

Lessons from the Field: How to Have a Successful Relationship with your Evaluator*



LLA Evaluation Requirement

The local lead agencies (LLAs) have always been required to evaluate their program activities in accordance with Tobacco Control Section (TCS) guidelines, but the TCS requirements have evolved over the years (Tang et al., 2002). In 2004, TCS established the California Tobacco Control Evaluation Center, based at the University of California, Davis, to provide evaluation-related technical assistance to the LLAs. The Evaluation Center is charged with providing consultations, conducting workshops and trainings, developing evaluation tools, reviewing evaluation plans, and providing other forms of assistance that can support the LLAs' evaluation efforts. However, the Evaluation Center's technical assistance activities do not alter the LLAs' responsibility for evaluation of their own programs. Each LLA must designate a proportion of its overall budget for evaluation and must determine whether it will use these funds to contract with external evaluation professionals or to support its own agency staff with time and materials to implement the evaluation activities.

Intent of this Paper

The intent of this paper is to share information we have learned from current LLAs about their evaluation arrangements, satisfaction with their selected approach, and lessons learned. Additionally, we have included a section on "How to Have a Successful Relationship with your Evaluator." We greatly appreciate the participation of LLAs in the collection of this data.

Kinds of Evaluation Arrangements

The TC Evaluation Center tried to contact all 61 LLAs funded by TCS to determine the evaluation approach they use for their tobacco control projects. We were able to reach 59 (97%) of the 61. From our conversations with Project Directors in these LLAs, four basic categories of evaluation arrangement were identified:

1. **Internal evaluation:** An individual within the LLA's tobacco control project is charged with completing 100% of the required evaluation activities.
2. **External evaluation:** The LLA contracts with an individual external to its project for 100% of the required evaluation activities. (This does not include the time spent by the LLA's Project Director to oversee the evaluation component of the project.)
3. **Combination:** The LLA uses a combination of internal agency staff and individuals under external contract to complete the required evaluation activities. The proportion of responsibility assigned to internal versus external individuals varies across agencies.
4. **Other:** The LLA uses an evaluator who is outside of the tobacco project but within the larger health agency.

Figure 1 shows the breakdown of evaluation arrangements for the 59 LLAs.

* This paper is based on a study reported at the National Conference on Tobacco or Health in May 2005. For more detailed information on the research questions addressed by the study, results for each question, and methods implemented, please refer to our paper titled "Benefits of Internal vs. External Evaluation for County-Based Tobacco Control" (Huddleston et al., 2005) available through PARTNERS or our web site (<http://tobaccoeval.ucdavis.edu>).

Lessons from the Field: How to Have a Successful Relationship with your Evaluator

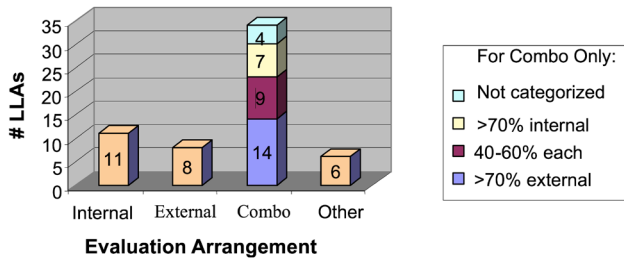


Figure 1. Evaluation Arrangements of the LLAs

As can be seen above, the majority of projects (34 projects, 58% of total) chose a Combination (“Combo”) arrangement, though the proportion of internal and external contributions varies greatly within this category. Fourteen of 34 projects (41%) using a Combination arrangement reported that at least 70% of their evaluation work is performed by an external evaluator. Nine projects reported using roughly equal proportions of an external evaluator and internal staff. Another 7 projects identified internal staff as responsible for at least 70% of evaluation activities. The remaining 4 projects identified themselves as using a Combination, but did not specify the distribution across internal staff and external contractors.

Looking Beyond the Labels: What Are the Arrangements Really Like?

To learn more about these evaluation arrangements, we identified a purposeful sample of 16 LLAs for in-depth telephone interviews. The selection of LLAs was made to balance several factors, including the evaluation relationship (as described above), the geographical location within California, and the size of the county served by the LLA. Of the 16 LLAs that we invited to participate, we were able to complete interviews with 13. The interviews used a combination of closed-ended ratings and open-ended questions. The closed-ended items had respondents rate their satisfaction with their project’s evaluator on the following factors: (1) expertise in evaluation methods, (2) expertise in issues of tobacco control, and (3) expertise in the specific tobacco control issues of the LLA’s program. In addition, the Project Directors rated their overall satisfaction with their LLA’s current evaluation arrangement. The open-ended questions

addressed a variety of areas including allocation of evaluation tasks, strengths and pitfalls of the arrangement, and lessons learned that might benefit other projects.

The interviews gave us insight into the evaluation arrangements beyond the labels we had identified in the initial phone calls. Our major findings are summarized below.

There is no “100% external” – project staff are almost always involved with data collection.

As noted above, we had originally identified evaluation arrangements based on the categories of internal, external, and combination. However, in our in-depth discussions with Project Directors, we found that no counties were purely external in their arrangements. In actual practice, internal staff was involved at a minimum level of about 10-15%, even for projects that had originally identified that they contract externally for all evaluation work. The internal staff activities went beyond project leadership or contract management, and involved data collection and other specific collaborative tasks. Therefore, we collapsed the two prior categories of external and combination into a single category that we designated as external. That left us with two types of arrangements: projects with an external evaluator, used to a lesser or greater extent, identified as “external,” and projects that were purely “internal” in their arrangement.

Each arrangement was tailored to the local context.

Whether internal or external approaches were selected depended on the available local options and resources. Staff capacity appeared to be the biggest influence on the approach selected. If capacity was available internally, it was used; if not, more reliance on external evaluators took place. Staff turnover, availability of external evaluators in the area, staff time, and funding available to contract out work were additional factors in determining whether an external evaluator was hired and to what capacity. Building internal staff capacity can offer more flexibility when choosing an evaluation arrangement, which may be especially important under the circumstances of budget adjustments or the lack of available external evaluators.

Lessons from the Field: How to Have a Successful Relationship with your Evaluator

Both “internal” and “external” groups were satisfied with their evaluation arrangement and the expertise of their evaluator.

Overall, Project Directors reported being satisfied with their agency’s evaluation approach (whether internal or external) and the expertise of their evaluator in the categories described above (evaluation methods, general tobacco control, and the LLA’s specific tobacco control activities). As highlighted in Table 1, while all ratings were high, the satisfaction ratings were lower in all categories for projects using an internal evaluation approach. Not expected were the very high ratings for satisfaction with external evaluators’ general expertise in tobacco control. Also notable is the high level of satisfaction with external evaluators’ expertise in the LLA’s specific tobacco control project. One possible explanation for this higher (more satisfied) rating for external evaluators is that some LLAs experience fairly high staff turnover, so that the internal staff person designated as the evaluator may be relatively new to the project. However, these results are based on a small, purposive sample of LLAs and cannot be generalized to all the internal or external evaluation arrangements across the state.

Table 1. Satisfaction with LPE by Type of Evaluation Arrangement*

| | Type of Arrangement | | |
|--|---------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Satisfaction of the Project Director with: | Internal (n=4) | External (n=9) | TOTAL (n=13) |
| Evaluator’s expertise in evaluation methods | 4.00 | 4.78 | 4.54 |
| Evaluator’s expertise in general issues of tobacco control | 4.25 | 5.00 | 4.77 |
| Evaluator’s expertise in the LLA’s specific tobacco control activities | 4.25 | 4.78 | 4.62 |
| The LLA’s overall evaluation approach | 4.00 | 4.39 | 4.27 |

*Response options ranged from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).

How to Have a Successful Relationship with Your Evaluator

The Project Directors that we interviewed identified the strengths and pitfalls of the different arrangements. The lessons they learned about what works and doesn’t work are summarized below. These keys to a successful evalu-

ation arrangement may seem obvious. Nonetheless, we hope that listing them will help you in your future decisions about what kind of evaluation arrangement to have and how to manage the arrangement you already have.

Keys to a successful evaluation arrangement

- **Communication** – Have an explicit plan for ongoing and regular communication between the Project Director, project staff and evaluator(s). Speaking the same “language” is also important.
- **Integration** – Integrate the evaluator (especially when external) into the project team. This can also help facilitate better communication.
- **Clarity of roles** – Internal evaluators may have more than one role in the project (for example acting as the Project Director and evaluator). External evaluators and the internal staff they work with also need to have clearly specified roles so that it is clear who is responsible for what aspects of the evaluation. Clear roles can be especially important for projects that want an evaluator that is not too involved.
- **Clarity of timeframes and deliverables** – Determine who is responsible for what, and when. Evaluators with multiple projects (internal or external) may have a problem scheduling or meeting the deadlines for a project if not laid out in advance.
- **Evaluation expertise** – Find someone with evaluation expertise and, if possible, someone who can help build the staff’s capacity for evaluation.
- **Project expertise** – Make sure your evaluator is knowledgeable about tobacco control in general, as well as your specific tobacco control project. This is important for developing an appropriate evaluation plan, as well as tools and reports.
- **Planning for evaluation use** – The Project Director needs to be sure they are getting the evaluation that is needed for their project, and not the one that the evaluator is interested in doing. This also includes planning for how data and results will be used and disseminated.

Lessons from the Field: How to Have a Successful Relationship with your Evaluator

References

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