

# Considerations for Evaluating Evolving Organizations and Initiatives

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Lori-Ann Palen  
*RTI International*

**Background:** Evaluators are often called to be flexible in response to changing programmatic and contextual circumstances. However, the field offers little guidance around issues to consider before modifying an in-progress evaluation.

**Purpose:** This article describes the evaluation of an organization that underwent significant mid-evaluation changes, with a focus on factors that went into the evaluator's recommendations about whether to modify evaluation design and instrumentation.

**Setting:** Community collaborative in Wake County, North Carolina

**Intervention:** NA

**Research Design:** NA

**Data Collection and Analysis:** The evaluator noted factors that went in to decisions about modifying evaluation design and instrumentation.

**Findings:** Issues around validity and sustainability push evaluators to update evaluation designs to keep pace with changes, whereas issues around continuity and accountability pull back to the current course.

**Keywords:** *evaluation design; data collection; modification; flexibility*

## Introduction

Evaluators are often called to be flexible in response to changing programmatic and contextual circumstances (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2003; Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2010). However, the field offers little guidance around issues to consider before modifying an in-progress evaluation. The purpose of this article is to describe the evaluation of an organization that underwent significant mid-evaluation changes, with a focus on factors that went into the evaluator's recommendations about whether to modify evaluation design and instrumentation. This may help guide other evaluators faced with the common challenge of evaluating an evolving organization or initiative.

## Background

Youth Thrive is a community collaborative whose goal is to create a promising future for youth ages 5 to 18 in Wake County, North Carolina. Their efforts include a geographic information system (GIS) mapping initiative for youth development opportunities, youth service provider trainings, compilation of data on youth health and well-being (Youth Thrive, 2015), and creation of a strategic plan to prioritize services and supports for youth (Youth Thrive, 2016).

From 2013 to 2016, Youth Thrive contracted with an independent evaluator to design and execute an evaluation of their work. The original evaluation design involved three components: an annual survey of youth service providers, an annual survey of youth, and interviews with the organization's stakeholders at the beginning and end of the evaluation. Each of these activities was completed in the first year of the evaluation. Over the course of that year, however, Youth Thrive's

original executive director left, and a new executive director was hired. Under the new executive director, Youth Thrive's goals were updated, and many of the organization's activities were changed (discontinued, continued with alterations, or started new) to align with the updated goals. In the second year of the evaluation, the evaluator was faced with the question of whether and how to change the evaluation design and instruments to accommodate Youth Thrive's updated goals and activities. Ultimately, four factors fed into modification decisions: validity, continuity, accountability, and sustainability.

Note that Youth Thrive's decisions about whether and how to modify their operations were informed by input from stakeholders, including their Board of Directors. All evaluation modifications were discussed with and approved by Youth Thrive's executive director. The evaluator documented evaluation modifications in an addendum to the original evaluation plan, which she submitted to the executive director. The executive director could, in turn, share this addendum with stakeholders as appropriate.

## Factors Affecting Evaluation Modification Decisions

### *Validity*

An evaluation can only provide valid conclusions if it is directly linked to intervention activities, goals, and target population. To the extent that any of these change, an evaluation may need to be modified. Validity is the focus of one of the few articles about evaluation modification, in which Hembroff and colleagues (1999) describe how an evaluation evolved to accommodate clarified program goals and changes in program activities due to shifts in national policy.

During the first year of their evaluation, Youth Thrive discontinued their few, infrequent activities that involved interaction with youth. They did not expect that their remaining efforts would have a direct impact on youth. As a result, they narrowed their evaluation focus to the youth service providers and stakeholders with whom they had direct interaction, and they discontinued the youth survey.

Issues of validity also led to changes within evaluation instruments. For example, one of Youth Thrive's original goals was building service provider knowledge about the concept of positive youth development. Over time, this became less of

a focus. This led to the removal of positive youth development knowledge questions from the youth service provider survey and the stakeholder interview guide. Relatedly, questions were added to the stakeholder interview guide to capture reflections on Youth Thrive's strategic planning process, an activity that did not exist when the interview guide was originally developed.

### *Continuity*

Longitudinal evaluation designs are critical for determining whether and how an intervention prompted change in a target population. Changing the way data are collected complicates or eliminates one's ability to make accurate statements about change. Evaluators should consider whether this would be a loss not only to the evaluation, but also for the community or field. For example, a health program might switch from a focus on physical activity to a focus on nutrition, such that survey questions about daily exercise habits no longer directly correspond with program goals. However, exercise questions may still serve important purposes, such as giving background and context for evaluation results or being a source of epidemiological data for the community. Or perhaps the evaluator developed an innovative way to measure exercise behavior, and collecting more data will allow them to fully test the measure and then share it for the benefit of other health programs. Continuity can be about thinking more broadly than assessing program effectiveness and capitalizing on opportunities that stem from having multiple time points of data.

For the purpose of the Youth Thrive evaluation, the evaluator needed a closed-ended measure of the degree to which local youth opportunities had features, such as appropriate structure and positive social norms, that have been shown to promote positive development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). She was unaware of existing closed-ended measures of these constructs for this setting, so she developed a new measure. In addition to benefiting the Youth Thrive evaluation, she thought a possible psychometric analysis of the new measure might benefit the positive youth development field more broadly. These items were not as central to Youth Thrive's goals as time went on, however, continuing to ask the same items in each youth service provider survey helped to boost sample size for this measure and retain the option of longitudinal analysis for a future off-shoot study.

### *Accountability*

One of the functions of evaluation is accountability, or holding an organization responsible for what they promised to do (McKenna, 1983). Organizations may be accountable to external funders, internal leadership, legislators, clients/participants, and the general public. All else being equal, it is in an organization's best interest to demonstrate (through evaluation) that they are making good on their promises, even if they are evolving as an organization or initiative. However, if an organization evolves to the point that many evaluation activities become invalid, leaving the evaluation unchanged may constitute a misuse of resources.

During its evaluation, Youth Thrive was funded primarily by a large grant from a local foundation. In their application for these funds, Youth Thrive put forth goals around increasing opportunities for positive youth development and increasing youth involvement in designing these opportunities. Youth Thrive shifted away from these goals over the course of their grant period, but they wanted to make a good faith effort to examine some of the outcomes they had originally promised. The original youth service provider survey included items about the positive youth development opportunities that the respondent's organization offered and whether youth were involvement in the planning, implementation, or management of these opportunities. In the interest of accountability, these items were retained for the life of the evaluation.

Also, in final reporting, we framed results around original grant objectives and evaluation research questions, even though the data source sometimes changed from what was originally planned. For example, the objective "Increase number of positive youth development opportunities designed in partnership with youth" was addressed using data from the youth service provider survey, rather than the discontinued youth survey.

### *Sustainability*

If the focus of an organization or program has evolved, future funding applications may look very different from applications submitted in the past. Organizations should think strategically about the types of data a future funder will want to see described in a funding application, and consider whether those data can be collected as part of their current evaluation. Organizations should also

think about potential goals for future funding cycles, and consider whether they can start collecting data in their current funding period that will serve as a baseline for evaluating future progress.

As they approached the end of their major supporting grant, Youth Thrive needed to think about what might replace it. One of their needs for new funding applications was data justifying the need for and impact of Youth Thrive. To this end, the stakeholder interview guide was amended to ask about whether and why it was necessary to have dedicated staff to implement Youth Thrive's collaboration work. Youth Thrive also added questions to the youth service provider survey about any ways that Youth Thrive had benefitted the respondent personally and the county more broadly.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this manuscript was to outline factors to consider when evaluating an evolving organization or initiative, supported by examples from the evaluation of a local community change initiative. Issues around validity and sustainability pushed the evaluator to update the evaluation design to keep pace with changes, whereas issues around continuity and accountability pulled back to the current course. Giving proper consideration of all four factors helped maximize the utility of the evaluation findings. However, these factors emerged from a single evaluation study; they should be confirmed and built upon by other evaluators in their own evaluation studies.

Note that the modifications to this particular evaluation were related to data collection approach and instruments. The overall approach to the evaluation, non-experimental utilization-focused process and outcome evaluation, remained unchanged. There are factors that could prompt an evaluator to modify their evaluation approach. For example, an organization may decide that they want to increase stakeholder voice in evaluation, prompting them to consider adopting a participatory evaluation approach. Or, stakeholders may decide that they want to make stronger causal statements than a non-experimental approach provides, which might lead an evaluator to consider designing a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to replace current evaluation activities. When considering these modifications, an evaluator should still be cognizant of the potential ramifications for validity, continuity, accountability, and sustainability. However, there may be additional considerations, such as whether

switching to a participatory approach will build needed goodwill within the community or whether enough time and resources remain on an evaluation project for a mid-stream switch to an RCT to be feasible. This manuscript lays the groundwork for increased dialogue about evaluation modifications and the factors that evaluators need to keep in mind when considering them.

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