Writing Up Data Collection Results

Once the data is collected, then what? How should results be written up and how is what is given to the project at this stage different from what goes into the final evaluation report?

To get the perspective of an experienced evaluator, we talked with Marianne Brown who works in the San Diego region for answers.

The key factor is to get results of any evaluation activity to the project as soon as possible after data collection is finished. For activities like public opinion surveys or observations, which generate quantitative data, the analysis and write up is fairly quick and easy. Marianne includes the raw scores for every variable -- so for each question, how many people gave each of the possible responses. If the sample is large enough, she will run crosstabs, or comparisons of several variables, presented as tables -- e.g., how many smokers vs. non-smokers were supportive of a policy.

In addition to compiling summaries of the raw data through frequencies and tables, she will look for anything that pops out as unusual or interesting in the data. In the narrative she explores possible meanings which account for what she is seeing. For example, she may look at differences between population groups, cities, or the same situations over time and attempt to explain why those differences might exist.

With this information, she will then contact project staff to discuss what she found and have them help her understand what might account for these results. From there she writes up the findings in a 2-3 page report which includes: background on the data collection activity (purpose), a description of the method and sample (how, where, when and from whom the data was collected), a description of the data collection instrument (source, content), presentation of the data, analysis and interpretation of the data, and any recommendations about what implications the findings have for the project. Generating this report is a fairly quick process; typically within one week after data collection is finished.

Get results as quickly as possible

Analyzing qualitative data from key informant interviews, focus groups or document review is more time-intensive, since it is not just a matter of running statistics. This content analysis is a true art form; not everyone can do it well, Marianne says. So working from the interviewers' notes, she does the analysis and drafts a summary so that the interviewers can fill in the blanks and attribute meaning to the findings. Because interviews are usually done with informants specific to each jurisdiction, the write-ups summarize results by city (or entity), rather than analyzing all interviews together and looking for wider commonalities or differences.

Sometimes the interviews can stretch out over a longer period of time. This means that the project has to proceed without getting the results right away. However, because staff were at the interviews, they already know what was said; it's just not down on paper yet. Therefore being without the write ups doesn't really slow down their work. With survey and observation data, though, projects don't necessarily have much of an inkling about what the results will show until they get the analysis because it is coming from many different people and/or data collectors. So a project is flying a bit blind without those results.

Once the evaluation activity report is in the hands of the program, the main question is then how should this be used? Obviously it can tell them if the time is right to push for a policy or whether more outreach and education is needed. They can use tables and graphs in community presentations or to create fact sheets for meetings with decisionmakers. And they will recap results in their progress reports.

Don't just cut and paste

But when it comes to writing final evaluation reports, how much of this information should be repeated? Marianne notes that there is a strong temptation for projects just to cut and paste text from all of the activity reports into the final report, but that's not the level of detail that is needed. Each of those reports may have been unique to each jurisdiction that a project was trying to get a policy passed in, but in the final report it is more important to take a step back and analyze across cities and summarize the various efforts in a comparative table, for example.

Yes, you still need to describe each method and sample you used to collect data, but then draw on the findings to examine which tactics led to success or failure, and explain what might account for that. This way, the final evaluation report can provide a good historical record of how a project went about pursuing a policy and what someone might do differently next time.