



Establishing a Culture of Data Tip Sheet

Organizations can use data to understand and improve programs long before conducting a formal evaluation. Building capacity to collect and analyze data consistently and establishing a “data culture” can help organizations deliver services more effectively. Previous AmeriCorps-funded programs have demonstrated that efforts to establish this data culture include developing an understanding of the value of data, using data openly and regularly, developing clear data collection protocols and tools, and collecting data on all stages of the program using a variety of methods. See the “About This Tip Sheet” box for more information.

This tip sheet discusses the importance of establishing a data culture and ways data can be used to improve program performance.

Building a Data Culture

To effectively use data, organizations must first build a culture in which all staff value data and embrace the opportunity to make data-based program improvements. Using and sharing data to inform work can be sensitive as staff and leaders may associate program data with individual performance. Enacting data-based adjustments can also be challenging if staff are invested in the way they currently operate their programs. To address such issues, organizations should build a data culture by discussing data regularly and openly at all levels, developing a shared understanding of the value of data for program improvement, and embracing opportunities to make changes. Consulting with staff at all levels to understand what data would be most useful, when they need the data, and who needs the data will help grow buy-in on the value of collecting and reviewing data.

View the [Partnering on the Evidence Journey](#) and the [Evidence Continuum](#) videos for examples of how AmeriCorps uses data and evidence to strengthen its capacity to deliver on the agency’s mission.

What your organization can do:

- Secure buy-in and commitment from the organization’s leadership to promote a data culture where data are routinely used to inform program decisions.
- Create an atmosphere where program performance data can be discussed openly and used as a basis for decision making by building data sharing into every part of the organization. Share information at staff meetings, distribute dashboards with relevant indicators, and involve staff at all levels of the organization in interpreting data and developing strategies for continuous improvement.
- Get input from staff about what data they need to inform their work and the most effective format for getting that information to them.
- Make clear how the data analysis supports what staff value—serving clients more effectively by focusing efforts on what is working and adjusting or ending what is not.
- Communicate to staff the benefits of having reliable data to demonstrate the impact of their work to clients, partners, and funders.

Using Data to Ensure Program Fidelity

Program fidelity requires adhering to a program model as it was designed and for which there is evidence of effectiveness. Attention to fidelity is critical for evidence-based programs. Organizations can capture program fidelity data by establishing appropriate metrics and protocols, training staff appropriately, collecting data efficiently, and analyzing data effectively. Staff can use the data to identify, understand, and address variations in implementation across staff and to the extent to which the program is implemented to the program model itself.

What your organization can do:

- Develop clear protocols for program delivery, and train frontline staff so they know what they need to do and why it is important.
- Use quality control tools such as observations and logs to ensure services are delivered as intended.
- Track program delivery metrics, such as number and length of client contacts, and adjust as needed to ensure consistent program delivery.

Using Data to Improve Program Delivery

Organizations can also use data to identify and adjust programs that are not performing well or as expected. When collecting these data, organizations should think through the data needed at all points in the life cycle of the program, from recruitment, placement, engagement, and retention, to program implementation, to long-term follow-up. Collecting data on all aspects of the program, at all points, and using different methods (such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, and service delivery data) will help to create a more detailed picture of how the program is working.



Recruitment Data

Using recruitment data to modify or refine recruitment strategies

Example: An organization makes changes to their recruitment strategies based on data from monitoring recruitment messages and corresponding response rates.



Engagement Data

Using engagement data to determine how to increase use of an organization's services

Example: An organization uses focus groups and field observations to understand why clients are not using certain services and tests new engagement strategies with clients.



Retention Data

Using retention data to address barriers causing clients to leave the program

Example: An organization uses exit interviews to identify reasons clients leave the program and makes programmatic changes based on findings to increase retention.

What your organization can do:

- Collect data about all aspects of the program, not just direct service delivery components. This includes information about recruitment and long-term outcomes.
- Look for barriers to client success and focus on program modifications to address them.
- Use mixed-method data collection techniques. While quantitative data from a survey can provide key information, qualitative data from focus groups, interviews, and observations can highlight program needs that a survey can miss.
- Collect data in a systematic way to ensure data reliability. Design a data collection strategy that is consistent and can be used to compare performance over time.
- Design data dashboards that present data in simple, visual, and easy-to-understand ways, and ensure staff use them regularly.
- Pay attention to the data, consider possible options with an open mind, and be willing to take risks by trying a new approach.

About the Office of Research and Evaluation

The [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation](#) assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America.

About AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation's most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. **Learn more at [AmeriCorps.gov](#).**

About This Tip Sheet

This tip sheet was based on research sponsored by the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation that collected input from three grantees and six subgrantees from the Social Innovation Fund (SIF). The [SIF issue brief](#) was originally developed by ICF (authored by Johanna Barrero, Janet Pershing, and Janet Griffith) and published in 2015 as a deliverable of the SIF Classic National Assessment and synthesized for this document. If you have any questions, please reach out to evaluation@cns.gov.