Methods for Collecting Information

By learning about the many different methods to collect information, you can select one that works best for your research question.

Before collecting information, think about the purpose of your evaluation and the questions you want answered. What types of data will help you answer your evaluation question? Consider the time and resources you have available and how complex the data you need will be to collect. Then, you can select data collection strategies like the ones listed below.

Case study

In-depth examination of a particular case (program, group of participants, single individual, site/location). Case studies use multiple sources of information and methods to provide as complete a picture as possible.

Creative expression

Use of art forms to represent people's ideas and feeling as through stories, drama, dance, music, art.

Document analysis

Gathering information by selecting facts from documents while keeping some general theme in mind.

Interviews

Information collected by talking with and listening to people, either face-to-face or over the telephone or virtual meetings. Interviews range on a continuum from those which are tightly structured (as in a survey) to free flowing, conversational interviews.

Logs

Recording of chronological entries which are usually brief and factual.

Observation

Collecting information through "seeing" and "listening." Observations may be structured or unstructured. Observations can be made by participants, third party observers, and/or the program staff.

Participant reflection

Techniques that prompt participants to share their perception of an event or program.

- *Action cards*
  Use of index cards on which participants record what they did—the "action"—and when they reach their goal; primarily used in self-assessment.

- *Card sorting*
  Subjects are written on cards and participants are asked to categorize and rank those cards.

- *Diaries, journals*
  Recording of events over time revealing the personal perspective of the writer/recorder.

- *Group assessment*
  Use of group processes to collect evaluation information such as nominal group technique, focus group, Delphi, brainstorming and community forums.

EVALUATION *Quick Tips*

For additional Quick Tips in this series visit **fyi.extension.wisc.edu/programdevelopment**.

- **Photographs, slides, videos**
  Use of photography to capture visual images.

- **Photovoice**
  A digital storytelling technique that shows participatory photography to inspire feelings.

- **Polling**
  An anonymous way to collect information quickly.

- **Portfolio reviews**
  Collection of materials, including samples of work, that encompass the breadth and scope of the program activity being evaluated.

- **Testimonials**
  Individual statements by people indicating personal responses and reactions.

Problem stories

Narrative accounts of past, present or future situations as a means of identifying perceptions using fictional characters to externalize the problem situation.

Simulations

Use of models or mock-ups to solicit perceptions and reactions.

Surveys

Collecting standardized information through structured questionnaires to generate data. Surveys may be mailed (paper and electronic), completed on site or through interviews, either face-to-face or telephone or virtual meeting. Sample surveys use probability or purposive sampling. Surveys are typically designed to collect quantitative data. However, open-ended questions that generate qualitative data on surveys are not uncommon.

Tests

Use of established standards to assess knowledge, skill, performance such as in pen-and-pencil tests or skills tests.

References

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