, curriculum tools, or Web
sites. Many programs will seek volunteers to answer questionnaires or to participate in focus groups to provide outcome information. This is perfectly acceptable.

**Will funders pay for small outcomes?**

For LSTA grant projects, it is less about small or large outcomes than about what you hoped to achieve for an audience, what you learned in the process and what was reasonable to expect for that audience. In some cases a 10% improvement is very significant, while in others, a 90% impact is reasonable to expect.

You need to know your audience and your stakeholders, in order to create realistic goals and expectations. When that is done, and outcomes still fall short of goals, OBE allows institutions to assess, explain, and learn from why outcomes fell short of goals. Without OBE, it can appear as if a program just didn't do what it said it would. With OBE, you have the opportunity to learn why the plan did not succeed as expected, and make improvements for the next program.

The "size" of the outcome is proportionate to the size of the target audience and the duration or the intensity of their experience in a program. If a project works closely with a small number of participants, the outcome might look small, but might be profound for those participants. If a project offers a rapid service to a very large number of participants or users, the outcome is likely to be minor, but may reach many people.

Many proposals make idealized claims for anticipated contributions without offering any concrete information about how project managers will know if their intentions were realized. It is increasingly important to funders that programs or projects have concrete audience benefits, with services designed to achieve them for a clearly-defined audience, and that managers demonstrate that the benefits were achieved.

**Can my program take credit for large outcomes?**

Certainly, if the outcomes were logical and closely related results of the services provided. Funders are less concerned with big or small outcomes and more concerned with the logical connection between services and outcomes and the clarity of indicators. Part of the usefulness of OBE is the concrete, objective way it can connect participation in a program or service to specific knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, skills, and other achievements.

**What does OBE cost?**

On average, an institution should budget 7-10% of a program's total budget to cover the costs of OBE. It is expected that evaluation costs will be included in the budget for a project. LSTA funds may be used for evaluation.

**If OBE is not the same as academic research, and the results may not be completely reliable evidence of outcomes, why should I do it?**

Formal research is one way of capturing information, but not the only way. OBE is a strong, effective and reliable management tool that provides an institution with information regarding the degree to which a program did what it set out to do.

While it does not allow you to determine and claim unique or complete credit for an outcome, OBE does allow you to demonstrate the degree to which a program
contributed to the outcome for individuals. If you have no information, you cannot credibly claim any contribution to impact.

This is a burning question for many in the library community, in part because academic training conditions us to look skeptically at any information that is not statistically valid, rigorous in its sample selection, and otherwise derived from the scientific model. In OBE, we're not looking for information that we intend to extend to other institutions or contexts. Instead, we're looking to see if what we did had the result we intended. That information helps us make decisions about a particular program: whether to continue it, expand it, improve it, or replace it with another.

OBE doesn't usually look for signs that participants have more or better of what it's evaluating than non-participants. It is not intended to prove that one program did something more effectively than another (although that's possible). If a project intends to demonstrate the relative worth of one approach measured against others, or to provide a tool for use by other organizations, then of course it needs to turn to the tools and criteria of research.

Since the use of the data provided by OBE is limited, we can usually be satisfied with information that is accurate, without requiring statistical rigor, blind or random sampling, or other characteristics of research for which broad applications are intended.

**How many outcomes should my program have?**
A program needs to have at least one outcome, however, programs are likely to have more than one outcome. It is important to consider what the purpose of the program is and the ways you would expect participants to benefit from your program. These benefits will likely be the outcomes for your program, but you need not measure everything. You may want to prioritize this list and determine what you and your program's stakeholders would really need to know about the program's impact.

**What is a logic model and is it necessary?**
A logic model is a step-by-step approach for defining and measuring outcomes. It is your program's evaluation plan. It shows how you will measure outcomes, what information you need to collect, who you will collect information about, when you will get the information and what targets you have chosen for the outcomes.

A logic model is essential to the success of your institution's implementation of outcome-based evaluation. Without this, outcome based evaluation will not become a reality for your institution.

**How complicated is outcome based evaluation?**
Once the concepts are understood and you have successfully implemented it a few times, it is a very simple process to understand and manage. The key to success is commitment of the institution and the clear identification of roles in managing OBE.

**How much time will it take?**
It isn't possible to prescribe a time for all programs. It does take a commitment of time and resources to get it done. The majority of time comes at the front end. In compensation, once incorporated, OBE can save significant time in planning and
management by allowing you to get at the right questions, and answers, early on in the program planning process.

**What can outcome based evaluation do for my institution?**

Employing outcome-based evaluation and reporting on the impact of a project can have many positive benefits:

- **First**, it can help in telling a story about the library’s services in ways stakeholders and the general public can understand and appreciate. It helps the library to convey important information about its impact on the community, and also to convey the very powerful personal stories that show how important the program was to specific individuals.

- **Second**, it can help better position the library to pursue other funding because intended benefits and impact of a proposed program can be described in very specific terms by identifying what the program will do for participants.

- **Third**, OBE places a structure on the planning and management of a project, by clarifying goals and success in meeting them. Project staff can better communicate the benefits they intend to deliver to program participants - it can aid recruitment and marketing.

**Aren’t some things difficult to measure?**

Some things will seem more difficult to measure (evaluate) than others, and not all things programs accomplish need be measured. It is often more straightforward to measure "hard" impact, such as knowledge, behavior, and skills than it is to measure "soft" impact such as attitudes. Measuring attitude changes or other "soft" impacts is not actually more difficult, but it may require more creativity.

**How will I know if my outcomes are good enough?**

Outcomes are effective if they 1) are closely associated with the purpose of a program and describe what an organization wants to make happen for people, 2) are realistic and within the scope of what the program can affect and 3) have indicators that allow them to be measured.

**How do I report outcome based evaluation information?**

Consider what your program’s stakeholders want to know about the results of your program when developing reports from outcome-based evaluation data. The institution's Board, its community, and funders may want similar information, but this does not mean that one report will satisfy everyone. In general, consider the following as desirable information for reports:

- Needs identified
- Inputs (what we used)
- Activities and services (what we did)
- Audience (characteristics and participation)
- Outputs (what we produced)
- Outcomes (what impact we achieved and how we know) and
- Interpretation (what it all means, why it matters)