Introduction to Evaluating Inputs

What are Inputs?
Inputs are "*the resources that are available to help clients change" (*Baudouin et al, 2007, p. 148). These resources include time, cost, materials, and so forth that are required for you to deliver your programming (not the actual workshops, appointments, etc., which are looked at more closely under the sections of Processes and Outcomes)

Why Assess Inputs?
The process of assessing inputs may be undertaken for a variety of reasons, including:

> **Evaluation**
> When designing or reviewing a program, tracking inputs can assist you in finding or supporting answers to questions that are raised (e.g. Are outcomes/processes worth the costs? Is this program feasible? Are we running more/less efficiently than last year?)
>
> **Decision making**
> Assessment of inputs can be used for decision making and planning purposes. Having a clear representation of what is needed to deliver a program is necessary for effective distribution of staff, budget and other resources. Comparing the planned inputs to the actual inputs can also help identify areas where shortages exist or resources are being wasted.
>
> **Documentation**
> Simply documenting what is involved in a program may be worthwhile. Having such a list may be very useful for staff training. While every input doesn't necessarily need to be evaluated, all inputs can be recorded, even if they are constant.

Possible Inputs of Interest
There are a variety of potential inputs you can measure – any of which may be relevant for a comprehensive look at evaluation.

Possible inputs to measure include:

Staff	Funding	Infrastructure
Number of staff	Continuing funding available	Marketing support
Cost of staff	Time-specific or project specific funding available (e.g. from event sponsors)	Registration and client intake (in person or online)
Training/credentials of staff	User fees (e.g. from employers, from students)	Technical and website support
Skills & competencies of staff		Insurance costs
Hours staff are available		
Staff availability during off hours (e.g. for evening outreach workshops)		

Facilities	Service Guidelines	Community Resources
Space (office, workshop, event)	Mandate	Professionals in other offices
Technology for staff use (data projector, laptop)	Policies and procedures	Other resources on campus (e.g. alumni support network, mentorship programs)
Technology for student use (e.g. computer workstations)		
Handouts and other materials		
Books		
Electronic resources (e.g. online fee-for-service career tools)		
Accessibility – are materials and technology accessible to all students? Costs for interpreters, note-takers, etc.		

Note: these categories (Staff, Funding, Infrastructure, Facilities, Service Guidelines, and Community Resources) are examples only and may be changed depending on your particular centre or program characteristics.

Choosing Inputs
As you document the inputs for a particular program you will not necessarily include each of the types of inputs listed above. The inputs you choose to document and gather data on will depend on what types of resources are applicable and relevant to your centre, and which variables will provide data to help with the decisions you are trying to make or the questions you are trying to answer at any given time.

Specific Uses of Documenting and Measuring Inputs
You may want to document and/or measure inputs for a number of different purposes, including:

- For program scoping.
  - If you are trying to determine whether to offer a new program or service, documenting the inputs required can help you investigate what would it take to create and deliver that new initiative.
- For calculating costs of particular activities.
  - You may want to know how many resources particular activities required. For example, you may wonder “How much does a resume appointment cost to deliver?” Documenting inputs will help you answer this type of question.
- For distributing resources.
  - As you try to decide how to distribute the resources you have available, documenting inputs can help by answering “What amount of resources does this particular service/program take, compared to another service/program?” and by allowing you to make more informed decisions about where to allocate resources.
- For getting greater clarity on how time and resources are spent.
  - Documenting inputs will allow you to see in greater detail how time and resources are currently being used.
- For identifying gaps in resources.
  - After documenting the inputs that are required for your programming plans, you may be able to identify what, if any, resources are missing.
- For decision making about what to continue, and what to discontinue.

Inputs can also be considered in terms of how they relate to processes (see Section 3B) and outcomes (see Section 3C). For example, you might have questions such as:

- With this amount of resources, what can we deliver?
- If we received more resources, what could we then deliver?
- If we received fewer resources, what could we deliver?
- What are our costs per student?
- How does the cost per student of program/service x compare with the cost per student of program service y? In other words, "Where will we get the best 'bang for our bucks" or "What are the most relied upon resources our clients want?"

Steps for Documenting Inputs

Because no two programs or organizations have identical priorities or access to resources, the assessment process and related tools must be flexible and easily customized.

Step 1: What inputs are of interest?

In general, the first step in assessing inputs is to think about all of the resources that go into a particular program/activity and list them. This may require some brainstorming and gathering of information from multiple sources. Even if an item seems intangible or doesn't have a direct link to the intended outcomes of the program, this list should be as comprehensive as possible. All resources drawn upon can be listed, even if just for documentation purposes at this point.

Step 2: What questions do we want to answer?

Once a comprehensive list of inputs is created, the next step is to determine what the priorities and key questions that need answering are. These will differ from program to program and maybe even from cycle to cycle for the same program. It is also possible for this step is taken before or in tandem with the aforementioned step. Some example input related key questions may include:

- What is the cost per student to run this program?
- How could we run this program more cost effectively?
- How much staff time would be required to run a new program?
- Now that we are reconfiguring our office space, what would be the ideal set-up (office space, computer terminals, etc)?
- What campus and community resources would I need to draw upon to run this new program?

There will likely be certain inputs that are kept track of consistently (ex. budget, headcount), and others that only come into play when necessary for a key question being answered. For example, one year the focus may be on thoroughly assessing staff time and capacity planning, whereas another year the focus might be on technological resources used in a program. In any case, the list of inputs should be revisited to determine which inputs are critical to assess in order to answer key questions.

Step 3: What units of measurement will we use?

The unit of measurement for some inputs may be easy to choose, for example the cost of materials, room bookings or other such resources would be noted in dollars.

The unit of measurement for other inputs may not be so obvious. An example might be staff time – should this be measured in hours, in percentage of a job? Should it be noted if the time use is different during different parts of the year? Another example would be "support from a supervisor." This may not have a number attached to it, but notes about what specific support is required (eg a letter of congratulations, a quote to include in the brochure, or a 10 minute welcome at reception). Some discussion and thought need to go into how best to capture variables like these.

Some inputs will need to be assigned values so that they can be measured and evaluated, whereas others may only be reflected for documentation purposes. If forced, a value could be assigned to every documented input. However, it will be more effective to assign values only to items that factor in to the questions being answered with the assessment rather than to bog down the decision making and evaluation process with irrelevant data. At this stage, some of the listed inputs may need to be broken down further for the key question to be answered. For example, if staff time were being assessed, it may be useful to boil down the number of hours that staff work to the number of hours spent on certain activities.

General Considerations Regarding Inputs

Here are a few things to consider to help you strategize about how to incorporate documenting and assessing inputs into your evaluation practices:

- Inputs are really about measuring quantity of resources that are required and/or utilized.
- Because priorities and key questions being answered vary from program to program and may even change over time, certain elements are going to be more critical than others. This may mean that you may be documenting the same inputs across programs, or different inputs for different programs.
- While you may create a general tool that you use to document inputs for all your programs, this tool will need to be a living document because from year to year, decisions as to which inputs are to be measured may change.
- Sometimes the same "item" may be both documented as an input variable, and evaluated as a process variable.
    - For example, think of a program that requires you to recruit employers to participate (for example an internship program). You may want to record the resources required for recruitment as an input. This may include items such as staff time, travel time, phone costs, and marketing materials. This would allow you to assess what resources are going into the recruitment process for this program and answer the question "How much are we spending on recruitment?"

      You may also want to look at recruitment as a process variable. In this case, you would be attempting to answer the question "How well are we doing in our recruitment?" and "How can we measure the effectiveness of our recruitment activities?" In this case, you are not looking at the inputs of recruitment (ie the resources required) but are evaluating the process (i.e. the practice and activities) of doing recruitment.

Example Tools for Measuring Inputs

Here are several tools that have been used to look at inputs:

Each section of this guide contains tools that allow you to document and evaluate a specific component – either inputs, processes, or outcomes. However, often a single tool can in fact be used for multiple assessment purposes. For example, a post-service questionnaire can capture information about both processes and outcomes.

Inputs Worksheet for Proposed Employment Prep for International Students, Centre for Career Education, University of Windsor	Overview

	Worksheet	
Inputs Worksheet for Volunteer Internship Program, Centre for Career Education, University of Windsor	Overview	
	Worksheet	
Capacity Planning, Career Centre, Trent University	Overview	
	Worksheet	

Inputs References

Baudouin, R., Bezanson, L., Borgen, B., Goyer, L., Hiebert, B., Lalande, V., Magnusson, K., Michaud, G., Renald, C., & Turcotte, M. (2007). Demonstrating value: A draft framework for evaluating the effectiveness of career development interventions. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, 41(3), 146-157.