Program Evaluation Toolkit
Module 8, Chapter 1: Dissemination Approaches

Regional Educational Laboratory Central

From the National Center for Education Evaluation at IES

Speaker 1:

Welcome to the eighth module of the *Program Evaluation Toolkit*. The first seven modules guided you through the process of conducting a program evaluation, from creating a logic model and writing evaluation questions, to developing an evaluation design and plans for data collection and analysis, and finally to analyzing and interpreting the data and making recommendations. In this final module, you will consider the best ways to disseminate and share the findings of your evaluation.

This module is divided into two chapters, each highlighting a different component of disseminating your evaluation findings. Chapter 1 provides a framework for planning dissemination activities. Chapter 2 covers the basics of data visualization, or displaying data in a visual form.

Refer to the resources page of the website for worksheets, templates, and other resources to help you develop a dissemination plan and data visualizations. Throughout this module, you will be directed to specific resources related to dissemination and data visualization.

Welcome to the first chapter of module 8. In this chapter, you will learn how to develop a dissemination plan to share the findings of your evaluation.
Dissemination involves sharing information about an evaluation and its findings with a wide audience. There are many reasons to disseminate your work.

The first reason is altruistic. You share your work because others may benefit from it. People experiencing similar challenges can not only learn about your approach to solving a problem but also use your findings as evidence of the effectiveness of your program. Others may also learn that your program is not appropriate for their challenges, depending on the effectiveness of your program.

Money and resources are another reason to disseminate. Educators need to regularly obtain funding for high-quality programs. Funders frequently want evidence of the success of a program to justify continued funding. Disseminating findings and data related to your program's success will increase your chances of securing further grant funding.

Relationships are critical for the success of any program. Transparency in your evaluation of a program and its outcomes will help foster existing relationships and perhaps build new ones. Dissemination of evaluation findings often creates opportunities to connect with other evaluators and leaders focused on similar programs or challenges. This may lead to collaboration with and opportunities to learn from those new connections. In addition, disseminating your findings to key stakeholders such as parents, community members, and students can strengthen those relationships and build support for an existing program and new programs in the future.

Promotion is about publicizing your work and building credibility with stakeholders. Promotion connects to the other reasons for dissemination—altruism, money and resources, and relationships. Promoting your work can also build your credibility as an evaluator as well as the credibility of your program in achieving its intended outcomes.

Finally, utility involves making your evaluation useful to others by helping to translate research into practice. Others might struggle with similar problems to those that prompted you to implement and evaluate your program. By sharing how you have overcome barriers and successfully implemented your program, you contribute to a larger body of knowledge that practitioners can use in other settings. Most importantly, sharing your work with local stakeholders allows parents, community members, and other schools to use your findings to participate in the existing program or implement a similar program of their own.

If you expect your evaluation findings to be used, you need to put the right information into the right hands, at the right time, and in the right way. Being strategic in your dissemination activities will help you avoid wasting time and resources and communicate more effectively. By carefully developing a dissemination plan, you can use effective strategies to reach the right audience, share the right message, and apply the right approach and timing. The *Dissemination Plan Template*, available on the resources page of the website, guides you through the elements of a good dissemination plan. You might want to print out the template and use it to think and plan as these elements are discussed in this chapter.

As you plan your dissemination, there are several key questions to ask. The first involves the audience, or those who need the information you will disseminate. For instance, who are the right people to receive the information?

The message involves determining what the audience needs to know. In other words, what is the right information?

The approach is the means you use to transmit the information to the audience. How can you best spread the message?

Timing concerns when the audience needs to know the information. That is, what is the right time to share the information?

Finally, the responsible party is the individual or individuals who will be in charge of dissemination efforts. Who will lead the dissemination efforts?

Asking and answering these five critical questions will help you develop a solid dissemination plan. In the rest of this chapter, you will further consider each of these five questions to help you draft a dissemination plan.

Dissemination, regardless of form, type, or content, should be tailored to the intended audience.

The handout *Determining the Audience*, available on the resources page of the website, includes a framework for thinking about the audience. Start by listing possible end users for your information, being as specific as possible. First, identify groups that may be interested in the results. Consider anyone who is involved in the evaluation, groups that might have a stake in the findings, and, more broadly, those who might have an interest in the findings.

Then, identify specific names, titles, or subgroups of individuals within each of the target groups. You don't need to list everyone by name, but titles or roles in an organization can be very useful for defining who needs or wants to see your information. The list represents your initial audience for dissemination. Think big here. You can always narrow the list later if necessary.

Next, consider the purpose for disseminating information to each of the groups or individuals on your list. Why do they need to hear about your findings? You should also think about how informing this group may benefit you. What do you hope to gain by sharing your findings with these groups? For example, dissemination to funding groups may make it easier to procure funding in the future.

Finally, think about what the groups or individuals will do with the findings. How might they use the findings? What will they learn?

Identifying the intended audience is not a linear process. For example, thinking about the purpose may help you identify additional groups or individuals who need to know about the findings. Don't be afraid to continually revise and rethink your audience.

Crafting the message you want to disseminate is critical. You want to say something to the intended audience, and the message is what you want to say. So it is important to carefully consider the message and plan exactly what you want to say. You will likely need to craft a different message for each audience group with which you plan to share your findings. For example, what background knowledge does your audience have about program evaluation, research, and statistical analysis? An audience without a strong understanding of research methods and statistics will likely get more out of information summarized in plain language, whereas an audience with a background in research and statistics may prefer more depth, more data, and more information about your analyses.

Also think about the audience's familiarity with the program or its context. Do you need to provide background information about the program or the setting in which the program is implemented? Although unnecessary background information can drive away your audience, the lack of necessary information for unfamiliar audiences can lead to critical misunderstandings.

When crafting the message, consider both the formative and the summative aspects of your program. Messages about formative aspects of your program include information about how the data suggested necessary changes to the program and what helped the program to operate efficiently. Messages about summative aspects allow you to share the accomplishments of the program and, for the sake of transparency, the lessons learned. Also, base the message on the data you collected and the conclusions that you drew from those data.

Consider a few questions when crafting your message. First, what do you want to share from your findings? It is not necessary to share every finding and piece of data. Instead, ask how your research findings might be useful to your intended audience and focus on the findings you believe will be the most important, actionable, or useful. Also, consider what your audience might do with the findings. If they are unlikely to use them, you may have the wrong audience or be sharing the wrong findings.

Another way to think about the message is to ask what questions your audience might have in trying to understand or use the findings. By looking at the message from the audience perspective and trying to anticipate the questions they may have, you can help eliminate questions before they arise. Ultimately, asking what you want the audience to take away from your efforts allows you to develop a useful message.

Considering these questions in advance can help you to disseminate your information in the most appropriate way.

Now that you have determined the intended audience and the message you want to share, the next step is to determine the approach you will use to communicate the message. You will likely want to use a combination of approaches. Determining the right approach means balancing several factors:

- **The needs of the audience**: What is the best way for the audience to receive the message? Does the audience need multiple opportunities to consider the message?
- **The needs of the message**: What is the best way to share the message? Are visuals necessary?
- **The needs of the evaluator**: What is the easiest, most cost-effective way to communicate the message?

The handout *Dissemination Approaches: Pros and Cons*, available on the resources page of the website, outlines the advantages and disadvantages of several approaches for dissemination. Use this handout to inform your dissemination plan using the *Dissemination Plan Template.*

A blog is an online forum where you can share regular updates about your program and the evaluation process. One of the big advantages of a blog is that posts are written in informal, accessible language and in your own voice, making your work available to a wide variety of stakeholders. A blog also provides an opportunity to share thoughts and ideas from your perspective. By regularly using a blog to keep your audience up to date on your work, you can build relationships and entice readers to learn more about the results.

A data dashboard is a website you can use to organize and share large amounts of data. It is best for displaying quantitative data. In a data dashboard, all data are available in one location, accessible, and easy to visualize, analyze, and interpret. Having all the data in one place allows your audience to stay up to date on your work without waiting for you to produce a summary or report. Data dashboards are also generally interactive, so users can customize visualization to see the information they need. Although you can create a data dashboard with available tools, it is best to bring in an expert to develop and build the site. That way, your dashboard can be customized to look exactly as you want. However, keep in mind that a data dashboard, like any website, requires regular maintenance and updates to keep the data current.

A common way to disseminate evaluation results is an in-person meeting. An in-person meeting generally involves convening a group of interested stakeholders and having an evaluator present the findings through multimedia and visual displays of the data. A benefit of an in-person meeting is the ability to explain the findings, including why they may have turned out the way they did. In addition, the evaluator can discuss ways to use the findings and respond to feedback from stakeholders in real time.

Another advantage is being able to see nonverbal reactions from stakeholders, which provide information that you cannot get in any other way. An in-person meeting can also help establish and build relationships that are critical to the long-term success of a program.

A media release is a quick, easy, and low-cost way to reach a broad audience. Although you can control how the release is written and what message is communicated, you can't control to whom it is delivered or how far it will go. Disseminating a media release does not mean that the media will do anything with it.

A media release generally follows a standard format. The first paragraph of the release generally answers the five Ws (who, what, when, where, and why). It should be roughly two sentences. The first sentence highlights the most important piece of information. In the case of program evaluation, the first sentence will likely be your most important finding. The second sentence describes what the next steps are or sets the timeliness of the story. Consider this paragraph a summary of the rest of the article.

The second paragraph then provides more detail about the topic. Consider including a quotation from someone directly associated with the program to highlight important information. Additional paragraphs can be used to provide more detailed information such as additional quotations, background information, and statistics as needed. Keep in mind that media releases should be short and narrowly focused. Provide only directly relevant background information.

Finally, provide contact information for more information. The three pound signs at the end of the template indicate that the release is complete.

The *Media Release Template*, available on the resource page of the website, can help you write your own media release.

The most traditional way to disseminate evaluation findings is a report. A report is the ideal means to share in-depth information about the methods, measures, and findings of the evaluation. It also creates a permanent record of the findings. Its highly organized nature allows your audience to easily find the information they need or want about your work. However, a report does not allow as much freedom to craft or control the message. Because the report is designed to share exactly what you did and what you found, you are not as free to focus the audience's attention on what you want them to see.

An evaluation brief is a condensed version of a report. It typically provides a brief overview of the methods and explains the findings without going into extensive detail. In addition, it does not include the full measures used in the evaluation, which might be included in an appendix in the report. An evaluation brief may also provide an overview of existing research on a topic.

A summary of findings is a short one- to two-paragraph piece that briefly describes what is happening and what was found. It is not a dissemination approach on its own, but it can contribute to multiple dissemination approaches. You can use a summary on a website, in a blog post, for an email campaign, in a newsletter, or as part of any other dissemination activity. A good summary provides a limited set of findings that you want to share, describes your program in plain language, explains who is impacted by the findings and how, and includes contact information. You can use the *Summary Template*, available on the resources page of the website, to draft a simple summary paragraph.

Social media should not be ignored as a way to increase awareness of an evaluation. Social media allow you to share your results and their implications quickly with a broad demographic and at no cost. Although you cannot share detailed information, you can use social media to refer users to other dissemination approaches that provide much more detail. For example, a tweet can include a link to a blog post or a report about your evaluation.

The two-way nature of communication in social media also creates the potential for gathering feedback. However, social media feedback, like other forms of feedback, should always be supplemented with other methods.

Another common approach for sharing your findings is a webinar. A webinar can reach large numbers of people at little to no cost. In addition, because it is a visual medium, a webinar is an easy way to share and explain graphic representations of findings and other information or to share other forms of media such as videos. A webinar, like an in-person presentation, also allows you to explain and highlight individual findings and gives you control over what you say. You can also archive a webinar as a recording for later viewing, unlike an in-person presentation. The chat and comment features on the webinar platform allow for real-time commenting and feedback. The platform also permits you to record the comments and feedback for later use.

A critical part of conducting a webinar is promoting it. If people do not know that you are offering a webinar, and if the link is not readily available, they will not view it.

An infographic is a one- or two-page document that graphically represents data and findings to tell a story. It is a great way to make your data and findings more user friendly. The idea is to use graphics such as images, graphs, and tables to convey critical information in as few words as possible. If you choose an infographic as a dissemination approach, you need to decide what information to share (that is, determine the message) because you likely cannot include every piece of information that you may want to share.

See the handout *Infographic Considerations*, available on the resources page of the website, for more information.

A video is a way to share information quickly, clearly, and in an engaging way. Videos can be easily edited to target different audiences using the same content. Videos are easily shared through multiple social media platforms, making them free to most audiences and relatively low cost to produce.

Complex videos that include music, narration, and graphic animation will require an editing program and capacity to use the program. If you do not have these resources, you might want to factor the cost of using a videographer or editor into your evaluation budget.

A podcast is a brief audio recording for sharing information on a topic through a discussion format. A podcast on a single topic can be shared over multiple episodes across many streaming sources and devices. Podcasts might use storytelling techniques to engage users with complex content in more accessible ways. Some podcasts use a host to narrate a discussion that can either be scripted or improvised. Podcasts are relatively inexpensive to produce and free to the audience, making them a highly accessible form of media.

If you choose a podcast as a dissemination approach, you may also want to provide links to a companion webpage that includes notes from each episode, biographies on the host and speakers, transcripts for reading offline, and additional resources such as a report or infographic.

It is also important to consider the timing of your dissemination efforts. When you release findings and how often you release them can influence how the audience perceives your evaluation and understands and uses the findings. For example, your audience may discount what you say if you disseminate findings before they are finalized and correct them later. On the other hand, waiting too long to release findings when the audience is expecting them can suggest that you are trying to hide something.

Some dissemination approaches, such as blogs, in-person meetings, and social media, are well suited to providing formative or ongoing updates on your work. Other approaches, such as press releases, reports, webinars, and data dashboards, are better suited for releasing final or summative findings from your evaluation.

The frequency of dissemination also matters. The more often you share the findings from your evaluation, using multiple approaches as discussed earlier, the more likely the audience will see and use the findings. Wide dissemination can also contribute a greater perception of utility, meaning simply that the audience will be more likely to view the findings as meaningful and use them.

There are several critical points to consider when planning the timing of the dissemination. First, when possible, release appropriate results while the evaluation is in process. For example, you may be able to report the numbers of students who are using a program while you are waiting to gather and analyze the student outcome data. Releasing findings while the program is in progress creates a sense of transparency.

When answering process or formative questions, you can release findings to help inform program changes without waiting for outcome or summative results.

Sometimes. evaluation findings may be time sensitive—to meet grant deadlines, for example, or for use before the end of the school year. In these cases, you should release the findings as soon as possible.

Of course, if the findings will inform the implementation of a new program, release them in enough time to be used for that purpose.

Once a timeline is decided on, it is important to identify the responsible party of dissemination efforts. Identifying a responsible party helps to ensure that dissemination efforts occur within the appropriate time frame.

Communicating complex evaluation data or findings to nontechnical audiences is not an easy task. If your audience can't understand what you write, they won't use your findings, and you'll miss out on the advantages of dissemination. Recognizing this issue, the U.S. government passed the Plain Writing Act of 2010, requiring that federal agencies use clear communication that the public can understand and use.

The *Federal Plain Language Guidelines*, available on the resources page of the website, is a useful tool for ensuring that evaluation reports and other dissemination products are clearly written and readily understood. You can also review the additional resources at the end of this chapter to help you write about your findings in plain language.

Use the handout *Checking Recommendations for Plain Language*, also available on the resource page of the website, to review your evaluation reports or other dissemination products resulting from your evaluation to make sure that they use plain language.

Accessibility involves ensuring that your dissemination products are available to all individuals, including people with disabilities. It is your responsibility to consider the needs of everyone in your intended audience. Thinking about accessibility in advance makes this responsibility much easier. The handout *Key Considerations for Accessibility*, available on the resources page of the website, offers general guidelines and links to resources, videos, checklists, and tutorials to help you make your documents or digital products accessible to the widest possible audience.

Now it's your turn. Using what you learned, jot down some ideas for a dissemination plan. Think carefully about the audience you want to reach, the message you want to share, the approach that would best suit the message and meet your needs and the needs of the audience, and the timing of dissemination. The *Dissemination Plan Template*, available on the resources page of the website, can help you structure your thinking around the dissemination plan.

This concludes chapter 1 of module 8. The next chapter of this module focuses on data visualization, or presenting your data in a visual form.

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