Building Evaluation Capacity in a Federal Research Funding Office, the NIH Common Fund

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Abstract
The Common Fund of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) provides strategic, goal-driven investments to overcome key roadblocks and capitalize on emerging opportunities in biomedical research. Although performance monitoring has occurred continuously, formal evaluations of Common Fund programs have been ad hoc and conducted by contract studies. A recent process of the planning and management strategies for the Common Fund encouraged evaluative activities to be better integrated into the development and management of these programs. To address this need, the Common Fund is increasing internal evaluation capacity. We will share our efforts to build evaluation knowledge and skills among biomedical research scientists who are unfamiliar with evaluation practice. Capacity building prepares scientists to participate as team members and supporters of evaluation activities, paving the way for an evaluation-friendly culture within this unique NIH research funding entity.

Introduction
The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is a Federal Agency within the Department of Health and Human Services, and the premier funder of biomedical research and human health. Trans-NIH efforts that include participation by multiple NIH Institutes and Centers are frequently organized by the NIH Office of the Director. The NIH Common Fund is a unique funding entity within the NIH Office of the Director. It was established within the Division of Program Coordination, Planning, and Strategic Initiatives and is overseen by the Office of Strategic Coordination. Its purpose is to remove key roadblocks to biomedical research and to capitalize on emerging scientific opportunities. The Common Fund supports a series of short-term, exceptionally high-impact, trans-NIH programs. Each program has a 10-year maximum life span in which to achieve specific goals, and is required to develop a set of milestones that are used to assess progress toward program goals. All NIH Common Fund Programs are required to meet the following five criteria: transformative, synergistic, catalytic, cross-cutting, and unique.

Management of Common Fund Programs

NIH Office of Strategic Coordination (OSC)
- Coordinates & Program Leader
  - Provides leadership, oversees program logistics and funding
  - Co-locates with NIH Institutes & Centers
  - Ensures maximum impact of Common Fund programs

NIH Common Fund
- Program Working Group
  - Oversight of program planning & management
  - Evaluation strategies

Co-Chairs
- Conduct high-level program management, coordination from NIH Institutes & Centers

Coordinators & Program Leader
- Conduct high-level program planning & management, including from NIH Institutes & Centers

Working Group Members, including OSC Staff
- Conduct day-to-day program tasks, including from NIH Institutes & Centers

Evaluation
- Conduct evaluation of Common Fund programs

Lessons Learned
- Maximize training resources through peer teaching
- Remember, researchers are data savvy & motivated by discovery
- Take advantage of internal evaluation resources
- Integrate evaluation into planning & management procedures
- Train researchers to be evaluation ambassadors

Building Evaluation Capacity within the Common Fund
Performance monitoring of Common Fund programs has occurred continually. Now, in response to recommendations from the process evaluation of Common Fund strategic planning and management practices, the NIH Office of Strategic Coordination is looking to expand its capacity to conduct additional evaluative activities. The overall goal of Building Evaluation Capacity within the Common Fund is to ensure evaluative activities are better integrated into the development and management of Common Fund programs.

To achieve this goal, we are working toward:
- Prepare NIH scientists to participate as team members and supporters of Common Fund-related evaluation activities
- Lay the foundation for an evaluation-friendly culture among the NIH staff who plan and carry out Common Fund programs

Challenges to Building Evaluation Capacity within a Research Funding Agency

- Research and Evaluation Differ in Context
  - Research Seek to prevent, treat, cure
  - Evaluation Inform decision making
- Hypothesis-focused vs. Stakeholder-focused
- Key Questions: Make research recommendations vs. Key questions: Report to stakeholders

Social Science Methods Used in Evaluation May Be Unfamiliar to Biomedical Bench Scientists
- Qualitative Data Collection & Analysis
- Designing & Conducting Focus Groups
- Using Mixed Methods

Parallels between Evaluation and Bench Research May Promote Understanding
- Utility: Adds to Knowledge Base
- Feasibility: Appropriate Methods, Adequate Resources
- Propriety: Complete & Faithful Reporting
- Accuracy: Accuracy
- Accountability: Reproducibility

Activities to Build Evaluation Capacity

Hired Personnel
- Evaluation activities related to the NIH Common Fund are monitored by members of the Policy, Planning, Evaluation, and Communications Team (PPEC) within the office that oversees the Common Fund. Additional members were added to the team to increase the time each member could devote to evaluative activities, including an experienced Health Research Evaluator to guide and coordinate Common Fund efforts in evaluation and to manage an evaluation contract.

Procedural Revisions to Boost Evaluation
- The office that oversees the Common Fund revised its procedures to better integrate evaluative activities into program planning and management. First, it solicited input from NIH colleagues on how to boost evaluative activities. Then, it conducted an iterative process of internal review and consensus building on how to expand evaluation capacity.

- The responsibility of Policy, Planning, Evaluation, & Communications Team (PPEC) members to program evaluation was expanded and more clearly articulated.
- PPEC members were more deeply embedded in the working group structure to provide evaluation consultation.
- Program planning discussions and documents were designed to address evaluation.
- Each program was required to have an articulated plan to assess its progress toward achieving its goals.

Signs of Success
- New Common Fund program goals and milestones are refined by working group members, including PPEC staff, to ensure they are evaluable.
- Implementation plans for new Common Fund programs now include a suite of metrics developed by the working group to help track progress toward program goals and milestones.
- PPEC members have received training on evaluation topics including components of quality evaluations, portfolio analysis, program theory and logic models, needs assessment, evaluation project management, evaluation framework development, and stakeholder engagement.
- Some Common Fund program working groups have begun to request evaluative activities or analyses without prompting from the PPEC team member embedded in the group.
- Evaluative activities have provided valuable information to NIH Common Fund leadership and decision-makers.
- Buy-in from leadership has resulted in requests for additional evaluative analyses and encouragement for data-driven decision making.

Team-Oriented Evaluation Priority Setting
- Evaluation priorities for a Common Fund program are set by the program’s working group. A PPEC team member helps the group to articulate clear, evaluable goals for the program, and to develop milestones and metrics for monitoring program performance. The PPEC member is also steward of a program assessment plan which ensures evaluative activities are integrated into program planning and activities. Like the other working group members, most PPEC members are bench scientists by training. Serving as evaluation ambassadors to the working groups requires PPEC members to bridge the gap between research and evaluation terminologies and practices.

Staff Training in Evaluation
- To enhance their ability to consult on evaluative activities, PPEC team members receive evaluation training through a variety of internal NIH resources and external sources. PPEC members bring back what they have learned from external training and share with the team, building evaluation capacity through peer teaching.