

SOME THOUGHTS ON PROGRAM EVALUATION

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Recently, in an online discussion among grant professionals, a question was raised whether there might be a template that could be followed to compose the section of a grant proposal that addresses program evaluation. Two or three individuals quickly replied that every grant proposal is unique and the narrative for program evaluation must be tailored to the specifics of the individual grant and client interests. To use a template for the program evaluation text would be doing a disservice to the client. The individual raising the question thanked the others for their response, and there the matter might have ended. However, one of your authors decided to enter the discussion with a different tack on the question. Below is the author's comment that was posted, and the discussion that follows in this white paper expands on our thoughts regarding what might constitute a "template" for composing text on program evaluation.

Comment Posted 4/29/13 by Bill Carruthers to an online discussion:

I will offer a bit of a different perspective [on the question whether there is a template for writing the program evaluation section of a grant proposal]. I agree, generally, that each evaluation plan needs to be uniquely developed for each proposal. However, I do believe that there are a number of elements that are commonly seen in evaluation plans...not all, but most. For instance, you may want to address both formative (aka process) and summative (aka outcomes) evaluation. What purposes will formative evaluation serve and what purposes will summative evaluation serve? While there are other approaches to evaluation, these are the two most common. You may want to explain how your measurable outcomes are "SMART" (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound). You may want to describe a set of questions the evaluation will address, the measurement instrumentation that will be used, the sources of data and time frame when data will become available, along with the output plan (what reports will be produced) and dissemination plan for sharing results of the evaluation. Certainly, you need to indicate if the evaluation will be conducted in-house, or if it will be contracted to an independent evaluator. Whether in-house or contracted, you may want to discuss the experience of the evaluators with this type evaluation or, if the evaluation function will be bid, then what evaluators you have available in the vicinity who may be bidders. You may want to discuss how much of the budget is being allocated to the evaluation so as to indicate that the evaluation is being properly resourced. And, there may be a need to discuss the model you are using for Goal(s), Objective(s), and Outcome(s) and/or Output(s). Regarding Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes/Outputs, it may be that these are addressed in a different section of the narrative but, if not, then they can be described in the evaluation plan. Also, I like to reference one or two evaluation "models" that are published in the literature so as to demonstrate that our evaluation plan is itself built on an established, research-based model. Long and short, while an evaluation plan should be constructed to fit each proposal, there are many elements to evaluation that are commonly seen in a proposal...and, there is a general logic for how to organize these elements in the evaluation plan. Regards...

In the comment above, the last sentence suggests that “...there is a logic for how to organize these [program evaluation] elements in an evaluation plan.” In the remainder of this paper, we will share our thinking about this logic, but first, some caveats:

- Caveat 1: It is true that every grant proposal is unique; the funding agencies are unique and the clients preparing the proposal are unique. Accordingly, there is no fixed template—if the term “template” is narrowly conceived as a specific piece of text that can be reused in different proposals—that will satisfy the requirements of each proposal and client interests. However, if broadly conceived, a template might be thought of as a loose collection of narrative elements that have particular significance for program evaluation. Selecting among these elements, and adding other material as appropriate, is a reasoned approach to developing the narrative for program evaluation.
- Caveat 2: The request for proposal (RFP) released by the funding agency for the grant program is the principle document that dictates how the evaluation plan must be written. It behooves the grant writer to follow the RFP closely, addressing the questions and issues about program evaluation raised by the RFP.
- Caveat 3: In this paper, we make no claim to being exhaustive in our coverage of the possible elements that might be included in a narrative on program evaluation. The elements that we discuss in this paper are ones that we find ourselves often writing, although not for every proposal or with the same reasoning or in the same sequence as we describe here.

With these caveats in mind, let us imagine a situation where the funding agency indicates that a narrative for program evaluation must be written but does not specify in the RFP any guidelines or criteria indicating how it is to be written. Maybe the funding agency indicates the program evaluation section will constitute 15% of the rating for the whole proposal—indicating this section is a significant part of the proposal. In a situation like this, we are left with deciding for ourselves what we will write about our evaluation plan and how we will construct our narrative. So, let us begin.

First, a few comments about our overall approach to writing will be useful. Generally, we like to compose our text in three sections: 1) Tell them what you’re going to tell them; 2) Tell them; and 3) Tell them what you told them. In this hypothetical situation, with the program evaluation narrative worth 15% of the grant rating, there may be two to three pages of text that we would write (depending, of course, on how much text is permitted for the entire proposal). With two pages of text, we would devote an introductory paragraph to provide an overview of the program evaluation text that will follow (Tell them what you’re going to tell them). Following this, the major portion of the two pages would be devoted to discussing the evaluation plan (Tell them), and a last paragraph would summarize what we’ve said in this portion of the proposal (Tell them what you’ve told them). In what follows below, we address the “elements” that we could write in our section on “Tell them.” These are elements that we have found to be common to many evaluation plans.

Element 1: It will likely be necessary to indicate what “agent” will conduct the evaluation. Will the evaluation be conducted by the applicant using resources they can draw upon in their own agency, or will the evaluation be conducted by an independent party that contracts with the applicant agency? While this evaluation “agent” might be mentioned in the management section,

it is in the evaluation section that we provide greater information on the agent. In our hypothetical situation, the RFP does not specify who should conduct the evaluation, thus we apparently can make the choice. In a situation like this, we generally encourage the applicant to consider an independent evaluation, reasoning that this approach may be viewed a bit more favorably by the reviewers. After all, the applicant can be expected to be biased towards their own project and an evaluation conducted by the applicant may not be as revealing as one conducted by an independent agent. Another factor to consider in making this decision is how much the proposal will be budgeted for—whether for a few thousand dollars or a few million dollars. The bigger the proposal, the more important it probably is to have an independent evaluator. And yet, there are variations. Even for a very large proposal, the applicant might prefer to budget for one or two salaried positions that the applicant will employ. Still, our rule of thumb is to think in-house evaluation for small proposals and independent evaluations for large proposals. Along with naming the agent that will conduct the evaluation—whether in-house or independent—this section of the narrative would also address the qualifications of this agent. When discussing qualifications, we like to emphasize legitimacy, competency, and experience. Regarding legitimacy, is the evaluator an established business, independent consultant, or department within the agency? Regarding competency, what skill set does the evaluator possess? And, regarding experience, is the evaluator experienced with the type of program evaluation being described in the narrative? Text written for Element 1 might be the first one or two paragraphs of the program evaluation narrative (following our opening paragraph devoted to “Tell them what you’re going to tell them”).

Element 2: Having identified the agent in Element 1, it might also be appropriate to describe how the evaluation will be resourced. If a portion of the grant budget request is to be allocated for the evaluation (e.g., to pay salaries for in-house employees or to pay an independent firm’s contractual fee) how much is being budgeted for evaluation? In our experience, we generally advise clients that an evaluation budget may range between 5-10% of the total budget. While many considerations factor into this decision, we have found this range to be common among others whom we know to be grant writers. A smaller evaluation budget, for instance 3-5%, might be appropriate for grants in the \$5,000 to \$25,000 range (3% of a \$5,000 grant would only be \$150 so there is clearly not much that is being “spent” on evaluation, possibly just mailing out a survey or producing a summary report); 5-8% might be appropriate for grants in the \$25,000 to \$1M range; and 8-10% might be appropriate for multi-million dollar budgets. At the 8-10% end of this range, the evaluation is obviously a significant aspect of the grant project and there may be many implications including difficulties associated with collecting varied sources of data, the sophistication of the data analyses, and the effort that will be made to widely disseminate findings of the evaluation. Element 2 may only need a paragraph of text, or possibly just a sentence or two and appended to the earlier paragraph(s).

Element 3: Having established the agent that will conduct the evaluation and how the evaluation will be resourced, it is time to turn our attention to the type of evaluation that will be conducted. We almost always describe two types of evaluations—formative and summative—and with very large grant programs might also describe an impact evaluation. Each of these forms of evaluation could be thought of separate elements, but we will keep them together here as Element 3.

- Formative Evaluation (also known as process evaluation). Formative evaluation focuses on how a program is being implemented. It describes how the program operates, the services it delivers, and the functions it carries out. Much like monitoring, the formative evaluation addresses whether the program is being implemented as originally designed (fidelity) and is providing services as intended. Formative evaluation is typically an ongoing activity, occurring throughout the period of program operations and typically involves qualitative forms of measurement instrumentation (e.g., interviews, focus groups, observations, attendance at leadership meetings, and review of program records, among others). Along with monitoring fidelity to the project design, the formative evaluation is also a vehicle for periodically organizing and providing feedback information on program operations—information that can be useful to introducing refinements and “continuous improvements” in the program. When changes are introduced to program operations, formative evaluation will explain why and how these deviations from the original design came to be. By documenting the program's development and operation, it allows an assessment of the reasons for successful or unsuccessful performance, and provides information for potential replication. Between formative and summative evaluation, it is our opinion that formative evaluation is the more important. We maintain that those in charge of implementing the grant project should be especially interested in learning what improvements they could introduce to their project, one of the purposes of formative evaluation.
- Summative Evaluation (also known as outcome evaluation). Summative evaluation is used to measure progress towards the goals/objectives/outcomes of the program and identify the results of a program's effort. It seeks to answer an overarching question, "What difference did the program make?", providing a statement about the net effects of a program after a specified period of operation. Summative evaluation typically employs quantitative measurement instrumentation (e.g., surveys, percentages, test scores, period of employment, change in pollution, etc.) so as to quantify change—indicating what has changed over the period of the program. Generally speaking, quantitative measures can be added, subtracted, multiplied, and divided. While formative evaluation addresses a question of how change occurred, summative evaluation measures the nature and/or amount of this change. The emphasis on quantitative measurement in summative evaluation often requires that objectives or outcomes be written in a numerical fashion (e.g., “Among participants in this program, there will be a 10% increase passing their final exam relative to baseline from the previous year”). The summative evaluation is conducted at specific points in time, when data become available, and results of the summative evaluation may be an important determinant of whether the program receives continued funding.
- Impact Evaluation. Impact evaluation is a type of summative evaluation that focuses on the broad, long-term impacts or results of program activities. Impact evaluation tries to evaluate the secondary and tertiary benefits of the program that may have been unintended, such as activity in this program has now led to X, Y, and Z new initiatives. Impact evaluation is most appropriate for multi-year projects and is usually completed at the end of the grant funding. A main purpose of the impact evaluation is to serve as an executive summary for decision-makers, describing the overall impact of the program and providing information on features that should be continued and/or changed to make the program more successful. Impact evaluation may include a cost analysis, describing the costs/benefits aspect of the program, make recommendations for future sustainability beyond the terms of the grant, and/or identify new avenues and resources to pursue for the future.

Element 4. By this point in the narrative, we have identified the agent that will carry out the evaluation, have indicated how the evaluation will be resourced, and have described the type(s) of evaluation that will be conducted. Now, it may be time to provide details on the outcomes that we anticipate impacting. Or, maybe not. Interestingly, the so-called measureable outcomes may have already been described in an earlier section of the proposal. A recent example of this situation was provided by the U.S. Department of Education. In the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) RFP released 12/31/12, one narrative section was “Plan of Operation” and one of the components in this section called for a discussion of *The effectiveness of [the] plan to attain specific outcomes that—(A) Will accomplish the purposes of the program; (B) Are attainable within the project period; (C) Are measurable and quantifiable; and (D) For multi-year projects, can be used to determine the project’s progress in meeting its intended outcomes.* Accordingly, this is where we detailed the measureable outcomes we hoped to achieve in the grant project. And yet, there was still another section of the MSAP proposal where we were required to describe the Evaluation Plan. Our purpose in relating this information is to make the point that the measureable outcomes are not one and the same as the evaluation plan. Rather, the evaluation plan describes the means by which the measureable outcomes will be evaluated. This is the summative evaluation that we described above in Element 3. However, we will pretend in this white paper that the evaluation plan we are writing does require a description of the goals, objectives and outcomes, and we will discuss our approach to creating measurable outcomes. In a separate white paper we will discuss our model for integrating and aligning goals, objectives, and outcomes.

First, it is important to appreciate that not every RFP will require a statement of goals, objectives, and outcomes. Some RFPs may only ask for goals and outcomes or maybe just outcomes. Whatever the case, there is typically a requirement to describe something that will be measureable—usually the measureable outcomes. (We once responded to an RFP from the Department of Defense that required measureable goals and, of course, that is what we wrote.) In this paper, we will refer to measureable outcomes, and these need to be written in a SMART fashion, although the acronym itself has dubious value.

Standing for Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound, the acronym SMART provides only limited guidance. Specific—sure, you want your outcomes to be specific, but that’s obvious, and the same can be said for Measureable. For example, possibly one of your outcomes is to raise students’ self-esteem. While self-esteem is a commonly recognized personality construct, is it specific enough for a reviewer to understand what you are trying to impact? And, how will you measure self-esteem? Your measurement problem will not be a lack of instruments as there are certainly hundreds of purported ways and means of measuring self-esteem. Rather, your measurement problem will be selecting a method that is suitable for your project, and one that has some degree of validity and reliability. So, we will argue that the S and the M in SMART don’t tell us much, but they can’t be ignored. More importantly, we do believe the A—achievable—actually contributes considerable value to the task of creating measureable outcomes. The difficulty of determining targets for your outcomes comes down to the question of whether these targets are achievable. Some applicants for grant funding will want to set high targets so as to impress the reviewers with their ambition. Other applicants will want to set low targets, feeling that the lower target is more realistic and may prevent a future possible problem

with the funding agency should they have set their targets too high and not be able to reach them. While there is no best solution to this problem, we encourage our clients to set “stretch” targets, something that may in fact be a bit higher than they think they can really reach but could be “achievable” under good conditions. We might even say this in the narrative—“Our outcomes are achievable and have been set to purposefully stretch our efforts to be ambitious and aim high.”

Having dispensed of S, M, and A, we now arrive at R for relevant and again we think this is rather obvious and possibly one of the least valuable letters in the SMART acronym. We will just say that we hope it’s obvious to the grant writer that your outcomes should be relevant to the grant project and applicant’s aspirations for impacting change. And, don’t forget, your outcomes should be relevant to the funding agency’s interests as well!

Finally, we come to T for time-bound. There is no question that it is especially important to identify the point in time by when an outcome will be achieved. This time will likely be concomitant with the time the data become available. For multi-year grant projects, it will probably be necessary to determine interim targets to be achieved at the end of each year, with the final target set for the end of the grant’s performance period. Possibly there are baseline data available from the recent period before the grant project began and the annual interim targets would be set to show year-by-year improvements relative to this baseline.

We don’t want the reader to think we take the SMART acronym lightly. The acronym does have its value, and we will often state in our narrative that we have identified SMART outcomes. In fact, it is not unusual for the funding agency, both Federal and others, to indicate in their RFP that they wish to see SMART outcomes. However, we do not find that that the acronym provides much guidance for how to actually write such an outcome. When we set out to write a SMART outcome, we like to use the following model, stating:

- Who is involved,
- What is the desired outcome,
- How progress will be measured,
- The target or proficiency level, and
- When the outcome will occur.

The outcome here is an example of how we follow this model:

- By December 2007 [when],
- 100% [proficiency]
- of kindergarten teachers [who]
- will demonstrate knowledge of reading instructional strategies appropriate for developmentally delayed children [what] as measured by a test of knowledge and observation of classroom instruction [how measured].

Being our own critic, we can point out that it’s difficult to achieve 100% of anything. Possibly, we have set an outcome that is not “Achievable” and we may want to consider lowering our desired proficiency level.

In summary, we would like to say about Element 4—addressing measureable outcomes—that there is the ideal and there is the real. In our discussion above, we are describing an ideal

situation. Space permitting, it would be ideal to be able to write all outcomes in a manner such as our example; however, the real situation that one often faces when writing a grant is that there are multiple outcomes the funding agency and/or the applicant require, and there is probably not enough space in the limited pages permitted for the narrative to fully detail these outcomes. So, we do the best we can with the space we have, trying to emulate this model as closely as possible.

Regarding space, we have devoted considerable space in this white paper describing measurable outcomes in Element 4 even though we have argued that these are not necessarily relevant to the evaluation plan. We have done so because leaving them out of our discussion may cause some readers to question how we could fail to consider the importance of having measurable outcomes defined in the grant proposal. In fact, we believe they are **very** (note our emphasis of the word “very”) important and are actually quite difficult to compose. In a separate white paper, we will write at greater length and with examples about our approach to goals, objectives, outcomes, and outputs.

Element 5. Here, in Element 5, we get to what we believe is the real substance of an evaluation “plan,” namely, how the evaluator will carry out the evaluation. Earlier in this paper, we set up the hypothetical situation of having two pages in which to write the evaluation plan. Writing text on Elements 1-4 may require us to use most of one page (assuming we were able to discuss the measurable outcomes in some other section of the proposal), so now we have a little over a page left for our last two Elements.

For Element 5, many years ago we reviewed the research literature on program evaluation in search of models for an evaluation plan. There is an extensive literature on program evaluation and many models are available. One that we found to our liking was authored by R. O. Brinkerhoff and others in 1983. In the 1990s, author Carruthers called Dr. Brinkerhoff and learned that his book was out of print, but Dr. Brinkerhoff kindly made a copy of it and sent it along; we have since adapted the model for use with grants. Over the years we have continued to adapt this model and don’t know if Dr. Brinkerhoff would recognize it any longer, but we still wish to give credit where credit is due. Accordingly, we often insert the following figure in our program evaluation narrative.

Adapted from Brinkerhoff, Brethower, Hluchyj, & Nowakowski (1983) ¹						
Evaluation Questions	Information Collection Plan				Continuous Improvement Plan	Output & Report Plan
	Methods & Instruments	Type of Data	Data Sources	Data Timelines		

Following this model, our discussion of the evaluation plan will provide details on each component shown in the image above.

- **Evaluation Questions:** We try to identify one, two, or three especially relevant questions that we wish the evaluation to address. Examples of evaluation questions include: What communications are necessary to reach a diverse population of parents, some of whom do not speak or read English? What inducements will be needed to maintain clients’ active

¹ Brinkerhoff, R.O., Brethower, D.M., Hluchyj, T., & Nowakowski, J.R. (1983). *Program evaluation: A practitioner's guide for trainers and educators*. Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing

participation in a jobs training program? How well is the program being implemented with fidelity to its original design?

- Methods and Instruments: Methods will include both formative and summative evaluations, along with other possible methods such as experimental design (e.g., randomized treatment and control groups, matched controls, case studies). Examples of instrumentation include the surveys, interviews, observations, and tests that we described above along with many other such forms of measurement.
- Type of Data: Generally, data are of two type: 1) Qualitative (ordinal or nominal such as interviews, observations, focus groups); and 2) Quantitative (discrete or continuous such as enrollment rosters, frequency counts, test scores). Often the distinction is blurry, for instance, with qualitative interviews having items such as multiple choice or yes/no responses that could be quantified.
- Data Sources: Teachers, Parents, Students, Clients, Job Trainees, Participation logs, Archival records, Website analytics, etc.
- Data Timeline: When will the data become available? Some forms of data change continuously and are available at any point in time (e.g., Website traffic, daily temperature) and other forms of data are available only at specific points in time (e.g., surveys that will be completed at the end of a training program, data from tests that are collected at the end of a semester).
- Continuous Improvement Plan: As we've stated above, we feel that it is very important for the program evaluation to provide frequent feedback to the project leaders on how the project appears to be functioning. Accordingly, when will this feedback be provided, what form of feedback will be provided, and what use will be made of the feedback? For instance, *"The project evaluator will analyze and report data at quarterly intervals, providing feedback to the project leaders for making modifications in program operations so as to ensure continuous improvement."*
- Output and Reports Plan: What outputs will result from the evaluation? Will presentations be made at conferences; will papers be written for publication; will reports be widely disseminated to key stakeholders, including as well consumers of project services?

Clearly, there is a lot of material that could be written for this evaluation plan if we try to follow the Brinkerhoff model, and the limited space that we often have in the narrative for this discussion will present a challenge. Just as we have bulleted these components of the Brinkerhoff model here, we may do the same in our narrative. And, with Element 6 below, we are at the end of our template for what to include in an evaluation plan.

Element 6. The last component of Element 5 above—Output and Reports Plan—sets us up to discuss Element 6—dissemination, replication, and sustainability. Most funding agencies want to know the applicant's plans for sustaining the project after grant funding runs out. Often, the question of sustainability is addressed in its own section, separate from program evaluation. However, if this is not the case, then some text can be written about the role program evaluation will have in providing guidance to the project leaders about sustaining program operations. Additionally, text can be written about the role program evaluation will have in providing guidance for replicating the project, either in other contexts within the applicant's agency or in settings similar to that of the applicant. Naturally, if replication is to happen, then there should be some discussion of how information about the project will be disseminated to other interested

parties—an activity that may be incorporated in the Output and Reports Plan noted above in Element 5.

In Summary

And thus, we complete our discussion of common elements that we often find ourselves describing in an evaluation plan—our “template” so to speak—and some final thoughts are in order. In this white paper, we have not tried to be all-inclusive—to address every conceivable aspect of program evaluation. To do that would take a book, probably two or three books, and it is not our intention to be so authoritative. Rather, it has been our intention to provide a quick discussion of some elements that are commonly seen in the narrative on program evaluation, and to generate ideas for your consideration when you next find yourself staring at the blank piece of paper and working out in your mind what you want to say about program evaluation. We hope this white paper has been useful, and invite you to follow *GrantProse, Inc.* at its Website (www.grantproseinc.com), through our newsletter, LinkedIn presence, and Twitter feeds.

Our best regards...BC & RL.

Keywords

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