

The Evaluation Part of a Proposal Budget

Question:

How much money should I budget for an evaluation?

Answer:

The amount may vary according to the evaluation expectations of the foundation or government agency you are applying to. Two situations:

- The application guidelines specify a program and evaluation design that is based on research studies. The funder also suggests or states in general terms the amount of evaluation money that a grantee should invest. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau, which funds many demonstration project grants, expects applicants to build in an evaluation budget that is 10-15% of the total budget.
- You look at all the guidelines the funder provides, and you feel uncertain about what the funder expects. Some foundations, for example, expect fairly complex, research-based evaluation. For other foundations, it seems that a well thought-out but simple evaluation will be enough.

Question:

If the funder's guidelines are so vague that I cannot tell what sort of evaluation will be expected, how can I tell?

Answer:

It can help to recruit some help. A researcher can look at a funder's guidelines and usually identify what the unspoken expectations will be like. The question of how to find researcher-help will be answered a bit farther on.

Question:

Once I know what sort of evaluation will be expected, how much money should I budget?

Answer:

When a complex evaluation will be expected—

The answer may be easy if the funder indicates an expected amount. If you are applying to foundations that seem to want a research-based evaluation, draw on the federal government guidelines described above as a benchmark

for setting your own. Allocating that share for evaluation will indicate that you take their evaluation standards seriously. The 10-15% is only a guideline. Your evaluation plan may be somewhat less, or somewhat more, expensive. Be prepared to explain why.

When a straightforward evaluation will be expected—

It will depend upon your evaluation plan. For that reason, the answer to the question “How much money should I budget?” is included in the answer to the question-after-next.

Question:

What elements need to go into an evaluation plan?

Answer:

For complex evaluations—

1 – The funder will want you to see whether, or to what extent, you had the impact you hoped to have. In other words, plan to collect information that answers the question “Did it work?”.

2 - Almost all funders also will want you to document carefully the process of providing the program. The process evaluation indicates: What parts of your program plan went well? Where did unexpected challenges develop? What would you do differently if you had it to do over? How did the process determine the answer to the question “Did it work?”

For straightforward evaluations—

Part 1 above applies: Plan to collect information that answers the question, “Did it work?” The evaluation sections of winning grant proposals* will give you ideas of how the “Does it work?” question can be dealt with in a straightforward way. Those examples may help you plan an evaluation. You may decide that you want to assess your program process as well as your impact, or in some other way, you may want to do more than the funder seems to expect. In that case, you might describe and budget for a straightforward evaluation, and then say, “If funds were available...” and describe your wished-for evaluation and its probable cost.

*(If you live in a city that has a Foundation Center library, you will find a collection of examples there; for library locations, see <http://fdncenter.org>. Alternatively, the Foundation Center’s Guide to Winning Proposals has numerous examples and can be purchased from the Foundation Center if you cannot find it at a local library.)

Question:

When do I put the evaluation plan together?

Answer:

For complex evaluations—

Start thinking about the evaluation as soon as your project goals, and a process for reaching them, are decided on. An evaluation plan can be, and often should be, less detailed than the program plan. It is useful, though, to have a general idea of how you will run the evaluation (and it can help you estimate a budget). A good approach is to make the planning of the program, and the preliminary planning of the evaluation (such as what information will be collected, when and by whom) part of one process.

For straightforward evaluations—

The answer is nearly the same. Start thinking about the evaluation as soon as your project goals, and a process for reaching them, are decided on. A good approach is to make the planning of the program and the planning of the evaluation (such as what information will be collected, when it will be collected, how it will be summarized and reported, and who will have responsibility for each evaluation area) part of one process. This approach can make the task of estimating an evaluation budget a part of the overall budgeting chore.

Question:

How can I guess what the funder will want to see in my evaluation plan?

Answer:

For complex evaluations—

Again, think of the parts of your proposal—the “What we propose doing” part and the “How we plan to evaluate it” part—as two parts of one construction process. Your reason for the way you have designed a program needs to be more than common sense. In your proposal, there should be evidence from research studies to support your logic for the project design and also the logic behind your plan for how to measure your impact.

For straightforward evaluations—

Again, examples from winning grant proposals are likely to be your best aids.

Question:

But I am a program manager (or service provider); my skills are in areas such as the sound management of a project and working with people. How can I appear expert at putting together an evaluation plan?

Answer:

Here, too, it can pay to recruit some help, especially if you are applying for a grant that will require a complex evaluation. A researcher with expertise in your area of programming can help you back up your logic with research evidence. A researcher also can help with what often is a big challenge: How can you measure the impact of your program in a cost-effective, logical, research-backed way? Whether planning a complex or a straightforward evaluation, you may see other ways in which a small amount of help from a researcher would help you a lot.

Question:

Where do I find someone to help?

Answer:

You should be able to get a little help with proposal construction without being obligated to hire that researcher as your evaluator if you get the grant (see the document *WHY, WHEN, AND HOW TO RECRUIT A RESEARCHER-ALLY*).

As you look for help, look for a researcher who knows your general area. (For example, an expert in community development is not a good choice if you are planning an early intervention program.) An exception to this rule is if you want a researcher to look at a funder's guidelines to answer the question: What are this funder's evaluation expectations? Researchers with a variety of areas of expertise could have equal skill at reading between the same set of lines.

Question:

Isn't most of this activity a diversion of funding that should be going to meeting pressing social/economic needs? We're not academic social scientists!

Answer:

It could be, but only if you don't take control of the evaluation activities in order to make them serve your organization's long-term interests. Make those activities your own! As you plan for meeting the funder's evaluation needs, think about your own organizational development. What questions about what works and what doesn't, about program effectiveness or program management, would you like to answer for your own future planning and management goals? What management information and feedback system will make your organization a more attractive candidate for funders in the future? How can you show that you are prepared to measure and learn from any failures? Those questions ought to be part of the evaluation, for which you may be spending a lot of money. A program evaluator's job is to be a skilled navigator as you go through an evaluation,

but the pilot's seat belongs to the project and organization leadership. Also, be sure that, if you hire a program evaluator, he or she is thinking about your institutional needs and will give you an information/measurement system that contributes to meeting them.