

Tips for Finding and Working with an Evaluator

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YOU DECIDED TO SUBMIT A PROPOSAL... CONGRATULATIONS! NOW WHAT?

Tips for selecting an evaluator and including them in your proposal-writing team

FIRST, TALK TO YOUR PROCUREMENT OFFICE

- Can you do a sole source contract with an evaluator – or does it need to go out to bid?
- Is the answer dependent on the size of the contract?
- This is important because many evaluators will contribute evaluation text to a proposal for no cost, with the understanding that, if funded, the work will come to them.
- If you cannot select an evaluator at the proposal stage, advice for this situation can be found in this Evalu-ATE newsletter: <http://www.evaluate.org/newsletter/2015-summer-rqra/>

WHEN DO YOU BRING IN THE EVALUATOR?

- Contact us as soon as possible to start the conversation. Some clients contact me 6+ months in advance! This lets me put the proposal on my calendar.
- The evaluation plan cannot be completed until the project team has developed its goals/objectives/outcomes/activities.
 - We need to know what you are trying to accomplish and how you will accomplish it in order to figure out what we are measuring and what access we will have to measure it.
- Build in time to review the evaluation plan. If funded, you will be using the results of this plan as evidence of your project's success. It's important!
- Ideally...
 - 3 months out – identify evaluator.
 - 2 months out – define goals/objectives/outcomes/activities in draft proposal. Evaluator drafts evaluation section.
 - 1 month out – evaluator sends supplementary documents (biosketch, budget, budget justification, etc.).

FINDING POTENTIAL EVALUATORS

- Sources of evaluators:
 - Referrals from other PIs
 - American Evaluation Association's evaluator directory: <https://www.eval.org/p/cm/ld/fid=108>
 - ATE Central evaluator map: <https://atecentral.net/evaluators>
- Who is an evaluator?
 - There is no certification or credential required to be an evaluator.
 - Look for someone with...
 - Social science or education research background.
 - Evaluation experience. Do they have experience ...with similar projects? ...for similar clients (e.g., community colleges)? ...with the same funder (e.g., the NSF) or grant program (e.g., ATE)? (It's a plus if they have been a proposal reviewer for that funder.)
 - Skills that match your needs: qualitative, quantitative, etc. You might not know what you need yet, but if you do, make sure the evaluator meets those needs. All evaluators don't come with the same skillset.

SELECTING YOUR EVALUATOR

- Review resume/biosketch and call references.
- Ask for examples of evaluation reports or other deliverables, ideally on projects of similar size and complexity to yours.
 - Is the language clear?
 - Is this the type of report that you would want to represent your project – or could it become that type of report?
- Ask who will be doing the work.
 - Will it be subcontracted out?
 - If there is a team working on the project, how will the work be divided up?
- Consider your rapport with the evaluator.
 - Can you communicate well?
 - Trust your gut. The evaluator will be an important part of your team. You want to be able to speak frankly.
- For questions to ask a potential evaluator: see Evalu-ATE's "Finding and Selecting an Evaluator for Advanced Technological Education (ATE) Proposals" by Lori Wingate:
 - <http://www.eval-ate.org/resources/finding-evaluator/>

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN SELECTING AN EVALUATOR

- How “independent” does your evaluator need to be?
 - Can be in the same organization but a different department.
 - You and the evaluator should not have any supervisory responsibilities over each other.
- Does location matter?
 - Sometimes. It’s certainly not a requirement to have a local evaluator, but if you want in-person assessment, it’s less expensive if the evaluator lives in the region.
- Is lack of experience in your discipline a deal-breaker?
 - It’s nice to have, but it’s more important to have evaluation expertise. You want someone who can get the methodology right. We can bring in subject matter experts on an as-needed basis if we don’t have a background in the discipline.

WORK WITH THE EVALUATOR ON THE PROPOSAL

- Ask what we need from you: likely the solicitation, proposal draft, proposal timeline, rough evaluation budget, and the length you expect the proposal evaluation section to be.
- Request what you need from us: For an ATE proposal, this is likely the proposal evaluation section, biosketch, budget, budget justification, and current and pending support form (if we are a sub-awardee, rather than a consultant). Some PIs also request letters of commitment.
- Speak up!
 - Do the evaluation questions measure what you are trying to accomplish? Is there anything missing? Read them carefully. Think about how they relate to your goals, objectives, and activities.
 - Two primary ways evaluation questions go wrong:
 1. An evaluation question is unrelated to the project activities. This pretty much guarantees that we will not have positive evaluation findings. This is related to making sure you have activities addressing all the project goals.

For instance, a common culprit is “career awareness”. Proposals often include this as a goal but have no activities addressing it. If there’s no career awareness content in the project activities, the needle probably isn’t going to move on career awareness. I need to report on all of the evaluation questions; give me a fighting chance to give you positive results!
 2. An important project goal is not captured in the evaluation questions. As evaluators, we want to show all the fruits of your hard work. Make sure that the evaluation questions are comprehensive and reflect all that you are trying to accomplish.
- Review the draft evaluation section to ensure it contains all the required evaluation elements named in the solicitation. (Search the solicitation for “evaluat” to find these requirements.)

EVALUATION BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS

- Rule of thumb: 7-10% of direct costs.
- Can be more: up to 15-20%+ if research is included.
- Budget should be commensurate with the evaluation activities.
- Budget can be a sensitive subject. It's worth speaking frankly to the evaluator. If you have a small project, you might not need the Rolls Royce of evaluations. On the other hand, if you have a large, complex project, you will want to capture the evidence of your effectiveness across all your efforts, which takes a larger budget.
- If you need a smaller evaluation budget, speak up to the evaluator. Ideas to shave costs: shift the data collection responsibilities to the project staff (if appropriate), limit the number of data sources, and slim down the evaluation report.

YOUR PROPOSAL WAS NOT FUNDED. NOW WHAT?

Tips for continuing the evaluator relationship

- Inform the evaluator and share the reviewers' notes. We're always looking to improve, and the notes can be invaluable feedback for us.
- If the proposal development process was positive with the evaluator, **maintain the relationship for the next proposal**. Let us know what types of proposals or projects you are interested in developing in the future. I talk to a lot of people in my work, and you never know when an interesting collaboration idea might come up. Or I sometimes forward along articles or notices of funding opportunities to clients that might be a good fit. The more I know about the client, the more likely it is that they'll come to mind when something crosses my desk.

YOUR PROPOSAL WAS FUNDED! NOW WHAT?

Tips for working with an evaluator

- Start working on the contract and statement of work as soon as possible.
 - It often takes longer (sometimes much longer!) than you think it will.
- Speak up!
 - During the project... Are you adding or dropping an activity? Talk to your evaluator! We may want to evaluate the new activity or include it in our report of your accomplishments.
 - If you are responsible for collecting evaluation data (e.g., administering surveys), have you run into any problems? Let us know so we can help with solutions.
 - Reading your evaluation report... Did we get any of the details wrong? Are there evaluation findings that need additional explanation/context? Let us know so we can make sure your report is accurate.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY...

You aren't at the mercy of the evaluator, who will drop out of the sky to tell you how effective you are. This is a partnership! We're working together to make sure that the evaluation accurately reflects your project's impacts and to provide feedback to help your project be as successful as it can be.

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