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Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation for Federal Evaluation Staff

Federal evaluation staff sponsor evaluations to advise policymakers, practitioners, and the public on which programs work to improve people’s lives. Incorporating a [culturally responsive and equitable evaluation \(CREE\)](#) lens into an evaluation helps ensure that all community stakeholders—including those who operate and participate in programs—have the chance to contribute to and benefit from the evaluation, but incorporating CREE into traditional federally funded evaluations can be challenging. Federal evaluation staff might face timeline and budget constraints, and lengthy Paperwork Reduction Act requirements can limit flexibility in evaluation design. To help navigate this complex set of challenges, federal evaluation staff might consider conducting the following activities as they decide on research objectives, how to fund evaluations, and how to support evaluations.

CREE integrates diversity, equity, and inclusion into all aspects of evaluation.

Engage deeply and intentionally with community stakeholders

Applying a CREE lens means engaging a range of stakeholders to inform an evaluation. For example, before developing a plan for an evaluation as described in a request for proposal (RFP), federal evaluation staff might seek input to identify which programs they want to learn more about. They could establish an advisory panel or board made up of people participating in a certain type of program. This can help federal evaluation staff learn which programs might be worth studying and how an evaluation could help community stakeholders, such as program leaders, staff, participants, and other community members. Federal evaluation staff could also interview colleagues in the program office and community stakeholders, including

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Engaging community stakeholders

Organizations participating in the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services’ [Accountable Health Communities Model](#) are building partnerships between health care systems and social services to link people with resources that address health-related social needs, such as food insecurity and housing instability. One organization, [Health Net of West Michigan](#), established a board that includes advisors who are members of the communities served by the Accountable Health Communities Model. The board meets quarterly to review study data and prioritize areas for action, including advocacy and systems-level change. Community advisors are compensated for their time, and Health Net prepared them for their roles by educating them on social determinants of health. ▲

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program participants, to understand how programs are meeting participants' and communities' needs.

Once the evaluation is underway, federal evaluation staff might seek time for the evaluation team to identify stakeholders, build relationships with them, and enable them to contribute to the study design. For example, stakeholders could participate in a series of design thinking sessions to refine research questions. Later, they might help to determine evaluation methods, refine data collection instruments, collect and interpret data, and review draft products before they are disseminated more widely. This approach might require more time and resources, but ultimately, it could lead to a more equitable evaluation.

Look directly at equity issues

Federal evaluation staff might want their evaluations to examine issues of equity that are front and center in the CREE approach. Potential issues to explore include:

- / Cultural competency among federal staff and those directly involved in service delivery, such as program leaders, staff, and participants
- / How stakeholders communicate, relate to, and interact with one another
- / Differences in access, service delivery, outcomes, or impacts for different groups or types of participants, including by participant need, and factors that led to those differences (for example, eligibility criteria or other program policies)
- / Steps that the program took to address differences in access or service delivery, and possible improvements in access and service delivery for certain groups

Federal evaluation staff should also explore criticisms related to equitable program access or service delivery voiced by stakeholders or the broader community. At the dissemination stage, federal evaluation staff can also ensure that products discuss the importance of equity and the CREE approach, to promote these concepts among stakeholders, such as Congress, researchers, and practitioners.

Support participatory methods of data collection, analysis, and dissemination

A CREE approach encourages evaluation funders and researchers to give program participants a voice. Often, this includes using innovative techniques to describe program implementation and participant experiences. These methods might include in-depth and ethnographic interviews, storytelling, poetry, and [PhotoVoice](#). Evaluations might also engage research panels, made up of participants chosen for characteristics such as their demographic background or program experiences, to contribute data repeatedly over a certain time period. Engaging with the same panel of participants and getting to know them over time can result in deeper insights. These approaches can yield more contextualized information from participants than typical methods, such as focus groups or program observations, to better reflect participants' experiences.

Drawing on local cultural protocols for data collection

The Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation worked with community partners for the American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Early Childhood Needs Assessment Design Project, 2014–2017. For the project, a community of learning met to discuss cultural considerations for research conducted in AIAN communities based on firsthand experiences with AIAN children, families, and programs. The community of learning included AIAN community partners, researchers with experience working with AIAN communities, and federal staff from several agencies. With input from the community of learning, the project team developed three design options for the needs assessment to meet the interests and priorities of AIAN practitioners and communities. The design options drew on data collection methods that would respect local cultural protocols and build rapport so that community members could engage in and build capacity for the data collection. For example, they used storytelling as a framework for data collection and respected Indigenous ways of knowing. ▲

Importantly, interpreters can enhance analysis while not diminishing the rigor of the research. To identify differences in access or service delivery, analysis can include methods that disaggregate data by participant groups and seek to identify unintended positive and negative consequences of program implementation.

Federal evaluation staff might also delay dissemination planning until study teams build relationships with community stakeholders, so that those stakeholders can weigh in on the products and means of dissemination that best fit their context. In addition, evaluation findings might get more exposure and follow-up if they are communicated in ways that reach and resonate with program participants and community members. Depending on community context and preferences, dissemination methods could range from web-based platforms to print products distributed at locations participants regularly visit. All products can be designed to meet the preferences of specific audiences, including program participants and other community members.

Plan for a CREE approach in budgets, timelines, and contracts

It can take time and resources to incorporate a CREE lens into an evaluation study. But engaging deeply with stakeholders, iterating on research questions, considering equity issues, and using innovative data collection and analysis methods can result in findings and dissemination approaches that better meet communities' needs and describe a program more accurately than traditional evaluation methods. When developing RFPs and supporting evaluations, federal evaluation staff might think about lengthening the

timeline for the study design tasks or specifying that activities for stakeholder engagement tasks must include meaningful involvement from community-level stakeholders, including program participants.

For example, to enable stakeholder engagement, evaluations might be split into an initial design or formative study contract, an implementation contract, and a summative evaluation contract. To get a head start on stakeholder engagement, federal evaluation staff can also seek fast-track clearance for Paperwork Reduction Act approval to recruit sites. They can then seek traditional clearance for broader data collection after stakeholders have been engaged.

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Recommendations in this brief are based on discussions of CREE in the following resources:

- [“A Guide to Conducting Culturally Responsive Evaluations” \(Chapter 7 in *The 2010 User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation*\)](#)
 - [Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment, University of Illinois–Urbana Champaign](#)
 - [Equitable Evaluation Initiative](#)
 - [“Culturally Responsive Evaluation: Theory, Practice, and Future Implications” \(Chapter 12 in *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation, Fourth Edition*\)](#)
 - [“Considerations for Conducting Evaluation Using a Culturally Responsive and Racial Equity Lens”](#)
 - [“How to Embed a Racial and Ethnic Equity Perspective in Research: Practical Guidance for the Research Process”](#) ▲
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