Best Practices in Performance Measure Design and Review Presented 6/15/2015

This course was designed for staff of State Service Commissions. It describes key elements in developing and review AmeriCorps program performance measures including an overview of the commission's role in performance measurement, best practice in design, MSY and member allocations, and the CNCS National Performance Measures. The course was created to help commissions develop and submit strong performance measures in the subgrantee portfolios.

Let's start with a brief overview of performance measurement just to make sure we're all speaking the same language as we move forward with this webinar

Performance measurement is the ongoing and systematic process of tracking outputs and outcomes for a program

Outputs = amount of service provided; what exactly that means depends on the program design. For many AmeriCorps programs, the outputs are the number of people served by the program; however, for some programs it could be other types of counts, such as the number of acres of land treated by AmeriCorps members.

Outcomes = changes or benefits that occur in a program as a logical consequence to the intervention, or activities, taking place. Again, for many of our programs, these are changes that are directly related to people; however, they could also be changes in organizations, in the broader community, or in the environment.

Outcomes can generally be classified as changes in knowledge, attitude, behavior, or condition (or KABC as I tend to remember it). As I mentioned, they should be logically connected to the program's intervention; they should also be aligned with outputs. So if an output counts the number of people served by the program, the output should reflect a change in those people's knowledge, attitudes, behavior, or condition in life.

From CNCS' perspective, performance measure data helps us to tell the story of the collective impact of AmeriCorps members and other national service programs across the country.

We do that primarily through our set of National Performance Measures, which were designed to mirror the CNCS strategic plan as well as the specific priorities of the programs we fund. NPMs allow us to "speak the same language" about national service activities, including terms, definitions, and measurement strategies. There are a set of NPMs for all six of our focus areas – Education, Healthy Futures, Economic Opportunity, Veterans and Military Families, Disaster Services, and Environmental Stewardship – and also a set of NPMs for Capacity Building activities.

Within the National Performance Measures there are two sub-categories: priority measures, which are used agency-wide across multiple national service programs, and complementary measures, which were customized to meet the needs of specific programs. However, both of these categories are still considered to be National Performance Measures.

CNCS expects programs to select National Performance Measures if their program design is consistent with these measures. However, we recognize that there are some AmeriCorps programs and program models where National Performance Measures don't quite fit. As a result, programs also have the option to create applicant-determined measures. I should note that some National Performance Measures also have applicant-determined outcomes, which means that programs need to develop their own outcome measures to pair with the NPM outputs.

As Commission EDs, you have a huge and primary role in ensuring the quality of the performance measures in all of the applications you submit to CNCS.

There is a persistent misconception out there that formula programs' performance measures do not have to meet the same quality standards as competitive performance measures, or that CNCS cares less about formula performance measures. This is not at all true. Because performance measures are used to tell the story of collective impact for CNCS programs, and because a large percentage of AmeriCorps programs and AmeriCorps members are supported through formula dollars, formula performance measures are a huge part of our collective impact story and are just as important as competitive performance measures. All AmeriCorps State and National performance measures, both formula and competitive, must follow the same rules and utilize the same set of instructions and definitions.

The primary difference with formula PMs is that CNCS staff do not review and clarify the PMs as we do with the competitive programs. As a result, we rely even more heavily on you, our Commission partners, to quality-check the PMs and complete your own rounds of clarification before submitting the applications to us. Otherwise, program officers end up discovering PM problems during GPR review and have to work with you to clean up the measures retroactively, sometimes by submitting amendments mid-year. This may mean that your subgrantees spend part or all of the program year collecting erroneous data and are not able to meet their PM targets at the end of the year.

To help you with your review and clarification of your PMs, we sent out a detailed PM checklist that lists the general requirements for a compliant PM. Please consider using this tool as you finalize this year's formula applications, and as you plan for your application review process next year.

To reduce your own burden of PM review and clarification, it's important that you train both prospective AmeriCorps applicants and current AmeriCorps subgrantees on how to design and collect data on performance measures. CNCS has resources available on our Performance Measurement page to help you, including a version of the presentation you are viewing right now, plus our Performance Measurement Core Curriculum and a webinar on how to complete the Performance Measure Module in eGrants . There are links to these resources at the end of this presentation.

Finally, it's important that you develop a subgrantee monitoring strategy that helps you ensure that the performance measure data being reported to you by your subgrantees is valid, complete, consistent, accurate, and verifiable. This includes delving into the specifics of your subgrantees' data collection strategies and making sure that programs have primary documentation to back up the numbers they report to you. Those of you that have had monitoring visits from your program officer already this year, or have visits coming up, know that CNCS is implementing its own protocol to ensure the quality of the data reported by direct grantees and state commissions. There will be additional training on best practices for data quality monitoring at the commission level later this year.

PAUSE for QUESTIONS

I'd like to run through a few best practices from CNCS' perspective for performance measure design. This list was developed by a team of CNCS program officers and is based on common issues we see in the hundreds of performance measures we review each year. Many of these will sound familiar to you too! But we very much need your help in making sure that all commission subgrantees understand these best practices and are following them in their applications. I will share these as if I'm speaking directly to AmeriCorps program directors, so put yourself in their shoes for a moment as you listen to these recommendations.

(Select PMs…)

- Start with your own vision for what your program is doing and what you hope to accomplish. Don't try to artificially fit your program model into a particular performance measure just because you want to use that measure. A performance measure is not going to be helpful for your program if it doesn't effectively capture what you are actually trying to do.

(Read the instructions…)

- The CNCS National Performance Measure Instructions are a fundamental guidance document in preparing an application, just like the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) and the Application Instructions. When you are choosing a National Performance Measure, it is ESSENTIAL (in capital letters) that you read the instructions for that measure very closely. You need to make sure that you understand who or what may be counted under the measure, what type of instrument should be used to collect the performance measure data, and what the required output-outcome pairs are.

(Less = more…)

- Remember that you are only required to report on one performance measure connected to your primary intervention. You are welcome to have more than one measure; however, quality is much more important than quantity. If an activity is not a significant one in terms of time or effort on the part of the members, we encourage you not to create a performance measure for it. You can collect and monitor data on those activities for your own programmatic purposes, but you do not need to submit it to CNCS.

(Measure outputs and outcomes…)

- Most AmeriCorps performance measures are designed to report on outputs and outcomes for program beneficiaries – that is, the individuals served by AmeriCorps members. There are only a few National Performance measures that are designed to capture impacts on AmeriCorps members themselves: the Teacher Corps measures in Education, and the "member development" measures in Economic Opportunity (classified under the "Finding Economic Opportunity for National Service Participants" objective). There are also a few Veterans and Military Families national measures where AmeriCorps members themselves can be counted under the outputs and outcomes. Other than those exceptions, performance measures should tell the story of the community impact of the AmeriCorps program, not the impact on the members themselves. (A note to commission EDs: Keep an eye out for this when reviewing applicant-determined measures; applicant-determined outcomes should not measure the level of satisfaction AmeriCorps members feel about their service activities, or the number of AmeriCorps members who gain skills and knowledge in their field of service.)

(Clearly define terms…)

It's critical that performance measures explicitly spell out the meaning of important words and phrases used in the measures, such as "program completion" and "improvement". Otherwise, CNCS doesn't know whether "program completion" means one hour or 100, or whether "improvement" means a tiny increase or a large one. It's also critical that you follow all definitions provided in the National Performance Measure instructions, such as the definition of "economically disadvantaged." We can only get good data from performance measures when we know what the numbers being reported actually mean, and when we're confident that all grantees are using key terms in consistent ways.

(For longer-term outcomes…)

Some performance measure outcomes involve changes in condition, such as high-school graduation or obtaining a job, that may not be achieved by all beneficiaries within a single program year. For these types of performance measures, it's important to set targets that reflect what can be accomplished in a single grant year. For example, if your program is designed to help students graduate successfully from high school, but the program serves students in grades 9-12, your target should only reflect the students who would be eligible to graduate from high school within the current grant year, which is likely to be only 12th-grade students. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't serve the 9th-11th grade students; it just means that you will need to set your outcome target as a smaller subset of the output target and explain your rationale.

(use national meaures…)

CNCS expects you to use national performance measures in any case where your program design and measurement strategy fits these measures. This applies to both formula and competitive grantees. CNCS does NOT want you to create applicant-determined measures that duplicate or are very similar to existing national measures. We also don't want you to type national measure codes and definitions into an applicant-determined measure field in the Performance Measure Module. If you can't find a particular national performance measure in the PMM screens, it probably means that you need to go back and select a different objective on an earlier tab. The first few pages of the NPM Instructions show you which measures are located under each objective.

(use numerical targets…)

This allows us to add up numbers across all of our programs; percentages are not add-able

(For outcomes that require…)

Many outcomes require surveys, tests, or some other type of participant follow-up to determine changes in knowledge, attitude, behavior, or condition. Unfortunately, it's rarely possible to get 100% of your program participants to respond to those surveys or follow-up requests. We also don't want you to extrapolate your results unless you have an approved sampling plan (in other words, if you get a 50% response rate to your post-survey, you can't just double the numbers to simulate a 100% response rate.) As a result, it's wise to set your outcome targets somewhat lower than your output targets to account for less than 100% response rates. However, you should also make it a goal to achieve the highest response rates possible.

(Clearly distinguish…)

This is a mistake that is most commonly made with applicant-determined outcomes. You need to make sure that your outcome doesn't just count participation in a program or re-state the output measure, but reflects an actual change in knowledge, attitude, behavior, or condition. For example, if the output is the number of individuals participating in a program, the outcome can't be the number of individuals who completed the program; this is not a change in KAB or C. Instead, the outcome could be the number of individuals who showed improved knowledge of program content, or the number of individuals taking specific actions as a result of participating in the program.

(Choose outcome measures…)

We want you to reach for the moon in setting your long-term goals for the program, and we want you to include those long-term goals in your logic model. However, you don't need to measure your long-term goals as part of your performance measures; you can measure short- or medium-term goals that are attainable in a single grant year but reflect important and steps toward your ultimate goals. For example, if your ultimate goal is for children to grow up to be healthy adults, you don't need to (and can't) measure that in a single year; instead, you could measure the number of children that have increased their level of physical activity as a result of participating in a member-led program. This is a meaningful change in behavior that is appropriately ambitious and is a logical step toward developing healthier adults, but is also measurable in a single year.

(Use pre-assessments to get baseline data…)

Objective measures almost always yield better data than subjective measures. If I ask you at the end of this webinar whether you feel like you know more about performance measurement than you did at the beginning of the workshop, chances are that you will say yes (at least, I hope so!). But if I gave you a pre- and post-assessment that actually measured your knowledge about performance measurement before and after the webinar, it may or may not show the increase in knowledge that you believed took place. People's own perceptions of change are frequently different than the actual change itself.

(Select data collection instruments…) AND (Keep data collection procedures consistent…)

Performance measure actuals are not meaningful unless you can say with confidence that they mean what they are supposed to mean, and that the meaning does not fluctuate across different sites or across different time periods. To be able to make good decisions about a program based on performance measures, you need to have good data.

(Choose data collection instruments…)

If you rely on an instrument – for example, in education programs, a state standardized test – where there can be several months of delay in receiving the results, or where are a lot of restrictions or hurdles in accessing the data, you may have difficulty getting performance measure data and/or using it to make informed decisions about your program. You might consider looking for alternative instruments where the data are more accessible and there is a quicker turnaround time.

(Allocate sufficient resources…)

Data collection is a significant investment, certainly in terms of dollars, but also in terms of staff time and member time. You will want to build those dollar and time investments up-front into your budget, staffing, and program design. Performance measurement will not be done effectively if it becomes an unexpected "add-on" to an already full schedule.

In addition to crafting performance measures, you will also be asked to allocate your Member Service Years (MSY) and AmeriCorps members to the focus areas, objectives, and performance measures that you have selected for your program.

MSY and member allocations indicate slightly different things. MSY are proportional to the level of investment being made in a particular area, both in terms of member time and in terms of the dollars that are directly tied to that member time. As a result, you can't double-count MSYs across different focus areas or objectives or performance measures. Member allocations are the number of individuals, or "warm bodies," that are engaged in a particular area. Because individual AmeriCorps members can serve in more than one focus area or under more than one PM, members can be double-counted across multiple focus areas, objectives, or PMs.

As I mentioned earlier, there are some objectives and PMs that focus on member outcomes rather than beneficiary outcomes. Those should have 0 MSY and 0 members allotted to them. So, for example, member development measures that count the number of AmeriCorps members who earn a GED or obtain a job should not have any MSY or members associated with them. All MSY and members should be allocated to the objectives and performance measures that reflect the community impact of the program.

When allocating MSY and members, keep in mind that 100% of your MSY should be allotted to your community impact objectives and performance measures. No MSY should be left out, and the sum of the MSY allotments should not add up to more than the total requested MSY in your budget. In contrast, it is not required that 100% of your MSY be allotted to performance measures. You are only required to have one PM aligned with your primary service activity, and you do not have to devote all of your MSY to this performance measure. Instead, you should allocate the portion of MSY that accurately reflects the amount of member effort devoted to the measure.

PAUSE for QUESTIONS

Program Overview:

The EduCorps Program is requesting six half-time AmeriCorps members to lead one-on-one and small-group tutoring programs for middle-school students at a high-poverty school. The primary goal of the program is to improve students' achievement levels in mathematics and to help students stay on track for high-school graduation. Members will meet with groups of 1-3 students after school every day for an hour each, using instructional materials that complement the normal classroom curriculum. Members also spend approximately three hours per week assisting with childhood obesity prevention initiatives by leading afterschool sports programming.

As mentioned earlier, CNCS expects programs to choose National Performance Measures if they are consistent with the program design. In the case of EduCorps, the members’ primary service activity is providing 1-on-1 and small group tutoring to increase students’ achievement in mathematics. This fits under CNCS’s “K-12 Success” Strategic Plan Objective. There are several possible performance measures related this objective; the slide shows a screenshot from the National Performance Measures Instructions with a red bracket around those measures. A review of these measures suggests that outcome measure ED5 (“Number of students with improved academic performance in literacy and/or math”) would be a good fit for this program design. ED30 is also an outcome measure related to improved academic achievement, but it is for subject areas other than literacy or math.

Per the chart shown on the slide, the required output measures for outcome ED5 are ED1 and ED2. (Output measures ED3A and ED4A can also be paired with ED5, but the Performance Measure Instructions require these two output measures to used for mentoring interventions, not tutoring interventions.) Thus, the performance measure the program should create for its primary intervention will consist of outputs ED1 and ED2, plus outcome ED5.

The program is only required to have one performance measure aligned with its primary intervention. The program is welcome to select other measures too, either in the Education focus area or in other focus areas such as Healthy Futures, but it is not necessary. It’s also important that any performance measure the program selects is measurable during the grant year. So, for example, while the EduCorps program description mentions “staying on track for high-school graduation” as one of their long-term goals, a program that serves middle-school students would not be able to measure high-school graduation outcomes within the grant period.

Once an applicant has tentatively selected their outputs and outcomes, it’s essential that they read the National Performance Measure Instructions carefully for each output and outcome. The program needs to make sure that the measures truly are the right fit, and that their program design will allow them to meet the requirements for each measure in terms of eligibility (who or what can be counted under the measure) as well as data collection (what instruments must be used to collect data).

For example: for measure ED2, only economically disadvantaged students may be counted under the measure. The Performance Measure Instructions provide very specific guidance about the definition of "economically disadvantaged" and how it should be assessed.

For ED5, the National Performance Measure instructions require that only students counted under ED2 (i.e., students who have completed participation in the education program) be counted under ED5. This means that programs can't report more students under outcome ED5 than they do under output ED2 – and that is true for almost all output-outcome pairs. The instructions also require that a standardized pre-post test be used to assess improved academic performance. Using report card grades or teacher-created assessments would not meet the requirements for this measure.

If an applicant's specific program design will not allow them to meet the requirements for a particular measure, they should not use that measure. They can either select a different National Performance Measure or create an applicant-determined measure.

While the National Performance Measure instructions are very specific about some definitions, others are left up to the applicant. Measures ED2 and ED5 both have very important terms that must be defined within the text of the performance measures. For ED2, it is the definition of program completion – the number of days or hours that is required for a student to complete the activity, and thus, to be counted under the measure. For ED5, it is the definition of improved academic performance – in other words, how much academic growth a student needs to show during the course of the program in order to be counted under the measure. These definitions MUST be included in the performance measures when they are submitted as part of the application.

Some possible example definitions are shown here for EduCorps.

The next step in performance measure development is to set output and outcome targets. These should reflect a realistic but ambitious picture of what an applicant thinks the program can accomplish in a single program year. The targets should also be logically related to each other; for example, in most cases, the target for the outcome should not exceed the output target.

In the case of EduCorps, the program estimates that six part-time members can collectively tutor 100 students per year, so this is the target for ED1. Due to student attrition over the course of 20 weeks, they expect that only 90 of those 100 students will complete the program and be counted under ED2. Of those 90 students that complete the program, the program projects that 60 of the students will meet the definition of improved academic performance. This represents 67% of the students who complete the program; however, the outcome target should be stated as a number, not a percentage.

The next step is to choose instruments to measure the output and outcome. First and foremost, the instrument must meet the specific requirements set out in the National Performance Measure instructions. For ED5, programs are required to use a standardized pre-post test that meets five criteria (see the text on the slide). The instruments must also meet the other requirements we discussed earlier: they must measure what they are supposed to measure, yield consistent results, and provide data that the program can access in a timely fashion. The instrument the program plans to use should be clearly described in the performance measure text. If the applicant knows the actual name of the instrument they will use, they should include the name in the performance measure.

Once a program has selected and finalized the performance measure they will use, they need to allocate MSYs and members to it. Looking back at the program description, it sounds like about two-thirds of member time will be spent doing individual and small-group tutoring for midde-school students in mathematics. This falls under the Education focus area in the K-12 Success objective. The balance of the member time will be spent doing physical activities with students to combat childhood obesity, which falls into the Healthy Futures focus area in the Obesity & Food objective. Since the program has six half-time members, or 3 MSY total, it should allocate 2/3 of that, or 2 MSY, to the K-12 Success objective, and 1/3 of the MSY, or 1 MSY, to the Obesity and Food objective. However, since all six members are engaged in activities under both objectives, all six members should be double-counted across both objectives.

For the performance measure: since all of the member activity under the K-12 Success objective will be spent on the program's primary tutoring intervention, all of the MSYs and members allocated to the K-12 Success objective should also be devoted to the performance measure: 2 MSY and 6 members. The remainder of the MSY will not be allocated to any performance measures, and that's OK. The program could have chosen to create a Healthy Futures performance measure to capture the remaining MSY, but that is not required.

Once an applicant has mapped out all of those required details, they will use the eGrants Performance Measure Module to put together all of the pieces: the outputs and outcomes they have chosen, the definitions they have created, the instruments they have selected, and the MSYs and members they have allocated. This will all come together to create a single aligned National Performance Measure, similar to the PDF version you see on the slide. A link to a tutorial on how to use the PMM is on the next slide.

2015 Performance Measure Instructions: http://www.nationalservice.gov/documents/main-menu/2014/2015-performance-measures-instructions

Performance Measurement Core Curriculum: http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/performance-measurement/training-resources

- **Performance Measurement Basics**
- Theory of Change
- Evidence
- **Quality Performance Measures**
- **Data Collection and Instruments**

How to use the CNCS National Performance Measure Instructions: http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/performance-measurement/how-use-cncs-national-performance-measure-instructions

How to navigate the eGrants Performance Measure Module:
http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/performance-measurement/egrants-performance-measures-module-americorps