

Hiring the Right Evaluator for your National Service Program



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Developed by Project STAR and the Corporation for National and Community Service

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Introduction

Program evaluation is an important aspect of every national service program. Through well-designed, systematic evaluation, the essential components of successful national service programs can be identified and replicated, and less effective elements can be modified. Further, evaluation results will provide stakeholders with evidence of the impacts of national service.

Effective evaluation requires commitment, experience, and an investment of time. Maintaining objectivity is vital. Many programs find hiring an external evaluator to be an effective means of obtaining a valuable evaluation. An external evaluator must be chosen carefully, however, because program personnel can easily become dissatisfied with an inappropriate or inadequate evaluation and may come to question the usefulness of the results obtained.

Well-planned and well-conducted evaluations are invaluable in determining where a national service program succeeds and how it can be improved. The following eight guidelines can assist you in selecting and working with an appropriate external evaluator.

Guideline 1: Form an evaluation committee.

An evaluation committee should oversee the entire evaluation process, from initial planning through implementation and crafting of the final report. This committee should be made up of persons representing the various aspects of your program, including service participants, participant supervisors, program managers, host agency staff, and other key people involved in programmatic planning. The committee's size will depend upon the size of your program. A large program might support an evaluation committee of five to seven persons, chaired by the program director. Smaller programs, of course, may require no more than three people; some, only a single staff member. In other cases, the evaluation committee might need to include the entire program staff.

The evaluation committee will have primary responsibility for all aspects of the evaluation and will receive regular reports from the external evaluator. Committee members must be actively involved in the evaluation process to increase their understanding of it and to allow them to feel ownership and make use of, evaluation results.

Guideline 2: Define the evaluation.

The evaluation committee must have a clear understanding of what it wants the evaluation to accomplish. In particular, the committee must identify the issues intended to be the focus of the evaluation. The development of those issues should be guided by the program's objectives. Keep in mind that the evaluation should be *decision-focused*. At

Project STAR

each step of the design process, committee members should ask themselves how data collected will inform programmatic decisions.

Once the key issues have been identified and clarified in writing, the committee should identify specific tasks for which the external evaluator will be responsible. These tasks should relate directly to the conduct of the evaluation and might include development of the evaluation plan, development of evaluation instruments, selection of the sampling procedures and drawing of the evaluation sample, collection of evaluation data, analysis of evaluation data, composition of the evaluation report, and assistance in presenting evaluation results.

Once these tasks have been determined, the committee must compose a task description (also called a statement of work or request for proposals) including these and any other requirements for the position. An overall description of your national service project and an estimate of the evaluation funds available should also be included in this document.

The task description should include detailed instructions on how potential candidates are to apply for the position, identifying all information and documentation they must provide to the committee. Most committees will want to have candidates submit written proposals, even if they are brief. At a minimum, the committee will want to review a copy of at least one evaluation report previously written by the applicant and interview at least two references from individuals or organizations for which the evaluator rendered services.

Guideline 3: Develop a task description and solicit candidates.

Developing a task description

Once your committee has determined the issues and decisions that your evaluation should address, you need to design a statement of work to which potential evaluators can respond. Your statement of work can be complex or simple, depending upon your needs and the degree to which you want to specify how the candidates will respond. Here are some work elements to consider including in your task description are:

- Required meetings (e.g. planning meeting, regular updates, interim report presentation, final debrief)
- Development of an evaluation plan (or execution of your existing plan)
- Development of instruments
- Selection and implementation of a sampling plan
- Collection of data
- Analysis of data
- Development of report
- Presentation of results

Project STAR

Soliciting candidates

Once the task description has been completed, it should be distributed to local and professional organizations such as the American Educational Research Association, the American Evaluation Association, and others that might have a network of experienced evaluators. It also should be advertised at least once in a local newspaper. Viable candidates with good credentials in program evaluation can usually be found in social science research organizations and institutions of higher education. Try using your existing network to identify persons who have conducted program evaluations for other organizations in your community or among your national service contacts.

Send copies of the statement of work to all identified candidates. When someone is identified as a good program evaluator, a telephone call or letter to recruit that person is appropriate. If a potential candidate resides outside your immediate geographical area, make sure the evaluator will be able to participate in regular evaluation committee meetings.

Solicitation will require some real effort, so use your evaluation committee to actively recruit and make your outreach effective.

Your committee should decide how candidates will apply. Written proposals, interviews, or some combination of the two is most typical. If you decide to use a written proposal, consider how you want the candidates' responses to be organized. Here are some common section headings:

- **Description of program:** Give the candidate an overview of your program, or include some appended materials about it.
- **General goals of the evaluation:** Let the respondent know what you are seeking.
- **Work elements of the task plan:** Specify that the candidate must describe their approach to each work task. Select from those listed above under "develop a task description", or add others, as appropriate.
- **Timeline:** Have the candidate estimate the completion date of all key elements.
- **Funds available:** Give the candidate some sense of the scale of funding you can support.
- **Qualifications:** Have the candidate include relevant professional experience, credentials, references, work samples, etc.
- **Application format (e.g. length) and due date:** Give the candidate guidance on how extensive a proposal you are seeking and provide a submission deadline.
- **Contact person:** Include the name of a person in your organization to whom candidates may direct inquiries.

Project STAR

Guideline 4: Interview and select the evaluator.

Although the evaluation committee will likely review a number of applicants for the position, it should narrow the pool down to five or fewer candidates for formal interviews. The committee will want to explore a number of issues during these interviews. The following questions—to be asked of the candidate or discussed among committee members—may be helpful.

Does the candidate understand the difference between research and evaluation?

The primary purpose of research is to develop a new knowledge base or expand on an existing one. On the other hand, the primary purpose of program evaluation is to provide information related to specific program improvement or program management decisions. It is possible, of course, for program evaluation efforts to expand on an existing knowledge base while simultaneously providing program personnel with the information they need. However, external evaluators are sometimes more interested in conducting research peripheral to the evaluation needs of the program—in part, because of their desire to publish in research journals. Such desires will frequently lead to ineffective evaluation results. To prevent such a situation, have the candidate describe the difference between research and evaluation approaches. If a candidate does not appreciate this difference, he or she could lean toward conducting research during your evaluation as a consequence of professional research interests.

Does the candidate understand your program?

Have the candidate describe his or her understanding of your program's intent (as reflected in the information you provide to applicants) and how its goals are to be attained. If the candidate misunderstands program goals or operational strategies, make corrections at this time to give the candidate a fair opportunity to respond to subsequent questions. It is important that you feel comfortable about the candidate's understanding of your program's goals and strategies.

What would the candidate's general approach be to your evaluation?

Have the candidate describe the general approach he or she intends to take for the evaluation. Pay attention to questions and issues the candidate believes should be the focus of the evaluation, the type of data to be collected to address those questions and issues, the method of data collection, and the presentation of the evaluation's results. If the discussion becomes very technical and a candidate is unable to present information in an easily understood manner, it is unlikely that this candidate will meet your needs. A candidate unable to communicate effectively at this time will probably not overcome the problem during the evaluation. Effective communication is a key for success, and the interview gives committee members a good idea of how effectively a candidate can communicate.

Project STAR

Does the candidate believe your evaluation can be conducted for the available funds?

Candidates must indicate that their proposed evaluation approach can be carried out for the funds you indicated would be available. You may find a proposed evaluation plan to be excellent but unattainable under your anticipated budget.

All candidates who pass the initial screening process should be asked to produce a detailed budget for the evaluation. A detailed budget is useful for identifying the aspects of the evaluation that are being emphasized, as well as for providing the committee with a way of monitoring the overall evaluation effort.

What is the candidate's reaction to supervision by the evaluation committee?

The evaluator should report to the evaluation committee to assist the committee's supervision of the evaluation. It is reasonable to assume that a candidate unwilling to work under such conditions is not appropriate for the position.

Experienced evaluators might offer suggestions to help your committee's proposed project management operate more efficiently and effectively.

What is the candidate's prior evaluation experience?

Experience is an important factor to consider. A candidate probably will not have performed exactly the same evaluation that you require, but many similarities between previous programs and your own can be found. The candidate's prior experience will be your main opportunity to discover and weigh that person's strengths and weaknesses.

How useful are the candidate's previous evaluation reports?

Look for evaluation reports for which the candidate served as lead author. Assess the reports for their clarity, organization, readability, and potential usefulness for decision makers. Pay particular attention to how well they would help a program improve. Candidates providing technical, poorly written, disorganized, difficult-to-understand, or lengthy evaluation reports will likely compose similar reports for your evaluation. Evaluators with poor writing skills are all too common, and a poorly written report can ruin the best evaluation study.

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Does the candidate have good references?

Candidates should be asked to provide the names of at least two persons or organizations for whom they have previously conducted evaluation projects. These references should be contacted for objective views of the candidates. Here are some questions you could ask the references:

- Did the evaluation approach used by the evaluator address the needs and desires of your organization?
- Was the evaluation conducted in a timely fashion?
- Was the evaluation conducted within your budget?
- Was the evaluation report useful to you?
- Would you hire the evaluator to conduct another evaluation for you?

Will the candidate's existing professional commitments interfere with the planned evaluation?

Good program evaluators are usually in demand. A candidate who is engaged in several projects, however, may be unable to devote sufficient time to your program evaluation. Ask the candidate to describe current and expected professional commitments. If the commitments seem excessive, ask how the candidate plans to conduct your program evaluation along with these other tasks. If the candidate indicates that other persons will be used to assist with the evaluation, determine which tasks will be performed by whom. Also determine if these other persons are capable of performing the tasks assigned to them. Using a team of trained and experienced persons to perform an evaluation is common, but the committee must satisfy itself that the team leader (i.e., the candidate) will be involved in all tasks that the committee believes require this person's direct involvement.

What is your general reaction to the candidate?

During interviews, be alert to the candidate's ability to communicate in a straightforward manner, and be alert to your own expectations of how effectively you and your colleagues can work with this person. A clash of working styles can certainly be a problem, and the chemistry between a candidate and committee members should not be ignored.

What is your overall rating of the candidate?

Following the interview process, committee members should individually rate the candidates on all of the issues previously described. Candidates might be rated on a five-point scale, ranging from "Definitely hire as our evaluator" to "Definitely do not hire as our evaluator". "No opinion" should be the midpoint. (See Attachment 1 for a sample form for rating candidates). After combining committee members' individual scores, the

Project STAR

candidates should be ranked so that the position can be offered to the candidate most acceptable to the majority of committee members.

Guideline 5: Write and negotiate the contract.

The desired relationship between the evaluation committee and the external evaluator is one of partnership and should be reflected as such in the contract. The contract should state, in a single paragraph if possible, the evaluator's general responsibilities. If you have the evaluator produce a work plan, it can be incorporated into your agreement. Also include a brief statement detailing your intended decision-making process and the authority of the evaluation committee. In another paragraph, list the contract deliverables and provide a timetable for them. Consider including language describing how changes in the scope of work or work plan will be handled. Many evaluation contracts also specify who owns the data gathered during the evaluation, as well as who has the right to publish the results of the evaluation study. Finally, indicate how the evaluator will bill for services rendered and a schedule of payments. Between 20 and 30 percent of the evaluator's fee should be withheld until acceptance of the final report by the committee.

The contract should also detail the evaluation committee's responsibilities to provide the external evaluator with timely and appropriate guidance, to review and approve evaluation instruments and documents in a timely and constructive manner, and to assist the evaluator in solving problems that arise during the evaluation.

Guideline 6: Interact closely with the evaluator.

At the first meeting with the evaluator, the evaluation committee should again describe the overall project and express its expectations of how the evaluation should be conducted. Following this general discussion, the evaluator and the committee should schedule, and make agendas for, subsequent meetings to keep the evaluation moving in a timely and efficient manner. Later meetings should include a review of the sample selection process, if applicable, and a discussion of the data-collection plan. The more specific the agenda you make for subsequent meetings, the more likely that the evaluation will meet the needs of the program and be completed in a timely manner. Be sure to keep the minutes of the committee meetings that record decisions made about the evaluation effort.

The committee's involvement in the evaluation process should not be limited to periodic meetings with the evaluator. The committee, in part or in whole, should continually monitor the evaluator and the evaluation. Committee members should review all major work elements, including sampling plans, instrumentation, data collection plans, etc. The committee can be of considerable service to the evaluator by facilitating involvement with host sites, beneficiaries, service participants, and others from whom the evaluator wishes to collect information.

Solicit feedback from your evaluator as the study progresses. Informal insights gained during the study period can be valuable. A committee that is intermittently

Project STAR

involved in the evaluation process may discover that the study had gone in an inappropriate direction after considerable time, money, and effort have been expended.

Guideline 7: Prepare the final report and release of results.

As your evaluation nears completion, the committee and the evaluator should agree on a format for the evaluation report. The evaluation report should address evaluation questions directly and briefly and should be understandable to the target audience. Any report, of course, must provide useful and direct guidance for program decision makers.

The committee and the evaluator should also agree at this time on the evaluator's role in the release of the evaluation's results. The committee may request that the evaluator be available to meet with decision makers, conduct interviews with news media, and make public presentations of the results.

The evaluator customarily submits a preliminary draft of the final report to committee members for review and comment. If the changes suggested by the committee are significant and would have the effect of changing the findings, recommendations, or overall focus of the report, they should be discussed at a meeting between the committee and the evaluator. If the evaluator does not believe that the suggested changes are consistent with the data, the evaluator has the right to be disassociated from the report. In such an instance, the evaluator may make the requested changes and assign authorship of the report to the committee. Such situations should be avoided, however, as they usually place the integrity and public acceptance of the report in jeopardy.

Guideline 8: Use the findings of your study.

Once your study is complete, its value will be very limited unless the results are used to improve your program. Use the insights gained to review your program design and modify, or replicate, program elements as appropriate. Use your evaluator as a resource in this activity. Your evaluator's assistance in interpreting the results for their program management implications can be very valuable.

Address the most compelling findings first. Don't get overwhelmed trying to do everything at once. Make note of findings that suggest further areas of investigation. Future evaluations may shed light on unclear data.

Use your study not only to improve operations, but to market your program. Potential funders and service partners will be more willing to become involved with your program if you can show them evidence of effectiveness and a willingness to make improvements based on evaluation data.

Conclusion

Most evaluations of national service programs are undertaken to help decision makers improve the programs. The relationship between the evaluation committee and the external evaluator must thus be viewed as a functional partnership. An effective functional partnership is founded on agreement over the objectives of the evaluation, an understanding of the responsibilities and authority of each partner, and mutual respect for the contributions that each partner provides to the evaluation. Your committee must have ultimate responsibility for the program's evaluation, and the evaluator, as a partner, should function as an advisor and staff person to you. Selecting an appropriate evaluator will largely depend upon the specificity of the evaluation tasks your committee identifies to be performed, the effort you put into the selection process, and the extent and quality of your interaction with the evaluator during the development and implementation of the evaluation. If the steps identified here are followed, the evaluation process should be enjoyable and productive for both the evaluation committee and the external evaluator.

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Attachment 1

Candidate Rating Form

Candidate Name: _____

1. Distinction between research and evaluation

Clearly understands the distinction between evaluation and research No opinion Has no understanding of the distinction between evaluation and research

2. Understanding of the program.

Has excellent understanding of the program No opinion Has no understanding of the program

3. Evaluation approach

Understandable: can clearly explain how evaluation approach addresses needs of program No opinion Not understandable: cannot clearly explain how evaluation approach addresses needs of program

4. Evaluation costs

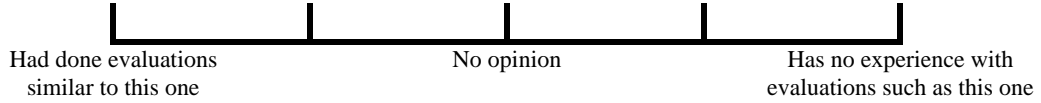
Evaluation is very likely to be conducted with available resources No opinion Evaluation can be conducted with available resources

5. Reaction to the evaluation management structure

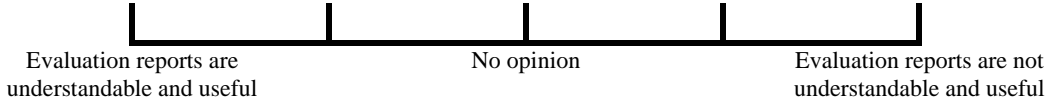
Supports management structure No opinion Wants sole authority

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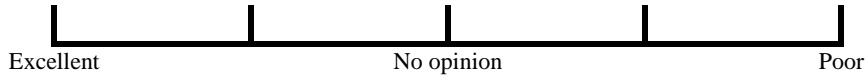
6. Prior evaluation experience



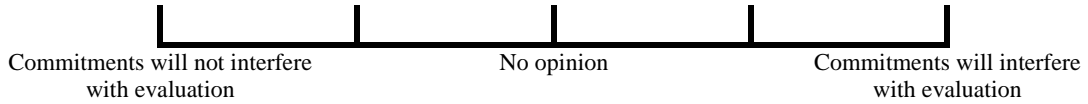
7. Usefulness of previous evaluation reports



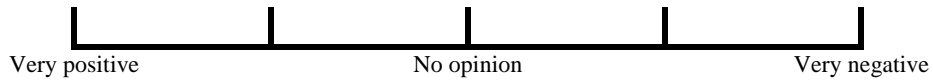
8. References



9. Professional commitments



10. General reaction (manner, personality)



11. Overall rating

