



Outcomes, not only outputs, define success

A distinguished Midwest university has a tremendous social media presence with thousands of followers on social media. They put out frequent content with well-aligned photos capturing the algorithms' attention.

So what?

Who knows if all this effort is working? Who knows if the social-media department is doing a good job? In logic model terms, these large numbers of followers on social media are defined as *outputs*, no different than the number of individuals participating in a program and yes, that is one measure of success.

However, if education is defined as "changed behavior," how do we measure educational success? What do we know about changed behavior if the only information we have is *outputs*, the number of followers or participants?

Chari Smith in *Nonprofit Program Evaluation Made Simple* (Brick Road, 2020) emphasizes this issue: "Several decades ago, outputs were acceptable by funders as evaluation results ... But they do not provide information on actual change that occurred as a result of program activities." (p. 59)

Actual change because of educational activities is called *outcomes*.

Another story on this issue: There are many educational institutions producing online content and printed materials with important educational content. Without measures of success that not only included *outputs*, the number of online hits and copies of the brochures printed and distributed, but also measurable *outcomes*, who knows if they are successful in promoting measurable change?

Similarly, as a fundraising leader for different educational institutions, when I was asked about results of generous donations, I always had a moving story in my proverbial back pocket about one or more transformed beneficiaries of our educational programs. Rarely, if ever, was I pushed back by the potential donor demanding more than anecdotal evidence about success. We were lucky because we were let off easy by donors.

Donors and nonprofit professionals should be demanding measurable success including both *outputs* AND *outcomes*. Moreover, Smith, referenced above, notes that the organization's development and program staff should work together to determine what data to collect and share with donors of examples of measurable success.

Smith also helps us with an achievable formula for measurable outcomes for a target market. We should begin with an action word like: increase, improve, decrease, gain, create, expand, reduce, or maintain. Then we should state what we plan to change: knowledge, behavior, skills and/or attitudes.

For educational institutions, pre and post-surveys (to note and measure change as a result of the program) are a great tool to measure outcomes. Not only should the participants be surveyed with closed-ended and open-ended questions in the beginning and at the end of a program, but surveys should be distributed one, two and three years after a program is completed. Focus groups and individual interviews also can produce important information about outcomes.

Calls-to-action should be included in every program and frequently in social media postings, driving participants/followers to the organization's website, enabling them to participate in campaigns and surveys. Such engagements as measurable *outcomes* should be noted and counted.

A word to the wise to today's professionals and volunteer leaders of NGO's- If your donors aren't demanding measurable outcomes now from their generous donations, they soon will be.

Now is the time to change your organization's behavior and data collection.

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