

GUIDANCE IN APPROACHING EVALUATION

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The field of program evaluation is comprised of a wide-range of disciplines and a wide-range of methodological orientations. Since the 90's there has been an increasing emphasis on evaluation in the non-profit sector that is promoted by both public and private funders, as well as accreditation organizations and the non-profit field itself. While the call for evaluation has been widely heard, non-profit leaders often need guidance in determining **how** to approach evaluation and **who** to turn to for help. This is especially important in view of the tremendous range that exists in the evaluation field.

This brief guidance offers suggestions about **how** to approach evaluation and **who** to turn to for help.

How to Approach Evaluation

The most important decision for you to make in your approach to evaluation is to be clear on the **PURPOSE** of your evaluation. Typically, non-profit organizations develop their approach to evaluation to meet the requirements of funders. These requirements are likely to be focused on monitoring performance and measuring outcomes. In some cases, especially in the context of large federal grant programs and large foundation initiatives, there may be expectations for more complex evaluation methodologies involving experimental research designs in order to contribute to field building or the establishment of merit and worth. These expectations are usually clearly stated by the funders up front.

Not all non-profit evaluation is driven by funders. Best practices in non-profit management promote the use of evaluation for strategic thinking, program strengthening, and resource allocations, accountability to clients and community, among other purposes. These purposes lend themselves to evaluation strategies such as process and outcome evaluations and performance measurement.

The range of evaluation purposes are listed below along with a brief description. This is intended to help guide you in determining how to approach your evaluation.

PURPOSES OF EVALUATION OF NON-PROFIT PROGRAMS

1. Assessment of Merit and Worth—the development of judgments about the value of a program or policy. Methods—rigorous evaluation research, typically experimental or quasi-experimental designs. Common elements of these designs are longitudinal data and a randomly assigned control group or comparison group. They often involve an external evaluator who maintains a neutral and scientific perspective.

2. Program and Operational Improvement—the effort to use information to strengthen program planning and delivery. Methods—quasi-experimental designs, process and

outcome evaluations. Common elements of these designs include a clearly articulated logic model, process documentation, and/or data collection of specific outcomes. This evaluation typically happens in “real-time” frameworks, e.g., one year or less, and is as likely to be conducted internally as externally.

3. Oversight and Compliance—the assessment of the extent to which a program complies with its contractual obligations, performance outputs, regulations and so on. Methods—documentation of performance. Common elements of this design are an emphasis on outputs and/or targets. These data are most often collected internally by program staff.

4. Knowledge Development—the discovery or testing of theories intended to build the general knowledge about a field of service. Methods—wider ranging, including process and outcome evaluations and experimental designs. This type of research tends to be more academically-oriented.

[Adapted from Mark, Melvin M. et al. *Evaluation: An Integrated Framework for Understanding, Guiding, and Improving Policies and Programs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2000.]

Who to Turn to

Non-profit organizations often engage a consultant who is an expert in evaluation in order to help them at various stages of the evaluation process. These areas of assistance could be the development of a logic model, evaluation design, data collection methodology, tool selection or development, data analysis, etc. Selection of an evaluation consultant should bear in mind that the field is wide-ranging and quality is also likely to vary. Importantly, if you engage an external consultant, it would be very helpful for that consultant to have practical experience with non-profit and community settings. The following guidance in selecting a consultant is intended to offer insight into qualities and characteristics that would be valuable to consider in your selection process.

QUALITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS TO CONSIDER IN SELECTING AN EVALUATION CONSULTANT

Technical competence in program evaluation – both quantitative and qualitative techniques

- ◆ Evaluation is a field that includes a wide range of methodologies. It is helpful to select an evaluator who is comfortable with both quantitative and qualitative techniques.

Experience in program evaluation in non-profit and community settings

- ◆ The rigorous standards of academic research can look very different from the applied approaches frequently used in program evaluation settings in non-profit and community settings. An ideal evaluator should have the breadth of understanding of the standards of academic research and the practical wisdom of the how to apply—and modify these standards in the practical settings of non-profit and community programs.

Familiarity with programs related to the mission of your agency

- ◆ A well suited evaluator will have a degree of familiarity with the service strategies, issues, populations served, and challenges related to the program(s) that are the focus of the evaluation. While comprehensive program knowledge is not necessary for appropriately conducting your evaluation, a working knowledge of the field of service is very helpful to designing an appropriate evaluation.

Cultural competence

- ◆ Program evaluation frequently involves data collection from populations with a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. An evaluator must consider cultural characteristics and offer a sensitivity to what works and what doesn't work with diverse populations.

Skills in understanding and incorporating a variety of different perspectives:

Responsiveness; Flexibility; Ability to facilitate a group process

- ◆ The design of a program evaluation should consider multiple factors, such as various audiences, practical application in non-profit settings and affects on clients and staff. Aspects of the development of an evaluation often include participatory processes. A skilled evaluator will be able to balance diverse perspectives and needs and adjust evaluation strategies accordingly.

High-level research ethics

- ◆ Collection of data can provide risks to "human subjects." Evaluators must be aware of how to assess these risks and create processes for protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of the individuals and organizations from which they collect data.

Ability to stay focused on goals (and to help focus groups on their agreed-upon goals)

- ◆ Evaluation can readily become a "back-burner" issue while more pressing needs are addressed. A strong evaluation consultant will ably facilitate the continued development of an evaluation system alongside the ongoing work of the non-profit organization.

Sensitivity to costs and clarity of scope and budget

- ◆ Evaluation consultants have a range of backgrounds and fee structures. This variation typically reflects level of training and experience in the field. Most evaluation consultants in the non-profit sector are sensitive to the limited resources in the non-profit sector and their costs reflect this understanding. It is important to be clear about the scope of work, timeframe, and the cost of this work. This can generally be estimated fairly accurately. It may also be helpful to develop an agreement that caps the total amount of the consulting budget.