Evaluation and Measurement for TAACCCT Grant Programs: Recommendations and Resources for Getting Started

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BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW OF THE GUIDE

In September 2011, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Employment and Training Administration (ETA) announced the Round One grants under the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program. Under this program, DOL plans to award $500 million in grants each year from 2011 through 2014. TAACCCT grants provide support for building individuals’ skills for employment in high-wage, high-growth fields such as health care, advanced manufacturing, science, technology, and engineering. Grants were awarded to innovative institutional initiatives around the country to increase the attainment of degrees, certificates, and other industry-recognized credentials that provide these skills in two years or less and target economically dislocated and low-skilled workers.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) Postsecondary Success strategy shares the TAACCCT program’s goal of increasing attainment of postsecondary credentials that prepare people, especially those from low-income populations, for living-wage jobs. BMGF funded a team from Mathematica Policy Research and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) to provide technical assistance (TA) for measurement and evaluation to 32 Round One TAACCCT grantees. The TA support was designed to increase the grantees’ capacity to measure and evaluate their programs and to generate valid evidence about program effectiveness. The Mathematica-CCRC team provided TA through webinars, a convening, and direct assistance to the grantees between May and October 2012. The TA helped identify common measurement and evaluation challenges across Round One grantees, and enabled us to develop recommendations and resources to help current and future TAACCCT grantees structure and implement sound measurement and evaluation procedures to understand and improve their programs.

This guide provides four key recommendations to help grantees as they plan and implement measurement and evaluation strategies:

1. **Identify and prioritize your learning goals**
2. **Involve key stakeholders early and often**
3. **Develop a shared logic model**
4. **Develop data collection and analysis plans to address your priority learning goals**

For each recommendation, we frame the issue, describe what needs to be done to implement the recommendation, and provide descriptions of, and links to, resources to support grantee efforts. Examples from Round One grantees show how the issues have played out in the field. We conclude with a brief listing of extant resources grantees may find useful.
RECOMMENDATION #1: IDENTIFY AND PRIORITIZE YOUR LEARNING GOALS

Measurement and evaluation can serve many purposes, including:

- Complying with grant reporting requirements. You need to know “what happened” in the program and report it per ETA requirements.

- Understanding program development. You want to understand how and what happened in the program, and you want to use the findings to improve it.

- Assessing program impacts. You want to know if your program caused the observed outcomes, and you want to rule out alternative explanations.

- Understanding program replication and scale. You want to learn from the program to expand it to other populations or sites.

To comply with grant requirements and still get what you want from the evaluation, you will need to determine where and how to focus your efforts.

**What Needs to Happen**

Determine how your work aligns with, and builds on, evidence of success for the strategy you are using to develop your program. The TAACCCT application requires applicants to describe the evidence that supports the program strategy they adopted and to classify the evidence as “strong,” “moderate,” or “preliminary.” The strength of the evidence can help grantees identify and prioritize what type of measurement and evaluation would best support their learning goals. For example, if evidence of a strategy’s effectiveness is weak, you may want to focus on a rigorous impact study to understand the impact of the strategy adopted. If evidence of effectiveness is strong, you might want to better understand successes and challenges in implementing the program so you can replicate and expand it.

Articulate clear, relevant, and answerable research questions that will provide information that can lead to actions to improve the program. When developing research questions that will guide your measurement and evaluation, think about what you would do differently if you knew the answer. Also consider the timing of necessary programmatic decisions, and try to structure questions so that evidence of success will be delivered by the time decisions must be made. Developing a logic model (see Recommendation #3) can help.
Understand and leverage TAACCCT reporting requirements to meet learning goals. The TAACCCT reporting requirements generally align with most of the purposes of evaluation listed above. For example, ETA-required quarterly program implementation and progress reports should inform program improvement and can shed light on replication and scale. Similarly, the required annual outcome reports for participant and comparison cohorts can form the basis for assessing program impacts. Challenges arise when TAACCCT reporting requirements do not align with, or even conflict with, grantee learning goals. In such instances, grantees should work with their DOL regional federal project officer to seek appropriate solutions.

Resources to Inform the Work

When working with Round One grantees, we developed materials to help them understand the value of developing and implementing a measurement and evaluation system that can help program heads assess what aspects of their programs are working well and what aspects might need to be enhanced or altered. The materials are in Appendix A and can be accessed using the hyperlinks below:

- **Engaging Practitioners in a Culture of Inquiry: “Evaluation” Work in Context.** A PowerPoint presentation that shows how stakeholders can work with data to enhance learning from college programs and to support continuous improvement.

- **General Principles for Creating Comparison Groups.** A PowerPoint presentation discussing the importance of comparison groups for program evaluation and their limitations: validity of comparisons, possible threats to validity, and how to mitigate these threats to ensure compelling results.

- **Performance Reporting.** A handout developed from the PowerPoint presentation on creating comparison cohorts for evaluation and performance reporting requirements.

The Air Washington consortium is launching new programs in the aerospace industry with redesigned developmental education, enhanced support services, and curricula realigned to employer needs. Air Washington initially planned to contract with a research team at a local university to conduct a comprehensive program evaluation, but had to scale back its plans due to budget constraints. It decided that its first priority was to collect and report on the data DOL requires (which includes implementation, progress, and outcome performance measures).

Because the consortium spanned 11 colleges with programs of varying length and credentials in five occupational fields, meeting DOL requirements was a challenge. In particular, DOL’s requirement that participant and comparison cohorts be balanced on gender posed problems, given Air Washington's explicit goal of increasing female enrollments and reducing time to completion. The involvement of two of the consortium’s colleges in another TAACCCT grant added an extra layer of complexity. Although the grant leadership was keen to learn about how implementation and outcomes varied across programs and colleges, it took a pragmatic approach to evaluation in the first year. It chose to limit the scope of its learning goals to focus on the DOL-required measures and to limit its sample to students at the “lead college” in each of the five occupational fields. Although it may add new learning goals as the grant period progresses, it was able to make the evaluation task manageable by limiting the focus in the first year of the grant.
RECOMMENDATION #2: INVOLVE KEY STAKEHOLDERS EARLY AND OFTEN

Grantees often think of evaluation as separate from program development and implementation and may be tempted to put off developing evaluation-related activities as they deal with the more pressing needs of launching new programs. If measurement and evaluation are not considered early in program implementation, however, it may be difficult to design and implement data collection that can help build strong programs in a continuous improvement framework.

Even if TAACCCT grantees contract with an external third-party evaluator, stakeholders from both the “program side” and “evaluation side” need to communicate early in program implementation. Evaluators must understand the program to evaluate it appropriately, and program leaders need to understand how an evaluation can address their learning goals.

What Needs to Happen

Build measurement and evaluation into program development. During planning and early implementation, stakeholders should have input into what to measure and how to measure it so that data collection and analysis are used in ongoing program development and decision making. If measurement and evaluation are built into program development, stakeholders can provide input and use findings, even if they do not participate in all aspects of program development. Therefore, it is important that you devote enough resources to processes that allow stakeholders to provide input. Round One TAACCCT grantees faced at least two challenges in this area. First, it was difficult to determine when to involve stakeholders—to early, and the program model was unclear; too late, and evaluation design options were limited. Second, because stakeholders had competing responsibilities, it was difficult to ensure that TAACCCT work would receive adequate priority.

Identify and engage the people with appropriate knowledge, skills, and authority for the roles they will play. Different stakeholders have different skills and perspectives, all of which are necessary for successful measurement and evaluation. Key stakeholders will typically play the following roles:

- **Programmatic leaders.** People leading the design and delivery of program content are the best source for information on how programs are supposed to work for the students they target. Their content expertise should guide early thinking about program logic (see Recommendation #3) and learning goals. They will also use information generated by measurement and evaluation to improve their programs.
Institutional research (IR) officers. College IR officers can help identify data in the colleges’ information systems that might be used to monitor and assess program quality. Sometimes, they can generate ideas about integrating data into a measurement and evaluation system, lead efforts to collect new student data (for example, flags for TAA eligibility or program participation), and conduct analyses of student data.

Internal or external evaluation partners. Experts in qualitative methods (for example, interviews, focus groups) can help develop and implement tools that build an understanding of program implementation and inform program improvement. Experts in quantitative methods (for example, statistical expertise) can help determine how to assess program outcomes, including those that DOL requires. Grantees must understand which kinds of expertise they need to meet their learning goals (see Recommendation #4).

State workforce agencies (SWAs). SWAs can provide aggregate reports of student employment outcomes for the group of students identified by the colleges (that is, participant and comparison cohorts) using student Social Security Numbers (SSNs). In some cases, they can also provide individual-level data. Because TAACCCT grantees must report on employment outcomes, most will need to involve their SWA to obtain this information.

Resources to Inform the Work

When working with Round One grantees, we developed materials to help key stakeholders with measurement and evaluation for program quality improvement. These materials are in Appendix B and can be accessed using the hyperlinks below:

- Choosing and Working with an Evaluator. A PowerPoint presentation given via webinar by Mathematica and CCRC. Topics covered include “Writing an Effective RFP,” “Negotiating with Your Evaluator,” and “Creating an Effective Partnership,” and each provides an evaluator and a grantee perspective.

- Summary Notes from “Choosing and Working with an Evaluator.” Transcript-like notes of the webinar provide a detailed discussion of the topic.

- Measurement and Evaluation Planning Worksheets. Worksheets designed to help grantees (1) think about issues that can support successful measurement and evaluation efforts as they build their programs, and (2) organize and prioritize measurement and evaluation needs and shape a plan for addressing them.

- Using Wage Records for TAACCCT Reporting and Evaluation. A PowerPoint presentation to help grantees understand approaches to reporting employment outcomes. It discusses the basic TAACCCT reporting requirements and additional measures grantees can use to determine the impact of a TAACCCT-funded intervention.
RECOMMENDATION #3: DEVELOP A SHARED LOGIC MODEL

A well-developed logic model lays the groundwork for measurement and evaluation by graphically demonstrating the expected causal relationships—indicating “If we do X, then Y will happen”. It identifies what ought to be measured, when it should be measured (that is, at what point as the program unfolds), and how measurement and evaluation can be used for continuous program improvement (prompting questions such as “Did X really cause Y? Why or why not?”). Because many TAACCCT grants involve more than one program at multiple campuses, colleges, or states, a logic model is essential as it allows the disparate stakeholders to have a common understanding of the program. Most important, it identifies the relationships among inputs, activities, and results. Although it is important to develop a shared logic model early, logic models—like the programs—are not static and should be revisited throughout grant implementation.

What Needs to Happen

Agree on program goals and objectives. Program goals must be clearly articulated because they are the benchmark against which progress and outcomes are assessed. DOL’s overarching goal for the TAACCCT program is clear: to prepare program participants for employment in high-wage, high-skill occupations. Because different stakeholders may set other goals—for participants or institutions—it is important to articulate, and agree on, which goals are most important and can be achieved within the grant period so they can be included in measurement and evaluation efforts.

Identify key program components. The complexity of most TAACCCT-funded programs can make individual program components difficult to evaluate. Grantees should determine what components are critical to their program success and implementation plans, for these are the elements that should be central in measurement and evaluation efforts. If components vary by program or college, this should be recognized and documented to support understanding of the differences observed between them.

Identify indicators to lay the foundation for measurement and evaluation. TAACCCT requires that grantees measure implementation, progress, and outcomes, and a logic model can help develop indicators for each. After stakeholders have identified the key program components and how they should affect desired outcomes, they can begin to determine which inputs, activities, and results should be tracked and how. Specific measurement approaches may require expertise from IR and evaluation specialists (see Recommendation #4), but the logic model will serve as their point of departure.

The Missouri Healthcare Workforce Innovation Networks (MoHealthWINs) is a statewide consortium that is developing short certificate modules and degree programs with online and hybrid courses in four health services career pathways. During the initial stages of implementation, it became clear that there was a disconnect between the original grant writers and the grant implementers: although the relationship among grant priorities, programs, strategies, and outcomes was clear to the executive director and members of the grant-writing team, it was not clear to program staff at the college level.

The leadership team initiated a logic modeling process called “Do the Crosswalk,” which allowed program staff at each campus to map out links between grant strategies, program components, and outcomes. Because program staff were overwhelmed with implementation issues during the first grant year, the MoHealthWINs-led researchers provided in-person small-group training sessions and webinars to guide the process. They also rolled out the logic model in small steps, starting in the first year, by identifying which strategies were relevant to each college’s program. Colleges are continuing to flesh out the logic model in the second grant year as they link specific actions to each strategy and identify the outcomes most relevant to their programs.

The process has helped program staff focus on what they are doing and hope to accomplish, and ultimately will help the consortium learn how program components affect student outcomes.
Discuss, document, and disseminate how you expect the program to work. Logic modeling needs time and attention. Facilitated workshops can be a good way to explain the program and to produce a documented description of the logic behind it. Other means, such as conference calls, virtual meetings, or wikis, can also serve this purpose, if stakeholders actively engage in the process and the resulting logic is documented, shared, and reexamined as the program, grant implementation, and evaluation activities evolve.

Resources to Inform the Work

Mathematica and CCRC hosted a webinar on “Creating and Applying Logic Models in Your TAACCCT Evaluation.” Materials from the webinar appear in Appendix C and are linked below:

- **Creating and Applying Logic Models in Your TAACCCT Evaluation.** PowerPoint from the webinar that explains a logic model and discusses how grantees can develop a model specific to their program to serve as a foundation for measurement and evaluation.

- **Summary Notes from “Creating and Applying Logic Models in Your TAACCCT Evaluation.”** Transcript-like notes of the webinar provide a detailed discussion of the topic.
RECOMMENDATION #4: DEVELOP DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PLANS TO ADDRESS YOUR PRIORITY LEARNING GOALS

A program’s logic model will suggest what needs to be measured and when it should be measured. However, grantees still must determine how to (1) define key indicators, (2) collect the data to measure them, and (3) analyze the data in ways that address learning goals.

What Needs to Happen

Develop technical materials to support high-quality, consistent data collection. Data on student characteristics and outcomes will typically be available through colleges’ student information systems and SWAs, but a data dictionary—which provides detailed definitions of all terms and specifies how to calculate all measures—is necessary to ensure that all programs or colleges collect and report data consistently. Grantees may need to collect implementation and progress data through other means, including document reviews, interviews, and surveys. Protocols specifying procedures (for example, timing, content, other rules) for such data collection are necessary to ensure that data are consistent and relevant. IR and evaluation partners should have the expertise to develop such materials.

Identify appropriate participant and comparison cohorts. DOL requires grantees to report outcomes for participant and “comparison” cohorts. A comparison cohort is a group of people similar to those enrolled in the TAACCCT-funded program (that is, participants), but who do not receive the services funded by the grant. Individuals in the participant cohort are sometimes known in measurement and evaluation jargon as the treatment group. Reporting outcomes for both participant and comparison cohorts was extremely challenging for Round One grantees for at least three reasons. First, the programs tended to be complex and comprehensive, making it difficult to discern who is in a program and a participant and who is not. Specific issues they needed to consider included how to handle noncredit students, previously enrolled students, programs with few students, and comprehensive programs in which all students are touched by a program. Second, even when it was clear who is in a program, many community colleges could not track their participation. Some grantees needed to adapt intake mechanisms to flag students as participants or comparison group members and develop a way to link this information to student information systems. Finally, some grantees found it necessary to obtain student consent and information such as SSNs for students that had enrolled in a program some years earlier.

Align analytic methods with learning goals. The method selected for analyzing data depends on how the data will be used and grantees should seek evaluation partners with an expertise in the methodological requirements needed to address their learning goal. If a grantee’s primary measurement goal is to describe a program’s progress and outcomes, the comprehensiveness and quality of data are paramount and the analytic approach is fairly straightforward. If a grantee’s primary measurement goal is to understand what program components caused better outcomes, the analytic approach must systematically rule out alternative explanations (for example, “The program didn’t cause the employment boost; economic conditions did”). Ruling out alternative explanations poses technical challenges and requires careful planning. Experimental methods—in which program participants are randomly assigned to a treatment or control group—provide the strongest evidence of what causes an outcome. It may be difficult to randomly assign students into complex TAACCCT programs, however, and even if it could be done, findings might not be generalizable if the program is small or serves a targeted population or setting. Research that uses random assignment into a program or statistical tools that approximate random assignment (for example, regression discontinuity designs and propensity score matching) have technical challenges and call for specific analytic expertise.
Resources to Inform the Work

Mathematica and CCRC developed several resources to help grantees collect data that meet their measurement and evaluation needs and the DOL reporting requirements. These resources are in Appendix D and can be accessed using the hyperlinks below:

- **Common Performance Measures.** Tables of information to help define and measure implementation, progress, and outcomes for each TAACCCT priority. The handout suggests how to collect data and calculate measures and discusses challenges associated with each.

- **Qualitative Research Guide.** A handout on designing a qualitative study. The worksheet helps grantees refine research questions and determine whether research design can benefit from a qualitative component. Included are tips and suggestions for conducting focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

- **Surveys of Students, Graduates, and Employers.** A PowerPoint presentation reviewing techniques to conduct surveys and providing examples from surveys conducted by Mathematica. It discusses survey design (who to ask, how long it should be), and implementation (who needs to approve), including how to determine the best respondent and appropriate survey modes.

- **Constructing Credible Comparison and Treatment Groups.** A PowerPoint presentation that defines well-designed experimental groups and discusses challenges associated with constructing credible comparison and treatment groups. It also discusses statistical techniques, such as propensity score matching methods, that might be used to ensure similarity between comparison and treatment groups.

- **Dealing with Variation in Treatment.** A PowerPoint presentation that discusses how to define a comparison group when treatment varies across sites or programs of study. It includes real-world examples of successful comparison groups used to assess varying programs and reviews how to incorporate implementation data into your analysis to understand which variations are most important to success.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

TAACCCT grantees might find the following resources useful when starting to build and implement their measurement and evaluation systems.

Organizations to Support Measurement and Evaluation

The following organizations contributed to the BMGF-funded TA to Round One TAACCCT grantees.

Mathematica Policy Research. Mathematica is a private research and evaluation firm. The website provides information about the services provided, including program evaluation and policy research, survey design and data collection, research assessment and interpretation, and program performance and data management. It also provides links to Mathematica’s research centers, including the Center for Improving Research Evidence (http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/cire/), which provides training and assistance in designing, conducting, assessing, and using research and evaluations.

http://mathematica-mpr.com/

Community College Research Center. CCRC conducts applied research to support the development of practice and policy that will achieve the most effective outcomes for community college students and institutions. Its website provides links to research on the major issues affecting community colleges in the United States, including workforce development, developmental education, and data-driven reform.

http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Home.asp

TAConneCt. TAConneCt provides TAACCCT grantees with “just-in-time” resources and serves as an online community for grantees and vetted experts who can help with grant planning, implementation, and evaluation.

http://www.taconnect.org/

RP Group. RP Group works with California community colleges to strengthen their ability to gather, analyze, and act on information in order to strengthen student success. The site provides links to studies, tools, how-to guides, and multimedia presentations on issues key to success in community colleges.

http://www.rpgroup.org/

Office of Community College Research and Leadership. OCCRL conducts research on policies, programs, and practices, focusing on P-20 preparation, transition, and completion. The site includes links to OCCRL research, including practice-oriented publications on topics of interest to TAACCCT grantees.

http://ocerl.illinois.edu/
DOL Resources

TAACCCT Grantee Community of Practice Resources. This site directs Round One and Round Two grantees to ETA resources for implementation and evaluation. Resources include recorded webinars, reporting guidance, and implementation tools.


DOL Website for TAACCCT Grantees. This site includes applicant, award, and contact information for Round One and Round Two grantees.

http://www.doleta.gov/taaccct/

Round One Annual Performance Reporting (APR) Training Module. This 87-minute slide show and audiorecording provides guidance on how to complete APR Tables 1 and 2 for Round One grantees.

https://www.workforce3one.org/view/3001209451326249264

Round One Supplemental Materials for APR Training Module. This document includes templates for APR Tables 1 and 2, as well as diagrams explaining how to calculate the required measures in the tables.

https://etagrantees.workforce3one.org/view/2001210248014905650/info

Round One Reporting Schedule. This is a schedule of the quarterly and annual reporting deadlines for Round One grantees.

https://etagrantees.workforce3one.org/view/2001222134012519937/info

Round One Participant and Comparison Cohort Training Module. This 47-minute slide show and audiorecording provides guidance on participant and comparison cohorts.

https://www.workforce3one.org/view/3001132653170738022

Round One Reporting Forms and Instructions. This file includes instructions and templates for Round One grantee annual and quarterly performance reporting.

https://etagrantees.workforce3one.org/view/2001210159266566882/info

Comparison Cohort Match-up Tool. This tool facilitates networking among grantees for comparison cohort matching.

https://etagrantees.workforce3one.org/view/4011210249094479175

Project Inventory for Cohort Development. This checklist of steps helps guide grantees through the process of cohort development.

https://etagrantees.workforce3one.org/view/2001210249299899796/info

Round Two Performance Reporting Training Module. This 30-minute slide show and audiorecording provides guidance on quarterly reporting for Round Two grantees.

https://etagrantees.workforce3one.org/view/4011233245037887198/info

Round Two Reporting Instructions. This file includes instructions for Round Two grantee annual and quarterly performance reporting.

https://etagrantees.workforce3one.org/view/2001233244759335516/info

TAACCCTitioners Monthly Newsletters. These newsletters include grant updates, upcoming deadlines, and grantee stories.

https://etagrantees.workforce3one.org/page/resources/1001210154074757215