



EVALUATIVE THINKING

5. COMMISSIONING EVALUATION: TIPS FOR GRANTMAKERS AND GRANT SEEKERS

As stated previously, choosing data collection strategies (e.g., surveys, observations, record reviews) depends upon the purpose of the evaluation, the evaluation questions, the time frame, and the available resources. **Evaluation assistance can be obtained from independent technical assistance or evaluation consultants, evaluation or other technical assistance consulting firms, and sometimes universities with graduate programs that include training or projects in program evaluation.** Before you hire any consultant or organization be sure to find out whether they have: **experience with program evaluation, especially with non-profit organizations; basic knowledge of the substantive area being evaluated; good references (from sources you trust); and a personal style that fits with your organization's working style.** Think long and hard about the purpose of the evaluation project you are considering. This bulletin will help you understand: differences between research and evaluation, what evaluation should cost, and what you should think about before you initiate it.

What's the Difference Between Evaluation and Research?

Program evaluation and research are similar, but they have different objectives and data standards. They are also different in size and scope. The following table shows important differences between them.

	Evaluation	Research
Objectives	Change and action oriented, aimed at determining impact	Aimed at causality, testing theory
Data	Evidentiary data	Very precise measurements
Subjects	Program target groups or samples of target groups (sometimes very small)	Usually study of samples from fairly large populations
Standards	Usefulness, practicality, accuracy, ethicalness	Truth, causality, generalizability, theory
Costs	Range from minimal to fairly substantial	Usually, high costs
Stakes/Scope	Fairly low stakes, fairly narrow scope (the program)	Very high stakes (e.g., human life or health,
Focus	Whether something is being done well, not necessarily better. Should focus on outcomes of participants (not broad community indicators)	Determining the best treatments, solutions, etc. Can include community indicators where appropriate.
Use	Should not be conducted unless there is real opportunity to use the results	Sometimes conducted when the use is uncertain.

What Should Evaluation Cost?

The rule of thumb is that program evaluation should cost somewhere between 10% and 20% of the cost of program operation. Most of the time the major cost elements of evaluation are labor, especially for senior evaluation practitioners, and overhead. Common daily rates for senior professionals range from about \$500 to \$1200 per day, depending on the types of tasks being undertaken.

This bulletin was developed by Anita Baker with Beth Bruner to help organizations integrate evaluative thinking into their organizational practice. After a successful effort to help organizations build evaluation capacity (see www.brunerfoundation.org for more information about REP 1996-2003), the Bruner Foundation has been working to help organizations use that capacity in other management areas. The Foundation continues pursuing its strong belief that using evaluation skills, specifically identifying key questions of substance, determining what data are needed to answer questions, gathering appropriate data in systematic ways, analyzing data, sharing results, and developing strategies to act on evaluation findings, is valuable in everyday work of organizations. The contents of this bulletin were influenced by the non-profit organizations in Rochester that are former REP partners and ongoing consumers of these efforts, as well as by the work of Michael Quinn Patton, Paul Connolly, Paul Light, and Peter York, and the many others who thoughtfully add to the evaluation and organizational capacity-building literature.

There are two ways to project evaluation costs:

- 1) Design an appropriate evaluation and then calculate the costs associated with the tasks. OR
- 2) Identify a ball park sum and have the evaluator determine the best design for you based on available funds.

**** Remember, evaluation should not be viewed as in competition with program resources. Evaluations can be funded as a component of a program (using program funds) or as a separate project (using ear-marked or additional funds).**

What Should you Ask External Evaluators?

If you want to or must hire an external evaluator to come and work with your organization, the following are questions you should consider asking. These can be asked via an RFP or a meeting/interview. Do remember that your organization is the contractor and although you are bringing someone in because they have specialized expertise, they must answer questions in a way that is satisfactory. If you don't understand a response, don't assume it is because you don't know enough about evaluation – always ask for clarification. It is also a good idea to decide in advance whether a participatory approach will make sense and if so, how that will best be enacted. The following are suggested questions.

- **What do you need to know to properly design an evaluation for this program/initiative?** (The evaluator should minimally need to know about the purpose for commissioning the work, as well as details about service delivery or other organizational structure, and scope of the project including timeframe, ballpark program budget and size of the target population. A smart evaluator will also request other background materials or perhaps even a preliminary visit.)
- **What evaluation questions would guide your effort?** (It may also be valuable to have a preliminary conversation about outcomes and indicators, or specify a whole task where the evaluator works together with program staff to clarify expected outcomes, timeframes, indicators, and important assumptions and contextual issues related to service delivery.)
- **What strategies would you use to address the evaluation questions?** (Be specific about how you would: collect and analyze data involve agency staff, why this approach makes sense or is common, whether there are any standard instruments and why they were chosen.)
- **How will you handle common challenges?** (For example, how will your evaluation design be affected by poor project implementation? Which outcome measures would be appropriate if the program is not well implemented? How will you communicate this to stakeholders?) What will you do to insure necessary access to subjects and confidentiality of response?
- **What timeline is expected for the evaluation project?** (Specify dates when key evaluation tasks will be completed.)
- **Who will conduct the work and what other relevant experiences do they have?** (Identify key staff and clarify their level of involvement – attach resumes and a capacity statement with descriptions of other similar projects. Be sure to get specific directions if web-site reviews are recommended. Ask about supervision if multiple evaluators are involved – who is ultimately responsible for collecting and analyzing data, verifying accuracy and reporting results? For multi-site initiatives, will any local evaluators be involved? How will they and any other staff be trained to conduct specific evaluation activities?)
- **How and when will the findings from the evaluation work be communicated** What products/deliverables will be developed? (look for multiple products where appropriate) Will the products of the evaluation have any greater usefulness? How are program managers expected to use the information obtained through the evaluation?
- **How will evaluation resources be used including professional time, travel, other direct, and indirect costs.** (Be sure to ask for a task-specific budget.)



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What Should Grantmakers Do Before Commissioning an Evaluation?

- **Talk to a few trusted grantmaker colleagues** about experiences they have had. If possible also talk to some grantees and a professional evaluator. Gather some basic advice and determine if it is relevant for your project.
- **Think about how you will identify evaluators.** Is sole sourcing an option for your project, or will a competitive process be more appropriate or advantageous? There are merits to either approach. If you want to or are required to use a competitive approach, determine how broad the competition should or must be. (Determine answers to these questions.)
 - Will an invitational approach work, or do you want unrestricted competition?
 - Are there any geographic limitations or advantages?
 - Are there tax or business requirements (for-profit./non-profit, private firm, individual, university institute or department)
 - What sources will you use to inform evaluators about your project and attract bidders (e.g., RFPs posted on your website, in publications, through your RAG, through associations)
- **Determine the best strategy and requirements for proposals.** Can you go ahead with a letter proposal, a letter of interest (LOI)? or an interview only process, or is a Request for Quotes/Qualifications (RFQ), or a full **Request for Proposal (RFP)** best? *Whatever you decide, be sure to make the request specific enough that you make your needs known, but not so detailed that the evaluator or other stakeholders have no real input into how to proceed.*
- **Determine the timeline for finding evaluators.** If you do a full, competitive proposal process, you will need to determine your sequence for announcing your competition, releasing the actual request (RFP or RFQ), conducting a bidders conference or responding to clarification requests, collecting responses, making selections (including possible “best and final” competitions or invited interviews/presentations) and notification. *Remember that good responses, especially those that are written or presented through a meeting take some time to develop – be sure to give potential contractors adequate time.*
- **Determine the format for response.** Do you need a written or oral response, or a combination? What categories of information are required and what additional materials will help. (It is always helpful to provide specific questions of interest – see following -- and parameters for response.)
- **Determine who will be involved in making the selection and how.** Do you need external reviewers? How will you manage multiple (conflicting?) reviews? If you host an interview, who needs to participate? What role can/should program staff and leaders play?



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What Should Grantmakers Ask Grantees Before Commissioning Evaluation?

1) Contributions to Mission or Broader Field

What is the general purpose of the proposed project and how will it contribute to grantmaker's mission? If not, are there other reasons why it should be supported? (This can also be discussed with grantee as long as they are aware of the grantmaker's mission.)

How does this project contribute to the broader field? What are the likely lessons learned?

2) Implementation and Feasibility

Does the program target population know about and want to participate in this program? Have all necessary collaborative agreements been secured?

How will you guard against implementation impediments?

3) Project Design/Staging

Describe the key components of the project and how they are integrated into the overall project design. Has a reasonable program logic model been developed?

How will the project be staged over time?

4.) Finances (ask if necessary)

Please clarify the following details about your projected budget: _____

5) Outcomes & Evaluation

How is the project expected to impact participants? How will you know when this has happened?

What Should Grantmakers Avoid When Working on Evaluation Projects?

- Agreeing to fund a program evaluation design that you do not understand.
- Agreeing to fund a program evaluation where disbursement is not attached to deliverables.
- Commissioning a program evaluation on a timetable that is inappropriate for the program.
- Commissioning an overly complicated evaluation design, or one for which there was insufficient stakeholder involvement in the development.
- Using proposals as program evaluations.
- Using data collected for other purposes as substitutes for program evaluation.
- Forcing accountability without developing a system that supports use of the information.
- Assuming that you must ALWAYS measure outcomes. Forcing evaluation of outcomes that are inappropriate or beyond the scope of the program.



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How Do You Stay Informed About Evaluation Status?

Periodic or Mid-Point Reports

Request that the evaluator make status reports about:

- What evaluation activities have taken place;
- Any data collection or instrument development problems they have encountered;
- Any proposed changes to data collection timelines or strategies;
- Preliminary findings when appropriate.

These status reports should be on a regular schedule that matches with funder needs and the timeline of the evaluation. Compare each status report with proposed activities and timeline. Be prepared to request clarification if there have been challenges (e.g., timeline, access).

*****Note: do not require evaluator grantees to complete status reports unless there is a real commitment to review them. Be aware that to produce them takes time and costs money.**

Project Conclusion

Request a final status report or make it part of the final evaluation report. Compare what was actually done with what was proposed. Assume there will be some differences as not all tasks work as projected.



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How to Use These Bulletins

The *Integrating Evaluative Thinking Bulletins* were developed in response to the continuing need expressed by nonprofit partners to clarify **how** to enhance evaluative thinking and put enhanced evaluation capacity to work. The bulletins are intended to do the following:

- Clarify what evaluative thinking is, why it is important, and who can do it.
- Provide direction regarding the use of the Bruner Foundation's Evaluative Thinking Assessment Tool to inform action plans that will enhance evaluative thinking.
- Describe additional ways that evaluation strategies can be used internally to increase evaluative thinking (e.g., evaluating the effectiveness of staff development efforts or collaborative ventures).
- Help organizations think about creative ways to present and use evaluation findings.
- Provide practical advice on how to hone analytical skills, and use Evaluative Thinking when making decisions about standard organizational procedures including governance, mission development, strategic planning, fund development, leadership, technology, human relations, staff development, alliances and business ventures.

There are 11 individual *Integrating Evaluative Thinking Bulletins* including this edition. They cover the following topics: evaluation basics and definitions, evaluative thinking basics and assessment of evaluative thinking, evaluation and nonprofit boards, commissioning evaluation, collecting, analyzing and using evaluation data, communicating about evaluation, evaluation and technology, evaluation and HR, evaluation and alliances, increasing participation in evaluation and sustaining evaluative thinking. Each bulletin is brief and replete with practical suggestions made by nonprofit partners who reviewed the work (including some very specific pointers highlighted in yellow). A complete set of all Bulletins, as well as other complementary tools and resources are available via the Bruner Foundation website, www.brunerfoundation.org. We encourage all users of the bulletins to:

- Familiarize (or re-familiarize) yourself with basic information about evaluation capacity.
- Orient yourself regarding the Bruner Foundation's Evaluative Thinking Assessment Tool and conduct preliminary assessment in your organization.
- Develop action plans informed by the suggestions found in the bulletins.
- Implement action plans to enhance Evaluative Thinking in your organization.
- Use these specific bulletins as reference materials when needed.
- Visit the Bruner Foundation website Effectiveness Initiatives pages (www.Brunerfoundation.org), to familiarize yourself with the history behind this effort and to access the tools and resources available there.

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