



Evaluation: A Key Resource in Planning and Pursuing Funding Opportunities Highlights of October 14, 2009 webinar

Thanks to everyone who attended the webinar on *Evaluation: A Key Resource in Planning and Pursuing Funding Opportunities*. Twenty-seven participants attended and many submitted questions to our presenters. While we were able to address many of the questions during the webinar, enclosed is a summary of program highlights and resources that you may find useful. The responses to the poll questions also revealed new information and insights on the challenges of evaluation. We thought you would be interested in this summary and encourage you to view the archived version of the webinar for more information about the topics raised in this session.

Presenter Deborah Collins, Director of Research & Evaluation, provided an overview of the initial stages of evaluation development: “In order to design an evaluation plan, we as evaluators need to have a clear understanding of program elements.” Collins underscored that a program’s theory of action is a critical element in the early stages of the planning process.

Webinar participants provided the following comments on the advantages of working with an external evaluator early on in the planning process:

- An external evaluator helped us frame our theory of action and identify interim measures of progress.
- It helps to ensure data collection is a more natural part of the program flow, and which then tends to result in better data.
- Better data collection is possible with intentional planning

Specifying the program

Presenter Amy Burns described how evaluators often collaborate with program developers through joint use of tools such as logic models. Burns underscored a key point noting that: “A logic model depicts the program and not the evaluation.” She added that although logic models are ideally developed prior to program implementation, “They can also be helpful to programs in presentations to their boards, school committees or other key stakeholders.”

Resources: Evaluation Toolkit for Magnet School Programs (www.evaluationtoolkit.org)
The 2002 User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation
(www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02057/start.htm)

Interpreting requirements for rigorous evaluation

Kim Sprague presented an overview on the requirements for rigorous evaluations, which she noted are set by the grant rather than the evaluator. She explained that rigorous designs are only advisable where program elements are well specified and a feasible sample size is identified up front. Identifying a feasible sample often requires a lot of back and forth communication between the district and the evaluator to clarify program components. As Sprague described, “You have to consider your unit of analysis. Is your program targeting a whole school effort? Or is your program targeting teacher classroom improvement, because your design will be dictated by these elements.”

Resource: Reporting the Results of Your Study: A User-Friendly Guide

(ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/references/iDocViewer/Doc.aspx?docId=11&tocId=1)

Securing funding

Elise Laorenza described how evaluators often offer valuable assistance during “the high-stakes phase” when a program is close to getting an award and is asked for a response to questions. “This is often an exciting but often a very anxious time and can feel like a test where the likelihood of funding can come down to what seem like essay questions.” At this phase evaluators can provide a much more detailed description of the measurable outcomes, benchmarks, instruments, and evidence supporting the measures chosen, which might not have fit into the initial proposal.

Resource: Online Evaluation Resource Library (oerl.sri.com/home.html)

During the webinar participants also raised questions about identifying and selecting evaluators, such as:

- What recommendations do you have that would frame the RFP requirements to direct the applicants away from inexperienced evaluators?
- Is there any perceived benefit by funders in using a university-based evaluator vs. another type of evaluator?
- How do you handle working with university-based researcher if it appears that their timeline/priorities for research may overshadow that which best serves their client/program organization?

Resources: American Evaluation Association (www.eval.org)

Western Michigan University’s Directory of Evaluators (ec.wmich.edu/evaldir/)

Poll questions

What brings you here today? (multiple items could be selected)

New to evaluation - gaining awareness: 40%

Considering evaluation - learning about specific benefits: 10%

Have used evaluation: interested in building capacity: 40%

I work in the field – networking: 25%

What is your biggest challenge when considering evaluation?

Cost: 63%

Unclear about benefits: 0%

Complexity of approach: 31%

Access to expertise: 13%

Lack experience with an external evaluator: 31%