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BEST PRACTICE BRIEFS

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: PROVIDING USEFUL REPORTS

*This **BRIEF** explores the characteristics of reports by university faculty and engagement staff that will be most useful to their community partners. University faculty or engagement staff are involved with community agencies in various types of advisory, collaborative and research relationships. Two relationships in which the university partners have an obligation to provide a report to the community will be discussed:*

- *Faculty-initiated community-based research projects that require the cooperation of a community agency, and*
- *Community-requested evaluations, analyses or policy reviews*

UNIVERSITY-INITIATED RESEARCH PROJECTS: REPORTING TO COMMUNITY PARTNERS

While the primary purpose of a research project may be the advancement of knowledge, the findings often have some implications for policy or service provision. When community agencies facilitate or participate in the research endeavor, the university investigator has an obligation to provide written and/or oral feedback to them.

There are three valid reasons for providing an understandable and useful report to the community:

- Community participants deserve some product in exchange for their cooperation
- Providing feedback increases the likelihood that the findings will contribute to change
- Providing feedback is key to maintaining good relationships for future research in that community

OUTLINE OF AN ACADEMIC REPORT

Faculty have been trained to report research in a format that is acceptable for publication in a scholarly journal. Characteristically, a journal article presents information in the following sequence:

1. Findings from previous research (literature review)
2. Hypotheses or research questions to be tested
3. Methodology in detail
4. Results in detail
5. Discussion, including limitations of results
6. Conclusions, including directions for future research

This bottom-up structure mirrors the sequence followed by the researcher in undertaking the project. While useful in communicating new knowledge to a scientific or professional audience, academic reports are neither organized nor written in a way that is meaningful to non-researchers.

In a report to community members, researchers should present information that is:

- Interesting or useful to decision makers or service providers
- Written in a friendly style that is easily readable by non-researchers

Appropriate format and style are discussed in the next sections.

Community members are most likely to be interested in reports with:

- New understandings about the community
- Implications for policy directions
- Implications for service delivery
- Implications for appropriate process if the intervention is going to be replicated

Initial and periodic discussions about the issues and interests of concern to community partners will help to frame the content for a brief report later on.

REPORTING FOR COMMUNITY-INITIATED CONTRACTS

State or community agencies (hereinafter referred to as "community partners") sometimes contract with university faculty or engagement staff for an evaluation of a program or initiative, or for an analysis or policy review. The relationship may be a time-limited project or an ongoing partnership. The product contracted for is generally one or more reports designed to guide decision making for service or system improvement.

The evaluation or policy report may be expected to provide insights that will assist in

- Judging the merit or effectiveness of a program or system to which resources have been assigned
- Understanding how the program or system can be improved
- Defending the program or system against possible onslaughts

A USEFUL COMMUNITY REPORT IS ORGANIZED TO FACILITATE DISSEMINATION AND USE OF THE INFORMATION.

THE OUTLINE OF A USEFUL COMMUNITY REPORT

A useful community report is organized to facilitate dissemination and use of the information. Characteristically the report is short and written for a specific audience. If the contract addressed specific questions, the report should be organized around them.

Generally, information is presented in the following sequence:

1. Executive summary
2. Framing of the issue(s)
3. How the information was obtained
4. Significant results
5. Implications for practice, policy, and replication
6. Appendices
    a. Details of findings from previous research
    b. Methodology
    c. Detailed tables

This top-down presentation enables people to grasp the main findings without getting mired in the details of the investigation.

MAKING A REPORT USEFUL FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The parameters of the report—expected date of submission, relevant issues, expected audience and use—should be discussed and understood at the beginning of the project or partnership.

In making a report useful for community partners, the issues outlined below should be considered.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Expected Date for Submission

The date for the submission to the community should be set in accordance with the amount of **internal processing time** required by the community agency.

Agencies generally operate in an environment in which funding depends on meeting deadlines which are established by budget submissions, board or legislative calendars, dates for submitting requests for funding continuation, etc. Before a report can be submitted to a board, executive office, or legislative committee, agency staff generally requires some processing time so that they can explore strategy issues and feel confident about answering questions.

The date for submission of the report should be stated in the contractual agreement and should be considered by the university as immovable as the date set for submitting a proposal for funding.

Processing, analysis and writing of an initial draft should be completed by a date that allows time for internal review and rewriting by university staff. The community agency may also want an opportunity to review a preliminary draft and discuss interpretations of findings. Last minute processing results in a less than adequate product and high stress.

The Audience

The audience for the report may be **internal** to the agency (the agency head, the board of directors, staff) or **external** (the funder, a state or federal agency, a legislative committee, the public). The target audience is important in framing the issues, analysis, and presentation of the report.

The internal and external policy makers who will receive reports should be identified, preferably in the request for proposals. Information about the expected audience should be part of the preliminary discussion between the community agency and the university partner.

Organization

Policy or practice issues should form the central organizing theme. Information about specific results and their policy implications should be combined in **short segments**. Each segment should start with the conclusion (policy implication) and then state supporting evidence.

Executive Summary

Community agencies will expect a short executive summary with conclusions outlined.

This will be the part of the report that policy makers will read. It should be understandable without reference to the rest of the report or to an appendix (although the back up narrative for each point should be easy to locate in the main report).

A one to two page summary will be read. A longer one may get overlooked.

Length

To be useful, reports must be **brief, succinct, and to the point**. It can be expected that staff will translate vital information to their own context and frame of reference. But in order to help them do that, the salient points must be clearly and unequivocally stated.

The work day of agency managers, board members, and legislators is characterized by multiple, quick, episodic activities. They—and their staff—do not have the luxury of spending hours to decode, debrief, and reframe information.

Write so that the reader can skim quickly through the material, spending not more than 10-15 seconds per page. Style and format make this possible.

Style

Reports should be **understandable** to community members and policy makers.

- Avoid academic jargon; if necessary, use the jargon of policymakers
- Spell out acronyms
- Use non-technical language

- Strive for **understandability**; most complex topics can be communicated with simple language
- Write **short, simple sentences**, averaging 15-20 words per sentence and limited to one major idea
- Use simple statistical charts and graphs—summary counts, percentages, rank order, costs per unit of service; elaborate statistical manipulations are likely to be misinterpreted
- **Clearly label** content

Format

The format should enable the reader to pick up key points easily.

- **Sections** should be short, with headings that clearly state the content; use differences in fonts and sizes to indicate the organization of the material
- Use short **paragraphs**—average of 7-8 lines—to avoid readers skipping dense text
- Emphasize **key points** with bold face, italics and underlining
- Use **white space** (i.e., those parts of a page that do not contain writing) to draw the reader's eye:
  - Indent
  - Present a sequence by listing or using bullets

Content

- Whenever possible, reports should present **specific recommendations** that will inform or influence policy or service provision
- Aspects of the **process** that resulted in success or failure are important learnings, generally left out of written reports
- Present **both positive and negative findings** of relevance. Leave out findings based on limited or incomplete data
- Use **charts**, **historical narratives** and **case examples** to illuminate answers to questions
- Prior to the final draft, involve the community partner in **interpretations** of information. There may be aspects of the operation or of the data collection that shed light on the findings

CHECKING OUT READABILITY
THE FOGG INDEX

The Fogg Index represents the level of writing for a particular educational grade. Follow the steps below to calculate the Fogg Index of your content:

1. Select a sample of at least 100 words.
2. Compute the average number of words per sentence:
   a. Divide the number of sentences into the total number of words in the sample.
3. Compute the percentage of words with 3 or more syllables (Exclude words where the polysyllable is created by ..ed or .. ing. Exclude proper nouns.)
   a. Divide the number of words into the number of polysyllables.
4. Add the average number of words per sentence (2a) to the percent of polysyllables (3a).
5. Multiply the sum by 0.4 and round off to the nearest tenth.

This is your Fogg Index.

Source: Gunning, R. (1952). *The technique of clear writing.* New York: McGraw Hill.

THERE MAY BE MORE

The report to the community partner may be only the first step. The agency may want to involve the university in presenting the findings to various groups. This may require yet another iteration of the information in PowerPoint or handouts. Again, presentations should be clear and brief.

QUICK TIPS

- **Know your audience**
- **Meet deadlines**: Allow time for internal review and rewriting by university staff
- **Organize appropriately**: Start each segment with the conclusion (policy implication) followed by supporting evidence
- **Length, style and content**: Keep everything short and simple; include process, issues and negative findings
- **Executive summary**: 1 – 2 pages; understandable without reference to the report
- **Format** with readability in mind

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