

FIVE STEPS OF OUTCOME-BASED PLANNING AND EVALUATION FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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AN IMPRINT OF THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

CHICAGO 2016

www.alastore.ala.org

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ISBNs

978-0-8389-1404-5 (paper)

978-0-8389-1415-1 (PDF)

978-0-8389-1416-8 (ePub)

978-0-8389-1417-5 (Kindle)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gross, Melissa, author. | Mediavilla, Cindy, 1953- author. | Walter, Virginia A., author.

Title: Five steps of outcome-based planning and evaluation for public libraries / Melissa Gross, Cindy Mediavilla, Virginia A. Walter.

Description: Chicago : ALA Editions, an imprint of the American Library Association, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015043372 | ISBN 9780838914045 (print : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780838914151 (pdf) | ISBN 9780838914168 (epub) | ISBN 9780838914175 (kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Public libraries—Planning. | Public libraries—Evaluation. | Public services (Libraries)—Evaluation. | Libraries and community. | Public libraries—California—Planning—Case studies. | Public libraries—California—Evaluation—Case studies.

Classification: LCC Z678 .G74 2016 | DDC 027.4—dc23 LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015043372>

Cover design by Alejandra Diaz. Text design in the Chaparral, Gotham, and Bell Gothic typefaces.

© This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

IN 2013 WE CONDUCTED A SERIES OF WORKSHOPS throughout California on how to use the outcome-based planning and evaluation (OBPE) model to enhance and evaluate public library services. The training was a resounding success, with 99 percent of participants saying they now had a much better understanding of outcomes. As one participant enthused, “The presenters made what could’ve been a very confusing topic easy to understand and approachable. I feel like I can actually implement this without going crazy.” Another described the workshop as “very important” because it helped attendees “look at the larger reasons for doing what we do.” Inspired by these and other comments, the three of us looked at each other and decided, on the spot, to write this book.

Our goal here is to make the process accessible for readers interested in implementing OBPE in their projects. While other books have tackled the role of outcomes evaluation in libraries, no single volume exists on outcome-based planning and evaluation for public libraries—that is, until now. Our book targets public librarians, but should also be of use to library managers, grant writers, and anyone

else developing, implementing, or evaluating new library programs and services for the public.

By the way, it wasn't long before we received requests for more training, and so an encore series of workshops was delivered in eight libraries across California in summer 2015. This time we added content on leveraging program results as the final step of the OBPE process. The workshops were again a huge success, with nearly 200 library staff members attending statewide. This book presents the same content delivered in our OBPE workshops.

Before proceeding, we do want to acknowledge several people and organizations in helping make this publication possible. First is the California State Library, which, through a Library Services and Technology Act grant administered by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), made both series of workshops possible. We also want to thank IMLS for supporting the development of the original OBPE model through a demonstration and research grant. And finally, we thank all the workshop attendees, who, because of their overwhelming enthusiasm, inspired us to continue to hone the OBPE model and write this book.

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August 2015

Introduction

MORE AND MORE, LIBRARIES ARE REQUIRED TO DEMONstrate their importance to stakeholders. Many libraries, like other organizations, engage in strategic planning in order to understand their community's information needs and to be aware of strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats that can influence success. Evaluation is the process of understanding the extent to which specific goals are reached and provides information that is useful in demonstrating the library's worth. Evaluating library programs is also essential to continued planning. All of the activities related to strategic planning and evaluation take time, resources, training, and participation from all stakeholders to be performed well. If the process is too overwhelming, it becomes more difficult, if not impossible, for you to accomplish. Therefore, with this book, we have tried to make the process transparent and easy to follow. In our workshops, we urged people to start small and go step-by-step. We recommend that our readers do the same thing.

WHY OUTCOME-BASED EVALUATION?

There are many ways to evaluate library services. Among the most common is measuring inputs—that is, the resources you have and use to provide and support what you do. Inputs tend to be expressed numerically and capture the quantity of the various resources you use to provide service. Examples include numbers of librarians and staff, size of collections, amount of computers, and the library’s physical infrastructure (e.g., square footage, number of meeting rooms, total seating, etc.). When describing your library in terms of inputs, you usually equate quality of service with the number of staff, books, computers, and so on that the library contains for its size. Your inputs might then be compared to professional standards or similarly sized institutions to determine how well your library is performing. The annual documentation of inputs allows you to track the library’s performance year to year or conduct trend analysis over several years. However, an increase in resources, or even knowing the library has a wealth of resources, doesn’t tell you much about the extent to which, how, or with what effect people use your services.

Consequently, the library field developed output measures that describe resource use. Beginning in the 1980s, a series of output measures books for public libraries was published by the American Library Association (ALA) and its divisions (Van House, Zweizig, and the Public Library Association New Standards Task Force 1987; Zweizig and Rodger 1982; Walter 1992; Walter 1995). Outputs were later incorporated into measuring the needs of networked public libraries (Bertot, McClure, and Ryan 2000) and into the evaluation of digital reference services (McClure, Lankes, Gross, and Choltco-Devlin 2002).

Output measures typically focus on “how much” or “how many” of the library’s resources are used. An output measure collected by most libraries is circulation—that is, the extent to which materials are being checked out. Circulation statistics tell us how often items are checked out, and for how long, and are typically used to determine library funding. Other common output measures include program

attendance and reference transaction counts. When program attendance is strong, and maybe even growing over time, you usually take this as a sign of success. Likewise, you might track the number of reference transactions to determine usage patterns, so you can schedule the reference desk accordingly.

Input and output measures provide useful data, but they don't tell us how library programs benefit participants. Neither do they tell us anything about user satisfaction or what the library means in the lives of the people it serves. Therefore, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) began to look for additional ways to evaluate and talk about programs and services in terms of their impact on people's lives. Though it may be good to know that 100 community members attended a lecture at the library, it also helps to know what effect the lecture had on its audience. Did the lecture help make them better citizens, more literate, more employable, happier? Outcome measures are designed to support evaluation that gets at the human experience and allows you to use the voices of participants to talk about the merits, as well as the shortcomings, of that experience. While outcomes may be used in conjunction with inputs and outputs, they differ from them fundamentally in that outcomes focus on human impact, which is often described through the participants' own words. Not only does this feedback tell you how effective your services are, but it can also be used to make program improvements, to terminate programs that aren't working, and to help you design new programs.

Despite universal acknowledgment that outcomes are now the de facto method for measuring the effectiveness of library programs, staff and managers don't necessarily know how to use outcomes to plan and evaluate services. Moreover, previous outcome-based planning models have been deemed too complicated to use. The Outcome-Based Planning and Evaluation (OBPE) process tested as part of the CATE (Children's Access to and Use of Technology Evaluation) Project provides a comprehensive and comprehensible model that has been demonstrated in public libraries by a variety of target user groups. Our book walks you through, step-by-step, the OBPE model in designing and implementing library programs and services.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE OBPE MODEL

Developed by the Florida State University College of Information and the St. Louis Public Library and supported by an IMLS demonstration research grant, the CATE Project used OBPE to plan, design, develop, and evaluate technology programs for youth ages 8 to 13. The project was revolutionary in that it was among the first studies to look at how youth actually use computers in the library. In addition, the children themselves, along with other stakeholders in the community, helped determine the outcomes the technology programs were designed to achieve. The results of the project were published by ALA as *Dynamic Youth Services through Outcome-Based Planning and Evaluation* (Dresang, Gross, and Holt 2006) and have been used to assess services and programs in public libraries. OBPE has also provided the basis for countless workshops at professional conferences and individual library systems. Indeed, the success of these workshops is the reason we wrote this book!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Our book builds on the four-step CATE OBPE model and extends it to public librarians serving the entire community. We have also extended the original OBPE model by adding a fifth step on how to use outcomes to increase library visibility in the community. Although our primary audience is public librarians, we have found that library managers, grant writers, and anyone developing, implementing or evaluating new library services can also benefit from OBPE. Among the concepts explored in this book are:

Defining “outcomes”—What they are and why public librarians should use them to plan and evaluate services.

Assessing the community—The rationale behind and methodologies for assessing community needs and interests that will then inform the creation of new library programs

and services. Methods include key informant interviews, surveys, focus groups, and environmental scans.

Determining outcomes—How to use community assessment data to create outcome statements that not only guide the creation of new library services, but also provide targets for measuring the effectiveness of those services.

Developing programs and services—How to design services that directly relate to the community’s needs and interests, while achieving the outcomes the library has targeted.

Evaluating programs and services—How to use outcome statements to design and conduct an evaluation plan that measures the effectiveness of the library’s new services.

Sharing results—How to maximize the results of successful outcome-based programs to leverage the library’s role in the community.

Each area above is addressed in a separate chapter, followed by a set of appendixes that offer sample data-gathering instruments to be used during the community assessment step of the OBPE process. There is also a bibliography of related resources for further reading.

If you are new to OBPE, chapter 1 will orient you to important terminology and the five-step model. Chapters 2 through 6 contain specific information and advice related to each step and may be used by both new and experienced managers as they advance in designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating projects. Chapter 2 discusses how to perform an assessment in order to understand the needs and aspirations of your community in a way that supports planning. Chapter 3 helps you use community assessment data in targeting outcomes to respond to user information needs. Chapter 4 provides advice on the process of program development, and chapter 5 walks you through how to evaluate whether your project helped users attain the outcomes it was designed to deliver. Chapter 6 gives advice about sharing your results with various stakeholder groups and how to make sure the community knows how your library is

contributing to its well-being. All of the chapters provide examples of how to proceed through each phase of the OBPE model.

Whatever size your project, we believe OBPE can help you and your library attain your program and service goals. We would be happy to hear how you use the OBPE model and how it has impacted your library and the community.

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