DEVELOPING AN EVALUATION TIMELINE

Deciding when to collect data is an important part of planning an evaluation. When you don't plan for data collection, you often miss important opportunities to gather data. For example, once you begin your community-building project, you may no longer have the opportunity to gather important baseline data about the community.

Basically, evaluation data can be collected at only three points in time—*before* the community-building project, *during* the community-building project, and *after* it has been completed. Frequently, you collect *baseline data* before the community-building project to document the conditions that existed beforehand. Sometimes data are collected during a community-building effort to determine whether the effort is on course or needs changes. Data can also be collected after the community-building project is completed to document what was accomplished. Below are several evaluation designs that use different time frames for data collection. The arrows indicate the points at which data are collected.

Community-Building Activities

In the example above, evaluation data are collected just once—after the community-building efforts have been completed. Although this design allows evaluators to ask community members about the changes they have seen since the onset of community-building activities, it does not involve collection of true baseline data.

Community-Building Activities

The next design includes the collection of baseline data before the community-building activities are implemented. This design provides more assurances that change did, in fact, occur between the two points in time, but it does not say for certain that your community-building efforts produced the change. This design is frequently called a *pretest–posttest design*.

Community-Building Activities

This design adds a measurement point during the community-building activities. Data collection at this point in time frequently focuses on the community-building process and how it could be improved.

Community-Building Activities

This final design, called a *time-series design*, involves taking periodic measurements of a relevant indicator at multiple points in time. This design helps identify trends that may be brought about by the community-building activities. Again, however, it is difficult to be sure that the changes were brought about by the community-building activities.

Each of the designs above has strengths and limitations. All could be improved by taking measurements from a comparison or control group. When you know how much natural change occurred in a group or community that was not affected by your community-building effort, you are better prepared to make claims regarding the success of your efforts.