

This presentation provides an overview of the basic steps involved in conducting an evaluation.

For this presentation, we have identified a number of learning objectives.

By the end of this presentation, you will be able to:

- Describe the basic steps for conducting an evaluation
- Plan for an evaluation
- Identify the key components of an evaluation plan
- Identify approaches for collecting and analyzing data
- Understand how to communicate and apply findings for program improvement
- Why do evaluation? To build evidence of effectiveness, and for program improvement.

This diagram illustrates CNCS's overall developmental approach. It shows that evidence falls along a continuum with the understanding that identifying an evidence-based program model requires organizational capacities that correspond to an organization's life cycle. The key building blocks for generating evidence are shown in the diagram. The first step is identifying a strong program design by gathering evidence that supports the intervention to be used. During this initial process, it is helpful to develop a logic model which clearly communicates the central model of your program. We will discuss logic models in more detail later in this presentation. It also is recommended that the program be piloted during this initial step to ensure its effective implementation prior to expanding the program more widely.

Once a strong program design has been identified, the second building block is ensuring the effective full implementation of the program. Efforts should be made to document program processes, ensure fidelity to the central program model, evaluate program quality and efficiency, and establish continuous process improvement protocols. Much of these activities can be supported through the identification and regular monitoring of performance measures.

The next level in the continuum is assessing the program's outcomes. This process involves developing indicators for measuring outcomes, possibly conducting one of the less rigorous outcome evaluation designs, such as a single group pre-post design to measure program outcomes, and conducting a thorough process evaluation. We will discuss what these types of evaluation designs entail later in this presentation.

One step further in the continuum is obtaining evidence of positive program outcomes by examining the linkages between program activities and outcomes. Programs at this level of the continuum will have performed multiple pre- and post-evaluations and conducted outcome evaluations using an independent evaluator.

Finally, the highest level of evidence allows a program to make the claim of being evidence-based by attaining strong evidence of positive program outcomes. At this level, programs have established the causal linkage between program activities and intended outcomes/impacts. Programs at this level have completed multiple independent evaluations using strong study designs, such as a quasi-experimental evaluation using a comparison group or an experimental, random assignment design study. Many of these programs also have measured the cost effectiveness of their program compared to other interventions addressing the same need.

Based on this understanding of a continuum of evidence, a strong program design, sound performance measures, and the identification of measureable program outcomes are a fundamental starting point for building evidence of effectiveness. Consequently, attempts to generate experimental evidence before earlier developmental work has been completed is not recommended and may result in wasting valuable resources. As an agency, CNCS continues to develop a funding strategy that will create a portfolio of programs reflecting a range of evidence levels (e.g., strong, moderate, preliminary) that are appropriate to the program's life cycle and investment of public dollars. CNCS sees value in infusing evaluative thinking and knowledge into every phase of a program's life cycle – program development, implementation, improvement, and replication/scaling.

Evaluation can be thought of as a set of linked activities, and the process for undertaking an evaluation includes four main phases – planning, development, implementation, and action and improvement.

Within each of the 4 broad phases, there are 9 basic steps for conducting an evaluation. The planning phase involves building (or reviewing a program logic model), defining the purpose and scope of the evaluation, budgeting for an evaluation, and selecting an evaluator. The planning phase is followed by the development phase which involves the creation of an evaluation plan. The next phase relates to implementation where data are collected and analyzed. The last phase, action and improvement, involves communicating findings and applying those findings and feedback for program improvement. Together, these steps are designed to help build a strong foundation for your evaluation.

It should be noted that while some order exists as to how programs generally approach evaluation steps, the process largely depends on a project's particular circumstances. In addition, the interdependent nature of the activities means that the steps are not necessarily linear but may evolve throughout the development and implementation of your evaluation strategies. While there are some differences in evaluation requirements between large (>\$500K) grantees and small (<\$500K) grantees, these general steps apply to any kind of evaluation.

We'll talk through each of these steps in more detail over the next several slides. Think about an evaluation you might conduct for your program, and as we go through the presentation try to think through how each step would apply to your program's evaluation.

The first four steps in conducting an evaluation are part of the planning phase and involve activities that will help you prepare for an evaluation of your program. We'll talk about these four planning steps in more detail over the next few slides. Again, we want to emphasize that these planning steps do not need to follow this particular order. Depending on your program, these activities may overlap with one another or follow a different order than what is presented above.

As you begin to plan for an evaluation of a program or intervention, it is essential that there be a clear and comprehensive mapping of the program or intervention itself. Thus, a useful first step in planning an evaluation should be to clarify and confirm your program's operations or processes and intended outcomes by developing a logic model. If your program has already developed a logic model, then you might only need to review the existing model and possibly update or refine it to reflect your current program operations and goals.

So how can a logic model be used to help in planning for an evaluation? Your logic model can serve as a framework for your evaluation plan by helping you make informed decisions about what to evaluate,

when to evaluate, and how you will evaluate. Your logic model can be used as a tool to help you focus your evaluation with respect to the following:

- Identify questions you want or need answered about your program
- Identify which aspects of your program to evaluate (e.g., will you evaluate a subset or all of your AmeriCorps activities? Will you evaluate your program's short-term outcomes?)
- Determine the appropriate evaluation design (e.g., will you use a process or an impact evaluation design, or a combination of both?)
- Identify what information to collect
- Identify measures and data collection methods
- Determine an appropriate timeframe for your evaluation

Throughout this presentation, we will be making several references to a logic model – we consider a logic model to be a planning tool that can be used to help guide you through many of the basic steps involved in planning and conducting an evaluation. [Reference pre-work Logic Model handout.] Note that logic models come in many sizes and shapes and also vary in level of detail, ranging from basic/simple to complex. There is no one or “right” way to develop a logic model. It often depends upon your purpose, how you will use the logic model, who will use the logic model, and what your program entails. The logic model shown here follows the CNCS template, but you may find that you need to develop a logic model for your evaluation that is slightly different, or expands upon, the logic model that you submitted as part of your AmeriCorps application.

For more information on developing a program logic model, please see the webinar on How to Develop a Program Logic Model located on the National Service Knowledge Network.

Let's turn now to talk about a second step in the evaluation planning phase – defining the purpose and scope of your evaluation. Just as your program needs to have a specific purpose and scope, so does your evaluation. Each evaluation should have a *primary* purpose around which it can be designed and planned, although it may have several other purposes. The stated purpose of the evaluation drives the expectations and sets the boundaries for what the evaluation can and cannot deliver.

In defining the purpose of the study, it is helpful to identify why the evaluation is being done and how the information collected and reported by the study will actually be used and by whom.

For example, are program staff trying to understand how to operate the program more efficiently or identify barriers or constraints to implementation? Or does your program need to produce evidence that it is meeting its intended outcomes? Will the results be used by program staff to make changes to the program's implementation? Will the results be used by the program's funder to make decisions about future funding opportunities?

In general, defining a specific purpose for your evaluation will allow you to set parameters around the data you collect and methods you will use.

Questions about why your evaluation is being done and how the information will be used should be discussed among a variety of program staff, and any other individuals who may be involved in the evaluation to ensure there is consensus as to what the evaluation will accomplish.

As you work to define your evaluation's purpose and scope, you should also consider:

- Whether your funder has any specific evaluation requirements that must be fulfilled. This means that if you are doing an evaluation to fulfill a program requirement set forth by your funder, you want to make sure you understand what exactly those requirements are as they will likely drive the purpose and scope of your evaluation. For example, AmeriCorps National Direct grantees and AmeriCorps State Competitive grantees that receive an average annual CNCS grant of \$500,000 or more must conduct an independent impact evaluation, designed to provide statistical evidence of the impact of the program compared to what would have happened in the absence of the program using a comparison or control group. AmeriCorps National Direct grantees and AmeriCorps State Competitive grantees with average grants of less than \$500,000 are also required by CNCS to conduct an evaluation. However, the requirement differs in that they may use an internal evaluator rather than an independent one. Another difference in the requirement is that although it is strongly encouraged by CNCS to use the most rigorous evaluation design feasible, they are not required to conduct an impact evaluation that uses a comparison or control group.
- It is also important to take into consideration what resources (time, funds, expertise) are available to carry out the evaluation. Because most programs have limited resources that can be put towards an evaluation, it is important to note that it is not necessary to evaluate every aspect of your program as depicted in your logic model. Your evaluation can have a narrow focus (e.g., only address questions about one of your program's service activities and desired outcomes) or it can have a broader focus (e.g., address questions about each of your program's service activities and desired outcomes), depending on the information you hope to gain from your evaluation and the resources you have available.

Turning back now to a logic model, on this slide we present an example of how your logic model can be used to help you focus your evaluation by narrowing in on the primary question or questions you want to address. A program logic model can help narrow down the vast array of questions you may want to answer about your program, by highlighting the connections between program components and outcomes.

The graphic above provides an example of the types of questions that may be asked of each component in a logic model:

- Questions related to **inputs** ask, "Are resources adequate to implement the program?"
- Questions related to **activities** ask, "Are activities delivered as intended?"
- Questions related to **outputs** ask, "How many, how much was produced?"
- Questions related to **outcomes** ask, "What changes occurred as a result of the program?"

As you may recall from an earlier slide, a logic model has two "sides." The process side represents a program's implementation or its planned work and the outcomes side describes the expected sequence of changes that the program is to accomplish. Determining which side of the model your question(s) of interest lies will help you to decide what type of evaluation you will need to conduct – process vs. outcome/impact, or both. We will talk more about the differences between these two types of evaluation at a later point in the presentation.

As you can see at the bottom of this graphic, in order to answer each of these questions, indicators, which are the evidence or information that represents the phenomenon in question, and their data sources will need to be identified. Again, we will talk more about this at a later point in the presentation.

Now that we have presented examples of the types of questions that may be asked for each logic model component, let's apply these ideas to developing research questions for the hypothetical AmeriCorps veterans program. As you'll recall, the program is designed to address unemployment and among veterans and their spouses as well as their transition into civilian work and community life. For this exercise, we will develop research questions as a group and have participants use the example logic model to come up with potential research questions. We encourage all of you to participate and provide your input as we develop research questions for this program together.

Please use the handouts that have been provided on the program's description and its accompanying logic model as a reference. [Logic Model provided on next slide as reference]

Beginning with the left side of the logic model, a process evaluation asks the broad question, "Is the program being implemented as designed?" What are some potential research questions that we can pose with respect to inputs, activities, and outputs? (At this point, the facilitator may wish to return to the previous slide so participants can see the types of questions that are asked and apply them to the veteran's program logic model handout.)

Examples:

- Inputs:
 - Were resources adequate to implement program activities?
 - What is the budget for this program?
 - How many staff and volunteers does the program have?
- Activities:
 - Were education and outreach activities delivered as intended?
 - Is the program running efficiently?
- Outputs:
 - How many veterans participated in the job readiness workshops?
 - Is the program reaching its target population?
 - Who is the program serving?

Moving to the right side of the logic model, an outcomes evaluation asks the broad question, "What difference has the program made?" What are some potential research questions that we can pose with respect to short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes?

Examples:

- Short-term:
 - Did veterans demonstrate an improvement in their job readiness skills?
 - Do employers understand the strengths and benefits of hiring veterans?
- Medium-term:
 - Was there an increase in the number of veterans finding jobs?
 - Do families adopt more proactive coping strategies to manage the transition from military to civilian life?
- Long-term:

- Were veterans able to maintain their jobs over the long-term?
- Are families better off?

This exercise was intended to help you think through program evaluation questions in terms of the logic model components. To recap, a process evaluation provides information that helps you improve your program and mainly focuses on inputs, activities, and outputs. An impact evaluation provides information that can be used to demonstrate the results of your program on participants and the community. It focuses on the program's short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes.

Facilitator notes: The third step in the planning phase involves budgeting for an evaluation. The cost of evaluations varies widely and will depend on the type of study design, the size of the study, the level of expertise and experience of the evaluator, and data collection expenses.

Other common considerations for creating a program evaluation budget are: staff time; materials, equipment, and supplies; travel costs; and data collection. With respect to this last item, evaluations involving more primary data collection tend to be more expensive than those that rely on existing internal program records or external data sources. This is not a comprehensive list of cost consideration. Depending on the program to be evaluated and/or the actual evaluation activities, there may be additional expenses required.

Facilitator notes: In determining what resources are needed to conduct the evaluation, you should consider,

“Who will conduct the evaluation?”, whether it will be an external evaluator or a member of the program staff. If it will be a member of the program staff, you should anticipate the extra hours it will take to complete evaluation activities. Remember that large grantees are required to use an external evaluator, while small grantees are not.

Some other considerations in estimating resource needs are:

“What will the evaluation include?”

“How will it be conducted?”

“Will the evaluation involve new data collection?” If so, at what time points will data be collected and where will the data collection take place?”

Even when an external evaluator is hired, organizations must also invest staff time in managing an evaluation. Just as you would monitor your program to ensure that it is on track and running smoothly, you want to have staff responsible for monitoring that your evaluation is moving forward as planned. This may require regular meetings (e.g., weekly, monthly, quarterly) with the evaluator to check in on the current status of the evaluation, progress made, whether there have been any setbacks or challenges that need attention, any resource needs, etc. Having program staff invested in the evaluation process ensures that an informed and well-planned evaluation will be produced.

Facilitator notes: We turn now to step 4, selecting an evaluator. An evaluator is an individual or a team of people who are deemed responsible for leading the program evaluation. Your evaluator might be an external source – an individual or a team of people you hire, such as a consulting firm, college or university personnel, or an independent consultant. Remember that large grantees are required to use an external evaluator. If you are a small grantee, you may use an external evaluator or you may decide to use an internal source such as one or more of your program staff members.

Facilitator notes: Determining whether to use an internal staff member or rely on an external evaluator is a critical decision that will need to be made early on in the planning phase of your evaluation. Some factors to consider when making this decision include:

- The purpose of your evaluation – Program evaluations that focus on providing statistical evidence of a program’s impact are often conducted by an independent evaluator as required by the funding agency.
- Staff workload and expertise – While using a program staff member may be less costly, it also adds to staff workload. It is important to consider this trade-off and whether staff have the capacity to take on additional work to carry out the evaluation activities. Also, when considering an internal staff member(s), be sure they have training and experience in evaluation, collecting and working with data, and analyzing information. Some programs may not have this type of technical expertise within their organization, thus, it may be necessary to rely primarily on an external evaluator for the evaluation.
- Program resources (e.g., financial, necessary computer software, etc.)
- Specific program requirements - As you may already know, CNCS requirements for independent evaluations vary by funding level. AmeriCorps grantees receiving annual funds of less than \$500,000 are NOT required to conduct an independent evaluation that uses an external evaluator. However, AmeriCorps grantees receiving annual funds of \$500,000 or more are required to conduct an independent evaluation which involves hiring an external evaluator.

Note that your program may also decide to take a hybrid approach by hiring an external evaluator to support the more technical aspects of the evaluation, and have your internal program staff carry out the non-technical aspects of the evaluation. For example, you may hire an external evaluator to identify or develop your data collection instruments, analyze the data, and also write up the results. Program staff may play a role in the evaluation by helping to collect the evaluation data (e.g., administering surveys or tests) and entering or processing the data into a database that can be passed on to the external evaluator. This may help to avoid unnecessary costs and ensures program staff will be actively involved in the process.

If your program decides to or is required to conduct an **independent** evaluation, it is critical that you select an individual or organization that meets the following criteria:

- The external evaluator must not have any conflicts of interest related to the evaluation; for example, the evaluator should not serve on the program’s board or make financial contributions to the program.
- The external evaluator must have sufficient independence to provide an unbiased assessment of the program’s outcomes and impacts.

How does a program go about identifying an external evaluator? There are several possibilities.

- First, programs can look to academic settings. Evaluators can often be found in academic entities such as colleges or universities. Formal evaluation is similar to research, and in many cases, evaluators are formally trained in research design and statistics. When looking for an evaluator in an academic setting, you may start by contacting the department that works with your field (e.g., social work, sociology, education or public administration), or see if there’s an evaluation office on campus.
- Second, there are professional evaluation or research firms, as well as individuals who work as independent consultants. Ask other organizations in your community who they have used and recommend working with. Check the American Evaluation Association (AEA) website as it contains a database of individuals who are available for evaluation consulting or to serve on

evaluation teams due to specific expertise in particular methodologies. You can search for a listing of individuals in your geographic area and/or your desired area of expertise.

- Lastly, programs can ask others in their network for ideas. Some large foundations have lists of evaluators with expertise in their field. Or you can call similar programs and ask them who they worked with. If a particular name emerges as having worked with the grantees of a particular funding agency, that firm could add credibility to your proposal. However, make sure that those grantees had a successful partnership with the evaluator and that the evaluations were of high quality. The last thing we want to do is perpetuate poorly designed and conducted evaluations.

Once you have identified potential evaluators, you will want to ensure that you choose an evaluator that has the capacity to understand your program and the information you expect to gain from your evaluation. Your evaluator must also possess the skills and experience needed to conduct a high quality evaluation.

When selecting an evaluator or evaluation team, consider whether your potential evaluator has:

- Formal training in evaluation
- Experience evaluating similar programs or interventions and experience that matches the type of design, methods, and/or approach of your planned evaluation. You want to find out how much evaluation work they have done, especially in projects similar in content and approach to yours.
- Capacity to handle the scale and size of your planned evaluation. Likewise, you want to find out the extent of evaluation work they have done that is of similar scope and size to yours.
- A personal style that fits with your program staff or organization. Make sure that the evaluator can communicate with your staff. If the evaluator only describes the process or approach they will take using highly technical jargon, it may be difficult for your staff to work with them. It may also be a sign that their products/reports will also be highly technical, and hard to interpret and implement recommended changes.

Before hiring an evaluator, make sure to interview prospective evaluators, look at their past work (e.g., request a recent report or sample of their work), ask for names of past clients and check their references. Lastly, make sure you feel comfortable that he, she, or the team is credible, competent, and capable of leading an evaluation process that meets your program's needs and interests.

Once the planning phase has been completed, the next phase is the development phase where your evaluation team will develop an evaluation plan.

An evaluation plan is similar to a roadmap or a blueprint. It clarifies the steps needed to assess the processes and/or outcomes of a program. An effective evaluation plan is meant to be a dynamic tool, that is, a document that you continue to update as you make decisions about what your evaluation will entail and how you will carry out your evaluation activities. Your evaluation plan should be updated on an ongoing basis (e.g., adding new strategies, methods, data sources, etc.) until you have reached a final point of documenting all of the steps, activities, methods, etc. that your evaluation will cover. We will talk more about what exactly an effective evaluation plan should include on the next few slides.

An evaluation plan can clarify what direction your evaluation should take based on priorities, resources, time, and skills needed to accomplish the evaluation. The process of developing an evaluation plan in cooperation with an evaluation workgroup of stakeholders will foster collaboration and a sense of

shared purpose. Having a written evaluation plan will foster transparency and ensure that stakeholders are on the same page with regards to the purpose, use, and users of the evaluation results.

A written evaluation plan is useful because it —

- creates a shared understanding of the purpose(s), use, and users of the evaluation results,
- fosters program transparency to stakeholders and decision makers
- helps to identify whether there are sufficient program resources and time to accomplish desired evaluation activities and answer prioritized evaluation questions
- facilitates a smoother transition when there is staff turnover

Based on CNCS's guidelines in the Frequently Asked Questions: Evaluation document located in the Knowledge Network, when fully developed, your evaluation plan should include the following components:

- Introduction
- Program background
- Research questions to be addressed in the study
- Evaluation design, including a rationale for the design selected, an assessment of its strengths and limitations, and a description of the process and/or impact assessment components
- Sampling methods, measurement tools, and data collection procedures
- Analysis plan
- Reporting results
- Timeline, budget, and evaluator qualifications

We will talk about each of these components in more detail on the following slides.

[We acknowledge that this is more detail than is provided in the most recent AmeriCorps NOFO. We would encourage you to submit more detailed evaluation plans in your application, but certainly when you are getting ready to conduct your evaluation you will need a more detailed evaluation plan that includes the components we will discuss here.]

The introduction section of your evaluation plan is similar to an executive summary of your report. It's an abridged version of your full evaluation plan and is intended to establish the context of your planned evaluation. It should briefly explain

- The problem/issue your program/intervention intends to address
- Your program's theory of change
- Purpose of the evaluation
- The general approach that will be taken to conduct the planned evaluation

The program background section of your evaluation plan should provide detail about your program model. It should include information on:

- Your program's theory of change
- Existing research or practice that is grounded in evidence and practitioner knowledge about the program and/or similar programs
- Logic model
- Outcomes of interest that your evaluation will assess

The next section of the evaluation plan outlines the key research questions that will be evaluated. These questions should be clearly stated, be measurable, and align with your program's theory of change and logic model.

The fourth section of your evaluation plan presents the approach you intend to use to evaluate your program. Before you decide on the most appropriate evaluation design, it is important that you are clear about the primary evaluation questions. Once you have defined the most important evaluation questions, there are several designs that may adequately answer your evaluation question. You can select a specific design by considering the following:

- Which design will provide the desired information?
- How feasible is each option?
- Are there any ethical concerns related to choosing a specific design?
- How much would each option cost?

The evaluation design that is selected should be based on and aligned with the objectives and priorities of the project, the purpose of the evaluation and the evaluation questions, the time frame for conducting the evaluation, how, and by whom, the results will be used, and the budget for the evaluation.

As mentioned earlier, there are two common types of evaluation designs:

A Process/Implementation design examines how well the program matches the theory behind its creation and confirms what the program actually does on the ground. As noted earlier, the **process** side of the logic model focuses on a program's implementation or its planned work – inputs/resources, activities, and outputs (direct products).

An Outcome/Impact design addresses how a program's activities are related to changes in its participants or beneficiaries, and ideally provides evidence as to whether the program causes the observed changes.

The **outcomes** side of the logic model describes the expected sequence of changes that the program is to accomplish, which can be short-term, medium-term, and/or long-term changes. The outcomes side reflects what difference the program intends to make.

In addition to their different attention to logic model components, a key difference between a process evaluation and an impact evaluation concerns the use of a comparison or control group. A process evaluation only requires that data be collected on program beneficiaries. An impact evaluation, on the other hand, requires collecting and analyzing data on a comparison or control group in addition to program beneficiaries. In this way we can determine whether any observed changes in program beneficiaries would have occurred in the absence of the program. We note that some evaluations use statistical controls and there are other evaluation techniques being applied for emerging frameworks such as collective impact, but within the current federal environment a strong evaluation design using a comparison or control group or is the only accepted way to determine causality.

It is also important to note how different evaluation designs align with CNCS requirements for grantees. Whereas conducting an impact evaluation fulfills requirements for all grantees, a process evaluation only fulfills the evaluation requirements for small grantees (i.e., grantees receiving funding of less than \$500,000 annually).

The fifth section of your evaluation plan should include information on how you will collect/compile data for your evaluation. Specifically, this section should provide information on:

- What will the evaluation measure (e.g., process/implementation, outcomes or both)?

- Sources of information (i.e., sources of data may include AmeriCorps members, program beneficiaries, program staff and stakeholders, comparison or control group members, or existing datasets, including program or administrative records such as earnings, health data, test scores, etc.)
- Types of data to be collected or compiled (i.e., quantitative and/or qualitative such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, administrative data)
- Sampling methods (if any)
- Criteria for selecting information sources
- Methods for collecting information, such as questionnaires and procedures
- Timeframe for collecting information
- Methods for analyzing information

Program staff should also consider “What is the level of effort and costs associated with collecting the needed data?” Most organizations already collect a great deal of information on their program on an on-going basis. It is important to identify and creatively use existing in-house data collection, particularly if resources are limited. In particular, an evaluation can incorporate or expand upon the data that a program already collects for performance measurement. For example, you may already be collecting performance data indicating whether a change among program beneficiaries has occurred. What the data do not show is causality – that the change occurred because of your specific intervention. If your requirement is to conduct an impact evaluation, this cause-effect relationship is what you want to demonstrate. You can build on this performance data by collecting the same data for a comparison group.

Once the evaluation plan has been completed, the next phase is the implementation phase where you will begin conducting the evaluation. These steps include collecting and analyzing data. It should be noted that this phase in the evaluation cycle can be very time-consuming. Programs need to allow sufficient time for data collection to ensure that data for a full program year are available, particularly when pre/post measures are being used. In addition, programs that will be pre-testing instruments must also factor in this additional time.

Data can be collected in many different ways. Programs often begin by first looking at the data already being collected to understand if existing data can adequately answer the evaluation’s research questions. Existing data may be data collected by the program itself or data that are gathered by external sources, such as administrative data. If a program elects to use existing datasets or program/administrative data, it is important to extract only relevant information that will answer your evaluation questions.

When existing data are not available to answer research questions, programs need to collect new data. Depending on the research questions being asked, there are several different types of data collection instruments that can be developed and administered such as interview protocols and survey questionnaires, among others. Wherever possible, it is also important to incorporate data collection into routine program activities.

Once the data have been collected, the information must be described, analyzed and interpreted. The steps for preparing the data for analysis and interpretation, however, differ depending on whether the data are quantitative or qualitative.

For quantitative data, the statistical analyses specified in the evaluation plan are conducted. While we do not attempt to go into detail on the different statistical techniques that might be used for quantitative analysis, most evaluations rely on simple descriptive statistics – means (which are averages), frequencies (which are counts of how often something occurs), etc. However, when more complex analyses and causal modeling are necessary (particularly in the case of impact evaluations), evaluators will need to use more sophisticated techniques such as analyses of variance, regression analysis, and so forth.

For qualitative data, content analysis is a widely used research technique. To ensure that qualitative data (such as from interviews or field observations) are amenable to analysis and systematically comparable, coding schemes are applied to the notes or data. Various approaches are used to interpret meaning or themes from the content of text data. It is important to note that anecdotes or what we sometimes refer to as “great stories” are not the same as qualitative data. Anecdotes – or personal accounts, thoughts, or feelings – collected in an ad hoc fashion cannot tell us whether any improvements occurred in an intervention because no measurements were established. As a final point, programs are not tied to one approach over another in carrying out their evaluation. In fact, most high quality evaluations include both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

At this point, we’d like to return to the hypothetical AmeriCorps job readiness program for veterans and provide you with an example crosswalk that can be created to help you think through the process for identifying the data collection and analysis for a given research question. For this example, we begin with a research question developed for a process evaluation of the hypothetical veterans program, followed by a research question developed for an impact evaluation. The hypothetical program is designed to combat veteran unemployment through a number of different activities. For simplicity, we focus here on the series of workshops delivered by the program.

The main research question for the process evaluation being conducted for this program concerns whether the job readiness program is being implemented as designed. Potential indicators for assessing fidelity to the program model include member use of program curriculum during workshops, the duration of workshops, and participant workshop rates. This information can be collected through member logs as well as evaluator observations of the workshops on a quarterly basis.

Once the data have been gathered, simple descriptive statistics can be generated from the quantitative data such as frequencies on the use of the curriculum and averages on the duration of workshop and participant attendance rates. Meanwhile, qualitative data that have been collected may be thematically coded and analyzed. Taken together, analyses of all the collected data are then used to assess the extent to which the program was implemented as designed.

In this example, we present a research question developed for an impact evaluation of the hypothetical veterans program.

The main research question asks what impact the job readiness program has on participants’ ability to secure and maintain employment relative to a comparison group. The outcome of interest is veterans’ employment status. One way to collect this information is through surveys. Since this is an impact evaluation, the information must be collected not only on participants but also on an identified comparison group.

[EXERCISE: Ask participants to refer to their handout and try to fill in the remaining three columns of the crosswalk.]

[Modify notes as needed depending on time allotted for exercise. If no time is available for the exercise, simply present this slide and omit the previous slide.]

Facilitator notes: In this example, we present a research question developed for an impact evaluation of the hypothetical veterans program.

The main research question asks what impact the job readiness program has on participants' ability to secure and maintain employment relative to a comparison group. The outcome of interest is veterans' employment status. One way to collect this information is through surveys. Since this is an impact evaluation, the information must be collected not only on participants but also on an identified comparison group. In this example, the comparison group is veterans who receive no job assistance services. Alternatively, programs may also look within their own program for a comparison group. For example, an impact evaluation may compare participants receiving core as well as supplemental services against participants receiving only core services to examine the impact of those supplemental services. Another alternative for a comparison group is veterans who receive job assistance services through another program.

Once the intervention and comparison groups have been identified, the evaluator will collect the data at two time points. In this example, data will be collected both before the job readiness program begins and a year after the program has been implemented for both the intervention and comparison groups. After the data have been gathered, statistical tests (in this case, difference-in-differences methods) are then used to compare program participants with their matched comparison group by subtracting the average outcome (gain) in the comparison group from the average outcome (gain) in the intervention group. Such analyses may show that, on average, veterans participating in the program are more likely to be employed and remain employed than veterans who are not participating in job assistance programs. It is important to note that the statistical techniques and methods used in an impact evaluation can be sophisticated (involving for example, propensity score matching, identification and inclusion of covariates, etc.) and it is important to have a qualified external evaluator conduct the analyses.

When analyzing the data, it is important to address two key areas: "What conclusions about the research questions can be drawn from the data that have been analyzed?" "What does the data suggest about the program's theory of change?" Does the theory of change require any modifications to better reflect how the program is functioning?

For the hypothetical veterans program, findings from the process evaluation may reveal that members are faithfully delivering the content of the curriculum during the workshops and that participation in the workshops among veterans remains consistent and high. Based on the data that were collected and analyzed, we would conclude that this particular component of the program faithfully adheres to the program model.

The final phase in the evaluation process includes steps for communicating findings to specific audiences and applying findings for program improvement. The final Action and Improvement Phase is meant to encourage programs to share findings with others to continue to build the knowledge base about "What Works" for AmeriCorps programs and to apply evaluation findings for program improvement.

Before determining how to communicate your findings, first it is important to identify the potential target audiences for your findings and the potential tools for communicating these findings. How you communicate your findings and insights will depend on the purpose of the report and your intended audiences.

An evaluation report is a written product that objectively describes all of the steps involved in completing the evaluation, including findings, conclusions, and lessons learned. While the evaluator generally leads the report writing process, several different types of people may be involved in developing and/or reviewing the final report. For example, the program background section may be best provided and/or reviewed by program staff, while descriptions requiring more technical explanation, such as evaluation methods, procedures and study limitations, are best written by the program evaluator. Conclusions and recommendations also should be written by the evaluator, so a more independent assessment of the findings is provided. However, lessons learned, including implications for program modification or improvement, are best determined through discussions involving a wider group of program stakeholders, including program staff, funders and program beneficiaries, as appropriate. Questions for future research should be identified through a collaborative approach involving program staff, the evaluator, and other program stakeholders.

An evaluation report also provides a basis for further discussion on:

- Understanding the program's accountability to its theory of change
- Decision-making on policies and programs
- Drawing lessons for program improvement

In writing the final report, it should be a key consideration who the main audience will be for the report. In general, it is best to anticipate the report will be viewed by a wider audience, not just CNCS and program staff. Then the report can be most useful for communicating study findings to outside stakeholders. When writing for a broader audience, the study description and reporting of results should be provided using less technical language, and the more technical aspects of the study should be moved to an appendix. Also, enough detailed information should be provided so that outside parties can gain a full understanding of the program and the evaluation processes. In the instance where the report is mainly intended for internal program use, then the potential audience may be less of a concern and the report can be written to a narrower audience.

There is much to be learned from what did work as well as from what did not. Importantly, reporting negative findings does not mean that the evaluation and/or the program failed. It is important to communicate the evidence generated and make changes to programs based on the evaluation findings. CNCS expects grantees to make improvements to their programs in response to evaluation findings. This is a key reason for conducting program evaluation.

Some interventions have a very limited evidence base and any new information greatly increases knowledge in the field.

Lastly, it is important to communicate the results of your evaluation in the context of your particular program and not generalize too broadly.

We will provide an example of when negative findings can be useful for program improvement later in the presentation.

As mentioned previously, it is important that evaluation findings be disseminated to a wider audience, not just CNCS and program staff. However, a detailed final report is not always the best means for clearly communicating program findings to outside stakeholders. Shorter, less technical documents can be useful for disseminating evaluation findings, especially when developed in tandem with the final evaluation report. An executive summary to the final report is often useful for communicating the most pertinent details of an evaluation without overwhelming potential readers. Also, short research briefs, which contain mainly graphics, pictures, and bulleted information about the evaluation and its findings, can be useful for summarizing evaluation findings in a more digestible format. Research briefs, which can be as simple as a one page, front-and-back document, can also be more easily distributed at program events and in combination with other program materials.

Non-technical memos can be particularly useful for communicating additional or more targeted information beyond that found in the final report, such as implications for program planning or future evaluation plans.

Ultimately an evaluation must provide usable information that can directly inform program decision-making.

We can use the veterans program as an example of when negative findings can be useful for program improvement. Say a process evaluation of the program is conducted, and it finds that the program is successful in training and placing several veterans in new jobs. However, the most common reason reported by program participants for later leaving a new job placement was a lack of initial support for them and their families to relocate to new communities. What the evaluation found was that many veterans took jobs in new locations, but then, due to moving costs and a lack of familiarity with local services, family members had to wait to join them in their new communities. This unanticipated separation from family was a key reason why veterans tended to voluntarily leave new jobs and return back to their original communities. In response to these findings, the program could decide to add more transitional and support services for the families of recently placed veterans, so they can more quickly join them in their new communities.

To recap, these are the 9 basic steps for conducting an evaluation. Together, these steps are designed to help build a strong foundation for your evaluation.

For more information on evaluation, please go to the National Service Knowledge Network located here.

Does anyone have any questions?

This slide is provided as a blank template here and in the exercises handout. If time allows, participants can fill the crosswalk out for an evaluation of their AmeriCorps program.