

Why, When, and How to Recruit a Researcher-Ally

WHY RECRUIT A RESEARCHER TO WORK WITH YOU?

1. You want to check on, or improve the quality of, your organization's data-gathering system (see the document *WHAT IS A DATA AUDIT AND WHY WOULD I WANT ONE?*).
2. You want to advocate for, or to find funding for, a program approach that you are certain would be beneficial to the program participants. Your certainty is based on subjective impressions or anecdotal evidence. These forms of evidence have value, but you know that you could argue most effectively for the program's value if you could back your argument with theory and evidence from the research literature.
3. You are writing a grant proposal, and you know what you want to say about something related to research or evaluation, but how can you say it so that it will make sense to your reader? Recruiting a researcher to help with wording can be a good strategy. Grant proposal reviewers either are researchers or have learned a lot about how to think like a researcher. Consequently, you can get some lingo from a researcher-ally that will convey your ideas clearly.
4. You are looking at an RFP, and you see that your program design needs to be supported by "a thorough, high-quality review of the relevant literature."
5. You are looking at an RFP, and you see that your proposal will be judged on "the extent to which there is a sound plan for effectively evaluating" various aspects of your project, including the program's outcomes and the effectiveness of your strategies for having an impact. In this situation, you can feel certain that the grant proposal reviewers will be researchers.

Your researcher-ally, knowing how to think like a reviewer, can support you in several ways:

- Check the logic of your program plan. Your plan might include a cause-and-effect assumption that someone who knows the theory and research in your program area would think is an unsound assumption (even though it does look good on paper).
- Check the clarity with which your program plan's conceptual underpinnings can be seen. It is possible to have a completely sound cause-and-effect assumption that seems to be unsound because of the way it is described in writing. A researcher can suggest a way to rewrite an explanation so that, in a reviewer's eyes, the logic will shine through.
- Suggest a general strategy for measuring outcomes along with suggesting a way to describe the strategy in your proposal. You especially could benefit from a researcher-ally if the hoped-for outcome is a change inside the program participants (such as greater self-confidence or refined problem-solving skills), as is often true. The right researcher-ally has had extensive training in assessing the unseen.
- Suggest a workable outcome evaluation approach. Some funders assume that an experimental design (also known as a "randomized controlled trial") is the strongest evaluation approach. That is unlikely to be true in the program you are planning. Some reviewers privately advocate a "take the bull by the horns" approach in your proposal. Explain why a randomized controlled trial is unworkable, given the nature of your program, and then describe a well-thought-out alternative. A researcher can help with both the thinking and the wording in this area.

Needless to say, if your program plan contains any flaw, any poorly explained rationale, any unworkable element, or any area that easily could be improved upon, you would rather have your very own researcher-ally be the one who spots it, not a reviewer.

WHEN SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR A RECRUIT?

If you are applying for a grant that will entail an outcome evaluation, it is good to get a researcher in on the planning process at an early stage. Why are you planning an evaluation? Often the honest answer is "because we have to." If you are not being given a choice, then at least design a double-duty evaluation.

"What is a double-duty evaluation?" I hear you say. It is an evaluation designed to meet the funder's requirement and also to meet **your** needs. It will address questions for which you and your staff would like answers. It is designed to

yield data that you can use for advocacy or additional fundraising efforts. It is planned in a way that will make it as efficient and cost-effective as possible.

It is easiest to plan an effective double-duty evaluation if your researcher-ally

- can see and critique your program plan before the plan is in a final, unchangeable form; and
- can help you make evaluation planning a part of program planning, not a final step.

HOW CAN YOU FIND (AND AFFORD) A RESEARCHER-ALLY?

One strategy: Ask the members of your board of directors if anyone knows a researcher who might be willing to volunteer. Geographic distance is not a barrier to getting help when you are in a program's planning and proposal-writing stages.

If you cannot find a volunteer researcher-ally, friends or acquaintances in other organizations might be able to recommend someone. In addition, there are directories of program design and/or evaluation consultants at www.allianceonline.org/Provider_Search, <http://ec.umich.edu/evaldir/>, www.eval.org, www.idealists.org, and www.vendorbank.org.

Some evaluators will help prepare a proposal at no charge, but the "price" is an agreement to hire them as your evaluator if you are given the grant. Would you feel comfortable with that trade-off? This is an important question to answer before you look for hired help. Some service providers prefer to treat the proposal-shaping process like a blind date, enabling them to get a sense of whether they would want to have their researcher-ally in their organization's life during the months or years of a project.

If this describes your point of view, you might consider spending a modest amount of money on a modest amount of skilled research help with no strings attached. Just be sure to have a clear-cut agreement with anyone you hire about the maximum amount you will spend and about what the researcher will provide in return.

THREE CAUTIONARY PIECES OF ADVICE

All program evaluators are researchers. Not all researchers have program evaluation expertise. If your reason for recruiting a researcher is a grant proposal, be sure you are getting a researcher who has insight into program evaluation.

Also be sure that any potential researcher-ally has expertise in your programmatic area. For example, if you are planning a preventive intervention for parents and their infants, you do not want an expert in community

development interventions trying to compile a state-of-the-art literature review or derive a winning strategy for measuring outcomes.

Whatever route you take in looking for expert help, look for someone who will not fight you for the steering wheel as you plan and carry out your program and its evaluation. A researcher can be your skilled navigator through the planning and implementation of a program and its evaluation. There may be moments when it useful to put that person in the driver's seat for awhile. Over the long haul, though, the driver's seat should belong to you. Regardless of the nature of your programmatic area, it is safe to say: You work with your program participants as a respectful collaborator, not as a dictator. A researcher ought to work with you in the very same way.