

# **Improving Local Evaluation Utility Within Multi-Site Risk Behavior Prevention Program Evaluations**

*(abstract and presentation slides)*

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## ABSTRACT

Behaviors that put adolescents and adults at risk for a variety of health-related problems, including risky sexual activity, alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, violence, poor nutrition, and inadequate physical activity, are increasingly addressed via school or community based prevention program interventions. Interventions might be focused on the individual, the family, the school, the community, or some combination of these agents, but all strive to achieve a lasting change in individual risk behaviors as one set of ultimate outcomes. Many of these programs have been developed outside of a research and evaluation context, and some might not have been evaluated at all. Others have demonstrated efficacy in an intensive researcher supervised, high fidelity, one-site or few-site implementation. Still others have failed to demonstrate efficacy under any conditions, but have been skillfully packaged and promoted. Of all of these programs, it is all too rare to find ones that have conclusively demonstrated *effectiveness* in real world applications across multiple diverse sites.

As this knowledge deficit attracts more attention, multi-site demonstration programs are increasingly being employed to test the effectiveness of prevention interventions under diverse conditions of real world program operations. Demonstration programs typically involve locally implemented prevention interventions, usually within the bounds of common cross-site theoretical frameworks, strategies, and goals, and are tied to uniform evaluation requirements. Demonstration programs vary in terms of the fidelity to a common intervention program model expected of the participating sites, the rigor of the multi-site evaluation design, and the relative allocation of resources between the program-wide and local aspects of the evaluation. One feature that many of these programs share is a generalized cross-site evaluation plan, combined with a local evaluation component supported at each site. The evaluation is often characterized by a precarious balance between research rigor and program-wide summative evaluation priorities on one hand, and adaptability to disparate local community conditions and needs, on the other. When local needs are insufficiently addressed, *motivational drift* might result among critical local participants, simultaneously attenuating the effectiveness of the local implementation, the local evaluation, and ultimately the cross-site demonstration.

In this paper, we start by reviewing some of the challenges encountered in balancing cross-site against local site needs and priorities, based on several examples from federal, state, and foundation funded demonstration programs. We then discuss causes behind the *motivational drift* that is frequently observed among the local site program participants and local evaluation staff. Inclusive evaluation approaches are discussed as an effective means to ameliorate this drift. Finally we present six specific strategies for remediating these problems, with examples from our and others' work of how these strategies can be applied from the bottom up in the context of top-down multisite studies of various types.

## TO OBTAIN A COMPLETE PAPER

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*American Psychological Association 106th Annual Conference  
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## **Improving Local Evaluation Utility Within Multi-Site Risk Behavior Prevention Programs**

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## **Multisite Demonstrations with Local Evaluation Components: Examples**

### **Federal Government Funded**

- *High Risk Youth Demonstration Program*  
(Center for Substance Abuse Prevention)

### **State Government Funded**

- *Teen Pregnancy Prevention Grant Program*  
(California Department of Education)
- *Community Challenge Grant Program*  
(California Department of Health Services)

### **Foundation Funded**

- *Fighting Back Program* (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation)

## Key Characteristics

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### **PROGRAM**

- locally designed and implemented interventions programs
- within a generalized cross-site framework

### **EVALUATION**

- externally imposed cross-site evaluation design
- often with a minimally supported local evaluation add-on

## A Precarious Balance

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Research rigor and cross-site  
summative evaluation

vs.

Adaptability to local  
conditions and needs

## Motivational Drift

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- **Evaluation Month 1:** *How can we make this evaluation as useful and as rigorous as possible?*
- **Evaluation Month 6:** *How much of our program resources is this evaluation going to eat up?*
- **Evaluation Month 12:** *What is the least we need to do to meet this part of the evaluation mandate?*
- **Evaluation Month 18+:** *Can we get away with ignoring this part of the evaluation mandate?*

## The Etiology of Motivation Drift

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- **Detachment:** Lack of ownership by the sites of the externally imposed multisite evaluation design
- **Irrelevance:** Insufficient applicability of the overall design to local evaluation and program improvement needs
- **Outcome Pessimism:** Multidimensional challenges to demonstrating significant program outcomes

## Detachment

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### **Participation Limitations**

- *none vs. input vs. genuine partnership*

### **Design Rigidity**

- *legislation*
- *timing*
- *(false) rigor*

## Irrelevance

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- *Summative* instead of developmental
- *Future-focused* instead of immediate
- *Generalized* instead of specific
- *Rigid* instead of flexible

## Outcome Pessimism

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- Detachment
- Under-relevance
- Data burden
- Type III errors
- Outcome mis-specification
- Experimental design problems

## Inclusive Evaluation

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### **By any other name ...**

- Participatory, collaborative, empowerment, etc.
- All involve program staff and other relevant participants as full partners

### **Organizational development approaches**

- *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (Patton)
- *Continuous Process Improvement* (Deming)

## Utilization-Focused Evaluation

- Commitment to intended use by intended users
- Ongoing and continuous strategizing about use
- Personal factor: interest and commitments of specific real people
- Situational design and adaptation
- Adequate investment of time and money

Patton, M. Q. (1997). *Utilization-Focused Evaluation: The New Century Text*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Constantine, N. A. (1997, November). *Coordinated statewide and local evaluations of teenage pregnancy prevention grant programs in California*. Symposium presented at the American Evaluation Association Annual Conference, San Diego, CA. (with Claire Brindis, Shari Golan, Kathleen Curry, and Michael Patton).

## Continuous Process Improvement

- Full involvement of local stakeholders
- Collaborative problem solving
- Regular review of process and outcome data
- Ultimate goal of helping program staff to become:
  - more responsive to clients
  - more effective in providing service
  - more focused on achieving program's mission

Kerridge, D. (1991). Deming's ideas change the world. *American Statistical News*, 173, 1-4.

Stone, JR, III, Madzar, S, Cagampang, H. H., & Smith, C. (1995). *Continuous Improvement in Programs Connecting School to Work*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, Center for Research in Vocational Education.



## Specific Strategies

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1. Support implementation
2. Facilitate community among sites
3. Evaluate for development
4. Recycle data
5. Focus outcomes
6. Identify realistic goals

## 1. Support Implementation

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*Program implementation often taken for granted; Type III (implementation) errors common*

- Facilitate articulation of program's theoretical framework
- Conduct ongoing needs assessment
- Offer a variety of training and support activities
- Build a network of support

## 2. Evaluate for development

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- Balance formative, developmental, and outcome evaluation components
- Conduct program assessment (evaluability assessment)
- Educate funders and policy makers about legitimacy and importance of developmental evaluation
- Leave a legacy

## 3. Facilitate Community

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- Use implementation support to help build community by providing:
- Training meetings with interactive activities
  - Advance readings and discussion
  - E-mail discussion groups
  - Facilitated conference calls
  - Demonstration sites
  - Site staff as specialized peer consultants

## 4. Recycle Data

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- Employ data management information systems
- Provide monthly data quality control reports
- Provide monthly program activity and accomplishment reports
- Ensure timeliness of reports
- Facilitate discussion and interpretation

## 5. Focus Outcomes

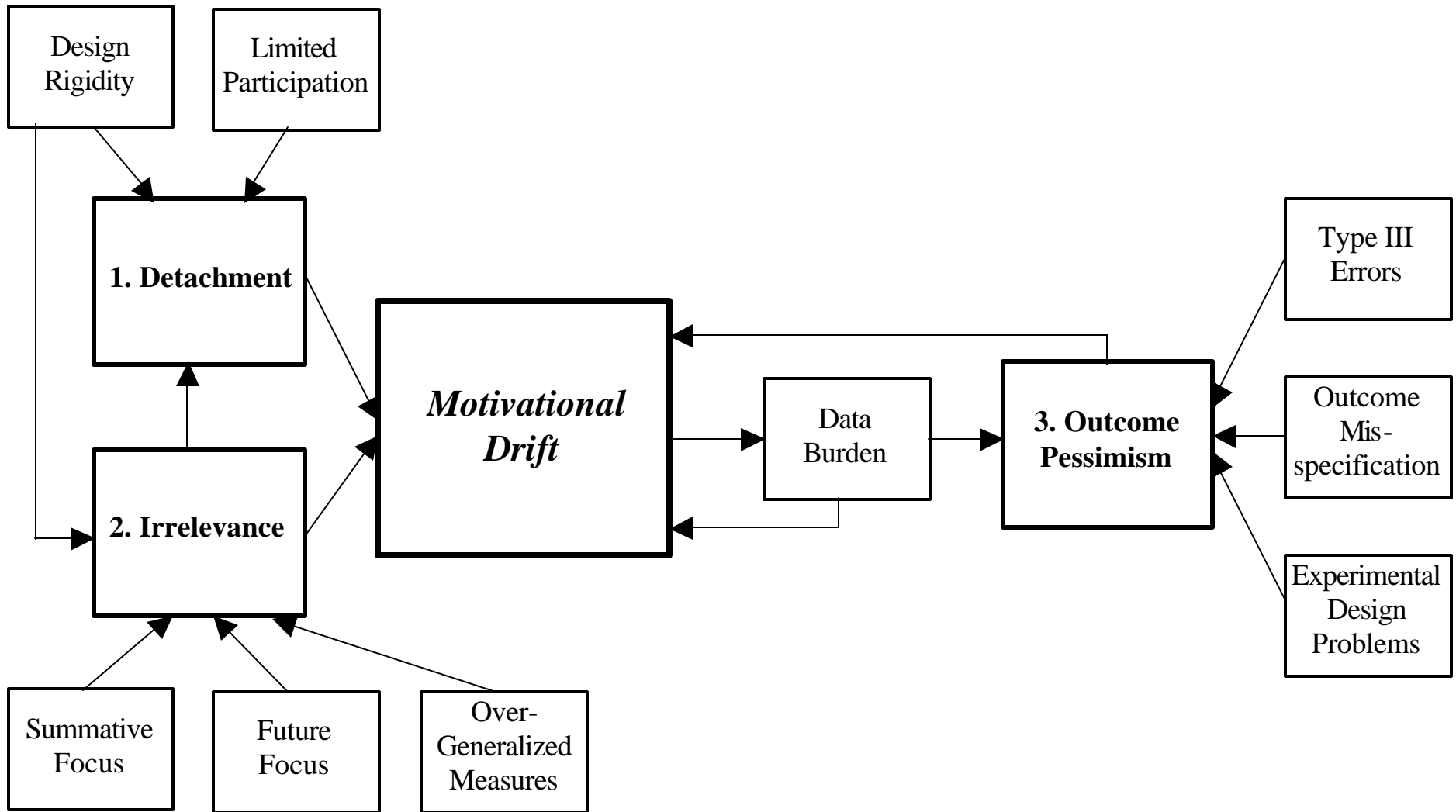
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- Include site participation on multisite design
- Respect and value local wisdom
- Write legislation with outcome flexibility consistent with program flexibility
- Offer coordinated data reporting and survey modules across sites
- Employ hierarchical theories of change from generalized to specific
- Use meta analysis approaches as an alternative to pooling of data

## 6. Identify Realistic Goals

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- Facilitate critical review of proposed program goals and outcomes
- Educate funders and legislators about realistic program goals and outcomes
- Include justification of proposed goals and outcomes as funding review criterion



**Figure 1. The Etiology of Motivational Drift**

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