

By Sonja Evensen

Hiring an Evaluator—Not Like Hiring a Mechanic!

Hiring a mechanic to fix your car? Easy. The problem and solution are

straightforward; the services are predetermined.

Hiring an evaluator to assess your education program? It may be intimidating or frustrating, and it is certainly not as straightforward. When do you hire an evaluator? What do you want the evaluator to do for you? Is your program broke, leaking, or running just fine? As a program manager, you may be required to hire an external evaluator, or you may sense the need for one. Then what? If you get nothing else out of reading this article, just remember to consult with an evaluator in the planning stages of your project and carefully consider whom you hire.

When should you hire an evaluator?

A common mistake is hiring an evaluator when it's too late to set things up proactively. If the evaluator is hired at the middle or end of a project, it becomes a cleanup job at best. When the evaluator is brought into the discussion at the early planning stages, he or she can help you to align your activities with your goals and objectives and come up with a data collection plan that best suits your program needs.

Knowing what you want from an evaluator will better prepare you to hire one. There are many different services a program evaluator can provide. It depends on what you want to shed light on, who wants to know, and how rigorous of proof is required of the results. Answering these questions first will help you.

What do you want to know?

Are you interested in doing a formative evaluation to learn how to improve your program and to make sure that the machinery is running smoothly, or have you developed a fine-tuned program to the extent that you are now interested in proving that it works? From an evaluator's perspective, it helps to know what phase a program is in. Do you want to know whether the program is implemented as intended? Do you want to know whether your program is reaching the intended audience?

Why do you want to know it?

You should consider why you are conducting an evaluation. Is it mandated? What does the funder want to know about it? Has your organization bought into the

idea of evaluating its programs? Are there particular aspects of your program you want to learn more about?

What will you do with this information when you get it?

How will you use the information to modify or make changes in your program? Are you likely to make changes in programs or policies because of the information you glean?

Whom is the evaluation for?

Is it commissioned primarily for the funders, or will it be shared with program staff or other stakeholders? This may have implications for the style of reporting.

How much time and money can you afford?

You and the potential evaluator can come to a common understanding of what the work should focus on, given the budget constraints.

How do you find the best fit?

It is best to agree on the details of the work, as specifically as possible. Tell the evaluator what he or she needs to produce, in what format, and what you hope the evaluation can accomplish. Try to ensure that you are asking for the right type of evaluation for the phase your program is in. For example, when you are just beginning to develop a program, don't ask for an outcome-based evaluation. One of your concerns should be to make sure the evaluation truly captures the essence of your program.

It is the evaluator's responsibility to "negotiate honestly with clients and relevant stakeholders concerning the costs, tasks to be undertaken, limitations of methodology, scope of results likely to be obtained, and uses of data resulting from a specific evaluation. It is *primarily the evaluator's responsibility* to initiate discussion and clarification of these matters, not the client's" (see American Evaluation Association [AEA] standard under Integrity/Honesty: www.eval.org/EvaluationDocuments/progeval.html).

At the same time, you should take the responsibility yourself to go into negotiations with as much information as possible and a good idea of what you want from the evaluator.

Please visit the newly formed Hawaii-Pacific Evaluation Association at www2.hawaii.edu/~hpea/.

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