

**Planning for Causality**

*Practical recommendations for securing a sound evaluation design within the integrated planning process*

We all want to know what is working for our students, and we need data and evidence to show it. But exactly how to secure the right evidence amidst the torrent of reports and statistics can be daunting. Perhaps most of us have heard of the randomized control trial (RCT)—that “gold standard” evaluation design for establishing causal claims; however, we must face it: the RCT is extremely difficult to implement in the community college setting. This doesn’t mean it can’t be done, just that it is highly unlikely. Suppose this ideal doesn’t manifest into reality, what does this mean for those program implementers, overseers, administrators and staff who need concrete answers to best serve their students? How do we answer that perennial question, “did it work?”

Thankfully, the Integrated Planning (IP) Model can help with this, and here’s how: by integrating evaluation planning, the data needed, and the analysis within the overall planning process—and from the outset. The IP Model suggests this kind of framework, which will help Institutional Research offices in collecting the most sound evidence. As such, evaluation designs for causality (impact evaluations) will prove more profitable if they arise from a collaborative effort between two fundamental parties (although, probably much more than two): Program Planners/Implementers and Institutional Research. There are five phases of the IP Model, but the most crucial for designing and executing an impact evaluation are the phases Develop, Implement, and Evaluate; therefore, nine practical recommendations for facilitating a theory-driven evaluation process—with causality in mind—can be mapped directly to these phases of the IP Model.

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| **Practical Recommendation** | **IP Phase** |
| 1. Initiate and facilitate meetings that incorporate evaluation processes well before service or program implementation | Develop |
| 1. Gain thorough understanding of the phenomenon under study | Develop |
| 1. Explicitly work with grant directors and service implementers in drafting the program theory (or logic model) | Develop |
| 1. Critically assess the plausibility of causal linkages outlined in the program theory (or logic model) | Develop |
| 1. Prioritize essential questions that must be addressed and identity what information would be needed to answer them 2. Design an evaluation alongside program implementation (consider the campus resources and viability and choose a design that can be readily executed to answer the prioritized questions) | Implement |
| 1. Coach data collection process and broaden these procedures to capture relevant mediating and moderating variables that are outside of student database and tracking systems | Implement |
| 1. Analyze the causal linkages using robust statistical or quasi-experimental techniques (contingent on the evaluation questions) | Evaluate |
| 1. Analyze unanticipated (alongside anticipated) consequences | Evaluate |

**References**

* Chen, H. T. (1990). *Theory-driven evaluations*. Sage.
* Chen, H. T. (2014). *Practical program evaluation: Theory-driven evaluation and the integrated evaluation perspective*. SAGE Publications.