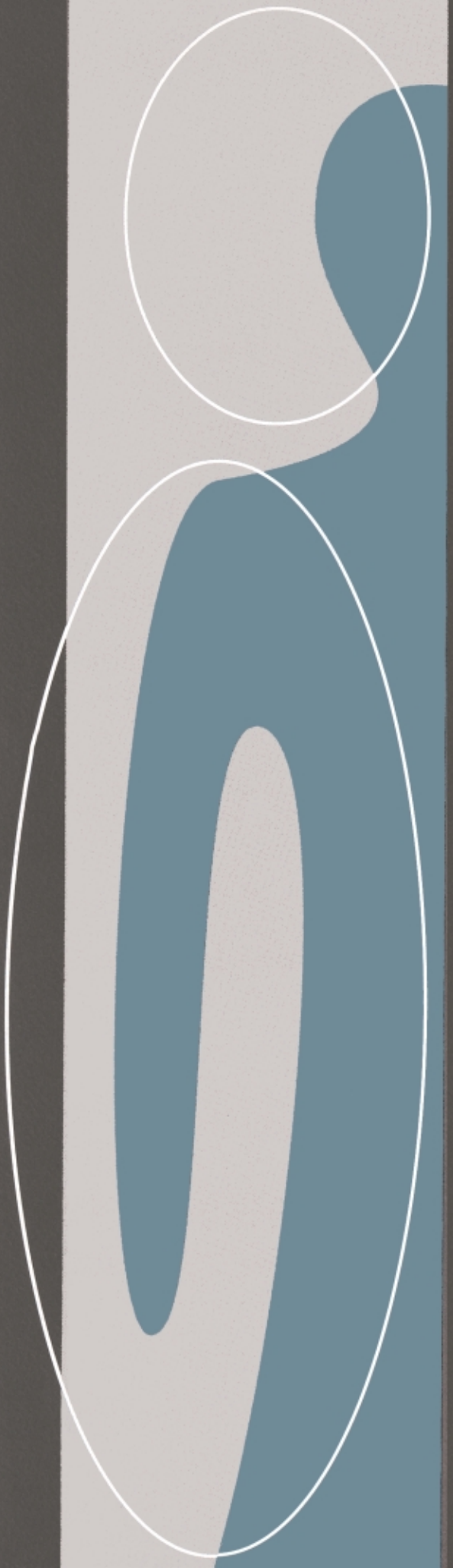

# Choosing and Using an External Evaluator

BOOKLET 7

DIVISION OF ADOLESCENT AND SCHOOL HEALTH
NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHRONIC DISEASE PREVENTION AND HEALTH PROMOTION
CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL

# Choosing and Using an External Evaluator

**Donald C. Iverson**

This booklet was prepared by IOX Assessment Associates under Contract No. 200-88-0683 with the Division of Adolescent and School Health, Centers for Disease Control. Preliminary draft: May 1992.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

INTRODUCTION . . . . . 1

GUIDELINES

Guideline 1: Form an evaluation committee. . . . . 1

Guideline 2: Define the evaluation. . . . . 2

Guideline 3: Solicit candidates. . . . . 2

Guideline 4: Interview and select the evaluator. . . . . 3

Guideline 5: Write and negotiate the contract. . . . . 7

Guideline 6: Interact closely with the evaluator. . . . . 7

Guideline 7: Prepare the final report and release of results. . . . . 8

CONCLUSION . . . . . 8

APPENDICES

A: Sample Job Description . . . . . 11

B: Candidate Rating Form . . . . . 13

C: Sample Contract . . . . . 17

# Introduction

An important aspect of every HIV education program is program evaluation. Evaluation of HIV education is especially important since so little is known about these programs. Only through well-designed, systematic evaluations can the essential components of successful HIV programs be identified. Further, evaluation results will provide educators with information regarding the expected effects of well-designed and adequately implemented HIV education programs.

Objectivity is vital to an effective evaluation, and an external evaluator is often the surest method of attaining that. An external evaluator, however, should not be hurriedly chosen, because program personnel can easily become dissatisfied with an inappropriate evaluation approach and can then question the usefulness of its results.

Well-planned and well-conducted evaluations are invaluable in determining how an HIV education program can be improved. Such evaluations can also assist program personnel in making judgments about program effectiveness with a target population. The following seven guidelines can direct you in selecting and interacting with an appropriate external evaluator.

## Guideline 1: Form an evaluation committee.

*Form an evaluation committee.*

An evaluation committee should oversee the entire evaluation process, from initial planning, through implementation, through final report. This committee should be made up of persons representing the various aspects of the HIV education program, including teachers who will deliver the curriculum or train other teachers to deliver it. The committee's size will depend on the size of your program. A large program will support an evaluation committee of five to seven persons, chaired by the project director. Smaller programs, of course, may involve no more than three people in all—some, perhaps only a single staffer. In such cases, the evaluation committee might need to include the entire program staff.

The evaluation committee will have primary responsibility for all aspects of the evaluation and will receive regular reports from the external evaluator. Committee members must be actively involved in the evaluation process to increase their understanding of it and to allow them to make effective use of evaluation results.

## Guideline 2: Define the evaluation.

*Define the evaluation.*

The evaluation committee must have a clear understanding of what it wants the evaluation to accomplish. In particular, the committee must identify the decisions intended to be the focus of the evaluation. Once these decisions have been identified and clarified in writing, the committee should identify specific tasks for which the external evaluator will be responsible. These tasks should relate directly to the decisions to be addressed by the evaluation and might include development of the evaluation plan, development of evaluation instruments, selection of the sampling procedures and drawing of the evaluation sample, collection of evaluation data, analysis of evaluation data, composition of the evaluation report, and assistance in presenting evaluation results.

Once these tasks have been determined, the committee must compose a job description including these and any other requirements for the position. An overall description of your HIV education project and an estimate of the evaluation funds available should also be included in this document. (See Appendix A for a sample job description.)

The job description should end with detailed instructions of how potential candidates are to apply for the position, identifying all information and documentation they must provide to the committee. At a minimum, the committee will want to review a copy of at least one evaluation report previously written by the applicant and at least two references from individuals or organizations for which evaluation services have been rendered.

## Guideline 3: Solicit candidates.

*Solicit candidates.*

Once the job description has been completed, it should be distributed to local colleges and universities and to professional organizations such as the American Educational Research Association and the National Council on Measurement in Education. It should also be advertised at least once in the local newspaper. The evaluation office and the personnel office of the state education agency can often provide assistance in identifying or soliciting viable applicants. Viable candidates with academic credentials in program evaluation can usually be found in college or university departments of educational research and statistics. Specialized academic centers, such as centers for health services research or educational research, are another potential source of candidates. You might also use

your own existing network of contacts to identify persons who have conducted program evaluations for other organizations in your community.

Send copies of the job description to all identified candidates. When someone is identified as a good program evaluator, a telephone call or letter to recruit that person is appropriate. If an external evaluator is selected who resides outside your immediate geographical area, make sure the evaluator will be able to participate in regular evaluation committee meetings.

## Guideline 4: Interview and select the evaluator.

*Select the evaluator.*

Although the evaluation committee will review a number of applicants for the position, it should narrow the pool down to five or fewer candidates for formal interviews. The committee will want to explore a number of issues during these interviews. The following questions—to be asked of the candidate or discussed among committee members—may be helpful.

### Does the candidate understand the difference between research and evaluation?

The primary purpose of research is to develop a new knowledge base or expand on an existing one. On the other hand, the primary purpose of program evaluation is to provide information related to specific program improvement or program continuation decisions. It is possible, of course, for program evaluation efforts to expand on an existing knowledge base while simultaneously providing program personnel with the information they need. However, external evaluators are sometimes more interested in conducting research peripheral to the evaluation needs of the program—in part, because of their desire to publish in research journals. Such instances will usually lead to ineffective evaluation results. To prevent such a situation, have the candidate describe the difference between research and evaluation approaches. If a candidate does not understand or appreciate this difference, he or she will likely lean toward research during your evaluation because most graduate programs emphasize the acquisition of research rather than program evaluation skills.

## Does the candidate understand your program?

Have the candidate describe his or her understanding of your program's intent (as reflected in the information you provide to applicants) and how its goals are to be attained. If the candidate misunderstands program goals or operational strategies, make corrections at this time to give the candidate a fair opportunity to respond to subsequent questions. It is important that you feel comfortable about the candidate's understanding of your program's goals and strategies.

## What would the candidate's general approach be to your evaluation?

Have the candidate describe the general approach he or she intends to take for the evaluation. Pay attention to questions and issues the candidate believes should be the focus of the evaluation, the type of data to be collected to address those questions and issues, the method of data collection, and the presentation of the evaluation's results. If the discussion becomes very technical and a candidate is unable to present information that you can understand, it is unlikely that this candidate will meet your needs. A candidate unable to communicate effectively at this time will probably not overcome the problem during the evaluation. Effective communication is a key for success, and the interview gives committee members a good idea of how effectively a candidate can communicate.

## Does the candidate believe your evaluation can be conducted for the available monies?

Candidates must indicate that their proposed evaluation approach can be carried out for the monies you indicated would be available. You may find a proposed evaluation plan to be excellent but unattainable under your anticipated budget.

All candidates who pass the initial screening process should be asked to produce a detailed budget for the evaluation. A detailed budget is useful for identifying the aspects of the evaluation that are being emphasized, as well as for providing the committee with a way of monitoring the overall evaluation effort.

## What is the candidate's reaction to supervision by the evaluation committee?

The evaluator should report to the evaluation committee to assist the committee's supervision of the evaluation. It is reasonable to assume that a candidate unwilling to work under such conditions is not appropriate for the position.

Experienced evaluators might offer suggestions to help your committee's proposed project management operate more efficiently and effectively.

## What is the candidate's prior evaluation experience?

Experience is an important factor to consider. A candidate probably will not have performed exactly the same evaluation that you require, but many similarities between previous programs and your own can be found. The candidate's prior experience will be your main opportunity to discover and weigh that person's strengths and weaknesses.

## How useful are the candidate's previous evaluation reports?

Look for evaluation reports for which the candidate served as lead author. Assess the reports for their clarity, organization, readability, and potential usefulness for decision makers. Pay particular attention to how well they would help a program improve. Candidates providing technical, poorly written, disorganized, difficult-to-understand, or lengthy evaluation reports will likely compose similar reports for your evaluation. Evaluators with poor writing skills are all too common, and a poorly written report can ruin the best evaluation study.

## Does the candidate have good references?

Candidates should be asked to provide the names of at least two persons or organizations for whom they have previously conducted evaluation projects. These references should be contacted for objective views of the candidates. Here are some questions you could ask the references.

- Did the evaluation approach used by the evaluator address the needs and desires of your organization?

- Was the evaluation conducted in a timely fashion?
- Was the evaluation conducted within your budget?
- Was the evaluation report useful to you?
- Would you hire the evaluator to conduct another evaluation for you?

### Will the candidate's existing professional commitments interfere with the planned evaluation?

Good program evaluators are usually in demand. A candidate who is engaged in several projects, however, may be unable to devote sufficient time to your program evaluation. Ask the candidate to describe current and expected professional commitments. If the commitments seem excessive, ask how the candidate plans to conduct your program evaluation along with these other tasks. If the candidate indicates that other persons will be used to assist with the evaluation, determine which tasks will be performed by whom. Also determine if these other persons are capable of performing the tasks assigned to them. Using a team of trained and experienced persons to perform an evaluation is common, but the committee must satisfy itself that the team leader (i.e., the candidate) will be involved in all tasks that the committee believes require this person's direct involvement.

### What is your general reaction to the candidate?

During interviews, be alert to the candidate's ability to communicate in a straightforward manner, and be alert to your own expectations of how effectively you and your colleagues can work with this person. A clash of working styles can certainly be a problem, and the chemistry between a candidate and committee members is not always right. Negative subjective reactions should be viewed as a serious problem that may not be easily resolved.

### What is your overall rating of the candidate?

Following the interview process, committee members should individually rate the candidates on all of the issues previously described. Candidates might be rated on a five-point Likert-type

scale, ranging from "Definitely hire as our evaluator" to "Definitely do not hire as our evaluator." "No opinion" should be the midpoint. (See Appendix B for a sample form for rating candidates.) After combining committee members' individual scores, the candidates should be ranked so that the position can be offered to the candidate most acceptable to the majority of committee members.

## Guideline 5: Write and negotiate the contract.

*Write the contract.*

The desired relationship between the evaluation committee and the external evaluator is one of partnership and should be reflected as such in the contract. The contract should state, in a single paragraph if possible, the evaluator's general responsibilities. Also include in this paragraph a brief statement detailing your intended decision-making process and the authority of the evaluation committee. In another paragraph, list the contract deliverables and provide a timetable for them. Many evaluation contracts also specify who owns the data gathered during the evaluation as well as who has the right to publish the results of the evaluation study. Finally, indicate how the evaluator will bill for services rendered and a schedule of payment. Between 20 and 30 percent of the evaluator's fee should be withheld until the acceptance of the final report by the committee.

The contract should also detail the evaluation committee's responsibilities to provide the external evaluator with timely and appropriate guidance, to review and approve evaluation instruments and documents in a timely and constructive manner, and to assist the evaluator in solving problems that arise during the evaluation. (See Appendix C for a sample contract.)

## Guideline 6: Interact closely with the evaluator.

*Interact with the evaluator.*

At the first meeting with the evaluator, the evaluation committee should again describe the overall project and express its expectations of how the evaluation should be conducted. Following this general discussion, the evaluator and the committee should schedule, and make agendas for, subsequent meetings to keep the evaluation moving in a timely and efficient manner. Later meetings should encompass a review of the sample selection process and a discussion of the data-collection plan. The more specific the agenda you make for subsequent meetings, the more likely that the evaluation will meet the needs of the program and be completed in

a timely manner. Be sure to keep minutes of the committee meetings. The minutes need not be detailed but should record decisions made about the evaluation effort.

The committee's involvement in the evaluation process, however, should not be limited to periodic meetings with the evaluator. The committee, in part or in whole, should continually monitor the evaluator and the evaluation. A committee only intermittently involved in the evaluation process might not be aware that the evaluation is going in an inappropriate direction before considerable time, money, and effort have been wasted.

### Guideline 7: Prepare the final report and release of results.

*Prepare the final evaluation report.*

As your HIV education evaluation nears completion, the committee and the evaluator should agree on a format for the evaluation report. The evaluation report should address evaluation questions directly and briefly and should be understandable to the target audience. Any report, of course, must provide useful and direct guidance for program decision makers. The committee and the evaluator should also agree at this time on the evaluator's role in the release of the evaluation's results. The committee may request that the evaluator be available to meet with decision makers, conduct interviews with news media, and make public presentations of the results.

The evaluator customarily submits a preliminary draft of the final report to committee members for review and comment. If the changes suggested by the committee are significant and would have the effect of changing the findings, recommendations, or overall focus of the report, they should be discussed at a meeting between the committee and the evaluator. If the evaluator does not believe that the suggested changes are consistent with the data, the evaluator has the right to be disassociated from the report. In such an instance, the evaluator may make the requested changes and assign authorship of the report to the committee. Such situations should be avoided, however, as they usually place the integrity and public acceptance of the report in jeopardy.

## Conclusion

Most evaluations of HIV education programs are undertaken to help decision makers improve the program. The relationship between the evaluation committee and the external evaluator must

thus be viewed as a functional partnership. An effective functional partnership is founded on agreement over the objectives of the evaluation, an understanding of the responsibilities and authority of each partner, and mutual respect for the contributions that each partner provides to the evaluation. Your committee must have ultimate responsibility for the program's evaluation, and the evaluator, as a partner, should function as an advisor and staff person to you. Selecting an appropriate evaluator will largely depend upon your committee's specificity in identifying the evaluation tasks to be performed, the effort you put into the selection process, and the extent and quality of your interaction with the evaluator in the development and implementation of the evaluation. If the steps identified in this booklet are followed, the evaluation process should be enjoyable and productive for both the evaluation committee and the external evaluator.

# APPENDIX A

## Sample Job Description

### Program Evaluator

The HIV Prevention Program of XYZ state wishes to contract someone to design and conduct an evaluation of a school-based HIV prevention program. (A description of the program, taken from the grant application, is attached.) The evaluation, which is to be conducted during the 1991-1992 school year, is intended to help planning personnel improve the program.

Interested candidates should submit a letter of intent in which their prior evaluation experiences are outlined, a current resumé, a copy of an evaluation report written by the candidate, and the names of two persons for whom program evaluations have been conducted. The above information should be sent to: Ms. Jane Zee, XYZ state. Applications postmarked by 4-15-91 will be accepted.

Candidates who are invited for an interview should be prepared to discuss the evaluation approach they would propose, based on the information provided in the attached program description. Candidates should assume that approximately $40,000 is available for the evaluation, including personnel costs.

# APPENDIX B

## Candidate Rating Form

Candidate Name: _____

**1. Distinction between research and evaluation**

| Clearly understands the distinction between evaluation and research | | No opinion | | Has no understanding of the distinction between evaluation and research |
|---|---|---|---|---|

**2. Understanding of the program**

| Has excellent understanding of the program | | No opinion | | Has no understanding of the program |
|---|---|---|---|---|

**3. Evaluation approach**

| Understandable: can clearly explain how evaluation approach addresses needs of program | | No opinion | | Not understandable: cannot clearly explain how evaluation approach addresses needs of program |
|---|---|---|---|---|

**4. Evaluation costs**

| Evaluation is very likely to be conducted with available resources | | No opinion | | Evaluation can't be conducted with available resources |
|---|---|---|---|---|

**5. Reaction to management structure**

| Supports management structure | | No opinion | | Wants sole authority |
|---|---|---|---|---|

**6. Prior evaluation experience**

Has done evaluations similar to this one | No opinion | Has no experience with evaluations such as this one

**7. Usefulness of previous evaluation reports**

Evaluation reports are understandable and useful | No opinion | Evaluation reports are not understandable or useful

**8. References**

Excellent | No opinion | Poor

**9. Professional commitments**

Commitments will not interfere with evaluation | No opinion | Commitments will interfere with evaluation

**10. General reaction (manner, personality)**

Very positive | No opinion | Very negative

**11. Overall rating**

Definitely hire as our evaluator | No opinion | Definitely do not hire as our evaluator

# APPENDIX C

## Sample Contract*

The evaluator, _____, is responsible for designing and conducting an evaluation of the HIV education program of the XYZ State Department of Education. The evaluator is responsible for preparing the evaluation plan, developing the evaluation instruments, identifying the program participants who will complete the evaluation instruments, administering the evaluation instruments to the selected participants, entering the data onto a computer tape or disc, conducting the appropriate statistical analyses, writing the evaluation report, and presenting the evaluation's results to designated parties. The evaluator reports to the HIV Education Director, Ms. Jane Zee, but an Evaluation Committee chaired by Ms. Zee has oversight responsibility for the evaluation. The overall evaluation plan as well as the evaluation instruments, sampling plan, data-collection plan, data-analysis plan, and final report must be submitted to, and approved by, the Evaluation Committee. The evaluator serves as an advisor to the Evaluation Committee and is expected to attend all meetings of the Committee, unless informed otherwise.

The Evaluation Committee is responsible for making timely decisions regarding the overall evaluation plan and its components. If the Committee recommends changes in the plan, the suggested changes will be specific and feasible within the scope of this contract. If the evaluator disputes the feasibility of the changes, Ms. Zee will be the final arbiter. If the Evaluation Committee reverses one of its decisions, and the changes require additional work on the part of the evaluator, the contract may be modified as agreed to by Ms. Zee and within the regulations of XYZ state. The Evaluation Committee will also be responsible for assisting the evaluator in securing permission for collecting the evaluation data, as well as assisting the evaluator in resolving political or logistical barriers to conducting the evaluation. The Evaluation Committee will assist the evaluator in developing a model outline for the evaluation report. Finally, the Evaluation Committee will identify the person(s) to whom a presentation of the evaluation's results will be made.

The evaluation contract will be in effect from July 1, 1991, through June 30, 1992. The evaluator will deliver the following products at the times specified below.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | General evaluation plan | 7-15-91 |
| 2. | Evaluation instruments | 8-31-91 |
| 3. | Sampling plan and sampling frame | 9-30-91 |
| 4. | Data-collection plan | 9-30-91 |
| 5. | Data-analysis plan | 9-30-91 |
| 6. | Collection of evaluation data | 3-15-92 |
| 7. | Evaluation report, including data tape or disc | 5-31-92 |
| 8. | Presentation (limit of 2) of evaluation results | 6-30-92 |

---

*This sample contract illustrates content typically included in such documents and is *not* intended for use as a legal contract. Before issuing your own contract, be sure to review it with your own legal counsel.

A deliverable will not be considered satisfactorily completed until it is approved/accepted by the Evaluation Committee. If a deliverable is not approved/accepted by the Evaluation Committee, specific reasons for its disapproval/rejection must be provided to the evaluator within two weeks of the deliverable's receipt.

The payment schedule for the contract is as follows: 10% after deliverable #1; 20% after deliverable #2; 10% after deliverables #3-5; 30% after deliverable #6; 20% after deliverable #7; and 10% after deliverable #8.

Accepted by:

| | |
|---|---|
| _____ | _____ |
| | Evaluator |
| _____ | |
| State XYZ Officials | |
| _____ | _____ |
| Date | Date |