Identifying Resources for Evaluation

Agency resources for evaluation can vary widely, based on their context and existing capabilities. Generally, resource needs fall into the following areas: funding; people (with expertise); the availability of high-quality data, support systems (i.e., infrastructure, contracting support, etc.); leadership buy-in and support; and program buy-in and support. This Q&A focuses on getting started on planning an evaluation, funding an evaluation, and bringing in external staff to build agency capacity. Know that there are no easy answers or one-size- fits all solutions.

Getting Started

An important first step is figuring out what you need to answer your evaluation question(s). Consider available resources first.

Q How can I gather more information about the state of evidence in a field (before/without launching a new study)?

A **Perhaps.** Do some preliminary research. Review evidence libraries (clearinghouses) or evidence syntheses.[i] Review the academic and grey literature. If more is needed, issue a Request for Information to solicit external input on the Government's requirement and strategy, and learn about potential vendors' capabilities and interest.[ii]

> *An evidence-based clearinghouse is a repository of evidence associated with programs, interventions, and practices that have been rigorously evaluated and rated according to criteria. For more information go to Evaluation.gov or here:* **https://research2policy.org/clearinghouses-and-evidence-based-resources/**

Q What are appropriate methods for answering the evaluation question?

A **It depends.** In addition to looking at evaluations of similar programs or policies to see what evaluation approaches were used you may want to issue a Request for Information to solicit external input on the Government's requirement and strategy, and learn about potential vendors' capabilities and interest.

Q

What Federal resources are available to support an evaluation?

A

There are many! Talk to others in your agency and across the Government with evaluation expertise to help you identify the resources needed. Consultation, partnerships, and collaborations can fill a need for funding or staff. Consult with an inter-agency workgroup, like the Evaluation Officer Council or Interagency Council on Evaluation Policy.

Q

Are other federally sponsored data collections addressing a similar evaluation question or reaching a similar population?

A

Possibly. There are resources that you can tap. Some approaches may be feasible in the short term, others may require more longer-term planning within your agency.

- Explore adding modules to pre-existing data collection efforts conducted by other Federal agencies
- Review existing ICRs (Information Collection Requests)[iii] to see if the data you need already exist https://www.reginfo.gov/public/jsp/Utilities/faq.myjsp
- Coordinate with program offices in the design of administrative data collections that could serve evaluation needs

Federal agencies can formally make a request to the Census Bureau to add questions to the American Community Survey. Keep in mind that the agency must have a programmatic reason In order for Census to add questions.

Funding an Evaluation

Agencies use blended approaches to fund evaluation activities and staff. No one approach will work for every agency, and within an agency, funding approaches may change over time. Some approaches may be feasible within the fiscal year, while others may take time and effort (i.e., legislative proposals).

Q **What Federal funding resources are available to support an evaluation?**

A **This can vary, based on agency appropriations, funding priorities, and fiscal year cycles.** No one approach will work for every agency. Common approaches for funding evaluations are: [iv]

- **Direct appropriations** (i.e., funding that Congress has given to an agency through the appropriations process) for evaluation FTE (full-time equivalent federal staff) and/or evaluation projects
  - May rely on other appropriations to fund FTE and to fund or supplement evaluation activities (e.g., general FTE fund or program office funds)[v]
- **Specific portion of program funding, often referred to as a "carve out" or "set aside"** that is meant for research, evaluation, and statistics within a funding appropriation for another agency purpose:
  - May be a percentage (e.g., up to 1 percent) or set amount (e.g., $10 million) or a minimum (e.g., a minimum of $10 million)
  - May be used for evaluation alone or for evaluation, technical assistance (TA), or award monitoring and administration
  - Program administrative funds can be used for evaluation, even if not directly specified
- Funding that enables an agency to test new things and couples that with evaluation to demonstrate their effectiveness, often known as "Demonstration authority"
  - Enables agencies to use a portion of program activity funds for demonstration pilots that would have an evaluation component (and sometimes TA and monitoring) to demonstrate the effectiveness of a program, intervention, or policy.
  - One example of demonstration authority that supports evaluation is under Section 1115 of the Social Security Act, which gives the Secretary of Health and Human Services authority to approve experimental, pilot, or demonstration projects that are found by the Secretary to be likely to assist in promoting the objectives of the Medicaid program, and conducts evaluations on these demonstrations to assess their impacts on outcomes of interest.
- Grantee-led evaluations and contracting for third-party evaluators
  - As part of a grant award, some grantees are required to conduct evaluations using a portion of their grant funds and/or matching funds [vi]
    - This requires having the grantee contract with a third-party, external evaluator.
    - The level of effort can vary based on the scope and the contracted evaluators' capacity.
  - 2 CFR § 200.22 and § 200. 31 (Uniform Grants Guidance) clarifies that evaluation costs are allowable costs, unless otherwise prohibited by statute or regulation [vii]

Engaging External Talent

Q **How can an agency bring in external experts or consultants to support an evaluation?**

A **Work with an IPA!** Through the Intergovernmental Personnel Act, an agency can arrange for a temporary assignment of personnel (an IPA) from state and local governments, colleges and universities, Indian tribal governments, federally funded research and development centers, and other eligible organizations, such as non-profits. [viii][ix]

IPAs are an underutilized and flexible mechanism for engaging experts from a variety of types of organizations. IPAs can be reimbursable or non-reimbursable; they may be cost-neutral to Federal agencies. IPAs can be for intermittent, part-time, or full-time rotations.

Q **Are details or developmental assignments that are required by some fellowships a way to get temporary staff?**

A **Yes.** Bringing in staff on detail from other agencies or offices within your agency can augment your evaluation capacity.

- Similarly, many federal fellowship programs (e.g., Presidential Management Fellowship Program (PMF))[x] require that fellows go on "rotations' to work in other offices. Such staff can be great resources because they can perform inherently governmental tasks and may already be familiar with your agency or program. Because these are typically short assignments (3-9 months) it will be important to have well-defined tasks or projects for them to conduct.

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[i] Links to nine Evidence Clearinghouses can be found at
https://www.evaluation.gov/resources/#resource=.evidence-clearinghouse&role=*&content=*&year=*

[ii] A Request for Information (RFI) / Sources Sought Notice (SSN): A market research tool used to obtain price, delivery, capabilities, interest, etc. for planning purposes https://www.gsa.gov/small-business/small-business-resources/training-resources/rfp-rfi-and-rfq-understanding-the-difference

[iii] An ICR is an agency request for OMB approval of an information collection. It includes a description of the collection and its planned use as well as other information that demonstrates that the agency has met the requirements of the PRA. It may also include an information collection instrument (e.g., a form, survey, script, etc.) and supporting documentation that has been sent to OMB for review and approval under the PRA.

[iv] See Building and Using Evidence to Improve Government Effectiveness https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ap_6_evidence-fy2020.pdf

[v] See Epstein, D., Zielewski, E., & Liliedahl, E. (2022). Evaluation policy and the federal workforce. New Directions for Evaluation, 2022, 85–100. https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.20487

[vi] Grantee-led evaluations using third-party evaluators require evaluation expertise within the Federal agency to support this work and establish expectations. A "value-add" of this approach may support cross-program evaluations or national-level evaluations.

[vii] From OMB M-21-27: For Federal awards, agencies should similarly consider all available evidence when complying with the OMB uniform grants guidance on program design and when planning performance reporting requirements in order to leverage existing evidence or determine new opportunities to add to the body of evidence. (p. 14)

[viii] https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-information/intergovernment-personnel-act/

[ix] See the Intergovernmental Personnel Act Toolkit, published by the Office of Evaluation Sciences Intergovernmental Personnel Act Toolkit (Last Updated February 2022) https://oes.gsa.gov/assets/files/ipa-toolkit-oes.pdf

[x] For information about the Presidential Management Fellows program go to https://www.pmf.gov/