EVALUATING YOUR ACP PROGRAM

January 2019

Guide to using ACP Evaluation Tools for Process Improvement

Produced in partnership with the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

This guidance document provides a brief overview of important points to consider when designing your ACP evaluation.

This document is intended to serve as basic guidance for district and school staff interested in evaluating or gathering feedback about their local Academic and Career Planning (ACP) program. For more in-depth guidance around program evaluation in education, you may wish to refer to:

- The US Department of Education's free publication "Evaluation Matters," https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/sst/evaluationmatters.pdf
- University of Kansas "Community Toolbox" chapters on Evaluation https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/evaluate/evaluation

In this guidance document and the accompanying Question Banks, the term "ACP" refers to your overall district program related to academic and career planning. In your district or school, you may refer to your ACP programming by some other name, and/or think of "ACP" as strictly the creation of a student portfolio or written plan.

The guidance and tools in this toolkit cover topics addressing the larger context, and include questions about infrastructure, work-based learning, staff involvement, advising and mentoring, course selection, family involvement, and many other factors related to ACP. Because ACP is intended to be much more than the creation of a written plan (the "product") and more of a process, or in many districts, the philosophy behind school itself, this toolkit covers many topics. No evaluation will use all the questions included in the question banks—there are far too many. They are meant to be a resource that school/district leaders can pick and choose from when conducting a focused, purposeful, and well-considered evaluation of one or more aspects of ACP.

The question banks are available as word documents so that individual questions can be copied and pasted into surveys or interview protocols. They can also be edited to reflect your specific context. For example, if you have branded your ACP program, you can change the term "ACP" in a question to your particular brand name. If you conduct some ACP activities in "homerooms" or "advisory periods" you can choose the appropriate term, or substitute another.

Break down your evaluation into specific areas of inquiry to obtain valuable, actionable information.

Designing an Evaluation

Before beginning to select questions from the question banks, you need to carefully consider the purpose and design of the evaluation. This guidance document provides a brief overview of important points to consider when designing your ACP evaluation.

What Do You Want to Know and Why?

Before conducting an evaluation, you should determine what you want to learn from your efforts. "Is our ACP program working?" is typically too broad a question to answer directly, but by breaking down your evaluation into more specific areas of inquiry, you can obtain valuable, actionable information. Perhaps you want to know more about how effectively advisory periods are being used for ACP, and/or how stakeholders feel about work-based learning. Have you identified questions from another feedback mechanism, or a question from board members? From whose perspectives do you want to collect information? Given that there are a number of different stakeholders in the ACP process (teachers, students, families, administrators, community, etc.), you may well want to measure the perspectives of more than just one group.

Evaluators typically start with a *logic model* of the program to be evaluated. A logic model is a graphic representation of the theory of action of a program—what resources or "inputs" are used, what activities and outputs will occur, and what resulting outcomes are expected. Evaluators use a logic model of a program to determine how to measure or evaluate the various components—to find what is working, what is not, and whether the "logic" of the program is sound. DPI has a logic model for the implementation of ACP on the state level. You may find that using/creating a logic model for your own ACP program will help to organize your evaluation and help you determine which components you want to focus on. For more information on logic models, see Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative's Basic Logic Model Template.

Possible areas of focus may be general awareness of local ACP-related activities, family involvement related to ACP activities, and/or student experiences with respect to ACP activities. You may wish to investigate the strengths or gaps related to ACP in content learning, your communication efforts, supports, or other areas. Perhaps you are interested in determining which features of your ACP program are being used frequently or infrequently? Consider questions related to ACP priorities, such as:

- Leadership and Culture
- Policy and Planning
- Professional Development
- Family Engagement
- Individualized ACP Support
- Community Partnerships
- Access for All Students

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has created an ACP Components Rubric and an ACP Infrastructure Rubric that not only can be used to self-assess your level of implementation of and supports for a variety of ACP-related aspects, but may also be helpful in prioritizing your areas of inquiry.

What Will You Do with Your Findings?

When designing an evaluation, you also need to determine in advance of collecting data what you will do with the results. First, how will you report or share your findings? Stakeholders who are interviewed or surveyed typically want to know that their participation matters and will make a difference, and are often curious to learn about results. Second and most importantly, what actions will be taken following the evaluation? Are you planning to revise your implementation plan? Reallocate resources? Make staffing or curricular determinations? Evaluation findings that go unused waste everyone's time. Evaluation results should lead to actions intended to improve the system, as part of a cycle of continuous improvement. Consequently, the most important rule of designing and conducting an evaluation is: **Do not collect data without a clear purpose/question to be investigated**.

Evaluation findings that go unused waste everyone's time.

Results should lead to actions intended to improve the system, as part of a cycle of continuous improvement.

Who Do You Want To Hear From?

Perspectives typically vary both within and across different stakeholder groups, and considering multiple perspectives can lead to more comprehensive findings. You may choose to include students, families, teachers, building level staff, and/or district level staff in your inquiry. Note that you will need to have separate surveys for each stakeholder group, as the manner in which you ask questions will differ depending on the group. And again, when you ask people about their opinions or experiences, there is an implicit agreement that you plan to take their responses into consideration. Moreover, you will want to make sure that the stakeholders you survey or interview represent your greater population—that all relevant voices are heard from. Choosing a student focus group from among the student council will likely not provide a representative sample of student experiences and perspectives. Using the convenience sample of Parent Teacher Organization members will likely not give you input about the greater range of opinions from families. Make sure to carefully consider whose voices will be heard and whether your "sampling" techniques will be representative, equitable, and meaningful.

What Data Will You Collect?

Program evaluations can consider *quantitative data* (numbers and measurements such as test scores, attendance data, graduation rates, most survey data, etc.), *qualitative data* (interviews, observations, focus groups, and some types of survey data) or, typically, both ("*mixed methods*" evaluations). The data collection methods you use will depend on the questions you are asking. This toolkit currently focuses on gathering survey and interview/focus group data. Quantitative student data measures can be found in WISEdash Secure, with more robust quantitative data measures and guidance planned for the future. The DPI offers training and resources on using an effective data inquiry process to help you discover the meaning behind your quantitative data (see also: *Strategic Use of Data Rubric*, Harvard University).

Surveys, Interviews, and Focus Groups

When determining which of the tools in this toolkit to use, it is important to consider what your evaluation questions are, who your respondents will be, and the time, resources, and expertise available to the evaluators.

Surveys have the advantages of being able to quickly and efficiently collect data from a large number of people. Electronic (web) surveys have the additional advantage of eliminating the need for data entry, and depending on the survey program, most results can be analyzed by the software. Some disadvantages of surveys are the lack of certainty regarding whether responses received are representative of the larger population of stakeholders, particularly if response rates are low, and limitations on inquiring about complex phenomena and personal stories.

Interviews and *focus groups* (group interviews) are better for collecting more in-depth data that can, for example, further flesh out survey findings. However, they take more time to plan, coordinate, conduct, analyze and interpret. Conducting effective interviews and focus groups takes experience. Questions of reliability also arise: survey data can be gathered anonymously, which may allow respondents to be more candid with their responses, but respondents may not necessarily interpret questions as they were intended. Interviews and focus groups allow interviewers to probe and verify understanding, but the situation may inhibit some respondents from speaking freely. Consequently, care must be taken when considering the make-up of focus groups and the relationships between respondents and interviewers. Typically, evaluators try to eliminate or reduce "power imbalances" in a focus group or interview situation. For example, you would probably not want to mix teachers and administrators in a focus group intended to inquire about support for ACP implementation. Similarly, school or district personnel may not be able to obtain candid answers from people they supervise. For this reason, when doing interviews or focus groups, there may be value in finding a "neutral party" to conduct the interviews. Professional evaluators or CESA evaluation personnel can be hired if budgets allow. Retired educators with interviewing skills may be another solution, if they are unknown to respondents or viewed as neutral. Peer interviewing may also be effective in high-trust schools.

Creating an Evaluation Plan

Creating a document that outlines the plan for your evaluation is important for keeping your evaluation focused and on track. A written document helps to make your plan concrete and actionable, and allows you to share it with others for feedback and/or collaboration. A basic evaluation plan should contain:

- the reason/rationale for conducting the evaluation
- the overarching evaluation question(s) and any sub-questions
- the method(s) of data collection
- how the data will be analyzed
- a workplan detailing the steps, people responsible, and timeline
- information about how the findings will be disseminated and acted upon

An example of a basic evaluation plan is provided as part of our *Evaluating Your ACP Program* toolkit.

Collecting Data – Using the Question Banks

This toolkit includes question banks that can be used for surveying and/or interviewing (individually or in focus groups) a variety of stakeholder groups typically included in an evaluation of an ACP program. You will want to carefully consider which questions will address your evaluation question(s), and resist the temptation to try to ask too much. Educators tend to be life-long learners and naturally curious, so the temptation to want to know more and more is real. Long surveys or interviews, however, result in poor data quality and the potential for low response or participation rates. Sticking to your evaluation plan to keep on track and focused will help you reign in your desire to ask about too many topics.

Resist the temptation to try to ask too much.

How should the questions be asked?

Your district may already have access to a survey program or application. If not, you may want to explore using the various electronic survey tools available, some of which are free of charge. Surveys can also be administered in a paper/pencil format, but you will want to factor in the time and cost related to administering that way—printing costs, logistics of administering and collecting paper forms, data entry, analysis, and other factors.

Questions can be selected from the Question Banks and modified if needed, to address your specific context and terminology. Note that some questions seem very similar, but actually get at slightly different ideas. Explanations for similar questions are located throughout the Question Banks to help clarify these differences. Some questions are simple "Yes/No" questions, some use response scales such as "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Other questions feature multiple choice options that you can edit based on your situation. These types of questions can be answered relatively quickly, and are easy to analyze, with survey software typically able to provide you with breakdowns and percentages of responses for each answer category.

Other survey questions are *open-ended*, inviting respondents to provide an answer in their own words. These questions are often also useful for interviews or focus groups. Open-ended questions should be used sparingly on surveys, to avoid survey fatigue on the part of the respondent, and with your own capacity to analyze such responses in mind.

To determine the number of questions or length of the survey there are a couple important considerations. First, think about the time an average respondent would have to answer the survey. This should serve as a rough guideline for how long you want the survey to take. Once you have an idea of which questions you want to ask, take the survey yourself to see if it falls within that rough guideline for length. Second, ask yourself: Do you have sufficient time to analyze open-ended survey questions (or interview/focus group notes)? The timeline in your evaluation plan should account for this factor.

In addition to being focused and restrained about the number of questions you ask, the order in which you ask them can make a difference. Consider ways to prioritize and stage questions. Start with high-level questions, and work towards more specific items. Generally, save open-ended questions for near the end of a survey. And again, remember: **Do not collect data without a clear purpose/question to be investigated.**

How and when you collect your data is also important. Do you have existing surveys or existing opportunities to interview stakeholders to which you can add ACP-related questions? Scheduling data collection is also important. For example, sending out an electronic survey on a Friday afternoon almost guarantees a low response rate. Conducting focus groups among the teachers on the last day of school will likely affect your data quality. Consider distractions, workload, and other timing issues when scheduling your data collection. You may even wish to survey in stages across time, asking high-level or general questions in a first survey, reviewing responses, and following up next quarter, semester or school year with more focused questions.

Choose an approach that is amenable to your respondents.

Remember that staff and parents receive links to many surveys throughout the year, which can impact their willingness to complete long surveys and consequently affect your results. Breaking your survey up into small, manageable surveys administered over time may improve your data quality, but use what you know about your context to decide what approach will be most amenable to your respondents. Finally, consider the accommodations that might be necessary for the stakeholder group that is answering the survey or participating in the focus group or interview. Translated versions of questions may be necessary for certain groups.

The question formats for the items in the Question Banks are indicated as follows:

> (S) items are appropriate for use in surveys and can be answered by indicating yes/no, a scale response, or selecting from a list of answers.
>
> (OE) items are open-ended survey items and require a text response, and consequently take more time to answer and to analyze.
>
> (FG) items are more appropriate for a focus group or interview.

Many survey (S) items can also be used as “starter” questions in focus groups followed by the relevant (OE/FG) questions which can be used to probe more deeply for additional information.

Items in the Question Banks are arranged by topic area, such as Awareness, Participation, Family Involvement, etc. There are also some sample layouts included to help you decide how best to format some types of questions for surveys, particularly those that share a common response scale. If using a web-based survey program, these formats are often pre-designed for easy use.

Analysis

Once you have your survey, interview, or focus group data collected, you will need to analyze or make sense of it. Surveys given electronically will often provide reports that break down the data for each item into percentages, counts or other ways of understanding what you've collected. Open-ended survey items or interview notes will need to be analyzed by a human. This may include looking for repeated themes, unexpected ideas, the range of perspectives on a question, or compellingly worded stories.

Whether findings are expected or surprising, be sure to link them back to the questions posed in the evaluation plan.

Your results may be surprising or confirm ideas you already suspected. Your findings may also indicate weaknesses in your data collection methods, or areas for further inquiry. You may find that you need to reach an underrepresented population, ask questions in a different way, or ask more focused questions in the future. During the analysis phase, remember to link findings back to the evaluation questions posed in the evaluation plan. Additionally, the analysis phase of an evaluation often raises new questions of interest. This is part of the cycle of continuous improvement.

Communicating and acting on your findings

As part of your evaluation plan, you will have considered ways to share the findings with stakeholders, such as during a staff meeting, in a newsletter, or in a report to the board. As noted before, respondents want to know that their feedback was considered and that their time was not wasted, while at the same time maintaining their confidentiality. Moreover, communicating your results helps to maintain or increase participation in future evaluation efforts. Most importantly, determine and then communicate how evaluation findings will be used to refine your ACP program. Remember: **Do not collect data that you don't plan to use.**

Feedback on this Toolkit

If you have utilized any of the questions or the guidance to collect information from your stakeholder groups about ACP, how did it go? Please consider sharing feedback so that these tools can continue to be refined and improved for future use. Feedback can be shared via this brief online survey: https://uwmadison.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2rUsQ5yXFYP3mct

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
125 S. Webster Street, P.O. Box 7841
Madison, WI 53707-7841

Academic and Career Planning
https://dpi.wi.gov/acp

January 2019