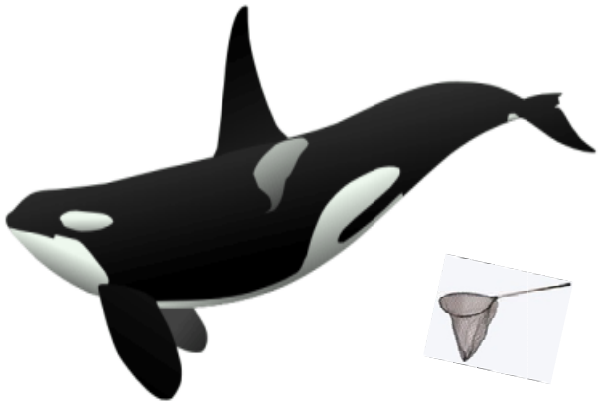
Importance of Lifecycle Alignment

Misalignment between program lifecycle stage and evaluation lifecycle stage is all too common, in practice. The purpose of this document is to explain and illustrate the costs and the risks of misalignment. This is intended to motivate an effort to work toward alignment when possible, and to support well-informed communication with stakeholders who may be pushing for a non-aligned evaluation plan. In addition, since misalignment may persist, this information is useful for clarifying how to be cautious in interpreting evaluation results.

Waste of Resources:

Being out of alignment – in either direction – amounts to a waste of resources. Evaluation should help programs evolve to their next stage. If the evaluation is misaligned, the program will not get the information it "needs".



Program Phase > Evaluation Phase

Simple post-event satisfaction surveys are not really "enough" for ensuring good decisions about a long-established, consistently-implemented, and possibly large program.

Evaluation Phase > Program Phase

Sophisticated evaluation strategies (perhaps with control groups and randomization) are more costly and take more time, and are not appropriate for evaluating programs that are newly developed, and still evolving rapidly.

Risk of Bad Decisions:

Using advanced outcome evaluation strategies on a program that's still in an early lifecycle phase (evolving rapidly and not yet stabilized in implementation) increases the likelihood risk of bad decisions. The program is inherently changeable, which introduces more random variability into evaluation results. In statistical terms, these are the risks of Type I and Type II errors (Type I = accepting something that's false; Type II = rejecting something that's true).

Type I Error

Making a decision to significantly expand a brand new program based on favorable results from an initial outcome evaluation would be like basing a large construction investment on a beach erosion study that might have been done on what happened to be a particularly calm sunny day. The program is still evolving rapidly, and much more information is needed in order to make sound investment decisions.

Type II Error

The opposite risk is important too: Abandoning a newly-developed program that had weak results on an initial outcome evaluation might eliminate a program that actually has a lot of potential but has not yet had a chance to develop and have the bugs worked out. The program is still evolving rapidly, and much more information is needed in order to ensure that you are not "throwing the baby out with the bathwater".