

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approaches to Evaluating the Outcomes of Faculty Outreach, Part I: Needs, Opportunities and Challenges

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We conducted a study of the needs, opportunities and challenges for evaluating projects funded by Faculty Outreach awards, a small grant program supporting a wide range of faculty outreach activities across colleges and disciplines at the University of Colorado Boulder. The study was commissioned by the Office of University Outreach (OUO) but carried out independent of it. Taking its focus as the potential for evaluating outcomes for audiences external to the university as the intended beneficiaries of outreach, the study objectives were:

- to identify the range of needs and opportunities related to evaluation that are offered by outreach projects of different types;
- to ascertain the interest or willingness of faculty and their campus collaborators to participate in evaluation if the opportunity or expectation arose; and
- to determine what resources and support would be required to implement more extensive evaluation of outreach projects across varied types.

The study used qualitative methods, including document analysis and interviews. We examined 143 documents representing 99 projects, including funded and unfunded proposals from two grant cycles and reports from one cycle of funded projects. We interviewed 21 individuals representing 12 projects. In addition, three funded outreach teams work closely with us to carry out evaluation “demonstration projects”; results of these small studies are reported separately.

The findings identify some common threads in outreach teams’ motivations, the benefits and costs that they report, and the benefits they perceive outreach work to bring to the university. Patterns of difference emerge when the nature of outreach teams’ work is considered in relation to their interests, opportunities, and needs for evaluation. We identify three main types of outreach projects, the core features of which account for most models of outreach represented by this program, and which explain patterns in teams’ ideas about evaluating their work.

Type 1 projects focus on teaching or sharing expertise with generally small external audiences who are perceived to benefit from this knowledge. Their evaluation needs thus most often center on measuring learning and affective outcomes for varied audiences. Type 2 projects integrate scholarly work with outreach. Typical of more applied disciplines, measures suitable for evaluation are often built into the scholarly work itself. Finally, Type 3 projects most often deliver performances or presentations to larger audiences. As the desired outcomes are often less intensive, they may be better documented in the form of impacts or outputs rather than outcomes.

In the full report, we justify this classification scheme and discuss typical features of each project type. We summarize the types and key patterns observed in their evaluation needs, interests and opportunities in a diagnostic graphic that we call the Evaluation Compass for Outreach. Based on these findings, we suggest some options for evaluating outreach that may support campus-wide goals of the OUO. In Appendix B, we also compile a list of possible evaluation strategies that individual projects might consider.