Program Evaluation Toolkit
Module 6, Chapter 1: Data Collection

Regional Educational
Laboratory
Central

From the National Center for Education Evaluation at IES

Speaker 1:

Welcome to the sixth module of the *Program Evaluation Toolkit*.

This toolkit is designed so that you can start with any module, but it is best to familiarize yourself with module 1, which covers logic models, before beginning module 6. If you do not yet have a logic model, evaluation questions, an evaluation design, a sampling plan, or a list of data sources to address your evaluation questions, review modules 1 through 5 before proceeding. The content from those modules is referenced throughout module 6.

Module 6 also features the AMMP! example introduced in module 1. AMMP! is a fictitious after-school middle-grades math program started in response to lower-than-expected homework completion rates and a lack of meaningful after-school activities for middle school students. The complete *AMMP! Logic Model* from module 1, which includes citations, is available on the resources page of the website.

This module is divided into three chapters, each highlighting different data collection instruments. Chapter 1 describes interviews and focus groups, chapter 2 deals with observations, and chapter 3 focuses on surveys.

Refer to the resources page of the website for resources to help you develop your own data collection instruments.

Let's get started with the first chapter, in which you will review the purposes of interviews and focus groups as well as best practices in conducting them.

To directly collect qualitative data to help answer an evaluation question of interest, you can conduct an interview with an individual or a focus group with a small set of individuals. Interviews and focus groups are useful for obtaining detailed information about thoughts and behaviors. You might ask questions about participants' opinions, perspectives, or ideas to determine how to further explore or address an issue, either by gathering more data or by making a decision based on the collected data. You could conduct interviews and focus groups to identify and define problems or to identify new or assess existing solutions. You might also pretest survey questions during interviews and focus groups or refine survey questions based on feedback from participants. Finally, you might use interviews and focus groups to provide context for quantitative data, such as further explanation of the "why" or "what happened" in the program you are evaluating.

Consider conducting interviews instead of focus groups when participants may feel more comfortable sharing information without others present to judge or disagree with them. On the other hand, focus groups can be helpful when a group of individuals feel comfortable building on

one another's thoughts and ideas. Ideally, interviews and focus groups should be held in person, but they can be conducted over the phone or through videoconferencing software, if necessary.

The *Guidelines for Interviews and Focus Groups*, available on the resources page of the website, includes the steps for conducting interviews and focus groups that you will learn about in this chapter.

The first step for conducting interviews or focus groups is to identify the evaluation question or questions you want to answer through the interviews or focus groups. Not every evaluation question lends itself to being answered through data collected from interviews or focus groups. For example, a question about student performance might be best answered through assessment or observation data rather than self-reported data from interviews or focus groups. But a question about how useful participants perceived a program to be could be answered with interview or focus group data.

Next, develop interview or focus group questions that will elicit information to help you answer the evaluation questions you identified in step 1. Limit the number of interview or focus group questions to three in-depth questions (for example, "What were the obstacles to using the program?") or 15 short-answer questions (for example, "What did you like best about the program?"). You may also use a manageable combination of in-depth and short-answer questions. Questions should be brief and concise. Rather than asking closed-ended questions, such as "yes/no" questions, ask open-ended questions, such as "how" and "what" questions, because the purpose of interviews and focus groups is to gather detailed information.

Ensure that your interview or focus group questions are developmentally appropriate. Consider, for example, The AMMP! evaluation team identifies the AMMP! evaluation question "What barriers exist that prevent AMMP! participants from completing homework?" to be answered through interviews with teachers and students. The team asks teachers "What barriers are you aware of that prevent students from completing homework?" Middle school students may find it difficult to think of barriers, so a more developmentally appropriate question for middle school students might be "What makes it hard to complete homework?"

Also ensure that your questions are culturally appropriate, in that they respect cultural differences. There are many aspects of culture to consider when writing interview and focus group questions, and it is important to consider these aspects for each audience. Phrase questions so that participants can understand them clearly and respond in a way that will help to answer your evaluation questions. The *Guide to Conducting a Needs Assessment for American Indian Students*, available on the resources page of the website, includes a framework for conducting a culturally responsive needs assessment for American Indian students. This guide is a specific example of how to ensure questions are culturally appropriate for American Indian students. For more information on culturally responsive evaluation, see the Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment website (https://crea.education.illinois.edu/).Consider, for example, the AMMP! evaluation question "What barriers exist that prevent AMMP! participants from completing homework?" In interviews or focus groups, the AMMP! evaluation team may want to ask teachers, "What are the most common answers you have heard from caregivers about why students do not complete their homework?" In this case, the team decides to use the word

"caregivers" instead of "parents" because some students in the community live with caregivers instead of parents. So, the word choice in this question appropriately reflects the community's culture.

After you create your primary interview or focus group questions, develop optional follow-up or probing questions to help you gain more context for a particular response or help participants respond more fully to the initial questions. You may or may not need to use these questions, but they are helpful to have ready prior to the interview or focus group. In the AMMP! example, to help middle school students further explain their responses to the question about homework, the AMMP! evaluation team may ask the probing question "Can you give me an example?" or "Can you give me a little more information?"

Finally, at the end of the interview or focus group, include a question about topics you may not have considered—for example, "What else do you think I should know about barriers to completing math homework that I have not asked about?"

After finalizing your interview or focus group questions, the next step is developing a protocol. The protocol includes steps for conducting interviews or focus groups, a script of what to say during the interviews or focus groups, and a complete set of questions. The protocol also includes the timing of the interviews or focus groups. Interview or focus groups should not be a burden to participants, so limit the time length as much as possible. The recommended time range for interviews and focus groups is from 30 to 90 minutes.

A protocol also helps to ensure that multiple interviews or focus groups are conducted in the same manner and that the same information is collected each time, even if the interviews or focus groups are facilitated by different people.

For sample protocols, see the *AMMP! Interview Protocol* and AMMP! *Focus Group Protocol*, available on the resources page of the website.

The next step involves developing a template or data form to record participants' responses, take notes, and pace the interviews or focus groups. Consider recording interviews and focus groups in addition to taking notes so that you can review participants' responses later in case you missed something during note-taking. It is often helpful to have both an interviewer or facilitator and a notetaker present during interviews and focus groups. Having a notetaker lets the interviewer or facilitator focus attention on the participant or participants. If possible, the notetaker should also capture nonverbal communication such as shrugs or facial expressions that an audio-recording cannot capture. Such information will add context to the collected data.

Thoughtfully identifying participants for interviews and focus groups is an important step. Choose a representative set of participants who can provide you with detailed information related to your questions. Participants from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, positions, locales, and socioeconomic levels, for example, will provide multiple perspectives when answering questions. Consider the AMMP! evaluation question "What barriers exist that prevent students from completing homework?" To gain a full picture in response to this question, the evaluation team wants to talk with students in different middle school grades, from different socioeconomic

backgrounds, and at different performance levels. Conducting multiple interviews or focus groups can help you investigate areas of consensus and difference across participants.

When assembling focus groups, also consider group dynamics. For example, students may not provide much information about barriers to completing homework if teachers or parents are present in the room. Sometimes, determining focus group participants is as simple as putting together groups of students, parents, teachers, and so on. Depending on the questions you ask or the program you are evaluating, you may organize groups by different factors such as socioeconomic status, grade level, role, locale, and so on.

Focus groups typically include 6 to 10 participants so that the participants or facilitators do not feel overwhelmed. Review module 4 on sampling for more in-depth information about selecting participants for data collection.

Before you conduct interviews or focus groups, identify interviewers or facilitators and train them on the protocol. Interviewers or facilitators can come from different fields, but they should be skilled in talking with people and informed about the topic. They should know how to conduct interviews or focus groups and understand group dynamics. For example, sometimes a participant may monopolize a conversation, not provide input, or get off track when asked a question. When this happens, interviewers or facilitators need to know how to redirect and engage. They should also be able to speak the language of participants. If an interviewer or facilitator does not speak the language, or if a group is bilingual, have a translator present as well. Finally, interviewers or facilitators should be trained on the protocol to ensure they are using a consistent approach across all interviews or focus groups.

After completing all of the preparation steps, you are ready to conduct your interviews or focus groups. During an interview or focus group session, consider providing a type of compensation or resource to help engage participants, such as a monetary incentive (for example, a gift card), refreshments, or childcare, if the budget and venue allow. Refreshments, for example, help participants feel comfortable and fuel conversation. If you plan to record the session, prepare the recording equipment before starting. Arrange seating so that focus group participants can see one another.

Begin the interview or focus group by explaining its purpose and the intended use of the collected data, assuring participants of confidentiality, and establishing ground rules for discussion, such as showing respect for others' opinions and speaking one at a time. Once you communicate these preliminary details to participants, obtain their informed consent, either in writing or verbally. Ethical research involves obtaining informed consent so that participants understand and agree that their participation is voluntary, that they can withdraw at any time, and what their participation will entail.

After participants provide their consent, begin the interview or focus group. Start with warm-up questions to build rapport and help participants feel comfortable before digging into the primary content. Ask one question at a time. It is best to ask difficult or potentially uncomfortable questions at the end, after rapport and comfort have been established. Use active listening techniques, such as affirming and clarifying, throughout the session. If you are conducting a

focus group, make sure that everyone's voice is heard by balancing participation and paying attention to nonverbal communication. Also monitor time and stay within the set time limit. Even if you use recording equipment, take notes so that you can remember connections to comments made earlier in the session. At the end of the session, provide closure and thank participants.

Here are examples of an interview protocol and a focus group protocol for the AMMP! evaluation. These example interview and focus group protocols are aligned to the AMMP! evaluation question "What barriers exist that prevent students from completing homework?" You can see subtle differences between an interview and focus group protocol. Remember that the AMMP! evaluation question aligns with the *AMMP! Logic Model*, found on the resources page of the website.

This concludes the chapter on preparing for and conducting interviews and focus groups. Chapter 2 of this module covers considerations for conducting observations.