

**ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
PROGRAM EVALUATION FRAMEWORK
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OAC PROGRAM EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

1. Purpose of OAC's Program Evaluation Framework

This evaluation framework sets out the Ontario Arts Council (OAC)'s approach to program evaluation, outlining the general principles, uses and approaches that guide OAC's evaluation work. The framework also establishes roles, responsibilities and authorities for the evaluation function at OAC, and outlines the process the organization will follow in carrying out evaluations and in acting on the findings.

2. Principles Guiding Program Evaluation at OAC

OAC is committed to regularly carry out program evaluations as part of its ongoing management process.

OAC's approach to program evaluation is based on the following principle: the production of *credible, timely, useful* and *objective* findings. OAC's approach to evaluation prioritizes: (1) valid and credible evaluations of high quality using the most suitable methods to the situation; and (2) the use and adoption of evaluation findings.

The most fundamental goal is to conduct evaluations that are truly useful. In the field, this is commonly referred to as "utilization-focused evaluation", and this approach reflects currently accepted professional practice in the evaluation field. Some key features of a use-focused evaluation approach are summarized in Appendix A.

"An evaluation is designed, first and foremost, to answer a particular set of questions.... The [funder] must be deliberate in formulating the questions that serve its own purposes, its own need for learning. If the questions are not set out explicitly at the outset, the evaluation is unlikely to be relevant to the [funder] when the results role in."

Doug Easterling et al in "Using Evaluations to Improve Grantmaking: What's Good for the Goose is Good for the Grantor" (The Colorado Trust, 1999)

Typical Uses of Evaluation by Funders:

Evaluations undertaken by grantmakers generally serve one or more of three general purposes:

- **Accountability:** to measure the results of programs and account for use of resources;
- **Knowledge generation:** to create new understanding about what works and what does not;
- **Program planning or improvement:** to support clear, well-designed, feasible, and measurable grantmaking programs and to support ongoing program planning, implementation and overall organizational effectiveness.

Demonstrating accountability and good stewardship of public funds are principles that underlie all of OAC's activities and may, from time to time, be identified as a particular focus in a given evaluation. In general, however, OAC believes that "the major power of evaluation comes from its ability to stimulate learning, improvement, and wise decision making" (Easterling, 1999). Evaluation becomes a key part of a funder's organizational learning process as findings help staff and Board in the ongoing refinement of grantmaking strategy, and in identifying effective strategies that inform the development of future initiatives.

3. Development of Annual Evaluation Plan

OAC will develop an annual evaluation plan each year, in conjunction with its business planning, budget and operating planning processes. The annual evaluation plan will indicate the specific evaluation activities to be undertaken in the upcoming 12-24 months. While the number of specific evaluations launched each year will depend on the number of evaluations already underway, the complexity of the current evaluation needs, plus time and budget available – it is expected that between one and three evaluations is a realistic number.

Identifying Programs for Evaluation

Undertaking program evaluation (and doing it well) is time consuming and not inexpensive. For this reason, an approach that automatically requires every program to go through a full evaluation every “x” years “whether it needs it or not” is not an efficient use of an organization’s resources. Instead, OAC will use a set of criteria or circumstances – or “checklist” – as a pre-screening process to indicate whether a program is a priority for evaluation.

Over a 5-year cycle, every program at OAC will be run through this checklist to determine whether or not there is a need to formally evaluate it. (This means that about 12 programs will be run through the checklist each year.) Programs will be prioritized for inclusion on the annual evaluation plan based on the results of this pre-screening.

Specifically, this pre-screening process will include the following steps:

- For each of the programs due to be screened that year, the Director of Granting Programs and the Director of Research, Policy and Evaluation will meet with the program manager (Officer) to review the program vis-à-vis the checklist.
- Once these meetings have been completed, the two Directors will assess the findings of the pre-screening meetings to begin to identify which programs are priorities for evaluation.
- The Director of Granting Programs will make the final selection of priority programs. She will prepare a brief report that summarizes the pre-screening process for all programs and recommends specific programs as priorities for evaluation.
- At this point, the report may be taken to a GIG meeting for broader discussion and input, at the discretion of the Director of Granting Programs.
- The Director of Granting Programs will submit her final report to the Executive Director for his approval. Once approved, this report becomes the base for the Annual Evaluation Plan.
- This pre-screening process will begin in early fall to ensure that its results feed into the business planning and budget processes.

Pre-Screening Checklist:

The following criteria or checklist will be used to help identify programs that should be considered for evaluation in the coming year:

- Have changes taken place in the client community that may have changed needs, composition, ways of working, etc. since the program was created or last revised?
- Have OAC strategic priorities evolved or changed in a way that may have an impact on the program?
- Have OAC staff/Board received comments or complaints from the community about the impact or implementation of the program?

- Has the Officer (or others) become aware of questions or issues relating to the program through discussions by jurors/advisors during the assessment process, or through their own analysis of grant applications or final reports, or through their ongoing interaction with their community?
- Is the program a pilot program that is coming to the end of its pilot term – and a decision will need to be made about whether to continue it or not?
- Similarly, is the program new, or does it have new components, and should be assessed after a few years in the field?
- Is this program/activity experiencing better than expected success? (In which case an evaluation can help identify why, and whether this success can, for example, be adapted in other areas/programs.)
- Do OAC staff/Board otherwise have questions about this program or set of activities that we cannot answer?
- Does this program/activity cover large portions of OAC's budget?
- When was this program last evaluated?
- Based on an initial estimate of the cost, scope, technical factors and time involved, is evaluating the program realistic and feasible within current resources?

The checklist questions serve as a tool to guide and inform a full discussion of each program and the potential need for and urgency of any evaluation. While the checklist is not intended as a rigid or formal scoring mechanism, a program that meets several or many of the checklist items is *more likely* to have issues that need to be evaluated and will be assessed more closely.

It should be noted that in some cases it will become clear during the pre-screening process that evaluations should be focused across offices, functions, activities, or sectors – rather than being limited to a specific program.

4. Roles and Responsibilities

Management of OAC's Program Evaluation Function

Responsibility for the ongoing management and direction of OAC's program evaluation function is shared by the Director of Granting Programs and the Director of Research, Policy and Evaluation. In this shared management role, these two positions play different, but complementary roles.

Director of Granting Programs:

- Has the lead role in identifying programs to be evaluated, including the process of running programs through the checklist
- Holds and manages the budget for program evaluation
- Is a member of the Program Evaluation Steering Committees (*see below*)
- Is significantly involved in the evaluation assessment phase of each evaluation by: considering evaluation study options; approving the selection of the specific issues to be examined and general approaches to be used in each program evaluation study; and overseeing the consultant selection process
- Approves the terms of reference for each program evaluation study
- Reviews and assesses program evaluation study findings and any recommendations made by consultants
- Approves the OAC staff recommendations and implementation actions to be taken as a result of decisions based on findings and any consultant recommendations
- Approves program evaluation reports for release

- Is significantly involved in developing evaluation frameworks for new programs and approves these frameworks
- Is accountable for ensuring the implementation of recommendations and actions in the granting area arising from the program evaluations

Director of Research, Policy & Evaluation

- Provides oversight on the objectivity and methodological soundness of OAC’s evaluation function, providing an independent perspective from line management
- Is a member of the Program Evaluation Steering Committees (*see below*)
- Is significantly involved in the evaluation assessment phase of each evaluation by: considering evaluation study options; approving the selection of the specific issues to be examined and general approaches to be used in each program evaluation study; and overseeing the consultant selection process
- Approves terms of reference for all evaluation assessment studies
- In addition, serves as an internal consultant by facilitating the evaluation assessment process, and providing technical advice on key aspects of the evaluation process (e.g. development of terms of reference, methodology, objective interpretation of consultant’s findings)
- Is significantly involved in developing evaluation frameworks for new programs and approves these frameworks
- Endorses or comments on the interpretation of findings and recommendations by consultants and OAC staff, to ensure that these objectively reflect the evaluation findings.
- Works to build capacity of OAC staff on program evaluation

Program Evaluation Steering Committees:

- A Program Evaluation Steering Committee will be established for each program evaluation, comprising at minimum the Director of Granting Programs, the Director of Research, Policy and Evaluation, and the program manager (Officer). Other staff, including the Executive Director, may be included on the Committee for specific evaluations as needed/desired.
- The Committee will set the evaluation question(s), approve the terms of reference, oversee the RFP process (including identifying potential consultants, selecting the consultant), oversee the conducting of the study, review the consultant’s report, and agree on internal follow-up and recommendations.

Executive Director:

- In their shared management role for program evaluation, the Director of Granting Programs and the Director of Research, Policy and Evaluation report directly to the Executive Director.
- The Executive Director may have input into the process of running programs through the checklist and approves the list of program evaluations to be undertaken each year as outlined in the Annual Evaluation Plan
- The Executive Director’s level of involvement in specific evaluations will vary. He will be updated regularly on the progress of specific evaluations, and will review aspects of the RFP processes (such as the list of potential suppliers). Otherwise the Executive Director will be involved in specific evaluations only as desired/needed.

OAC Board:

- As noted in the checklist, the Board may at any time raise issues or concerns that they have, or have become aware of, that may indicate that a program should be considered for evaluation.
- The Annual Evaluation Report will be submitted to the Board for their information, with in-year progress reports provided as needed.

- Reports on completed program evaluations will be provided to the Board for their information. OAC staff recommendations arising from the program evaluations will come to the Board for approval.

Program or Activity Managers (e.g. Officers, etc):

- Involvement of program managers (typically Officers) is critical to ensuring that the realities of program operations and environment are incorporated in the program evaluation process.
- Program managers can and should contribute to all phases of the program evaluation process. In fact, they are responsible for managing the tasks and implementation of specific evaluations in their program areas, in consultation with the Evaluation Steering Committee.
- Identifies needs and ideas for evaluations in their own program areas through the budget and operational planning process, and in relation to the strategic plan.
- Identifies, during the evaluation assessment, program evaluation issues of importance to them
- Prepares the project terms of reference with input from the Evaluation Steering Committee
- Is key point of contact for the project consultant, including coordination of any gathering of internal information
- Reviews and comments on evaluation findings and any recommendations made by consultants
- Develops internal recommendations for appropriate decisions or actions arising from findings and any consultant recommendations. When required, prepares an implementation plan based on decisions taken as a result of evaluation activity
- Implements any action required as a result of evaluation studies.

5. Process/Steps for Program Evaluations

In general, there are three distinct phases in the program evaluation process: the evaluation assessment (pre-evaluation planning); the evaluation study itself (data collection, analysis, consultant's report); and the internal reporting, recommendations and decision-making process (based on the findings and recommendations of the study).

Step One. Evaluation Assessment

- Evaluation assessment is the front-end planning part of program evaluation and is the most important step in a use-focused evaluation. It involves identifying the specific evaluation questions to be considered and the nature of these questions and the extent to which they can be and will be addressed in a particular evaluation study. Such factors as the needs of the users, the resources available and possible evaluation methods are considered. The output from the evaluation assessment process is the terms of reference for an evaluation study, or documented reasons for not doing such a study at this time.
- Terms of reference are essential for all evaluation studies. They clearly articulate the purpose, uses and scope of the evaluation; they represent senior management commitment; authorize the execution of the study and the expenditure of resources; and provide a formal record of agreement between the client and the evaluators as to what will be done. The terms of reference should serve as clear guidelines to all involved on what is expected in the evaluation study.
- It is possible that, at the end of the evaluation assessment, it is decided that an evaluation is not appropriate or needed at that time, or that certain important evaluation issues are best addressed in another context. (e.g. Program is too new for any significant results to have

occurred; A recent externally conducted study has answered most evaluation questions; Program is found to be undergoing significant review/restructuring; The priorities for evaluating have changed; Identified evaluation issues cut across several programs/offices suggesting the need for an integrated evaluation extending beyond the current program.)

- The evaluation assessment process will usually be iterative in nature, as issues are selected from among the many possible issues that could be addressed, and subjected to further questioning, consideration and costing.
- In summary, an evaluation assessment study should:
 - Develop an understanding of the rationale and structure of the program and the environment in which it is operating
 - Identify the expected use of the evaluation study
 - Determine the program-specific evaluation issues to be examined
 - Determine, analyse and cost the evaluation options – approaches, data collection, etc.
 - Recommend an appropriate evaluation approach (although sometimes the development of an appropriate methodology becomes the consultant’s role and part of the evaluation).
- Note: All new programs require a special assessment to help ensure they are “evaluation – ready” for the future. This includes ensuring that the purposes of the program are clear, determining how success will be measured (indicators), and building-in the collection of data that will be needed later to assess results.

Step Two. Conducting the Evaluation Study Itself

As noted previously, the methodology used in a specific evaluation is chosen to suit the purposes and intended uses of that evaluation. However, general key steps in the study are data collection, analysis and reporting. This section addresses some general aspects related to conducting the study including the use of external consultants, advisory committees, and principles for good reports.

Use of External Consultants:

- In general, OAC will use external consultants to conduct program evaluations
- Consultants bring a number of benefits to the evaluation process including:
 - Specialized expertise (in either the content area and/or evaluation methods);
 - Practicality: When internal personnel do not have the time to carry out the evaluations themselves;
 - In situations where a third party is essential, for example, when any evaluation carried out by internal staff, no matter how good, will not be seen as objective or credible.
- Good consultants can bring required expertise and experience to an evaluation study, but cannot be given the responsibility of deciding at the assessment stage what exactly will be evaluated. However, a good consultant can help to identify, articulate and question program assumptions.
- The decision about whether an external consultant is needed will be made by the Evaluation Steering Committee.
- Once a decision has been made to use an external consultant, the Evaluation Steering Committee will meet with the Manager of Operations to begin planning the procurement process for consulting services.

Evaluation Advisory Committee:

- Evaluation Advisory Committees comprising client/community reps and additional internal staff may be established for a specific program evaluation, where broader community or stakeholder feedback or advice is needed.
- The use of an Evaluation Advisory Committee is optional and will be decided by the Program Evaluation Steering Committee.

Principles for Good Reports

- Reports should be credible and useful and keep separate the evidence, conclusions and recommendations. Evidence contrary to expectations should not be suppressed.
- Reports should be reviewed by all concerned parties – not just the program manager – to benefit from a broader perspective on implications of findings.
- Where possible, reports should be made public.

Step Three. Internal Reporting, Recommendations and Decision-Making

- The findings and recommendations outlined in the consultant's report, will be reviewed by the Program Evaluation Steering Committee, and taken to Grant Review for discussion, and to the Board for information
- The program manager will develop internal recommendations for decisions/actions arising from the consultant's report – also to be reviewed internally and then taken to the Board for its approval

6. Process for Assignment of Resources

- An appropriate budget for program evaluation will be set each year as part of OAC's overall budget process.
- The Director of Granting Programs holds and manages the budget for program evaluation
- Within this budget, costs will be estimated for each program evaluation on the annual evaluation plan.
- Actual costs for individual evaluations will be determined through the process of developing terms of reference and undertaking an RFP.

7. Relationship of Program Evaluation to Other OAC Management Functions

Program evaluation relates to and supports a number of other OAC management processes and functions. For example:

- The strategic planning process often creates the need for program evaluations as we consider whether and how existing programs need to be revised in light of new priorities and goals.
- In some cases, program evaluations can also inform the strategic planning process by identifying new issues or strategies that help shape future strategic plans.
- Other management processes including budget planning, operating planning and performance appraisal also often facilitate the identification of issues for program evaluation.
- The program evaluation framework supports OAC's fulfillment of the Transfer Payment Accountability Directive (TPAD) as evidence of our commitment to accountability.
- Aspects of the Granting Process Manager's work in streamlining overall granting process will address many process issues common across granting programs – that might otherwise need to be addressed through individual program evaluations.
- Bringing the findings of all program evaluations to GIG for information and discussion, becomes part of OAC's continuous organizational learning process.
- On this last point it's important to note that distinct from formal program evaluations, OAC staff also receive information on an ongoing basis from the grant assessment process, recipient final reports, ongoing consultations, etc. Officers regularly analyze this information and integrate it, where appropriate, into program changes and improvements that are captured in the granting approvals process.

APPENDIX A. Key Features of a Use-Focused Evaluation Approach

Underlying all evaluation is an assessment of the effectiveness of programs in meeting needs/objectives and/or the efficiency with which they are being administered. However, to be truly useful, the purpose of any evaluation must be articulated more specifically.

In use-focused evaluations, the most important first step is to clarify (1) what do you want/need to know? and (2) Who will use the information and how? This process of identifying the evaluation purposes and intended uses results in the formulation of the evaluation question(s) that will then determine the appropriate evaluation methods. This sequence is important because methods should not be chosen without purpose and uses in mind.

Each evaluation study is therefore unique. While there are general principles to be followed, the issues addressed and the approaches used may be quite different from study to study. Promoting appropriate methodology for particular use is a key feature of a use-focused evaluation approach.