What is the difference between program evaluation and research??

Program evaluations are "individual systematic studies conducted periodically or on an ad hoc basis to assess how well a program is working[1]." Largely, program evaluation is not the same as research and usually does not need to be as complicated.

Although we use the same techniques in evaluation and research and though both methods are equally systematic and rigorous, here are some key differences:

1. **Program Evaluation Focuses on a Program vs. a Population**

   Research aims to produce new knowledge within a field. Ideally, researchers design studies to be able to generalize findings to the whole population–every single individual within the group being studied. Evaluation only focuses on the particular program at hand. Evaluations may face added resource and time constraints.

2. **Program Evaluation Improves vs. Proves**

   The purpose of evaluation is to *improve*, not prove. In other words, research strives to establish that a particular factor caused a particular effect. The goal of evaluation, however, is to help improve a particular program. In order to improve a program, program evaluations get down-to-earth. They examine all the pieces required for successful program outcomes, including the practical inner workings of the program such as program activities.

3. **Program Evaluation Determines Value vs. Being Value-free**

   Evaluation assigns value to a program while research seeks to be value-free. Researchers collect data, present results and then draw conclusions that expressly link to the empirical data. Evaluators add extra steps. They collect data, examine how the data lines up with previously-determined standards (also known as criteria or benchmarks) and determine the worth of the program. So while evaluators also make conclusions that must reflect the empirical data, they take the *extra steps of comparing the program data to performance benchmarks and judging the value of the program*.

4. **Program Evaluations ask "Is it working?" vs. "Did it work"**

   Tom Chapel, MA, MBA, Chief Evaluation Officer at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) differentiates between evaluation and research on the basis of when they occur in relation to time:

   > Researchers must stand back and wait for the experiment to play out. To use the analogy of cultivating tomato plants, researchers ask, "How many tomatoes did we grow?" Evaluation, on the other hand, is a *process* unfolding "*in real time*." In addition to determining numbers of tomatoes, evaluators also inquire about related areas like, "how much watering and weeding is

[1] U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2005). Performance Measurement and Evaluation. Retrieved January 8, 2012 from **http://www.gao.gov/special.pubs/gg98026.pdf**

taking place?" "Are there nematodes on the plants?" If evaluators realize that activities are insufficient, staff are free to adjust accordingly.

To summarize, evaluation: 1) focuses on programs vs. populations, 2) improves vs. proves, 3) determines value vs. stays value-free and 4) happens in real time. In light of these 4 points, evaluations, when carried out properly, have great potential to be very relevant and useful for program-related decision-making.