

Frequently Asked Questions: Evaluation

Background

The following FAQs are intended to explain the evaluation requirements and CNCS's expectations for grantee evaluations. Additionally, we provide information for applicants and grantees to assess different evaluation designs and make some suggestions that can help both grantees and applicants to maximize evaluation efforts.

Evaluation Requirements

1. What are the evaluation requirements for AmeriCorps grantees?

As articulated in the AmeriCorps regulations [45 C.F.R. §§2522.500-.540 and .700-.740](#), **AmeriCorps National Direct grantees and AmeriCorps State Competitive grantees (with the exclusion of Education Award Program grantees) that receive an average annual CNCS grant of \$500,000 or more** must conduct an independent evaluation to measure the impact of programs. An evaluation is considered ***independent*** if it uses an external evaluator who has no formal or personal relationship with, or stake in, the administration, management, or finances of the grantee or of the program being evaluated. An ***impact evaluation*** is designed to provide statistical evidence of the impact of the program compared to what would have happened in the absence of the program (i.e. evaluations that include a comparison or control group). For further information on the requirements for an independent evaluation that measures program impact, see [Q3](#).

The \$500,000 threshold is calculated by averaging the AmeriCorps grant funding amounts over the last three years the grantee has received CNCS funding at the time of the re-competition. The \$500,000 threshold is based on CNCS funding, not the program's total budget with matching funds.

AmeriCorps National Direct grantees and State Competitive grantees with average grants of less than \$500,000, as well as all AmeriCorps Education Award Program grantees, are required to conduct an evaluation, but may use an internal evaluator rather than an independent one. An internal evaluation is designed and conducted by qualified program staff or other stakeholders, such as board members, partners, or volunteer affiliates. For further information on the requirements for grantees that have grants that average less than \$500,000 annually, see [Q4](#).

Evaluations of National Direct and State Competitive funded programs must cover at least one year of CNCS-funded service activity.

For information on how the evaluation plans and reports will be used in National Direct and State Competitive application reviews, see [Q9](#).

AmeriCorps State Formula grantees are required to complete the evaluation requirements as established by their respective State Service Commission. Applicants for State Formula grants should contact their State Commission for their grant evaluation requirements.

The AmeriCorps regulations can be found at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/ecfr>.

In summary:

| <i>If you are a...</i> | <i>The following evaluation requirements apply...</i> |
|--|---|
| State Competitive grantee with an average annual CNCS grant under \$500,000 | Internal or Independent Evaluation |
| State Competitive grantee with an average annual CNCS grant of \$500,000 or more | Independent Impact Evaluation |
| National Grantee with an average annual CNCS grant under \$500,000 | Internal or Independent Evaluation |
| National Grantee with an average annual CNCS grant of \$500,000 or more | Independent Impact Evaluation |
| State and National Education Award Program (EAP) grantee, regardless of funding amount | Internal or Independent Evaluation |
| State Formula grantee | Evaluation as specified by your state commission |

2. When should evaluations be completed?

AmeriCorps grantees must (1) submit an evaluation plan when they re compete for funding subsequent to their initial three-year grant award; (2) conduct an evaluation during the period of their second three-year grant award; and (3) submit a report of the findings from the evaluation when they re compete for funding (§2522.730). Therefore, in order to report on evaluation findings in time for their second re compete applications, grantees should complete the evaluation within five years of their initial grant award.

First time applicants for AmeriCorps funding are not required to submit an evaluation plan with their application and grantees are not required to conduct an evaluation during their initial three-year grant period. However, it is highly recommended that grantees begin the evaluation planning process during their initial grant period so that they have a strong evaluation plan and are prepared to conduct a high-quality evaluation if selected for funding during a subsequent grant award period.

Grantees who continue to re compete for funding beyond their second three-year grant award should continue to submit evaluation plans for the next grant period, as well as evaluation reports of their past evaluation efforts, with their re compete applications.

Grantees with an average annual CNCS grant of \$500,000 or more who have fulfilled the evaluation requirements and have completed an [impact evaluation](#) are not required to conduct another impact evaluation in subsequent grant periods. However, their subsequent independent evaluation activities should build on the findings from the impact evaluation and other evaluation efforts in order to strengthen the evidence-base for their program and make continuous improvements to the program. For example, subsequent evaluation activities may be designed to answer questions that arose during or as a result of past evaluations; conduct a cost-benefit analysis based on the impact findings; examine the relationship between components of the program model and the program's impacts; or test the effectiveness of the program when replicated in new communities or expanded to reach new populations. Grantees are encouraged to work with an experienced evaluator to identify evaluation

activities that will build on past evaluation findings and strengthen the evidence-base for their program.

Grantees with an average annual CNCS grant of less than \$500,000 who have fulfilled the evaluation requirement should continue to build on the findings from their evaluation efforts in subsequent grant periods in order to strengthen the evidence-base for their program and make continuous improvements to the program.

In summary:

| <i>If you are applying for...</i> | <i>The following evaluation requirements apply:</i> |
|---|---|
| Your <i>first</i> three-year AmeriCorps grant | You are not required to submit an evaluation plan with your application or conduct an evaluation during the three-year period. However, if you are planning to re-compete for funding, it is highly recommended that you begin the evaluation planning process during the first three-year grant period. |
| Your <i>second</i> three-year AmeriCorps grant | You must submit an evaluation plan with your application and are required to complete the evaluation during the second three-year grant period. |
| Your <i>third</i> three-year AmeriCorps grant | You are required to submit a report detailing the results of the evaluation conducted during the second grant period with your application. You should also submit an evaluation plan for the third three-year grant period that will build on the results of the evaluation from the second three-year grant period. |
| An AmeriCorps grant <i>beyond</i> your third three-year grant award | You must continue to submit an evaluation plan for each successive three-year grant period and a report with findings from evaluations conducted in previous grant periods with your application. |

3. What does CNCS expect of grantees that receive an average annual CNCS grant of \$500,000 or more and are required to conduct an independent impact evaluation?

If a National Direct or State Competitive grantee has received an average of \$500,000 or more per year from CNCS over the last three years prior to re-competition, they will be expected to conduct an [independent impact evaluation](#) by engaging an independent evaluator. The evaluation should provide statistical evidence of how well a program works and what effect it has on service recipients and/or service participants compared to what would have happened in the absence of the program. In addition, high-quality evaluations must be designed to provide evidence of a causal relationship between program activities and outcomes (45 C.F.R. § 2522.700). Grantees may consider using an experimental or quasi-experimental design, or compare program results with national/state/local data for a similar population. The external evaluation method should match the size, scale, and purpose of the program.

An impact evaluation should be guided by measurable and clearly defined research questions that identify the effect of program participation on program service recipients and/or service participants for specific outcomes. The research questions and outcomes should be identified in the evaluation plan. Evaluation plans submitted with re-compete applications will be reviewed during the grant review process and recommendations for strengthening the plans may be provided to award recipients. An outline of the

criteria relevant to high-quality evaluation plans may be found under [Q11](#).

4. What does CNCS expect of grantees that receive an average annual CNCS grant of less than \$500,000, as well as those that receive an Education Award grant, and are required to conduct an evaluation, which may be conducted by an internal or external evaluator?

Grantees with an average annual grant under \$500,000, as well as those that receive Education Award grants, are required to submit an evaluation that may be conducted by an [internal](#) or [independent](#) evaluator. These grantees are not required to work with an external individual or entity, such as a university or research firm. Instead, internal staff and other stakeholders can serve as the evaluators. Grantees are encouraged to use evaluators with training and/or experience with rigorous evaluations and may use an independent evaluator, if preferred. See [Q1](#) for more information.

In addition, while we encourage these grantees to use the most rigorous design feasible, they are not required to conduct an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation, unlike the requirement for grantees that receive \$500,000 or more. When selecting a study design, grantees should consider the various options and select the design most appropriate for the program. Grantees may opt for a process, implementation, or impact evaluation. However, CNCS strongly encourages grantees to build on outcome data collected through existing performance measurement efforts and implement a design that includes assessment of program outcomes and a study comparison group, which can help to determine whether outcomes can be attributed to the program.

5. What happens if a grantee does not conduct an evaluation that successfully fulfills the AmeriCorps evaluation requirements by the end of their second three-year grant award?

If a grantee has not completed an evaluation that fulfills the AmeriCorps evaluation requirements, they should detail the evaluation activities that they have carried out to date, along with any evidence that they have gathered on the impact of their program when they submit a recompetite application. The grantee should also provide an evaluation plan with their application that details their evaluation activities in the next grant cycle. The evaluation plan should be designed to fulfill the evaluation requirements.

Recompeting grantees should keep in mind that evaluation results and evaluation plans are a required part of the AmeriCorps funding process. If a grantee that is required to submit an evaluation report and/or evaluation plan fails to do so, CNCS will take this into consideration in making funding decisions. CNCS reserves the right to not consider an application that does not include the requisite evaluation report.

6. Why do the evaluation requirements appear to be stronger than in the past?

The evaluation requirements have not changed, but we are providing more comprehensive guidance to assist grantees in fulfilling the requirements. The requirements are central to CNCS's strategic goals and efforts to expand the use of evidence to make strong and informed funding and technical assistance decisions. These clarifications will also help programs identify areas for improvement.

7. For impact evaluations, is it required that evaluations measure the impact of the primary service activity on the service beneficiaries or the community? May these evaluations measure the impact

of the program on member development?

The regulations do not require that [impact evaluations](#) measure the impact of the primary service activity on the service beneficiaries or the community. Evaluations may measure the impact on service beneficiaries, the community, and/or members. CNCS strongly encourages grantees to conduct evaluations that will provide rigorous evidence of community impact and demonstrate that the program is an effective means to solve community problems.

Review of Evaluation Plans and Reports

8. What happens if a grantee that is required to submit an evaluation plan or report does not submit it by the due date?

Evaluation plans and reports are a required part of the AmeriCorps funding process. If a grantee that is required to submit an evaluation report and/or evaluation plan fails to do so by the due date, CNCS will take this into consideration when making funding decisions. CNCS reserves the right to not consider an application that does not include the requisite evaluation report.

9. What will CNCS do with evaluation plans and reports submitted with grant applications?

Evaluation findings will inform CNCS's consideration of the selection criteria and may be used to assess the strengths and weaknesses in the program. The evaluation also may be used for the purpose of clarifying or verifying information provided in the application proposal.

During the grant review process, CNCS will review evaluation plans submitted with applications from those **applicants that received an average annual CNCS grant of \$500,000 or more in the last three-year grant period** (for further information, see [Q1](#)). In an effort to help these grantees strengthen their evaluation efforts, CNCS will provide feedback on evaluations plans for those applicants that are awarded an AmeriCorps grant. Clarification of the evaluation plans may also be requested during the clarification process. For further information on the evaluation plan, see [Q11](#).

In addition, expert evaluators will assess the design, implementation, and outcomes of evaluations submitted by **applicants that received an average annual CNCS grant of \$500,000 or more in the previous grant period** (for further information, see [Q1](#)). Reports will be assessed both in terms of the quality of the evaluation designs and the studies' findings. These assessments may be used to inform CNCS's consideration of the selection criteria and for the purpose of clarifying or verifying information in the proposals. Refer to the Notice of Funding Opportunity for additional information on how the plans and reports will be used during the review process.

For **applicants that received an average annual CNCS grant of less than \$500,000 in the previous grant cycle** (for further information, see [Q1](#)), CNCS may review evaluation plans and reports submitted with the applications during the grant review process to inform CNCS's consideration of the selection criteria and for the purpose of clarifying or verifying information in the proposals. Refer to the Notice of Funding Opportunity for additional information on how the plans and reports will be used during the review process. Grantees that are required to conduct an internal evaluation will not necessarily be provided individualized feedback on their evaluation plan. However, CNCS will provide tools to all

grantees on developing an evaluation plan.

Evaluation plans and reports will also be used by AmeriCorps program officers when monitoring and supporting grantees throughout the grant term. This information will be used in three ways. First, to identify training and technical assistance needs and support to foster continuous improvement and identify programmatic areas that need attention. Second, to identify and share promising practices and models that merit replication. And third, to strengthen the evidence base for the impact of national service.

Evaluations are a vital tool that can help organizations strengthen their program and their impact. Not only can evaluations measure the impact on participants and beneficiaries, they can provide feedback on the extent to which program implementation aligns with the program model and whether impacts differ for different aspects of the program or different populations. These findings can provide data for improvement, adjustment, and future action. Grantees will have the opportunity to refine their evaluation plans post-award. CNCS will provide tools and guidance for developing and implementing evaluation plans.

10. What happens if a grantee's evaluation shows null or negative findings?

Evaluation findings are one way that applicants can demonstrate evidence of a program's impact, and as such may be used in consideration of the selection criteria and for the purpose of clarifying or verifying information in the proposals. However, applications with evaluations that show null or negative findings will not automatically be rated as unacceptable. Applicants should demonstrate how they have learned from the evaluation findings and made program improvements to address weaknesses. Applicants should also develop evaluation plans for the coming grant cycle that will build on the findings from the previous evaluation and help the program continuously improve. Grantees are encouraged to work with an experienced evaluator to identify how the evaluation findings can be used as a learning tool.

Evaluation Plans

11. What should be included in my evaluation plan?

Applicants should provide sufficient detail on the evaluation objectives and study methods, as well as plans for identifying a qualified evaluator and an estimated budget, in their application. All grantees will have the opportunity to refine and fully develop their evaluation plan post-award. Grantees are encouraged to cover the following elements in the evaluation plan submitted with their applications:

- A description of the theory of change, or why the proposed intervention is expected to produce the proposed results;
- Clear and measurable outcomes that are aligned with the theory of change and will be assessed during the evaluation;
- Concrete research questions (or hypotheses) that are clearly connected to the outcomes;
- A proposed research design for the evaluation;
- Qualifications needed for the evaluator; and
- An estimated budget.

Those applicants that are selected to receive a grant and are required to conduct an independent impact

evaluation (i.e. they received a CNCS grant of \$500,000 or more during their last three-year grant period) will be provided feedback on their evaluation plan. Grantees that are required to conduct an internal or independent evaluation (i.e. they received a CNCS grant award of less than \$500,000 during their last three-year grant period) will not necessarily be provided individualized feedback on their evaluation plan. All grantees will have the opportunity to refine their evaluation plans. CNCS will provide tools and guidance for developing and implementing evaluation plans.

When fully developed, an evaluation plan would include the following components:

- I. Introduction
 - a. Program Background and Problem Definition
 - b. Overview of Prior Research
- II. Program Theory, Logic Model and Outcomes of Interest
- III. Research Questions to be Addressed in the Study
- IV. Study Components
 - a. Evaluation Design, including a rationale for the design selected, an assessment of its strengths and limitations, and a description of the process and/or impact assessment components
 - b. Sampling Methods, Measurement Tools, and Data Collection Procedures
 - c. Analysis Plan
- V. Internal Review Board (IRB) Clearance (if applicable)
- VI. Evaluator Qualifications
- VII. Reporting Results, Timeline and Budget

12. Are AmeriCorps grantees required to submit evaluation instruments to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)?

No. These requirements apply only to Federal Executive Departments and agencies, branches of the military and other establishments of the Executive Branch of the federal government.

13. How much should I budget for evaluation?

The cost of evaluations vary widely and will depend on the type of study design, the size of the study, the level of expertise and experience of the evaluator, and data collection expenses. The more rigorous the level of evidence the evaluation is designed to provide or detect, the higher the evaluation costs are likely to be. For example, random control trials (RCTs), which use an experimental study design, tend to be more expensive than other evaluations, but also tend to yield the highest level of valid and rigorous evidence.

14. Where can I locate an independent evaluator and what should be the selection criteria for choosing one?

Universities are good sources for evaluators. Peers and state service commissions may be able to provide recommendations or a list of college and university contacts that have evaluation expertise. National conferences can also be excellent sources for referrals to evaluators. There are many entities dedicated to conducting program evaluations and these typically have the breadth and depth of expertise and resources

to carry out rigorous evaluations. The American Evaluation Association website provides a list of research firms/evaluators available by state.

Evaluator qualifications are critical to a successful evaluation that will improve the program's level of evidence. Here are some criteria to consider when selecting an evaluator:

- Years of experience
- Successful completion of similar types of evaluations for similar social service programs
- Experience in evaluating similar types of programs in similar settings
- Capacity and/or access to other resources necessary to manage the scale and scope of the evaluation (e.g. staff has the time to commit to the project; the organization has the resources to collect and analyze breadth of data needed)
- References from previous clients
- Absence of investment in the program to be evaluated; independence is essential to avoid potential or perceived bias on the part of the evaluator.

In planning for an evaluation, grantees should identify the qualifications required for the evaluator and then assess potential evaluators on the extent to which their previous experience and training provide them with the background necessary to meet those qualifications. When selecting an evaluator, grantees should also consider any potential conflicts of interest. For example, there is potential and perceived conflict of interest if the evaluator played a role in designing the program, or if the person supervising the evaluator is connected to the program in some way.

Other Questions on Evaluations

15. What is the relationship between performance measurement and evaluation?

Performance measurement is the process of systematically and regularly collecting and monitoring data related to the direction of observed changes in communities, participants (members), or end beneficiaries receiving program's services. While there are different types of evaluation (e.g. context, process, implementation, outcome and impact), evaluation, as defined by the AmeriCorps regulations, is a more in-depth, rigorous effort that is designed to measure the impact of programs. Performance measurement and evaluation both include systematic data collection and measurement of progress; however, an evaluation that is designed to measure impact uses scientifically-based research methods to assess the effectiveness of programs by comparing the observed program outcomes with what would have happened in the absence of the program.

Data collected through performance measurement can serve as preliminary evidence for an evaluation and the logic model and measures that serve as the basis for performance measurement activities can also serve as the basis for the evaluation.

For example: a reading tutoring program identifies the need and a theory of change for addressing that need, e.g. students are reading below grade level and the tutoring program can help them achieve reading success. The program develops performance measures and identifies a primary outcome to measure their ability to address the need, e.g. the primary outcome is to have students reading at or above grade level by the end of one year. The program tests students' reading ability as part of their *performance measurement* activities and gathers evidence of the extent to which the students who participate in the tutoring program improve their reading ability and are reading at grade level after one year. The program then designs an

evaluation that will allow them to compare the outcomes for the students who participate in the tutoring program with a similar group of students that does not receive the tutoring services. By comparing the outcomes for the two groups, the evaluation can determine whether the students' improved reading skills can actually be attributed to the tutoring program and not to other factors, such as regular reading improvement or classroom instruction. The greater the capacity of the evaluation to control for the differences between the students who receive tutoring and the comparison group and their experiences (outside of participation in the tutoring program), the stronger the case can be made that the improvement in tutored students' reading ability, when compared to the other group, was the direct result of the tutoring program.

Additional information on how evaluation differs from performance measurement can be found in the AmeriCorps regulations [45 C.F.R. § 2522.700](#).

16. Are multi-site grantees expected to perform a multi-site evaluation and compare findings to national data?

CNCS recommends that multi-site grantees evaluate a representative sample of operating sites, if not all of the sites. If a sample of sites are selected, the evaluation results should articulate how the results can be generalized to the other sites, and describe any key elements in variation (e.g. operations, size, type of location, program activity) among the included and excluded sites. The most important factors are that the sites chosen for evaluation are appropriate within the context of the evaluation design and methodology, and can serve as a representative sample for all of the program sites.

17. For grantees that serve as umbrella organizations for many different types of service activities (e.g. support mentoring, health, public safety, and environmental programs), what should they evaluate?

Several factors may be considered in deciding which type of service activities should be evaluated and how they should be evaluated. For example, grantees may want to focus on the primary service activity. In addition, grantees should consider program maturity, preliminary evidence of effectiveness, and the feasibility of conducting a high quality evaluation for the different types of service activities. Grantees that support multiple types of service activities may want to work with their evaluator to determine what to evaluate. If grantees have multiple and very different performance measures, they may want to evaluate elements that are common to all the service programs, such as volunteer leveraging or capacity-building results.

18. Are organizations that receive CNCS funding from more than one type of funding (i.e. AmeriCorps State, AmeriCorps National Direct, VISTA, or Social Innovation Fund) to fund more than one program required to conduct separate evaluations for each program?

Organizations are required to evaluate each of the programs, in accordance with the evaluation requirements of the CNCS program that funds that program. Depending on the characteristics of the organization and programs, it may be possible for the grantees to develop a single evaluation design capable of assessing more than one program. In addition, it is possible that part of the evaluation requirements may be covered if one or more of the programs have been included in a national or a statewide evaluation. If an individual program receives more than one type of funding, grantees may work with their state service commission and/or CNCS program officer to determine if a separate

evaluation is required.

19. How does the language in [§2522.710](#) of the regulations, which states that CNCS may “supersede these requirements with an alternative evaluation approach, including one conducted by the Corporation at the national level,” apply to the evaluation requirements?

CNCS’s Office of Research and Evaluation undertakes national grantee evaluations. Grantees who participate in these evaluations may meet the evaluation requirements through their participation. CNCS will notify grantees of such national evaluation efforts as they emerge. We encourage programs to participate if invited to do so. Due to resource constraints, most CNCS evaluation studies will focus on certain types of programs. For example, CNCS may be interested in conducting a study of mentoring programs, and only a nationally representative or random sample of programs conducting these activities may be asked to participate in the study.

If a program participates in a national evaluation conducted by CNCS, that program may be exempt from the requirement to provide an internal or independent evaluation for the next grant cycle if the evaluation provides findings that fulfill the grantee’s evaluation requirements. The program should describe its participation in the national evaluation when presenting their evaluation plan for that grant cycle. Results must be disaggregated by program to ensure consistency across the entire national portfolio, although those individual results are not always made public, due to confidentiality constraints. Nevertheless, the program is required to submit its evaluation results as part of their re-compete application in order to meet the evaluation requirement.

For State Commissions

20. Does participation in a statewide evaluation fulfill the evaluation requirements?

If a program participates in a statewide evaluation, that program may be exempt from the requirement to provide an internal or independent evaluation for the next grant cycle if the evaluation provides findings that fulfill the grantee’s evaluation requirements. The program should describe its participation in the statewide evaluation when presenting their evaluation plan for that grant cycle. Results must be disaggregated by program to ensure consistency across the entire state portfolio, although individual results may not be made public due to reasons of confidentiality. Nevertheless, the program is required to submit its evaluation results as part of its re-compete application in order to meet the evaluation requirements.

21. Is a state commission required to submit the evaluations for its formula programs to CNCS?

No. However, CNCS is very interested in developing best practices in evaluation design and implementation. If a state commission has an example of a strong evaluation from a formula grantee that they would like to share with CNCS, we encourage them to do so.

22. What role should AmeriCorps Program Officers play in the development of state commissions’

evaluation policies?

State commissions are expected to establish their own evaluation policies for their formula portfolios. They are encouraged to confer with their CNCS program officer when developing the evaluation policy.

23. When a commission submits a former formula program to CNCS as a state competitive application, is the application required to include an evaluation plan and/or report?

The requirements for a former formula program that is submitted as a competitive application depends on whether the program submitted for competitive funding satisfies CNCS's definition of "same project." (45 C.F.R. § 2522.340)

If the program submitted for competitive funding is considered the same project as the formula program, then the applicant must include an evaluation plan with the application and conduct an evaluation during the three-year competitive grant period that will fulfill the relevant evaluation requirements, as outlined in [Q1](#). If the applicant has already completed an evaluation that fulfills the relevant evaluation requirements, the applicant should include an evaluation report that details the study and its findings. In addition, the applicant must provide a plan that outlines the evaluation activities for the next grant period that will build on the findings from the previous evaluation efforts in order to strengthen the evidence-base for their program and make continuous improvements to the program. See [Q2](#) for further details.

If the program submitted for competitive funding does not satisfy the definition of "same project," the application is considered new and the applicant will not be required to submit an evaluation plan or report with the application for competitive funding. However, if the applicant recompetes for competitive funds for a subsequent grant period, they are required to submit an evaluation plan and conduct an evaluation that fulfills the evaluation requirements outlined in [Q1](#) during the subsequent grant period.

A program will be considered the "same project" if CNCS cannot identify a meaningful difference between the two programs based on a comparison of the following characteristics, among others: :

- a) The objectives and priorities;
- b) The nature of the services provided;
- c) The program staff, participants, and volunteers involved;
- d) The geographic locations in which the services are provided;
- e) The populations served; and
- f) The proposed community partnerships.