

AmeriCorps Policies and Procedures

Policy Number: 900

Effective Date: April 3, 2023

Title: Evaluation Policy

Purpose: The purpose of this policy is to articulate the key principles that govern the agency's program evaluations.

Who is Covered: All AmeriCorps staff engaged in program or agency evaluation.

Policies Replaced: All previous versions.

Originating Office: Office of Research and Evaluation

Approved By:



**Jenny Mauk
Chief of Staff**



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1. What is this policy?

The Evaluation Policy presents key principles that govern AmeriCorps’s planning, conduct, and use of program evaluations. The policy expresses the agency’s commitment to conducting rigorous, relevant evaluations and to using evidence from evaluations to inform policy and practice. AmeriCorps will promote rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics in the conduct of evaluations. This policy addresses each of these principles.

The mission of AmeriCorps is to “improve lives, strengthen communities and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.” The importance of these goals demands that our agency continually innovates, improves, and evaluates the performance and effectiveness of agency programs and activities. Through evaluation, AmeriCorps and our partners can learn systematically so that the services they provide are as effective as possible.

2. Who is responsible for the implementation and oversight of AmeriCorps evaluation and research activities?

The AmeriCorps Research and Evaluation Council’s role is to strengthen and coordinate the integration of evaluation and research across the agency and focus agency resources in support of the agency evidence agenda (See [Strategic Learning and Evidence Building Plan: Fiscal Years 2022 - 2026](#)). This centralized governance structure informs an agency-wide research and evaluation agenda to increase efficacy in internal operations and improve our impact in communities by prioritizing and identifying evidence-based policies, programs, and practices. The Research and Evaluation Council is the agency’s highest decision-making body for research and evaluation and includes enterprise-wide representation (see Charter). All agency research and evaluation activities must be approved by the Council.

The Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) is responsible for the technical quality of the agency’s research and evaluation evidence. ORE will determine the most scientifically credible way to measure and collect information for various purposes (e.g., survey research, program evaluation, performance management) and will oversee the development and implementation of all social science research and program evaluation studies.

To ensure the relevance of the agency’s research and evaluation activities, ORE will work closely with all Departments (Chief Executive Officer, Chief of Program



Operations, Chief Operating Officer) to identify what information is needed and for what purposes. These working partnerships will help ensure that the information resulting from research and evaluation studies is actionable for managerial, programmatic, and budget purposes. ORE will also work closely with the Office of Information Technology (OIT), Chief Data Officer (CDO) and the Office of Facilities and Support Services (OFSS) to identify and deploy technology solutions needed to collect, store, and share data for internal and external use efficiently and effectively.

The standard operating procedure titled, "*Clearance and Dissemination of Evidence-based Content*," codifies the process for clearance of research, evaluation and evidence-based knowledge produced by AmeriCorps (See [SOP](#)).

3. What is AmeriCorps' perspective on evidence pertaining to evaluation?

Evaluation produces one type of evidence. A learning organization with a culture of continual improvement requires many types of evidence, including not only evaluation but also descriptive research studies, performance measurement, financial and cost data, survey statistics, and program administrative data. Further, continual improvement requires systematic approaches to using information, such as regular data-driven reviews of performance and progress. This establishes the agency's evidence base.

Although this policy focuses on evaluation, the principles apply to the development and use of other types of information as well. The emphasis on evidence is meant to support and not inhibit innovation, improvement, and learning. The intent is to integrate the use of evidence and opportunities for further learning into all activities. Where an evidence base is lacking, evidence will be developed through strong evaluations and analysis. Where evidence exists, it will be used to encourage data-driven actions, including replication of what works.

Discretionary grant funding opportunity announcements from AmeriCorps will include evidence criteria that specify how activities will be evaluated. Successful applicants will be required to cooperate with and participate in evaluations. Evaluations conducted by awardees must adhere to program-specific requirements. As such, the AmeriCorps evaluation policy does not include evaluations conducted by awardees.

4. What is the AmeriCorps perspective on rigor pertaining to evaluation?

AmeriCorps is committed to using the most rigorous methods that are appropriate to the evaluation questions and feasible within statutory, budget, and other constraints. Rigor is required for all types of evaluations, including impact and outcome evaluations, implementation and process evaluations, descriptive studies, and formative evaluations. Rigor requires ensuring that inferences about cause and effect are well founded (internal validity); requires clarity about the populations, settings, or



circumstances to which results can be generalized (external validity); and requires the use of measures that accurately capture the intended information (measurement reliability and validity).

ORE maintains an evaluation workforce with training and experience appropriate for planning and overseeing a rigorous evaluation portfolio, recruiting staff with advanced academic degrees and experience in disciplines such as sociology, psychology, economics, and public policy. AmeriCorps provides professional development opportunities so ORE staff can keep their evaluation and methodological skills current.

5. What is AmeriCorps' perspective on relevance pertaining to evaluation?

Evaluation priorities take into account:

- Legislative requirements and the needs of government-wide leadership
- Agency leadership and staff, and
- AmeriCorps partners such as states, territories, tribes, grantees, populations served, researchers, and other stakeholders.

Evaluations are designed to address AmeriCorps' diverse programs, customers, and stakeholders. AmeriCorps encourages diversity among those carrying out the evaluations.

6. What is AmeriCorps' perspective on transparency pertaining to evaluation?

AmeriCorps will make information about evaluations and findings from evaluations broadly available and accessible, typically through AmeriCorps' standard internal and external communications channels for information dissemination. This includes identifying the evaluator, releasing study plans, and describing the evaluation methods. AmeriCorps will release results of all evaluations that are not specifically focused on internal management, legal, or enforcement procedures that are not otherwise prohibited from disclosure.

Evaluation reports present all results, including favorable, unfavorable, and null findings. AmeriCorps will release evaluation results timely - usually within 90 to 120 days after a report's completion - and will archive evaluation data for secondary use by interested researchers (e.g., public use files with appropriate data security protections). Transparency pertaining to research, evaluation, and evidence does not include pre-decisional or deliberative information which would not be available by law other than to a partner collaborating with AmeriCorps.¹

7. What is AmeriCorps' perspective on independence pertaining to evaluation?

¹ Freedom of Information Guide, 2004 Edition: [Exemption 5](#)



Independence and objectivity are core principles of evaluation.² Agency and program leadership, program staff, service providers, and others should participate actively in setting evaluation priorities, identifying evaluation questions, and assessing the implications of findings. However, it is important to insulate evaluation functions from undue influence and from both the appearance and the reality of bias. To promote objectivity, AmeriCorps protects independence in the design, execution, and analysis of evaluations. Following internal clearance³ by appropriate Program Office staff, the Office of External Affairs, the Office of General Counsel, and a technical peer review, the Director of ORE has authority to approve, release, and disseminate evaluation reports.

8. What is the AmeriCorps perspective on ethics pertaining to evaluation?

AmeriCorps-sponsored evaluations are conducted in an ethical manner and safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants. Evaluations comply with both the spirit and the letter of relevant requirements such as regulations governing research involving human subjects.

9. What is the AmeriCorps perspective on equity pertaining to evaluation?

Principles of inclusion and equity guide the evidence building activities of the agency. Participatory and inclusive approaches to research and evaluation foster civic engagement and volunteerism of people of all ages and backgrounds, thereby strengthening civil society and communities across the United States, U.S. territories, and with federally recognized tribes. Using a participatory and equity-focused process in research and evaluation intentionally identifies and includes constituencies that have fewer opportunities to directly influence decisions that impact their lives.

This approach amplifies individual and community voices as critical stakeholders in the learning and evidence ecosystem. It engages the community, leverages local expertise, builds knowledge, capacity, and connections, and makes findings more relevant to the needs of the community. AmeriCorps' participatory research and evaluation practice is best exemplified in its participatory **research grant program** and its participatory evaluation and capacity building projects. Our viewpoint and practices ensure that diverse and inclusive perspectives inform the agency's evidence building activities, which in turn enhance the possibility of more data-driven, equitable, and actionable solutions for improving individual lives and strengthening communities.

² American Evaluation Association, **An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government**, September 2010, accessed 18 June 2012, and Government Accountability Office, Employment and Training Administration: **Increased Authority and Accountability Could Improve Research Program, GAO-10-243**, January 2010, accessed 18 June 2012.

³ The purpose of AmeriCorps' internal clearance process is to provide staff the opportunity to review documents for potential erroneous programmatic information, as well as any potential legal issues. Staff are not allowed to edit study results.



10. Charter: Research and Evaluation Council

a) Council Purpose and Goals

The purpose of the Research and Evaluation Council is to strengthen and coordinate the integration of evaluation and research across the agency. This centralized governance structure will inform an agency-wide research and evaluation agenda to increase effectiveness of internal operations and improve our impact in communities by prioritizing and identifying evidence-based policies, programs, and practices. The Research and Evaluation Council is the agency's decision-making body for research and evaluation.

The goals of Research and Evaluation Council are to:

- Align research and evaluation activities with the learning priorities associated with the agency's Strategic Plan.
- Align agency resources including funding and human capital to support research and evaluation activities.
- Strengthen the coordination and integration of evidence into agency management activities.
- Provide oversight of implementation efforts associated with learning priorities aligned with the agency's Strategic Plan.
- Ensure that evidence-based programming models are prioritized in competitive grant-making decisions.

b) Authorities

This Charter establishes the Research and Evaluation Governance Structure under the authority of the agency's Chief Executive Officer – **Section 193A(c)(1) of the National and Community Service Act of 1990, as amended**. This charter is based on the following laws, regulations, and directives:

- **Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act (FEBP) of 2018, Pub. L. 115-435**
- **National and Community Service Act of 1990, SEC. 179. [42 U.S.C. §12639] EVALUATION and SEC. 179A. [42 U.S.C. §12639a] CIVIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT AND VOLUNTEERING RESEARCH AND EVALUATION**
- **OMB Memorandum, M-19-23**
- **OMB Memorandum, M-20-12**
- **OMB Memorandum, M-21-27.**

c) Roles and Responsibilities

The Council is responsible for aligning the agency's research and evaluation resources and activities with relevant laws, regulations, directives, and best practices as set forth by Congress and the United States Office of Management and Budget. Furthermore, the Council is responsible for identifying research and evaluation priorities required to achieve the agency's mission and annual strategic goals. Finally, the Council is responsible for ensuring the agency's Board of Directors (specifically



the Program, Budget, and Evaluation Committee) has an opportunity to review the research and evaluation priorities prior to final decision-making each year.

As part of the agency's annual strategic planning and budget formulation processes, the Council will also review the agency's evidence-building priorities to ensure alignment across the strategic plan, the Congressional Budget Justification, and the learning agenda. More specifically, the Council's annual scope of activities related to research and evaluation governance include the following:

Annual Planning Activities

- Make decisions on all multiyear research and evaluation initiatives, programs, and cross-agency initiatives as directed by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO).
- Ensure that research and evaluation priorities are reflected in the agency's budget formulation process so that necessary fiscal and human resources are available to implement priorities.
- Ensure that research and evaluation evidence findings are integrated into Department-level budget formulations each fiscal year.
- Ensure that the agency's Strategic Learning and Evidence Building Plan ("Learning Agenda") is updated annually to reflect current priorities.

Annual Oversight and Implementation Activities

- Ensure that agency research and evaluation activities as defined in OMB M-19-23 and M-21-27 are aligned with the agency's Evaluation Policy.
- Ensure that all research and evaluation activities are conducted and approved by the Office of Research and Evaluation staff with appropriate technical expertise and qualifications.
- Ensure appropriate representation on the Research and Evaluation Committee (See section 4.1 Research and Evaluation Committee).
- Review and approve or reject additional projects and investment funding requests during the fiscal year (post Q1).
- Make decisions about requests or issues escalated by the Research and Evaluation Committee based on business impact, risk, or other factors.

Annual Reporting Activities

- Ensure that all agency research and evaluation findings are:
 - Summarized in the Evidence template provided by OMB each year.
 - Prepared by the Director of the Office of Research and Evaluation.
 - Included as part of the agency's Congressional Budget Justification submission.

d) Membership

Voting Members

- Chief of Staff (COS, Chair)
- Chief Operations Officer (COO)



- Chief of Program Operations (CPO)
- Director of Research and Evaluation (Co-Chair)
- Chief Data Officer

Non-Voting Members

- General Counsel
- Chief Financial Officer
- Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer
- Chief Information Officer
- Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Engagement
- Deputy Chief of Program Operations
- Other advisors by invitation of COS

e) Research and Evaluation Committee

This Committee includes the Deputy Chief of Staff, the Deputy Chief of Program Operations, each Program Director and Deputy Director, a representative from the CFO Office and the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE). Committee representatives will be nominated by Department Heads. Representatives will hold positions that include decision-making authority and oversight responsibilities for office resources and strategic priorities.

The Committee serves in an administrative role to support the Research and Evaluation Council and has the following responsibilities:

- Engage relevant agency stakeholders in an annual planning process to identify core business information needs, emerging evidence priorities, and discuss the progress of ongoing research and evaluation activities.
- Inform, review, and approve key project-specific research and evaluation questions and high-level strategies for addressing them.
- Identify relevant stakeholders for engaging in the successful implementation of each individual research and evaluation project included in the agency-wide agenda and for ensuring the successful use of research and evaluation findings in management decisions.
- Review requests to realign or reallocate research and evaluation resources after the annual planning decisions have been made and submit them to the Research and Evaluation Council for consideration.

f) Office of Research and Evaluation

Staff from the Office of Research and Evaluation will provide the following administrative support to the Research and Evaluation Council and Committee.

- Plan, schedule, and facilitate all Research and Evaluation Council/Committee meetings and assume responsibility for managing all the meeting logistics and

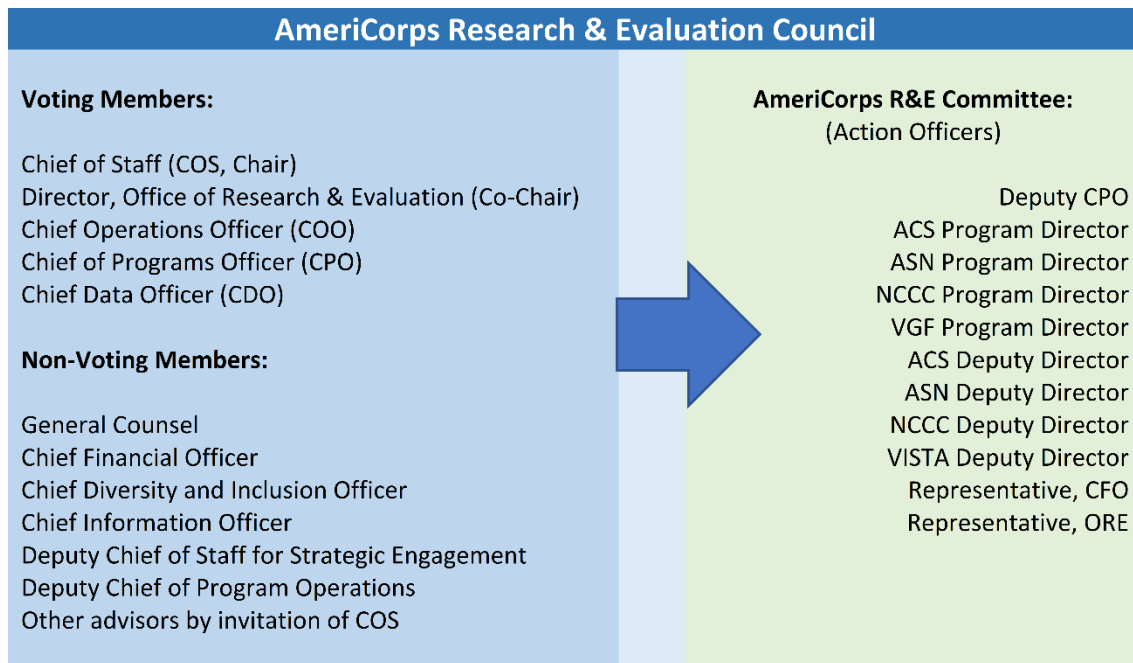


documentation, including all Council/Committee-related communications, agenda, invitations, pre-reading materials, minutes, and action items.

- Distribute materials for each meeting **at least two (2) business days** in advance of the scheduled meeting date.
- Track, report, and maintain the status of all Council/Committee action items.
- Ensure all Council/Committee decisions are recorded and processed consistent with agency policies, procedures, and processes.
- Post, track, monitor, and maintain all relevant Council/Committee documents and ensure that all oversight and governance documentation is available to oversight groups (e.g., Office of the Inspector General (OIG), OGC, and Government Accountability Office).

The representative(s) from the Office of Research and Evaluation that provide administrative support to the Council is not a member of the Research and Evaluation Council.

g) Visualization: Council and Committee Relationship



h) Operating Procedures

This charter will be reviewed on an annual basis and updated as needed.

Research and Evaluation Council meetings will be held on a monthly basis to ensure successful execution of annual planning, oversight, implementation, and reporting activities. Additional Council meetings may be called as necessary by the



Chairperson/Co-Chairs. In this case, all attempts will be made to provide notice ten (10) business days in advance of the unscheduled meeting. Should a meeting need to be rescheduled or cancelled, the Chairperson/Co-Chairs shall notify members at **least two (2) business days** in advance of the scheduled meeting date.

i) Decision-Making Process

- The Council will make every reasonable effort to achieve consensus on all issues.
- Council decisions will be a result of collaboration of the members; however, the Chairperson/Co-Chairs has the authority to make all final decisions.
- To cast votes, a quorum must be present. For the Council, a quorum is defined by the number present, not to the number voting. The presiding officer, in determining the presence of a quorum, counts all the members attending, whether voting or not. The Council has 11 identified members. To achieve a quorum, at least, 6 must be present.
- In the instance where a quorum can't be achieved, the Chair will make the final decision.
- All decisions and the rationale to support them will be documented by a representative from the Office of Research and Evaluation staff and made available to Council members.
- For each item/investment on the Council agenda, voting members must cast one of the following votes:
 - Option A (Approve) - decision/investment moves forward within the budget formulation process.
 - Option B (More information needed) - Council to reach out to relevant owners/stakeholders, and the decision/investment is re-presented at next Council meeting.
 - Option C (Discontinue) - decision/investment does not move forward in the budget formulation process.

j) Record Keeping

All records of the Council and the Committee shall be handled in accordance with General Records Schedule 26, Item 2, and other approved agency records disposition schedule. These records shall be available for public inspection and copying, subject to the Freedom of Information Act, as amended, 5 U.S.C. § 552.