TIGER TIPS
RESOURCES FOR AUBURN RESEARCHERS
Program Evaluators and the Grant Process
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Program evaluation is an important, and often required, tool not only in applying for and securing both public and private grants, but also in understanding for whom, under what conditions, and to what extent the program proposed in the grant met or didn't meet its objectives. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, program evaluation can highlight lessons to be learned from current programs, and use those data to inform future projects.

What Added Value Does Evaluation Provide?
Not surprisingly, people who are asking the government for money to fund a project want the maximum amount of resources spent on that project. So a question I am often asked in various ways comes down to this: "Why should we spend our money on an evaluator?" The first answer, and one that is becoming more common in both the private and public sector is: Because the grant requires it. While true, this answer is also inadequate.

Contributions by an external evaluator to the grant process include the following:

1. Planning. An evaluator can help you set realistic and measurable goals for your project. Because evaluators use many methods and instruments to collect, analyze, and report outcomes, involving the evaluator early in the process can help provide structure to the narrative and other parts of the grant.

2. Use of Resources. A good evaluation will tell the PIs or project managers what is working in the program, what is not working, and which program elements are least successful. Best practice in program evaluation dictates collection and reporting of both formative (early/mid/late program data) as well as summative (end of program data) results, allowing program managers to make decisions involving resources, staff, and other program considerations. In the most basic form, this means doing more of what works, and either changing or doing less of what doesn't.

3. Another Set of Eyes. Good evaluators work as objective partners in projects they are evaluating. Evaluators often collect data from participants that can serve to inform the PIs about issues (or successes) that might otherwise be overlooked in the daily operation of the grant. A formal data gathering process to achieve this end is often included in program evaluations.

4. Credibility. I often tell my doctoral students that dissertations come down to one questions: How well did you make your argument? When arguing for future or continued funding the more scientifically collected, analyzed and reported data the better. Program evaluators are trained to make evidence-based arguments for their conclusions, and use a variety of methodologies to make these arguments. This benefits current programs by allowing PIs and others to understand the current state of the program, and also benefits future grant applications by providing evidence not only of program efficacy, but of an evaluation culture within the project.

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5. <u>Telling the Story of a Program</u>. One of the most important uses of program evaluation is in telling the story of the program. Funders, stakeholders, and program staff are obvious audiences for information about the supports and barriers to program success, individual experiences within the program, and *for whom, under what conditions and to what extent* the program met or didn't meet its intended objectives. A successful evaluation not only provides information to the stakeholders of the program, but also allows for the possibility of program replication, scalability, and the wider dissemination of the results to appropriate audiences.

What Should the Evaluation Plan Include?
For many grants, the page limits, structure, and requirements for the evaluation section of the project are heavily proscribed. A good evaluator will be able to work within the limits of the grant application to successfully meet its requirements. Ideally, evaluation plans should include at least the following elements:

•A statement of evaluation capacity by the evaluator

•A model of the evaluation approach to be used. Although many models and variations exist, best practice models include both formative and summative feedback, data collection plans, and a general philosophy of the approach.

•A step by step plan addressing each objective, how and when data will be collected and in what form, how those data will be secured, how they will be analyzed, and how (and how often) they will be reported.

•A schedule detailing deliverables, due dates, and data collection dates.

•A detailed budget outlining expectations of products and effort of the evaluator

•A logic model. Logic models are essential, a detailed discussion of them is beyond the scope of this brief introduction. An excellent resource for logic models appears below.

•A plan for dissemination of results to stakeholders and other interesting parties

Finally
A qualified, experienced evaluator can bring a great deal of value to a program, and greatly enhance the chances of funding. Working with a qualified evaluator as the grant is being developed can allow PIs to work backwards from measureable program objectives to program activities that produce them, and provide a strong logical structure for a grant application.

Further resources:
1. W.K. Kellogg Foundation – Evaluation Toolkit. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has developed an evaluation toolkit designed to give guidance to programs embarking on evaluation. Available online at:
http://www.northskynonprofitnetwork.org/resource-center/wk-kellogg-foundation-evaluation-toolkit

2. The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University is a very useful resource for many topics in evaluation, and presents a series of checklists at https://www.wmich.edu/evaluation/checklists that are very useful in formalizing the relationship between the evaluation client and the evaluator, including contracts, budgets, logic models, and evaluation design.

3. Finally, the American Evaluation Association's website at http://eval.org provides resources and referral services, as well as representing the vast majority of the professional evaluation community in examining ethics, methodology, and best practices in program evaluation.