The Urban Institute

The Nonprofit Taxonomy of Outcomes: Creating a Common Language for the Sector

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WHY A TAXONOMY OF OUTCOMES?

Outcome indicators for various programs often reflect similar program goals. For example, often changes in knowledge, attitudes, behavior, and status or condition of clients/participants and the assessment of various quality-of-service characteristics are sought. If various types of outcomes used across a wide variety of targeted program areas are collected, reviewed for quality, and then categorized into general areas, then the results are likely to be useful to nonprofits providing a wide range of programs not included in the targeted program areas.

Such a taxonomy of outcomes with associated indicators can become a standard framework that provides guidance and context, helping users learn what they need to know. For example, although much information on program outcomes is available from a web-based key word search, the results are likely to be overwhelming in volume and be very time consuming to review for relevance. And the search results might vary significantly if different key terms were chosen for the search.

A taxonomy, however, can provide a systematic listing enabling a user to select appropriate outcomes and outcome indicators for a program considerably more efficiently. A taxonomy of outcomes can help nonprofits think in a more structured way about how to measure their contributions to society. Over time, this can help them not only better document program effectiveness but also efficiently manage their resources.

DEVELOPING THE NONPROFIT TAXONOMY OF OUTCOMES

The Urban Institute and the Center for What Works have created a draft taxonomy of nonprofit outcomes to provide a resource of candidate quality indicators and assist nonprofits in developing outcome indicators and collecting outcome data.

While there is no shortage of outcomes and their indicators in some program areas, there is no centralized grouping of them or assessment of their quality that could serve as a resource for organizations that wish to develop outcome measurement systems. And because of the vast range of programs in the voluntary sector, major gaps exist in the coverage of indicators that have been developed. The attached taxonomy attempts to provide a way to help reduce this gap – for those programs for which indicators are not yet available

The first step used in developing this taxonomy was to choose a number of specific program areas and then identify program outcomes and indicators already in use and/or recommended. It is often difficult to measure outcomes directly; therefore, many indicators are proxies. For example, while tracking the extent to which avoidance of a certain kind of behavior has occurred can be difficult, a client can be tested about the client's level of knowledge about why someone should avoid that behavior. However, the degree to which increased knowledge leads to the desired change in behavior needs to be known before this increased knowledge can be deemed a "good" indicator of the desired change in behavior. Without documentation that when knowledge increases, a behavioral change follows, a proxy may not be a useful and appropriate indicator of the outcome.

We collected information from a wide range of sources, from national nonprofit umbrella groups in the US, national accreditation agencies in specific fields, and from national nonprofits with local affiliates. They were assessed with thought about which ones were useful, relevant, and feasible. We also considered outcome indicators that were seldom currently used but appear to be very appropriate for inclusion.

An additional basis for identifying outcomes and outcome indicators is the use of outcome sequence charts (also called logic models) for the program – indicating what results a program's activities leads to desired outcomes?

Basic criteria for quality indicators included ones that are: *specific* – unique, unambiguous; *observable* – achievable, practical, cost effective to collect, measurable; *understandable* – comprehensible; *relevant* – measure important dimension, valid, appropriate, related to program, of significance, predictive, timely; *time bound*; and *reliable* – accurate, unbiased, consistent, verifiable.

The most useful taxonomies tend to reflect the manner in which the sector itself organizes, collects and reports the information. Although essential taxonomic principles of comprehensiveness, mutual exclusivity of elements, and logical consistency must be followed, a grounding is needed in what is actually in use by practitioners and what has worked for the specific program areas. Thus, testing by stakeholders (including nonprofit staff; funders, both public and private; clients, participants, and service users; and even the public, where appropriate) is essential.

Outcomes and indicators were collected for fourteen different program areas to help inform the development of the taxonomy. Lists of quality outcomes and their indicators were selected for program areas ranging from emergency shelter to youth mentoring to health risk reduction programs. The outcomes for the various programs were reviewed for common elements, which then became part of the taxonomy.

The development and refinement of the taxonomy will continue to be an iterative process, as outcomes and indicators are collected for even more programs.

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The Center for WhatWorks®

Nonprofit Taxonomy of Outcomes (NPTOO)

I. PROGRAM-CENTERED OUTCOMES

1) Reach

a) Outreach

Common Indicators:	Percent of target constituency enrolled Percent of target constituency aware of service Participation rate Number of service requests/month

b) Reputation

Common Indicators:	Number of favorable reviews/awards Number of community partnerships Percent constituents satisfied/renewing

c) Access

Common Indicators:	Percent of target constituents turned away Percent of target constituents reporting significant barriers to entry Percent of services offered at no charge

2) Participation

a) Attendance/utilization

Common Indicators:	Acceptance rate Percent of capacity enrolled/registered Percent who enroll for multiple services/offerings Attendance rate Average attendance rate at events Percent of capacity filled at event Number of subscriptions Renewal rate Percent of subscribers who are also donors

b) Commitment/Engagement

Common Indicators:	Percent who continue with program past initial experience Percent of participants considered active Percent of constituents utilizing multiple services/offerings Referral rate

c) Graduation/completion

Common Indicators:
- Percent who successfully complete program
- Percent who report immediate needs met
- Recidivism rate (back into program)
- Average length of time in program
- Percent who continue to next level

3) Satisfaction

a) Quality

Common Indicators:
- Number of favorable reviews/awards
- Percent reporting improved attitude/feeling
- Constituent satisfaction rate
- Referral rate

b) Fulfillment

Common Indicators:
- Percent reporting needs met
- Percent of target constituents served
- Completion rate

II. PARTICIPANT-CENTERED OUTCOMES

1) Knowledge/Learning/Attitude

a) Skills (knowledge, learning)

Common Indicators:
- Percent increase in scores after attending
- Percent that believe skills were increased after attending
- Percent increase in knowledge (before/after program)

b) Attitude

Common Indicators:
- Percent improvement as reported by parent, teacher, co-worker, other
- Percent improvement as reported by participant

c) Readiness (qualification)

Common Indicators:
- Percent feeling well-prepared for a particular task/undertaking
- Percent meeting minimum qualifications for next level/undertaking

2) Behavior

a) Incidence of bad behavior

Common Indicators:
- Incidence rate
- Relapse/recidivism rate
- Percent reduction in reported behavior frequency

b) Incidence of desirable activity

Common Indicators:
- Success rate
- Percent that achieve goal
- Rate of improvement

c) Maintenance of new behavior

Common Indicators:
- Number weeks/months/years continued
- Percent change over time
- Percent moving to next level/condition/status
- Percent that do not reenter the program/system

4) Condition/Status

a) Participant social status

Common Indicators:	Percent with improved relationships
	Percent who graduate
	Percent who move to next level/condition/status
	Percent who maintain current level/condition/status
	Percent who avoid undesirable course of action/behavior

b) Participant economic condition

Common Indicators:	Percent who establish career/employment
	Percent who move to long term housing
	Percent who maintain safe and permanent housing
	Percent enrolled in education programs
	Percent who retain employment
	Percent with increased earnings

c) Participant health condition

Common Indicators:	Percent with reduced incidence of health problem
	Percent with immediate positive response
	Percent that report positive response post-90 days

III. COMMUNITY-CENTERED OUTCOMES

1) Policy

a) Awareness/understanding of issue

Common Indicators:	Percent of target constituents aware of issue
	Number of people reached through communications
	Percent of target constituents taking desirable action

b) Stakeholder support of issue

Common Indicators:	Number of stakeholders convened
	Percent of key stakeholders as partners

c) Influence on legislative agenda

Common Indicators:	Number of legislative contacts
	Percent of supporting votes secured
	Percent of legislators aware of issue

3) Public Health/Safety

a) Risk of threat

Common Indicators:	Percent of public aware of issue
	Percent of public taking precautions
	Number of options/contingency plans
	Time spent planning

4) Civic Participation (to be developed)

a) Increase participation

Common Indicators	Number of people participating in event
	Percent increase in turnout
	Number of people volunteering

5) Economic (to be developed)

a) Increased opportunities
b) Support for economic growth/development
c) Economic sustainability

6) Environmental (to be developed)

a) Cleanliness
b) Safety
c) Aesthetics
d) Preservation

7) Social (to be developed)

a) Awareness of an issue
b) Incidence of undesirable activity
c) Incidence of desirable activity

IV. ORGANIZATION-CENTERED OUTCOMES

1) Financial (to be developed)
2) Management (to be developed)
3) Governance (to be developed)