Tip Sheet:

5 Steps for Establishing Productive Research Partnerships

Does your organization aspire to do **research**? Going beyond routine program monitoring and evaluation, research is a systematic investigation conducted to contribute to or fill a gap in evidence or generalizable knowledge. A common reason organizations may conduct research is in the context of **impact evaluation**. But regardless of the motivation, research can be difficult or impossible for an organization to do on its own. This tip sheet covers five steps for establishing research partnerships with an external academic institution.

Research in the context of impact evaluation

How can we truly measure the **impact** of our work? When a program sees positive results or outcomes, it may be tempting to ascribe them directly to our intervention. But sometimes these outcomes are produced by outside circumstances. Impact goes beyond simply achieving results or outcomes—it is defined as the measured effect of an intervention on the outcome for the client population, that is, the changes in an outcome that are *attributable to the intervention*.

To truly understand a program's impact, an impact evaluation is required. Impact evaluations typically use an experimental or quasi-experimental design that includes a comparison or control group.

This type of evaluation allows an organization to not only learn whether a program was effective, but also say with a degree of confidence whether results were the result of the program delivered and not other factors.

Impact - The measured effect of an intervention on the outcome for the client population. The changes in an outcome that are *attributable to the intervention*.

When impact evaluations contribute to the generalizable knowledge base, they may be considered research, generating evidence that can be used to inform future program design.

Establishing Research Partnerships

If an organization lacks the in-house capacity, external partners can make research projects possible. Academic institutions or others with the necessary specialized skills can help design and implement rigorous studies and assess a program's impact.

Here are five steps for getting started:

Step 1: Define your research topic.

What are you trying to discover? Identify potential research questions and determine if there may be any potential funding opportunities.

For guidance on developing research questions in the context of impact evaluation, see META's [Evaluation Plan Template/standalone resource on evaluation questions].

Step 2: Identify potential partners.

Research partnership is a two-way street. In choosing a research partner, prioritize individuals or institutions who will not only serve your needs (including the needs of a particular program, in the context of impact evaluation), but who will themselves benefit from collaborating with you.

You may need to orient potential partners to your organization and programs, as they may not be familiar with them. You will also need to assess the interest and capacity of your own program team(s) to understand their attitudes and abilities to enter such a partnership.

Step 3: Determine if the research would generate meaningful, actionable evidence.

At a minimum you should consider the following questions about potential research projects:

- ☐ Does the research have the potential to influence the adoption of effective programs and policies?
- ☐ Is the research in line with your organization's learning priorities?
- ☐ Does the research address any critical emerging questions?

Keep in mind that researchers often have different priorities than service providers do, such as publishing in academic journals rather than sharing actionable findings with program staff. To ensure research is truly useful, a clear, mutual understanding on these priorities is needed from the start.

Step 4: Create a research management structure.

A **research management structure** describes the main roles and responsibilities of all partners engaged in research.

Depending on the size and complexity of the project, and on each partner's capacity, you may assign a larger role for the implementing program team or a larger role for your research partner. The research management structure may also reflect donor preferences regarding third-party evaluations.

> **Tip:** Whatever research management structure you choose, you will need to clearly determine who is responsible for what.
>
> META's **Research/Evaluation Roles and Responsibilities Mapping Template** provides a list of tasks involved that may be involved in each phase of your research, and allows you to clarify the duties of different staff within your organization and of your academic partner.

Ensure you will follow all federal requirements related to data sharing, such as the Office of Refugee Resettlement Policy Letter 17-02 on Data Sharing that safeguards personally identifying information, or PII.

Once you have agreed on a research management structure, draft a legal agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (depending on whether payment is involved) in order to establish a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities between you and your partner—this should include who will own data, publish findings, and have authorship of all materials produced.

Research/Evaluation Phases				
Research/ Evaluation Design and Proposal Development	Research/ Evaluation Start-Up	Research/ Evaluation Implementation	Close-Out and Results Dissemination	Learning Review

Diagram: This table summarizes common phases of research, including as part of evaluation. Each phase includes various tasks you will need to assign as part of mapping roles and responsibilities among actors in your organization and your research partner.

Step 5: Develop a research budget for each step of the project lifecycle

Take into consideration each step of the research cycle, from design to dissemination and learning review. Make sure to include provisions for operational support of your program coordinator or other staff.

Other costs you should consider may include:

- ☐ Time and effort for the research staff;
- ☐ Daily costs for lodging, transportation and data collection;
- ☐ Research materials, including data collection and training supplies;
- ☐ Equipment costs, including any tablets, laptops, mobile phones, software, or geographic information system (GIS) devices;
- ☐ Other costs such as translation, incentives for study participants, conference fees, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) submissions; and
- ☐ Dissemination costs, including validation workshops, dissemination meetings and conferences.

For more information on developing a thorough research budget in the context of impact evaluation, see META's [resources on budgeting for evaluation].

Keep the focus on learning

In the context of impact evaluation, remember that productive research partnerships should not stop at generating a report. The most important step is to decide how you will disseminate and use your findings.

For more information on disseminating evaluation findings, see META's [Evaluation Plan Template].

If you have feedback on this tip sheet, questions, or have good examples of how your organization has developed productive research partnerships, contact us at META@Rescue.org.