

DESIGNING PROGRAM OUTCOMES WITH AN EYE TOWARDS PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

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Years of research have identified particular issues that grant programs are ideally designed to address. Grant programs are structured to offer practitioners the opportunity to make meaningful improvements for participants within a particular and often unique context of implementation, and funders – be they governments or donors – can target funds to particular populations or purposes to meet their objectives in a way that general appropriations or unrestricted grant funds do not. Yet, there exists an inherent tension in what would otherwise be considered an ideal combination of mutual interests. In particular, I speak of the desire by practitioners to make improvements in program delivery and outcomes and the desire of funders to achieve often very specific outcomes.

How then do we structure programs to acknowledge both program improvement and excellence? The purpose of this essay is to suggest a process to address this paradox. This is accomplished by first reviewing key components of a purposefully structured plan focused on success which includes identifying what is to be measured, requiring projected outcomes, comparing actual and projected data to inform program impact and explaining what the data mean.

Structured for Success

Like a building, a program cannot be sound unless it has a strong foundation. Characteristics of a strong foundation include a series of articulate statements that define the scope of the work, expected deliverables and parameters delineating allowable activities. As it relates to federally funded programs in particular, these characteristics are well espoused.

A request for proposals (RFP) that includes these foundational elements allows for applicants to focus squarely on the activities and related expenses that will be employed to meet the grant objectives. Furthermore, a strong RFP allows for the development of a monitoring and accountability system during the proposal phase to guide the creation of proposed activities and align all activities across the various phases of the grant program to ensure fidelity in implementation.

Abstract

This essay focuses on the way programs should be structured in order to address both program improvement and excellence. It closes with a discussion about two supporting factors critical to the success of the process: leadership and management.

Figure 1: Aligning Outcomes Throughout the Grant Process						
Outcomes	RFP	Proposal	Annual Report #1	Annual Report #2	Final Report	
Outcome #1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Outcome #2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Outcome #3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Outcome #4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Outcome #5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

NOTE: The above graph illustrates the alignment of outcomes across the primary documents associated with a grant program: the request for proposals, the proposal, and the (usually) annual and final reports.

Experienced grants writers and practitioners recognize that the aligned outcomes that run throughout the grant process – from the RFP to project completion – are just one aspect of a successful application. The substantive part of any proposal and resulting reports include the activities undertaken by the proposed program to achieve the outcomes. Should a proposal be funded, successful implementation is the result of implementing the plan as proposed, continually monitoring its outcomes, and learning throughout implementation.

In this section, I discuss a linear progression from grant development – building the foundation – through project completion with a direct focus on the use of data to ensure that the program focuses not only on the outcomes desired but the continual improvement practitioners seek. I begin with a process to identify what is to be measured and how it is measured, then continue to articulate the need for projections to remain focused, and close with how comparing data supports improvement efforts.

Part 1: Identify What is to be Measured

The development of outcomes measures is a process that starts with identifying goals, continues to the creation of outcomes that reflect the goals, which informs the creation of metrics to quantify the outcomes and hinges on meaningful indicators of performance. In 2015, the Post Collegiate Outcomes Initiative¹ published a number of papers related to the post-college

¹ The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), in partnership with the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) have

outcomes of students. Among them was a paper examining the dimensions to consider when creating measures in which the terms outcomes, metrics and indicators were defined as the following:

- Outcomes: the results of a higher education experience that are evaluated or measured
- Metrics: the standards of measurement of a system of parameters used to evaluate outcomes, and
- Indicators: statistics that provide a context or benchmark for metric results (American Association of Community Colleges [AACCC], American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASCU], and the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities [APLU], 2015, p.2)

This essay builds upon this important work by extending the conversation around metrics to include both outcome and process metrics as well as re-envisioning how we think about indicators. This discussion is supplemented by a modified version of a table presented by the Initiative, shown here as Figure 2.

collectively developed a strategic framework to guide discussion and the creation of measurement tools for reporting student outcomes after college. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the project partners assembled subject-matter experts and institutional leaders to create a framework and application tools that will enable colleges and universities, policymakers, and the public to better understand and talk about post collegiate outcomes in areas such as economic well-being, ongoing personal development, and social and civic engagement. The development of the framework and the accompanying tools are an important first step toward the creation of common metrics and indicators for use by institutions to report a more comprehensive set of post collegiate outcomes. For more information see <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Trends/pco/Pages/default.aspx>

Figure 2: Outcomes, Metrics, Process Metrics and Indicators

Outcome	Outcome Metrics	Process Metrics	Indicators
Program Completion Rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants completing the program as a percent of all participants starting the program. • Participants completing the program as a percent of participants in the program one month after starting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants completing core activities. • Attendance rates of program participants. • Percent of participants completing $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total program activities. 	Weekly attendance rates
Employment Rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment in the fourth fiscal quarter after completing the program. • Position change (promotion) for program participants who were working at time of program enrollment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hours of on-the-job training/internship/externship per participant. • Acquisition of industry certification during program participation. 	Weekly rates of work completion

Outcomes. Outcomes are those results of an experience that are to be measured. Often, these outcomes are constructs, or concepts, that allow for laypersons to be engaged in the project without being over-prescriptive so as to squander creativity and alienate the support of laypersons or experts. Figure 2 presents two fairly common outcomes of interest: completion rates and employment rates. Practitioners with experience in the field fully understand that there are a number of ways to measure these outcomes, each accompanied by caveats and concerns. However, this cannot serve as a barrier to embracing the idea. What must occur to support meaningful grant implementation is the acceptance of a metric or series of metrics related to the outcome.

Outcomes Metrics. Measurement of those actions that can be observed may be constructed in a way that results in some metrics, be they the counts of actions (number of participants) or rates (number of participants reaching a defined threshold such as completion). Outcome metrics are directly related to the outcome and are typically “high-level” metrics that speak to the group in

aggregate. Figure 2 presents an example, where outcome metrics for the Program Completion Rates outcome are calculated as the number of participants completing the program as a percent of all program participants starting the program.

Setting an outcome in the planning phase can be worrisome, but it is critical to a strong proposal, plan and program. All too often there is the desire to refrain from clearly articulating expected outcomes for fear of not meeting them. I would suggest that thoughtfully prepared outcomes remove that fear as 100% perfection is an aspiration and not a reality. That being said, there is a way to provide expected outcomes while also acknowledging potential differences.

For example, if a program participant begins a program but leaves shortly after the program begins, it may be hard to say that the program itself was at fault. In this case it may be that a grant program may choose to only include the participants who were still participating one month after starting; in practice this is called behaviorally-defined cohorts which are determined by participant behavior. The second outcome metric in Figure 2, calculated as the number of participants completing the program as a percent of all program participants one month after starting the program, is an example of a metric based upon a behaviorally defined cohort.

The American Association of Community Colleges, in the development of their Voluntary Framework of Accountability (www.aacc.nche.edu/vfa), allows for the recognition that students use community colleges in a number of ways, including the acquisition of credits to apply at another college. As such, they have developed a behaviorally-defined cohort where students are only counted after they have enrolled for 12 credit hours.

Process Metrics. Process metrics are those interim measures that are connected, or statistically correlated, to outcome metrics. Figure 2 presents a number of examples for the outcomes of completion and employment rates. In higher education, these process metrics are the result of research by Ewell (2007) and Leinbach and Jenkins (2008) that identified milestone events and momentum points as they relate to student progression in college.

The intent of process metrics is to monitor those activities that will lead to the outcome metrics of interest to external stakeholders. In some cases, such as state performance funding models, these process metrics are considered outcome metrics. I argue that by achieving (process) outcomes strongly correlated with outer (outcome) metrics one is essentially duplicating the same metric. Rather, the value of process metrics comes from the brainstorming and resulting understanding of the midpoints these measures signify. If developed with the proposal development and implementation team, a proposal will generate buy-in to metrics by making them meaningful as well as serving to support the clear expectations of practitioners and further reinforcing the leadership and management needed to make a grant successful as discussed later in this essay.

Indicators. Indicators allow for the monitoring of program performance. More often than not, the indicator is framed as a comparison of one program to another. The end result of such a peer approach is often statements along the lines of, “Our program had outcomes comparable to other similar programs.” I am of the opinion that such peer comparisons are meaningless and downright detrimental to program performance because validating performance by comparing to others puts in place a mindset of acceptable failure. We have all heard others say something

along the lines of “that’s not bad for this population we are serving.”

Put simply, the indicators for your program should be levels of performance you expect to achieve as a result of implementing the program for the population your program is serving as compared to the program’s actual performance, not another program. Indicators, developed during grant development like all metrics and expected levels of performance, must be clearly set and tracked, compared to actual performance and used to improve the program – not to explain away a lack of performance. The following three sections illustrate this approach in greater detail.

Part 2: Requiring Projections

Practitioners need to recognize that funding has associated expectations. Increasingly, in the current and likely future competitive environment for funding, “blank checks” are going to increasingly diminish. This means that outcome metrics, process metrics and indicators must be detailed as part of the proposal, prior to implementation.

As an example, if the program believes that weekly attendance rates impact program completion rates, then attendance rates should be projected at regular intervals. It is reasonable to expect that, since attendees are humans, participants may miss an activity on occasion – especially as grant-funded programs tend to focus on students who may be at greater risk than the rest of the population. So, it would be appropriate for a program to set expected activity attendance rates at a certain percent. These projections must be a part of the proposal development process and as importantly accurately measured throughout the program’s implementation. Doing so will allow for the comparison of data to improve the program and support the completion of the program.

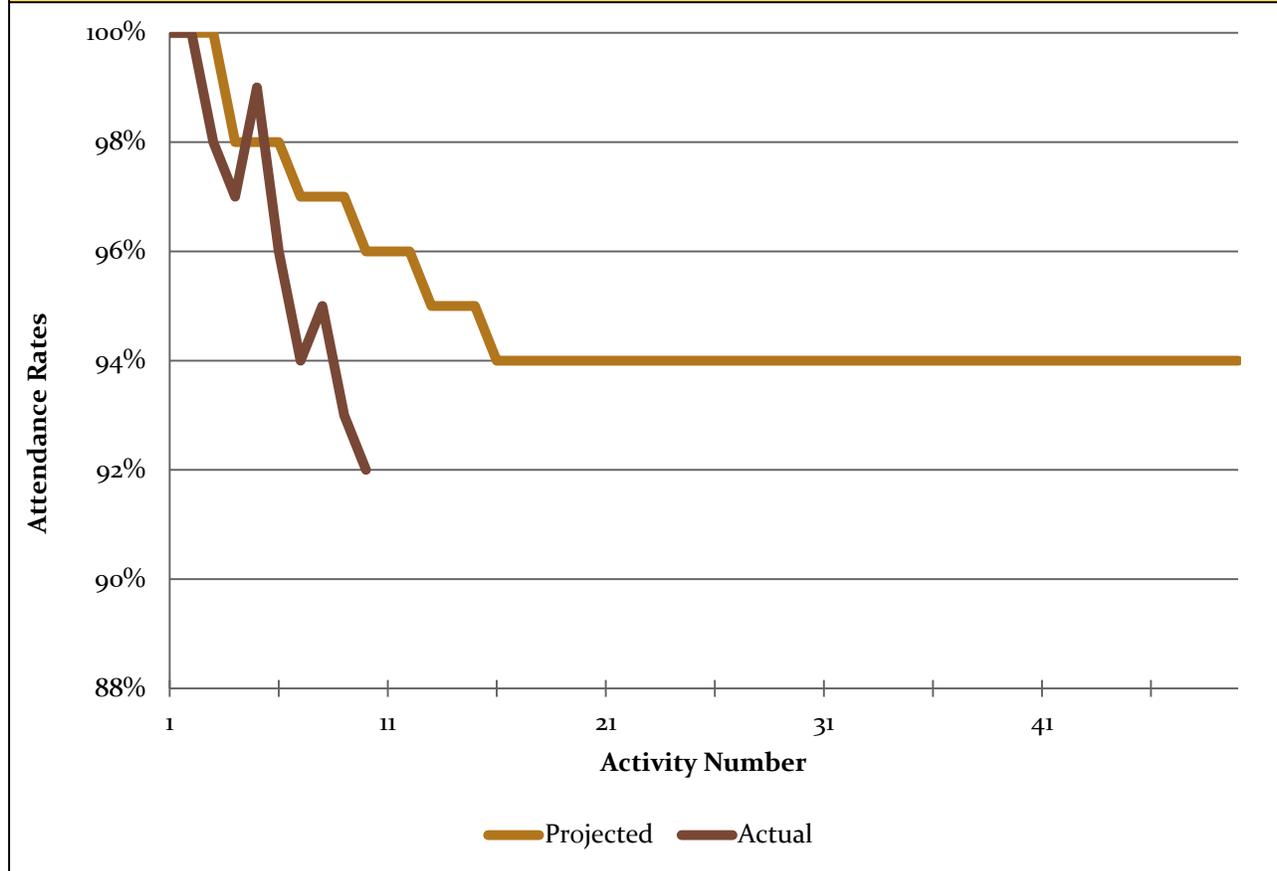
Part 3: Comparing Data to Inform Mid-Course Improvements

Comparing the data that was projected to actual data is a stronger indicator of performance than it would be to attendance in another program because of difference in program delivery such as time of day, duration, quality of experience, the availability of transportation, and other factors.

Continuing the discussion, let’s imagine that a grant program consisted of a series of 50 activities. Further, it was projected – prior to the implementation of the program – that the attendance rate for each program started at 100% for the first 3 activities and then leveled out at 94% starting at the 16th activity.

After the first 10 activities, the program the grant manager looks at the actual data as compared to the projected data with the implementation team to see if mid-course adjustments need to be made. Figure 3 illustrates the outcomes to date.

Figure 3: Projected and Actual Attendance Rates (Indicator) for Program Activities



The implementation team then examines the data to find that attendance is less than expected and will likely impact the number of participants who will complete the program. The team then can begin to use the data for program improvements rather than waiting until the end of the 50-week period, at which point it is too late to take action. These actions may include contacting students that have been absent to understand why they are missing activities or disaggregating data to see if particular sub-populations are absent more than other sub-populations. One can imagine that, upon getting more information, the program offers a catch-up day where previously offered activities are presented, individual circumstances are overcome, or delivery is reimagined to engage students in a meaningful manner--the end result being that more students attend activities and complete the program.

Part 4: Using Data to Explain Performance and Highlight Program Improvement

By considering how outcome metrics, process metrics, and indicators are implemented throughout the duration of the program prior to its implementation, a clear direction for all

involved stakeholders may be achieved. It will also result in substantive and meaningful interim reports and final reports that use data to drive the narrative rather than artifacts of simple statements of compliance coupled with justifications that other programs may be performing similarly. Review the following two program updates and see if you agree.

- “Our completion rates are comparable to similar programs.”
- “Our completion rates were higher than we initially projected. We believe a contributing reason why is that we tracked attendance rates and found that initially they were below what we expected. However, after reviewing the data 10 activities into implementation we made some adjustments that included revamping our delivery and engaging workforce partners to make the program more applied and meaningful to participants who were able to see real worked connections. The result was that our attendance rates climbed to 96%, which we believe impacted our completion rate.”

The second update provides a richer understanding of the program to the reader; it also makes writing the reports easier, and subsequently funders more engaged and likely to be supportive in those instances where the actual outcomes do not meet projected outcomes. You may also notice that the second update included examples of how the data was used to make changes to program delivery. In almost all cases I am aware of, grantees are requested to provide lessons learned from the program so that funders can, like grantees, improve. Admittedly, this approach is different, requires thought, and may be threatening. To implement it well takes a grant manager who can both lead and manage.

The implementation of this process relies not only on the structures suggested in this essay, but practitioners with the management and leadership skills necessary to implement change; something that is no small feat itself. Rather than give an extensive treatise on leadership and management, I share a few thoughts about each as they relate to grant programs from my experience as both a grantee and the manager of a multi-million dollar grant program.

Leading the Program. If the proposal is developed with implementation in mind, then the grant manager has the vision set for them. The act of leading, then, is generating the interest and belief in the grant vision set before them. It requires the grant manager to have a firm commitment to the proposal, however, as the fidelity of implementation has long been recognized as a barrier to carrying-out programs. Staff are also watching grant leaders.

I once had the opportunity to conduct a site visit where a project staff member expressed appreciation that the project was being held accountable for the actions delineated in the proposal. In the same breath, the staff member shared that the grant leader informed staff that they did not expect to meet all of the proposed activities. This is exactly the lack of commitment by leadership that leads projects to fail, often at taxpayer expense. Conversely, there may be a situation where staff are not implementing the proposed actions as planned; this requires firm but fair management.

Managing the Program, Not the Staff. Being elevated to the position of leadership is nice. It is empowering. However, while it requires weaving together disparate pieces into one it also requires one assume the responsibility to manage. And management is not nearly as pleasant.

Management requires one to set and implement a clear direction, to navigate unexpected challenges by relying on the plan not personal opinions, to facilitate tough conversations, and to make decisions that are best for the program rather than staff. All too often decisions are indefinitely delayed, and yet what is often unrecognized is that not making a decision – or inaction – is actually a decision.

In short, grant management means managing the grant, rather than the staff itself. By doing so, one can remove the personal aspect as decisions are made in terms of what is best to meet the objectives, not the wishes of staff.

Moving Forward. In this essay I shared my perspective on how grant programs can be developed with an eye towards improvement. It requires leadership, thoughtful work throughout all aspects of the program, and effective management. This level of commitment makes one vulnerable if outcomes are not met, but there is no other way to lead. Receiving a grant and the funds that accompany it is more than a mark of distinction for the institution and leader. It is more than an on-ramp to further funding. It is a commitment to deliver on what is proposed.

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