

## Why I Love Program Evaluation And You Should Too

By [Sarah Cortell Vandersypen, CFRE](#)

It's true. I love program evaluation.

Now hear me out. As someone who has worked in nonprofit organizations for more than a decade, I know that program evaluation can feel like *just one more thing* you have to do.

But program evaluation is actually so much more than that. It's a powerful tool for any program manager, fundraiser, or executive director.

Program evaluation can:

1. Tell you what works and what doesn't work
2. Showcase the effectiveness of a program to the community and your funders
3. Improve your program and the staff's work with participants
4. Increase your capacity to conduct critical self-assessment and plan for the future
5. Build the knowledge of the field

Like I said, **program evaluation is a powerful tool.**

Let's start by defining some terms so we're speaking the same language.

**Program evaluation** is a *systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and using information to answer basic questions about a program.*<sup>1</sup>

**Qualitative data** can be used to describe how your project functions and what it may mean to the people involved. You may gather qualitative data from interviews, observations, written documents or journals, even open-ended survey questions.

**Quantitative data** includes things that can be counted and measured. For example, your evaluation may count the number of people involved in a project activity, or the number of products or services provided. Other projects may measure the number of infant deaths in a community, the percentage of students who drop out of schools, or the number of community residents living below the poverty line.

**Logic model** is a *picture of how your organization does its work - the theory and assumptions underlying the program...links outcomes (both short- and long-term) with program activities/processes and the theoretical assumptions/principles of the program.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (2003). *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation*. Washington, DC.

<sup>2</sup> W.K. Kellogg Foundation Logic Model Development Guide Handbook, 2004, Page IV

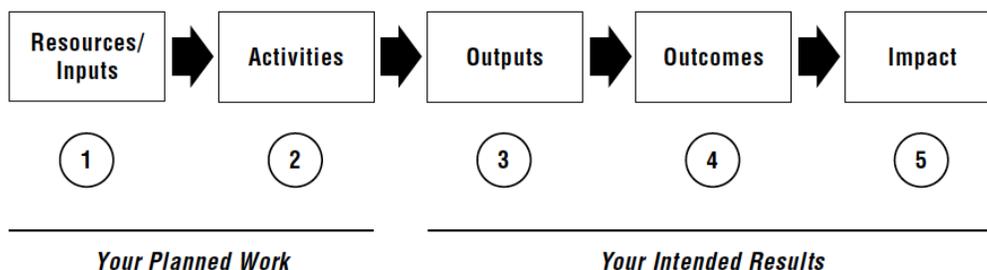


Figure 1. The Basic Logic Model.

Let's pause there. There's a lot to unpack.

Does your organization use logic models? I first encountered logic models in graduate school and then again when one of my organizations worked with an evaluation consultant as a part of a capacity building grant. Larger, national funders may request a logic model or your [theory of change](#) framework. It's good to think through both of these for both funder requirements but also because it provides direction for your organization and programs.

One thing I want to draw out specifically from the logic model is the difference between outputs and outcomes. As a one-time grant funder, I immediately noticed that many organizations did not understand that outputs and outcomes are not the same. **Outputs are the direct products of your activities.** Think numbers. The number of classes conducted, the number of students reached, the number of artworks created. Those are outputs. **Outcomes are changes in behavior, skill, knowledge, and condition.** Outcomes can be short-term, intermediate, and long-term. Outcomes are the impact we're trying to achieve with our programs. This is really what we're trying to measure with program evaluation. You can reach lots of people (output), but with very little change in their knowledge or skill (outcome). This does not mean your program is effective or successful.

If logic models are new to you, I highly recommend checking out the [Urban Institute Outcome Indicators Project](#). The taxonomy of outcomes as well as the outcomes and performance indicators for 14 specific program areas, including youth tutoring and youth mentoring, are wonderful resources.

This blog post and the supplemental micro-learning videos can be the beginning of your learning journey about program evaluation. Check out the additional resources linked at the bottom of this blog post. There are also recorded webinars on program evaluation by [Community Development Works](#).

### **Microvideos**

What is Program Evaluation?

Outputs vs. Outcomes

Who leads program evaluation in your organization?

### **Resources**

[Urban Institute Outcome Indicators Project](#)

W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook, 1998

W.K. Kellogg Foundation Logic Model Development Guide Handbook, 2004

W.K. Kellogg Foundation Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation, 2017

[Recorded Webinars, Community Development Works](#)