Data Collection

Introduction

Data are the "raw materials" with which an evaluation is built. Evaluation data are systematically collected information relevant to your program that will be used in assessing whether your program achieved its objectives. Evaluation data can come from the content of surveys, questionnaires and interviews, tallies from logs, information from scales and self-assessments. Your instruments may produce both qualitative data (e.g., notes from interviews, open-ended questions on a survey, observation notes) and quantitative data (e.g., test scores, statistics, ratings). Data collection itself involves administering instruments as well as gathering and organizing responses and measures for analysis. A well-planned data collection strategy is critical to obtaining reliable, consistent and useful information about the effects of your program.

This packet will describe the steps you need to collect meaningful information for your evaluation. Each step includes explanations and examples. On page 10 you will find a sample Data Collection Plan. In addition, there is a blank Data Collection Plan on page 11 for you to complete as you work through this packet.

Steps in Data Collection:

1. **Identify Data Types and Sources**
2. **Identify Who Will Be Involved**
3. **Set a Schedule**
4. **Train Your Data Collectors**
5. **Pilot Test Your Collection Processes**
6. **Implement Your Data Collection**

Step 1

Identifying Data Types and Sources

During instrument development, you identified the data you needed for your evaluation. An important initial step in data collection planning is to make an inventory of the types of data you want to collect and where or from whom you will collect them. You may be collecting two types of data: existing and program-generated. Pre-data collection planning and contact with organizations and people providing existing data are important. Planning and stakeholder involvement will help ensure that the data are accessible and available in the form that you need.

In identifying data and data sources, think about the following questions:	Example
What type of existing data will I need to collect?	*Neighborhood crime statistics*
Where will I get it?	*Police Department crime log*
What type of program-generated data will I need to collect?	*Neighbor ratings of neighborhood safety*
Where will I get it?	*Neighbor surveys*

Data you need, data types and data source information might look like the following:

Data You Need	Data Type	Data Source
# of car break-ins and burglaries in neighborhood	Existing	Police crime log
# of neighborhood watch groups	Existing	Police records
Neighbor ratings of neighborhood safety	Program-generated	Neighbor surveys

It's Your Turn

Step 2

Identifying Who Will Be Involved

It is important to involve stakeholders, as well as anyone who will be involved in collecting or obtaining data, in your pre-data collection planning. This will help eliminate questions or issues that may impede or delay data collection. If permission to collect data is necessary, such as parental permission for student surveys or patient permission for access to immunization records, this must be arranged before collection begins. Stakeholders not directly involved in data collection should also be informed of the data collection plan. Being clear up-front about who will actually collect the data will eliminate confusion about people's roles and will help in thinking about whether or not data collectors are qualified and have the necessary access to collect the data. You will also want to consider the appropriateness of your data collectors (e.g., don't have members collect satisfaction data about their own performance).

To identify who will be involved, think about the following questions:	Example
What data will you be collecting?	*Individual child immunization data*
Who will the data collectors be?	*AmeriCorps members and Public Health nurses*
Who are the stakeholders?	*Parents, children, health center director, immunization program staff*
How do they need to be involved?	*Information release from parents, approval of health center director, cooperative agreement to collect data at immunization clinic from public health nurses*

People involved in data collection information might look like the following:

Data Type	Data Collector/ Stakeholder/Other	Type of Involvement	Additional Issues
Child Immunization Data	AmeriCorps member	Data collectors for post-service data	Needs clearance from parents (release)
Child Immunization Data	Public Health Nurses	Data collectors for pre-service data	Must get their commitment prior to collection
Child Immunization Data	Health Center Director	Informed of program and will oversee public health nurse activities	Must get agreement regarding use of staff and access of AC members to immunization records, provide with updates on data collected
Child Immunization Data	Parents	Informed of program; informed of child's immunization status	Must get their approval for release of child immunization information

It's your turn

Turn to page 11 and complete the sections Data Collectors and Others Involved with the names of people who will be involved in data collection for your AmeriCorps program.

Step 3

Setting a Schedule

Timing is one of the most critical elements of data collection. Many types of existing data, such as grades and crime statistics, may be available only on set schedules. In addition, people who can give you access to existing data (for example, teachers or camp counselors) may be less available at certain times of the year. To avoid planning your data collection for times when data may be unavailable, involve as early in your evaluation planning as possible those people you have listed in step 2 who can give you access to existing data. It is a good idea to consult agency schedules and calendars. Timing is also important for program-generated data. It is critical that you have planned for the collection of pre-service/program data before services have been provided or very early in service provision. For example, if you are doing neighborhood clean-ups and want to measure a change in residents' perceptions of their neighborhood, a pre-program survey would need to be completed before any cleanup began.

Before developing your data collection schedule, think about the following questions:	Example
What existing data do I need?	*Reading grades*
When are they collected?	*Quarterly*
When do I need to collect them?	*At end of the last quarter, provided that tutoring begins at the beginning of the quarter*
What program-generated data do I need?	*Self-esteem ratings (self-assessment by students))*
When do I need to collect them?	*Before any mentoring and after mentoring is completed*

A data collection schedule might look like the following:

Data Method	Data Collectors/ Data Source	Collection Deadline	Collection Date(s)
Pre-program Self-esteem Ratings	Students/ Teachers	Before program begins on 1/6/98	12/15-1/6/98
Pre-program Reading Grades	Teachers/ Teachers	At end of winter quarter in December	12/18/98
Post-program Self-esteem Ratings	Students/ Teachers	At end of program, but before summer vacation in June	5/27-5/29/98
Post-program Reading Grades	Teachers/ Teachers	At end of program, but before summer vacation in June	5/30/98

It's Your Turn

Step 4

Training Your Data Collectors

To ensure that your data collection is consistent and accurate, it is important to train your data collectors. Provide your data collectors with clear instructions on how to use instruments and to conduct interviews, focus groups, and other data collection activities.

Points to remember for training data collectors:

- Walk through the instrument with your data collectors to point out specific instructions.
- Provide an example of a completed instrument or interview transcript for your data collectors.
- Provide clear instructions and/or a script (for phone surveys or interviews) for your data collectors to follow.
- Allow your data collectors to practice with a "standard" data set or example to make sure everyone is getting the same answers, when consistency is desirable. Allow interviewers and focus group facilitators to practice in a "role play."

When planning your data collector training, think about the following questions:	Example
Which data collection methods will require training?	*Neighbor focus group*
Who will I need to train?	*Neighborhood Watch Corps Members*
What training will this data collection require?	*Conducting focus groups, asking non-leading questions, following the focus group format, recording responses*
What will my training look like?	*Materials on conducting focus groups, Two-day training, 2-hour trial focus group*

Data collector training information might look like the following:

Data Collection Method/Instrument	Data Collectors	Training Needs	Training Activities
Parent Interview	AmeriCorps members	Interviewing techniques, how to follow interview guide	Interview guide instructions, building rapport, how to ask questions, mock interview
Math Grades	Teachers	How to fill out grade log/tally sheet	Instructions for tally sheet, mock data set
Student Goal Setting Plan	AmeriCorps member	How to use/fill out plan	Instructions, mock student plan/data set

It's Your Turn

Turn to page 11 and complete the sections Training Needs and Training Dates for your AmeriCorps program.

Step 5

Pilot Testing Your Data Collection Processes

As previously mentioned, it is important to practice using data collection methods and instruments. By doing a practice data collection exercise, you can identify and eliminate problems that might occur. Keep your practice exercises as realistic as possible. For example, to train data collectors to interview students, it would be ideal to have student interviewees of similar ages and backgrounds as those in the program for practice interviews. Additionally, if you can collect pre-existing data on the groups you will be serving, your dry run can also serve as pre-service/program baseline data.

Include the following in your pilot test:

1. Pilot test the instruments or other collection methods using realistic practice sessions, focus groups, or other methods.

2. Analyze data produced by the exercise and data collectors.

3. Hold a feedback session with data collectors to discuss any challenges. Determine solutions to challenges that arose.

If the pilot test results indicate that changes need to be made to data collection approaches or instruments, these should be made prior to actual data collection. If changes are drastic, another pilot test of instruments and/or another practice session with data collectors may be appropriate. Training issues may also arise, requiring additional training for data collectors in instrument/method use.

Step 6

Implementing Your Data Collection

You have spent a lot of time planning for your data collection. It is important that your data collectors and others involved are aware of the data collection schedule as well as their deadlines for collecting and returning data back to you. One issue you will need to consider during your planning, and especially during your data collection, is the willingness of respondents to participate in or complete surveys, focus groups, etc. The following are some additional tips to remember while you plan for your data collection.

Take Steps to Ensure that You Get Enough Information

- Keep instruments short, one or two pages if possible.
- Provide directions on how to return the survey.
- Provide a self-addressed, stamped envelope if money permits.
- Let people know how you will use the data to make their lives better. Always find a way to report the information back to the participants. This will not only improve their cooperation, but may improve your data (e.g., getting feedback on observations and other qualitative data to validate it).
- Offer incentives like money, free food samples, or coupons, if appropriate.
- When possible, use a captive audience (classes, waiting rooms, people in offices, or people who need a service).
- Sometimes changing methods of collecting data will help improve response rates. (For example, mailed surveys usually have lower response rates than phone surveys, or in-person surveys or interviews.)
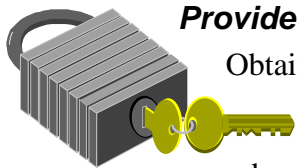
Provide Confidentiality

Obtaining data from respondents can often be difficult if they are concerned that the data will be shared with others or that they will be identified in data analysis or reporting. It is always important to consider the potential impact of collecting and providing data on the respondent. This is especially important when respondents are providing information which is sensitive, or which may have personal or legal implications (e.g., surveys on drug use or child abuse, school grades, or opinions about teachers, mentors, program staff).

- Always inform respondents about your confidentiality guidelines when you begin data collection. These guidelines can be included in the directions or cover letter for a survey, or in the permission letters distributed before existing or interview data are collected.
- Always provide the confidentiality you promise.
- Make surveys anonymous, or, if you need to collect pre-post data, have respondents use code numbers or names.
- When analyzing data collected from interviews, focus groups, or observations, assign fictitious names to respondents or provide answers in categories rather than by respondent.
- When collecting grades, discipline records, or other existing data, it may be useful to assign each student a code for reporting purposes, or to report data in aggregate form.

Identify the Quantity of Service

When appropriate, make sure your data collection processes contain a system for separating individuals who received a lot of service from those who received little or none. This means that it will be important to keep track of program attendance through sign-in sheets or attendance logs. For anonymous measures, it may help to ask questions such as "how often did you attend the drop-in counseling sessions?" or "how

Use Low Burden Methods

Data collection should not be a burden: plan to integrate it with service provision when you can. Some instruments, such as goal-setting logs and journals, may be implemented as part of the activity provided by the programs. For example, goal setting can serve both to plan tutoring sessions and to measure their impact. Journals can act as a forum for learning writing skills, as well as a demonstration of change in skills and attitudes. Similarly, in an immunization program, child immunization cards can serve both as a data collection instrument and an educational tool as well as an appointment reminder system for parents.

A Complete Data Collection Plan might look like the following:

Data Type/ Method	Data Collectors	Data Source	Others Involved/ Contact and Dates	Training Needs	Training Dates	Data Collection Dates	Additional Issues
Immunization data	*AC members*	*Immunization records*	*Health center director (9/1); Nurses (9/15); Parents (10/1-11/15)*	*Immunization schedule; Reading records; filling out immunized child tally sheets*	*10/15-17*	*Baseline: 11/16-28* *Post-service: 8/20-31 of next year*	*Must get signed information release forms from parents.*

It's Your Turn

Turn to page 11 and complete the Data Collection Plan for your AmeriCorps program using the information from the various worksheets you previously completed.

Data Collection Plan

Data You Need		
Data Type/ Method		
Data Source		
Data Collectors (include type of involvement)		
Others Involved (include type of involvement)		
Contact Dates		
Training Needs		
Training Dates		
Data Collection Dates		
Additional Issues		