

# Tip Sheet and Checklist: Budgeting for Research or Evaluation

To produce useful results, evaluation and research projects must have enough resources to answer the research or evaluation questions at a high level of quality. In general, evaluation budgets should be:

- Appropriate for the research design used and key questions to be answered;
- Adequate for ensuring quality and rigor;
- Commensurate with stakeholder expectations and involvement; and
- In line with the level of program and organizational resources available.<sup>1</sup>

## Considerations at the Planning Stage

In research or evaluation projects, there is often a trade-off between rigor and cost: expenses often increase with the level of evidence<sup>2</sup> that a project is seeking to generate. However, projects of all design types have the potential to be expensive—for instance, if they involve large sample sizes and multiple sites. More rigorous projects *can* be relatively inexpensive, though—for example, if they involve low-cost university partnerships or use existing data rather than new data to be collected.

Bear in mind that costs for a multi-year project will rarely be the same year to year. Consider the pacing of expenses and ensure that you budget enough funds to support the quarters or months that will be the most resource-intensive. Also keep in mind that your project is likely to evolve and that some flexibility may be needed to reassess and adjust the budget over time.

After developing a research or evaluation plan, you can use this checklist to create a budget that includes all necessary elements. If you find that you don't have enough resources to conduct the project as planned, return to the design and revise it as needed. *It is better to conduct high-quality research or evaluation at a smaller scope than to conduct a large-scale project of low quality.*

It is commonly recommended that evaluation makes up 10% of the overall project budget. Realistically, a rigorous evaluation that produces reliable evidence may cost more, but this may not always be feasible. Even limited resources, when invested strategically, can help advance your research or learning agenda. Consider how you can [maximize use of each piece of data you collect](#) to learn more about your programming.

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<sup>1</sup> Evaluation budget criteria adapted from [Budgeting for Evaluation](#), Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), 2014 AmeriCorps State and National Symposium.

<sup>2</sup> Here, "level of evidence" refers to the confidence you have in your results. A very robust study may generate evidence that strongly suggests that a certain intervention leads to a certain outcome. Less robust studies may indicate that the intervention is promising without allowing you to make confident claims about its effectiveness.

## Investing in Project Evaluation

While finding the resources for rigorous research and evaluation can be a challenge, dedicating funds towards these projects can be a strategic investment. Generating a strong evidence base for a program can often attract future donors. In addition, if your evaluation includes questions on a program's cost effectiveness and cost efficiency, its results can inform decisions about how to effectively serve the largest number of clients at the lowest cost. Note that even limited resources, when invested strategically, can help advance your research or learning agenda.

*Adapted from CNCS, 2014.*

## Budget Checklist

### 1. Personnel

Budget for adequate time and effort for all project activities. Remember that for multi-year projects, salaries should include yearly cost-of-living and merit increases in line with organizational policies.

If contracting an external evaluator or subgranting to a partner, ensure you are clear about what services are and are not included in their cost. If using your organization's own staff, consider the cost of time spent on research/evaluation relative to their other responsibilities. [Switchboard's Research/Evaluation Time & Effort Calculator](#) can help you estimate the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff needed based on tasks required throughout the project cycle.<sup>3</sup>

Costs may include adequate staff time to lead, contribute to, and oversee:

- Research/evaluation design and proposal development, including development of research questions, evidence syntheses, etc.
- Research/evaluation start-up, including planning; recruitment; development of agreements; conducting the ethical review process; procurement; development, translation and piloting of data collection tools; etc.
- Research/evaluation implementation, including data collection (with enumerators and interpreters as needed), management, quality assurance, deidentification, and analysis and interpretation.
- Close-out and results dissemination, including writing and sharing reports and briefs, holding validation workshops, etc.
- After-action learning review

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<sup>3</sup> If your project is funded by the federal government, be sure to consult the 2 CFR 200 regulation mandating documentation of time and effort expended. See <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-2/subtitle-A/chapter-II/part-200> for more.



## 2. Staff Benefits (Fringe)

Budget for benefits costs at an appropriate rate based on the total staff time needed. Keep in mind any necessary variations in benefits based on staff location, length of employment, seniority, etc.

## 3. Travel

Travel may be needed for planning and initial stakeholder meetings; for data collection including training, piloting, and quality assurance; for site visits and stakeholder follow-up meetings; and for dissemination including validation workshops, community meetings, and conferences. Note that local staff travel is typically budgeted under *Other Direct Costs*.

Costs may include:

- Airfare, train tickets, or car rental
- Ground transportation, such as taxi fare
- Lodging at an appropriate rate
- Mileage reimbursement at an appropriate rate (if own vehicles are used)
- Per diem for meals and incidentals at an appropriate rate

## 4. Equipment

An item in this category is typically non-expendable, tangible property with a unit cost of \$5,000 or more and a useful life of one year or more.

Equipment costs are not usually required for evaluation and research projects, except in rare cases such as extremely large-scale or long-duration projects where it might be necessary to purchase a copier for printing needs or a vehicle to use in data collection, for example. Refer to donor guidance for allowable equipment costs.

## 5. Supplies

This category should include consumable office supplies for activities like training, data collection, and project management (pens, pencils, paper, etc.), ideally purchased at the start of the project.

### Ideas for Reducing Research/Evaluation Costs

- Limit the project's scope (number of research/evaluation questions)
- Use existing program administrative data instead of collecting new data
- [Build data collection into routine program operations](#)
- Develop internal staff capacity to conduct evaluation tasks (but ensure you consider the necessary time commitment)
- Engage volunteers, interns, research students, or pro bono experts to assist in the design, to collect data, or to analyze and help disseminate data

*Adapted from CNCS, 2014.*



## 6. Contractual

There are different types of contracts, such as fixed-price, cost-reimbursement, labor-hour, and outcome-based, that differ by how contractors are compensated. This category should include subgrants, such as those to partner organizations or to academic partners, if donor guidelines require these to be budgeted in this category.

## 7. Other Direct Costs

Costs may include:

- Payments to external consultants, if donor guidelines require these to be budgeted as one line item in a lump sum
- Tablets, laptops, mobile phones, Geographic Information System (GIS) devices, etc.
- Software licenses required for data collection, management, and analysis
- Communications expenses such as office WiFi, conference call lines, online meeting platforms, data plans for mobile devices, etc.
- Printing, photocopying, and postage for materials like consent forms, surveys, focus group and interview protocols, maps, nametags, final reports, etc.
- Translation/interpretation services, if not budgeted under *Personnel*
- Incentives, such as gift cards or cash, if being offered to survey, interview, or focus group respondents
- External space rental if needed for training, data collection activities, etc.
- Shared program costs (SPCs) as appropriate for the research/evaluation project, such as office rent, utilities, insurance, etc.

## 8. Indirect Costs

Indirect cost recovery for the research/evaluation project should be budgeted per your organization's policy or federally negotiated rate, following donor guidelines. Ensure you correctly calculate indirect cost recovery on any subgrants.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from CNCS, 2014.

