

Summary of Brown Bag Discussion on May 25, 2007
Participant Retention in Program Evaluations

On May 25, 2007, a brown bag lunch discussion was held to address the topic of participant retention in program evaluations. The meeting was located in the TCC Institute, lower level of the Mary Brogan Museum. Four questions guided the discussion and they were:

- 1) Where do measures of retention fit in a LOGIC Model?
- 2) Are measures of retention appropriate in summative or outcome evaluations?
- 3) What are common measures of retention and what are their strengths and weaknesses?
- 4) How can we help programs improve participant retention?

At the beginning of the session, the facilitators of the session shared a couple of examples of Logic models (Kellogg Logic Model Development Guide at www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub3669.pdf and The University of Wisconsin Extension, local evaluation project at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/evallogicmodelexamples.html>). Participants attending the session shared some of their experiences with participant retention in their evaluation research. There were some variations across the professional fields (i.e., education and social service programs). All participants agreed that participant retention should be included in LOGIC models as outputs or in some cases, retention might actually be a short-term outcome. The importance of retention to the success of the program might determine where the measure is placed in the LOGIC model. It was also acknowledged that serious consideration should be given to including participant retention in summative or outcome evaluations. Common measures of participant retention mentioned were percentage of the participants retained by time intervals in a program (e.g., 3, 6, and 12 months) and average number of days in a program or length of stay (LOS). When discussing measures, it was also emphasized that it would be important to consider the length of time for completion and schedules for the actual delivery of services which might be used to adjust the measures in order for them to reflect the actual length of time services were received. Planning for the collection of data that would allow the calculation of the appropriate retention measures was discussed in addition to identifying codes to indicate reasons for a participant being closed. These reasons can help identify aspects of a program that might require more attention and improvement. A couple of examples of research projects that assisted a program in their efforts to improve participant retention were shared in response to the fourth question. Looking at retention across participant subgroups, analyzing relationships between participant characteristics, program experiences and length of stay in a program, and collecting information from direct service workers using a modified Delphi technique were some of the approaches that had been used in recent research to improve participant retention. At the end of the session, there was a brief discussion of topics for future brown bag lunch discussions. One suggestion was mixed methods or methodological options and the use of one page scenarios to stimulate discussion of appropriate methodologies. Questions regarding this workshop should be directed to Mary Kay Falconer (mfalconer@ounce.org) or Joanna Arrington (jarrington@ounce.org) at the Ounce of Prevention Fund.

We would like you to offer your suggestions for future discussions and your assistance to lead one of these discussions would also be appreciated. Contact us at seacoordinator@southeastevaluation.com.