FIVE STEPS FOR SELECTING AN EVALUATOR: A GUIDE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PRACTITIONERS

Part 2 in a Series on Practical Evaluation Methods

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BACKGROUND

Conducting an evaluation can be an essential step for the success of a program. Programs may view an evaluation as a burden and as an expense that takes resources away from service provision; however, evaluations are essential to ensure that a program is fulfilling its intended goals and are important for attracting sustained funding. Whether an internal or external evaluator is used, selecting the right evaluator can help strengthen program operations, identify successes and areas that need improvement, and improve outcomes for those served. This brief describes different types of evaluations and sets forth five steps for selecting an evaluator that can benefit a program in the long run. It also provides some tips on the cost of evaluations.

WHAT IS AN EVALUATION?

Evaluation refers to *the process of acquiring and assessing information to provide useful feedback about a program or program activity*.[1] Evaluations use systematic methods for collecting, analyzing, and using information to answer basic questions about program implementation and effectiveness.[2] Different types of evaluations may be conducted depending on the goal of the evaluation and the aspect of the program being evaluated.

- **Process Evaluations** examine the process of program delivery, including alternative delivery procedures,[3] and may include:
  - **Implementation Evaluations**, which monitor fidelity to an established program model,[4] and
  - **Formative Evaluations**, which examine the quality of implementation, and assess organizational context, personnel, and procedures to improve programs.[5]

- **Outcome Evaluations** investigate whether changes in participant outcomes occur and whether changes can be attributed to the program or program activities.[6] Outcome evaluations look at whether, to what extent, and in what direction outcomes change for participants in the program, and may include:
  - **Experimental** or **Impact Evaluations**, which are random assignment studies that assess overall program impacts and allow investigators to draw conclusions about cause and effect.[7]
  - **Quasi-Experimental Evaluations**, which are studies that compare participant outcomes before and after a program is implemented and/or compare participant outcomes with outcomes for a similar population or with national data. Because quasi-experimental

evaluations are not true random assignment studies, they do not allow investigators to draw definitive conclusions about cause and effect.
- o **Cost-Effectiveness** and **Cost-Benefit Analyses**, which determine the efficiency of programs by assessing outcomes in terms of their dollar costs and their value relative to those costs.[8]

FIVE STEPS FOR SELECTING AN EVALUATOR

Step 1: Assign a project manager and form a steering committee to develop a plan.

The role of project manager should ideally be assigned to a person who is familiar with the program and the basics of the evaluation process.[9] The primary role of the project manager is to manage the process and help determine the type of evaluation that needs to be done.[10] Establishing a steering committee allows key stakeholders, such as employees and board members, to have input into the evaluation process, and this can reduce resistance to participation that could undermine the evaluation.[11] Involvement of the steering committee also helps the evaluator have a deeper understanding of the program model and intended outcomes. The project manager and steering committee should develop a plan that draws together information about the organization and clarifies what is being evaluated. This document should create a shared vision on the part of stakeholders. It can also provide information for potential evaluators so that they can prepare and submit an effective and well-organized proposal. Information in the plan may include:[12]

- Evaluation objectives;
- Program overview;
- Statement of work;
- Resources available;
- Information on who will review the proposals;
- Time frame for the project; and
- Expected deliverables.

Step 2: Decide whether to use an internal evaluator or hire an external evaluator.

Depending on the situation, an internal or external evaluator may be more appropriate and/or required.[13] Using an **internal evaluator** means that the evaluation will be conducted by a member of the staff from the program or the organization being evaluated. Using an **external evaluator** involves seeking an expert from outside the program. Several factors should be considered in deciding whether to use an internal or external evaluator:[14]

- Cost;
- Availability;
- Knowledge of program and operations;
- Flexibility;
- Specialized skills and expertise;
- Objectivity; and
- Ethical issues.

Advantages and disadvantages that should be kept in mind when deciding whether to choose an internal or external evaluator for your program include:

	Advantages [15,16, 17]	Disadvantages [18,19, 20]
Internal Evaluator	- Can be the least expensive option; - Has detailed knowledge about the program being evaluated; - Promotes maximum involvement and participation of program staff; and - Helps build capacity of agency to conduct future evaluations.	- May not have enough evaluation experience; - May not be objective, or potential funders may not view the evaluation as objective; - Draws on personnel resources that may be limited in the program; - May inhibit candor of clients who may not express themselves honestly to someone on the staff whom they will see again; - May have access to confidential information about clients or staff; and - The validity of evaluation findings may not be highly regarded by those outside the program.
External Evaluator	- May be more objective; - Brings technical expertise that may not exist in the program; - May be more efficient because of experience with evaluation; - Likely to have greater credibility with the outside world; and - May offer a new perspective and fresh insights.	- Can be expensive; - May not have adequate understanding of program context or target population; and - May cause staff members to be less engaged in evaluation because they see it as someone else's responsibility.

It is worth noting that a hybrid model may work, with an evaluation consultant providing expertise and experience to an internal evaluator.

Step 3: Advertise to potential evaluators.
The next task is alerting potential evaluators of the need for an evaluation. This can be done by releasing a request for proposals (RFP), which is a document that details the purpose of the evaluation, outlines the expected outcomes, and solicits proposals to conduct the project. The RFP typically contains the following items:
- Statement of work expected;
- Time frame for project;
- Expected deliverables;
- Contract provisions, e.g., allowable overhead, payment stipulations;
- Format requirements for the proposal, e.g., number of pages;
- Deadlines for submission and procedures for submission;
- Description of how the proposal will be rated; and
- A contact person in the program.

Advertising helps ensure that the best possible applicants are able to apply and submit a proposal in a timely manner. There are several ways to advertise the RFP:

- Post an ad on your Web site, where it is easily accessible and potential evaluators can download the information needed to submit a proposal;[21]
- Place an ad in the newspaper or advertise on listservs;
- Invite proposals from a few evaluators;
- Contact schools of social work, sociology, or other relevant fields at local universities;
- Contact research organizations and professional associations that have a large membership base of evaluators, such as the American Evaluation Association (AEA); and
- Network by asking colleagues or obtaining contacts at conferences or large meetings, etc.

Step 4: Create criteria to assess and choose the most qualified evaluator.[22]

Before evaluating the submitted proposals, it is crucial to establish concrete criteria on which to assess each applicant.[23] A scoring or rating scale should be developed to establish the basis on which the proposals will be assessed.[24] One option is to assign "each criterion with a numerical value reflecting its relative importance in comparison with other criteria," as noted in one government publication on selecting an evaluation consultant.[25] Agreeing on standards for rating the applicants provides a consistent measurement strategy and promotes an objective evaluation of proposals.[26] Once the scoring method is established, the task of reviewing the proposals can begin. Some criteria that may be used to assess the proposals include:[27,28]
- Evaluation plan and a detailed outline of how to carry it out;
- Successful experience evaluating a similar program;
- Knowledge about evaluation methods;
- Knowledge about the population to be evaluated, including knowledge of the population's culture and first language;
- Ability to submit work in a timely manner;
- Ability to communicate well with the targeted audience, in person and in writing;
- Understanding of the rights and privileges of study participants and the operations of institutional review boards (IRBs);
- References, which can include clients; and/or
- Costs.

Several additional questions may help in the final selection:[29]
- Does the evaluator's view of the goals for the evaluation match those of the program to be evaluated?
- Is the evaluator willing to assist in building the knowledge base and skills of program staff?
- Is the evaluator culturally sensitive and able to work with varied target populations?

Step 5: Evaluate the proposals and select an evaluator.

Once all proposals have been submitted by potential evaluators, it is time for the steering committee and project manager, as well as any others in the program who are familiar with the process, to help review the proposals using the criteria set in step 4. Including a consultant with strong methodological expertise in the review process may help the team weed out inadequate proposals.[30]

After all proposals have been reviewed and rated, it is time to choose the proposal with the highest rating that matches your criteria. There may be a few proposals that are close in rating, and in-person or telephone interviews may help the team reach a final choice.[31] If additional information is needed, each applicant may be asked to respond to questions or participate in a "best and final" meeting to ensure that all bidders are given the same opportunities and to ensure an objective scoring. Once an evaluator is chosen, sign a contract defining the scope of work to be completed, deliverables expected, time table, and cost.

HOW MUCH DO EVALUATIONS COST?

Typically, programs are advised to allocate 10 to 20 percent of their program budgets for evaluation activities (including both process *and* outcome evaluations).[32] This percentage may increase or decrease, depending on the evaluation design, the comprehensiveness of the evaluation, and the type of evaluator. An internal process evaluation may be fairly low-cost, while a random assignment experiment may be quite expensive. Salaries take up a large portion of evaluation budgets; however, it is also important to consider the following factors that can have an impact on the overall cost of evaluations:

- Travel/transportation and per diem costs if an external evaluator is used;
- Data collection, including training and staff development;[33]
- Incentives for participants in the evaluation;[34]
- Data analysis and processing, including training and staff development;[35]
- Office and administrative costs, such as copying, faxing, telephone consultation, and meeting room space;[36] and
- Dissemination of findings.[37]

FINAL THOUGHTS

With the selection of a qualified and efficient evaluator, whether internal or external, a program can receive feedback that will help in making informed decisions about the overall direction of the program, as well as feedback on specific activities and procedures. The process of choosing an evaluator requires the assistance and cooperation of staff, board members, and administrators. Regardless of the type of evaluation being conducted, each method can provide insights that can benefit both the program and those being served.

NEXT STEPS: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR PROGRAMS

The American Evaluation Association (AEA). The AEA is an international professional association of evaluators that has approximately 5,000 members representing all 50 states in the United States, as well as more than 60 foreign countries. This site has a "find an evaluator" feature that allows viewers to search for an evaluator in their area.
Available online at: http://www.eval.org/find_an_evaluator/evaluator_search.asp

The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University. The Evaluation Center has conducted a number of evaluations in the education field, and its Web site posts a national directory of evaluators.
Available online at: http://ec.wmich.edu/evaldir/index.html

W.K. Kellogg Foundation – Evaluation Toolkit. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has developed an evaluation toolkit, designed to give guidance to programs embarking on evaluation. A section of the toolkit is devoted to the topic of "Hiring and Managing Evaluators."
Available online at:
http://www.wkkf.org/Default.aspx?tabid=90&CID=281&ItemID=2810002&NID=2820002&LanguageID=0

Juvenile Justice Evaluation Center – Hiring and Working With an Evaluator. This document, which was created with support from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, outlines the necessary steps for choosing an evaluator. **Available online at: http://www.jrsa.org/jjec/about/publications/evaluator.pdf**

The University of Tasmania – Project Evaluation Toolkit. The University of Tasmania in Australia has developed an evaluation toolkit, which includes a section that helps programs budget for evaluations. **Available online at: http://www.utas.edu.au/pet/sections/costing.html**

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[6] Ibid.

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[20] Conley-Tyler, M. (2005).

[21] Ibid.

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[23] Ibid.

[24] U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Procurement and Assistance Management. (2004). Acquisition guide: Establishing evaluation criteria. Retrieved March 28, 2007 from http://professionals.pr.doe.gov/ma5/MA-5Web.nsf/WebAttachments/AcqGuide15pt3/$File/AcqGuide15pt3.doc.

[25] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2005).

[26] Office of Procurement and Assistance Management.

[27] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2005).

[28] The International Development Research Centre, Science for Humanity (2004).

[29] Ibid.

[30] To assess a consultant's methodological expertise, ask to see reports the consultant completed for other programs or locate examples of the consultant's previous work online. Funders and other programs may also be able to provide useful information and references.

[31] Government of the Northwest Territories Financial Management Board Secretariat (1999).

[32] The Administration on Children, Youth and Families refers programs applying for demonstration grants to the Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation: An evaluation handbook series from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families. This guide recommends that 15% to 20% of total funds allocated for a program be used for conducting a process and outcome evaluation. However, if a program is conducting only a process evaluation or a single component of an evaluation, such as developing a logic model, a smaller percentage of funds may be needed.

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