



Determining Your Capacity for Evaluation

NATIONAL RECREATION
AND PARK ASSOCIATION

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Introduction

People visit your parks and participate in your programs. While you believe these parks and programs are providing positive experiences, you're not completely sure they are having the kind of impact you had anticipated. How do you determine if the services your agency is providing are making an impact and meeting the needs of your community? One way is to *evaluate* your parks and programs.

The goal of any evaluation is to inform decisions or judgments based on systematically gathered evidence. Within parks and recreation, evaluation can help to:

Determine accountability	Is a park area effectively meeting the needs of the surrounding community?
Establish a baseline	How many school-aged youth participate in an afterschool program?
Assess goals and objectives	Is the park accessible to all members of the surrounding community?
Determine impacts	Did the addition of a new basketball court increase use of the park?
Determine the keys to successes and failures	What elements of a major event contributed most to attendee satisfaction?
Improve programs or organizations	How could the park be redesigned to support more diverse programming opportunities?
Set future directions	What alterations to a program would increase participation?
Comply with standards	Does the playground meet current industry standards?

Adopted from: Henderson, K., Bialeschki, M.D., & Browne, L.P. (2017). *Evaluating recreation services: making enlightened decisions* (No. Ed. 4). Sagamore Publishing.



Determining if the services your agency is providing are making an impact and meeting the needs of your community. Photo credit: freepik.com

Conducting a good evaluation requires an investment of time and money. Before beginning an evaluation, it is best to do a “reality check” and assess whether your proposed evaluation is feasible. This step will help determine the resources needed to complete the evaluation.

Three categories of resources and capacity that you should consider are:

- **Staff Capacity and Expertise:** Does your current staff have evaluation experience? Do you have collaboration partners with evaluation experience?
- **Time and Budget:** How much time do you have to prepare for and conduct the evaluation? Do you have the financial resources for a dedicated evaluation lead?
- **Stakeholder Buy-in:** Do your evaluation questions represent the values and perspectives of your stakeholders and community?

Staff Capacity and Expertise

Selecting the right individuals or teams is an important first step. Evaluators must consider the expertise required for an evaluation. Areas of expertise include general evaluation knowledge/skills, familiarity with the park or program being evaluated and awareness of the community impacted.

Internal Expertise

Internal staff likely will have a leadership role in the evaluation and will shoulder much of the responsibility. Therefore, understanding your internal staff’s existing evaluation expertise is critical to starting the process. Some specific areas include expertise in survey/interview development and implementation, data analysis, synthesis of findings and the ability to communicate evaluation findings to specific audiences. Taking a clear inventory of your agency’s existing areas of expertise will identify areas where you will need additional support from an external partner.

Employees with experience and training in evaluation are ideal. Such employees may already be part of your park and recreation department or may be employed in a different division of your local government. Seek out these internal experts and ask for their assistance.

To build internal evaluation capacity, a variety of professional development training courses are provided through [NRPA Online Learning](#). Additional evaluation resources are located in the [NRPA Evaluation Resource Hub](#).



Selecting the right individuals or teams is an important first step.
Photo credit: freepik.com

External Expertise

You likely will not have all the needed expertise on staff and will need to look outside your agency/local government to help fill any gaps. You may require external evaluators to conduct more advanced or large-scale evaluations. Partnering with evaluators who have experience in the park and recreation field is preferable but not required. Note that external evaluators may charge for their services. See the resources below on how to find and select an evaluator:

- [Evaluator Finder](#)
- [Selecting an Evaluator](#)

Local colleges/universities also are potential sources of information and assistance in evaluation efforts. Professors and graduate students can be particularly effective partners since they possess advanced research and evaluation skills (and may provide their services for free or at a substantially reduced price). In addition, students may want internships or to work on special projects with your agency. Faculty and students within the following departments likely will be of most value in your evaluation efforts: Parks and Recreation, Public Health, Urban Design, Landscape Architecture, Statistics, Psychology and other Social Sciences.

Time and Budget

When will your evaluation start? When will it finish? Taking stock of the evaluation time frame and comparing it against other priorities (major events, capital projects, etc.) will help you reduce any potential issues or conflicts that lie ahead.

Evaluations cost money. Data collection, analysis and dissemination incur personnel costs as well as expenses for materials. If the evaluation requires a paid consultant or contracted academic partner, funding also must cover those associated fees.

Depending on the type and complexity of data collected, an evaluation may require specialized analytical tools. However, most park and recreation evaluations analyze basic quantitative (numbers) or qualitative (narrative) data, and spreadsheets (such as Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets) will suffice.

Stakeholder Buy-in

Partnerships are a key feature of a successful evaluation. At minimum, community partners should not only participate in identifying the evaluation objectives and contribute to the evaluation questions, but they also should be key consumers of the evaluation results and involved in their interpretation. Support from partners during implementation lends credibility to the evaluation, helps encourage participation and often enables access to a broader range of study participants. Additionally, all stakeholders should maintain involvement throughout the evaluation process and participate in any decision making based on results from the evaluation.

Key evaluation partners may include: (1) community members and leaders, (2) those affecting change such as elected and appointed officials, (3) park programming staff and leadership, (4) subject matter experts, and (5) any internal or external evaluators or consultants. In short, stakeholders are any individuals or groups who affect or are affected by the evaluation process.

Capacity Worksheet

Let's put this all into practice! The sample worksheet below is designed to help identify existing evaluation resources and highlight areas where gaps may exist. It includes example answers in the right-hand column.

When you are ready, complete the worksheet by downloading a blank copy [here](#).

Worksheet for Assessing Resources and Capacity – Example

Complete the Assessing Resources and Capacity worksheet. This exercise will help you identify existing resources and gaps in your evaluation capacity. When completing this worksheet, think about your immediate team, your broader department and your external partners — each has a role to play. Identifying the status of your resources will help you realistically determine the level of effort for training staff, engaging external partners or consultants and adapting to community needs.

Capacity of Existing Staff

Example answers

What evaluation experience does your staff have?	Our staff often has collected data through surveys and community meeting focus groups, but we have limited understanding of how to analyze the data.
Where is additional evaluation support needed?	It would be helpful to have some assistance with analyzing the data.
Which staff have experience with survey development and implementation, interview design and implementation, qualitative analysis and/or quantitative analysis?	Sue and Joe have experience with survey development and implementation and designing interviews and focus groups. None of us are particularly confident with analysis.
Do any collaborating organizations (e.g., local health departments, AmeriCorps Vista volunteers, academic institutions, community health workers) have evaluation expertise that they can contribute?	We typically ask for a graduate student volunteer from our local university to help us run statistics for the data we have collected.

Time and Budget

When does the program implementation begin?	Implementation begins in May.
When does the program implementation conclude?	Implementation ends the following May.
Does your program budget have dedicated funds for evaluation?	No, but two staff members are 10 percent full-time equivalent (FTEs) to work on the project.
Does your organizational budget have dedicated funds for evaluation?	No, but two staff members are 10 percent full-time equivalent (FTEs) on this project.

Stakeholder Buy-in

Whose values and perspectives are represented in the evaluation questions?

Program director, staff members, park board and community members are represented.

How will I obtain multiple perspectives on how the evaluation will be implemented?

An evaluation advisory team — including staff, park leadership, park board members and community members — have been involved from the beginning of the planning stages and will be included in conversations throughout the project.

Adopted from the [NRPA Health Impact Evaluation Framework](#)

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