










Choosing Methods

There are many methods for collecting data for performance measurement. Each method is useful for certain measurement tasks (or goals) and less appropriate for others. Each method also has its own set of advantages and constraints. You don't have to avoid a method because of its constraints. However, when you plan your data collection, you should consider constraints and how these constraints will be addressed. There may be a number of data collection instruments for any data collection method. The goal is to select the instrument that is most appropriate for your data. The following table describes several common data collection methods.

Common Data Collection Methods

<p>Pre/Post Standardized Tests</p> 	<p>Characteristics: Pre-existing tests with a large group of respondents. Tests are administered at two points in time (i.e., the beginning and end of activities).</p> <p>Advantages: They offer a rigorous, ready-made context for documenting improvement. They are widely accepted as credible evidence if appropriate for the activity. They may allow for comparison across programs or schools.</p> <p>Constraints: The tests may not be designed to measure outcomes the program expects. They lose validity if changes in content, administration, or context occur.</p>
<p>Pre/Post Program-Based Tests</p> 	<p>Characteristics: An alternative to standardized tests. National service programs can create such tests to document specific knowledge or performance but they capture gains directly related to the consequences of national service program activities. These tests are administered at two or more points in time (e.g., the beginning, quarterly, and the end of activities).</p> <p>Advantages: The tests are widely accepted as credible evidence of accomplishments, if they are directly related to the services provided. They must be administered to respondents both before their participation (a "pre-test") and upon the conclusion of their participation (a "post-test").</p> <p>Constraints: It is difficult to verify the degree to which the responses to test questions are an accurate representation of changes in knowledge or skills because of the program. They may not show changes in a consistent manner.</p>
<p>Logs or Tally Sheets</p> 	<p>Characteristics: A log documents a participant's attendance or achievement such as "acquisition of skills." It is especially appropriate for programs where it is difficult to identify exactly what will be learned at any point in time.</p> <p>Advantages: Logs are performance-based. They accommodate a range of starting and ending points and are easy to complete.</p> <p>Constraints: Data are unreliable and invalid if observation/recording is not systematic. Logs should include specific questions or categories directly tied to the results and indicators to prompt the user.</p>

<p>Rubrics</p> 	<p>Characteristics: Rubrics provide a detailed scale that can be used to measure performance. Rubrics are used either with other records, such as portfolios or written work, or with direct performance, such as conversation.</p> <p>Advantages: Rubrics can be used to measure a variety of abilities and behaviors. When well constructed, they are relatively easy to administer. (See “Instrument Development” in the reference section for more information.)</p> <p>Constraints: Developing a good rubric takes time. Off-the-shelf rubrics may be useful, but you need to match the rubric to the services you provide. The people administering the rubric must be thoroughly trained in its use.</p>
<p>Performance Ratings</p> 	<p>Characteristics: Set of questions regarding the manner in which national service participants carry out their activities. The focus is on issues such as attitude and ability to carry out specific tasks.</p> <p>Advantages: Data collection can be integrated with regularly scheduled meetings with the supervisor, or accomplished through a supervisor questionnaire.</p> <p>Constraints: Rating for performance standards must be explicit and consistent. The rating process must be short and focused. Supervisors are unlikely to be able to assess the persistence of any traits observed outside the job site. It may be difficult to link to outcomes of participant development activities.</p>
<p>Interviews</p> 	<p>Characteristics: Data are collected orally. The interviewer asks clearly defined, systematic questions. Usually questions are predetermined and limited to a specific topic. Sometimes there are additional questions asked to elicit a more detailed response.</p> <p>Advantages: The data demonstrate specific examples of the observed outcome of national service programs. Interviews allow for flexibility.</p> <p>Constraints: The interviewer must be skilled in the process of interviewing and conduct the interviews in a systematic manner to ensure unbiased results.</p>
<p>Surveys</p> 	<p>Characteristics: The data are collected in a written format. Each respondent provides data on a set of clearly defined questions.</p> <p>Advantages: The data can be used to demonstrate specific examples of the observed outcome of national service programs.</p> <p>Constraints: It is difficult to balance specific and general questions and ensure that larger or unexpected issues are not missed. Survey instruments must be completed consistently to avoid biased results.</p>

<p>Focus Groups</p> 	<p>Characteristics: A moderator guides a group discussion involving six to ten individuals representing specific stakeholders.</p> <p>Advantages: Focus groups provide specific, pertinent data. Group interaction can produce more information than individual interviews.</p> <p>Constraints: A specific set of skills is required of the focus group moderator. Data are difficult to summarize succinctly.</p>
<p>Plugging Into Existing Information</p> 	<p>Characteristics: Other sources have collected the existing data, often statistical in nature. This may range from student grade point averages to neighborhood crime statistics.</p> <p>Advantages: It is often perceived as being more reliable and less subject to bias than other kinds of data. It can be less burdensome than other methods and prevents duplicating data collection.</p> <p>Constraints: The usefulness depends on whether the program being evaluated can reasonably be expected to influence the data directly. A variety of factors typically influence these indicators, and they may change very slowly even if a national service program does have a great deal of impact on the problem being studied (e.g., crime statistics).</p>