

Description of Audio for the Developing a Long Term Research Agenda presentation on July 30, 2015

This presentation is about developing a long-term research agenda for your AmeriCorps program.

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

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

- Recognize the importance of building a long-term research agenda
- Identify the various stages in building evidence of a program's effectiveness
- Understand the key questions to consider prior to developing a long-term research agenda for your program

We begin this presentation with an overview of what a long-term research agenda is, why it is important to develop one, and the relationship between a long-term research agenda and a program's evidence of effectiveness.

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Here you see this idea illustrated.

The vertical axis shows capacity – as a program develops more capacity, the types of evaluations it does and the research tools it uses can become more sophisticated. The horizontal axis shows time – as a program becomes more established and mature, the number and scale of the research activities it can conduct increases.

Certain activities, like performance measurement, should happen at all times and from the very beginning of a program's lifespan. Data collection systems should also be developed and utilized from the very beginning.

Other activities develop over time, as a program builds capacity and becomes more established. Data collection systems are refined and become more sophisticated, and eventually a program begins to do program evaluation.

This picture also shows that many activities can and should occur simultaneously, no matter how well-established a program is or how much capacity it has. Performance measurement is ongoing, and program evaluation is not simply a one-time task.

All these various activities should be aligned and build upon one another in service of a program's research goal, or goals.

There are a number of reasons why it is beneficial to develop a long-term research agenda for your program.

A research agenda sets clear goals for what program stakeholders want or need to know about the program years into the future. CNCS does not expect grantees to evaluate their entire program at once, but we recommend that grantees conduct a series of evaluation activities over time. This will help to more strategically commit resources for evaluation by designing studies that build upon one another and by creating complementary evaluation tools and data collection systems that can be deployed multiple times.

A research agenda defines your destination and then identifies the supporting steps that will get you there. It is important to first lay a foundation for evaluation activities through the completion of important early, developmental work.

A long-term research agenda should be designed to continue to build evidence of the program's effectiveness over time. Furthermore, as additional evaluations of the program are designed and planned, the findings from previous evaluations should inform these new efforts.

A research agenda demonstrates strategic investment of funds. Planning evaluation activities such that they comprise a program's long-term research agenda allows a program to maximize its resources for evaluation and provide information that will benefit its overall development.

As you begin to build your long-term research agenda, ask program staff and various stakeholders "what does a long-term research agenda look like for this organization?"

Figuring out what you want to know 5 or 10 years in the future will help you spend evaluation money more strategically by laying out studies that build upon one another, and will allow you to create complementary resources that can be used multiple times.

Each evaluation should build upon what you learned in earlier steps.

As we noted in the last slide, it is important to first lay a foundation for evaluation activities through the completion of some important early, developmental work. For example, if your program's stakeholders ultimately want to obtain strong causal evidence for the program by implementing a randomized control trial (RCT) or a quasi-experimental design (QED), it is important to identify what supporting steps need to be taken to reach that goal.

You may need to begin with descriptive studies and start collecting routine program data. This should happen during your first grant cycle. Then you might develop and administer an annual survey, field a process evaluation, and invest in building additional data collection instruments. Depending on your program size and its evaluation requirements, this could happen in either the first or the second grant cycle. Then you might use those same data collection instruments again but also collect data from a comparison or control group as you work toward implementing an RCT or QED. Again, depending on your program size and its evaluation requirements, this could happen in either the second or third grant cycle.

By thinking long-term and investing evaluation money strategically, your scarce resources can have a much larger impact.

For example, consider the long-term research agenda for a hypothetical AmeriCorps program that provides housing assistance for low-income families. The program would eventually like to demonstrate that it has a positive impact on beneficiaries by implementing a randomized control trial evaluation.

This is a very worthy goal, but the program would be wise to build up to this point by investing in a number of earlier steps first. For example, during its first grant cycle the program might start by collecting data on the families it serves on a regular basis. Next could be a process study to assess if the program is actually being implemented with fidelity to its logic model. Based on results from the process study, the program would make adjustments to the model as needed.

Then it might design an annual survey and collect pre and post outcome data each year. Then, assuming the program is being implemented well, during its second grant cycle it could start to collect longer-term outcome data from families by designing and administering a follow-up survey. Finally, knowing that demand for the program far exceeds the available resources, the program could implement a randomized control trial (RCT) by randomly assigning families to receive housing assistance. This might happen in the second grant cycle, or possibly in the third. All the necessary data collection instruments have already been designed and tested in the earlier years, and this data is already being collected routinely from families served, so all the program really needs to do is collect the same information from the families who are not receiving housing assistance. Furthermore, the program has learned and improved at every earlier stage, so by the time they get to the RCT they have a stable, mature program model to evaluate.

By incrementally fielding studies as part of a long-term research agenda, not only has the program gradually built up its evidence base but it has put systems in place that made the final more rigorous evaluation much less costly than it otherwise would have been.

The grant cycles here are just a guide – we know that some grantees may need to spend more time on earlier steps.

Here is the same long-term research agenda, just presented in visual form. It shows how the program has gradually built up to its research goal over time, adding activities that build upon one another.

The scope and depth of a program's long-term research agenda is influenced by a number of factors. These factors include:

Program maturity This refers to how long the program has been in operation and its grant cycle timing. Key research questions and needs for information will differ based on a program's maturity. If your program is in an early stage of development (1st grant cycle), your long-term research agenda may include developing the appropriate data collection systems and identifying baseline information needed to measure program outcomes. On the other hand, a more established program (6+ years in operation, 3rd grant cycle) likely already has data collection systems in place and is measuring program outcomes in

some capacity. Thus a long term research agenda for a mature program may be different than a newer program. Factoring in a program's level of maturity when developing a long-term research agenda will help ensure that the research agenda is appropriately focused and feasible for the program to carry out over time.

Existing evidence base. This refers to evidence that has already been generated on the program. As noted earlier, one aspect of a long-term research agenda is that it should be designed to build evidence of the program's effectiveness over time. Doing so allows a program to maximize its resources for research and evaluation to provide information that will benefit the program's overall development. Building on past evidence also means that a program doesn't waste time and resources by repeating the same studies over and over.

Funder requirements and other stakeholder needs

Grantees should take into account CNCS's evaluation requirements and find ways to build those requirements into their long-term research agenda in order to maximize resources.

CNCS has different evaluation requirements for large and small grantees in terms of which evaluation design they may use to assess their programs. Large grantees are those receiving annual CNCS funds of \$500,000 or more. Small grantees are those receiving annual CNCS funds of less than \$500,000. CNCS's evaluation requirements also differ depending on the number of years of AmeriCorps funding a program has received.

Also consider the needs and requirements of other stakeholders such as your board and community members, and note that sometimes one evaluation can meet the needs of multiple stakeholder groups.

It's important to also consider...

Long-term program goals. This refers to a program's long-term strategic goals related to strengthening its program activities, addressing areas for improvement, moving the program forward to new accomplishments, and possibly expanding to new sites or adding new services. A long-term research agenda should be designed to systematically provide information that supports a program's long-term strategic goals.

Long-term research goals. In addition to having long-term program goals, programs should also have long-term research goals that relate to building evidence of effectiveness over time. A long-term research agenda should be designed to help programs accumulate evidence of effectiveness in a resource efficient manner. We will provide more detail on building evidence of effectiveness in Part 2 of this presentation.

Evaluation budget. The amount of the program's funding base that will be set aside for evaluation activities each year or each grant cycle. A program's evaluation budget should be considered in developing a long-term research agenda. Because programs may need to raise additional funds to carry out the research activities identified in a long-term research agenda, it is important to plan ahead.

This course has one exercise that we are going to present in phases throughout the presentation.

For this first part, fill in these key considerations for developing a long-term research agenda for your program. You have a copy in your handout.

- **Program maturity:**
- **Existing evidence:**
- **Funder requirements:**
- **Long-term program goals:**
- **Long-term research goals:**
- **Evaluation budget:**

Keep this in mind as we go through the next sections of the presentation, and we'll return to the next part later on.

In Part 2 of this presentation, we will focus on building evidence of effectiveness, which is a key factor that influences a program's long-term research agenda.

As an agency, CNCS continues to invest in a portfolio of programs reflecting a range of evidence, from evidence-informed to evidence-based. The diagram on this slide illustrates CNCS's approach to building evidence which emphasizes that evidence of effectiveness is built over time and falls along a continuum. Evidence should be appropriate for a program's life cycle and investment of public dollars. This diagram shows different stages to situate a program's cumulative body of evidence along an evidence continuum. Having a long-term research agenda will help programs progress from stage to stage along the evidence continuum in a resource efficient manner. Programs are not expected to follow the same linear path to building evidence along the continuum. Some programs may accumulate evidence from output performance measurement activities (stage 2) to having causal evidence of effectiveness from an RCT/QED (stage 5). Others may move from collecting output performance measurement data (stage 2) to having pre/post outcome data (stage 3). Programs may also go back and forth between stages as they refine and adjust their program models over time.

The key stages that a program goes through as they build their evidence base are shown in the diagram.

Stage 1: Identify a strong program design

Stage 2: Ensure effective implementation

Stage 3: Assess program outcomes

Stage 4: Obtain evidence of positive program outcomes

Stage 5: Attain causal evidence of positive program outcomes

-It's important to note that these stages are not mutually exclusive and they do overlap, so consider the continuum to be a guide. Next, each of these stages will be discussed in more detail.

The first stage on the evidence continuum is to identify and implement a strong program design by gathering evidence that supports the intervention to be used. At this stage, programs might be looking at evidence from other programs to better define their program model such that it is evidence-informed. This may be done by conducting a literature review or a needs assessment. During this initial stage, you should develop a logic model which clearly communicates the central model of your program. *For an overview of logic models, CNCS grantees can refer to the module, "How to Develop a Program Logic Model" located on the Evaluation Resources page.* It is also recommended that the program be piloted during this initial step to achieve full implementation prior to expanding the program more widely.

: Once a strong program design has been identified, the second stage on the evidence continuum is ensuring the effective full implementation of the program. In other words, it is important to gather evidence to confirm that the program is operating as envisioned. Much of these activities can be supported through the identification and regular monitoring of performance measures. In addition, a formal process evaluation should be conducted at this stage to document program processes, ensure fidelity to the program model, evaluate program quality and efficiency, and establish continuous improvement protocols.

For many programs, this includes collecting data on the specific activities carried out and the direct products and services produced by your program's activities, referred to as outputs. Outputs are generally measured in terms of the volume of work accomplished, such as amount of service delivered, staff hired, systems developed, sessions conducted, and materials developed. Examples include number of beneficiaries served, number of hours of service provided to beneficiaries, number of staff trained, number of materials distributed, and number of trainings conducted. Collecting and analyzing a program's output data are useful for keeping implementation of the program on track and also for determining if program implementation meets the quality standards to which the program aspires. This is important so that, if a program does not achieve its intended goals, it can be determined if the program was using the wrong approach or if it was a strong program that simply was not implemented correctly. Output measures also can assess issues such as the costs of operating a program, the numbers of beneficiaries reached, the most successful program locations, or comparisons of the program's design and activities to other similar programs.

The third stage in the continuum involves assessing the program's outcomes to better understand whether the program is achieving its outcomes. This process involves developing indicators for measuring outcomes and possibly conducting one of the less rigorous and less resource-intensive outcome evaluation designs, such as a non-experimental outcome study.

An example of a non-experimental outcome design is a single group pre-post design, which examines program beneficiaries both before and after they receive program services. For example, an AmeriCorps program that provides literacy assistance to struggling readers in elementary schools may conduct a non-experimental outcome evaluation by administering a literacy assessment to students who were served by the program at two time points – at the beginning of the school semester and at the end of the school semester. The pre-post outcome data would be analyzed to determine if students' literacy

scores improved over the semester. It is important to point out that a non-experimental evaluation design such as this would not produce results which can be considered attributable or caused by the program. That evidence would be generated by an impact evaluation, which we will discuss later.

For an overview on evaluation designs, CNCS grantees can refer to the module, "Overview of Evaluation Designs" located Evaluation Resources page.

One stage further in the continuum is obtaining evidence of positive program outcomes by examining the relationship between program activities and outcomes to determine if the program's activities lead to the program's expected outcomes. Programs at this stage of the continuum will have performed multiple non-experimental outcome evaluations on their program using pre/post measures that yielded positive findings. A program at this stage might utilize an independent external evaluator to conduct a more rigorous outcome study. Or, using the example from the previous slide, at this stage the literacy program might administer a follow-up assessment to students one semester later to see if literacy gains have been sustained.

Also, by this stage a program has established regular evaluation activities and processes for obtaining continuous program feedback (e.g., annual member surveys and regular data collection and analysis of pre-post measures on their program beneficiaries, etc.).

An outcome evaluation is not the same as collecting and reporting on performance measurement outcome data. Performance measures should be collected on an ongoing basis and compared to a target level, whereas an evaluation is designed to answer a specific research question about the goals of the intervention. Also, an outcome evaluation may in some cases examine different outcomes, or it may involve collecting data on outcomes at an additional time point.

Finally, the highest stage of evidence allows a program to make the claim of being evidence-based after attaining causal evidence of positive program outcomes. At this stage, programs 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 using a control group to establish the causal linkage between program activities and intended outcomes.

These types of outcome evaluation designs are referred to as impact evaluations and they are distinguished by the use of a comparison or control group, which is a group of individuals that either receive a different intervention than the one being evaluated or no intervention at all. A comparison or control group is necessary for deriving an estimate of the program's impact by comparing the amount of change or improvement between comparison/control groups and those who participated in the program. An evaluation design that utilizes a comparison/control group provides more reliable evidence that observed changes in program beneficiaries were due to the program or intervention and not caused by something else.

For this stage on the evidence continuum, an AmeriCorps program that provides literacy assistance to struggling readers in elementary schools may conduct an experimental impact evaluation by administering a literacy assessment to students in the treatment group who were served by the

program and a control group of students who were not served by the program. An evaluator would randomly assign students to either the treatment group or the control group. To determine if the program has an impact on students' literacy achievement, a literacy assessment would be administered to students in both groups at two time points – at the beginning of the school semester when the program starts and at the end of the school semester when the program ends. The pre-post literacy assessment data would be analyzed to calculate the difference in average score of the intervention group minus the difference in average score of the comparison group before and after treatment (difference in differences method). If the data shows that the average score gain of the treatment group is higher than average score gain of the control group at the end of the program, there is reliable causal evidence that shows the program has an effect on students' literacy achievement.

While it may be more of a challenge for some programs to obtain evidence at this stage on the evidence continuum due to the structure of their program model, their program's life cycle, and/or resource limitations, CNCS's expectation is that programs will use the most rigorous evaluation approaches possible as they continue to build their evidence base.

To summarize, programs should have a long-term research agenda that will help them progress from stage to stage along the evidence continuum in a resource efficient manner. Programs should conduct research and evaluation activities with the understanding that these accomplishments are part of a larger continuum of evidence that builds over time and across multiple stages. It is important to note that establishing a strong program design, sound performance measures, and data collection systems, and identifying measureable program outcomes are key accomplishments in the earlier stages of a program's evaluation activities. These activities also are fundamental to building later stages of evidence of effectiveness through more rigorous evaluation methods such as an impact evaluation design. Impact evaluations are best implemented after a program has had sufficient time to mature and is no longer undergoing refinement of its central model.

While the evidence continuum is described in terms of stages, a program's movement along the continuum is not always linear and may be completed in a back-and-forth direction that is more cyclical in nature. For example, a program that is at stage 3 on the continuum may find that the results from a non-experimental outcome evaluation showed no changes in the program's short-term outcome for beneficiaries. This finding suggests that the relationship between the program's activities and the short-term outcome may not be working as intended and thus may need to be examined further through a targeted process evaluation to gather more in-depth information about how the program's activities are being implemented and whether there is fidelity to the program's central model. While conducting a process evaluation after an outcome evaluation implies moving back to stage 2 on the evidence continuum, the program will still be accumulating new evidence to further its path on the evidence continuum.

Now we'll return back to the exercise. For this second part, identify where your program currently is on the evidence continuum and then consider where you want to go. Where would you place the stars for your program?

Keep this in mind as we go through the next section of the presentation, and we'll return to the final part of the exercise later on.

For this next section of the presentation, we present two example scenarios of what a long-term research agenda might look like for different types of funded AmeriCorps programs.

The first scenario is of a small, new AmeriCorps program, and the second scenario is of a large, established AmeriCorps program. Your program may fit with one of these better than the other, but there are lessons from both that will likely apply to your program and its particular stage of evidence-building.

Example scenario 1 is based on a small grantee (annual CNCS funds < \$500k) implementing a new AmeriCorps program. This slide shows that for a small, new AmeriCorps program, their evidence of effectiveness is initially at stage 1, but the grantee intends to develop a long-term research agenda that will move them to the third stage on the evidence continuum.

On this slide we present an example of what a logic model might look like for a small, new AmeriCorps program that focuses on providing services aimed at preventing first-time homelessness in a mid-sized urban community. The program has two major service activities. Case management services are provided to families that are most at-risk of a housing crisis. Members assist families by developing and implementing individualized plans to prevent a future housing crisis. Educational workshops are provided to families that are identified as being at moderate risk of a housing crisis. Members facilitate the workshops which are designed to help families maintain housing, increase or stabilize income, and make connections with services and supports to prevent the loss of housing in the future.

Based on the logic model, the program has the following inputs and resources: funding, full-time program staff, AmeriCorps members, staff, and trainings in order to provide case management services and educational workshops. By carrying out these activities, the program expects to produce the following outputs each year: 50 families (highest risk) receive case management services and 50 families (moderate risk) attend workshops. The program is expected to achieve the following outcomes:

Short-term

- Increase head of households' knowledge of responsible home owner or tenant practices/skills
- Increase head of households' knowledge of available resources/services in the community

Medium-term

- Increase head of households' adoption of responsible homeowner and tenant practices/skills
- Decrease likelihood of foreclosures and evictions

Long-term

- Reduce first-time homelessness in the community
- Some key considerations in developing a long-term research agenda for this small, new AmeriCorps program that provides homelessness prevention services include:
 - **Program maturity:** The program is new, a first-time AmeriCorps grantee in its first grant cycle with no prior years of program implementation. In its first year of operation, the program is only operating in one community site.
 - **Existing evidence:** As a new program, the program's evidence falls in the first stage on the continuum. The program's is considered evidence-informed based on conducting a needs assessment to determine which program activities are most critical to the community it serves and a literature review to determine best practices for implementing its core service activities.
 - **Funder requirements:** For small grantees, CNCS requires an internal or an external program evaluation to be completed by the end of the second three-year grant cycle. Grantees are required to submit an evaluation report AND an evaluation plan with their re-compete application after completing two or more three-year cycles.
 - **Long-term program goals:** Within a six-year time frame, the program intends to achieve full program operation with efficiency and fidelity to the program's central model. It intends to realize all expected short- and medium-term program outcomes.
 - **Long-term research goals:** The program's long-term research goals are aligned with its programmatic goals and involve generating data to facilitate program improvements and ensure an efficient, full operation of the program's service activities. Additionally, the goal is to generate data on the program's targeted short- and medium-term outcomes, specifically assessing whether changes occur between beneficiaries' program entry and exit. The outcomes that will be measured are the following: beneficiaries' knowledge of responsible home owner or tenant practices/skills, knowledge of resources/services in community, adoption of responsible practices/skills, and likelihood of foreclosure or eviction.
 - **Evaluation budget:** The program has a small evaluation budget and has set aside between 10-15% of its annual funding for evaluation activities.

On this slide we present an example of a long-term research agenda for the small, new AmeriCorps grantee that takes into account the program's logic model and other key characteristics.

The grantee's long-term research agenda outlines a set of evaluation activities that are designed to move the program from stage 1 (Identify a strong program design) to stage 3: (Assess program outcomes) on the evidence continuum. Over a six-year time frame, the activities include:

1. Conduct a literature review to determine best practices for implementing the program's core service activities – case management services and educational workshops to help at risk households develop and implement plans to prevent a future housing crisis. Develop a logic model and a detailed program implementation plan that lays out what and how each of the program's core service activities are to be implemented, incorporating best practices identified in the literature. This first set of activities aligns with stage 1 on the evidence continuum and should have been accomplished before the program applied for funding.

2. Create a data system to routinely collect performance measurement data and background data on program beneficiaries, program staff, and AmeriCorps members. Collecting background data on all individuals who are involved in the program helps lay the groundwork for a process evaluation. Once the core elements of the data system have been developed, program staff and members will begin to support routine data collection activities. This second set of activities aligns with stage 2 on the evidence continuum. Data collection systems should be in place before the program begins its first year of operation.
3. Once the program is collecting performance measure routinely and accurately, they would develop a survey to measure the program's short-term outcomes such as beneficiaries' knowledge of responsible homeowner or tenant practices and knowledge of resources and services in community. After the survey has been developed and pilot-tested with a small sample, members will begin to administer the survey to program beneficiaries at program entry and program exit. This would start in the first grant cycle and would continue into the second grant cycle. This third set of activities aligns with stage 3 on the evidence continuum.
4. Next, for the program's first evaluation, they could conduct an internal process evaluation to determine if the program is being implemented with fidelity to the central model as depicted by the logic model and program implementation plan. Examples of questions that a process evaluation might address include:

- Who is the program serving? Is the program reaching its target population? Are members implementing the case management service activity according to the program's central model? Are members using the workshop curriculum according to the central model? What challenges are members facing in serving the program's beneficiaries?

They program would then make data-driven adjustments to the program's implementation as needed. This fourth set of activities aligns with stage 2 on the evidence continuum and could happen during the first grant cycle, or possibly the second.

5. Next, conduct a non-experimental outcome evaluation using an external evaluator, measuring both short-term and medium-term outcomes. Again, the outcomes that will be measured are the following: beneficiaries' knowledge of responsible homeowner or tenant practices/skills, knowledge of resources/services in community, adoption of responsible practices/skills, and likelihood of foreclosure or eviction. This fifth set of activities aligns with stage 3 on the evidence continuum, and could happen during the program's second grant cycle.

In sum, this example long-term research agenda for a small, new AmeriCorps grantee covers stages 1, 2, and 3 on the evidence continuum with each of the evaluation activities designed to build evidence of program effectiveness.

Example scenario 2 is based on a large grantee (annual CNCS funds > \$500k) in its second three-year AmeriCorps grant cycle. This slide shows that for a large, relatively established AmeriCorps program, the program's evidence falls at stage 3 on the evidence continuum, but the grantee intends to develop a

long-term research agenda that will move them to the fifth stage on the evidence continuum. At the same time, the grantee's research agenda includes evaluation activities to continue to generate evidence that falls under stages 2 and 3 on the continuum.

On this slide we present an example of what a logic model might look like for a large, relatively established AmeriCorps program that recruits members to protect and restore natural habitats. Improving habitat for state and federally listed species is a primary goal of the program and member projects focus on forest enhancement and restoration.

The program has the following inputs and resources: funding, full-time program staff, AmeriCorps members, staff, enhancement and restoration projects on forest and wetland sites, and upkeep activities to enable native plants to survive. By carrying out these activities, the program expects to produce the following outputs in a three-year period: install 100,000 native trees and shrubs on public land and remove 50% of invasive plant species on 10 forest sites (25 acres in size). The program is expected to achieve the following outcomes:

Short-term

- Increase diversity and coverage of native plant species
- Reduce presence of invasive plant species

Medium-term

- Improve habitat spaces for native plants and wildlife
- Increase survival rate of native plants and wildlife

Long-term

Maintain conservation of healthy, productive, sustainable ecosystems

Some key considerations in developing a long-term research agenda for a large, established AmeriCorps program that focuses on environmental restoration services include:

Program maturity: The program has completed its first three-year AmeriCorps grant cycle, and has just received a second three-year cycle of funding. Members conduct environmental restoration projects in multiple sites and 2 new sites are to be added in the coming years.

Existing evidence: During its first grant cycle, the grantee developed a program-wide database and established routine data collection processes for collecting performance measurement output and outcome data across all service sites. This program also conducted a process evaluation in its first grant cycle; while this is good practice, note that it is technically more than CNCS requires for the first grant cycle.

Funder requirements: For large grantees, CNCS requires an external impact evaluation to be completed by the end of the second three-year grant cycle. Grantees are required to submit an evaluation report

AND an evaluation plan with their re-compete application after completing two or more three-year cycles.

Long-term program goals: The program's long-term goals include maintaining fidelity of program implementation across existing program sites as well as new sites that are added during the second grant cycle. Additionally, the program intends to build up its evidence of effectiveness as part of a larger strategy to secure additional funding to expand program operations in the future.

Long-term research goals: The program's long-term research goals consist of conducting an impact evaluation that spans a six-year time frame to assess the program's short- and medium-term outcomes, specifically whether there's an increase in the diversity and coverage of native plant species, a reduced presence of invasive plant species, improved habitat spaces for wildlife, and an increase in survival rate of native plant species and wildlife. As an environmental restoration program, four to six years is the minimum amount of time needed for the program's short- and medium-term outcomes to be fully realized. For this reason, the grantee intends to submit a request for an alternative evaluation approach for timing considerations, specifically requesting approval for a three-year extension to complete an external impact evaluation report. If their request is approved, the grantee will submit an "interim" evaluation report with their re-compete application after completing a second three-year grant cycle. More information on CNCS's "Approval of Alternative Evaluation Approaches for ACSN Grantees" can be found on the Evaluation Resources page.

Evaluation budget: The program has set aside 15% of its annual funding for evaluation activities and is seeking additional outside funding to cover the last three years of the impact evaluation study.

On this slide we present an example of a long-term research agenda for a large, established AmeriCorps grantee that takes into account the program's logic model and other key characteristics.

The grantee's long-term research agenda outlines a set of evaluation activities that are designed to move the program from stage 3 (Assess program outcomes) to stage 5: (Obtain strong evidence of positive program impact) on the evidence continuum while continuing to generate evidence that supports stages 2 and 3. The activities include:

1. Continue to collect and analyze output and outcome performance measurement data on an annual basis. This set of activities aligns with stage 3 on the evidence continuum, and will occur in the second grant cycle and beyond.
2. Simultaneous to those ongoing activities, conduct a quasi-experimental (QED) study using an external evaluator, measuring all short- and medium-term outcomes over a six-year time frame and relative to a matched comparison group of sites (i.e., adjacent non-serviced areas that are similar to the pre-restoration conditions at the treatment sites). Data collection for the QED study may include:

- A pre-restoration site condition survey at both treatment and comparison sites to document the dominant invasive plants at each site, existing native vegetation conditions and coverage, and existing habitat conditions;
 - A post-restoration site condition survey administered at multiple time points over a six-year period at both treatment and comparison sites to record native and invasive plant cover estimates, native species richness, plant health and vigor, and habitat conditions. This set of activities aligns with stage 5 on the evidence continuum, and will start in the second grant cycle and continue into the third grant cycle.
3. Conduct an internal process evaluation focused on new service sites to determine if the new restoration projects are being implemented with fidelity to the central model. Make data-driven adjustments to the program's implementation as needed. This set of activities aligns with stage 2 on the evidence continuum, and will occur in the second grant cycle.

In sum, this example long-term research agenda for a large, relatively established AmeriCorps grantee shows the grantee moving from stage 3 to stage 5 on the evidence continuum while also carrying out evaluation activities that fall under stages 2 and 3 to assess program implementation across new service sites and generate performance measurement data.

Now let's finish up the exercise, first reviewing the two parts that you completed earlier.

Remember, the goal of the exercise is to begin to build a long-term research agenda for your AmeriCorps program.

First, we asked you to fill in these key considerations for developing a long-term research agenda for your program:

- **Program maturity:**
- **Existing evidence:**
- **Funder requirements:**
- **Long-term program goals:**
- **Long-term research goals:**

Evaluation budget:

Next we asked you to identify where your program currently is on the evidence continuum and then consider where you want to go.

Now for this last part of the exercise, fill in the evaluation activities that match up with each stage of evidence that you will be building as part of your long-term research agenda.

There are a few points that are important to remember when developing a long-term research agenda:

- A long-term research agenda is a developmental approach to evaluation whereby evidence of effectiveness is built over time, including your planned research activities over several future years.

- A number of unique factors help determine a program's long-term research agenda, so it should be tailored to your program's goals, structure, and available resources.
- There is value to building evidence at all stages along the continuum. While it may be more of a challenge for some programs to obtain evidence at the highest stage on the evidence continuum due to the structure of their program model, their program's life cycle, and/or resource limitations, CNCS's expectation is that programs will use the most rigorous evaluation approaches possible as they continue to build their evidence base.
- A long-term research agenda should reflect an iterative process where evidence is gradually built up over time.

Consequently, there are several key questions to consider prior to developing your program's long-term research agenda, including: program maturity, your program's existing evidence base, its funder requirements, its long-term program and research goals, and your program's evaluation budget.

For more information on evaluation and additional webinars and other resources, check out the [Evaluation Resources](#) page on the CNCS website.

Here we provide a list of additional resources on program evaluation that you may find helpful.