

# Evaluating Nonprofit Fellowship Programs

## For Readiness, Process, and Impact

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While the term "fellowship" is used by a variety of different programs, generally these positions are considered short-term opportunities (lasting from a few months to two or three years) that focus on an individual's professional development and are sponsored by a specific organization seeking to benefit by expanding its leadership in a given field.

Nonprofit fellowship programs can be designed to support a range of activities, including research to advance work on a particular issue, developing a new community-based initiative, or training and reflection in support of a fellow's personal development. Fellowships frequently take place at the beginning of one's career, but there are interesting examples of mid and senior-career fellowships as well. Fellowships generally provide support in the form of a small stipend, but there is a wide range of support, depending on both the sponsor and host organizations.

Fellowships are usually structured to provide significant work experiences, and fellows are often expected to take on a great deal of responsibility quickly. In turn, organizations reward fellows with unique opportunities that are not generally available to someone in an entry-level position. This experiential learning component varies from program to program.

TCC Group's recent experience evaluating fellowship programs has helped us discover some of the practices that frequently lead to



lasting impact for both the fellow and the organization or community he or she serves. Our evaluations show

that these practices tend to fall in three main categories: selection and readiness factors, the process and structure of the fellowship, and measuring the resulting impact.

### Selection and Readiness

**Choosing the right fellows is the backbone of a successful fellowship program.** Our research shows that fellows who have vision and passion when entering a fellowship program find it easier to maintain their motivation while adapting to the host institution's goals. These fellows also create more original and inspired ways of impacting their issue area. Comfort with ambiguity and proactivity were other characteristics of successful fellows.

**The host's readiness and willingness to accommodate a fellow has a big impact on what the fellow is able to achieve.** Staff across the host organization should be excited about accommodating a new fellow, since fellows help an organization to cross-pollinate ideas. A fellow's readiness, too, has a significant impact on achieving outcomes. Fellows are expected to bring content knowledge and the willingness to work with others to the program.

TCC Group evaluated a program that contained a mix of fellows, some of whom had content expertise and some with community ties and local knowledge. Both elements helped fellows achieve their goals in different ways. For example, a longtime community resident will have knowledge of the city's neighborhoods that a newcomer would not possess, while someone with content expertise but not from the area might be able to use fresh eyes to smooth over historic silos. Organizations should consider whether knowledge about the field or knowledge about the community will be most useful to accomplish their goals.

### Process and Structure

Through TCC Group's work evaluating fellowship programs, we've developed specific indicators around three focus areas that contribute to achievement: **clear accountability standards, support, and peer learning.**

- **Accountability standards are muddled by multiple stakeholders.** Organizations can get confused about whether the fellow is accountable for personal goals, or to the host organization's goals, or to those of the agency that placed the fellow. Accountability and goals should be made clear to all stakeholders before the fellowship program begins.
- **Creating a structured environment early on helps to sustain momentum.** Our work has found that programs with well-defined goals and expectations for the first six months help a fellow enter a program with greater enthusiasm and understanding. These processes allow the fellow and the host organization to communicate more effectively while creating early "wins."
- **Fellows need friends.** Part of the strength of a fellow and the value he or she brings to the program depends on his or her social connections and integration into the host

organization. Friendship is an essential to building these connections. Maintaining friendships with other fellows is also important. Peer fellows can problem solve and brainstorm ways around typical barriers together. Even beyond peer learning, support from other fellows helps individuals clarify their purpose, maintain motivation, and experience being part of a cohort that has the ability to create change.

- **Fellows need mentors.** Our research has shown that a high level of support, supervision, and mentoring empowers fellows to meet their goals. This support also helps fellows learn organizational culture and how to best position themselves within the host organization. Effective mentors play both a proactive role (such as discussing work culture and how to share information) and a reactive role (which might include being present for idea development).

### Tips for Evaluating Fellowship Programs

- **Talk to people with different relationships to the program:** the fellow, staff at the host site, staff at the placing agency, community members, and other knowledgeable stakeholders.
- **Focus on readiness, process, and overall impact.** All three factors are equally important for creating a solid program.
- **Think about year-one implications.** Fellows joining a program in its first year may have a very different perspective than fellows who participate in the same program years later.

### Measuring Impact

Interviews, surveys, and program data can assess change at various levels. In fact, the most successful fellowship programs demonstrate impact that goes beyond the fellow, the host organization, and the program to create transformation in the community at large.

Diverse data tools can evaluate these unique levels of change.

Of course, sustaining impact after the fellowship ends remains a challenge. Organizations should decide what sort of sustainability is most important. Is it the viability of the fellowship program itself? Or sustainability of the learning? These are equally valid reasons, but each lends itself to different types of evaluation questions.

With so many factors in the external environment, it is tempting to track multiple influences. However, when evaluations focus on readiness, process, and impact, the findings lead to the most learning and improvement for the overall fellowship program.