

Benefits of External Evaluation

Prepared by Jan Upton, Ph.D., President, IRC
Version: 5/14/13

Strong evaluation can help faculty and other non-evaluators document and “tell the story” of their projects. Most funding agencies require it, and though it can sometimes feel like a nuisance, it can often lead to project improvement and long-term funding. Below is a brief overview of the usual initial contact with an external evaluator, common errors that faculty and other non-evaluators make, and the potential benefits of having a professional external evaluator.

Faculty and other non-evaluators typically contact me when one of the following situations arises

- 1) They have lost funding due to not paying sufficient attention to evaluation. However, they have an opportunity to resubmit for continued funding, so they ask me to develop an evaluation plan for their revised proposal.
- 2) They have funding but are frustrated with their current evaluation process. Specifically, they have come to realize that they need more information—useful input that can help them understand and improve their program.
- 3) They are preparing a new proposal in response to a Request for Proposal (RFP).

Common mistakes faculty and other non-evaluators make when it comes to evaluation

- 1) Trying to do it all on their own.
- 2) Failure to develop a comprehensive evaluation plan that collects information at appropriate intervals from participants and other key stakeholders.
- 3) Developing surveys that have too many open-ended questions.
- 4) Surveying too frequently or not often enough.
- 5) Confusing evaluation (overall monitoring of project) and assessment (student testing).
- 6) Not realizing the potential benefits of the “objectivity” and “distance from the program” that an external evaluator can offer. Evaluators can provide candid feedback and recommend solutions that those close to the program may have missed. Evaluation findings can also help confirm and support needed changes that a project team may have already identified. In addition, an external evaluator can listen to participants non-judgmentally while protecting individual confidentiality.

Benefits of having an external evaluator

- 1) Professional evaluators have the expertise to develop evaluation plans, surveys, and interview protocols. A project team should always review and have input into all evaluation tools, but they do not have to design everything themselves.
- 2) There is ongoing data collection throughout the project so that a project team can make adjustments as early as possible. Such feedback can produce a superior program. In addition, if a project team makes improvements based on participants’ feedback, this can enhance the project experience for everyone involved.
- 3) Evaluators process/analyze data and write reports. These activities often pose a huge burden on a project team that should be focused on project implementation.
- 4) Evaluators offer greater objectivity, since they are not university employees or otherwise connected with any particular project.
- 5) Finally, the evaluation provides extensive information that can be shared with the funder, helping to ensure continued funding or stimulating ideas for new initiatives. A client can copy parts of or include full evaluation reports in the annual reports required by funders. I regularly work with clients who have projects that receive funding continuously for years and who then develop spin-off projects that are equally well received.

In summary, the evaluator can become a “critical friend” to a project, helping faculty and other non-evaluators identify what is working as well as aspects that may need to be modified. Such feedback can be essential in ensuring that a project is effectively meeting its goals.