Best Practices for Writing an Evaluation Plan

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Presenters

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Learning objectives

- Understand what an evaluation plan is and the purpose of developing one
- Identify key sections of an evaluation plan
- Understand what information to include in an evaluation plan

What is an evaluation plan?

- Details the program model being evaluated
- Describes and justifies the evaluation approach selected
- Provides instructions for the evaluation / a guide for each step of the evaluation process

Purpose of an evaluation plan

- Helps decide what information is needed to address the evaluation objectives
- Helps identify methods for obtaining and analyzing the needed information
- Helps anticipate potential challenges
- Helps determine a reasonable and realistic timeline for the evaluation
- Creates a shared understanding between stakeholders (e.g., the grantee staff, evaluator, CNCS staff)

Key components of a plan

I. Theory of change

II. Outcome(s) of interest

III. Research questions

IV. Evaluation design

V. Sampling methods

VI. Data collection procedures, data sources, and measurement tools

VII. Analysis plan

VIII. Timeline

IX. Evaluator qualifications

X. Budget

What to include on…

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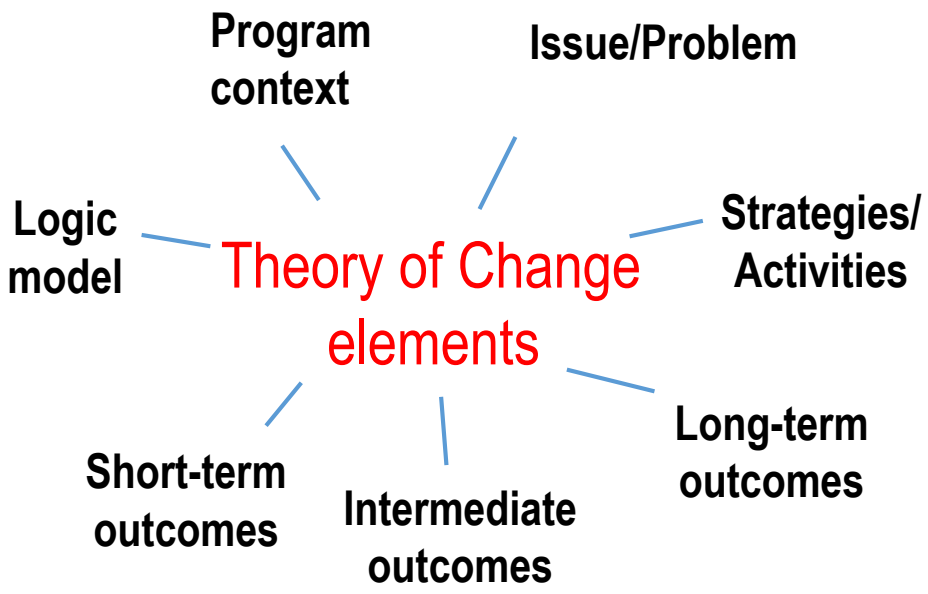
I. Theory of change



- Describe how the activities undertaken by your program contribute to a chain of results that lead to the intended outcomes
- Your evaluation plan must align with your theory of change

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II. Outcome(s) of interest

- Describe what outcomes your evaluation will measure
  - Process / implementation outcomes
  - Program beneficiary outcomes
  - Member outcomes

- Your outcomes of interest should be:
  - Part of your program's theory of change
  - Feasible for your program to measure given the source(s) of data needed and level of effort required

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III. Research questions

- One or more questions that define exactly what your evaluation intends to accomplish

- Characteristics of a good research question:
  - Clearly stated and specific
  - Aligned with your theory of change / logic model
  - Measurable and feasible to answer

III. Research questions

Research questions are worded differently depending on their focus:

Research questions for *process-focused evaluations* ask:

Who?
What?
When?
Where?
Why?
How?

→ **About:**
Inputs/resources
Program activities
Outputs
Stakeholder views

Research questions for *outcome-focused evaluations* ask about:

Changes?
Effects?
Impacts?

→ **In:**

(Short-term)	*(Medium-term)*	*(Long-term)*
Knowledge	Behaviors	Conditions
Skills	Actions	Status
Attitudes		
Opinions		

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IV. Evaluation design

Description of the type of evaluation design that will be used to answer your research questions

Process Evaluation	Outcome/Impact Evaluation
• Examines the extent to which a program is operating as intended by assessing ongoing program operations and determining whether the target population is being served • Results may be used to determine what changes and/or improvements should be made to the program's operations	• Measures changes in knowledge, attitude(s), behavior(s) and/or condition(s) that may be associated with or caused by the program • Results may demonstrate what the program has achieved and/or its outcome or impact on beneficiaries or other stakeholder groups

IV. Evaluation design

Type of design	Details needed on evaluation design
Experimental design/Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT)	• Description of the eligibility criteria, random assignment procedures, and monitoring procedures for the treatment and control groups
Quasi-experimental design (QED)	• Description of the approach for identifying a reasonably similar comparison group (e.g., propensity score matching) • List of variables (covariates) to be used to statistically equate treatment and comparison groups at baseline
Non-experimental design	• Description of whether pre- AND post-test measurements OR post-only measurements will be used
Process	• Description of the methods that will be used (i.e., qualitative only, quantitative only, or mixed methods)

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V. Sampling methods

For each data source, describe the sample or the target population for the evaluation, including:

- Eligibility criteria that limits the sample or population (e.g., participation level, site/location, age or grade level)
- Sampling procedures (e.g., random, purposeful, or convenience sampling)
- Expected size of the sample or population
- Rationale for sample size (e.g., power analysis)

V. Sampling methods

- **Power analysis** is used to determine:
  - How large a sample is needed to enable statistical judgments that are accurate and reliable (i.e., required minimum sample size)
  - How likely your statistical test will be to detect effects of a given size in a particular situation

- Your plan must include the results of a power analysis **IF**:
  - An impact evaluation design (i.e. experimental/RCT or QED)
  - Your analysis involves statistical significance testing

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VI. Data

- Provide a detailed description of the data that will be collected or extracted to answer the research questions:
  - Who/what will be the source of the data?
  - What tools/instruments will be used to collect data?
  - What is the plan for accessing administrative/extant data?
  - What information will be collected/compiled?
  - When and how often data will data be collected?

- Ensure that the data are adequate for addressing all of the study's research questions

VI. Data

Research Question	Data Collection Tool	Data Sources	Data Instruments	Frequency of Data Collection	Topics for Data Collection
Do students who participate in the AmeriCorps intervention demonstrate gains in math and reading scores, compared to students who do not participate in the intervention?	Administrative Data (existing data)	Department of Education	Assessment/Tests	Fall, Winter, Spring	Student math scores Student reading scores
What factors affect family involvement in the AmeriCorps intervention?	Focus Groups	Parents	Interview Protocol	Fall/Spring	Family involvement in academic activities; challenges and facilitators to program participation
Does participation in the AmeriCorps intervention improve students' behavior (social/emotional as well as attendance)?	Phone Interviews Program data (existing data)	Teachers	Interview Protocol	Fall, Spring	Student behavior; attendance records
Does participation in the AmeriCorps program increase members' professional skills and interest in continued civic engagement?	Survey	AmeriCorps Members	Online Survey	Fall, Spring	Professional skills; future goals; program satisfaction
How is the AmeriCorps intervention being implemented across sites?	Focus Groups Phone Interviews Survey	Parents, Teachers, AmeriCorps Members	Interview Protocols, Online survey	Fall	Implementation; challenges and facilitators

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VII. Analysis plan

Explain how each data source will be analyzed to produce findings that address the evaluation's research questions

Type of design	Details needed on analysis
Non-experimental / Process evaluation design	• The quantitative data analysis techniques that will be used to produce the study findings (e.g., Chi-square, t-tests, frequencies, means) • The qualitative data analysis techniques that will be used to produce the study findings (e.g., content analysis, thematic coding)

VII. Analysis plan

Type of design	Details needed on analysis
Impact design (RCT or QED)	• The statistical test/model that will be used to compare outcomes for the treatment and comparison groups • Plans to assess baseline equivalency of the treatment and comparison groups and any statistical adjustments to be used (if necessary)

Chi-square tests and t-tests are not adequate for conducting a QED analysis. Instead, a multivariate regression model (e.g., ANOVA) is preferred, so covariates (e.g., pre-test measures and other variables that may affect the outcome of interest) can be controlled for in the analysis.

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VIII-X. Timeline, Evaluator, & Budget

- Provide a detailed **timeline** of when the major evaluation activities will occur (e.g., finalize evaluation plan, hire evaluator, develop instruments, collect data, analyze data, write report)
  - Helps determine if the evaluation is on track to be completed on time (i.e., before the next GARP cycle)

- Describe the **evaluator(s)** who will be carrying out the evaluation activities, including
  - Whether they are internal or external to the program; and
  - Qualifications for conducting the evaluation

- Specify the **budget** allotted for the evaluation

General guidelines to follow

- Know what type of evaluation you must complete
  - Small vs large grantee requirements
- Fully describe each component of the plan
- Ensure that your description of each of the components aligns with one another (i.e., interrelated)
- Know where to go for help
  - CNCS's website
  - External evaluator
  - Technical assistance portal
  - CNCS contact/State Commission representative

Evaluation resources

- CNCS Research and Evaluation general link:
  https://nationalservice.gov/impact-our-nation/research-evaluation

- CNCS Evaluation Policy:
  https://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/evaluation/cncs-evaluation-policies

- CNCS TA portal link:
  https://americorpsevaluationta.norc.org/

Questions?

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