What Works? Analyzing Natural Variation in Program Components

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OPRE Innovative Methods Meeting
What Works, Under What Circumstances, and How?
Methods for Unpacking the "Black Box" of Programs and Policies

September 3, 2014

What Works? Analyzing Natural Variation in Program Components

❖ Goal: Answer ambitious questions with high degree of rigor

❖ Multi-component programs add complication to identifying evidence-based "programs" and disseminating them

❖ To really understand "what works," need to systematically correlate the variation observed in impacts with the existence of specific program features.

❖ These three papers do this – two analyze results across many prior studies and one designed a new study that purposefully includes numerous sites and exploits the variation across those sites.

Understanding effects of specific program components can improve decisions about <u>service delivery</u> AND <u>allocation of resources</u>

❖ Individual service providers and administrators

❖ Program model developers

❖ Local funders

❖ State and federal policy-makers

Some challenges and advice

❖ No single study can answer all questions - decide which parts of the black box your study is positioned to pry open and focus on those

❖ Instead of trying to measure every possible influence, bolster rigor in other ways:

- Find features that vary exogenously
- Use more than one method / conduct sensitivity tests
- Put bounds around degree of bias

❖ Find ways to communicate our level of confidence in these complex findings

Some challenges and advice

❖ To keep building knowledge *across* studies and fields:

- Need progress on theory and empirical evidence: Which features are "necessary" for impacts, "why," and "under what circumstances?"

- Use common constructs and measures in implementation research, and include those results in publications

❖ Both syntheses and new studies would benefit from additional focus on the counterfactual

Conceptual Framework:
Sources of Variation in Program Impacts

Program Model

| Treatment Planned |
| Implementation Plan |

Treatment Offered → Treatment Received → Outcomes

Treatment Contrast

Program Effect

Treatment Offered → Treatment Received → Outcomes

Characteristics of Implementing Organization

Client Characteristics and Context

Weiss, Bloom, and Brock (*JPAM*, 2014)