

Tier Five: Program Long-Term Outcomes

The purpose of Tier Five is to provide evidence that your program has made long-term improvements in the lives of children, youth, and families at risk.

There are four tasks associated with Tier Five:

- Plan to document long-term outcomes in the quality of life of children, youth, families, and communities;
- Provide evidence of program sustainability;
- Identify program components worthy of replication; and
- Distribute findings of long-term outcomes.

Plan to Document Long-Term Outcomes

What do you expect program participants to “look” like five years from now, ten years from now? What evidence is there to suggest that your program will continue to affect participants several years after they’ve been in the program? These are the kinds of questions your team will consider when designing a plan to document long-term outcomes (see the Assessing Long-Term Outcomes Worksheet).

The first step in establishing a plan is to identify the long-term outcome objectives of your program (a task you did in Tier Four). Once you have these objectives in-hand, your team can follow the same steps in Tier Four that prepared you to assess short-term program outcomes—identify indicators, measures, design, and analyses (see Select Long-term Outcome Indicators and Identify Measures Worksheet).

When planning to assess long-term outcomes several years down the road, there are a couple of issues to consider. First, participants, as well as the context, will change over time. Maturation, historical events, and environmental factors influence the participants and the contexts, regardless of program participation. As a consequence, indicators and measures that were appropriate at one time may no longer be appropriate in the future. For instance, self-esteem in a four-year-old is not the same construct as self-esteem in a 15-year-old; it is not defined the same way nor is it measured the same way. Issues related to change over time in participants and contexts are important points to consider when planning to assess long-term outcomes.

Second, what sources of data will be accessed in the future to demonstrate long-term outcomes? How will these data be collected? Who will be compared—participants to themselves, to those in other communities, to others in the U.S.? What factors need to be in place now to ensure access to these data in the future?

After spending a good deal of time planning to demonstrate long-term outcomes, it may become tempting to talk about cause and effect relationships related to program participation. We offer a caution against this temptation. The goal in assessing long-term outcomes is to demonstrate that the program has contributed to the desired outcomes and to celebrate these contributions.

Provide Evidence of Program Sustainability

Plans to sustain a program should be integrated into the daily life of a program. Mancini and Marek (1997) identify four keys to program sustainability:

- 1) Leadership with vision;
- 2) Identifying assets and mobilizing resources;
- 3) Collaboration and community partnership; and
- 4) Accountability/evaluation.

The task at this point is to ensure that your program has incorporated these keys into the functioning of the program (see Program Sustainability Worksheet).

For more information on program sustainability, go to <http://www.ext.vt.edu/vce/specialty/famhumdev/350-801.html>

Identify Program Components Worthy of Replication

As your program demonstrates success, the team may decide to expand it or replicate certain components. Documenting the process and outcomes of the program will allow your team to formulate an implementation manual that will allow others to examine how the program worked in certain contexts and hypothesize about its effectiveness in other contexts.

Distribute Findings of Long-Term Outcomes

The final task of Tier Five is to use all that you've learned in program development, implementation, and evaluation to contribute to Extension's ability to serve children, youth, and families at-risk. One way to do this is by publishing your work, both formally and informally. Reports will be submitted to CSREES and may be posted on your Web site. In addition, you may decide to share your findings with local government, community members, and other service providers. There are various ways to accomplish this, but some ideas include contacting television news stations, the newspapers, and community meetings. You may want to convey your findings in the form of success stories. Go to <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/AboutCES/Factsheets/stories.html> for information on how to write success stories. Or you may want to use Impact Statements. Go to <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agpsd/impact.htm> for information on writing Impact Statements. Finally, you might consider submitting your work to professional journals.

The team began by referring back to the Sorting Objectives Worksheet to access long-term outcome objectives and to re-evaluate decisions regarding priorities. As they discussed methodological issues, they learned that it was going to be a challenge to assess the contribution of the program on future personal growth in teens. They considered how the definition of personal growth might change from the teen years to the young adult years and how access to such data could be obtained.

On the other hand, some objectives would be easier to assess in the future. For instance, they found that continued access to school records allowed them to examine academic success of participants over time and allowed them to compare participants to non-participants in the district. Similarly, they accessed data of national averages to chart the progress of participants relative to the country as a whole.

Although they believed that comparing participants to non-participants in the district, as well as to a national statistical comparison group, would help control for unanticipated factors, they felt it wise to list possible events that might occur in the next few years that could influence their impact results. For instance, the implementation of a new reading curriculum in their school or in neighboring schools could contribute to a rise in scores among participants and non-participants alike, thus obscuring contributions of their program.

The results from the long-term outcome evaluation were submitted in the annual report to CSREES and as a community report to local government. They also chose to post results on the web. They wrote several news releases and held an annual award ceremony to inform the community and to recognize participants for their hard work. The team felt confident in their ability to sustain the project once State Strengthening funding expired as they had employed the four keys to sustainability from the onset.