What are different methods to gather data and to evaluate a program?

Surveys of participants – whether done through a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, online, or over the phone – use structured questions and are valuable for learning about participants’ perceptions of a program and its impacts on them. However, surveys may not be valuable or feasible for all programs. Depending on the intended outcomes of your program, you may seek other forms of data to better evaluate your program’s impacts.

Valuable information for evaluating your program may come from people (as in a survey), observations or visual sources, or from existing documents or records. Here are some possible methods for gathering program data:

- **Observation**: Information collected through seeing and listening, often with the aid of an observation protocol that can guide your attention. Observation may be done as a program is delivered, or afterward in a location where the desired outcomes are expected to occur.

- **Interviews**: Information collected by talking with and listening to people, face-to-face or over the phone. Interviews can be highly structured, like in a survey, or more open-ended and conversational, depending on your evaluation purposes.

- **Focus groups or group assessment**: Gathering data and/or participant interpretations of data through focus group interviews or group processes like brainstorming, community forums, Delphi, or nominal group technique.

- **Document analysis**: The collection and careful analysis of existing documents relevant to the evaluation. These documents could be curriculum materials, minutes from board or community group meetings, newspaper articles, or public records, among others.

- **Diaries, journals, or logs**: Recording of events or observations over time. Participants, program presenters, or others can record information about a program briefly and factually, or note their personal perspectives as well.

- **Case study**: In-depth examination of a particular case (e.g., site/location, group of participants, program variation). Case studies use multiple sources of information and methods to provide as complete a picture as possible.

Deciding which method or methods to use in a program evaluation requires you to think about the intended outcomes of your program as well as practical considerations (i.e., the time, energy and resources you have for evaluation).
METHODS FOR GATHERING EVALUATION DATA

SURVEYS
Use structured questions to learn about participants’ perceptions of a program and its impacts on them.

OBSERVATION
Information collected through seeing and listening, often with an observation protocol. May be done during a program or afterward in an environment where changes are expected to occur.

INTERVIEWS
Data is collected by talking with and listening to participants, face-to-face or over the phone. Can be highly-structured or open-ended and conversational, depending on your evaluation purposes.

FOCUS GROUPS
Group interviews or processes like brainstorming, community forums, nominal group technique, or Delphi (group decision-making that involves collecting the judgment of experts).

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS
Collect and analyze documents related to the evaluation. This could include curriculum materials, minutes from board or community group meetings, newspaper articles, or public records, among others.

DIARIES, JOURNALS, Logs
Participants, program presenters, or others can record information about their perspective of a program.

CASE STUDY
In-depth examination of a particular case (e.g., site/location, group of participants, program variation) using multiple sources of information and methods to provide as complete a picture as possible.