

November 2006 CMS MIG Conference (Chicago, IL)
Workgroup #5: Constructing a Research Project (aka Research Design 101)

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Session Objectives

- Add to participants' conceptual "tool-box" for developing and implementing a research project related to the MIG initiative
 - Provide practical guidelines for defining a researchable question and planning how to answer it
 - Brainstorm ideas to address specific obstacles, presented by participants, that are blocking new research efforts
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Workshop Agenda

A. Brief Overview Of Five Basic Steps In Research Design;

Typically, a researcher moves back and forth through these steps; for example, he or she may have to refine the primary question in light of new information or if fewer resources are available than anticipated. Rarely does a project move through these steps in a linear fashion, without looping back and forth to some extent.

1. Develop a focused, researchable question for a specific project

One of the biggest challenges faced by a researcher or a research team is to craft a researchable question. If the question is too broad, the project is likely to provide no useful or reliable answers. If the question is too narrow, the project may yield findings that are irrelevant to program administrators or policymakers. The rule of thumb here is: Its better to be able to say one thing with certainty than many things with doubt. Don't try to do too much in a single project.

Examples of questions that policymakers may ask, but which are too vague to answer through a single research project are listed below. (Answers to general questions are typically derived from a literature review or a series of strategically linked projects.)

- Is the Buy-In program working?
- Are participants and employers pleased with the program?
- Are monies for the program being spent wisely?

Examples of "researchable" questions:

- After one year of operations, was the actual number of participants in the program less than, the same as, or more than initial projections?
- Did applicants to the Buy-In program find the program requirements easy to understand?
- How much does it cost to operate the program, and how does this cost relate to the total dollars earned by participants in the program during one year?

2. Outline how the question will be answered and what resources will be needed

Once you have framed a question, determine how you will go about answering the question. This step involves research design. Designs can be based on

- Qualitative methods, such as key informant interviewing or focus groups
- Survey methods, using single or repeated structured questionnaires
- Experimental or quasi-experimental methods that compare intervention groups with control or comparison groups
- Analysis of existing data, such as administrative or claims data

A research study may use multiple methods or only one method. The major limiting factor here is cost. If dollars are quite limited, then it may be possible only to have a few interviews with key informants or perhaps a single focus group. Its not possible to move on to step 3 until you have a general sense of how many resources will be available.

In addition to money, resources means internal support. Without sufficient support from key leaders within your agency or within the agencies with which you need to collaborate, research projects can founder. The rule here is: Better to line up support (including necessary approvals) before you get too far into the planning stages. Participants in the workshop underscored long unanticipated delays in securing the approval of program administrators, even within the agencies that were sponsoring the project.

3. Identify specific methods for collecting data systematically

Once you have a general sense of the scope of the project, the next task involves developing the specific strategies for collecting data systematically. The key word here – in fact, the key word in all research – is “systematically.” Credible research depends on explaining exactly what you did and why your findings are valid in relation to the question that the research was designed to answer.

This step may require technical support to help you identify:

- Strategies for identifying focus group members who will be good representatives of your target group
- The best sampling strategy for your survey
- Previously used, valid questions and procedures for administering a survey to individuals with disabilities
- The strengths and limitations of establishing a database for research purposes that is based on administrative data from one or more agencies

4. Determine how data will be analyzed

Collecting data is one thing; analyzing it is something else. State staff can find themselves with a research project that has collected lots of data but with little

understanding of what to do with them. That's why it is critical to determine exactly how you will analyze the data before you start the data collection process.

One good strategy is to develop blank table shells that you would like to fill after the analysis of the data. Developing table shells as part of the research planning process can save a lot of time and confusion when the data come in – and can help refine the question that the research is designed to answer in the first place.

5. Write a report for a defined audience

Who cares about your research? If the answer is “Only me,” you may want to consider getting a job in academia.

But if the answer is “The members of the governors council on disability” or some other group of policymakers, then make sure you know what kind of a report would be helpful to them. Generally speaking, policymakers want to know 1) the key findings and 2) how much trust they should have in the findings. A clearly-written study report that does not overstate findings and describes both the strengths and limitations of the study's methods has a better chance of influencing the policymaking process than a report that makes broad statements with little credible evidence to support them. Also, policymakers typically have many demands on their time and a report that is full of jargon or otherwise hard to read will garner little attention.

B. Some “Tricks Of The Trade”

1. There are three strategies for starting a research project:

- make a plan and get comments on it
- revise the plan and get more comments
- keep planning

The point here is that planning is worth it, even if the research is delayed by six months or a year; a good plan that has been reviewed by multiple stakeholders and experts saves money and improves the results over the long term.

Several participants noted that their states contracted with a company first to develop a plan and then, in a separate contract, to conduct the research. This strategy can ensure that all stakeholders have input into the plan and lead to greater levels of support for the project.

2. Truth emerges more readily from error than from confusion.

The point of research is to find an answer to a question. If you really want to know whether some component of a program is working, you have to be willing to find out that it isn't. But its better to know that something is clearly *not* working than to come to the end of the research project still uncertain whether it is or is not. Plan your research to give you as unambiguous answers as possible.

3. Pilot testing saves money and embarrassment

Pilot testing is really part of planning. Few researchers have not been glad that they first pilot-tested their survey. Focus groups are especially useful in the process of pilot-testing a survey or a new intervention.

4. “Teaching pigs to fly” generally isn’t worth it

Research invariably involves some kind of data collection. Sometimes, researchers want program staff or providers to fill out forms about their activities or the services they deliver. Sometimes, researchers want administrators to compile information that is not pertinent to daily operations. Although the importance of this information may seem self-evident to researchers, the process of collecting research data can require routines or procedures that are unfamiliar or irrelevant to program staff or providers. For most projects, data collection procedures are more likely to be successful if they do not depend on program staff or providers.

5. When telling the story, aim for the Pulitzer in short non-fiction

How many research reports have you read that were barely understandable or that failed to provide a clear description of the question, the methods, and the findings?
Sometimes, even well-planned and useful projects

Writing a readable report about a research project can take a lot of time, experience, or both. In many cases, researchers do not leave enough resources to present their work in creative ways that capture the attention of their audience and explains the relevancy of the findings. The point here is to make sure that the last step – telling your story – reflects all the hard work you put into the project.

C. Getting Started On A Research Design

One useful exercise to begin a research project is to gather your team together and actually write out the answers to the following questions:

1. What is the most important question that you would like to answer with a focused research effort?
2. What methods could you use to answer this question?
3. What resources (time, money, expertise) are available and what additional expertise would be needed?
4. Who exactly is your audience and what do they really want to know?

The Center for MIG-RATS will be posting related reading materials and other suggestions that might be helpful for getting started on a research project.

GOOD LUCK!