



Quick Tips 16

Quick Tips

Avoid These Mistakes in Your Program Evaluation

Here are a few common mistakes to avoid when you work on your next program evaluation:

Forget to request human subjects approval from UW-Extension

Without clearance from the UW-Extension Human Subjects Procedure Administrator, you may not be able to use or report the results of your evaluation to audiences outside of Extension. If you hope to share your results with local elected officials, funders and others, you should clear your project with the Human Subjects Procedure Administrator. See www.uwex.edu/hsp for details.

Lead people to tell you what they think you want to hear

This can happen in many different situations – conversation, the way you word your questions or the setting in which you collect the information. No data can be perfectly free of bias; however, there are ways to guard against asking a leading question. For example, asking someone what he or she learned in a program will yield more useful information than the question, “How much did you like my teaching?” Asking “How much did you like my teaching?” assumes that they liked it, and that the question is only to what degree. Moreover, how useful is the information from that question anyway? The information you gather from responses to this question is probably not very useful to you for outcome reporting purposes.

Ask more than one question in only one question; ask “double-barreled” questions

An example of asking more than one question within a question is, “Describe your previous participation in local, state and national elections.” Whatever answer the respondent gives, you do not know if he or she is answering for local, state or national elections – or local and state – or local and national...You get the picture. The biggest consequence of asking a question that has more than one question within it is that it does not yield useful, easy-to-interpret information – and your critics may notice this right away.

Use vague wording in your questions and using the jargon of your academic discipline rather than using the words people use in everyday language

Unless you are looking for answers that are extremely free-form, steer clear of questions such as, “What do you think of parenting education?” or “How much do you know about land use planning?” Try to think about the many ways a respondent could interpret, or misinterpret, a question before you commit to asking it. If the interpretations might vary too widely, edit your questions to more specific and concrete wording. You could check this by showing your questions to a few different people and asking them what they think they mean.

Quick Tips 16 - Avoid These Mistakes as You Plan Your Evaluation continued

Use language, wording or methods that are inappropriate for the group of people from whom you are collecting information

If you are surveying people whom you know to have vision problems, use a larger typeface. If you want information from five year-olds, complicated questions are not necessarily the best choice. If you want to collect information from people with limited literacy skills, think of the best way to gather accurate, useful information that respects their human dignity.

Collect more information than is useful to you

If you do not have plans for using the data, do not collect the data. It wastes your time, the time of your respondents and the time of those who help you with data entry and analysis. This seems like common sense, and it is, but we can get wrapped up in the trees and forget about the forest. Remind yourself why you are doing this evaluation in the first place and make sure you have a legitimate use for each of the questions you ask your respondents to answer.

Keep information that identifies your participants with the data you have collected from them

You do not want to be able to connect people's names with their data, unless you have human subjects protection clearance as well as the consent of the participants to do so. Keep signed consent forms separate from the data itself. Respect all confidentiality and anonymity agreements.