

# Understand the Fundamentals of Evaluation Research

evaluation is a paradox On the one hand, it is familiar to all of us as a comfortable and safe activity. We all, for example, conduct evaluations of movies, TV shows, and restaurants. At the same time, evaluation is unfamiliar and somewhat scary. We often think that evaluation is more about “judging” and “got ya” than it is about “improving” and “learning together.”

Evaluation, at its core, is about collecting information about a specific issue that is important to a given organization or community. Evaluation is about the future. The aim is to use the collected information to make positive recommendations to strengthen a program, project or a policy.

Evaluation research is a systematic process. There are four phases that need to be implemented with intentionality and rigor: 1) identify the study purpose and research questions; 2) select a study methodology and collect data; 3) analyze and interpret the data; and 4) formulate conclusions and recommendations.

As we reviewed the literature, a fundamental finding of success emerged: All of the organizations, schools, and community groups that successfully engaged in Y-AP/E began the process with some expertise and experience. Successful projects took the time to do their homework. They reviewed and used existing resource guides and curricula written specifically for field professionals and youth (Leverage Point #1). Additionally, many projects invited collaborators with evaluation experience to join the initiative (Leverage Point #2).

## LEVERAGE POINT #1: Use Existing Curricula and Resources

There is absolutely no need to recreate the wheel. Over the past decade, strong practitioner and researcher collaborators have prepared useful curricula and resources for Y-AP/E teams. These materials describe the philosophies and strategies of participatory research; they provide detailed steps in doing evaluations, and provide guidance in designing surveys and interview schedules. Many provide activities that can be used to help the Y-AP/E teams accomplish these tasks.

We offer a list of some of the most often used curricula and resources. All of the materials have their own emphases, strengths, and limitations. There is no curriculum or resource that will work for all Y-AP/E groups.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** It is worth taking the time to examine a selection of these materials. Find what seems most accessible, practical, and useful for your own Y-AP/E group.

Here are some curricula and resources that are especially applicable and practical across a range of different settings.

### CURRICULUM

- Arnold, Mary (2009). Participatory Evaluation with Youth: Building Skills for Community Action. University of Oregon Extension.  
([http://www.national4hheadquarters.gov/about/pod-yig/partic\\_eval09.pdf](http://www.national4hheadquarters.gov/about/pod-yig/partic_eval09.pdf))
- Camino, Linda and Shep Zeldin, Carrie Mook, and Cailin O'Connor (2004). Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Improvement: A practical guide for program assessment and action planning.  
(<http://fyi.uwex.edu/youthadultpartnership/yalpe-workbook/>)
- Checkaway, Barry and Katie Richards-Shuster. Participatory Evaluation with Young People. University of Michigan School of Social Work.  
(<http://ssw.umich.edu/public/currentprojects/youthandcommunity/resourcesPublications.html>)
- Reflect and Improve: A tool Kit for Engaging Youth and Adults as Partners in Program Evaluation, Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2005

### RESOURCES

- Greene, Chad (2002) Evaluation Technical Notes  
UNICEF Evaluation Office  
([http://www.unicef.org/evaluation/index\\_13486.html](http://www.unicef.org/evaluation/index_13486.html) near bottom of page)
- Sabo, Kim Flores (2007). Youth participatory evaluation: Strategies for engaging young people. San Francisco, Jossey Bass.  
(<http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0787983926.html>).
- Zeldin, Shep and Jessica Collura (2010). Being Y-AP Savvy: A primer on creating and sustaining youth-adult partnerships. University of Wisconsin-Extension  
(<http://fyi.uwex.edu/youthadultpartnership/2011/07/28/being-y-ap-savvy-a-primer-on-creating-sustaining-youth-adult-partnerships/>)

## **LEVERAGE POINT #2:** **Collaborate with an “Outside” Evaluator**

It is ideal to recruit an experienced evaluator to collaborate with the Y-AP/E team. Such individuals can contribute their knowledge of applied research and evaluation and provide an “outsider’s” perspective. They can work with the Y-AP/E team to help ensure that the project stays focused and remains manageable.

Collaborators can be found through local universities and colleges. They can also be located through intermediary organizations, foundations, and coalitions.

■ Institutions of higher education can be hard to navigate. But, there are central points of contact that will be able to help you out. Applied researchers and evaluators can typically be found through on campus centers of service learning, volunteerism, public service, or evaluation. These Centers are set up to link organizations with faculty and staff.

■ Be sure to ask about graduate students. They often have the necessary expertise and skills, are reliable, are looking for opportunities to contribute and gain work experience. A small stipend will encourage graduate student participation. Most have taken out loans to go to school, and they will appreciate support for transportation, materials, or for their contributed time.

■ Local community foundations, United Way and other philanthropies, and community coalitions might provide promising leads. Staff in these types of organizations often work with applied researchers and evaluators, and keep directories of such persons.

As with the identification and retention of any new resource, networking is key. The goal is to locate at least one person with the type of experience that is required for the Y-AP/E project. From there, “working the network” should help you identify others who might be appropriate.

Finding the right “outside” evaluator takes some detective work. But, it is worth the time. The Y-AP/E project will have an additional member, and will be better positioned to meet its goals.

### **KEY LITERATURE FOR TIP SHEET 1:**

- Foster-Fishman, Pennie; Law, Kristen M.; Lichty, Lauren F.; Aoun, Christina  
Youth ReACT for Social Change: A Method for Youth Participatory Action  
Research. *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2010) 46:67-83
- Ren, Julie Yunyi; Langhout, Regina Day  
A Recess Evaluation with the Players: Taking Steps Toward Participatory Action  
Research. *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2010) 46:124-138
- Strack, Robert W.; Magil, Cathleen; McDonagh, Kara. Engaging  
Youth Through Photovoice. *Health Promotion Practice*, January 2004, No. 1, 49-58