

# Public Garden

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Evaluation

## Nonprofits, Foundations, and Evaluators or, *Where's the Advil?*

Randi Korn

Twenty-one years ago, when I worked at the Chicago Botanic Garden, I thought that Sue Brogdon, my supervisor at the time, was taking a very bold step by granting me permission to conduct evaluations for the education department. When I think back on my time there, I am thankful that she allowed me to learn on the job.

The evaluation landscape has changed since those early days. Not only are many gardens and museums conducting visitor studies and program evaluations, but those who fund their programs are starting to ask questions. Was the program effective? Did the program achieve its objectives? Should we continue to fund the program? Of course, these questions are reasonable, and in an ideal world, an evaluator would conduct a study and respond to the first two questions, and the funder could make an informed decision regarding the third question after reading the evaluator's report. But neither evaluators nor those who work for nonprofits or foundations live in an ideal world, and everyone is still learning how to integrate evaluation into program planning and implementation. Most who work in nonprofit institutions would agree that the relationship between nonprofits and funding agencies is complicated and delicate; add an evaluator to the mix and the relationship becomes tricky. If foundations and other granting agencies are going to continue requiring evaluation and if nonprofits are going to continue seeking funds from the philanthropic world, both parties would benefit from learning more about each other and evaluation.

As in all opinion pieces, knowing the writer's perspective is paramount. I'm an evaluator. I care most about conducting studies to improve practice,

and I assume, unless told otherwise, that those who work with me share that goal. This article recounts a true story that demonstrates how evaluation is misunderstood. It shows what happens when a foundation requires evaluation, and when a nonprofit produces a program and invites the evaluator to participate in the process too late—at the end of the program.

### The Story

A museum (it could have very well been a garden) had a great idea for a three-year, after-school program for middle school children. Because the guidelines stated that evaluation was required, museum staff wrote in the proposal that they would contact an evaluation consultant to conduct the summative evaluation. When the museum was awarded the funds, everyone was delighted.

Over the course of the three years, the program content shifted for various reasons. With the grant period almost over, the museum wanted to write another proposal to extend the program. Knowing that an evaluation must be included in the new proposal, the development officer immediately contacted an evaluator—which was the museum's very first contact with an evaluator for this project. During the initial meeting, the evaluator said, "So, what were the objectives of the program? What were you hoping students would be able to do after the program that would indicate your program was successful?" Eyes shot around the room until someone referred to the original proposal and read the intent of the program. Everyone was stunned. The current program barely resembled the description in the proposal and the objectives seemed idealistic and vague: "Students will score higher on reading standardized tests. Students will appre-



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ciate the museum and its collections. Students will visit the museum with their families."

The museum believed the current program was good and should be continued, but if the current program were evaluated, the foundation might not recognize it as the program it funded three years ago. The evaluator realized the following:

- The museum broke the first cardinal rule of evaluation: Never tie your objectives to a system over which you have no control, e.g., a public school system.
- The museum did not have contact information for the students who participated in the program, making it difficult to obtain feedback.
- Objectives provide the framework for evaluating a program (or, as Yogi Berra says, "If you don't know where you're going, how will you know when you get there?"). The current program did not reflect the original objectives, so someone would need to develop another framework, but what about the foundation's expectations?

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## Avoid the Bottom Drawer Syndrome

Too often when organizations do audience research, the study winds up in someone's bottom drawer.

When the results first come in, some people look at the study and says, "I knew it. That's just what I thought. And there is some excellent information in here. I'll look at it later." And the report goes in the bottom drawer.

Other people in the organization look at the study and say, "That's impossible. How can that be true? I don't believe it! But there is some interesting information in here. I'll look at it later." And the report goes in the bottom drawer.

In addition to a wealth of important and useful information in the 97-page report of the three-season survey, there were three results that are worth mentioning in this article even though they are specific to HHV because they highlight the importance of doing and using audience research.

**Intuition** We believed that the majority of our audience was made up of families with children and historic site buffs. We believed this was true at four out of six of our historic sites.

**Research** Only one site had a substantial family audience, and even at that site, families with children only accounted for one-third of the total audience. Rather than attracting only history aficionados, we learned that our audience is the same audience that goes to art museums and botanical gardens, which PP&DR characterizes as culture seekers.

**Intuition** We believed that visitors who came to special events would come back on a regular day, and we used our special events as a way of spurring repeat visitation.

**Research** Only about 20% of special event visitors return for a regular site visit. On the contrary, we learned that "regular day" visitors are the ones likely to return for a special event.

**Intuition** We believed that visitor satisfaction was much higher at special

events than for a regular site visit. **Research** The opposite was shown to be true; visitor satisfaction was much higher for a standard site visit than at special events.

### How Research Affects Organizational Change

Once the research results were in, we spent the following six months digesting the information, teasing out nuances, and discussing how this research impacted different areas of the organization. As part of this process, we invited Jeff Hayward to lead a directors' group retreat to discuss the implications of the research. We also presented the research findings at our annual all-staff meeting, and each site director held staff meetings to share the research results with interpreters, guides, and volunteers. Data from the research was incorporated into grant proposals to great success, curators use the information to guide new exhibitions and catalogs, and while some of us take pride in knowing that our programs are receiving high marks from visitors, others are working on making improvements in response to visitor concerns.

Since completion of the initial research, we've conducted two follow-up studies using the 2001 results as a baseline for comparison. Audience research is a topic that is now central at Historic Hudson Valley. We value the process and the results, and all the members of the directors' group keep the big, bound volume of survey results nearby for frequent reference. We are committed to the ongoing process of audience research as an important tool in guiding many of our decisions and direction as we strive to remain relevant. The comment made by one of the experts we consulted is well worth repeating: "You're too good not to be better!"

*Susan T. Greenstein is Director, Kykuit Program, Historic Hudson Valley, and Chair, AABGA Historic Landscape Committee. She was the team captain for HHV's audience research team and continues to direct ongoing audience research projects. She can be reached at [stgreenstein@hudsonvalley.org](mailto:stgreenstein@hudsonvalley.org).*

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### What are the lessons learned from this story?

Evaluation, unfortunately, is sometimes an afterthought. Because the traditional form of evaluation is done at the conclusion of a program (called summative evaluation), many mistakenly think evaluators do not have anything to offer during program development. If an evaluator had been contacted during the proposal-writing process, she/he would have done the following:

1. Discussed evaluation as a necessary part of program development and how evaluation provides an understanding of visitors' experiences throughout program development and implementation.
2. Explained that conducting evaluations demonstrates to funders that your organization cares about good practice and compares favorably to similar organizations.
3. Explained that program objectives are important. They should not be hastily written or just sound good; rather they should be carefully crafted to reflect the heart of the program's desired achievements.
4. Because evaluators are skilled at translating program ideas into realistic measurable objectives, offered to collaborate with the educator to write the objectives for the proposal.
5. Explained why objectives should not say they will improve students' test scores. Program educators have no control over what happens in school; they can only control what happens while the children are in the program.
6. Proposed that the museum track a defined sample of students so the evaluator can invite them to participate in an interview or complete a standardized questionnaire. Without contact information an evaluator's job is impossible.
7. Recommended treating year one as a pilot and conducting a formative evaluation to identify problems that could be addressed in subsequent years. If creating an excellent pro-

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gram is a goal, formative evaluation is one way to move closer to that goal.

Since none of the above took place and I was asked to evaluate the program, what was the right thing to do? I advised the museum to meet with the funder and explain that the program had changed over time, in response to the reality of working with the school and a deepened understanding of what the children needed in an after-school program. I offered to help the museum re-articulate their program goals and objectives to reflect the new program and write a rationale for the program's evolution. I also offered to provide an evaluation plan, which they could submit to the funder.

Granted, the museum isn't the only party that needs to learn about evaluation—the funder does, too. If I were living in the ideal world alluded to earlier, I would invite the funder to participate in the objective-writing session for two reasons. First, it is important that funders understand what is realistically possible to achieve in a museum program, and by hearing how museum staff talk about visitor experiences, they will recognize the opportunities and constraints of a museum program. Second, funders, like nonprofits, need to learn the basics of evaluation. I realize that staff at nonprofits may not want their funders to participate in such discussions because they don't want funders to be in a position to dictate program goals or content. But, my ideal world, or a slight variation of it, may need to become a reality if evaluation is going to continue to be a requirement.

The work we do, the big WE—nonprofits, philanthropic organizations, and evaluators—can be extremely beneficial to society. But our work must be well planned and inclusive so WE can build OUR knowledge and improve OUR practice. ☺☺☺

**Randi Korn** is Director, *Randi Korn & Associates, Inc.*, in Alexandria, Virginia, and can be reached at 703/548-4078 or [info@randikorn.com](mailto:info@randikorn.com).

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