Chapter 6
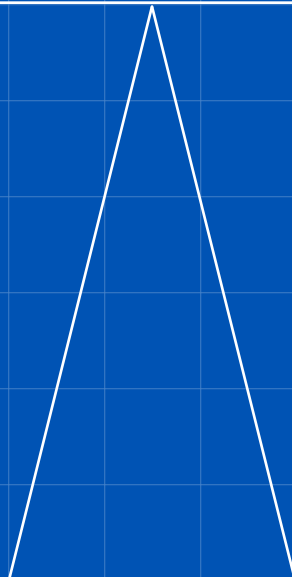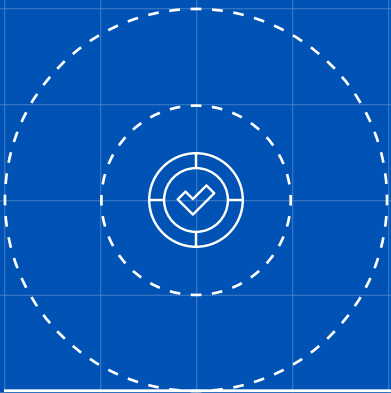
Leveraging Evaluation Opportunities

Why This Matters

Alongside establishing and adopting an evaluation policy, organizations should build their evaluation capacity. This chapter aims to equip governments with the necessary knowledge and skills to build related practices. The ultimate goals: enable evidence-based decisions, improve programs and services, and advance equitable outcomes.

The ability to identify and leverage the right evaluation opportunities is an important step in building your evaluation practice. Organizations that can do so are able to:

- align evaluation efforts and resources to focus on opportunities with the greatest feasibility and potential to drive equity;

- enhance the quality and usefulness of evaluations, ensuring they are aligned with strategic priorities;

- ensure evaluation insights are used to shape policies and practices, fostering a culture of learning and continuous improvement; and

- explore evaluation design and tools that embrace racial equity/equity as a core value.

These capabilities set the foundation for effective evaluation practice and capacity development. They also can help to make the case for continued investment in evaluations.

How to Identify Valuable Opportunities

Potentially valuable evaluation opportunities can arise for a variety of reasons. A program may be under political or media scrutiny. A federal or nonprofit grant funding stream may begin in one year, heightening the need to gather evidence of effectiveness to strengthen an application. A pilot program might be in its last year; evaluation could help ensure continued, long-term funding by a city or state.

To identify valuable evaluation opportunities, organizations should consider taking the following steps detailed below:

1   **identify goals that evaluations may support;**

2   **identify evaluation partners;**

3   **define research questions of interest;**

4   **select an appropriate evaluation approach; and**

5   **develop an evaluation plan**

Although the order of these steps may vary depending on an organization's context and starting point, all should be part of comprehensive evaluation planning.

Also keep in mind that if your organization has adopted an evaluation policy (see Chapter 5), it can spur the creation of a learning or evaluation agenda and serve as a touchstone for prioritizing individual evaluation opportunities.

Step 1: Identify Goals That Evaluations May Support

In conversations with teams across your organization, community members and other external stakeholders, you may consider:

Strategic Goals

Understanding these provides a clear sense of direction and ensures that any evaluation efforts are aligned with the organization's overall vision and objectives.

Equity-related questions:

- Are strategic goals focused on equity-related priorities?
- Do they represent viewpoints from across the organization?

Stakeholder Landscape

It is key to align your goals with the interests of stakeholders. For evaluation projects, the populations your organization serves are particularly important to consider. Also consider stakeholders such as community groups, academics and nonprofits that may have an interest in a topic. (See Chapter 3 to learn about how to engage community-based stakeholders.)

Equity-related questions:

- Who is your program currently serving? Who else could it serve?
- Are certain historically underserved communities more or less likely to support evaluation of the program?

Potential Impact

Finding opportunities that have a clear pathway for impact helps ensure that the evaluation will provide value for the department and, in turn, the organization. Reflect on who stands to benefit and how to avoid harm as you design the evaluation.

Equity-related questions:

- Would the evaluation adversely impact the community in any way? Would certain groups or populations be more impacted than others?
- How might the evaluation or its findings create harm and how can this be prevented?
- How will learnings be shared so they reach potential beneficiaries?

To begin identifying evaluation opportunities for your organization, see the exercise at the end of this chapter.

Step 2: Identify Your Evaluation Partners

Evaluation partners are the organizations or teams that you will work with to design and implement the evaluation. These could be:

- **program teams** that own and implement the program being evaluated. These internal partners will collaborate with you to provide access to information about the program, including relevant data and insights necessary for conducting the evaluation. The evaluation partner may also provide documentation, access to participants or stakeholders and other necessary resources.

- **technical partners** with expertise in research, data collection, analysis and evaluation methodologies. These partners could provide additional experience or capacity when designing or implementing your evaluation. They could be internal or external to your organization — for example, a local nonprofit organization, evaluation contractor or a university or college.

  For example, King County in the state of Washington often partners with Notre Dame University for evaluations (example here). The City of Washington D.C. often relies on The Lab @ DC, its internal data and evaluation shop. In Boston, a third-party research firm was hired by city partner Compass Working Capital to evaluate the Boston Housing Authority's Financial Self-Sufficiency program.

- **program participants and other community stakeholders** with an understanding of the realities of the program. Their input and engagement is critical throughout the evaluation process. It is important to ensure that these partners are empowered to bring the community's diverse experiences and perspectives to the table, and for evaluation teams to recognize the assets and lessons learned by these stakeholders.

> **CONSIDER**
> **Are Department Staff Enthusiastic About an Evaluation?**
>
> Staff interest in the work is a strong indicator that a potential evaluation will have buy-in when it comes time to execute the project. Departments who have embraced other forms of process improvement or innovation activities often make for good candidates for evaluation—they've already started the process of making a change!

- **other external partners** supporting the implementation of this evaluation. For example, funding organizations may have an interest in participating in evaluation design activities or ask for quarterly updates on the evaluation's progress.

Identifying evaluation partners should involve a thoughtful three-step approach:

- **first, assess your organization's evaluation needs and capacity to determine the specific expertise and skills required from a partner.** Consider factors such as their knowledge of the program area, evaluation methodologies and/or data analysis capabilities.

- **second, identify potential evaluation partners that fit your needs.** If this is a team, explore your professional networks to determine the appropriate contact person. Determine if internal or external partners (or both) will be most able to address your needs.

- **third, engage in scoping conversations with potential evaluation partners.** These are structured discussions you can use to build excitement and interest for evaluation projects, identify potential evaluation opportunities and assess partners' availability and capacity for a potential collaboration.

You may also choose to use more formal engagement processes, such as Statements of Interest, Requests for Information (RFI) or Requests for Proposals (RFP), to source evaluation partners.[18]

Step 3: Define Research Questions of Interest

Your team is now ready to begin translating what you're learning from scoping conversations into tangible research questions. You will use these to develop a research approach that aligns with emerging evaluation opportunities.

A good research question (1) describes exactly what you will learn from your evaluation; (2) clarifies what you will not learn; and (3) is written collaboratively with internal and external evaluation partners and, where possible, community stakeholders.

Spotlight: How the City of Tulsa Identified the Right Evaluation Opportunity

In recent years the City of Tulsa, Oklahoma has committed to building its evaluation capacity. Its first step? Identifying the right opportunity. To help prioritize various evaluation ideas, the City identified opportunities with (1) significance and clear benefit to residents; (2) department interest, capacity and resources; and (3) technical feasibility.

Ultimately, after discussing potential evaluation scopes with a few departments — and indicating a willingness to be flexible — the team was able to identify a standout opportunity: evaluating the Municipal Court Special Services program. This important program provides vulnerable individuals facing mental illness, substance abuse or homelessness with an alternative to serving jail time.

Evaluation showed that the program clearly benefits residents by lowering recidivism rates and incarceration costs. As a result of evaluating when and how referrals are made to the program, the team was able to recommend strategic uses for program funds, including improving transportation access to court to remove barriers to participation.
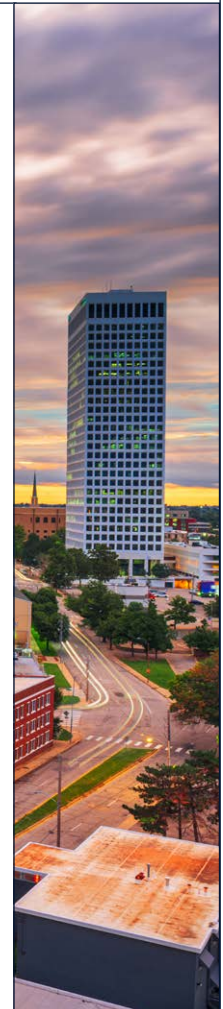
Research questions should address:

- desired sample, or the group of people from whom you are collecting data;

- the specific policy, services or program that you are studying;

- outcome, or what it is that you are measuring;

- timeframe, or the period of time you're measuring over; and

- what you are comparing or measuring against.

As you brainstorm research questions, keep in mind that evaluations should produce information that is meaningful, novel and actionable. Like the language you have incorporated into your evaluation policy, ensure that each evaluation is also feasible to implement.

- **Meaningful** Aligns with strategic priorities and offers a clear benefit for residents

- **Novel** Your evaluation gives you new information you wouldn't have had otherwise

- **Actionable** Your evaluation gives you information you can use to improve your service or policy, regardless of how the findings turn out.

- **Feasible** You and your evaluation partners have the resources (e.g., capacity, monetary), skills and time to conduct the evaluation.

Note that research questions can address both how the work was carried out (processes), as well as what results or impacts were achieved (outcomes). For example:

Process	- Was the intervention delivered as designed? Where there were deviations, what caused them? - What are the strengths and weaknesses of the process? - How accessible and accepted was the intervention approach? - Which aspects of the intervention were most utilized? - What considerations arose for organizational capacity, partnership or collaboration?
Outcomes	- What are the long-term effects of the intervention, both intended and unintended? - What type of changes occurred in participant attitude, beliefs or knowledge as a result of their experience? - What type of changes occurred in participant behavior? - What was the cost relative to the benefits? - To what extent did the intervention meet or exceed the stated goals? - What external factors impacted the results of the individual?

Importantly, your research questions will help you select a suitable evaluation approach. In other words, the focus and goal of the research directly relates to the method of research.

Example: The City of San Antonio's Research Question

San Antonio's Economic Development Department (EDD) launched Train for Jobs SA, a job program intended for people in industries who were disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The program had significant excess capacity, which EDD staff believed was due to lack of awareness. After initial scoping conversations, EDD identified the **project topic**:

How residents would engage with information about workforce services through different communication channels

Eventually EDD was able to refine this into a **formal, concrete research question** that guided their evaluation efforts:

Does distributing job training information to households that applied for COVID-19 assistance via postcard or SMS result in more calls to 311, three weeks after communications are sent?

Step 4: Select an Appropriate Evaluation Approach

Evaluation approaches vary by the types of questions they can answer, the resources required and the level of methodological rigor. The right approach for your evaluation project will help you answer your research question while striking the right balance between available resources and the rigor required for reliable results.

One evaluation approach isn't necessarily better than another — they're just different. Here is an overview of two important approaches: impact evaluations and process evaluations.

Impact Evaluations

Impact evaluations are used to assess program effectiveness in achieving its ultimate objectives or goals. They can help identify the causal effect of a program.

There are two main types of impact evaluations: randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental design. Both are applicable to public-sector work and accessible to those who are conducting evaluations for the first time.

Two Types of Impact Evaluations	
Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT)	**Quasi-Experimental Design (QED)**
• Aims to identify the difference between what happens, on average, to a group of people exposed to an intervention (or 'treatment') vs. what would have happened to that same group if they hadn't been exposed to it. • Uses randomization to create two or more groups of people who are comparable based on observable individual characteristics (e.g., gender, age).	• Aims to achieve conditions that are "nearly as good as random" when randomization or RCTs are not possible. This could be because you do not have control over the participant experience, or because it is not ethically viable to randomize. • Often used to conduct retroactive research (i.e., standards are naturally met based on how a policy or program was implemented). After implementation, researchers can identify whether the standards for a particular QED method (e.g., difference-in-differences, matching, regression discontinuity) have been met or not.
Requires: • Ability to randomize participants into treatment and comparison groups: some level of control is needed to execute randomization / assign individuals to different groups • Technical skills: data collection and execution of statistical analyses (e.g., t-tests, regressions) • Partners: to run an RCT, you will likely want to partner with an external expert (e.g., academic)	**Requires:** • Satisfying key assumptions: will vary based on the type of QED method and should be confirmed before and after running your evaluation • Technical skills: strong understanding of key assumptions, skills to validate them as well as handle data collected and execute basic to advanced statistical tests.

Process Evaluations

Process evaluations are used to answer questions related to the implementation and delivery of a program. As the name suggests, these evaluations focus on process. They can help you learn how a program (or part of a program) is running and whether it appears to be working as intended.

Five common dimensions that a process evaluation might assess include:

- **Fidelity:** Was the program implemented as planned?

- **Quality:** How well was the program delivered?

- **Reach:** Who received the program?

- **Acceptability:** How did participants react or respond to the program?

- **Adaptation:** What changes (if any) were made to the program during implementation?

Process evaluations typically combine different types of data collection and analyses to help answer research questions. Data can be both quantitative and qualitative. For example, the Seattle Department of Education & Early Learning conducted a process evaluation of the Seattle Promise Scholar Persistence and Advising Support program. It used both qualitative and quantitative data to understand program implementation, student experiences and short-term outcomes.

- **Quantitative data** (e.g., attendance rates, administrative data) are often helpful to answer research questions related to the "what" of a program, including its reach and fidelity. Data sources may already exist or involve a new collection process.

- **Qualitative data** (e.g., interviews, focus groups or observations) can help answer "how" and "why" something happens. For example, if you have a research question related to participants' perception of a program, you could collect qualitative data via focus groups.

Evaluations and Equity: Beware Biases

Any evaluation approach has the potential to incorporate biases, whether explicit or implicit. For example, measures might emphasize aspects of outcomes that are important to researchers over those that are important to community members.

It is important to consider the context in which your program is operating, the population it aims to serve and potential biases of those designing and carrying out the evaluation. As discussed in Chapter 3, engaging the community throughout the evaluation from design to interpretation of findings can help counter potential biases.

The following table details different types of process evaluations.

Process Evaluations: Three Types		
Light Touch	**Focused Evaluation**	**Comprehensive**
• May focus on a specific aspect of one service • Primarily uses one form of data (e.g. administrative data) • Research questions may be broad and exploratory • Seeks to gather information that could be used to improve program implementation in the future (e.g., reach)	• May focus on one service that is part of a broader program • Develops and uses several simple data collection instruments (e.g., survey, focus groups) • Aims to assess a few select dimensions of implementation (e.g., adaptation, acceptability)	• May focus on the full suite of services provided as part of a program • Develops and uses multiple data collection instruments to capture nuance in how services are tailored to different participants • Aims to assess multiple dimensions of implementation and may help identify opportunities for further evaluation

Learn even more about the evaluation methodologies that exist as you consider different process and impact evaluation opportunities (Theory Based, Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method) in [Results for America's Workforce Spending Guide](#).

Step 5: Develop an Evaluation Plan

Once research questions and an evaluation approach have been chosen, it's time to plan how you will design, implement and monitor your evaluation. This plan will help determine when the evaluation will be conducted and by whom.

Dive into the details, relying on the knowledge of your organization's experts to make sure that your evaluation is rigorous. Developing the plan may involve answering questions such as:

- **Who is included and excluded from our sample? How might this affect results?**

- **What data needs to be collected? How will it be collected, analyzed and reported?**

- **What might go wrong or prevent the evaluation results from being valid?**

Using a theory of change as the basis for your evaluation plan will set the stage for a successful impact evaluation. It will provide a clear framework of the program's elements from needs and inputs to outputs and outcomes, and guide the identification of causal pathways for an informed and effective evaluation process.

Note that developing an evaluation plan is an iterative process. You may need to refine research questions or exact outcome measures as you learn more about data availability, for example.

Also, different types of evaluations require different types of details. Whereas an impact evaluation plan may focus on data requirements, for example, a qualitative process evaluation plan may focus on developing focus group scripts. Consider developing a protocol to document important aspects of your evaluation.

Many federal agencies have published instructive examples of evaluation plans, which are collected here. Here are good places to start:

- **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's**
  Annual Evaluation Plan — Fiscal Year 2024

- **U.S. Department of Education's**
  Fiscal Year 2024 Annual Evaluation and Evidence-Building Plan

- **U.S. Agency for International Development's**
  Annual Evaluation Plan Fiscal Year 2024

A Learning Journey

As you take the steps detailed in this chapter, remember that building your evaluation practice is a continuous journey. With each evaluation, you will gain valuable experience. While challenges may arise along the way, approach them with a sense of curiosity and a growth mindset. Embrace the opportunity for learning and growth, knowing that with time and dedication, your organization can foster a culture of learning and make a lasting impact.

Ultimately, the evidence produced by effective evaluation practices should be used to improve programs and services and advance equitable outcomes. Evidence should also be used to inform key funding decisions — the focus of Chapter 7.

→ For endnotes, see the full policy guide here.

Exercise 6: Identify Opportunities in Your Organization

Use this worksheet to identify departments that may be interested in partnering with you to conduct an evaluation project. Then prioritize evaluation opportunities based on impact and feasibility.

Step 1. Brainstorm departments that may be interested in partnering with you to conduct an evaluation project.

What are some of the most pressing challenges departments are currently facing to serve residents? What are departments' current strategic goals?

	Name of Department and Policy, Program or Initiative to Evaluate	Strategic Goals
Example	**Dept. of Corrections / the City's Parole Process:** They have a new monitoring system for parolees and are interested in determining whether it's an improvement, and how it impacts parole period completion.	• Digital transformation • Modernizing corrections / administration of justice
Idea 1		
Idea 2		
Idea 3		

Step 2. For each idea, determine the following:

	Idea 1	Idea 2	Idea 3
VISIBILITY AND IMPORTANCE: Is this idea integral to achieving the leadership team's strategic priorities? Does the program to be evaluated serve a large portion of the population?			
POTENTIAL IMPACT: Is this an area of work where there is an identified need for improvement? Who is served by the program or policy?			
CAPACITY & COMMITMENT: Does the department have capacity to support an evaluation? If not, could duties be shifted to prioritize evaluation? Are department leaders and staff enthusiastic about an evaluation?			

Step 3. Prioritize ideas based on impact and feasibility.

Could this idea provide information that is...	Idea 1	Idea 2	Idea 3
meaningful?			
actionable			
novel?			
Is this idea feasible from a...	Idea 1	Idea 2	Idea 3
capacity perspective?			
timing perspective?			
technical perspective?			
Prioritizing Opportunities	Idea 1	Idea 2	Idea 3
Which two opportunities should you choose?			

→ **For endnotes, see the full policy guide here.**