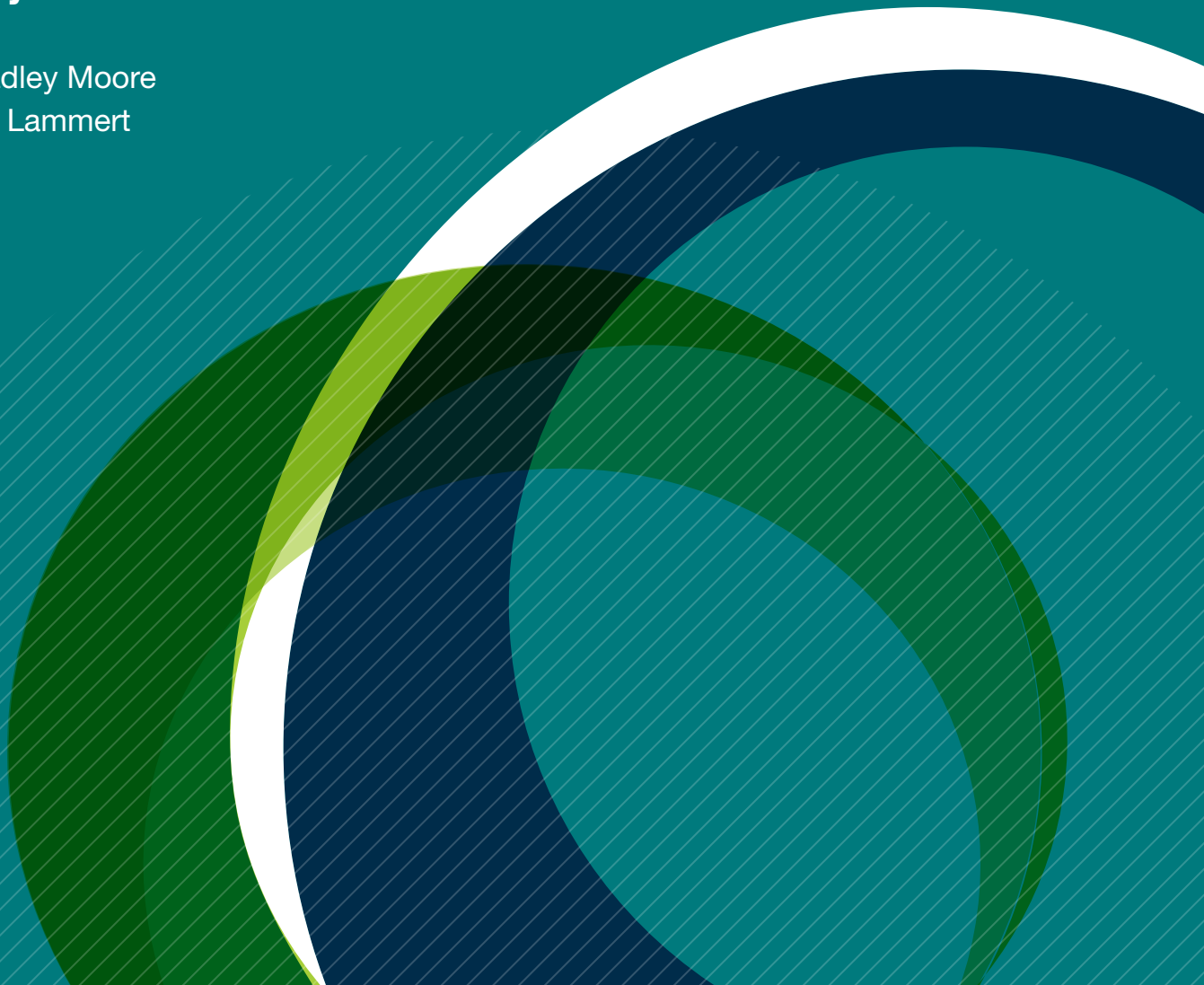




# **Making Project Measures Meaningful:** Quality, Relevance, Usefulness, and Beyond!

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## Making Project Measures Meaningful: Quality, Relevance, Usefulness, and Beyond!

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Federal grantees are increasingly asked to strive for more rigorous evaluations of their projects to demonstrate that they are achieving their objectives. If you are reading this brief, you are likely working with the evaluation of an OSEP-funded project. Your evaluation should be designed to show your project's progress toward your objectives, including demonstrating what is working and what is not.<sup>1</sup> It should also show the degree to which you are achieving your project's objectives, including improving outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities; their families; and personnel who serve them. OSEP grantees often focus their evaluations and project performance measures on the outcomes of quality, relevance, and usefulness (QRU), consistent with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). Measures of QRU are usually value statements about an output (e.g., the usefulness of a product), information that is necessary but not sufficient as you work to understand the effects of your project.

In this brief, we focus on developing project performance measures that move beyond assessments of QRU in two ways, by:

1. Limiting the number of project performance measures focused on QRU and
2. Striving for a greater focus on other types of outcomes in your remaining measures.

These shifts can open the door to incisive measures that better capture your important project work and the outcomes associated with it.

### LIMIT THE NUMBER OF PROJECT PERFORMANCE MEASURES FOCUSED ON QRU

Projects in the Educational, Technology, Media, and Materials Program; the Technical Assistance and Dissemination Program; and the Parent Information Centers Program are required to address QRU in response to GPRA requirements. Refer to [Appendix A](#) for lists of the OSEP GPRA measures by program.

CIPP reviewed 11 evaluation plans of large discretionary projects funded by OSEP in these program areas between 2014 and 2019 and found that, on average, about 30 percent of the evaluation questions across plans were related to the QRU of products and services (with a range of 18% to 50%). In these evaluation plans, data related to QRU were most often gathered through feedback surveys administered to a project's target audiences or ratings gathered from panels of experts. Data tended

#### Background on GPRA Measures

*GPRA measures are established by OSEP in conjunction with the Office of Management and Budget and the Department's Budget Service. Recipients of Federal grants are required to report on the GPRA measures established for the grantor's program each year.*

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. (2019). *Office of Special Education Programs: Grant performance report for continuation funding: Fiscal year 2019*. Washington, DC: Author.

to be collected on an annual basis from experts or in one-time data collections immediately after participants or users interacted with products or participated in trainings or technical assistance. In addition, surveys with 5-point Likert scales were commonly used to assess the QRU of products and services.

Of course, there is no “correct” percentage of evaluation questions related to QRU; instead, the balance depends on your type of project, project year, and project schedule. Think of your QRU-related project performance measures as one necessary component of a broader evaluation that focuses on the results you are trying to achieve. You should aim to have more evaluation questions that emphasize other project outcomes (such as changes in related service providers’ knowledge or skill) than evaluation questions related to the QRU of documents or products.

### FOCUS MORE ON OTHER OUTCOMES IN YOUR REMAINING MEASURES


First and foremost, project evaluations are meant to be meaningful to you and your project (as opposed to feeling like another box you need to check off as part of receiving funding). To ensure that your evaluation is meaningful, think about how you can shape your evaluation to collect data that give greater detail about the overall outcomes of the project. Work with your evaluator and performance monitoring team to carefully develop your project performance measures and evaluation activities, to ensure that the resulting evaluation data will be useful to the project team and will describe the performance and outcomes of your unique project (including your data related to QRU).<sup>2</sup>

On the following page, Figure 1 gives examples of what this approach might look like in practice for three strategies that are commonly used in OSEP projects: trainings, the project website, and tools and products. The examples are meant to show how you can employ different evaluation methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, and observations) to gather more data about the achievement of your project’s outcomes beyond QRU. As you think about ways to collect data on your project’s long-term outcomes, consider how you can increase the rigor of the evaluation methods used to gather data to show improvements in outcomes for infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities. For more information about creating an evaluation plan that aligns with your logic model and shows evidence of the achievement of your project’s outcomes, see the CIPP companion piece *Linking Your Evaluation Plan to Your Logic Model: A Good Way to Keep Your Project on Track*, available on the [OSEP IDEAs That Work website](#).

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<sup>2</sup> See the [Grantee Guide to Project Performance Measurement](#) for a step-by-step process that you can use to create and revise your project performance measures.

**Figure 1.** Examples of ways to collect data beyond QRU

QRU	Training data	Website data	Data on tools and products
 <p data-bbox="120 1108 228 1157"><b>Other Outcomes</b></p>	<p>Annually, participants provide numeric ratings of the quality of trainings that they have participated in over the past 12 months.</p>	<p>Annually, participants who have engaged with the project over the course of the past 12 months provide a numeric rating of the relevance of the website.</p>	<p>Annually, experts provide numeric ratings of the usefulness of tools and products.</p>
	<p>At the end of training sessions, participants provide numeric ratings of the quality of the training and are asked to report on what they found helpful, what should be improved, and what was missing.</p>	<p>When they first access the website, visitors are asked if they would be willing to participate in a popup survey to provide a numeric rating of the quality and relevance of the website.</p>	<p>Annually, participants who have engaged with the project over the course of the past 12 months self-report on the extent to which they have used tools and products.</p>
	<p>Before the training, participants take a short pre-test of knowledge. At the end of training sessions, participants provide numeric ratings of the quality of instruction, training materials, and session content. They are asked to report on what they found helpful, what should be improved, and what was missing. Participants then take a short post-test to determine if they gained the expected knowledge. Three months later, selected participants are observed to assess the fidelity with which they are implementing the practices they learned during the training.</p>	<p>Visitors to the website are asked in a real-time popup survey to provide a numeric rating of the quality and relevance of the website. They are also asked to provide responses to open-ended items that ask what information they hoped to find on the website, whether or not they found the information they were looking for, and how relevant and useful the resources they found on the site were to their current work.</p>	<p>On a rolling basis, participants who provided their email addresses when they downloaded tools and products are asked to report on the extent to which they have used tools and products and to detail any changes in knowledge or capacity they have experienced as a result.</p>

Evaluation data are also important to those outside of the project, including a variety of consumers and stakeholders such as funders, participants and potential participants, the public, professional colleagues, and policymakers. As such, you will also want to ensure that your project evaluation produces data that are meaningful to them, such as data that demonstrate what the project has achieved, what the project has produced, the return on investment, challenges for the project, and implications for sustainability and scale-up. Crafting project performance measures and evaluation activities that will provide this type of data will also take careful consideration and a concerted effort to avoid too many project performance measures focused solely on QRU.

Evaluation activities, and performance measures, can be focused on the process of implementing the project and on the outcomes of the project. Without a doubt, both types of information are valuable. However, selecting project performance measures and designing the corresponding evaluation often mean prioritizing the collection of certain types of information over others due to resource constraints. To best leverage limited resources, whenever possible make the most of any data collection activities that you have planned and gather data that your project can really use (e.g., to find out what is working and what is not, to show what you are doing and the outcomes that result, to advocate for additional funding). Make your data collection activities do double (or triple) duty. For example, even when gathering data related to your project's implementation, we recommend selecting indicators that provide information about outcomes to help you improve the way you carry out your planned activities and give you indications about your progress toward achieving the project's expected outcomes.

For example, a survey item that asks respondents to indicate only whether materials are "relevant" on a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., 1 = not at all relevant, 5 = very relevant) does not provide much actionable information if participants rate the materials as "not at all relevant" or "not very relevant." Without additional information about why the materials are not relevant or what would make them relevant, it will be difficult for project staff to know if there was (a) a mismatch between the way the participant intended to use the materials and the purpose for which the materials were designed or (b) an error in the materials themselves. Further, if the survey is only administered annually, it might not provide project staff with feedback in a timeframe that allows them to make needed corrections. As a result, the project might lose valuable project time or fail to achieve one or more of its expected outcomes because project participants did not consider the materials relevant. So, while a Likert scale item alone does provide some useful information, it might be helpful to also include another, open-ended item that asks for additional information about the respondent's perceptions of the materials. Additionally, administering the survey more frequently would provide data that are more actionable.

Of course, collecting more data—or collecting data more often—can be more costly, and that is always a valid concern. (For useful information about budgeting for evaluation, see the sidebar.) When trying to decide what data to collect, and how and when to collect them, prioritize the data that will be most useful as you implement your project and as you reflect on its outcomes.

## Selected Resources on Evaluation Budgeting

Corporation for National and Community Service. (2014). *A quick guide for Social Innovation Fund applicants: Budgeting for rigorous evaluations*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from: <http://www.nationalservice.gov/build-your-capacity/grants/funding-opportunities/2014/social-innovation-fund-grants-fy-2014/financial-management-system-requirements>

Horn, J. (2001). *Checklist for developing and evaluating evaluation budgets*. Kalamazoo, MI: Evaluations Checklist Project, Western Michigan University. Retrieved from: <https://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/u350/2018/budgets-horn.pdf>

Lammert, J.D., and Fiore, T. (2015). *Budgeting for evaluation: Key factors to consider*. Rockville, MD: Center to Improve Project Performance/Westat. Retrieved from: [https://osepideasthatwork.org/sites/default/files/CIPP2\\_Budgeting\\_for\\_Evaluation\\_Brief\\_2-13-15.pdf](https://osepideasthatwork.org/sites/default/files/CIPP2_Budgeting_for_Evaluation_Brief_2-13-15.pdf)

Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Institute for Higher Education Policy, and Pathways to College Network. (2014). *Evaluation toolkit: Create a budget*. Washington, DC: The Pell Institute. Retrieved from: <http://toolkit.pellinstitute.org/evaluation-guide/plan-budget/develop-a-budget/>

## UPDATE YOUR PROJECT PERFORMANCE MEASURES (IF NEEDED)

We recommend the following process as you update or revise your project performance measures. As a first step, use your logic model as a guide to help you focus on outcomes as you select both formative and summative indicators of progress and results. For example, the data you collect should relate to your key outputs, short-term outcomes, medium-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes. In addition, you may want to consider the collection of fidelity data, which tell you the degree to which a project, project component, or intervention is being delivered as intended.

**Focus on Outcomes in Your Formative Evaluation.** Many people think formative evaluation focuses primarily on process-oriented data. However, formative data can also be outcomes oriented. Formative data are simply the data that you gather during project implementation. They should help you improve the way you carry out the planned strategies and activities and can give you early indications of your progress toward achieving the project's expected outcomes.

You can think of formative evaluation activities for your project as being very similar to formative evaluation activities that might be employed with students in educational settings. For example, in both situations formative evaluation should focus on “assessment of progress toward a long-term or major objective.”<sup>3</sup> Your formative evaluation data should help increase the likelihood that your project will achieve its outcomes by giving you an early indication of the project activities that are working well and those that need to be adjusted or improved.

Importantly, to collect actionable data for formative purposes, carefully consider the frequency and timing of data collection activities. For example, annual measures of QRU may not give you the type of real-time information that you would need to adjust and fine-tune project activities in order to have a greater likelihood of achieving your expected outcomes.

**Focus on Outcomes in Your Summative Evaluation.** In general, summative evaluation more clearly focuses on outcomes since the overall purpose of summative evaluation is to assess the extent to which a project achieves its outcomes or goals. An important role for summative evaluation is to determine the unique contribution of the project to the desired change, which typically requires an investigation of the extent to which the change has occurred (usually among the populations served by the project, including infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities), the factors associated with the change, and the measurement of change among different populations. Summative questions are best informed when there are comparison data that can give you an idea of the counterfactual (i.e., what would have happened if the project had not been implemented).<sup>4</sup>

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3 Salvia, J., and Ysseldyke, J.E. (2004). *Assessment of special and inclusive education*. Boston, MA. Houghton Mifflin.

4 Lammert, J.D., Heinemeier, S., Schaaf, J.M., Fiore, T.A., and Howell, B. (2016). *Evaluating special education programs: Resource Toolkit*. Rockville, MD: Westat. Retrieved from: [https://osepideasthatwork.org/sites/default/files/Evaluating%20Special%20Education%20Programs%20Resource%20Toolkit\\_Section%20508\\_12.pdf](https://osepideasthatwork.org/sites/default/files/Evaluating%20Special%20Education%20Programs%20Resource%20Toolkit_Section%20508_12.pdf).

## ACTION STEPS TO MOVE YOUR PROJECT EVALUATION TOWARD A GREATER FOCUS ON OUTCOMES

Below, we have five specific suggestions for making your project measures more meaningful. Refer back to [Figure 1](#) for examples of what some of these suggestions might look like in practice.

- 1. Talk with Your Project Officer About Reducing Overemphasis on QRU.** If you have multiple project performance measures that separately address QRU (e.g., looking at the QRU of multiple components of your services or gathering feedback from multiple audiences on the QRU of the same products) and fewer other types of measures, talk with your OSEP Project Officer about reducing the number of measures that address QRU and increasing the number of measures that focus on other project-relevant outcomes.
- 2. Focus on Outcomes Beyond QRU.** If you are given the go-ahead, determine what information related to QRU would be most valuable to your project team and focus your efforts on creating high-quality project performance measures that will capture that information. Overall, in selecting your project performance measures and designing your evaluation, integrate the collection of data that can be used to gauge how well your project is moving toward achieving its outcomes (as they are articulated in your logic model). Consider both your formative and summative data collection activities. Ideally, the data that you are spending time and money to collect—including your QRU and other project performance data—should help you and your key stakeholders (including OSEP) to understand whether and how well you are accomplishing what you set out to do. See the [Grantee Guide to Project Performance Measurement](#) for a step-by-step process that you can use to create and revise your project performance measures.
- 3. Move Away from Self-Reported Data.** To make sure you are capturing information that is useful to your project staff as they fine-tune implementation, try moving away from self-reported data to the extent possible. You might think about incorporating data collection strategies such as observations for fidelity of implementation (looking at how resources or practices are actually being used). Or you could consider adding a pre- and posttest before and after a training to determine whether participants demonstrate gains in knowledge or increased skills after the training.
- 4. Collect Data More Frequently.** Collecting data annually might not provide you with timely enough information to adjust project activities, if needed. If you do not know whether you are making regular progress toward your expected outcomes—and if you are not able to make improvements along the way—there is a lower likelihood that you will actually achieve your project goals. If you are currently using an annual survey to collect most of your data, consider adding more data collections to ensure that you are gathering data in time to make needed adjustments or improvements. We recommend using data collection sources or instruments that can be administered relatively quickly and more frequently—similar to how you might collect progress monitoring data—to increase the chances that you will make steady progress toward your desired outcomes.

**5. Leverage Existing Evaluation Activities.** We understand that adding new or more frequent data collections can be costly. Before you do this, look carefully at the data collection activities that you already have planned and carefully consider whether some of them could be slightly repurposed to help you implement the suggestions above without breaking the bank. For example, can you add a few items to a survey you are already administering? Or can you change the timing of a data collection activity (without adding an additional data collection) so that you receive the data in time to make decisions for the next project year? Could some of your data collection activities take less time but be more frequent? Might you be able to increase the scope of your data collection activities but scale back on the number of participants, for example, by using a representative sample instead of the entire population? Think about what you are already doing and how you might use or slightly repurpose what you have in place.

Moving beyond measures of QRU is an exciting opportunity to reflect on your current project performance measures and think critically about whether they are providing the data that you need to determine whether your project is making appropriate progress toward your objectives. Ideally, your project performance measures and the corresponding evaluation activities should produce data that are invaluable to the project and that you are eager to analyze to see the results. If you decide that you do need to update your project performance measures, first consult your OSEP Project Officer and your evaluator. Then, together, you can begin thinking about how you can adjust the focus of your existing evaluation activities so that you can learn more about your project results and collect data that the project team can use to inform implementation.



## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more resources that you can use for your evaluation, see the CIPP resources available on the [OSEP IDEAs That Work](#) website. Some tools that might be especially valuable include:

[Evaluating Special Education Programs: Resource Toolkit](#)

[Grantee Guide to Project Performance Measurement](#)

[Demonstrating Evidence Across the Project Cycle](#)

[Budgeting for Evaluation: Key Factors to Consider](#)

[Why Evaluate? Infographic](#)

**APPENDIX A: OSEP GPRA MEASURES PERTAINING TO QRU, BY PROGRAM**

*Table A-1. Education Technology, Media, and Materials GPRA measures*

**Measure**

The percentage of Educational Technology, Media, and Materials Program products and services judged to be of high quality by an independent review panel of experts qualified to review the substantive content of the products and services

The percentage of Educational Technology, Media, and Materials Program products and services judged by an independent review panel of qualified experts to be useful in improving results for infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities

The percentage of Educational Technology, Media, and Materials Program products and services judged by an independent review panel of qualified experts to be of high relevance to improving outcomes of infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities

*Table A-2. Parent Information Centers GPRA measures*

**Measure**

The percentage of materials disseminated by Parent Training and Information Center Program projects deemed to be of high quality by an independent review panel of experts qualified to review the substantive content of the products or services

The percentage of Parent Training and Information Center Program products and services deemed to be of high relevance to educational and early intervention policy or practice by an independent review panel of qualified experts with appropriate expertise to review the substantive content of the products or services

The percentage of all Parent Training and Information Center Program products and services deemed by an independent review panel of qualified experts to be useful to improve educational or early intervention policy or practice

*Table A-3. Technical Assistance and Dissemination GPRA measures*

**Measure**

The percentage of Technical Assistance and Dissemination products and services deemed to be of high quality by an independent review panel of experts qualified to review the substantive content of the products and services

The percentage of Special Education Technical Assistance and Dissemination products and services deemed by an independent review panel of qualified experts to be of high relevance to educational and early intervention policy or practice

The percentage of all Special Education Technical Assistance and Dissemination products and services deemed by an independent review panel of qualified experts to be useful to improve educational or early intervention policy or practice