

Managing an External Evaluator Exercise

The following vignette describes a hypothetical situation involving the evaluation of an AmeriCorps program. The brief story illustrates how the extent of a program's involvement in and management of their evaluation can affect whether program evaluation needs are met. After reading the vignette, several questions are presented for your consideration.

Vignette

AmeriCorps ABC is an education program focused on improving disadvantaged students' academic engagement in schools throughout Maryland's Montgomery County. As a large grantee receiving an annual AmeriCorps grant of over \$500,000, AmeriCorps ABC is required to conduct an external evaluation of their program during the period of their second three-year grant award. To ensure that a high-quality evaluation is completed, AmeriCorps ABC begins laying the foundation for the evaluation using AmeriCorps' *Evaluation FAQs*, grant terms and conditions, and other AmeriCorps evidence readiness as guides. Based on AmeriCorps guidance, as well as the particular characteristics of the program itself, AmeriCorps ABC defines the purpose, scope, and budget of their impact evaluation and prepares a job description to hire an evaluator. In addition, AmeriCorps ABC has assigned responsibility for overseeing the external evaluation to the new program coordinator.

During the last grant cycle, AmeriCorps ABC hired XYZ Associates to complete their process evaluation and has decided to hire them again to conduct their impact evaluation. The lead evaluator has since left XYZ Associates; however, given the organization's familiarity with the program and the relationships that have already been established, AmeriCorps ABC feels confident that XYZ Associates is in the best position to carry out the evaluation. XYZ Associates agrees to conduct the evaluation based on the job description AmeriCorps ABC has drafted and a contract is signed to carry out the proposed work.

Before the end of the first year, XYZ Associates has completed an evaluation design plan for the program and prepared data collection instruments that will be used for the evaluation. The new AmeriCorps program coordinator tasks with managing the evaluation is currently familiarizing herself with the program's activities and knows little about evaluation. Given that the evaluation plan appears to largely correspond with the job description that was drafted, she agrees to the evaluation plan that XYZ Associates has developed and entrusts the evaluation team to successfully complete the impact evaluation. With the beginning of the school year approaching, AmeriCorps ABC's immediate priority is mobilizing, training, and supporting AmeriCorps members to work in selected schools throughout Montgomery County and is less focused on the evaluation component of their program.

During year two of the grant cycle, AmeriCorps ABC and XYZ Associates have had little contact through the data collection process. The AmeriCorps ABC program coordinator is aware the XYZ Associates collected student baseline data in the fall and follow-up data in the spring because the evaluator reached out to her for contact information in the schools where AmeriCorps members are assigned. Therefore, the data collection process appears to be on track.

In the third year of the grant cycle, XYZ Associates analyzes the data that have been collected and submits a final evaluation report to the AmeriCorps program coordinator who is pleased to see the project has been completed on time and that the evaluation has provided strong support for the

program's activities. One of the evaluation's major findings is that students who participated in the program were more likely to be academically engaged at the end of the intervention. The program coordinator, however, does not see that a comparison group was included in the evaluation, as was specifically outlined in the original job description. Baseline and post-intervention data was only collected on a group of students who participated in the program. After reviewing the entire evaluation report, the program coordinator contacts the evaluation lead at XYZ Associates about the absence of a comparison group. The evaluation lead indicates that the team was unable to identify an appropriate comparison group because of difficulties encountered in trying to recruit local schools to participate in the evaluation. The team had tried to explore other possibilities as well, such as the use of administrative data which would involve school recruitment, but the outcomes were not relevant for the specific intervention. As time was running out and data needed to be collected at the beginning of the intervention (in the fall of the school year), XYZ Associated proceeded to collect data on program participants only.

In the end, the impact evaluation was not conducted on the program, and AmeriCorps ABC did not meet AmeriCorps' evaluation requirements. While the evaluation results were positive, AmeriCorps ABC could not attribute the changes in student engagement to the program itself because no comparison group was included in the evaluation.

Questions

What could the evaluator have done differently? Did the evaluation team do everything they could to identify a comparison group?

How could the grantee have effectively communicated, monitored, and supported the evaluation to avoid this outcome? What management practices should have been used?

What could the grantee have done differently during the planning process? What qualifications should the person overseeing the evaluation have had? How could AmeriCorps ABC have supported the program coordinator? What other approaches could AmeriCorps ABC have used to identify an external evaluator?