

The Value of Site Visits

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What is a site visit?

A site visit is an evaluation activity intended to gather first-hand information about a program, usually with the intent to incorporate findings with other data collected. Several types of data collection may occur during a site visit that can strengthen the overall evaluation. The visiting researcher may take the role of non-participant observer by observing without interrupting program activities. (This tends to be the common role for a researcher conducting an external evaluation.) The visitor may also be a participant-observer and take on a role in the program while observing. For example, the researcher may lead an activity or discussion with program participants.



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How are site visits used?

Site visits are an effective way to better understand quantitative data that have been collected for other components of the evaluation. For an evaluation to be beneficial, it is essential that a researcher understand the program or policy being studied. By personally observing the program in action, the researcher can expand her understanding of the program, leading to new knowledge and perspectives.

Because a site visit can have a variety of purposes, the type of data collection is dependent upon the particular function of the visit. For example, the researcher may only intend to get a snapshot of the program in some or all of its locations. Or site visits may be used to enhance understanding of the logistics behind a program at one location, including the needs and interests of participants.

Site visits may also be an opportunity to identify and recognize unforeseen or unintended outcomes of the program, both positive and negative. Often, particular aspects of the implementation of a program don't match the program developers' intent. During a site visit, the researcher can assess how a program has been modified to suit that site's particular needs.

When should site visits be done?

Site visits can be done at any phase of the evaluation. The timing and frequency of visits varies and is sometimes determined by the project or evaluation budget. A researcher may choose to visit the same site multiple times, or visit different sites at various points in

the program. For consistency in data, the researcher may plan to visit multiple sites at the same point in the program.

A different approach would be to schedule the site visit after some quantitative data have been collected and analyzed; then the researcher will have some sense of the program effects and can use the site visit to contextualize findings collected thus far. The researcher may also use observations about program implementation to revise future data collection tools.

What are some other ways to use data from site visits?

Site visit data may also provide context for and add depth to quantitative data, such as surveys, and other qualitative data, such as phone interviews. Quantitative data are often collected to measure pre-post change after program participation. If statistical analyses detect no change, is it then fair to assume the program had no effect? Site visit data can help answer that question. By seeing the program in action, findings can be situated in the reality of the program at each location. Perceptions can be compared with the information gathered through other data sources.

Any final thoughts?

The objective of a multi-method evaluation is to collect data through a variety of methods and techniques, and then triangulate the findings to present a more complete, rich picture of the program.

At GRG we always find it helpful to use mixed methods because quantitative and qualitative methods together strengthen data and give the evaluator first-hand knowledge, making findings more accurate and practically useful to program developers, program staff, and funders.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Elizabeth Bachrach, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate, joined GRG in January 2000. She has managed over 20 evaluations of educational programs; written proposals and evaluation plans for projects that received funding from NSF, NIH, and HHS; and she serves as internal consultant on several GRG multi-year, large-scale projects.