

## **Changing Horses Mid-Stream: Lessons Learned from Evaluator Transitions During Two ITEST (Innovative Technology Experiences for Students & Teachers) STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Projects**

Ginger Fitzhugh, Evaluation & Research Associates (gfitzhugh@eraeval.org)  
Denice Ward Hood, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (dwhood@illinois.edu)  
Mary Aleta White, Arizona Grants Management (mwhite@azgm.org)

### **Introduction**

It is not uncommon for programs to change evaluators partway through a grant cycle by necessity or choice. Based on our experiences as incoming and outgoing evaluators of two multi-year, out-of-school time programs funded by the National Science Foundation, we considered the questions:

***What issues are associated with an evaluation transition for the evaluators, program staff, and other stakeholders?***

***What strategies can facilitate a smooth transition for all stakeholders?***

We found the issues and strategies related to **communication, context, logistics, and evaluation design**. While many of these challenges and practices are common to all evaluations, some are especially important when there is a change in the evaluator.

### **Issues Associated with Passing the Evaluation Baton and How to Address Them**

#### **Communication**

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Promising Practices</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Quickly building relationships between project stakeholders and the new evaluation team when program is underway and data collection is in progress</li><li>• Communicating with evaluation and project funders</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Involve relevant stakeholders in planning (typically PI, Co-PI's, some program staff and evaluation teams)</li><li>• Meet to develop transition plan</li><li>• Clarify responsibilities; make expectations as explicit as possible</li><li>• Overlap evaluation teams, if possible</li><li>• Keep funder/program officer informed</li></ul>

**Context**

Issues	Promising Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the history and goals of the program and the evaluation</li> <li>• Understanding everyone’s roles, including “who is who” and “who does what”</li> <li>• Understanding the reason(s) for the evaluator change and what it may mean for the incoming evaluator</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have discussions with stakeholders to provide context and enhance understanding</li> <li>• As outgoing evaluator, try to anticipate what incoming evaluator needs to know to complete the evaluation plan and share information regarding context</li> <li>• Revisit the program logic model</li> <li>• Visit the programs and observe</li> </ul>

**Logistics**

Issues	Promising Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transferring “institutional memory” between evaluators</li> <li>• Handling a gap between evaluators</li> <li>• Missing critical windows for collecting data due to gaps or confusion re: responsibilities</li> <li>• Managing program stakeholders’ added evaluation workload due to the transition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop work plan and timelines for the transition phase</li> <li>• Transfer all project information, materials, and data between outgoing and incoming evaluators; timely communication is critical</li> <li>• As incoming evaluator, review all major documents created by outgoing evaluator</li> <li>• Reduce disruption to program staff by minimizing changes to evaluation design</li> <li>• Store all evaluation-related documents centrally and electronically to facilitate their transfer</li> </ul>

**Evaluation Design**

Issues	Promising Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deciding what to keep and what to change from the previous evaluation plan</li> <li>• Preserving ability to compare multiple years of data while responding to changing program needs</li> <li>• Reconciling differences between outgoing and incoming evaluators’ methodology or approach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask the PIs if they would like to change any aspects of the evaluation going forward</li> <li>• Refine original plan as needed to improve the evaluation, while minimizing changes to preserve comparability</li> <li>• Explain any differences in approach or methodology to PIs/program officer and reasons for any changes</li> </ul>