# Research vs. Program Evaluation

**Research** is defined as a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to *generalizable knowledge* (knowledge where the research findings can be applied to populations or situations beyond the studied population; if you plan on publishing or presenting the information at professional conferences it is considered generalizable). The motivation is to advance broad knowledge and theory. These studies generally need IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval.

**Program evaluation** is defined as a systematic collection of information about the activities of programs to make judgments about the program, improve effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future program development. These types of studies are usually designed to bring improvement to the program in that *local setting*. For example, implementing a practice to improve patient care at a specific hospital. There is no intent to generalize the findings to the larger community. These studies do not generally need IRB approval.

## Common Elements

In the table below, elements that are common to evaluation and research projects are listed. This list is not intended to be comprehensive and not all elements are required in order for a project to be considered research or evaluation. Rather, this list of elements can be used to assist researchers in determining whether an activity involves research requiring IRB review. Note that not all projects will fall into one column or the other; if in doubt, always contact the IRB office at [umric@maine.edu](mailto:umric@maine.edu) for guidance.

| **Evaluation** | **Research** |
| --- | --- |
| Determines merit, worth, or value | Strives to be value-free |
| Assessment of how well a process, product, or program is working | Aims to produce new knowledge within a field *(designed to develop or contribute…)* |
| Focus on process, product, or program | Focus on population *(human subjects)* |
| Designed to improve a process, product, or program and may include:   * Needs assessment * Process, outcome, or impact evaluation * Cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness analyses | May be descriptive, relational, or causal |
| Designed to assess effectiveness or a process, product, or program | Designed to be generalized to a population beyond those participating in the study or contribute broadly to knowledge or theory in a field of study *(designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge)* |
| Assessment of program or product as it would exist regardless of the evaluation | May include an experimental or non-standard intervention |
| Rarely subject to peer review | Frequently submitted for peer review |
| Results are presented to program stakeholders | Expectation is to present results in scholarly forum or publication |
| Activity will rarely alter the timing or frequency of standard procedures | Standard procedures or normal activities may be altered by an experimental intervention |
| Frequently, the entity in which the activity is taking place will also be the funding source | May have external funding |
| Conducted within a setting of changing actors, priorities, resources, and timelines | Controlled setting (interaction or intervention) or natural setting (observation which may or may not include interaction or intervention) |
| Study question – how well does it work? | Study question – how does it work? |

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