



How Do I Evaluate Impact When The Make-Up Of The Audience Is Not Consistent?

Some extension programs have multiple sessions over a six to ten week period. Participants can be very excited about the program and participate fully when they are there. In some of these programs, however, participants do not attend on a consistent basis. In fact, attendance can be markedly erratic. Inconsistent attendance derives from many sources that range from poor mental and physical health, to relocation to another care facility, migration to new harvesting fields or an agency's drop-in policy. Such a program is referred to as having **floating audiences** (King, 2001). Many programs across the country face the challenge of **floating audiences** when it comes to evaluation.

At least two problems arise for designing an evaluation. One problem is theoretical, and another is practical.

Theoretical Problem

The result of inconsistent attendance means that each participant has different exposure to the program. Social scientists often use a scientific term from the medical world to explain this problem because it is simple to understand. They say that the "dosage" that each participant receives is different. As a result, it seems impossible to measure the impact of the program because the participants receive different dosages.

Practical Problem

Inconsistent attendance prohibits pre- and post-program evaluation at the beginning and end of an entire program because attendance is likely to begin late, be erratic, or, end early. The result is a lot of missing data.

Alternative Options

It is best to avoid evaluation of an entire program that has a **floating audience**. The evaluation may not be feasible or accurate. Feasibility and accuracy are two of four standards to use when deciding whether to evaluate a program. The other two standards are utility and propriety. If these standards are not achievable, an evaluation should not be done. "Sound evaluation can promote the understanding and improvement of education, while faulty evaluation can impair it" (Joint Committee, 1981).

Here are two options to consider:

Option 1

Rather than trying to evaluate an entire program that has a floating audience, researchers suggest considering another option that may be more feasible and produce more valid results.

Conceptualize the program in smaller components, as a series of mini programs or mini interventions. Consider for instance, a nine-week course as 3 components, each taking 3 weeks and evaluate just one (or two) components. Or, consider a nine-week course as 9 components, each taking one week, and evaluate each one separately.



Option 1 (Continued)

Plan to evaluate the impact of a component in which you have more participants staying for a period of time. Perhaps there are some periods in the month, or the year, that make the program more prone to attendance (such as an open food bank) and others more prone to transience. Avoid trying to evaluate impact during periods of higher transience.

Evaluation of components of a program that has a floating audience will provide more valid results, an important positive contribution. On the negative side however, evaluation of multiple components can require more time out of the instructional segment of the program. One way to lessen the evaluation time is to select only a few components to evaluate the first time you conduct the program, and to select other components the next time you conduct the program.

Option 2

If you must evaluate the entire program, for instance over the nine weeks, here is another option.

Keep track of attendance of each participant. Don't summarize the impact data for all the participants together. Rather, summarize the data for participants who come from 7 to 9 weeks of the program; summarize the data for those who come from 4-6 weeks; and summarize the data for those who come from 1-3 weeks of the program. Compare the results. The data are likely to demonstrate how impact increases as the participants attend more sessions—a favorable way to present the findings of a program that is a challenge to evaluate.

Before presenting the impact of your program to your stakeholders, explain your justification for the option you took to evaluate a program with a **floating audience**. For scientific reasons you always want to be clear and up front about what part of the program the impact refers. You will also give stakeholders a better understanding of the challenge that **floating audiences** present for sound evaluation.

References

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<http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/jc>- current as of January 26, 2005.

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