AmeriCorps and NORC at the University of Chicago

Laying the Groundwork Before Your First Evaluation

AmeriCorps

Learning Objectives

- Understand five critical activities for your first grant cycle
- Recognize how these activities lay the foundation for future evaluation work
- Learn how to plan ahead to ensure that your program achieves key first-cycle milestones

Pre-Award Time Period

- Do everything you can to set your program up for success in Year 1
- Think through risks/threats to implementation and mitigate them
- Begin to develop data collection systems
- Begin to develop performance measurement plans

Key Foundational Elements

1. Program design and implementation
2. Build and refine data collection systems
3. Performance measurement
4. Staff capacity and responsibilities
5. Evaluation planning
6. Become a learning organization

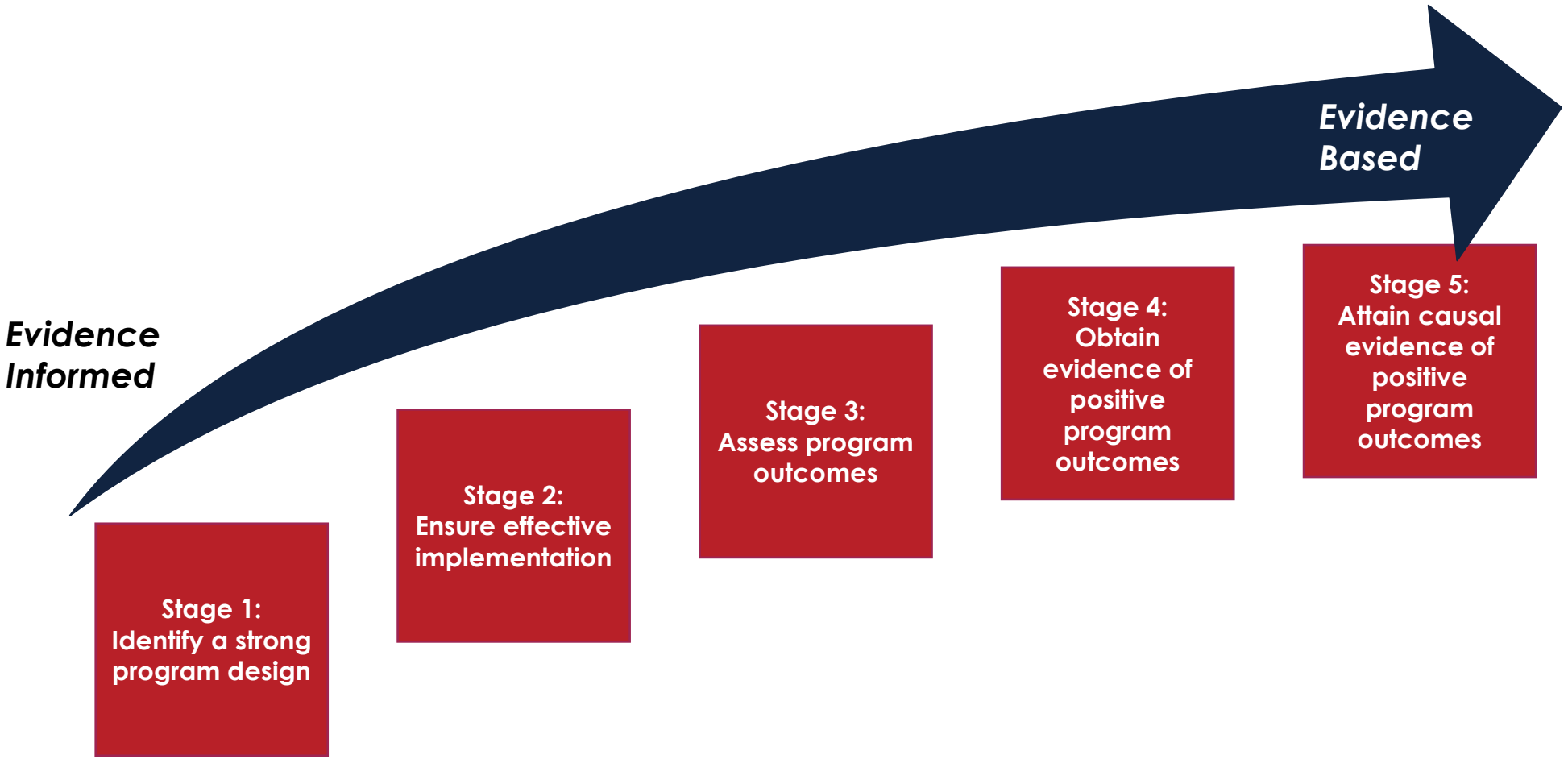
Your First Three Years: Program Activities Over Time

Pre-Award

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Program design and implementation	→	→	→
Build and refine data collection systems	→	→	→
Performance measurement	→	→	→
Staff capacity and responsibilities	→	→	→
Evaluation planning	→	→	→

Second Grant Cycle

Building Evidence of Effectiveness



1. Program Design And Implementation

- Goal: Improve program design and ensure effective implementation
- Key components
  - Refine logic model
  - Assess implementation
  - Conduct process evaluation
  - Adjust program model as needed

Refine Your Logic Model

- Make sure your “model” is actually a model
- Achieve shared agreement about what the model is and is not
- Ensure all pieces of the model are plausibly connected

Assessing Your Theory Of Change

	Indicate to what extent each statement is true.			
	Not at all true	**Somewhat true**	**True**	**Not applicable**
Theory of Change				
There is a coherent, logical program theory. Strategies and activities are designed to address a clearly identified and defined problem or need. There is a logical connection between the program strategies and activities and the intended outcomes or desired changes. Goals and objectives are articulated and attainable with the available resources. (The program has a logic model.)	❑	❑	❑	❑
Program participation is clearly defined and distinguishable from nonparticipation. There is no ambiguity about who is in the program and who is not.	❑	❑	❑	❑
There is a shared understanding among program leadership and staff about the core elements of the program and the context in which the program operates.	❑	❑	❑	❑
There is agreement across the program leadership and staff as to what the expected program outcomes are.	❑	❑	❑	❑
Clear Time Frame for the Program				
The intervention has a clearly defined timeframe.	❑	❑	❑	❑
There is a reasonable and shared expectation around the timeframe for when observable/measurable outcomes in the short, intermediate or long term will occur.	❑	❑	❑	❑

Impact Evaluability Assessment Tool. Source: https://www.americorps.gov/sites/default/files/document/2015_09_03_ImpactEvaluabilityAssessmentTool_ORE.pdf, "Conducting a Needs or Readiness Assessment".

Assess Implementation

- Implementing your program may lead to changes:
  - In your logic model
    - Some parts may not be plausible
    - Some outcomes may not be realistic
  - In how your program operates
- Application logic model may be ideal → program model may change as it is implemented
  - Important to document those changes so that you understand what you are actually doing
  - Document any variation in implementation

Assessing Implementation

	Indicate to what extent each statement is true.			
	Not at all true	**Somewhat true**	**True**	**Not applicable**
Program Implementation				
If the program is based on a model or logical program theory, it is implemented with fidelity to that model and has a well-planned sequence of activities.	❑	❑	❑	❑
If the program is currently being adapted, it is being adapted using theory/systematically-obtained field-based knowledge, and along lines that can be quantified and documented.	❑	❑	❑	❑
Staff members are qualified and properly trained to operate the program. There are enough qualified staff members on site to implement the planned activities.	❑	❑	❑	❑
Frontline workers who deliver the services provided by the program have sufficient qualifications to execute the program. There are enough qualified frontline workers on site to successfully execute the program.	❑	❑	❑	❑
There are systems in place to track program implementation:				
• There are procedures in place to determine if the target population is being served (referral system, intake process).	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Data that track service usage is collected (attendance lists, case management logs).	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Input is sought on a regular basis to understand how participants experience the services and to identify and address any problems in a timely manner.	❑	❑	❑	❑

Impact Evaluability Assessment Tool. Source: http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/evaluation/planning-evaluation, "Conducting a Needs or Readiness Assessment".

2. Build and Refine Data Collection Systems

- Goal: Build systems to collect and manage high-quality program data
- Key components
  - Select data collection instruments
  - Build data collection system
  - Build data management system
  - Obtain access to administrative data (if applicable)
  - Ensure data quality

Data Collection System

- First, examine logic model and think through data you need to collect
  - Outputs
  - Outcomes
  - Implementation
  - Other data beyond performance measures
- Then, develop and test instruments
  - Utilize existing resources
  - Work with a professional to develop instruments that are valid and reliable
  - Good instruments can also be used later for evaluation!

Data Management System

- Data management system should help you to:
  - Store data
  - Access data
  - Analyze data
  - Use data

- Build (or buy) system to accomplish those goals
  - Examples include: Efforts to Outcomes, Design Data, Outcomes Results System…

Ensuring Data Quality

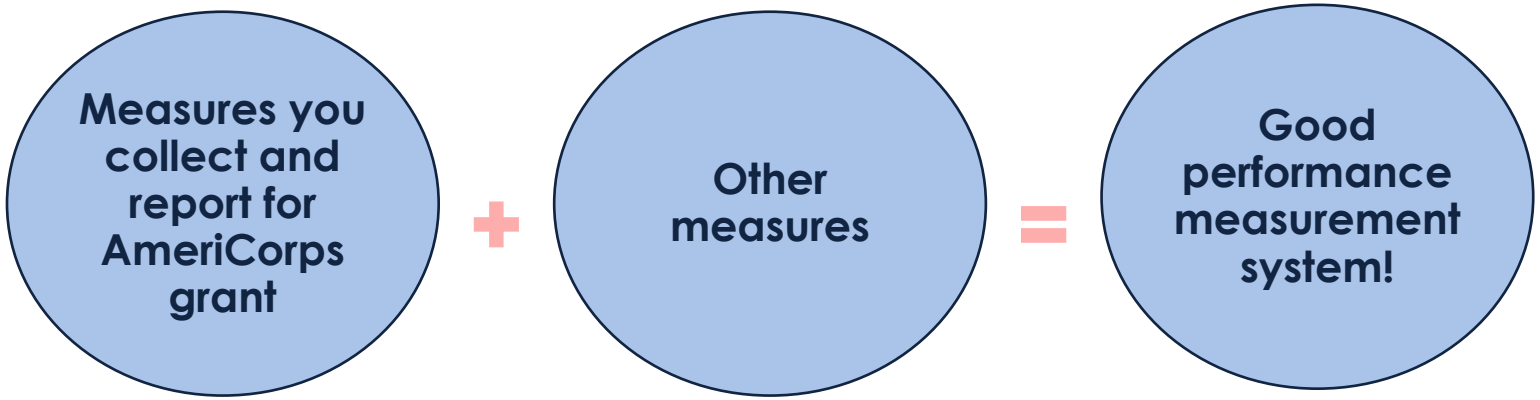
- Elements of data quality:
  - Valid: data mean what they are supposed to mean
  - Complete: everyone reports full set of data
  - Consistent: everyone uses same data collection methods
  - Accurate: data are free from errors
  - Verifiable: everyone follows standard practices and checks their data
- Ensuring data quality means that you describe your program's achievements in a trustworthy manner

3. Performance Measurement

- Goal: Collect and report performance measures; use results for program improvement
- Key components
  - Select performance measures
  - Determine measurement frequency
  - Adjust performance measures
  - Execute performance management processes
  - Connect performance management to evaluation

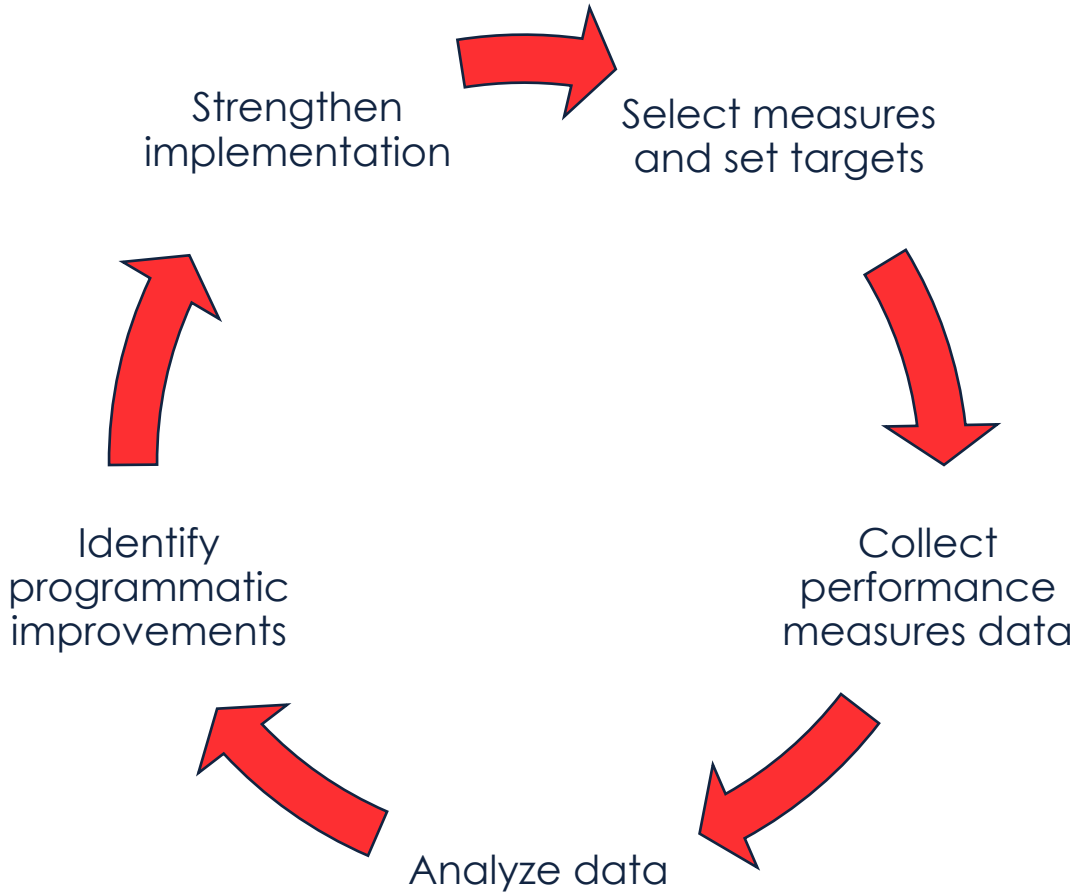
Measure Selection and Adjustment

- Select measures that reflect *what* your program is actually doing
- Select measures you can use to understand *how* your program is working
- Select targets that are ambitious yet achievable
- Adjust measures annually if needed



Performance Management

- Do not just collect and report your performance measurement data – you need to use it!
- Are goals being met?
- Use data for program improvement
  - Continuous feedback loop
  - Programmatic decisions are
  - grounded in data
  - Strengthen implementation



- Performance Measures Core Curriculum: http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/performance-measurement

Performance Management Example

- AmeriCorps housing assistance program
  - O5: Number of economically disadvantaged individuals, including homeless individuals, receiving housing services [Target = 500 calls]
  - O11: Number of economically disadvantaged individuals, including homeless individuals, transitioned into safe, healthy, affordable housing [Target = 600]
- Actuals: O5 = 900, O11 = 300
- What's going on?
  - Individuals are calling the hotline multiple times
  - Placement process takes longer than anticipated
- Program response?
  - Adjust call process – create a second number for repeat clients
  - Adjust target for O11 to reflect reality of placement process

Connection to Evaluation

- Good performance measurement can be the basis for future evaluation activities
  - Outcome measures may be extended
  - Instruments can be utilized
  - Data can suggest interesting research questions

- Performance measurement does not stop once evaluation begins

4. Staff Capacity and Responsibilities

- Goal: Build staff capacity to collect, manage, and utilize data
- Key components
  - Develop internal staff skills
  - Assign responsibilities
  - Engage external experts
  - Become a learning organization

Internal Staff Capacity

- Develop staff skills in data collection, management, and analysis
- Know enough to know what you know, and know what you don't know
- Staff do not have to be experts, but they need to be educated and informed consumers
- Assign responsibilities – someone has to take ownership of key tasks

Identify and Work with External Experts

- Utilize external experts for
  - Data collection instruments
  - Complicated analysis
  - Questions about measurement
  - Evaluation
- Consider consultants, pro bono experts, cooperative extension, universities
- Talk to other programs and stakeholders

Exercise: Evaluability Assessment Checklist

- This checklist is a tool designed to help organizations assess and discuss a program's readiness to participate in a rigorous impact evaluation. It can be used for assessment, planning, and communication purposes.

- The focus areas covered in this checklist are organized into three broad content categories:
  - Organization Readiness
  - Program Readiness
  - Evaluation Readiness

- Each category addresses key elements of readiness. Readiness in all three areas covered is important for successful planning and implementation of an evaluation.

5. Evaluation Planning

- Goal: Develop a plan for your first evaluation, which will occur in your second grant cycle (if not earlier).
- Key components
  - Select research questions
  - Budget for evaluation
  - Develop evaluation plan
  - Make design decisions (process or impact, internal or external) based on grantee size

Develop Research Questions

- Research questions are a list of questions grantees want to learn about their program

- Research questions should be:
  - Clear, specific, and well-defined
  - Focus on a program or program component
  - Measureable by the evaluation
  - Appropriate for the design proposed
  - Aligned with your logic model

Budget For Evaluation

- In general, evaluation budgets should be:
  - Commensurate with stakeholder expectations and involvement
  - Appropriate for the research design used and key questions to be answered
  - Adequate for ensuring quality and rigor
  - In line with the level of program and organizational resources available
- Budgeting for evaluation is a smart strategic investment

Write An Evaluation Plan

- Written document that details all he evaluation steps and activities you plan to conduct
- Dynamic tool (i.e., a living document) that should be continually updated as you plan and develop each aspect of the evaluation
- Evaluation Plan Outline

I. Theory of change
II. Scope of the evaluation
III. Evaluation outcome(s) of interest
IV. Research questions
V. Evaluation design
VI. Sampling methods
VII. Data collection
VIII. Analysis plan
IX. Evaluator qualifications
X. Timeline
XI. Budget

6. Becoming A Learning Organization

- A learning organization:
  - Reflects on past successes and challenges
  - Uses data to inform decision making
  - Makes adjustments to programs and processes based on data
  - Is not afraid to question assumptions
  - Thinks strategically about how to improve
  - Builds evidence of effectiveness
  - Sets a research agenda for the future

Milestones

- By the end of your first grant cycle, you should have:
  - Refined your program and ensured effective implementation
  - Built and refined data collection systems
  - Utilized accurate performance measures
  - Built staff capacity and defined responsibilities
  - Prepared a plan for your first evaluation
  - Become a learning organization
  - And hopefully you've also had some fun!

Exercise: Laying the Foundation for Your Program

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Program design and implementation			
Build and refine data collection systems			
Performance measurement			
Staff capacity and responsibilities			
Evaluation planning			

Resources on Evaluation

- Go to the Evaluation Resources page for more information: https://americorps.gov/grantees-sponsors/evaluation-resources

Other courses available:

- How to Develop a Program Logic Model
- Overview of Evaluation Designs
- How to Write an Evaluation Plan
- Budgeting for Evaluation
- Data Collection for Evaluation
- Asking the Right Research Questions
- Managing an External Evaluation
- And more!

Questions?

Thank you!

To contact the Office of Research and Evaluation: evaluation@americorps.gov

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