How Can We Draft our Program’s Outcomes?

Two mission-related questions provide the clear framework for every nonprofit’s effectiveness:

1. Who is your participant?
2. To what end do you engage them? For many programs and nonprofits, that end is achieving an outcome sequence. (For more information, please see What are Outcomes and Why Do They Matter?)

Before you begin, it’s helpful to gather a small group of program stakeholders with different perspectives on the program, about 3 to 6 people, to address these questions together. Start with defining your participant:

- What are their strengths?
- What challenges do they face?
- What are their demographics – where do they live, go to school, how old are they, male/female?
- Finally, why do they need you?

Your outcomes are related to addressing the reasons why your participants need your program. If you’ve thought deeply about your participants’ situation, this will help you articulate the outcomes you want to influence in your program. Once you’ve defined your participant and the outcomes sequence, you’ve defined the “bookends” of your logic model. All the other components – inputs, activities, and outputs – fit logically between them.

Here are some questions to help you begin to articulate your outcomes. Begin with long-term outcomes: What new condition or life status should your participants have gained one to two years after completing your program, if your program was successful for them? It’s important not to pick the exceptional participant; this is how you are defining success for all your participants. There is usually only one really important long-term outcome that defines success for your program. For example, a college access program might commit to a long-term outcome of ensuring that all their graduates complete at least two years of post-secondary education.

Now articulate your intermediate outcomes, the necessary milestones and changes in behavior your participants must attain before they complete your program. These behaviors form the logical pre-conditions for them to achieve the long-term outcomes a year or two later. What behavior changes will they demonstrate, that your program is willing to be accountable for? If a specific participant does not achieve these outcomes, you can say you were not ultimately successful. There are often several intermediate outcomes, which participants achieve as they progress through the program sequentially. For example, our college access program might commit to this sequence of intermediate outcomes:

- Students complete junior and senior year with at least a 3.0 GPA
- Students apply to at least three good-fit colleges
- Students are accepted into at least one good-fit college
- Students graduate high school with college-ready credits
- Students enroll in college

Be sure that your outcomes are defining characteristics of your participants, not their progress through your program. What do you require them to do to graduate?

Finally, list your initial outcomes, all the skills, new knowledge, attitudes, values, and plans your participants will develop on a daily and weekly basis as they engage with your program and your staff.
Be careful to list only outcomes, not outputs like consistent attendance or a strong relationship with your staff. These are essential for outcomes to develop, but they are not outcomes themselves. Here are some possible short-term outcomes for our college access program (depending on the unique student population they engage):

- Students learn essential study skills
- Students access school-based academic support services as needed
- Students address personal barriers to regular school attendance
- Students complete homework on a daily basis
- Students develop a college-going identity
- Students understand the college application process

Now look over your sequence of outcomes and make necessary corrections:

1. Do your outcomes describe changes in the lives of only one kind of participant?
2. Are your outcomes meaningful to program stakeholders, especially participants?
3. Do your outcomes describe characteristics that can be measured? (You will define indicators to measure them in a later step.)
4. Does the sequence logically flow from short-term to intermediate to long-term outcomes?
5. Do the long-term outcomes happen 1 to 2 years after participants complete your program?
6. Have you defined your outcomes in clear and concise language? Don’t leave anything vague, like “positive life” — what do you mean by that?