

NORC at the University of Chicago

How to Manage an External Evaluation

Learning Objectives



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

- Understand the importance of managing an external evaluation
- Plan for an evaluation, including identifying roles, resources, and evaluation needs
- Develop a solicitation to hire an external evaluator
- Oversee and collaborate on the evaluation process
- Recognize potential challenges

What is an External Evaluation?



- An evaluation of a program that is conducted by an individual(s) who is external to the program
- External implies that the evaluator:
 - Can not have a formal or personal relationship with, or stake in, the administration, management, or finances of the grantee or of the program being evaluated
 - An external evaluator is objective and impartial to the evaluation results

What is an External Evaluation?



- An external evaluator can not be:
 - An individual associated with the program, and is free of conflict of interest
 - A stakeholder, such as board members, partners, or volunteer affiliates
 - For example, a professor from a University through which the program is operated may not qualify



Identifying an External Evaluator

- Potential options for an external evaluator include:
 - Research consulting firm
 - College or university personnel (not affiliated with the organization)
 - Faculty members
 - Graduate students
 - Independent consultant

Internal or External Evaluation?



- Consider what expertise is needed
 - Scope and complexity may demand expertise outside of your program staff
- Check your funder's requirements
 - Funders may require an external evaluation to ensure objectivity (e.g., Required for AmeriCorps ASN grantees receiving >\$500K annually)
- Consider financial and staff time implications
 - Both types of evaluations have cost implications, whether financial or staff time



Internal or External Evaluation? (cont.)

- Certain types of AmeriCorps grantees (i.e., AmeriCorps State and National grantees) may be interested in achieving a specific evidence tier.
 - Preliminary evidence- internal or external
 - Moderate evidence- external
 - Strong evidence- external
- Consider taking a hybrid approach
 - Program and external evaluator share evaluation responsibilities
- For more information about these requirements and evidence levels, visit:
<https://americorps.gov/grantees-sponsors/evaluation-resources>

Why Does an External Evaluation Need to be Managed?



- An evaluation is like any other activity taking place within your organization – it requires management from start to finish
- Program staff should oversee and monitor their program's evaluation
- Building a good relationship with your evaluator and having formal management practices in place ensures:
 - Evaluation remains on schedule
 - Evaluation provides information that is helpful to the program

Overview of Key Tasks in Managing an External Evaluation



- Task 1: Determine who will manage the external evaluation
- Task 2: Define purpose, scope, and timing
- Task 3: Determine budget and secure resources
- Task 4: Solicit and select an external evaluator
- Task 5: Establish a contract or consulting agreement
- Task 6: Manage the evaluator – communicate, monitor, and support

Task 1: Determine Who Will Manage the External Evaluation



- Who among program staff will be responsible for managing evaluation activities?
 - Program Director
 - Another program staff member and/or evaluation department
 - An evaluation committee or working group

Task 1: Determine Who Will Manage the External Evaluation (cont.)



- Considerations in selecting an evaluation manager:
 - Basic knowledge of standard evaluation terms and research practices
 - Strong communication skills
 - Authority to make decisions about the evaluation
 - Supervisory skills
 - Capacity/time to assume additional responsibilities

Task 2: Consider Purpose, Scope, and Timing



- Consider the evaluation's purpose, scope, and timing
 - Why is the evaluation being done? What questions do you want answered? What type of evaluation should be conducted?
 - What component(s) of the program should be evaluated and over what time period?
 - What requirements does the evaluation need to fulfill? (e.g., ASN grantees receiving \$500K or more annually are required to conduct an external impact evaluation)

Task 2: Consider Purpose, Scope, and Timing (cont.)

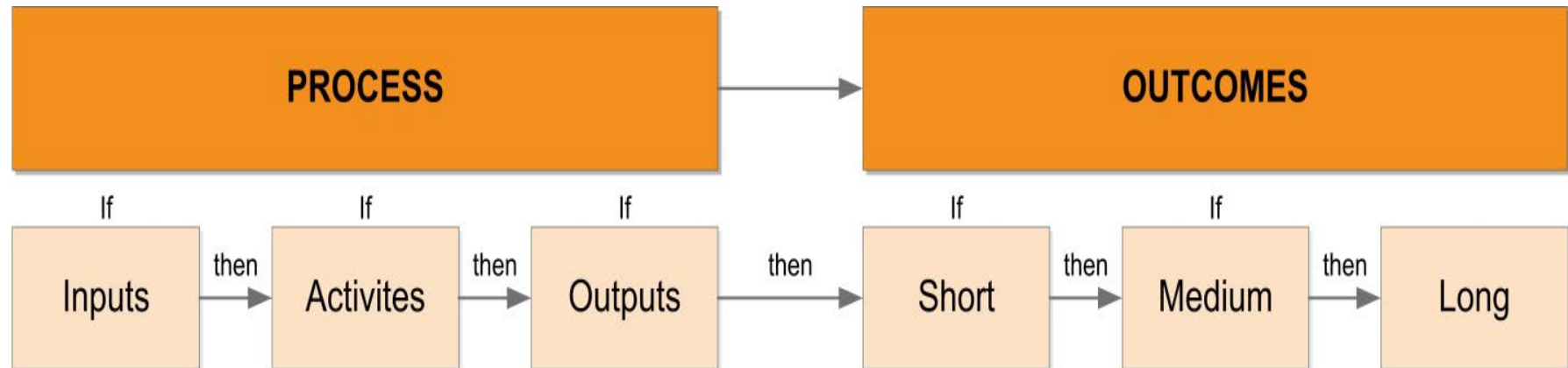


- Defining the purpose and scope helps with identifying an evaluator who is well-matched for your program
 - What qualifications and skills are needed from the evaluator to complete the evaluation tasks?
 - What is the level of effort required from the evaluator?

Task 2: Define Purpose, Scope, and Timing (cont.)



- Refer to your program's logic model
 - A program logic model is a detailed visual representation of a program and its theory of change.

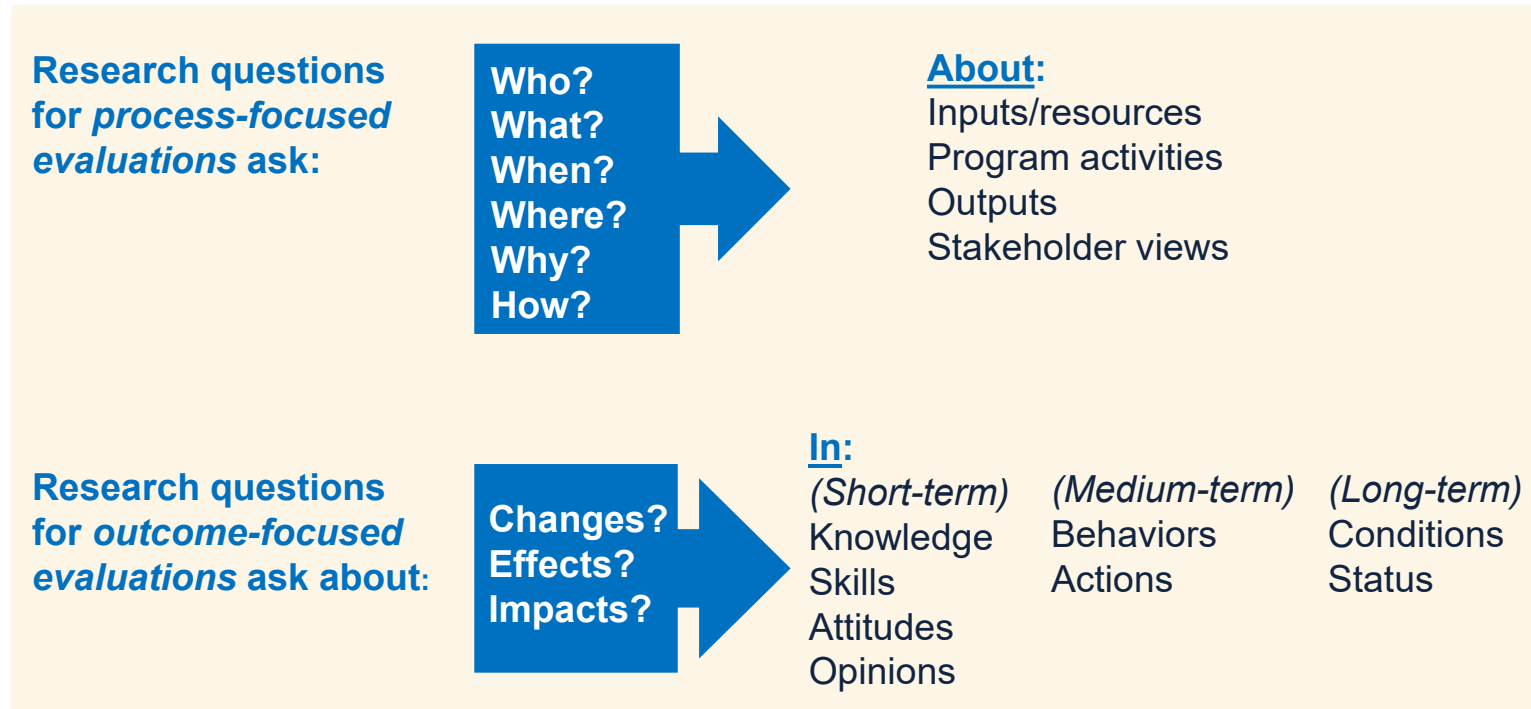


- It communicates how a program works by depicting the intended relationships among program components.
- For more information, review “How to Develop a Program Logic Model” located on the Resource Page on <https://americorps.gov/grantees-sponsors/evaluation-resources>

Task 2: Define Purpose, Scope, and Timing (cont.)



AmeriCorps's evaluation requirements differ for small and large grantees



For more information, review “Overview of Evaluation Designs” located on the Resource Page on <https://americorps.gov/grantees-sponsors/evaluation-resources>

Task 2: Define Purpose, Scope, and Timing (cont.)



Optimal timing of external evaluation activities for large AmeriCorps State and National grantees during their second grant award

- Year 1
 - Program staff define evaluation purpose and scope (by November)
 - Hire external evaluator (by January)
 - External evaluator completes a written detailed evaluation design plan and data collection instruments (by June)
 - The evaluation plan is formally approved by AmeriCorps (by August)

Task 2: Define Purpose, Scope, and Timing (cont.)



- Year 2
 - External evaluator conducts evaluation based on evaluation design plan from year 1 (i.e., collect and analyze data)
- Year 3
 - External evaluator produces evaluation report in time to be submitted with AmeriCorps State and National re-compete application

Task 2: Define Purpose, Scope, and Timing (cont.)



Considerations for when to bring on an evaluator may depend on the resources available or the timing of the evaluation planning. An evaluator could be brought in:

- As part of the initial evaluation plan drafting process
- If the organization has access or relationships with evaluation experts who can serve as consultants for developing an evaluation design
- After an evaluation plan has been drafted, where the evaluator could provide additional insights/recommendations for further improvement

Task 3: Determine Budget and Secure Resources



1. Evaluator(s) time/labor
 - Estimate cost of an evaluator (# of hours needed x average labor rate)
2. Travel
 - Consider travel expenses to attend meetings and collect data
3. Other direct costs (ODCs)
 - Estimate cost of expenses such as supplies, equipment, printing, etc.

Task 3: Determine Budget and Secure Resources (cont.)



4. Overhead costs and fees

- Evaluation firms often build these costs into “loaded” labor rates; independent evaluators may account for overhead differently

5. Program costs necessary to support the evaluation

- Consider the amount of staff and volunteer time needed to manage the evaluation

For more information, review “Budgeting for Evaluation” located on the Resource Page on <https://americorps.gov/grantees-sponsors/evaluation-resources>

Task 4: Solicit and Select an External Evaluator



- Task 4.1: Develop a solicitation to which potential evaluators can respond (also called a request for proposals (RFP))
- Task 4.2: Solicit responses to your request
- Task 4.3: Create criteria to assess and choose the most qualified evaluator
- Task 4.4: Evaluate the proposals and select an evaluator

Task 4.1 Develop a Solicitation



Key elements of a solicitation/RFP

1. Purpose and scope of the evaluation
2. Program background
3. Detailed description of the work plan
4. Timelines
5. Minimum eligibility requirements
6. Resources and/or data to be made available to the evaluator
7. Estimate of the funds available for the work (optional)
8. Contract vehicle



Task 4.1 Develop a Solicitation (cont.)

- Develop and include the evaluation plan with the solicitation
- An evaluation plan does the following:
 - 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

For more information, review “How to Write an Evaluation Plan” located on the Resource Page on <https://americorps.gov/grantees-sponsors/evaluation-resources>



Task 4.1 Develop a Solicitation (cont.)

- The evaluation plan can include a section to describe the characteristics of an evaluator. This could include:
 - Expertise in the evaluation design being proposed
 - Familiarity with a particular topic or focus area
 - Able to conduct an objective and unbiased evaluation (i.e., is external to the program and there is no conflict of interest)

Task 4.1 Develop a Solicitation (cont.)



Provide instructions for responding to the solicitation

- Format of proposal response
 - Is there a required template or structure to follow? Page limit?
- Categories of information requested
 - E.g., technical approach to the work, resumes of key staff, detailed budget, management plan, past work samples, prior experience evaluating AmeriCorps or similar programs
- Proposal submission deadline
- Point of contact for the proposal
- Evaluation and selection

Task 4.2 Solicit Responses to Your Request



- Determine method(s) of attracting applicants:
 - Post the solicitation on your program/organization's website
 - Share solicitation or advertise the work in other evaluation/research outlets
 - Contact prospective evaluator(s) directly

Task 4.2 Solicit Responses to Your Request (cont.)



- Potential sources for identifying evaluators:
 - Professional organizations that have a network of evaluators (e.g., AERA and AEA)
 - Local colleges and universities
 - CNCS Office of Research and Evaluation list
 - Evaluation divisions of state or local agencies
 - Personal networks

Task 4.3 Create Criteria to Assess and Choose the Most Qualified Evaluator



- Establish concrete criteria on which to assess each applicant. Criteria that may be used include:
 - Evaluation plan/approach
 - Evaluator qualifications (Years of experience, capacity, references, etc.)
 - Communication style
 - Project management
 - Cost

Task 4.3 Create Criteria to Assess and Choose the Most Qualified Evaluator (cont.)



- Develop a method to apply your criteria
 - Scoring/rating scale
 - Checklist
 - Weighting

Task 4.4 Evaluate the Proposals and Select an Evaluator



- Evaluate the proposals using the assessment criteria.
- Choose the highest quality proposal that matches your criteria.
 - If there is more than one high quality proposal, consider gathering additional information on top applicants (if allowed):
 - Ask them to respond to questions
 - Ask them to participate in a “best and final” meeting
 - Conduct interviews
 - Check references
- Make a final decision about who to hire

Task 5: Establish a Contract or Consulting Agreement



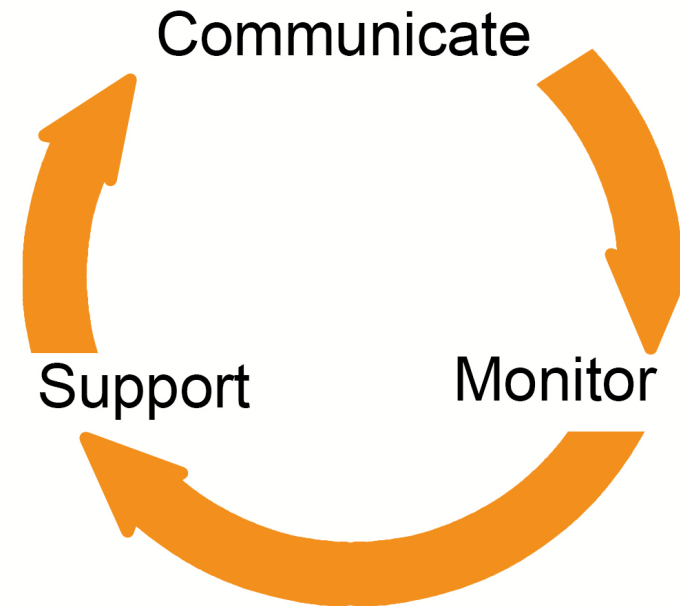
Standard elements of a contract:

1. Scope of work
2. Payment/invoicing
3. Point of contact for both parties
4. Product ownership and rights
5. Other special terms or conditions (e.g., modifications or termination of contract)

Task 6: Manage the Evaluator – Communicate, Monitor, and Support



- Communicate
- Monitor
- Support





Task 6: Manage The Evaluator – Communicate

Maintain communication throughout the project

- Project kick-off meeting
 - Discussion of tasks outlined in the contract
 - Details about upcoming deliverables
 - Project timeline
 - Questions or challenges to the work
- Regular, ongoing meetings to keep the evaluation moving in a timely and efficient manner
- Ad hoc meetings to discuss specific topics
 - e.g., Debrief on preliminary findings



Task 6: Manage the Evaluator – Monitor

Continually monitor progress on the evaluation and the evaluator's work:

- Review and provide feedback on deliverables
- Enforce the schedule for completing tasks and adjust as needed
- Assess the evaluator's skills and performance throughout the evaluation
 - Ask program staff about their interactions with the evaluator
 - Find opportunities to observe the evaluator, while on-site or in meetings
- Keep up with invoicing/payments

Task 6: Manage the Evaluator – Monitor Deliverables



- Evaluation design plan
 - Written document that should detail all evaluation steps and activities the evaluator plans to conduct
- Instruments
 - Surveys or assessment tools to be used to obtain data
- Monthly or quarterly progress reports
 - Reports that provide a status update on the evaluation activities
- Interim/final reports
 - Request to review an outline of the report prior to writing
 - Program staff may contribute to sections of report (e.g., background)
- Other deliverables
 - Short memos and/or research briefs

Task 6: Manage the Evaluator – Support



Provide support and feedback as needed

- Offer advice and guidance to help troubleshoot issues, as needed
- Ensure the evaluator has access to the information required
- Provide continuous input and feedback on the evaluator's work



Potential Challenges and Strategies



1. Evaluation of the program requires skills or expertise outside the original plan
2. The evaluator does not understand your program and/or does not make efforts to include your input/feedback
3. Evaluation has limited time for analysis and reporting in Year 3
4. The evaluator leaves, terminates the contract, or does not meet contractual requirements
5. You are not satisfied with the evaluator's findings
6. The evaluator changes the scope of the evaluation midcourse without approval to make this change
7. Serious and persistent differences in evaluation approach

Group Exercise



Read the example scenario

- Discuss the following questions in small groups:
 - What could the evaluator have done differently?
 - How could the grantee have effectively communicated, monitored, and supported the evaluation to avoid this outcome?
 - What could the grantee have done differently during the planning process?



Important Points to Remember:

- Start the process early
 - Build in time for unexpected delays to avoid potentially missing critical deadlines.
- Do your homework
 - The evaluation manager should have a basic understanding of evaluation concepts and methods to ensure that he/she can effectively communicate your program's evaluation needs to the evaluator.
 - Ensure that the evaluator has the appropriate expertise, i.e., if proposing a QED, they should have prior experience implementing that design



Important Points to Remember (cont.):

- Ask questions
 - Make sure to ask questions if you are unclear about the evaluation approach or activities your evaluator is undertaking.
- Collaborate often
 - An evaluation is best served when both program staff and the evaluator are well-informed and working together.

Resources on Evaluation



Please visit the Evaluation Resources Page for more information on the following courses:

- How to Write an Evaluation Plan
- How to Develop a Program Logic Model
- Overview of Evaluation Designs
- Budgeting for Evaluation

<https://americorps.gov/grantees-sponsors/evaluation-resources>

Hiring the Right Evaluator for your National Service Program:

https://www.americorps.gov/sites/default/files/document/2015_03_19_ManaginganExternalEvaluationHiringtheRightEvaluator_ORE.pdf

Frequently Asked Questions: AmeriCorps State and National Evaluations:

https://www.americorps.gov/sites/default/files/document/2019_10_01_AmeriCorps_State_and_National_Evaluation_FAQs_ASN.pdf

Resources on Evaluation



AmeriCorps State and National grantees with evaluation requirements may request assistance with identifying an appropriate evaluator using the AmeriCorps' Technical Assistance (TA) Portal:

<https://americorpsevaluationta.norc.org/>

Questions?



Thank you!

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