Building Evaluation Capacity for State Workforce System Programs

A Technical Assistance Summary Brief
of the 2020 Peer Learning Cohort on Evaluation

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Background

Evaluation of state workforce programs is a complex undertaking; many states may need help with building capacity to conduct workforce program evaluations to meet the requirements prescribed within Section 116(e) of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).[1] To help states in further developing workforce agency evaluation capacity, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Employment and Training Administration (ETA) supports an online community of practice, the Evaluation and Research Hub in WorkforceGPS, and conducts a complementary technical assistance (TA) opportunity—the Peer Learning Cohort on Evaluation (EvalPLC).

During the 2020 EvalPLC, states continued to deal with the system-stressing challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on workers, businesses, and the economy. The main and ongoing priority for the six state teams was to address the needs of unemployed and underemployed jobseekers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. While committed to the EvalPLC, responding to these pressing needs may have limited the ability of state team members to fully participate in the TA cohort activities conducted throughout the duration of the EvalPLC from September 2020 to May 2021.

This brief report summarizes activities, strengths, and challenges related to evaluation capacity, insights, and successes from the state teams invited to participate in the EvalPLC through an application process in 2020. The six state teams in the 2020 cohort were Idaho (ID), Massachusetts (MA), New Hampshire (NH), New Mexico (NM), North Dakota (ND), and Pennsylvania (PA).

Evaluation Peer Learning Cohort (EvalPLC) TA Activities

Throughout the EvalPLC, the members of the state teams had the opportunity to:

Use the State Workforce Agency Evaluation Toolkit to self-assess evaluation readiness, design, and implementation strengths and challenges. Participate in five virtual workgroup meetings that build knowledge, facilitate peer learning, and support the development of evaluation plans.

Meet regularly with an assigned coach who provides planning advice and assistance for evaluations tailored to each state's assessed needs and identified opportunities for improvement.

Exchange information and learn about each state's evaluation action plan, conduct activities with other states, and engage with workforce system evaluation subject matter experts (SMEs) to discuss interests and needs.

The virtual meetings encouraged peer-to-peer conversations, addressed TA needs, and provided resources on evaluation topics of common interest. Each session featured facilitated peer learning exchanges and presentations on evaluation topics. The topics ranged from evaluation culture and awareness to strategic planning, data analysis plans, evaluation methods, and funding approaches. As part of the evaluation action planning activities, cohort members also engaged with nationally recognized SMEs from federal evaluation offices, state workforce program agencies, private foundations, and academia. The SMEs provided

[1] Chocolaad, Yvette. "Evidence-Building Capacity in State Workforce Agencies: Insights from a National Scan and Two State Site Visits." National Association of State Workforce Agencies, 9 May 2017, wdr.doleta.gov/research/details.cfm?q=Evaluation%20capacity%20NASWA&id=2611.

theoretical perspectives and practical information, described efforts to build internal evaluation capacity and procure external evaluators, and explained their own efforts to report evaluation impacts and outcomes effectively.

One-on-one coaching sessions with cross-agency state teams occurred as they prepared to participate in each EvalPLC virtual session. Throughout the EvalPLC, state teams used these coaching sessions to identify the steps needed to implement actionable strategies. Information gained from the evaluation self-assessment results informed the topics for the EvalPLC meetings, peer conversations, and individualized coaching sessions as EvalPLC members developed a state-specific Evaluation Action Plan (EAP) tool. The EvalHub EAP tool is a resource that state workforce agencies can use to transform the state's goals for evaluation into strategies and identify concrete next steps related to:

- Evaluation Culture and Awareness
- Funding Strategies
- Data Management
- Staff Skills, Capacity, and Knowledge
- Strategic Planning

During the 2020 EvalPLC, states had the option to complete an EAP Design Supplement, participate in coach-facilitated evaluation planning, and develop a logic model, research questions, data collection plans, and analysis. The remainder of this brief highlights the strengths and challenges, evaluation capacity-building strategies, next steps, and successes of and insights from the 2020 EvalPLC.[2] The information sources for the states' strengths and challenges synthesized in this brief are gathered from the state teams' self-assessments, discussions during virtual meetings, coaching calls, and the states' EAPs. The report concludes with a section highlighting state team-identified successes and insightful takeaways for the Department's consideration. These considerations could be helpful for other states with building capacity in research and evaluation activities of their workforce development programs and services and for the Department in planning enhancements to future TA efforts.

States' Evaluation Capacity Strengths and Challenges

Each state team completed two self-assessment tools to help them identify their state's strengths and challenges related to evaluation activities conducted to determine the effectiveness of the states' WIOA programs. The two self-assessments contain 43 statements about the overall readiness of the state teams to conduct evaluation activities and to design and implement evaluations. Responses to each statement receive ratings that rank the state's evaluation capacity from "1," meaning not at all, to "5," meaning in place and exceeding the element's requirements.

[2] Information summarized in this brief reflects the selected state teams' self-assessed readiness to design and conduct workforce program evaluations during the five-month period of the 2020 EvalPLC cohort and their stated post-cohort plans.

The self-assessment responses from the state teams determined the approach used, content developed, and SMEs and presenters for each of the EvalPLC virtual meetings. Results from the EDA readiness assessments indicated that, on average, state teams identified strengths in evaluation culture and awareness with average ratings of "some of this sometimes" (see Figure 1). States identified data management; staff skills, capacity, and knowledge; funding strategies; and strategic planning as challenges, on average, and they rated these areas at an average of "making progress." From the design and implementation self-assessments, most state teams identified strengths in data collection and analysis planning. The teams tended to assess data collection and analysis planning as "some of this sometimes." Areas of challenge were evaluation design and research questions, evaluator selection, reporting, and participant rights. When they rated themselves on evaluation design and research questions and participant rights, results tended to be "making progress." Reporting and evaluator selection tended to receive ratings of "not at all."

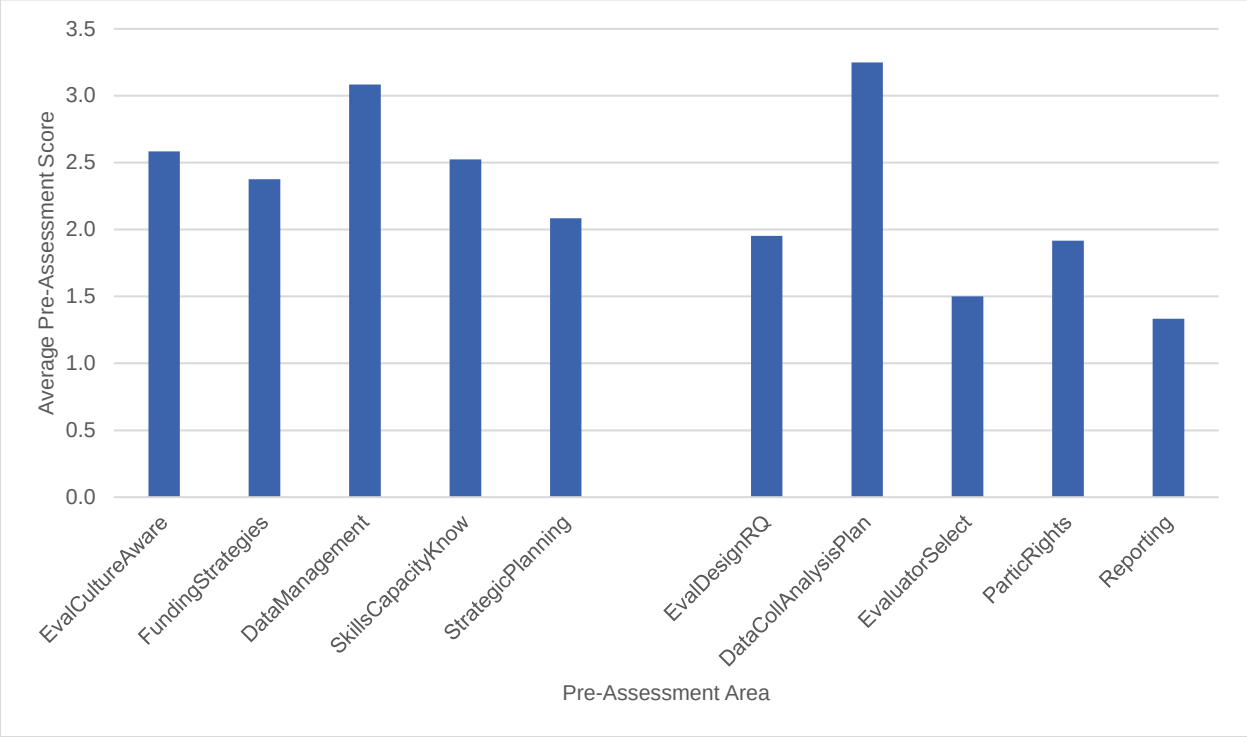


Figure 1. Average Self-Assessment Scores of 2020 EvalPLC State Teams

States' Plans to Build Evaluation Capacity

As the state teams developed Evaluation Action Plans, the EvalPLC coaches facilitated team discussions on how states might address challenges and areas needing improvement. State teams considered how to maintain momentum after the conclusion of the 2020 EvalPLC. Most committed to maintaining a cross-agency group to continue focusing on planning for and conducting evaluations. The following sections discuss the action plans in more detail across five topics on designing and conducting evaluations and building evaluation capacity: enhancing evaluation culture and awareness, identifying funding strategies, planning for data management, building evaluation capacity, and developing evaluation plans.

Enhancing Evaluation Culture and Awareness

Three states—Massachusetts, North Dakota, and New Hampshire—chose to focus on evaluation culture and awareness. Building a culture of evaluation means that the state workforce agency and its partners intentionally use information to analyze the enterprise's results (outputs and outcomes) to improve the delivery of services and programs. If an organization has a strong evaluation culture, its members can describe the benefits of program evaluation, use evidence-based results to inform its decisions, and conduct an evaluation or serve as a contributor to a partner's evaluation to add to the existing evidence base. Strategies identified by the state teams follow:

- Emphasize state-level processes to build evaluation culture or develop local evaluation requirements (MA, NH, ND).
- Transform the state's EvalPLC team into a permanent subcommittee of the state workforce board or assemble an evaluation team to create a seamless evaluation process for the state (MA, ND, NM).
- Include effective evaluation strategies as new programs are implemented or as existing programs or services are revamped (MA, NH).
- Conduct research through professional associations and other states' evaluations to identify approaches and enhance future evaluations (NH).
- Build relationships with universities and foundations to establish an evaluation professional learning community and promote evaluation partnerships (MA).

Identifying Funding Strategies

When planning for evaluation activities, the state or region must consider funding strategies. Funding strategies include investing in state-funded evaluations, leveraging local or state grant-funded project resources, or pursuing opportunities with external partnerships and other funding sources. Two of the state teams identified funding strategies unique to each:

- Use Title I set-aside or discretionary grant funding to secure funding for future evaluation (MA, NH).
- Establish a budget and identify long-term funding sources for evaluation (NH).
- Pursue foundation funding opportunities and incorporate evaluation into procurement opportunities (MA).

Data Management

Data management is more than the collection, storage, and dissemination of information. It also entails the development of effective processes for collecting and storing the data coupled with the critical element of ensuring the security and quality of the data. In evaluation, as noted in the

State Workforce Agency Evaluation Toolkit, data management also anticipates the development of a data analysis plan. Idaho, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania addressed issues related to data management as part of their EAPs. These states considered updates to existing data mechanisms or implemented new data processes, use, dissemination, and documentation as follows:

- Identify common enrollment data across titles, compare collected data to outcome measures, and enhance enrollment (ID).
- Determine key agencies, personnel, and policies that contribute to and benefit from shared data (PA).
- Identify data-sharing gaps and update data-sharing agreements and MOUs (MA, NH).
- Research best practices and barriers to centralizing data, assess financial resources, and develop a procedure document for a common data warehouse (PA).
- Develop a cross-agency longitudinal database (MA) or a common data warehouse and reporting system (NH, PA).

Building Evaluation Capacity

Building evaluation capacity involves developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of workforce agency and program staff to engage in conducting evaluations or procuring and selecting external evaluators. Three states identified strategies or actions to build in-house research and evaluation capacity, as follows:

- Define and compile examples of “evidence-based” and data-driven models and conduct gap analysis of staff KSAs on evaluation (PA).
- Determine budget and potential new staff allocations for evaluation (MA).
- Train existing evaluation staff (MA, NH, and PA) on evaluation components (NH), on implementing evidence-based, data-driven models (PA), or through project shadowing or mentoring (MA).
- If an evaluation unit cannot be developed, create a formally institutionalized, ongoing, cross-team evaluation committee (MA).

Developing Evaluation Plans

Strategic evaluation planning involves building relationships that foster a culture to support evaluations and evidence-based policymaking, ensures that evaluations conducted are relevant to all key stakeholders, and leverages resources to provide the foundation for research and evaluation capacity. This kind of planning occurs in a cycle that begins by engaging stakeholders to develop a learning agenda that aligns with the state workforce agency’s overarching program goals and identifies the research questions that address the program’s

effectiveness and impacts. Five states identified goals for integrating strategic evaluation planning into their EAPs, as follows:

- Maintain the state team after the EvalPLC, gather data from WDQI evaluation work, and collaborate with other states in conducting evaluation (ID).
- Develop policies and/or processes to involve all partner agencies in evaluation planning (MA, PA).
- Build an evidence portfolio of shared research projects and reports (MA, NH, PA).
- Evaluate participation in and use of virtual client delivery services pre- and post-pandemic (ND).
- Evaluate key factors for program success in career awareness programs for 16-24-year-old young adults (ND).
- Seek consortium and State Workforce Innovation Board approval of evaluation strategies and use of existing data (NH).

State Teams' Planned Next Steps

State teams collaborated with a coach with evaluation expertise to identify their post-cohort focus areas and to apply lessons learned to their states' EAPs. With a concrete and specific set of challenges, corresponding goals, and specific strategies in an EAP, states position themselves to make progress in planning for and conducting evaluations of workforce programs. Strategies the state teams planned to focus on after participation in the EvalPLC included the following:

- Use longitudinal data to evaluate federal and state-supported workforce training programs over the next 12 months. The state's long-term goal is "to create an evaluation that can be used with any grant" within two years. The team aimed to "continue moving forward with a community of practice while combining collaborative efforts across titles," with project oversight provided by the Idaho Department of Labor (ID).
- "Meet to work on key strategies identified in the EAP that will lead to desired outcomes for expanded evaluation capacity" over the next year. The team also plans to "spend time working through" the EAP Design Supplement. Longer term, they proposed to "establish a committee of WIOA partner agencies" to focus on implementing the EAP developed during the EvalPLC and "develop next steps for the areas of interest for evaluation" (MA).
- Determine specifics including the goal of evaluating the state's Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessments (RESEA) program. They planned to "better define populations [and] questions to be answered," decide on staff training needs, and identify "what new partners are needed" to conduct evaluation activities (NH).

- Commit to "maintain its Evaluation Committee." The state hired an internal Evaluator/Project Manager "to guide the committee and projects moving forward." They also committed to "develop an Evaluation Plan aligned with their State Combined Plan." They proposed to "start small" and to "always lead with evaluation when initiating projects." (NM).

- Get buy-in from the Workforce Development Commission by submitting a "proposal for [an] annual percentage of statewide set-aside funds [to be used] for purposes of research and evaluation" in May 2021. They hoped to establish a workgroup by June 2021 and complete EAP work in July 2021 (ND).

- Seek "cross-agency leadership buy-in and support" in the short term, as well as maintain the "effort and momentum" of the team in "accomplishing our goals." Longer term, they planned to seek "out additional partnerships and funding resources for evaluation," engage in a community of practice on an ongoing basis, secure funding to fill two new evaluation and partnership-development positions and join the existing Information Technology Management Board in support of future planning efforts (PA).

States' Successes and Insights from the EvalPLC

Despite the diversion of states' attention to a rapid and focused response to the economic situation of 2020, the state teams identified successful endeavors that came about because of their participation in the EvalPLC. The 2020 EvalPLC state teams' feedback on the TA experience consistently emphasized the value of knowing that they and their peers were at similar stages in planning.

Some successes occurred as early as October 2020, with New Mexico announcing that they would be "hiring at least one research/evaluation position under [their] LMI Director" and that they had "some great applicants." In the same month, Idaho's state team decided they wanted to keep the team "as a permanent fixture going forward." By January 2021, North Dakota appeared to "have made a lot of progress in focusing on what research and evaluation can do to support and improve operations," and New Mexico had hired its new evaluator and developed an initial logic model by March 2020. "[The team] found great value in working through a visual tool (i.e., Mural) to develop a logic model." As the EvalPLC concluded, New Hampshire learned from the process to plan its evaluation of RESEA. Five of the six states submitted EAPs by May 2021.

Short- and Long-Term Takeaways from the 2020 EvalPLC

In planning for future evaluations and state activities related to evaluation, such as strategic planning or developing grant RFPs, state teams commented on their takeaways from the 2020 EvalPLC. These takeaways reflect both planning for the short term (i.e., 3 to 6 months) and for the longer term as they implemented EAPs.

- Get buy-in from state leadership to establish a workgroup for evaluation.

- Use longitudinal data to evaluate federal- and state-supported workforce training programs.

- Focus on implementing the EAP developed during the EvalPLC with WIOA partners.
- Determine specific strategies, activities, and resources needed for next steps in the short and/or long term from the state's EAP developed during the EvalPLC.

Considerations for Future EvalPLC TA Efforts

State teams and coaches reflected on considerations for technical assistance to future cohorts. The following recommendations are made to benefit upcoming efforts in EvalPLC TA.

- Engage in discussions with state peers and seek out opportunities to learn from evaluation and research SMEs to support state evaluation planning efforts.
- Continue to utilize the evaluation self-assessments and planning tools to identify key areas and specific strategies to advance state evaluation activities, but not require state teams to complete the self-assessments before the first virtual session.
- Provide state teams with the opportunity to choose a capstone project, which may include a research design for a specific project, a statement of work for a request for proposal for an evaluation, or an EAP.
- Encourage states to establish and maintain a state cross-agency group that focuses on planning for and conducting evaluations.
- Engage cross-agency partners and other stakeholders to improve the likelihood of states meeting their evaluation and research goals.
- Encourage state cohorts, where possible, to include members with analytic expertise (i.e., LMI staff or evaluation staff with WIOA programs).

Appendix: Descriptions of the 2020 EvalPLC Virtual Events

Session	Planned Objectives	Session Descriptions
1: Establishing the Baseline	• Review expectations of state teams and states' assessments. • Recap the states' evaluation TA needs. • Conduct peer learning exchange about the status of each state's evaluation efforts.	Shared expectations for the EvalPLC; reviewed each state team's strengths including experiences with planning and conducting evaluations of workforce programs; creation of an evaluation learning community; discussed the use of customer feedback to improve programs and services; considered the states' opportunities to improve system-wide evaluations; and exchanged ideas about how evaluation results are used to improve programs and service delivery.
2: Designing an Evaluation and Driving Change Based on Evaluation Results	• Discuss the multi-dimensional aspects of evaluation, including participatory evaluation design and facilitating use of evaluation findings for positive change. • Describe state experiences with evaluation, rigorous evaluation design, and primary data collection plans. • Address how to conduct Evaluation Action Planning.	Shared insights about engaging stakeholders in the development of evaluation projects, offered strategies for processes relevant to evaluation policy and program operations, and introduced appropriate methodological approaches that apply to specific evaluation questions. State representatives shared tips about writing research questions, designing data collection analysis plans, and developing customer surveys to build relevant, meaningful data inputs for research and evaluation.
3: Identifying and Developing Capacity for Evaluation	• Improve awareness of developing evaluation capacity among state agency staff. • Gain a better understanding of partnering with external, third-party evaluators. • Provide an opportunity for state team members to divide into small groups to	Presenters shared insights and experiences about building evaluation capacity through in-house professional development and creating partnerships through research partnerships. Presenters shared aspects of developing in-house evaluation capacity, emphasizing knowledge and interests of staff, understanding contractual and financial parameters when

Session	Planned Objectives	Session Descriptions
	discuss developing in-house evaluation capacity OR partnering with third-party evaluators.	procuring an external evaluator, and setting realistic agency expectations for external evaluators. Partnerships with external evaluators were discussed, and emphases placed on seeking partners with applied research orientation, using the language of researchers, and valuing partnerships as supplements to—not replacements for—internal capacity. In breakout groups, states continued the discussion, including building capacity across multiple titles, programs, and agencies.
4: Building Evaluation Culture, Awareness, and Strategic Planning	• Improve understanding of evaluation culture and awareness and how to cultivate across workforce programs and services. • Explore the role of research and evaluation in strategic planning.	Research and evaluation as part of strategic planning, including ETA's expectations for state research and evaluation in WIOA state plans, were discus. Insights and experiences with building and maintaining strong evaluation cultures and awareness across workforce programs and services were shared by a state workforce agency. Examples of state-level approaches and initiatives to introduce evaluation components within contracts and opportunities to participate in the Coleridge Initiative's Advanced Data Analytics training were described.
5: Reflections and Next Steps	• Share state reflections and feedback on the EvalPLC TA activities. • Discuss states' lessons learned and next steps. • Conduct a peer learning exchange on furthering the	State teams discussed their strengths, challenges, lessons learned, next steps in research and evaluation, and how the evaluation action plans will help their workforce agencies going forward. Coaches reiterated their support and offered resources as state teams finalized EAPs and looked to the future success of

Session	Planned Objectives	Session Descriptions
	conversation on evaluation. • Highlight available resources, upcoming events, and the states' EAPs.	evaluation efforts. Reflections about what the cohort perceived as the most valuable from the EvalPLC were shared. State Leads shared feedback on how the EvalPLC process could be improved.