Grant Writing for State and County Faculty: Addressing Accountability and Evaluation Concerns

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Agencies and people who administer grant programs are very concerned about how their grant funds are used. But evaluation is more than fiscal accountability. In addition to a detailed budget, a grant proposal should describe how program effectiveness and efficiency will be evaluated.

As our programs become more dependent upon grants and gifts, those who provide such funds will continue to become more concerned about such attributes - especially in a competitive situation where one proposal is selected over another. Evaluation should not be directed only at recording positive program results but should also assess the way a program is implemented and how lessons learned can be applied to future programs.

EVALUATION - NOT AN AFTERTHOUGHT OR ADD-ON
Evaluation needs to be incorporated into program planning at the very beginning. Too often evaluation is discussed only at the end of a project. Such discussions in program design help to identify possible impacts that can be monitored and measured throughout the life of the project.

PLANNING EVALUATION IS KEY
Most grant applications will not require a full evaluation plan. They will, however, require enough detail to determine what type of information will be collected and through what methods. The basic evaluation plan should consider:

- what information is important to collect over the life of the project (i.e., knowledge, skills, attitudes, and/or behaviors);
- how the information should be collected (i.e., surveys, focus groups, interviews, meeting questionnaires, etc.);
- who will collect the information (i.e., project staff or an external professional);
- the time frame for information collection (i.e., weeks, months, is it a one- or two-time comparison); and
- how the results will be communicated (i.e., report, newsletter, news releases, memos, personal discussions, etc.).

LINK EVALUATION TO PROJECT'S OBJECTIVES
An important initial step in program planning is to develop a clear description of what the program will achieve. The evaluation plan should describe how progress will be monitored toward achieving program goals. Clarity of program objectives and linkage to the evaluation plan are important.

It is also important to develop program objectives as measurable statements. For example, an agricultural program aimed at reducing excessive nitrogen application might have an objective that states, "More than 50 percent of the farmers in the project area will decrease excessive nitrogen application by 30 percent." This specific objective will focus on both the implementation of the program and the evaluation strategy on recording information that is central to the program.

INQUIRE AND ASK QUESTIONS OF FUNDERS
Most grant program administrators do not mind getting questions about application materials and procedures. It is also important to understand what specific information - especially impact indicators - the funding entity wants to know. While some funders will be content with mere participation rates, others will want to know about behavioral changes, economic consequences, or environmental impacts. Some may have general budget percentages that they recommend be dedicated to evaluation. Knowing whether the funding entity has specific requirements will help to determine the amount of time and budget to dedicate to evaluation in the proposal.

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IS IRREPLACEABLE
Getting ideas from the funding entity is important but it can also improve both evaluation and program implementation if members of the target audiences are included in the planning process. Asking farmers about what they view as important impacts of the program will allow gathering of that information. It will also identify the types of reports and information that should be communicated to program participants, both during and after the program.

CONSIDER DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EVALUATION

Program evaluation is usually a combination of formal and informal data collection processes. Formal evaluation includes surveys, focus groups, interviews, and systematic field observations. Informal evaluation may be based on discussions with the target audience, meetings, staff contacts, and case files. While formal methods are deliberate and focused on specific points, they usually take more time and are generally more costly than informal methods. It is usually more advantageous to stress formal evaluation procedures in grant proposals.

IMPACTS ARE DIFFERENT FROM INPUTS

Impacts of programs focus on answering the "so what" question associated with program accomplishments. Impacts are changes in the target audience resulting in social, economic, or even environmental effects. Inputs are usually descriptive information about the project, such as staff hours, numbers of activities, or participation results. As a general rule, inputs describe internal program implementation and are important in understanding how the program was administered. Impacts focus more on what happened as a result of the program and can include practices adopted, dollars saved, or environmental changes made.

Finally, most grant proposals do not require that all of the details concerning your evaluation be specified. It is best to focus on describing the overall approach, the level of information to be collected, the evaluation methods to be employed, and how the information will be used to improve future programs. Evaluation is not the central issue for most grant requests unless the grant is focused on evaluation research. Addressing that subject in detail in your proposal can, however, enhance your chances of receiving funding.