Mapping your project conference breakout session

Facilitator: Kirk Knestis

Rapporteur: Pam Bishop

Summary:

This breakout session was well-attended and began with Dr. Knestis providing a slideshow of various project maps he has created during his tenure as a program evaluator. He described program models as ways to “illustrate how to turn money into smart people.” He began with the simple logic model that most participants were familiar with, then move on to casual pathway models (also known as Theory of Change models), which showed the specific linkages among project components and their outcomes. He discussed that he had recently begun thinking of models not in terms of activities and outcomes, but as “conditional” models, where every box was a condition rather than an activity or outcome. In his conditional models, every box was a condition that had to exist in order for another condition to occur. The software he recommended for creating project models was called Inspiration, which is a relatively inexpensive software developed for K-12 use in developing diagrams and other types of graphic organizers.

A participant asked what the difference is between a logic model and theory of change model and Dr. Knestis indicated that it depends on the context in which the terms are used. In general, people refer to a logic model as the graphic organizer with large boxes for inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes, whereas a theory of change model breaks down the relationships among the various inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. The most important aspect of a project map is that it must be useful within the context that it is used. There is no “right” way to map a project as it is a representation of reality. It is a visual representation of a mental model of a project, and must have utility within the context that it is to be used.

Dr. Knestis indicated that there are two questions he asks his clients when creating program models: (1) what are the quantities that matter, and (2) what are the qualities that matter? From these two guiding questions, he moves forward to ask:

* What data does the client need?
* What sources are these for those data?
* What do we do with the data to show that what is or is not happening in the project?

A question arose about the measurement of long term outcomes that won’t necessarily be able to be directly measured during the life of the project (e.g. broadening participation in STEM fields). A discussion ensued about knowing the literature behind the problem your project is trying to solve, and measuring more proximal outcomes that are known to lead to the distal outcome (e.g. awareness, enthusiasm, motivation, etc.). A model can include distal outcomes, but the proximal outcomes are really what is to be measured.

The conversation then evolved to the question of why make a model at all if everything can’t be measured. The response was that model are great for designing and intervention, and also getting all stakeholders on the same page about what the project aims to achieve, and how. Sometimes a graphic representation is enough, but some people are not visual, so sometimes outlining the story of a program is better.

Finally, the group discussed the idea of using a causal pathway model to create a case that there exists “evidence of promise” that a project is going to work. Essentially, this is a logic model that one creates using existing literature about what has worked in the past, linked to outcomes that are expected, and showing the relationship between what has worked in the past, and what you are proposing to do. The idea is to show that you are building on or furthering existing models and schools of thought for how an outcome or set of outcomes for a certain population could be achieved.