Laying the Groundwork Before Your First Evaluation

Diana Epstein, Ph.D, CNCS Office of Research and Evaluation
Adrienne DiTommaso, MPA, CNCS Office of Research and Evaluation
Learning objectives

• Understand five critical activities for your first grant cycle

• Recognize how these activities lay the foundation for future evaluation work

• Learn how to plan ahead to ensure that your program achieves key first-cycle milestones
Pre-award time period

- Do everything you can to set your program up for success in Year 1
- Think through risks/threats to implementation and mitigate them
- Begin to develop data collection systems
- Begin to develop performance measurement plans
Key foundational elements

1. Program design and implementation
2. Build and refine data collection systems
3. Performance measurement
4. Staff capacity and responsibilities
5. Evaluation planning
6. Become a learning organization
### Your first three years: program activities over time

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Pre-Award</th>
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**Second Grant Cycle**
Building evidence of effectiveness

Stage 1: Identify a strong program design

Stage 2: Ensure effective implementation

Stage 3: Assess program outcomes

Stage 4: Obtain evidence of positive program outcomes

Stage 5: Attain causal evidence of positive program outcomes

Evidence Informed

Evidence Based

AmeriCorps
1. Program design and implementation

Goal: Improve program design and ensure effective implementation

• Key components
  – Refine logic model
  – Assess implementation
  – Conduct process evaluation
  – Adjust program model as needed
Refine your logic model

• Make sure your “model” is actually a model

• Achieve shared agreement about what the model is and is not

• Ensure all pieces of the model are plausibly connected
## Assessing your theory of change

### Theory of Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Not at all true</th>
<th>Somewhat true</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is a coherent, logical program theory. Strategies and activities are designed to address a clearly identified and defined problem or need. There is a logical connection between the program strategies and activities and the intended outcomes or desired changes. Goals and objectives are articulated and attainable with the available resources. (The program has a logic model.)</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>Program participation is clearly defined and distinguishable from nonparticipation. There is no ambiguity about who is in the program and who is not.</td>
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<td>There is a shared understanding among program leadership and staff about the core elements of the program and the context in which the program operates.</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is agreement across the program leadership and staff as to what the expected program outcomes are.</td>
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### Clear Time Frame for the Program

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<tr>
<td>The intervention has a clearly defined timeframe.</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is a reasonable and shared expectation around the timeframe for when observable/measurable outcomes in the short, intermediate or long term will occur.</td>
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Assess implementation

• Implementing your program may lead to changes:
  – In your logic model
    • Some parts may not be plausible
    • Some outcomes may not be realistic
  – In how your program operates

• Application logic model may be ideal → program model may change as it is implemented
  – Important to document those changes so that you understand what you are actually doing
  – Document any variation in implementation
Assessing implementation

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<tr>
<td>If the program is based on a model or logical program theory, it is implemented with fidelity to that model and has a well-planned sequence of activities.</td>
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<td>If the program is currently being adapted, it is being adapted using theory/systematically-obtained field-based knowledge, and along lines that can be quantified and documented.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff members are qualified and properly trained to operate the program. There are enough qualified staff members on site to implement the planned activities.</td>
<td>❑</td>
<td>❑</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frontline workers who deliver the services provided by the program have sufficient qualifications to execute the program. There are enough qualified frontline workers on site to successfully execute the program.</td>
<td>❑</td>
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<td>There are systems in place to track program implementation:</td>
<td>❑</td>
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<td>• There are procedures in place to determine if the target population is being served (referral system, intake process).</td>
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<td>❑</td>
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<td>• Data that track service usage is collected (attendance lists, case management logs).</td>
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<td>• Input is sought on a regular basis to understand how participants experience the services and to identify and address any problems in a timely manner.</td>
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AmeriCorps
2. Build and refine data collection systems

Goal: Build systems to collect and manage high-quality program data

- Key components
  - Select data collection instruments
  - Build data collection system
  - Build data management system
  - Obtain access to administrative data (if applicable)
  - Ensure data quality
Data collection system

• First, examine logic model and think through data you need to collect
  – Outputs
  – Outcomes
  – Implementation
  – Other data beyond performance measures

• Then, develop and test instruments
  – Utilize existing resources
  – Work with a professional to develop instruments that are valid and reliable
  – Good instruments can also be used later for evaluation!
Data management system

- Data management system should help you to:
  - Store data
  - Access data
  - Analyze data
  - Use data

- Build (or buy) system to accomplish those goals
  - Examples include: Efforts to Outcomes, Design Data, Outcomes Results System…
Ensuring data quality

- **Elements of data quality:**
  - **Valid:** data mean what they are supposed to mean
  - **Complete:** everyone reports full set of data
  - **Consistent:** everyone uses same data collection methods
  - **Accurate:** data are free from errors
  - **Verifiable:** everyone follows standard practices and checks their data

- Ensuring data quality means that you describe your program’s achievements in a trustworthy manner
3. Performance measurement

Goal: Collect and report performance measures; use results for program improvement

- Key components
  - Select performance measures
  - Determine measurement frequency
  - Adjust performance measures
  - Execute performance management processes
  - Connect performance management to evaluation
Measure selection and adjustment

- Select measures that reflect *what* your program is actually doing
- Select measures you can use to understand *how* your program is working
- Select targets that are ambitious yet achievable
- Adjust measures annually if needed

Measures you collect and report for AmeriCorps grant + Other measures = Good performance measurement system!
Performance management

- Do not just collect and report your performance measurement data – you need to use it!
- Are goals being met?
- Use data for program improvement
  - Continuous feedback loop
  - Programmatic decisions are grounded in data
  - Strengthen implementation

Performance Measures Core Curriculum:
http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/performance-measurement
Performance management example

- **AmeriCorps housing assistance program**
  - O5: Number of economically disadvantaged individuals, including homeless individuals, receiving housing services [Target = 500 calls]
  - O11: Number of economically disadvantaged individuals, including homeless individuals, transitioned into safe, healthy, affordable housing [Target = 600]

- **Actuals:** O5 = 900, O11 = 300

- **What’s going on?**
  - Individuals are calling the hotline multiple times
  - Placement process takes longer than anticipated

- **Program response?**
  - Adjust call process – create a second number for repeat clients
  - Adjust target for O11 to reflect reality of placement process
Connection to evaluation

• Good performance measurement can be the basis for future evaluation activities
  – Outcome measures may be extended
  – Instruments can be utilized
  – Data can suggest interesting research questions

• Performance measurement does not stop once evaluation begins
4. Staff capacity and responsibilities

Goal: Build staff capacity to collect, manage, and utilize data

• Key components
  – Develop internal staff skills
  – Assign responsibilities
  – Engage external experts
  – Become a learning organization
Internal staff capacity

- Develop staff skills in data collection, management, and analysis
- Know enough to know what you know, and know what you don’t know
- Staff do not have to be experts, but they need to be educated and informed consumers
- Assign responsibilities – someone has to take ownership of key tasks
Identify and work with external experts

• Utilize external experts for
  – Data collection instruments
  – Complicated analysis
  – Questions about measurement
  – Evaluation

• Consider consultants, pro bono experts, cooperative extension, universities

• Talk to other programs and stakeholders
Exercise: Evaluability Assessment Checklist

- This checklist is a tool designed to help organizations assess and discuss a program’s readiness to participate in a rigorous impact evaluation. It can be used for assessment, planning, and communication purposes.

- The focus areas covered in this checklist are organized into three broad content categories:
  - Organization Readiness
  - Program Readiness
  - Evaluation Readiness

- Each category addresses key elements of readiness. Readiness in all three areas covered is important for successful planning and implementation of an evaluation.
5. Evaluation planning

Goal: Develop a plan for your first evaluation, which will occur in your second grant cycle (if not earlier).

- Key components
  - Select research questions
  - Budget for evaluation
  - Develop evaluation plan
  - Make design decisions (process or impact, internal or external)
Develop research questions

- Research questions are a list of questions to be answered at the end of the evaluation.

- Research questions should be:
  - Clear, specific, and well-defined
  - Focus on a program or program component
  - Measureable by the evaluation
  - Aligned with your logic model
Budget for evaluation

• In general, evaluation budgets should be:
  – Commensurate with stakeholder expectations and involvement
  – Appropriate for the research design used and key questions to be answered
  – Adequate for ensuring quality and rigor
  – In line with the level of program and organizational resources available

• Budgeting for evaluation is a smart strategic investment
Write an evaluation plan

• Written document that details all of the evaluation steps and activities you plan to conduct

• Dynamic tool (i.e., a living document) that should be continually updated as you plan and develop each aspect of the evaluation

• Evaluation Plan Outline

  I. Introduction
  II. Program background
  III. Research questions
  IV. Evaluation design
  V. Data collection
  VI. Analysis plan
  VII. Timeline
  VIII. Budget and other
Becoming a learning organization

• A learning organization:
  – Reflects on past successes and challenges
  – Uses data to inform decision making
  – Makes adjustments to programs and processes based on data
  – Is not afraid to question assumptions
  – Thinks strategically about how to improve
  – Builds evidence of effectiveness
  – Sets a research agenda for the future
By the end of your first grant cycle, you should have:

- Refined your program and ensured effective implementation
- Built and refined data collection systems
- Utilized accurate performance measures
- Built staff capacity and defined responsibilities
- Prepared a plan for your first evaluation

And hopefully you’ve also had some fun!
Exercise: Laying the foundation for your program

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Resources on evaluation

Go to the National Service Resources page for more information:
http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/evaluation

Other courses available:
• How to Develop a Program Logic Model
• Overview of Evaluation Designs
• How to Write an Evaluation Plan
• Budgeting for Evaluation
• Data Collection for Evaluation
• Asking the Right Research Questions
• Managing an External Evaluation
• And more!
Evaluation Resources page
Questions?