Defining and Evaluating Impact within Community Collaborations for Empowerment

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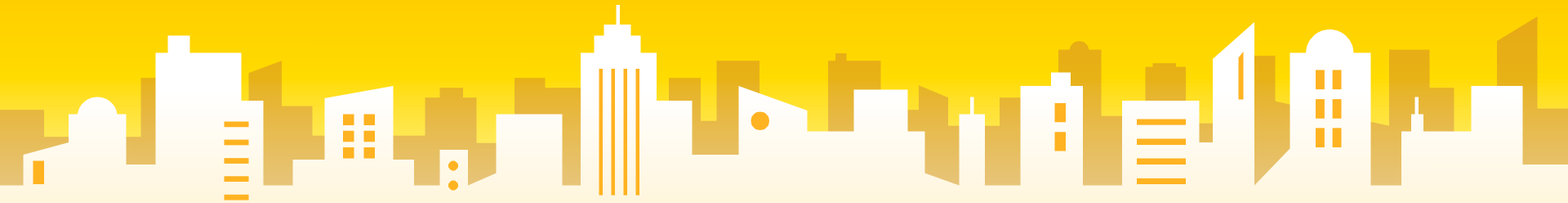**Kutztown University of Pennsylvania**

Community Empowerment

An intentional **ongoing process** centered in the local community, involving **mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation**, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources **gain greater access to and control** over those resources (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989) or simply a process by which people gain control over their lives, **democratic participation in the life of their community** (Rappaport, 1987), and a critical understanding of their environment (Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, Checkoway, 1992). Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 570
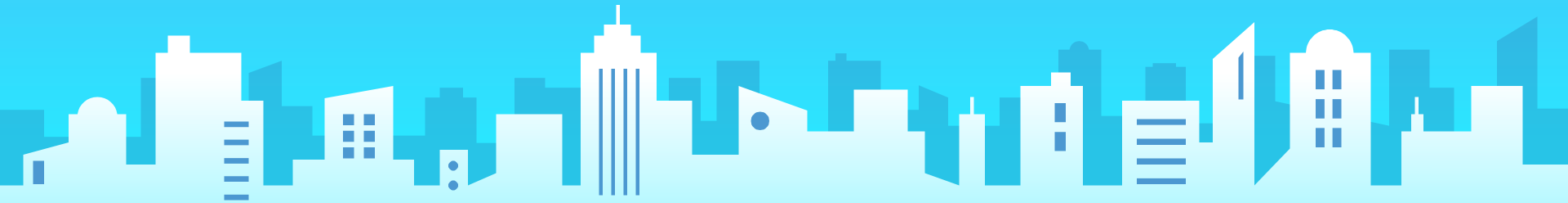
What is impact?

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The process and product of community empowerment is essential for marginalized communities to obtain social justice (Stoeffler, 2018).

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Organizations often interpret their participatory nature of interaction with communities as being empowering when in fact if the community is not involved in all aspects, including evaluation, "there is the risk of replicating a top down approach that does not value community members" (Stoeffler, 2018, p.271).

Empowerment evaluation provides the opportunity to address definitional issues in a manner that promotes cultural humility and advances social justice within communities through an abiding respect for community knowledge and commitment to build the people's evaluation capacity (Donaldson, 2017).

Andrews, Motes, Floyd, Flerx, & Lopez-DeFede (2005) wrote, "In human services, empowerment evaluation essentially places the people who provide and receive services as the participants who make critical decisions about the standards of success, program/organizational practices, lessons learned, and what to share with others" (p.88).
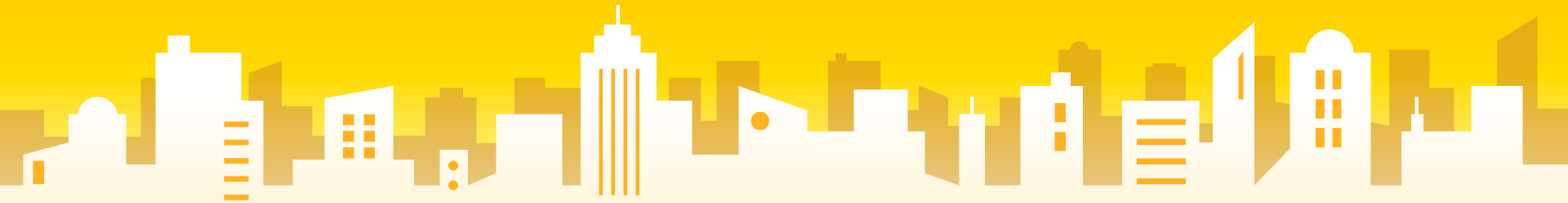
Core Principles of Empowerment Evaluation:

* Emphasis on collaboration and participation
* Support for continuous improvement (formative)
* Tools for managing and communicating
* External and internal accountability
* Facilitative evaluator's role (known as coaching)
* Evaluators also advocate for the project
* Collaboration between evaluators and project participants to inform decision making
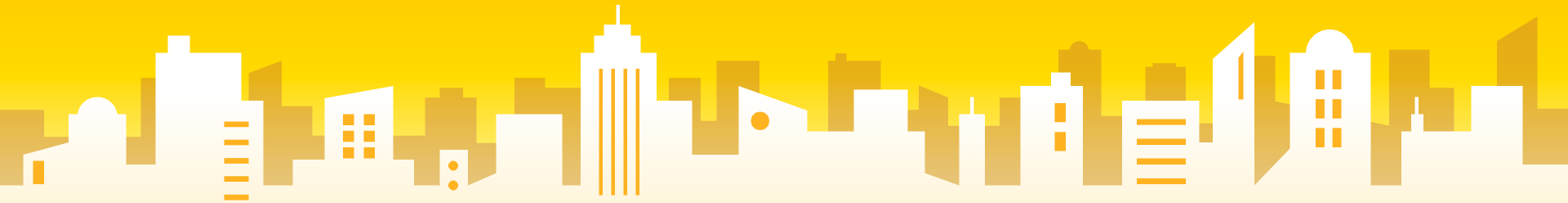* Quantitative and qualitative methods

(Fetterman, 1994, 1996)

"Organizations that embrace empowerment evaluation acknowledge that the participants in the organization are the primary stakeholders in wanting to know the results of their efforts."

Andrews et al., 2005, p. 89

Common Challenges

- Evaluation of own efforts leads to bias (Scriven, 2016).
- Being guided by an enthusiast for one approach to evaluation increases the chances toward bias toward Empowerment Evaluation and may lead them away from the use of hard-nosed controls for that bias (Scriven, 2016).
- Is the evaluation appropriate, acceptable, and accessible to people within their local context (Harris, et al., 2018)?
- Do the outcomes (impact) match the desired outcomes that are valued by the population (Harris, et al., 2018)?
- Sufficient recruitment / involvement by community members.

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"Empowerment cannot be achieved if the methods used in its pursuits are not also empowering" *(Stoeffler, 2018, p.278).*

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