The Pell Institute
Research for Equity in Higher Education

Toolkit for Equitable Evaluation

A step-by-step guide on how to conduct equitable evaluation and use data for program improvement and advocacy

2023

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About the Pell Institute

The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education (PELL) conducts and disseminates research and policy analysis to encourage policymakers, educators, and the public to address systemic equity issues in postsecondary education, and improve educational opportunities and outcomes of low-income, first-generation students, and students with disabilities. The Pell Institute is the research entity of the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE). The Pell Institute shares the mission of the Council to advance and defend the ideal of equal opportunity in postsecondary education. As such, the focus of the Council is to ensure that the least advantaged segments of the American population have a realistic chance to enter and graduate from a postsecondary institution.

The Pell Institute is focused on bringing clarity to questions of equity. Through the creation and dissemination of rigorous and timely research, PELL works to improve opportunities and outcomes for low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities. To achieve its mission, the Pell Institute strives to:

- serve as an information resource to policymakers and practitioners through the presentation of high-quality, rigorous research and policy analysis that is user-friendly and accessible.
- work in partnerships at national, regional, state, and institutional levels to maximize the impact of the Pell Institute and to increase its relevancy to improving access to higher education.

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ABOUT THE TOOLKIT

The *Pell Institute's Toolkit for Equitable Evaluation* is specially designed for professionals who work with college outreach and student support programs that are interested in conducting small-scale, high-quality evaluations of their programs. The contents of this *Toolkit* will help determine the effectiveness of program practices and generate recommendations for program improvement, refinement, and success. This is particularly important in the era of accountability, where funding is often tied to results. However, gathering data to show effectiveness is only one step in the process. Action—the use of data for improvement, practice refinement, policy development, and program advocacy—is the goal of this *Toolkit* and arguably the most impactful part.

The *Toolkit* can help you do the following:

- Identify the benefits and uses of evaluation and assessment
- Understand the different steps that comprise program evaluation plans
- Develop a comprehensive plan for your program evaluation embedding equitable practices
- Identify data collection methods most appropriate to answer your evaluation questions
- Work with and analyze data to determine the effects of your program practices and services
- Use your findings to improve and advocate for your program
- Find resources and examples that you can follow in your program

HOW TO USE THE EVALUATION TOOLKIT

First-time users of the *Toolkit*—especially those new to evaluation and assessment—are encouraged to go through the *Toolkit* in chronological order. However, the Toolkit is created to allow you to obtain the information you need by reviewing the section most relevant to your needs.

The Purpose of the Evaluation Toolkit

This *Toolkit for Equitable Evaluation* is designed to strengthen the capacity of pre-college and college outreach programs to collect and apply evaluation data to improve program outcomes. Outreach programs serve as an essential gateway to postsecondary education for underserved students by providing college planning, preparation, and support services. However, the lack of rigorous and reliable evaluation by most outreach programs is a significant barrier to increasing program effectiveness, comparing data across programs, and documenting program outcomes to maintain and grow funding. However, the contents of this *Toolkit* have general applicability for program evaluation and assessment. Given the intentional focus on creating equitable processes, the *Toolkit* can be applied across programs, departments, and organizations that (1) serve traditionally under-served and underrepresented populations, (2) want to develop more equitable evaluation and assessment processes, and/or (3) want to use data for evidence-based decision-making.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS TOOLKIT

1. Enable college outreach and student support programs to more readily, systematically, and equitably *collect and use data to improve* their programs, policies, and advocacy efforts to better support their students.

2. Showcase how programs can effectively embed an *equity* lens into evaluation and assessment.

3. Identify effective practices that programs can use to document and *advocate* for their programs using data and evidence-based storytelling to reach internal and external audiences.

EVALUATION 101

Evaluation and assessment are two interrelated terms that are often used interchangeably. However, there are nuanced differences that are important to understand, especially for implementing this toolkit since the theoretical and practical underpinnings that inform the equitable evaluation that this toolkit calls for borrow from both evaluation and the field of learning outcomes assessment. This chapter will give readers a unifying way to conceptualize equitable evaluation so it can be embedded in practice.

1

EVALUATION MYTHS & BENEFITS: you will review the most common assumptions that people make about evaluation so that we may all approach this process from a common understanding. This is preceded by a section that introduces working definitions of evaluation and assessment.

2

EVALUATION APPROACHES & TYPES: you will understand the various types of evaluations at your disposal, specifically summative and formative evaluations. This includes an overview of the different types of evaluation data you can leverage, their associated strengths, and a brief discussion about mixed methods.

3

EQUITABLE THEORETICAL & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS: you will learn what it means to be equity-minded and culturally responsive—as well as being inclusive of students in the evaluation process. Various theoretical and practical frameworks will be introduced to explain the sources of knowledge that inform the equitable evaluation approach heralded by this toolkit.

4

EQUITABLE EVALUAITON PROCESS: you will acquire the overall framework for equitable evaluation across two pages so you can quickly reference the entire evaluation process from start to finish—including considerations you must make to create an equity-minded evaluation process and specific equity questions the evaluation team should ask itself to embed equity within the process from start to finish.

Evaluation 101

Accountability and how programs show they are being accountable can vary based on context. At its core, accountability means proving you are doing what you promised. For programs, that means showing they are meeting goals. But what those goals are can vary. If a program or project is grant-funded, then accountability can mean showing that funds were not misused and that a final agreed-upon deliverable was indeed completed. If a program has a special mission to support the completion of Black and Latinx students, for example, then the program has to show data that proves it is having a positive impact on those populations; show that it is being effective. If the program has an academic component, accountability means showing that people who complete the program are learning what is intended and can apply it. Accountability is a mix of all three of these things for many programs, mainly because programs now have to be accountable to funders, institutions, stakeholders, and the public. This requires a concerted effort to gather data that meet their accountability criteria. Evaluation and assessment are two powerful tools to show accountability.

Evaluation is a process that informs decision-making by collecting information/data that can justify a program's continuation, expansion, or termination (Kuh & Ransdell, 1980) by concluding a program's value, effectiveness, and quality (Fournier, 2005). The "value" and "effectiveness" components set evaluation apart because those are at the center of what evaluation data should showcase. Evaluations typically involve a human element (qualitative) in its methods—directly speaking with stakeholders and program staff via interviews and focus groups—to better understand the context.

Assessment is the systematic gathering and use of evidence of student learning to aid decision-making, strengthen program performance, and meet accountability requirements (Kuh et al., 2015). Assessment is a practice that traditionally is rooted in understanding student learning gains. It helps programs understand what students should know and can do due to participating in a learning activity, structured class, program, major of study, etc. However, the tools traditionally used in assessment to gather quantifiable data can also be used in program evaluation, even for those without a structured learning component (e.g., rubrics, summative/formative assessment, and curriculum mapping). A central focus of assessment beneficial for program evaluation is "closing the loop"—*intentionally using* assessment data for programmatic improvement and meeting external accountability requirements.

The "use" component of assessment is the most impactful for this conversation. Because if evaluation and assessment are done simply for accountability, then programs are doing themselves a disservice. When evaluation and assessment are done only for external accountability, the data gathered will primarily be those that matter for external purposes. Instead, if programs focus on also collecting data that matters to them internally—to answer questions programs have about their effectiveness, efficiency, and quality—then the results of the evaluation and assessment effort will be much more impactful. Not to mention that those external requirements will likely also be met. The point is, do not focus on only gathering the data required for external reporting, but also ask yourself what data your program needs to make decisions.

DEVELOP A PLAN

A strong evaluation plan is the foundation that determines if the evaluation process will be as impactful, efficient, and effective as possible. This section is comprised of various worksheets, tables, and checklists that you can fill to craft an evaluation plan appropriate for your program. These tools can also be used to brainstorm possibilities in refinement of a final plan. From selecting the lead evaluator to identifying stakeholders to creating a budget, the purpose is to give you as many pieces to consider so that you can design an evaluation that can be worthwhile, informative, and impactful for your program.

1   **EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS:** you will review reflective questions that program staff and those involved in the evaluation should ask themselves to make the planning phase more inclusive and equitable. This helps to ensure that equity is embedded throughout the process from start to finish.

2   **EVALUATION TEAM:** you will understand the various considerations that must be made to choose a lead evaluator—whether internal or external—and a full evaluation team, if necessary. This includes dividing responsibilities amongst team members, assessing evaluation qualifications, engaging stakeholders, and clarifying expectations.

3   **PURPOSE & DESIGN:** you will be able to articulate different evaluation purposes and questions to advance a specific evaluation design. This includes using a logic model to set a strategy for the evaluation so you can reach intended outcomes given current resources and program activities. The evaluation design will make you think of appropriate data collection and analysis methods so the evaluation questions can be fully answered. A checklist will ensure every part of the evaluation design has been thought through.

4   **BUDGET:** you will know how to create a budget for the evaluation effort, including staffing, materials/supplies, equipment, and travel. The goal is to make the budget as appropriate for the program context and the evaluation design as possible. A sample budget is provided.
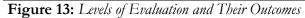
Develop a Plan

The first step in conducting an evaluation is to develop a plan. This is the **most important phase** of the evaluation process. The quality and utility of the findings and results are typically a direct byproduct of the amount of thought and time that is invested in the planning process. Proceeding without a well-intentioned, structured plan may cause various unforeseen obstacles in your evaluation process and may limit what you can do with your results. As you work through the plan, keep in mind that the various purposes for evaluation scaffold on each other adding complexity.

This section covers the following topics:
1. Equity Considerations During the Planning Phase
2. Prepare for the Evaluation: Who is the Lead Evaluator?
3. Engage Stakeholders
4. Identify the Purpose of the Evaluation
5. Select a Team
6. Developing Evaluation Questions / Learning Outcomes
7. Use a Logic Model
8. Choose an Evaluation Design
9. Create a Strategy
10. Create a Budget

At the most basic level, evaluation can be conducted to gather data and demonstrate how the program is doing (aka accountability). A step further than that are evaluations that attempt to understand why certain things in the program are happening (aka to judge program effectiveness). At this intermediate level, evaluators take data and they interpret it to assign meaning to the context of the program (aka findings) on what is being judged to be effective or ineffective. Then evaluators offer recommendations for change and the process concludes. At the most holistic level of evaluation, programs conduct evaluations to improve. Here, programs take data, they report findings, recommendations are offered, and then actions are taken to enact the changes that need to be made to improve the program, and those changes are then evaluated to ensure the intended consequences occurred while mitigating unintended impacts.

Level	Purpose	Means	Outcome
1. Basic	Supervise	Data	Accountability
2. Intermediate	Understand	Data, Findings, & Recommendations	Judge Effectiveness
3. Holistic	Improve	Data, Findings, Recommendations, & Action/Change	Equitable Program Improvement

Figure 13: *Levels of Evaluation and Their Outcomes*

Equity Considerations During the Planning Phase

Equitable evaluation and assessment efforts must be intentionally mindful of the context. In most cases, the context includes the program (the norms and cultures that permeate it, the program's history and future directions, challenges and barriers, strengths and weaknesses, etc.), the

A basic logic model follows the following formula:

Figure 26: *Outline of a Logic Model*

Inputs are the current realities of the program including resources and services the program needs. Activities are the services and activities the program will be providing. Outputs are the immediate accomplishments and the resulting outcomes and long-term impacts that the program creates through its activities.

Specifically for college outreach and student support programs, a base logic model can look like this:

Figure 27: *Logic Model Outline for College Outreach and Student Support Programs*

When developing your outcomes, or your vision for the future, make sure your goals are SMART: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ction-oriented, **R**ealistic, and **T**imed. Also, remember that you will want to create short-term and long-term goals, as well as measure those respectively.

Logic models can be useful tools for college outreach and student support programs.

- Logic models are useful to program administrators who are trying to implement changes in their programs.
- Creating logic models in a group brings the power of consensus and group examination of values and beliefs about change processes and program results.
- Logic models are actionable plans, strategies, or maps with clear outcomes and explicit steps for solving program problems.

Below is an example of a fully developed logic model (this Toolkit also walks you through the steps on how to develop your own logic model):

COLLECT DATA

The data collection methods you implement directly stem from the evaluation plan, and they are directly informed by the purpose, goals, evaluation questions, evaluator experience, and theoretical frameworks that guide the study. In this section, you will learn what should be considered when determining how you will collect data, including ethical and informed consent matters. You will also learn about several data collection methods and tools, how to best select a sample, and ways to increase participation rates.

1   **EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS:** you will review reflective questions that the evaluation team should ask themselves to make the data collection process more inclusive and equitable. This helps to ensure that data are collected from relevant stakeholders, appropriate methods are used, and culturally responsive examples are embedded in data collection instruments as appropriate.

2   **DATA TYPES & SOURCES:** you will understand the various data collection tools that are at your disposal (e.g., survey, case studies, interviews, focus groups, observations, document analysis, mixed methods, etc.). This includes exploring the necessary tools to also demonstrate learning gains as part of the evaluation. Each tool will be analyzed in terms of benefits and challenges.

3   **ETHICS & CONFIDENTIALITY:** you will learn about the various ethical consideration you should make to ensure the safety of participants. This includes the potential to attain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure proper procedures for confidentiality are in place.

4   **SAMPLING & RESPONSE RATES:** you will explore the different types of sampling procedures commonly used in evaluation and research. This includes a discussion on determining the appropriate sample size and tips to increase response rates if using surveys for data collection.

ANALYZE DATA

Data analysis is not only highly dependent on the data collection phase, but on the overall evaluation design. In data analysis, evaluators should also use the evaluation goals, questions, and theoretical framework guiding the study to run specific analyses. This section of the Toolkit with introduce various helpful quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques. While you will not learn everything about each method, you will have a basic understanding of how to implement different methods of analysis. This section is intended to give you a general understanding of what options are at your disposal so you can identify what best fits your data and context.

1 **EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS:** you will review reflective questions that the evaluation team should ask themselves to make data analysis more inclusive and equitable. This helps to ensure that data are analyzed using meaningful disaggregation, stakeholder involvement, and direct equity questions are asked of the data.

2 **ENTER, ORGANIZE, & CLEAN DATA:** you will understand common practices for entering, cleaning, and organizing data. Without this crucial step, the rest of analyses cannot be run with fidelity.

3 **QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES:** you will learn about the various quantitative analyses procedures you can use to draw meaning from numbered data sets. This includes knowing the different types of quantitative data (i.e., nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio data), different analyses (e.g., tabulations, descriptives, disaggregation), and an introduction to advanced statistics (e.g., t-tests, correlations, variance, and regression).

4 **QUALITATIVE ANALYSES:** you will explore the different types of quantitative analyses and best practices to follow. This includes reflective questions to ask yourself through the process to make it more effective, and an overview of the coding procedure to form themes.

Program Improvement & Communication

Typically, an evaluation concludes with a final report that depending on the purpose of the evaluation includes findings, recommendations, and/or a plan to incorporate changes to address shortcomings uncovered in the data while maintaining program strengths. This chapter argues that to make the evaluation effort more impactful, there should be an embedded effort to create an actionable improvement plan and a communications plan. These plans help facilitate the implementation of specific recommendations and ensure that key stakeholders are aware of the conclusions and agree with the changes to the program.

1   **EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS:** you will review reflective questions that the evaluation team should ask themselves to make the improvement and communication efforts more inclusive and equitable. This helps to increase the reach, understandability, and impact of results.

2   **WRITING THE EVALUAITON REPORT:** you will understand the various sections that comprise an evaluation report from executive summary to findings to actions that need to be taken to improve the program and communicate results effectively to stakeholders.

3   **IMPROVEMENT:** you will explore the different types of improvements that can be made resulting from an evaluation and how to design and improvement plan based on evaluation recommendations. You will be encouraged to evaluate the impacts stemming from the changes made.

4   **COMMUNICATION:** you will learn about the various method of communication and which one is most effective for different stakeholder groups. In addition, you will know how to create a communications plan to ensure that lessons learned are widely distributed. You will be encouraged to evaluate your communications efforts.