Data Collection Methods

Data collection methods are typically categorized as either *quantitative* or *qualitative*.

- Quantitative methods have more structured responses that are typically easy to aggregate and analyze using statistical techniques. Examples include surveys/questionnaires and existing data (e.g., Census data)

- Qualitative methods allow for greater variability and detail in responses. Examples include interviews, focus groups, and case studies.

Which data collection method to use for your evaluation depends on what you want to know, the type of data you need, and your available resources. The table below can help you decide which data collection method(s) to use.

Method	Overall Purpose	Advantages	Challenges
Questionnaires, Surveys, Checklists	When need to quickly and/or easily get lots of information from people in a non-threatening way	-can complete anonymously -inexpensive to administer -easy to analyze and compare across sources or over time -administer to many people -can get lots of data -many sample questionnaires already exist	-might not get specific feedback -question construction is important, as wording can bias responses -are impersonal -in surveys, may need sampling expert - doesn't get full story
Interviews	When want to fully understand someone's impressions or experiences, or learn more about their answers to questionnaires	-get full range and depth of information -develops relationship with interviewee -can be flexible and responsive to interviewee	-time-intensive to administer & analyze -can be challenging to analyze and compare across sources or over time -can be costly -interviewer can bias client's responses
Documentation review	When want impression of how program operates without interrupting the program; is from review of applications, finances, memos, minutes, etc.	-get comprehensive and historical information -doesn't interrupt program or client's routine in program -information already exists -few biases about information	-time-intensive -info may be incomplete - data restricted to what already exists and quality of sources not initially meant for data gathering purposes

Observation	To gather accurate information about how a program actually operates, particularly about processes	-view operations of a program as they are actually occurring -can adapt to events as they occur	-can be difficult to interpret seen behaviors -can be complex to categorize observations -can be challenging to obtain consistency across different observers -can influence behaviors of program participants -can be expensive
Focus groups	Explore a topic in depth through group discussion, e.g., about reactions to an experience or suggestion, understanding common complaints, etc.; useful in evaluation and marketing	-quickly and reliably get common impressions -can be efficient way to get much range and depth of information in short time - can convey key information about programs	-can be hard to analyze responses -need good facilitator for safety and closure -difficult to schedule 6-8 people together -can be challenging if topic areas of discussion are sensitive or highly personal
Case studies	To fully understand or depict client's experiences in a program, and conduct comprehensive examination through cross comparison of cases	-fully depicts client's experience in program input, process and results -powerful means to portray program to outsiders	-usually quite time consuming to collect, organize and describe -represents depth of information, rather than breadth

McNamara, C. (1997-2008). Overview of methods to collect information. In *Basic guide to program evaluation*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Management Library. http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm#anchor1585345

Things to consider when selecting a data collection method

Data Collection Standard	Excellent	Okay	Needs Improvement	Comments
UTILITY – How useful is your data collection method?				
Will the data sources and collection methods serve the information needs of your primary users?				
Are your sources of information clear?				

Are your sources of information appropriate?				
FEASIBILITY – How practical is your data collection method?				
Are your sources and methods practical and efficient?				
Do you have the capacity, time, and resources?				
Are your methods non-intrusive and non-disruptive?				
PROPRIETY – How appropriate your data collection method for your participants?				
Are your methods respectful, legal, ethical, and appropriate?				
Does your approach protect and respect the welfare of all those involved or affected?				
ACCURACY – Are your data collection methods technically adequate?				
Does your method adequately answer your questions?				
Does your method measure what you intend to measure?				
Does your method reveal credible and trustworthy information?				
Does your method convey important information?				
Are your data collected in a consistent and quality manner?				

Adapted from University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension (2008). Building capacity in evaluating outcomes: A teaching and facilitating resource for community-based programs and organizations. Madison, WI: UW Extension, Program Development and Evaluation.