WHAT PROGRAM PROVIDERS WANT RESEARCHERS TO KNOW

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OVERVIEW

Many researchers would like to be helpful to out-of-school time programs, and practitioners see a need for good research. Yet communication between researchers and practitioners can be a challenge. In a recent series of Roundtables to discuss program needs and research evaluations held with program practitioners, Child Trends obtained important insights into how researchers can be useful to program providers. Reporting findings *briefly* and *clearly*, for example, was one piece of the advice they directed at researchers. This brief summarizes the findings from these Roundtables.

BACKGROUND

Recognizing the value of evidence-based practice and accountability, out-of-school time programs increasingly feel a need to draw on research to design and improve programs, to write proposals, and to evaluate program effectiveness. However, few program managers or youth workers have extensive training in statistics and research methods or have much knowledge about research theories or previous studies. On the other hand, researchers generally have little on-the-ground experience running a youth development program and dealing with the everyday complexities of service provision to diverse groups of youth. Instead, researchers are rewarded for publishing cutting-edge studies. Nevertheless, many researchers would like their work to be useful to program providers who are striving to improve outcomes for children. How can researchers be more effective in reaching program providers? Ideas culled from the Practitioner Roundtables suggest some answers.

TIPS FOR RESEARCHERS FROM PROGRAM PRACTITIONERS

- **Keep reports short and straightforward**. Program managers who participated in the Practitioner Roundtables were unanimous in their emphasis on brevity and simplicity. They asked for reports that are a page or two in length, ideally, or—at most—three or four pages long. They also asked researchers to eliminate research jargon and avoid terms that a non-researcher would not generally know (such as "coefficient"). Practitioners commented that using bullets was a good way to present information. In addition, they observed that graphs and pictures, if they are clear, simple, and self-explanatory, can help to clarify points. For example, the title for a graph might be written as a short sentence that summarizes what the graph depicts.

  Also, practitioners cautioned that researchers should not assume that the same articles they produce for academic journals would be appropriate for practitioners. Instead, a brief executive summary or a PowerPoint presentation could be prepared that distills the purpose and findings of a study, while

providing only the essential details about methods and statistics. Some out-of-school time organizations have highly trained researchers on staff, and they may want the detailed research report; but most practitioners would appreciate just having the summary.

- **Listen as well as teach**. Practitioners highlighted their unique concerns and situations and the importance of having researchers who will listen to them about their needs and issues. From practitioners' perspectives, research that addresses questions raised by the program, as well as the needs of funders and researchers, would be more likely to obtain buy-in and interest from program staff. They also warned that researchers should not assume that practitioners are lacking in intelligence or are not interested in research. At the same time, they stressed the need for patience because the practitioner community is often unfamiliar with the language and methods used by researchers.

- **Inform and involve program staff as much as possible.** One participant described an evaluation that got off the ground badly, with staff uncertain and unclear about the value of the research, even after data collection had started. Fortunately, researchers were able to provide an early report, which gave the staff a sense of how the study could be useful. Another program manager stated that having a researcher attend staff training helped bridge the researcher/practitioner gap.[1]

- **Build internal capacity in out-of-school time programs**. It is not uncommon for researchers to do their study, get their research published, and walk away. While ongoing involvement may not be possible, program providers asked that researchers help them to build their own internal capacity to collect and analyze data and to use research to enhance program practices. Then, when a research project is completed, not only would the program have the project report, but it also would have a system for continuing to provide program data, as well as the understanding to want and be able to continue collecting and analyzing these data.

- **Make information accessible**. Many researchers belong to organizations that maintain Web sites, but practitioners don't know what information is available and where to obtain it. Moreover, practitioners commented that the sheer volume of information on the Web was overwhelming and that they were not in a position to judge the quality or rigor of the research information that can be accessed online. Reaching program staff may require sending copies of research reports or executive summaries to associations, newsletters, or professional organizations that will review them, excerpt from them, or otherwise let the out-of-school time community know about the work. Organizations that disseminate to the out-of-school time community are highlighted in the box on the next page.

- **Remember the parents and the community**. Practitioners noted that the language used in research is sometimes alarming or offensive to parents, for example, reports that highlight negative behavior problems and risks. Parents often don't trust researchers, seeing them as strangers who come into their neighborhood to examine them and criticize their children. Sometimes staff have to "sell" a study to parents (which is particularly difficult if staff members don't understand what is being done—and why—themselves). Identifying ways that a study will be helpful, useful, and constructive for a program and community can facilitate buy-in for research.

  Understanding the cultural and social concerns of the community is also important, both for increasing community support and involvement and for developing protocols that will be understood by families and found acceptable in the community. In this context, program managers noted the importance of examining positive outcomes and strengths, not just documenting failures and problems.

- **Be practical**. Practitioners urged researchers to recognize that out-of-school time programs face financial and staff constraints. Thus, research-based recommendations and implications need to

consider the cost and difficulty involved. For example, rather than suggesting that a program try to change federal or state policies, highlighting cost-free strategies for implementing improvements might be more feasible and realistic for programs on the ground. Along these lines, for instance, practitioners asked for templates of short surveys that they can use to collect data about their program.

RESEARCH RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS

Publications that include research relevant to the out-of-school time community:

Youth Today: This monthly newspaper is read by thousands of professionals in the youth services field. Each issue contains summaries of the latest youth work research: http://www.youthtoday.org

CFK Update: This biweekly e-newsletter, managed by the Forum for Youth Investment, gathers and contextualizes the latest news, research, emerging trends, and policy developments affecting children, youth, families, and communities: http://www.connectforkids.org/newsletters/cfk_weekly

Organizations that disseminate research to the out-of-school time community:

Child Trends. Child Trends has developed short, easy-to-read resources that provide research-based guidance for out-of-school time program providers. Topics range from staff development and cultural competence to implementing evidence-based practices and evaluating program outcomes for youth: http://www.childtrends.org/youthdevelopment

Afterschool Alliance: This organization raises awareness of the importance of afterschool programs and advocates for more afterschool investments. The Alliance has more than 25,000 afterschool program partners and its publications reach more than 65,000 interested individuals every month: http://www.afterschoolalliance.org

Statewide afterschool networks: There are 38 statewide afterschool networks that provide a means for joint planning, sharing of resources and best practices, building bridges to and among federal, state, and local afterschool initiatives, and forging partnerships necessary for comprehensive statewide afterschool policies: http://www.statewideafterschoolnetworks.net (scroll over "About the Statewide Networks" for a list of state networks).

Afterschool.org: This Web site, managed by the AED Center for Youth Development, is targeted at afterschool program directors who want to improve the quality of their programs. It includes information on promising practices from programs around the country, new resources, and a listserv that goes out to more than 2,300 afterschool, out-of-school-time, and extended learning professionals around the globe: http://www.afterschool.org

National Collaboration for Youth: This coalition brings together more than 50 national youth development organizations that collectively serve more than 40 million young people. Its biweekly e-newsletter features the latest news and resources in youth development and human services: http://www.collab4youth.org/nassembly/newsbytes/current.htm

America's Promise Alliance: The Alliance is the nation's largest multisector collaborative dedicated to the well-being of children and youth. Its weekly e-newsletter includes information and resources about children and youth issues: http://www.americaspromise.org/APB

4-H Afterschool: This initiative within the 4-H Youth Development Program focuses on helping 4-H and other youth-serving organizations create and improve afterschool programs in urban, suburban, and rural communities across the United States: http://www.4-hafterschool.org/

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CONCLUSION

Out-of-school time program providers value research and evaluation but often find research overwhelming, inaccessible, or off-target. Closer collaboration between researchers and practitioners and greater attention on the part of researchers to the needs of the out-of-school time program community could increase practitioners' use of research. This, in turn, could bolster program design and delivery, enhancing the experiences of the children and youth involved.

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[1] For more information on evaluation, see Metz, A. (2007). *Why Conduct a Program Evaluation? Five Reasons Why Evaluation Can Help an Out-of-School Time Program*. Research to Results Brief. Washington, DC: Child Trends.