Project Excellence:
A Project Evaluation Partnership

Michigan State University
Office of Rehabilitation and Disability Studies

Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth
Rehabilitation Services

Project Evaluation Training Guide for MRS Grants Program Applicants and Recipients

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Partnership Definition

The mission of Project Excellence at Michigan State University's Office of Rehabilitation and Disability Studies is to collaborate with Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) to enhance its program evaluation and outcome measurement processes. The overall objective of the partnership project is to conduct data summary, analysis, and reporting activities related to MRS case service processes. In addition, MRS seeks consultation from Project Excellence when specific functions warrant support, including evaluation of MRS grants.

Project Evaluation Training Guide Overview

In context to its Grants Program, MRS has asked Project Excellence to provide a training guide to all parties interested in submitting a grant application, as well as current grantees. The purpose of this training guide is twofold: 1) to inform any person or organization on methods for crafting a project evaluation design, and 2) to assist any person or organization in meeting the project evaluation and reporting requirements outlined below (found on page 11 of the RFA):

All grantees are responsible for project evaluation and reporting. At a minimum, this requires narrative reports on progress in meeting project objectives and fiscal reports on expenditures. These reports are submitted to the MRS manager on a quarterly basis, culminating with a final, year-end report. The signature of the MRS manager or designee indicates agreement with the report on progress of the grant project.

The grant application must include plans for periodic and/or final evaluation reports. Grantees are expected to disseminate any resulting project information or evaluation reports that would be useful to, or replicable, in other communities.

The objectives of this training guide are the following:

1. **To present a framework for project evaluation**

2. **To define important concepts (e.g., Process Evaluation, Outcome Evaluation, Evaluation Measures) related to a project evaluation process**

3. **To describe inherent challenges to project evaluation**

This training guide is also available as an on-line resource. Interested parties are invited to visit http://www.michigan.gov/mrs and scroll down the page to the Disability Resources section to access the training information. Contact Paula Brzezinski at 517-335-5887 if you encounter difficulties with accessing the website.

Project Evaluation Training Guide

A Framework for Project Evaluation

Project evaluation, in practice, assists a person or group in making decisions about improving a project, program, or policy established by an organization. Funders of grants often require a project evaluation component so that information gained from the evaluation can be used to examine the effectiveness of models of service and advance knowledge in the field (Weiss, 1998). The type of evaluation you choose to undertake to evaluate a project depends on what you want to learn about the project. For example, do you want to validate that you are doing or what you think you are doing? Do you want to identify project strengths and limitations in order to improve effectiveness and efficiency? Do you want to produce data or verify results that can be used for marketing services in the community?

Evaluation does not in itself prove the success or failure of a project; rather, it generates information to decide if the project is useful to a particular set of clients or consumers. McNamara (2004) proposes that the practice of project evaluation encourages an organization to remain open to continuing feedback and adjustments in programming efforts.

It often helps to think of your projects in terms of inputs, process, and outcomes (Bolton, 2001). An **input** describes the characteristics of a particular person or consumer of project services. These characteristics may include demographic characteristics, functional capacities, interests, skills, intelligence, vocational aptitudes, work experience, and medical/cultural/psychological factors that affect the needs of the individual. The **process** depicts how the project is carried out. For example, what are the individualized services received by an individual as a result of participating in the project? These services likely reflect the project structure of the organization. **Outcomes** illustrate the benefits or acquired changes in consumers that have resulted from involvement in your project. These benefits or changes may be things like competitive employment or days from admissions to placement.

Important Concepts

There are important concepts to understand when performing project evaluation. Concepts such as: process evaluation, outcome evaluation, measurement, report writing, use of findings, and replication provide evidence of the project's progress and achievements. Evidence is provided in both quantitative and qualitative terms, meaning an organization will provide evaluation information via concrete data and by way of descriptions of experiences or developments in the project.

Process Evaluation

Process evaluation is the collection of data that describe, measure, and monitor the methods and procedures through which your project achieved it outcomes, even when things did not go as planned (Kiernan, 2004). Typically, progress reports are generated quarterly to indicate the extent to which project objectives have been achieved, what barriers have been encountered, or what changes may be needed to better align with project objectives.

As stated in the MRS project evaluation narrative, "applicants must describe how they will track and document progress in implementing the project" (see Appendix, p. 11). For example, who will review demographic (input) or performance (outcome) reports? How often will such reports be reviewed? Evaluating your process by addressing questions such as these will assist in keeping your project in alignment with its stated objectives.

Outcome Evaluation

An outcome evaluation facilitates your asking if your organization is really doing the right project activities to bring about the outcomes you believe to be needed by your consumers (McNamara, 2004). Specifically, an organization that completes an outcome evaluation will ask:

- What was learned from the project?
- What objectives were met? (e.g., number of clients served, timeliness of service)
- What worked and what did not?
- Were participants' needs addressed/met?

The Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF, 2002) encourages those involved with project evaluation to think of outcome evaluation in terms of project effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction. Bolton (2001) states that rehabilitation is effective when the process/intervention established for project participants yields expected short-term or long-term positive outcome, and it is efficient when the outcome can justify the extent of investment in the process/intervention (cost-benefit).

When formulating an evaluation plan, you will want to start by reviewing your project goals and objectives in response to your audience (i.e., funders, members within the organization, community leaders, employers). While your goals will define the overall purpose behind the project, your objectives will direct the activities you choose to undertake. When writing objectives, you will want to keep these five standards for creating focused, concrete, short-range objectives in mind:

1. Provide a direction of change
2. Describe how much change is desired
3. Describe what you are trying to change
4. Provide information about who is affected by the change
5. Offer when the change will occur

For example, if one of your objectives is to increase independent living skills of project participants, then you will perform activities that align with meeting this objective (e.g., offer a 2-hour skills class once a week, for a month). In project evaluation, you want to quantify your objectives so that these can be measured as outcomes. In the example above, project evaluators would ask (of course keeping in mind what the audience wants to know), "To what extent did project participants' independent living skills increase after attending the weekly skills class for one month?" Independent living skills (outcome) can be measured and the project will gain knowledge about the effectiveness and efficiency of the skills class (process) for program participants (input).

In another example, suppose your project has as one of its objectives to maximize placement and job retention of project participants. When designing the evaluation plan, you want to think about how you will measure the results and achievements for participants (effectiveness), the timeliness of services/cost-benefit ratios (efficiency), and the participants' feelings about services they have received (satisfaction). For each project objective, you want to identify a measure of outcome that can inform you whether you are meeting, and to what extent you are meeting, your project objective. Table One illustrates how one identifies outcome measures in relation to project objectives:

Table One
CARF (2002) Example of Connecting Objectives to Outcome Evaluation

Project Objective	**Effectiveness Outcome Measure**	**Efficiency Outcome Measure**	**Satisfaction Outcome Measure**
Maximize job placement	Percentage of participants placed in jobs	Percentage of participants placed within 90 days	Percentage of participants who give high satisfaction rating
Maximize participant job retention	Percentage of participants maintaining job for more than 60 days	Cost per participant receiving services	Participant satisfaction regarding job is at or above a 4, on a scale of 1 to 5

<u>Measurement/Evaluation Measures</u>

Measurement is the process of assigning numbers or labels to objects of interest in order to characterize a phenomenon (Singleton, Straits and Straits, 1993; Weiss, 1998). Such characterization becomes the "data" that quantifiably or qualitatively describe an item of interest. For example, if an organization wants to know whether consumers were satisfied with their experience in the project, the organization would develop a questionnaire (quantitative) or run a focus group (qualitative) to determine levels of satisfaction.

“What measures to use” and “how many measures to use” are often asked questions in project evaluation. While there is no rule-of-thumb, restraint is needed to more adequately/efficiently understand whether your project objectives have been fulfilled. Table Two, on page 8, illustrates typical ways in which measurement is carried out, as well as the advantages and challenges of each approach.

It is important to select measures that document evidence of reliability and validity (Frankel and Wallen, 2000). The measure needs to be stable and consistent with the construct it is measuring (reliable) and it needs to show goodness-of-fit between the operational definition and the construct it claims to measure (valid).

Report Writing/Use of Findings

When data collection and analysis of data are complete, a report of findings is written. At its most basic level, findings should be used to inform your organization about what changes are needed in project design and operation.

It is important to share results with funders, members within the organization, community leaders, and additional stakeholders of interest. The purpose of the report is to indicate what the project accomplished, it may compare results to what you expected, and/or it may provide a description of the project’s experiences, strengths, and limitations (McNamara, 2004). The report should provide conclusions about whether project objectives were fulfilled and offer recommendations for improving the project.

Typically, an executive summary is presented first and provides the reader with a rapid overview of findings (Weiss, 1998). Many people will read only the executive summary, so select and present the most important findings and simply explain evidence that supports the conclusions you made.

Reports are only one way to use/share the findings. Other ways of dissemination include: discuss the results with practitioners in the organization, present evaluation findings at state or national conferences, submit an article to the newspaper or other mass-media outlet, gain a personal interview with a policy maker, and/or provide a written summary to a related organization’s newsletter.

Replication

When you document and disseminate findings, you are inviting interested parties to replicate the project in other communities. Results that are replicated can lead to stronger inferences across settings, thus providing professional confidence that the project does work (Schafer, 2001).

Table Two
McNamara's (2004) Overview of the Major Methods Used for Collecting Data During Evaluations

Method	Overall Purpose	Advantages	Challenges
questionnaires, surveys, checklists	when need to quickly and/or easily get lots of information from people in a non threatening way	-can complete anonymously -inexpensive to administer -easy to compare and analyze -administer to many people -can get lots of data -many sample questionnaires already exist	-might not get careful feedback -wording can bias client's responses -are impersonal -in surveys, may need sampling expert - doesn't get full story
interviews	when want to fully understand someone's impressions or experiences, or learn more about their answers to questionnaires	-get full range and depth of information -develops relationship with client -can be flexible with client	-can take much time -can be hard to analyze and compare -can be costly -interviewer can bias client's responses
documentation review	when want impression of how project operates without interrupting the project; is from review of applications, finances, memos, minutes, etc.	-get comprehensive and historical information -doesn't interrupt project or client's routine in project -information already exists -few biases about information	-often takes much time -info may be incomplete -need to be quite clear about what looking for -not flexible means to get data; data restricted to what already exists
observation	to gather accurate information about how a project actually operates, particularly about processes	-view operations of a project as they are actually occurring -can adapt to events as they occur	-can be difficult to interpret seen behaviors -can be complex to categorize observations -can influence behaviors of project participants -can be expensive
focus groups	explore a topic in depth through group discussion, e.g., about reactions to an experience or suggestion, understanding common complaints, etc.; useful in evaluation and marketing	-quickly and reliably get common impressions -can be efficient way to get much range and depth of information in short time - can convey key information about projects	-can be hard to analyze responses -need good facilitator for safety and closure -difficult to schedule 6-8 people together
case studies	to fully understand or depict client's experiences in a project, and conduct comprehensive examination through cross comparison of cases	-fully depicts client's experience in project input, process and results -powerful means to portray project to outsiders	-usually quite time consuming to collect, organize and describe -represents depth of information, rather than breadth

Encountering Challenges

As you conduct project evaluation, many questions arise that will challenge your focus. There is no perfect evaluation design. Instead, remember that in order to improve project services, etc. you need to remain open to continuing feedback and adjustments in programming efforts. The following suggestions (McNamara, 2004) are offered to help you avoid consequences associated with project evaluation:

- Do not think that project evaluation is too systematic or scientific. Small steps taken will lead to a well-develop plan for improvement.
- It may be helpful to include both quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods so that you obtain a powerful depiction of the benefits of your project.
- Do not examine only successes. You will learn much more about the project by understandings its failures.
- Do not throw away evaluation results once a report has been disseminated. The written report will serve an archive when trying to understand changes in the project.

Conclusion

This training guide was developed as a tool to assist you in understanding the various components of project evaluation. As you review your MRS Request for Application, the information contained herein should guide you toward completion of the project evaluation reporting requirements.

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Appendix

Project Evaluation Narrative Outline