Why Do Evaluation?


For many grantwriters, evaluation competes with finances as the least favorite part of developing proposals. It seems terribly complex, it can feel like it’s forced on you by funders, and you may experience resistance from the program people whose cooperation you need to develop a good proposal. The evaluation section is treated as a necessary evil and an afterthought — something you throw together after the real work of your proposal is done. As a result, it is often one of the weakest parts of many people’s grants. In a competitive funding round, a strong evaluation section may make the difference between getting funded or turned down.

Yet we have doubts. Most of us aren’t trained researchers and approach the subject with some skepticism. We know it’s going to take time and energy, and it’s not clear what it gets us. Let’s look at the pros and (perceived) cons of doing evaluation.

The primary reason for doing evaluation is that it gives you reliable information to improve your program and services to your clients. Evaluation can provide data on whether a program works and why, which parts of it are effective and which need improvement, whether it is the best use of your organization’s scarce resources.

The primary reason for including evaluation in grant proposals is that funders require it. Proposals with good evaluation sections score better and are more fundable than ones with poor (or no) evaluation. Being able to cite a positive prior evaluation of your existing program increases your chances of receiving future or continuation funding.

Notice that these are not the same. Fortunately, the stick of funder requirements and the carrot of program improvement both lead to the same place. The job of the grant professional is to take advantage of the requirement and use it to improve your grant proposals and therefore your programs and possibly your organization itself.

Beyond these two fundamental reasons for doing program evaluation, there are several more advantages to your organization both during grant development and during program implementation.

In grant proposals:

- Evaluation provides a framework for improving both your grant proposal and the project you’re seeking funding for, by providing measures to make your goals and objectives more meaningful.
• Evaluation provides a way to involve key stakeholders and direct service staff in program planning, increasing buy-in in your program. A positive evaluation can help your organization attract new staff, volunteers, funders and collaborators.

• Doing your own evaluation reduces the chances of funders or other outsiders undertaking their own evaluation of your program, which might be less informed and more detrimental to your organization.

• A strong scientifically based evaluation can turn your innovative project into a research study, and could lead to it being named an “evidence based practice”.

In program operations (after you get funded):

• Evaluation gives immediate feedback, allowing you to identify and fix problems in existing programs while you still have grant funding to implement the changes.

• Evaluation gives a mechanism/vehicle and techniques for getting feedback from your client/participants about their perceptions of your organization and project, and a way of letting them know how the project is working. An evaluation showing that your program works can motivate your existing clients and attract new ones.

• Evaluation provides valuable information for your organization to use for longer term strategic planning and program improvements.

• Evaluation provides solid data for disseminating information about your program, and for others who may want to replicate it elsewhere.

Resistance to Evaluation

Despite these advantages many nonprofit organizations and their staffs are resistant to, or suspicious of, evaluation for a variety of reasons. The grantwriter must often respond to these concerns, and even advocate for evaluation, in order to be able to develop a successful proposal. Here are some common objections to evaluation and responses you can use in overcoming to them. If these are your own beliefs, you’ll need to think them through before trying to convince others.

Objection # 1) Evaluation is a way to judge us, to label our program a success or failure, and perhaps punish us (i.e. cut our funding).

Assumptions:
• Evaluators are looking for a perfect program and if we don’t have it we’ll get marked down.
• Many people’s only experience with evaluation has been employment performance reviews and college board tests. They are reluctant to be judged and ranked.
• If we can keep our program results fuzzy, “they” won’t notice and we can keep doing what we’re doing.

Response:
• By looking at what works and doesn’t work in a program, evaluation can be used to improve your services, not to punish your organization. Evaluation also helps you learn “for whom, where and under what circumstances did it work?”
• Funders, management and governing boards are looking for results. The lack of good program evaluation is worse than finding things that need improvement.

Objection # 2) Evaluation is forced on us by the funders for their own purposes (like punishing us, see # 1.)

Assumptions.
• Evaluation is something we wouldn’t want to do funders didn’t make us. It has no intrinsic value to our organization.

Response:
• If you design your own evaluation you can have control over it, rather than ceding the control to others (like funders).
• If you do a good evaluation, it will help your organization improve its program, improve services to your clients, meet the funder’s needs and help you attract future funding.

Objection # 3) Money spent on evaluation is diverted from direct client services where it could be helping people.

Assumptions:
• Evaluation is expensive.
• Evaluation is always competing for the same funds as services.
• Evaluation doesn’t help our clients.

Response:
• Evaluation doesn’t have to be expensive, and sometimes has separate funding.
• A positive evaluation can help you raise more funds in the future.
• Evaluation can improve services and outcomes for your clients, making direct service dollars more effective.
Objection # 4) We’re “people people”, not “science people”, and we don’t understand or like statistics.

Assumptions:
- Evaluation is all abstract, dry statistical stuff, not relevant to the actual work we do.
- The outside evaluator will look down on us or manipulate the data to make us look bad.
- This is complicated and we can’t learn it.

Response:
- While evaluation was once heavily statistical, program evaluation is increasingly moving to qualitative measurement which looks at people’s actual experience and the impacts of programs on their lives.
- Getting clarity about the uses of data and intentions for using findings in advance can help both the evaluator and program staff do a better job.
- A good evaluation process is designed to include program staff, and a good evaluation report is written for lay people to understand.

Objection # 5) Evaluation will take staff time away from providing direct services.

Assumptions:
- The program staff only want to do their regular jobs and aren’t interested in improving their services.
- The best use of staff time is working directly with clients, even if the work is less effective than it could be.

Response:
- Evaluation data collection will take some of your program staff time — how much depends on the evaluation design.
- Staff time spent on a good evaluation will improve their worklives and the lives of their clients.

Objection # 6) This is different than the way we’ve always done things and we don’t understand or like it.

Assumptions:
- If we change, it may be uncomfortable.
- The way we do things is the best it could be, it doesn’t need improvement.

Response:
• This feeling may be the underlying basis for some of the first 5 issues.
• Doing evaluation may lead to change and may be uncomfortable, but it’s worth it if the resulting improvements are real.
• With new information, nonprofits are discovering better ways of operating.

If you embrace evaluation and incorporate it into your grant development process, it will strengthen your whole proposal. You’ll develop more compelling needs statements, create stronger goals and objectives, and write a better narratives. Your proposals will be more fundable and once funded, the grant programs will be more successful.

In fact, your whole organization will benefit, because evaluation is becoming more important not just in grant proposals but to all aspects of operation. The organizations that survive and thrive will be the ones that understand, measure and work to improve themselves and their programs. And the way that’s done is through program evaluation.

**Matching Evaluation to Your Project and Organization**


How will you know your grant project succeeded? The answer can be very different for a local community group funded by a local foundation than a social service program applying for a large federal grant. In one case it can be just looking whether you met the program goals for numbers served, in the other it may need control groups and a statistician. This article tells how to know which approach is appropriate, how to do an informal in-house evaluation, when in the grant process to involve a professional evaluator (early) and making sure you have outcomes that can be evaluated.

The need for evaluation of grant projects has increased over the years, as funders and nonprofits have become more sophisticated and focused on results. Before the 1960’s, it was possible to get funded by saying “There are young people living on the streets and really in need of help. We care about them and want to help them”. This wasn’t specific enough for funders to know if their grants were having an impact, so they started to ask “How many?” “There are 2000 homeless youth living on the streets of Portland and we will provide 500 of them with emergency food and 100 with emergency shelter in the next year.” Gradually funders realized this approach wasn’t making lasting changes, so they asking “So what?” and looking for results, which is where we are today. “There are 2000 homeless youth living on the streets of Portland and we will provide 500 of them with emergency food and
100 with emergency shelter in the next year. While they participate in our programs, staff outreach workers will interview them to determine needs and will refer them to counseling, alternative schools, and job training programs. As a result of this program, at least 50 will be reunited with their families or moving to transitional housing and 200 will be in school, job training or employed. “Evaluation is how you collect this information.

Evaluation serves two purposes for your organization and your funder. First, it monitors the success of your project. Second, it provides information for improving your project and overall program. The Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook says “Effective evaluation is not an ‘event’ that occurs at the end of a project, but is an ongoing process which helps decision makers better understand the project; how it is impacting participants, partner agencies and the community; and how it is being influenced/impacted by both internal and external factors.”

As a grantwriter, you will often be involved in the early planning of a project – which may mean there hasn’t been any planning for it done at all. Because the work of the project won’t happen unless the grant is funded, and that could be months away, it may be difficult to get program staff to focus on the eventual evaluation. At the project planning stage, you don’t have to force them to design evaluation criteria. You just need to decide how complex of an evaluation to describe in your proposal, and if further detailed work is needed to develop it.

Remember, when you’re writing a large grant proposal, you’re developing somebody’s job for the next few years. You don’t want to waste their time and your organization’s resources by creating unnecessary work. It is important that you align your project goals and objectives with your evaluation questions, so that the evaluation becomes a part of your project and not a separate set of tasks.

What kind of evaluation you need to do, and who you will involve, will depend on your project and your organization. In your planning you need to ask these questions:

- Why are you doing this evaluation? To better understand your program? To judge its success or improve it? To satisfy funder requirements? To produce data for agency to use for public relations or in seeking future funding?
- Who is the audience for your evaluation? Funders? Your board? Management? Program staff? The public or the press? Government officials?

I’ve identified five distinct types of grant evaluation, which can be defined by who needs to be involved.
1. Short term project with staff evaluation. The obvious case is a one-time purchase. You apply for funding to buy a van to take kids on outings. Evaluation consists of “Did you buy the van?” and “Are you using it to take kids on outings?” You could provide the funder with a copy of the bill of sale and vehicle title and a list of outings. You could spice it up with a picture of the van with happy children at the beach, maybe with the funder’s name printed discretely on the van under your logo. This evaluation can be performed by the program or development staff. It doesn’t create any extra work since it fits within existing program activities.

2. Board evaluation: I like to use board evaluation for straightforward projects which have significant impact for your organization. Your board’s job is to oversee the work of your organization, so the regular program reports at board meetings should allow them to evaluate the project and implement improvements. An example would be the marketing and audience development program for Portland Baroque Orchestra in Attachment A. If you’re mailing out brochures and your audience is growing, the board can measure and evaluate the results. Often I will break board evaluation down into 1) Were the objectives accomplished — on time and in budget? (Did we do what we said we would?) and 2) Did we reach the goal, fulfill the need? (Did the project accomplish its purpose?) Having the evaluation done by the board rather than staff adds some credibility. It also ties the grant project to other board work such as policy and program decisions. This is a good model for local foundations who like to fund direct program activities and who may already be familiar with your organization.

3. Inside Evaluation Team: For more complex projects, you may want to form your own evaluation team of stakeholders in both the project and your organization. Say you’re opening a new health clinic serving a different population than you have previously. This is too big an undertaking to leave to routine staff reports to your board. You might put together a team from the clinic: The clinic manager, a doctor, nurse, receptionist, records management staff. But don’t stop there, you should have at least one patient, someone from a major referral agency, maybe the local public health commission. Finally, how about a board member or your finance manager? If anyone in your agency has evaluation experience, invite them too. The idea is to represent all of the significant groups impacted by your project. The team will meet regularly to assess progress and use it to make project modifications.

In this case, you need to put some real thought into the evaluation design you’ll include in your grant proposal. You might decide on a theory-based outcomes evaluation and use a logic model to outline your project and outcomes. If you’re seeking government funding, the funder might have evaluation criteria you’ll need to include. You’ll have to decide at this stage what data you need to collect to perform an effective evaluation. I suggest looking at some of the books at the end of this article to use in planning your evaluation.
4. Outside Evaluator: In many cases with complex projects you’ll want or need to hire an outside evaluator. Some federal grants require you to budget 10% or 15% on evaluation, and you won’t have evaluation capacity in-house. Sometimes you’ll want to prove the effectiveness of a program and need someone with specialized skills to oversee control groups, do statistical analysis, etc.. You may want to use an independent and credentialed outsider because your program is controversial, highly visible, rapidly changing, or because you need to establish (or restore) credibility to your program or organization.

If you plan to use an outside evaluator choose them early, and if all possible involve them in planning your grant proposal. You want to make sure that your program design is structured so that it can be statistically evaluated. Sometimes a professional evaluator will write the evaluation section of your proposal on the understanding that you’ll hire them if the grant is funded. If you can’t involve the evaluator in grant planning, get them on board as soon as possible after you’re funded.

Evaluators can often be found in local Universities and colleges (or hospitals for health care grants). There are professional evaluation firms, as well as individuals, in most cities. Ask other organizations in your community who they have used and liked working with. Check with the Oregon Program Evaluators Network or the national American Evaluation Association for members in your area.

5. Research: Research grants are different from grants designed to implement programs. With research grants, a scientific question is being explored and the evaluation is itself the purpose. Most research grants are government funded. Many Federal agencies are engaged in supporting research through grants or contracts to universities and profit and nonprofit institutions. This support is offered to encourage research activities that are expected to have a favorable effect on the mission of the government agency. Some agencies have a general mandate to support basic research in scientific areas related to their primary mission or that are in the national interest.

Most research grants are highly technical and require knowledge of the science involved, as well as of research methods. In my experience the researchers themselves, or grantwriters attached to their institutions, develop most research proposals.

Do you need to budget for evaluation and how much? You probably don’t have to include funds for evaluation for numbers 1 and 2. In fact these kinds of projects are often funded by local foundations who don’t want any of their money spent on evaluation. They want to fund projects or direct service, and being told that the project goals were accomplished is as much as they want to know. For number 3, you might want to include evaluation funds in your budget for such things as staff for data collection, entry and analysis; computers and software; interviews or focus groups; and supplies and printing. For numbers 4 and 5, you definitely want to budget for evaluation.
With some government grants, there’s a defined percentage (often 10 or 15%) required to be spent on evaluation.

**ONGOING EVALUATION** Some agencies have ongoing evaluation programs, which can provide the framework and information for planning your grant evaluation.

**Organizational Commitment:** A national organization I work with, the National Indian Child Welfare Association, evaluates all of its programs including services, products and events. This helps them guarantee quality services in support of their mission and assures their diverse constituencies and funders that their programs are effective and produce results. While unusual in nonprofits, this commitment has helped NICWA build and maintain a national reputation as a leader in their field.

**Quality Assurance (QA):** In health care, mental health, substance abuse treatment, and related fields quality assurance staff or committees are often required for licensing or accreditation. They review program practices to make sure services meet required standards. Quality Assurance may be included in a grant as part of contract compliance. If your agency has a quality assurance program, the information it is already gathering will be invaluable for developing a program evaluation — or it may be all you need.

**Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI):** CQI was developed by Japanese industry, based on the work of W. Edward Deming in the 1940’s. Instead of collecting information centrally and periodically implementing major program changes, CQI involves the line staff and managers in constantly identifying problems or opportunities, and implementing them at the operating level without having to go to top management. Many nonprofits have started using CQI, and if your organization has a CQI program it can be the basis of your evaluation section. Sometimes Quality Assurance programs incorporate CQI.

**Resources for Evaluation:**

*W.K. Kellogg Evaluation Handbook*, available free for downloading as an Adobe Acrobat file or ordering a paper copy. This 117-page volume gives both theory and practice of evaluation, from one of America’s largest and most evaluation-oriented foundations.

*Outcomes for Success!* Judith Clegg & Jane Reissman, *Organizational Research Services* (Seattle, Washington). How to develop your own outcome-based program evaluation, including using a logic model.

Using an Outside Evaluator

In many cases with larger grants and complex projects you’ll want or need to hire an outside evaluator. Sometimes you’ll want to prove the effectiveness of a program and need someone with specialized skills to oversee control groups, do statistical analysis, and so forth.

Reasons for using an outside evaluator

- **The funder requires it**: Many federal grants require you to budget 10% or 15% on evaluation, and may require an outside evaluator. Some larger foundations will also require independent evaluation.

- **You don’t have evaluation capacity in-house**: If you’re planning a quantitative evaluation with an experimental design and control groups, very likely you won’t have the expertise in your organization to do the instrument design, select control groups and handle statistical analysis.

- **An outsider brings credibility**: You may want to use an independent and credentialed outsider because your program is controversial, highly visible, rapidly changing, or because you need to establish (or restore) credibility to your program or organization. An evaluator’s credibility may come because of their independence or their expertise. In most cases you’ll be looking for both.

- **An outsider may be able to get information your program can’t**: If your organization provides mandated services where participants could fear losing services or being punished, they may not give their true opinions to your staff. An outside person who is able to prove their independence may gain access or get truer responses than your staff. (Examples could be a probation department or alcohol and drug treatment program).

Pros and cons of using external evaluators

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<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<td>Less work for your organization</td>
<td>Less control over the process</td>
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<td>Evaluators professional expertise</td>
<td>Staff may have more complete understanding or</td>
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<td>Evaluators bring objectivity</td>
<td>your program</td>
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<td>Evaluation results may have more credibility</td>
<td>Less opportunity to develop internal evaluation capacity</td>
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<td>Expensive</td>
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How to find an external evaluator

If you plan to use an outside evaluator choose them early. Don’t succumb to the temptation to make the evaluator a “to be determined” person, if it can be avoided. Having the evaluator identified and involved will demonstrate your professionalism.

In addition to being able to use their credentials in your proposal, if all possible involve them in planning your grant proposal. You want to make sure that your program design is structured so that the evaluation can be statistically valid. Sometimes a professional evaluator will write the evaluation section of your proposal on the understanding that you’ll hire them if the grant is funded. If you can’t involve the evaluator in grant planning, get them on board as soon as possible after you’re funded.

- **Academic:** Evaluators can often be found in local Universities and medical schools (or hospitals for health care grants). Formal evaluation is similar to research, and in fact most evaluators formal training is in research design and statistics. Until a few years ago it was rare to find classes called “evaluation”. When looking for a university evaluator, you can contact the department that works with your field (like social work, sociology, education or public administration), the Office of Sponsored Research (who oversee faculty research) or see if there’s an evaluation office on campus. The [Regional Research Institute at Portland State University](http://www.rri.pdx.edu) often will provide evaluators for nonprofits.

- **Professional:** There are professional evaluation firms, as well as individuals, in most cities. Ask other organizations in your community who they have used and liked working with. Check with the [Oregon Program Evaluators Network](http://www.oregonprogramevaluatorsnetwork.org) or the [American Evaluation Association](http://www.aea.net) for members in your area.

- **Ask the Funder:** Some large foundations and government agencies have lists of evaluators with expertise in their field. Or you can call agencies who have been funded previously and ask them who they worked with. If a particular name emerges as having worked with the grantees of a particular funding agency, that firm could add credibility to your proposal.

- **Federal agencies or national trade or advocacy groups:** Many federal agencies have technical assistance websites with lists of evaluators.
Choosing an evaluator

Once you’ve identified some potential evaluators, you should call a few of them and get general information. Then you might interview a few that you like to start making decisions. Here are a few things to look for:

- **Do they favor a particular type of evaluation?** If an evaluator starts recommending particular evaluation methods before learning what you need to know, or how you plan to use the findings, it may indicate a preference for, or experience with, a particular evaluation design. If that’s not the kind of evaluation you’re looking for, or you haven’t decided, they’re probably not a good match for your project.

- **Do they have an agenda?** Check to see if a researcher you’re considering brings their own reasons for doing your evaluation. A professor may be writing a book or conducting long term research, a doctoral student may want to fit your evaluation into a dissertation. Or they may have their own theories that could influence what they expect to find. If their needs mesh with yours, then it’s win-win. If they don’t, you need to ensure that their work will meet your needs, not just theirs.

- **Can they communicate with your staff and board?** If the evaluator only describes the process in highly technical jargon, it may make it hard for your staff to work with them — either because of comprehension or intimidation. It may also be an indication that their reports will be full of jargon and theory, and hard to interpret and implement changes.

- **Cultural sensitivity:** If you work in a diverse community, the evaluator needs to be acceptable to the community and able to understand or learn the culture in order for the evaluation to gather accurate information.

After screening to get a good match, you will probably identify one or two possible evaluators you’re most comfortable with. You can then have a more detailed interview, with such questions as:

- How much evaluation have you done, especially in projects similar in size and content to ours?

- Who would be doing our evaluation — a senior staff, junior staff, a grad student? What are their qualifications?

- What are your ownership and confidentiality policies? Do you want or intend to publish an article based on our work? If so, how would our organization be identified? Could one of our senior staff be listed as co-author?
• Please provide us with some names of past clients we can talk to. (And be sure to check references!)

Once you’ve decided on an evaluator, you need to write a contract which should include the following:[1]

• **Scope of Work.** This includes defining the organization’s information needs and purpose of the evaluation, defining the Program Theory Model, identifying constraints (time, money, data availability, politics) and how they will be addressed.

• **Evaluation tasks.** Who does data entry, transcribing interviews, correlating interview answers, writes up reports and similar tasks?

• **Who owns the data?** If articles are published, does it need both parties approval and who is listed as authors?

• **Fees.** For a full, formal evaluation in a federal grant, 10-15% of the total is reasonable. For a smaller proposal to a private foundation, 5% may be more likely. To lower costs, the scope of work can be reduced or some work done by the organization.

• **Timeline.** This should include major steps in the evaluation process, data collection schedules, reports or other work components and billing deadlines.

• **What will be included in reports:** Narrative, charts, literature review, comparison to national or other statistics, number of drafts and who edits them.

• **Definition of responsibilities.** The chart below shows some typical responsibilities.

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<th>Evaluator Responsibilities</th>
<th>Organization (client) Responsibilities</th>
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<td>Develop an evaluation plan, in conjunction with staff</td>
<td>Educate the evaluator about the program or project</td>
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<td>Train project staff</td>
<td>Provide feedback about data collection tools for appropriateness and relevance</td>
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<td>Design or select data collection instruments</td>
<td>Keep evaluator informed of program changes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implement data collection procedures</td>
<td>Specify information to be</td>
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<td>Establish and oversee confidentiality procedures</td>
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Working with an outside evaluator

http://www.grantsnorthwest.com/using-an-outside-evaluator/

The Association of Baltimore Grantmakers has this list of tips for managing your evaluation on their website.

- Establish a desired communication pattern early and in writing. One person should be the point of contact for the consulting team—that person should facilitate contact with others, provide advice and guidance to the team, and gather additional information and/or resources to support the evaluation when necessary.
- Maintain communication throughout the project—you’ll need to know how the work is coming along and the consultant needs to be informed about things that arise at the foundation.
- Develop strategies for monitoring the work of the consultants (not just deliverables). You may want to accompany the evaluation team on select site visits. Are they organized? Do they work well with grantees? Are they doing everything that they said they would and in a manner with which you are comfortable?
- Seek input from grantees or other sources. Were they comfortable with the evaluator’s approach?

Don’t be a terrible client! Remember that consultants get paid for their time—every call, meeting, and presentation “uses up” valuable contract time. Do what you can to facilitate their work—don’t make it harder on them. If you want or need much more than was anticipated, expect to PAY more for it!

[1] The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University has a more detailed checklist of things that should be in an evaluation contract, as well as other checklists. http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/