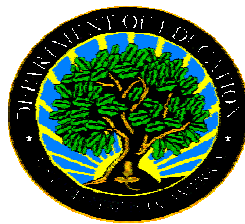


SELECTING AN SLC EVALUATOR

**Information for Federal Smaller Learning Communities
Grantee Project Teams**

**U.S. Department of Education
Office of Vocational and Adult Education**

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This paper is designed to provide Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) project directors and their program staff with useful information on what to look for in an evaluator, where to find one, and how to work with him or her as SLC implementation moves forward. All SLC grantees have different needs, different goals, and different resources as they decide on how to conduct their evaluations. This paper is intended to provide basic information and general guidance on issues that grantees may want to consider as they think about hiring and working with an independent third party evaluator. This document is *not* intended to establish new requirements to which all grantees must adhere.

I. U.S. Department of Education Evaluation Requirements

A key responsibility of each Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) grantee from Cohort 3 and beyond is to hire an evaluator to conduct the required annual program evaluation. Published in the *Federal Register* on March 15, 2004, the U.S. Department of Education's notice of final requirements, priorities, and selection criteria for Fiscal Year 2003 and subsequent years funds for the SLC Program includes several requirements related to SLC evaluation. The full text of the regulation can be found on-line at <http://a257.g.akamaitech.net/7/257/2422/14mar20010800/edocket.access.gpo.gov/2004/04-5817.htm>. Requirements related to evaluation are outlined below.

Annual Program Evaluation

As one of the conditions for receiving federal funding, all SLC grantees in Cohort 3 and beyond must report regularly to the Department of Education on the performance of their programs. One key element of this performance reporting is an annual program evaluation. As stated in the Department of Education's March 15, 2004, SLC regulation, SLC evaluation is designed "to provide information to the project director and key school personnel that will be useful in gauging progress and identifying areas for improvement." The regulation states that grantees must hire an evaluator to conduct an evaluation "for each of the three years of the project period and also for a final report that will be completed at the end of the fourth year of implementation."

"Independent Third Party" Evaluators

The March 15, 2004, Department of Education regulation requires that all evaluations undertaken for the SLC program be conducted by an "independent third party whose role in the project is limited to conducting the evaluation." The Office of Vocational and Adult Education has further stated that independent third party evaluators must be hired from outside the local education agency (LEA) that holds the SLC grant. Personnel from a district evaluation shop, for example, cannot serve as third party evaluators for an SLC project anywhere in the district – even if they have no routine direct contact with the school or schools involved.

Collaborative Evaluation Process

Although an SLC evaluation must be conducted by an "independent third party evaluator," the process of conducting it should not be isolated from the process of implementing the SLC program. As the March 15, 2004, Department of Education regulation notes, the evaluation should produce "timely and regular feedback to the LEA and the school on the success and progress of implementation and identify areas needed for improvement." SLC evaluations should therefore be *collaborative* between the evaluator and the project team – based on the idea that a key purpose of evaluation is to aid in continuous program improvement.

II. Fitting the Evaluator with the Evaluation

Guided by the Department of Education’s regulations, the SLC project team should decide – before hiring an evaluator – on the type of evaluation it wants to commission and how much funding can be allotted for evaluation. While the Department of Education requires that SLC grantees in Cohort 3 and beyond conduct an evaluation, it does not specify the type of evaluation that should be conducted.

Evaluation Scope and Budget

Evaluations can run the gamut from basic reporting on program implementation status to full-fledged investigations into the causal impact of specific interventions on long-term student outcomes. Each project team has the flexibility to decide the evaluation scope that it believes will be most useful and appropriate for its own SLC. It is critical that the SLC project team meet to discuss these issues and to examine all options carefully *before* beginning its search for an evaluator.

While the amount of the SLC budget devoted to evaluation will vary from local project to local project, project teams should clearly define their evaluation budget at the beginning of their program implementation process. The Department of Education has not set a specific level of funding that must be spent on evaluation for the SLC project, but the W. K. Kellogg Foundation estimates that, in general, evaluation costs will range between five and seven percent of any project’s total budget. Rates charged by professional evaluators vary greatly, depending upon experience and duties performed. Data on typical rates for SLC evaluators are not available, but the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention has reported a typical range of \$40-\$80 per hour for program evaluators in the substance abuse prevention field.

The Role of the Evaluator

The fundamental role of an SLC evaluator should be to help the grantee and participating SLC schools achieve their program goals. The evaluator serves this role by providing feedback for program improvement and producing information that can be disseminated to key stakeholders. In fact, the “evaluator” actually fulfills several distinct functions over the course of an evaluation:

Guide	to structuring a useful feedback process
Collector	of data/information
Reporter	of analyzed data/information and professional observations
Facilitator	of SLC project team meeting discussions

One important factor that SLC project teams should build into their initial ideas for evaluation - and their ideas for whom to hire as their evaluator - is that the SLC evaluation process should, as noted above, be a *collaborative* one. For the evaluation to function as a continuous improvement tool, the evaluator should be available to spend time on-site with the project team and should be comfortable serving as an ongoing part of the continuous improvement process throughout the performance period. There must be a two-way interaction between the evaluator and the project team throughout the entire evaluation process – from planning the evaluation to reporting on its results.

III. Hiring an SLC Evaluator

It is very important that the third party evaluator be hired as early in the grant period as possible – preferably before SLC program implementation even begins. Developing an evaluation plan early, in parallel with the development of program goals and objectives, provides crucial support for the foundation of a successful SLC. A good evaluation plan relies on clear program goals and measurable objectives.

Qualities of an SLC Evaluator

Ideally, the entire project team will be involved in the candidate search. As with any new hire, it is highly desirable that any prospective evaluator go through an interview and vetting process. This process should include a reference check and a review of samples of previous work, particularly written reports produced for prior evaluations. SLC evaluators should be experienced in presenting information clearly and in a format that is useful to the SLC program staff.

The specific qualities an SLC project team might look for in an evaluator will vary, depending on the type of evaluation the team has in mind, but some general characteristics are highly desirable in any evaluator. SLC evaluators should be:

- Experienced in evaluation design;
- Experienced in both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis;
- Skilled in database management and use;
- Experienced in a collaborative evaluation setting, where program staff participates in designing, conducting, and interpreting the evaluation;
- Skilled in clear, jargon-free oral and written communication;
- Experienced in communicating results clearly to the wider community; and
- Available to devote sufficient time in their overall schedule/workload to the project.

There are no professional licensing or certification requirements for evaluators, but experienced educational evaluators typically have earned at least a Master’s degree in a social science or education. In addition, evaluators should be able to provide references and recommendations from colleagues and clients who have knowledge of their track record. In particular, candidates should have a strong record of completing deliverables and reports on time and with a high quality level.

Where to Find an SLC Evaluator

Because the Department of Education requires that all SLC evaluations be conducted by independent third party evaluators, the project team will need to search outside its school and district for an evaluator. Outside evaluators typically fall into four categories:

- University faculty
- Private evaluation firms
- Non-profit organizations
- Independent contractors

Most school districts have access to at least one institution of higher education, and these institutions commonly house research and evaluation resources. Faculty are often willing to work with local school districts for relatively low fees, in return for the opportunity to publish research articles or fulfill service requirements for their institutions. Even if evaluation services are not directly available from the local college or university, faculty will likely be able to provide useful contacts to reputable outside evaluators in the area.

SLC project teams might also consult the various educational evaluation professional associations for information on evaluators working in their region. The American Evaluation Association (<http://www.eval.org/>) and American Educational Research Association (<http://www.aera.net/>), for example, maintain public websites that include lists of evaluators nationwide. These lists include all types of evaluators – from large private firms to small non-profit organizations and independent contractors – and can serve as a useful starting point in the search for the most appropriate hire.

Finally, other SLC grantees can be an invaluable resource in finding a good evaluator. All grantees from Cohort 3 and beyond are required to commission a third party evaluation, and many grantees from Cohorts 1 and 2 have voluntarily conducted evaluations. Fellow project teams may be able to provide helpful insight on evaluators with whom they have had good (or bad) experiences.

Expectations and Responsibilities

Once a candidate is selected, contracting with a third party evaluator is likely to be governed by local rules and regulations. In general, however, important issues to address in any contract with an evaluator include:

- Specific duties to be performed by the evaluator, including clear statements of the time commitment expected;
- Timeframes for collaborating with the SLC project team to prepare a detailed evaluation plan;
- A budget for duties to be performed;
- The collaborative nature of the evaluation, including clear statements of the method and frequency of communication with the SLC project team;
- Any specific data elements that the evaluator must include in the evaluation;
- Clear statements regarding the ownership of any data collected and any databases used during the data collection process; and
- Clear statements regarding the ownership of reports produced as a result of the evaluation.

IV. Project Team-Evaluator Interaction

After the evaluator has been hired, he or she should take part in an initial meeting with the SLC project team and follow up with regular meetings or other forums for communication throughout the school year.

Planning Meeting

The initial planning meeting has several purposes. First, the SLC project team, including the newly hired evaluator, should review the SLC program's goals and objectives as outlined in the approved grant application. This review will ensure that the evaluator understands what the district and participating schools hope to accomplish with SLC funding, and also will allow the district and schools to revisit the goals and objectives stated in the grant to ensure that goals are clear and objectives are measurable.

Secondly, the planning meeting should determine what kinds of information the evaluation will *produce* (as opposed to what types of data and information the evaluation will *collect*, which is discussed below). The SLC project team should have a discussion, facilitated by the evaluator and including teachers and counselors, about what types of information/data would be most useful for them to have for their own daily work.

Finally, the initial planning meeting should identify the types and sources of data and information the evaluation will *collect*. The SLC project team needs to make sure the data to answer their questions exist, or that they can realistically be produced. There should be a discussion about what data the district and school staff will need to help obtain, and what data the evaluator can obtain from the district's information technology system or other accessible databanks.

Regular Meetings and Communications

Throughout the school year, the evaluator should meet with the SLC project team – both to provide and to receive feedback on the progress of the program. Interim data and information should be provided to the project team on a regular basis, so that results can be used to make mid-course corrections in the program or suggest new paths or questions for the evaluator to pursue. The frequency of in-person meetings will depend upon the evaluation budget, but should be sufficient to conduct a truly collaborative evaluation.

Meetings with the evaluator will also assist the SLC project team in planning how to communicate the results of the evaluation to a wider audience. The evaluation will be most useful if there are carefully prepared presentations of information targeted to specific audiences, rather than simply producing one comprehensive final report for the project staff. Selected findings may be prepared in different ways for different audiences. The evaluator should be skilled in crafting effective communications and should help facilitate these discussions.

Conclusion

Ultimately, each SLC grantee will establish its own unique relationship with its independent third party evaluator, according to its own particular needs. Throughout the entire evaluation process – from deciding on the scope and type of evaluation, to hiring the right evaluator, to interacting on a regular basis – individual SLC grantees should keep the overarching goal of SLC evaluation firmly in mind: evaluation is meant to be of benefit to the grantee. The needs of the grantee in collecting, analyzing, and using information that will lead to program improvement should be foremost in SLC project teams' minds as they decide how to select and work with their evaluator.

V. Bibliography

The March 15, 2004 *Federal Register* notice for SLC grantees can be found online at <http://a257.g.akamaitech.net/7/257/2422/14mar20010800/edocket.access.gpo.gov/2004/04-5817.htm>

Other resources on working with an evaluator include:

Georgia Family Connection Partnership. *FAQs: The Ins and Outs of Hiring an Evaluator*. <http://www.georgiafamilyconnection.org/tools/eval/hiringfaqs.htm>

Juvenile Justice Evaluation Center/Justice Research and Statistics Association. *Hiring and Working With an Evaluator*. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, September 2001. <http://www.jrsa.org/jjec/about/publications/evaluator.pdf>

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