State Arts Agency Research Affinity Group
November 2, 2018

Breakfast Discussion

Introduction and Definitions

NASAA Senior Director of Research Ryan Stubbs gave a short presentation outlining the goals of the session and reviewing key research ideas related to it. He talked about the differences between "program evaluation" and "evaluation" and distinguished "outputs" from "outcomes." He noted that "research" many not be in many state arts agency (SAA) job titles, but it is in a lot of SAA job descriptions, and that NASAA is committed to continue to hold conversations that deepen our shared understanding of data, research and evaluation. Ryan then shared data from a recent survey of grants officers that revealed that 61% of respondents require grantees to evaluate their programs. Of those that require evaluation, the most common way of doing so was internal evaluations of mission relevant data, and the least common way of doing so was professional evaluations by third-party consultants.

NASAA Research Associate Patricia Mullaney-Loss said that NASAA is updating its collection of program evaluation and performance measurement resources. The forthcoming evaluation and measurement page on NASAA's website will feature performance measurement models, theoretical frameworks and examples of SAA program evaluation. As part of this process, NASAA is revising Getting Started with Program Evaluation, an on-line guide it developed with the Georgia Council for the Arts. Patricia mentioned that NASAA also creates, at the request of SAAs, customized funding and grant-making benchmarking reports.

Ryan helped participants divide into four discussion groups and introduced the topics to be addressed by each:

- Does evaluation currently influence your agency's planning? If so, how?
- Does evaluation of grantee programs influence the grant-making process? If so, how?
- What does your agency need to help further evaluative work? What besides money?

Group Discussions Report-Out and Synthesis

NASAA Research Manager Paul Pietsch led a discussion synthesizing what each breakout group discussed. Here are thematic highlights from the exchange:

Planning (Does evaluation currently influence your agency's planning? If so, how?)

- Evaluation is a necessary component of planning as it increases the intentionality and effectiveness of strategic plans. Grantee feedback is important.

- Time is a big challenge. It is important to incorporate evaluation into the design of the planning process, otherwise it might not happen.

- SAAs use a variety of evaluation tools and approaches as part of their planning process, including surveys, focus groups, listening sessions and data analysis.

- Evaluations help SAAs balance expectations and the realities of staff capacity.

- SAAs can use evaluations to understand the implications of their constituents' adoption of rapidly changing technologies.

- It can be useful to partner with other state agencies when undertaking an evaluation.

- Perennial challenge of evaluations relative to planning include:
    - limited understanding of evaluation practices
    - balancing the big picture and smaller details
    - ability to reach all constituents
    - not realizing the full potential of collected data
    - tracking grantee data on a longitudinal basis

Experiences (Does evaluation of grantee programs influence the grant-making process? If so, how?)

- Evaluations influence "what we get excited about" and can lead to program changes.

- Poor evaluations are a factor to consider when awarding funds.

- Shifting the evaluation metric from output to outcome can be difficult for grantees.

- Educating grantees about the goals of evaluations is helpful. For example, it might be beneficial to explain how an evaluation is more than tallying participation numbers.

- Evaluations tell stories on behalf of constituents.

- Longitudinal evaluations enable better understanding of the evolution of programs and program impacts.

- Evaluations can inform how an SAA addresses the question of whether it is better to award more grants or larger grant awards.

- Evaluations force grantees to be self-reflective, which benefits them in the long run.

Improvements (What does your agency need to help further evaluative work? What besides money?)

- There is a need for more staff and grantee training. This could help foster a culture of evaluation as well as promote consistency of evaluative practices. For example:

    o It is important to educate grantees about the difference between output and outcome.

    o Different grantees have different evaluation needs.

- Greater SAA staff capacity would enable better evaluations.

- SAA staff want more time to provide postevaluation support to grantees to help them learn from the process.

- Should grantees' FDRs (Final Descriptive Reports) be considered during adjudication of future grant applications?

- Should evaluations be based on the size or type of grant awarded?

- SAAs should focus more on helping applicants apply for funding and less time reviewing grant reports.