A Tale of Two (Graduate Student) Evaluators

Abstract: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times (and we’ve experienced both!) In this session, we will compare the benefits and limitations of a set of evaluations - one funded and one not - led by two different first-year graduate student evaluators studying university programs designed to help undergraduate students. Many of us assume that a funded project implies a simpler process or that evaluations without financial backing makes for bad study, but in practice, this simply is not always true. Participants will be given a brief comparison of both studies, some tips and tricks that peers can use if they find themselves in similar situations, and a working list of resources that graduate student evaluators can use whether their projects are funded or not.

Statement:

As graduate students who also happen to be new evaluators, an understanding of the benefits and limitations of funded projects is essential. In this session, we describe the experiences of two evaluations; one funded and one unfunded. Discussions will primarily focus on the effects of funding on the evaluators’ experiences related to study expectations, flexibility and scope as they pertain to decisions about methodology, and tools were distinct in each evaluation as a result of funding. We intend to share insights and make suggestions for graduate students who are novices in conducting evaluations.

The benefits of funded evaluations may include larger budgets, more robust methodological approaches, and access to accurate tools for evaluation. The benefits of proposing a budget include coverage of travel expenses, specific interview settings, transcription services, and the use of data analysis tools. Broadly, the introduction (and loss) of funding can modify the expectations of robustness and methodological approach in each evaluation. The benefits of not having a budget could provide a different strategy for evaluation. Evaluations of non-profit organizations that do not receive funding may use helpful tools to complete evaluations. Funded evaluations may choose to employ more robust, comprehensive methodologies to better understand the complexities of a program, while unfunded evaluations may lack the capacity to use such comprehensive approaches. Tools including data analysis programs and evaluation teams may be unavailable for programs with little or no funding. However, for evaluations without funding, reliable transcription tools and data analysis tools exist.

This session will compare and contrast the benefits and limitations that occur in funded and unfunded evaluations. The presentation will address how the addition or loss of funding changed approaches taken in the evaluations. Furthermore, examples of budget changes will be highlighted to outline the role funding plays in expectation, data collection, and data analysis. Evaluators will provide tips and tricks they learned as a result of funding changes including reflective budget modification, transcription services, and data analysis approaches. The primary takeaways from the presentation include how to adjust to the loss (or gain) of funding in an evaluation, things to consider when writing initial budgets, and resources available for graduate student evaluators regardless of their funding status.