Engaging Community in Evaluation

Central to our core values is respect for our community and tribal sovereignty. To honor these values, Indigenous evaluators should find ways to engage community and create a sense of ownership of the evaluation process. Throughout our discussion of this Framework, we will describe different ways to engage elements of the community in evaluation. However, before describing the steps involved in doing an evaluation, it is useful to consider the various roles for community participation.

The figure illustrates three dimensions of community engagement. Each line on the diagram represents a continuum of engagement and participation. These are:

1. Control of the evaluation.
2. Selection of participants for engagement.
3. Depth of participation.

Control of the Evaluation

One element of participation is control of the evaluation. The evaluator can maintain total control over the evaluation, which is at the top end of the continuum. In this case, the evaluator decides the timing and direction of the evaluation and has control over all aspects of data collection, analysis and reporting results. It does not mean that the evaluator does all of these activities, but has control over who does them and the processes used. At the lower end of the continuum, the community has total control over the evaluation. Through community processes, which are facilitated by the evaluator, decisions are made regarding the timing and direction of the evaluation and means for collecting data, doing analysis and reporting results.

21 Figure and discussion adapted from Cousins, B. & Whitmore, E., “Framing Participatory Evaluation,” in New Directions for Evaluation, no. 80, American Evaluation Association, Fairhaven, MA; Wiley Periodicals, Inc., Wilmington, DE, co-pubs., 1998, p. 5–23.
Selection of Participants for Engagement

Those who have a stake in the evaluation can be a wide ranging group. The director and staff in a program are primary stakeholders. Those who are served by the program are another group of stakeholders. The community in which the program is situated is a stakeholder. For example, the tribal college is a stakeholder for programs that operate within the college and serve its students. However, the tribe itself is another level of stakeholder. As shown in the figure on page 43, participation can be limited to staff and immediate beneficiaries of the program (upper right), or it can include a very broad segment of the community, such as elder associations, community, tribal council members, or those invited to special events related to the evaluation and program planning (lower left). Again, the degree of participation can vary along this dimension, from only a few people engaged in conducting the evaluation, to broad community participation.

Depth of Participation

The third dimension is the depth of participation. This can range from fairly limited, such as offering advice or reviewing instruments to be used in the evaluation (upper left), to a deeper level (lower right) that involves engaging participation in many aspects of the evaluation, such as collecting the information, analyzing data and writing reports.

Examples of Engagement

Community engagement can take many forms. An evaluator who was engaged in a large evaluation of Aboriginal Head Start in Canada began the evaluation planning with a community feast to announce the purpose of the evaluation. The meeting was open, food was served, and advice of those attending was sought.

Another evaluator, working within his own tribal community, makes it a point to ask that work groups of community members, including elders,
be part of program implementation. These work groups have become important sounding boards for problem solving and formative evaluation feedback on program implementation. Some of these work groups have been formally recognized by tribal council resolution.

In Indigenous communities, community engagement and public participation may be quite different from non-Indian communities, where a willingness to offer public comment might be common. We know of a situation where the Indian evaluator was mandated by federal program officers to get public input, but the only form of public input deemed acceptable was a public meeting. However, in this community, conducting a typical public meeting was not an appropriate cultural route for hearing from the community. The evaluator had gathered considerable input from community members, many of whom were on the program’s advisory committee, as well as from staff and participants in the program. As one program stakeholder noted, “We are the community. We represent our constituencies, our clients, and our families.” However, the federal program officer did not consider the input from these individuals to be valid input from the members of the community’s public, even though the people lived in and were a part of the community. At the federal funder’s request, public meetings were scheduled and held throughout the reservation. However, they were poorly attended and generated very little information.

Every program will have different constraints and opportunities for engaging the community. However, in framing Indigenous evaluation practice, the evaluator is encouraged to move toward the lower segment of the circle, toward greater community control, involvement, and participation. Throughout this workbook, we consider ways in which various levels of stakeholders and community can become engaged in evaluation activities.
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