Best Practices for Writing an Evaluation Plan

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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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Theory of change</th>
<th>VI. Data collection procedures, data sources, and measurement tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II. Outcome(s) of interest</td>
<td>VII. Analysis plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Research questions</td>
<td>VIII. Timeline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Evaluation design</td>
<td>IX. Evaluator qualifications</td>
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<td>V. Sampling methods</td>
<td>X. Budget</td>
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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:

For **process-focused evaluations**, research questions ask about:
- **Who?**
- **What?**
- **When?**
- **Where?**
- **Why?**
- **How?**

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

For **outcome-focused evaluations**, research questions ask about:
- **Changes?**
- **Effects?**
- **Impacts?**

**In:**
- **(Short-term)**
  - Knowledge
  - Skills
  - Attitudes
  - Opinions

- **(Medium-term)**
  - Behaviors
  - Actions

- **(Long-term)**
  - Conditions
  - Status
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Description of the type of evaluation design that will be used to answer your research questions

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<th>Process Evaluation</th>
<th>Outcome/Impact Evaluation</th>
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<tr>
<td>• 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</td>
<td>• Measures changes in knowledge, attitude(s), behavior(s) and/or condition(s) that may be associated with or caused by the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Results may be used to determine what changes and/or improvements should be made to the program’s operations</td>
<td>• Results may demonstrate what the program has achieved and/or its outcome or impact on beneficiaries or other stakeholder groups</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## IV. Evaluation design

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Collection Tool</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Data Instruments</th>
<th>Frequency of Data Collection</th>
<th>Topics for Data Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 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

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<tr>
<td>Non-experimental / Process evaluation design</td>
<td>• The quantitative data analysis techniques that will be used to produce the study findings (e.g., Chi-square, t-tests, frequencies, means)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The qualitative data analysis techniques that will be used to produce the study findings (e.g., content analysis, thematic coding)</td>
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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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| 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) |
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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/