

Alignment with Design

For Evaluations Involving Program Outcomes

Several aspects of an evaluation plan help determine how credible the results will be. One important pillar of credible results is the alignment between purpose (and implied claims) and evaluation design.

Key determinants of appropriate design are (1) whether the evaluation is intended to assess *change*; and (2) whether the evaluation is intended to assess *effectiveness* of the program in causing change. If the former, then the design will need to incorporate measurement both before and after program participation. If the latter, then the design will need to capture change and rule out other possible causes by comparing with a non-program group.

To check alignment of an evaluation plan: use the grid below, and note which Purpose, Claim, and Design best match those in the evaluation plan. If all three are in the same row, the design supports the evaluation goals. If they are not, Purpose, Claims, and/or Design must be adjusted as needed, keeping in mind stakeholder demands, the lifecycle stage of the program, and feasibility.

In making adjustments, keep in mind that there is a tradeoff between the strength of evidence and the feasibility of collecting and analyzing data. In reporting results, keep claims appropriate for the evaluation design used.

Evaluation Purpose	Associated Claim	Design where X=program O=observation R indicates random assignment	Does design show change?	Does design rule out other possible causes?*
...to assess the post-program state of participants.	After program, these participants show a certain level of outcome Z.	X O (post only)	No	No
...to compare the post-program state of participants with that of non-participants.	After program, these participants show a different level of outcome Z than non-participants.	X O O (post only with comparison group)	No	Somewhat
“	“	R X O R O (post-only with comparison group, random assignment)	No	Mostly
...to assess participant perceptions of program effectiveness.	According to these participants, in this setting and context, the program caused a change on outcome Z.	X O _{post} /O _{pre} (retrospective “post then pre”)	Yes	No
...to assess the extent to which participation in the program is associated with change in outcome Z.	Participation in the program is associated with a change in outcome Z in this setting and context, with these participants.	O X O (simple pre/post)	Yes	No
...to assess the effectiveness of the program in increasing or improving outcome Z.	The program is effective in this setting and context, with these participants.	O X O O O (pre/post with comparison group)	Yes	Somewhat
“	The program is effective in this setting and context, with these participants. It may also be effective in other settings and contexts, with other participants.	R O X O R O O (pre/post with random assignment)	Yes	Mostly

* Some possible outside causes of participant change include: a) bias in how participants are selected into the program; b) bias in how participants were assigned to program versus comparison groups, c) maturation of program participants, and d) events not related to the program that caused change.