



An Introduction to Incorporating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion into Nutrition Incentive Program Research and Evaluation

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Resource Prepared by Michigan State University Center
for Regional Food Systems

February 2021



About this Practitioner Paper

Evaluation provides a process to improve how we develop and implement programs. In particular, a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in evaluation can guide program improvement and organizational growth. This paper overviews the role of a DEI lens in nutrition incentive program research and evaluation, along with an example and questions to consider for your program.

Introduction

Program research and evaluation has many purposes. As a framework, they help industries, institutions, and communities with decision making. As a tool, evaluation can enhance democracy by giving voice to communities and project partners with less power and act as an accountability mechanism. Traditionally, evaluation has been used to improve programming or organizations (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). In any case, program research and evaluation can be aligned to program goals and objectives to advance the larger mission and vision.

One major goal of the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) is to increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables among low-income consumers participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) by providing incentives at the point of purchase. In support of this goal, the National Training, Technical Assistance, Evaluation and Information Center (NTAE) – which created the Nutrition Incentive Hub – collects standardized core metrics to measure the impact of incentive programs on program participants. These core metrics include:

- SNAP use
- Firm types
- Dose of incentive program
- Program satisfaction
- Fruit and vegetable consumption
- Food security
- Health status
- Healthy days
- COVID-19
- Sociodemographics
- Geography

The data collected is used in reports to Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, peer-reviewed journal articles, and for GusNIP grantees' own purposes (Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition, 2020).

Nutrition incentive programs often collect quantitative data – that is, data whose value is measured in numbers or counts – utilizing validated instruments (e.g., surveys). Validation ensures that the instrument will accurately measure what it aims to measure and has high comparability. This helps to increase the credibility of the data and can inform policy decisions and resource allocation.

Qualitative data collection, on the other hand, is more descriptive and provides context. When quantitative and qualitative data are paired together, evaluators can better tell the story behind the numbers to inform programmatic strategy and even promote organizational change or improvement (Regnault et al., 2017). In addition to the quantitative core metrics the GusNIP NTAE collects to help reach program goals, GusNIP grantees and practitioners can leverage the evaluation process to collect supplemental qualitative data that will help accomplish their own organizational mission.

When nutrition incentive programs are introduced into communities, program participants' perceptions are essential to program development and improvement. The way an organization chooses to evaluate their program can be just as important. Identifying and understanding the intersection of your organizational mission and the broader GusNIP goals can be an opportunity to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in your nutrition incentive program evaluation.

The role of a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens in program research and evaluation

Conventional beliefs about evaluation often result in practices where evaluation is informed from within the organization by experts with credentials, with results generalized and geared toward funders. This minimizes the voice of groups who are affected by inequities and excludes them from meaningful roles within the process (Center for Evaluation Innovation et al., 2017). It is also not uncommon for evaluators and the organizations in which they work to view evaluation in the context of individual, separate events as opposed to a continuous experience that informs both an approach and personal and organizational growth (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011).

Evaluation provides a process to improve our ways of thinking and, in turn, improve our ways of developing, implementing, and changing programs and policies.

A DEI lens advises that programs and evaluation processes, frameworks, and assumptions alike be questioned (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). The [Equitable Evaluation Initiative](#), for example, promotes using evaluation as a tool for advancing equity (Equitable Evaluation Initiative, n.d.). A commitment to DEI

can be a driver for program improvement and organizational growth by acting as an accountability mechanism.

An example of a research and evaluation initiative that presented an opportunity to incorporate a DEI approach is a 2016 study conducted by Kansas State University (Kansas State University Center for Engagement and Community Development, 2017). The researchers’ aim was to inform the development of the [Kansas Healthy Food Initiative](#) (KHFI), a public-private partnership with a goal to improve the health and economic development of Kansans and their communities by increasing access to affordable, healthy food.

A series of semi-structured, regional focus groups were conducted with food system stakeholders, grocers, and SNAP and WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) participants across the state of Kansas. The SNAP and WIC focus groups sought participant perceptions of healthy food; insight into healthy food access strategies, shopping behaviors, and preparation and storage techniques; and requests for technical and information resources. The semi-structured focus group format involved small groups of people who were asked a series of loosely structured questions. Personal stories shared by SNAP and WIC participants gave insight into details of daily living that complements the type of data traditionally gleaned from quantitative surveys. The decision to keep focus groups small created an intimate environment where participants developed a sense of camaraderie. This yielded

more personal storytelling. The qualitative results of this study informed new ideas and approaches that were included in the report to the Kansas Health Foundation proposing an operational framework for KHFI.

Although it is not uncommon to conduct focus groups as a form of qualitative research, that alone is not enough. Applying a DEI lens to program research and evaluation is an intentional process. Considering focus group format and composition, differences in cultural experience, and the influence of power imbalances in research interactions can enhance DEI in the planning process. However, DEI should extend beyond the planning and data collection phases.

Engaging with the research participants about the overall outcomes of the evaluation, whether they feel they’ve been accurately represented in the research, and their interest in helping share the outcomes of the evaluation are ways to further embed DEI in your evaluation plan.

Evaluators from organizations committed to using a DEI lens have an important opportunity to ensure that their evaluation practices do not reinforce or exacerbate the inequities that their efforts seek to address (Center for Evaluation Innovation et al., 2017). Table 1 (below) gives an overview of how operating with a DEI lens can lead to change that makes evaluation more representative of our communities, more engaging and inclusive of all stakeholders, and a mechanism to meaningfully shift power (Open Source Leadership Strategies, n.d.).

Table 1. The Focus and Kinds of Change Associated with a Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity Lens

Lens	This lens tends to focus attention on...	Operating with this lens tends to drive toward certain kinds of change...
Diversity	Composition The mix of attributes of a group; some differences matter more than others	Representation Ensuring that population demographics are appropriately reflected in participation, leadership, decision making, etc.
Inclusion	Relationships & Experience What happens with the diversity of a group, how differences are tapped and integrated	Engagement Considering ways to make diverse participants feel welcome and able to contribute
Equity	Outcomes & Root Structures How power relationships and systems shape life outcomes for group members, with a particular concern for patterns of disparity and disproportionality	Ownership Shifting systems and conditions so those who have been excluded or oppressed benefit and become empowered agents of the change they seek

Note: This table is an excerpt of the original, adapted from Diversity, Inclusion, Equity table by Open Source Leadership Strategies, retrieved from https://www.ncnonprofits.org/sites/default/files/resource_attachments/OSLS%20Diversity%20Inclusion%20Equity%20Table.pdf. Licensed by [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#).



Advancing DEI in evaluation: An example of researching racial equity in food hubs

What does it look like when we intentionally implement DEI in program evaluation? We can look to an example in recent research from the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems: [Delivering More Than Food: Understanding and Operationalizing Racial Equity in Food Hubs](#).

The goal of the authors' evaluative research was to explore how U.S.-based food hubs understand and operationalize racial equity work. At first, their methodology seemed straightforward. The researchers outlined broad questions and developed structured interview guides to probe these questions in interviews with food hub managers and researchers. The interview guide was "designed for answers to be comparable across interviews" (Rodman-Alvarez et al., 2020, p. 15) and the intention was that one interviewer would complete all interviews.

Due to feedback from the project's advisory board and interview participants, the researchers soon realized that they were "engaging with and recreating power systems" (p. 7) in their methodology. Authors and interviewers Sarah Rodman-Alvarez and Roxana Rodriguez reflect on the interview guide they used in this original methodology:

"We saw that the semi-structured interview guide was resulting in us controlling the narrative of food hubs and other experts. What we wanted, instead, was for them to control their own narrative around racial equity work." (p. 16)

The project team adjusted their methodology to align more with narrative ethics. Narrative ethics "recognizes that people are the authors of their own life stories and that ethics can and should be derived from individuals' stories...rather than preconceived principles" (p. 16). The priority shifted away from the researchers' preconceived expectations and towards the important stories that interviewees were sharing. Some of the changes they made included adding a second interviewer to diversify the perspectives of the interview listeners and opting to discard parts of the original interview guide to allow for a free-flowing conversation. The project team also increased the interview stipend from \$20 to \$70 to ensure they were equitably compensating these experts for their time and knowledge.

These changes had large returns for the researchers. Although the interviews were less comparable, their qualitative data revealed new ways of thinking about racial equity that the team had not considered before. By shifting their mindsets and their methodology, they accomplished their goal: to learn more about how food hubs understand racial equity work.

At the conclusion of the project, the project team reflected, "Some review team members voiced that asking participants to identify themselves in specific ways [like race/ethnicity and gender] did not allow them to tell their own story of their identity" (p. 16). By continuing to assess their evaluation even after project completion, the researchers continue to better integrate DEI in their approach to their work.

The research methodology employed for this study continues to have impacts beyond data collection and report distribution. For example, the recommendations for food hub stakeholders outlined within the report are now used by the [Restaurant Workers Community Foundation](#) board as a guiding document to ensure that an equity lens is applied to funded projects.

Additional information about the methodology used in this study can be found in the [full report](#) and a [webinar recording](#) overviewing the work.



Considerations for developing diverse, equitable, and inclusive methodology

To get started in applying a DEI lens in program evaluation, consider these key questions:

- What are your organization's goals and how do they align with [GusNIP program](#) goals (USDA, 2021)?
- What does success look like for your program and who defines success?
- In your role as an evaluator, does your need to be the expert get in the way of shifting your research and outreach strategies for the better (Rodman-Alvarez et al., 2020)? What biases do you bring to this work?
- Do your evaluation partners, participants, and collaborating organizations have access to commensurate financial resources and power (Rodman-Alvarez et al., 2020)? What can you do to address power imbalances?
- What process does your organization employ to ensure metrics are reflective of the community and culturally relevant?
- How does your organization assess its evaluation process?

Incorporating DEI into program research and evaluation yields positive outcomes, but it is also a process. The work transforms as contexts change and individuals and organizations learn and evolve. As an exercise in capacity building, it is important to actively seek opportunities to experience and practice DEI. This conversation can serve as a starting point for organizations to develop their own DEI spectrum for program research and evaluation and assess progress toward achieving DEI goals.

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About

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Rich Pirog, Director, MSU Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) and Andrea Weiss, CRFS Communications Director, for their input and guidance. Photos courtesy of MSU Center for Regional Food Systems.

About the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems

The Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems advances regionally-rooted food systems through applied research, education, and outreach by uniting the knowledge and experience of diverse stakeholders with that of MSU faculty and staff. Our work fosters a thriving economy, equity, and sustainability for Michigan, the nation, and the planet by advancing systems that produce food that is healthy, green, fair, and affordable. Learn more at foodsystems.msu.edu.

Suggested Citation

Mensch, L. & Souza, K. (2021, February). *An introduction to incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion into nutrition incentive program research and evaluation*. GusNIP NTAE Center, Nutrition Incentive Hub. <https://www.nutritionincentivehub.org>

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The Nutrition Incentive Hub

The Nutrition Incentive Program Training, Technical Assistance, Evaluation, and Information (NTAE) Center is led by the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition. In partnership with Fair Food Network, they created the Nutrition Incentive Hub, a coalition of partners to support this work, including the National Grocers Association Foundation, Farmers Market Coalition, Michigan Farmers Market Association, Ecology Center, Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis, Colorado School of Public Health, Ingredients Consulting, University of California San Francisco, and University of Michigan, among others. These partners are practitioners, retail experts, researchers, and evaluators from across the country bringing decades of experience and leadership in technical assistance, training, reporting, and evaluation. The Nutrition Incentive Hub is dedicated to building a community of practice to maximize program impact and ensure that all Americans have access to the healthy foods they need.

The GusNIP NTAE Center is supported by Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program grant no. 2019-70030-30415/project accession no. 1020863 from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.