Observation Tips

Planning your observation:

Identify what you are looking for during your observation. Start by looking at what you wrote on your grant application in response to all the questions starting with "What changes related to… do you hope to see…" Then list patrons' actions and behaviors you can actually observe that indicate they are or are not making the change you want to see. For example, if you want to see more adults participating in summer reading with their children and teens, you might look for the following behaviors and actions:

- Adults stay near their children and/or teens most of the time
- Adults ask their children and/or teens questions
- Adults are looking at and listening to their children and/or teens
- Adults are looking at and listening to the library staff or performer leading activities
- Adults are on their cell phones or distracted by other things
- Adults are talking amongst themselves about unrelated topics/issues
- Adults are not looking at or listening to their children and/or teens
- Adults are not looking at or listening to library staff or performer leading activities
- Adults drop off their children and/or teens and go somewhere else

Decide how you are going to document your observations and acquire the resources you need to do that documentation.

- Checklist with the behaviors and actions you're observing and you just write tally marks every time you observe a particular behavior or action
- Chart with pre-determined headings under which you write notes related to each heading
- Log for writing free-form observations and notes
- Photos of the behaviors and actions you are looking for

Develop a process for observing and documenting—make it as easy as possible! Things to consider:

- Who is going to observe and document?
- Can I implement the grant-funded program and observe or do I need another person to help?
- Where and how am I going to file my observations so they are ready to go when I have to write my grant report?
- How am I going to respect the privacy of the patrons I'm observing?
- How am I going to put patrons first while observing them at the same time?

Establish a timeline making observations and documenting them—do it at regular increments, not all the time! Things to consider:

- How often do observations need to be made and documented?
- When is the best time to observe?
- How long will the observations take each time?
- When do I need to have completed my observations so I can fill out my report by the December 1st deadline?

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Conducting your observation:

Label all your documentation with the date, location, and activity you observed.

Remember the difference between an observations and an interpretation. When making an observation, document exactly what you see. An interpretation is making assumptions or judgments about what your see.

- Observation: Two children argued about which extension activities from the handout to do when they got home, while the adult with them checked out three books that had been on this week's summer reading display.
- Interpretation: This family liked this week's summer reading topic, and they seem excited to go home and continue learning about that topic.

Look for the ordinary, not the extraordinary. You are trying to evaluate how *most* people are impacted by your grant-funded project. Document your observations of what *most* people are doing.

Whatever you observed could have happened differently.

- Look for the regularities. What happens when most adults and kids clearly come into the library together? Where do most kids go? Where do most adults go? What are they seeing when they walk in the door that may be influencing where they go? Are they behaving the way you intended?
- Look at the irregularities. Which families are doing something different when they come into the library? What regularities are they *not* following? Are they behaving the way you intended?

Identify the obvious behaviors and actions, and ask why. What is the most obvious behavior you observed? The kids were in the front close to the performer and the adults were loitering in the back. Why did this happen? The parents started off near their children, but it was crowded so they moved away from the front to let more kids get close. The performer didn't do anything to engage the parents. Library staff didn't set any expectations for the parents. Library staff didn't provide anything for the parents to do.

Look at the whole picture. How do most patrons enter the activity? How do they exit? What's going on in the library before or after the activity? What are patrons doing before or after the activity? What do they bring with them to the activity? Who do they bring with them to the activity? What do they take with them when they leave? What do they leave behind?

Reporting your observation results:

Set aside time to examine all the documentation throughout your grant-funded project, make interpretations, and draw conclusions.

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- Based on your documentation did some, about half, or most people participating in your grant-funded project achieve the desired outcomes? You will have to be able to answer this question for each outcome on the grant report form.
- What evidence from your documentation made you come to that conclusion? You will write about this evidence on the grant report form where it asks "What changes related to… did youth/adults make as a result of participating…"
- Is there anything else in your documentation that shows how youth or adults changed as a result of participating in your grant-funded project? You have to share one other example or story about the impact your grant-funded project had in the last question on the report form.

Learn more about observations:

- 7 rules for observational research: http://www.quirks.com/articles/a1997/19971208.aspx?searchID=625728
- Participant observation as a data collection method: http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/466/996#g1
- Introduction to Primary Research: http://www.parlorpress.com/pdf/driscoll--introduction-to-primary-research.pdf