Communication Plan Basics

1. Who will be the Key Staff Doing the Communicating?

An important first step in creating a communications plan is to select a key spokesperson or spokespeople who will take the lead on developing this plan.

- This person should be a communications facilitator who can work openly with other members of the evaluation team and program staff to establish the communications plan's goals and objectives.

- Remember that some aspects of the evaluation may need to be highlighted more than others, so identify these aspects before choosing a communications facilitator(s) and embarking on the full evaluation.

The individual(s) you choose must be able to allocate staff time and resources to communications tasks.

- The person(s) selected should have the ability to determine what communications needs are necessary for each member of the evaluation team to successfully complete their work.

- Another critical task for this person will be to engage the evaluators and others in creating and continually revising communications strategies.

- He or she may need a good bit of creative energy to develop new ideas for supporting both the evaluation and communications goals.

It is important to note, however, that each member of your program team can be part of the communications process.

- The roles each member plans can easily evolve as different aspects of your evaluation results become known and need to be shared with different constituents.

- Therefore, it makes sense to create a flexible plan that allows the roles of different staff members to change as different needs arise

2. What are the Communications Goals and Objects?

What are the Communications Goals and Objectives?

Once the spokesperson or spokespeople are chosen, they should decide on the goals they hope to achieve with the communications plan.

In most instances, the goals of your communications plan should mesh nicely with the goals of the evaluation and some potential goals may be:

- Increase the awareness of your college access program among key campus leaders

- Increase the number of students participating in your program

- Raise funds for your program

In addition to these goals, also think about which strategies would be most helpful for communicating the evaluation results. Some communications strategies that might be helpful to consider in the early stages of your evaluation include:

- Announcing the results to interested parties

- Motivating stakeholders or other important groups toward change

- Educating audiences to understand and use the information you are sharing

- Supporting decision making to help prospective program users

3. Who is the Target Audience(s)?

Who is the Target Audience?

The next step in developing a communications plan is to consider the different audiences who will receive and review the results of the evaluation.

- Think about how the audience will use the information (be especially clear how you would like for the evaluation to be used)

- Potential audiences can be both internal and external and should be identified early in the evaluation planning process

- Examples of audiences to be aware of include:

    o Current and potential funders

    o Policymakers (both on- and off-campus)

    o Key stakeholders

    o Faculty

    o Campus administrators

    o Current and prospective students and their families

    o The media (both on- and off-campus)

    o The general public

    o Other

Knowing the audience, especially if there multiple audiences, early in the evaluation process is important because it may require making a different communication strategy for each audience.

4. When and How Frequently to Plan to Communicate?

How Often and When Should We Communicate?

How often you may need to share your results can influence the pace of your evaluation efforts.

- Sometimes you may need to communicate interim results before your full evaluation is completed.

- You should identify, as soon as possible, when various constituents may want to review results.

    o Funders may want quarterly or semi-annual results

    o Campus administrators and the media may see the results just once at the end of the project

    o Results are shared more often in formative evaluations in contrast to summative evaluations

5. How to Communicate the Results?

How to Communicate the Results?

Make sure the appropriate media, software, or other formats are available to share the evaluation results with targeted constituents.

- The medium required to communicate will vary based on the audience(s) being targeted in the communications campaign

- Make sure constituents are communicated with in a timely fashion with the appropriate form of communication

    o Funders or faculty may need to see written reports or executive summaries of results

    o Campus leaders may want a verbal or PowerPoint presentation

    o Members of the press may want to interview knowledgeable individuals (e.g., the communications spokesperson or the program director)

Given the various types of ways results can be communicated, it is critical that members of your evaluation team are comfortable with several communications formats

6. What Resources Are Available for Communicating?

What Resources Are Available for Communicating?

When and how you communicate your results will, of course, depend on the availability of staff, funds, and other resources.

- The key spokesperson or people should take an early inventory of whatever dollars, staff, and supplies you have readily on hand for communications purposes

- Explore other organizations, departments, and units, both on-campus and off-campus, that may be willing to support the communications plan or might be a willing partner to maximize efforts

- To save time and resources, look for whatever "free" or donated resources might be available, such as services that provide the following possible support for communicating the final evaluation results:
    - Editing
    - Printing
    - Publishing
    - Disseminating