

**Corporation for National and Community Service
Policies and Procedures**

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Subject: Evaluation Policy

Purpose: The purpose of this policy is to articulate the key principles that govern the agency's program evaluations.

Who is Covered: All CNCS staff involved in program evaluations.

Policies Replaced: NA

Originating Office: Office of Research and Evaluation

Approved By:



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Corporation for National and Community Service

Office of Research and Evaluation

Evaluation Policy

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What is this policy?

This evaluation policy statement presents key principles that govern the Corporation for National and Community Service’s (CNCS’s) planning, conduct, and use of program evaluations. The policy expresses our commitment to conducting rigorous, relevant evaluations and to using evidence from evaluations to inform policy and practice. CNCS seeks to promote rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics in the conduct of evaluations. This policy addresses each of these principles.

The mission of the Corporation for National and Community Service is to “...improve lives, strengthen communities and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.” The importance of these goals demands that we continually innovate and improve, and that we evaluate the performance and effectiveness of our programs and activities. Through evaluation, CNCS and our partners can learn systematically so that we can make our services as effective as possible.

What is the CNCS perspective on evidence pertaining to evaluation?

Evaluation produces one type of evidence. A learning organization with a culture of continual improvement requires many types of evidence, including not only evaluation but also descriptive research studies, performance measurement, financial and cost data, survey statistics, and

program administrative data. Further, continual improvement requires systematic approaches to using information, such as regular data-driven reviews of performance and progress.

Although this policy focuses on evaluation, the principles apply to the development and use of other types of information as well. The emphasis on evidence is meant to support, not inhibit, innovation, improvement, and learning. The intent is to integrate the use of evidence and opportunities for further learning into all activities. Where an evidence base is lacking, evidence will be developed through strong evaluations and analysis. Where evidence exists, it will be used to encourage replication studies.

While much of CNCS's evaluation activity is overseen by the Director of Research and Evaluation, program offices within CNCS also sponsor evaluations through dedicated contracts or as part of their grant-making, typically in coordination with the Director of Research and Evaluation. Discretionary grant funding opportunity announcements from CNCS will include evidence criteria that specify how activities will be evaluated. Successful applicants will be required to cooperate with and participate in evaluations. Evaluations conducted by awardees must adhere to program-specific requirements. As such, the CNCS evaluation policy does not include evaluations conducted by awardees.

What is the CNCS perspective on rigor pertaining to evaluation?

CNCS is committed to using the most rigorous methods that are appropriate to the evaluation questions and feasible within statutory, budget and other constraints. Rigor is required for all types of evaluations, including impact and outcome evaluations, implementation and process evaluations, descriptive studies, and formative evaluations. Rigor requires ensuring that inferences about cause and effect are well founded (internal validity); requires clarity about the populations, settings, or circumstances to which results can be generalized (external validity); and requires the use of measures that accurately capture the intended information (measurement reliability and validity).

CNCS maintains an evaluation workforce with training and experience appropriate for planning and overseeing a rigorous evaluation portfolio, recruiting staff with advanced academic degrees and experience in disciplines such as sociology, psychology, economics, and public policy. CNCS provides professional development opportunities so staff can keep their evaluation and methodological skills current.

What is the CNCS perspective on relevance pertaining to evaluation?

Evaluation priorities should take into account legislative requirements and the needs of government-wide leadership; agency leadership and staff; and CNCS partners such as states, territories, tribes, and grantees; and populations served; researchers; and other stakeholders.

Evaluations should be designed to address CNCS's diverse programs, customers, and stakeholders; and CNCS should encourage diversity among those carrying out the evaluations.

What is the CNCS perspective on transparency pertaining to evaluation?

CNCS will make information about evaluations and findings from evaluations broadly available and accessible, typically on the Internet. This includes identifying the evaluator, releasing study plans, and describing the evaluation methods. CNCS will release results of all evaluations that are not specifically focused on internal management, legal, or enforcement procedures that are not otherwise prohibited from disclosure. Evaluation reports will present all results, including favorable, unfavorable, and null findings. CNCS will release evaluation results timely – usually within two months of a report's completion – and will archive evaluation data for secondary use by interested researchers (e.g., public use files with appropriate data security protections).

What is the CNCS perspective on independence pertaining to evaluation?

Independence and objectivity are core principles of evaluation.¹ Agency and program leadership, program staff, service providers and others should participate actively in setting evaluation priorities, identifying evaluation questions, and assessing the implications of findings. However, it is important to insulate evaluation functions from undue influence and from both the appearance and the reality of bias. To promote objectivity, CNCS protects independence in the design, conduct, and analysis of evaluations. Following internal clearance² by appropriate program staff, the Office of External Affairs, and the Office of General Counsel, and a technical peer review, the Director of Research and Evaluation has authority to approve, release, and disseminate evaluation reports.

What is the CNCS perspective on ethics pertaining to evaluation?

CNCS-sponsored evaluations will be conducted in an ethical manner and safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants. Evaluations will comply with both the spirit and the letter of relevant requirements such as regulations governing research involving human subjects.

¹ American Evaluation Association, **An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government**, September 2010, accessed 18 June 2012, and Government Accountability Office, Employment and Training Administration: **Increased Authority and Accountability Could Improve Research Program**, **GAO-10-243**, January 2010, accessed 18 June 2012.

² The purpose of CNCS's internal clearance process is to provide staff the opportunity to review documents for potential erroneous programmatic information as well as any potential legal issues. Staff are not allowed to edit study results.