

The Role of Goal Statements in Program Evaluation

What is a goal, and how is it involved in program evaluation?

A **goal** is a specific outcome (or impact) that you hope to produce. As you develop a project you may envision many different kinds of goals. Some of these will relate to the activities and timeframe for the project itself. Others may relate to long-term impacts from your project that only become visible over time (perhaps long after your project has ended). Other goals may relate to your department's needs, synergies with other projects happening in the community or region, or even your own skill-development as a Somerville employee.

When dealing with outcomes measurement, the goals that matter are those relating to the project itself, with a nod toward the project's long-term impacts. If your project is grant-funded the funder may ask you to drill down even more, to evaluate only the parts of the project they helped pay for.

A great way to start preparing to do outcomes measurement is to create a **goal statement** for your project. Most grant guidelines require you to include a goal statement in your application anyway. An effective goal statement is critical to outcomes measurement because it defines what success means for your project and the kinds of data that will prove your success.

A goal statement always includes your goal(s) but can also include strategies, objectives, and tactics that explain or qualify your goal(s):

Goal: A statement of the way you expect your program to change a given situation.

Strategy: An approach you will take to achieve your goal

Objective: A measurable step toward implementing your strategy

Tactic: A tool used to reach your objective.

Note: Some funders use "objective" and "strategy" interchangeably.

How you structure your goal statement will depend on your project and (perhaps) funder requirements, but to ensure that your goal statement is measurable, some part of it should be SMART:

SMART means:

- Specific – You can tell who is doing what to whom, and when
- Measurable – You include trackable activities that lead to trackable outcomes
- Achievable – A reasonable person could expect to achieve the goal with the existing timeframe, methods, and budget
- Relevant – The goal accurately reflects your program's overall context
- Time-bound – The goal has a timeframe for achievement

Some examples of SMART goal statements:

SMART Goal: “Our goal is to help a minimum of 20 Somerville youth, ages 16-22, to develop job-finding and job-readiness skills that result in actual paid employment during July and August 1999.”

Vague goal with SMART strategy: “Our goal is to help Somerville youth develop job-finding and job-readiness skills by providing paid summer jobs to a minimum of 20 youth, ages 16-22, during July and August 1999.”

Vague goal and strategy with SMART tactic and objective: “Our goal is to help Somerville youth develop job-finding and job-readiness skills by changing the way youth access job opportunities. We will partner with 30 local employers during spring 1999 to develop an online job source network and use the network to guide 20 youth, ages 16-22, through the process of obtaining paid employment for July and August 1999.”

A word about wording: Choose the action words in your goal statement carefully. They can spell the difference between a goal you can evaluate and one that (even if it’s SMART) is too expensive or time-consuming to evaluate. When creating goal statements, keep asking yourself: “How would I actually test this?”

Be careful with “absolute” words that suggest statistical movement from A to B: Words like “solve”, “eliminate”, “end”, and “repair” may box you into a corner. Most programs don’t solve a problem completely, and even when they do, it can be very difficult to prove it. At the very least it requires rock-solid starting data and a comprehensive data collection and analysis plan.

Choose words that demonstrate influence, not absolutes:

Words like “help”, “address”, “affect”, “explore”, “support”, and “change” help tie your project to key issues without trapping you in an evaluation process that may overwhelm your project.

It may help to reword your goal statement to make data collection easier:

Example:

- You’ve developed a project that involves partnering with Group #1 to make life better for Group #2.
- You recognize that it’s going to be very hard to collect outcomes data from Group #2
- You change your goal statement. Instead, of “supporting Group #2” your new goal is to “engage Group #1 in supporting Group #2.”
- Your activities stay the same but now you can collect most of your outcomes data from Group #1 regarding their engagement experiences and their observed impacts on Group #2.
- You bolster the Group #1 data with whatever Group #2 data you manage to collect, but you aren’t totally dependent on Group #2 to demonstrate the success of your project.
- Be careful not to weaken your project in the process. Ask yourself: will your funders still be excited if you focus on Group #1? Will your partners and stakeholders still want to be involved if you focus on Group 1? Will Group #2 feel slighted if you focus on Group 1?