Evaluating Broader Impacts

This section helps you to design and implement effective evaluations.

It introduces evaluation, helps you design an evaluation plan, and choose tools and methods.

Evaluation 101

As a potential PI you and your project team must develop a set of appropriate, measurable, and valid project impacts and create a plan for evaluation that will demonstrate whether and how you accomplished your project goals and objectives.

NSF Grant Proposal Guide

Guidelines
1. How will evaluation benefit your project?
2. Is external evaluation required?
3. What return will you get from the cost of evaluation?

Benefits
Evaluation is often considered an imposition or nuisance imposed by a funder that places undue administrative burden on scientists.

Evaluation is not adversarial. The purpose of evaluation is to help improve and strengthen a project. Evaluation lets you demonstrate your project's success or progress and communicate its impact to others. The take-away is that properly executed evaluation builds a case for retaining project support and attracting future funding.

Experts stress that evaluation can:

Focus the project
- Clarify what the program is trying to achieve.
- Create a foundation for strategic planning

Improve project design and implementation
- Identify and modify ineffective practices
- Identify and leverage program strengths

Track measurable project outcomes
- Provides evidence of effectiveness
- Produce credibility and visibility

Substantiate requests for increased funding
- Provide documentation for performance and annual reports
- Demonstrate program impact to grant providers and other constituents

Myths
Here are four common evaluation-related myths that concern many researchers.

Myth #1: Evaluation diverts resources and services from my research.

Consider evaluation an investment in your program.

Properly conducted evaluation can have an invaluable effect by improving education and services provided to students and learners. Evaluation does utilize time and resources. Combining inexpensive internal options and expert external options help can minimize the opportunity cost of evaluation.

Myth #2: Evaluation puts my program at risk to lose funding or be eliminated.

Evaluation is for program improvement. Properly executed evaluation shows results and builds a case for continued funding.

A common misconception is that evaluation is designed to find problems and see if you "measure up". Most projects have some room for improvement. Evaluation provides ongoing feedback to analyze, understand, and refine your program.

Myth #3: Evaluation is too complex.

Some aspects of evaluation are complex and require professional assistance.

A well planned and carefully executed evaluation plan makes evaluation much easier. Evaluation is often feared because PIs lack the time, resources, and expertise to plan an evaluation. Most PIs do not have training in program implementation or may not know whom or how to ask for help. In practice, carefully selecting professional advisors - Internal and external - provides benefit and makes the evaluation process easier to navigate.

Myth #4: Evaluation is too expensive.

Funders recognize that resources spent on evaluation return higher quality programs.

"I can not afford evaluation." is a common initial reaction. Researchers who have experienced the benefit of well-planned and carefully executed evaluation understand how evaluation expertise improves a project.

In practice, carefully selected professional advisors - internal and external – provide expertise to plan achievable outcomes and generate realistic and valuable measures to build a case for continuing or new funding.

Evaluators add specialized training in education and outreach to a team of researchers and subject experts.