

Taking an Equity-based Approach to Research and Evaluations¹

For local and national efforts

Reason for this document

There is a concern about the history of the research² community being dominated by wealthy white researchers conducting evaluations³ that *objectify* individuals of color and low-income communities but do not *subjectify* them. There is also a perception that evaluation is about judgment as opposed to learning and growth.

Through this document, we hope to confirm City Year's commitment to engaging diverse research teams that reflect the make-up of the individuals participating in the evaluation and to be explicit about City Year's commitment to research as a tool for learning and improvement alongside our efforts to build our evidence of impact. We are also committed to engaging a diverse group of City Year leadership in this work whenever possible. In addition to shedding light on the City Year services that produce the best outcomes for students, schools and AmeriCorps members, future research projects will seek to unpack the conditions in school communities that lead to educational disparities and provide insights on how to address them. It is a further hope that this document will ensure we always position students and their communities as leaders of our work and center their experience in any evaluation we design. We recognize that this document is only the first step in a lengthy process of internal self-reflection and ongoing learning.

How we will take an equity-based approach

1) Identify Research Questions

- Take authentic approach to research question generation, including involving site program staff, AmeriCorps members and community partners (i.e. students, school staff, parents) in meaningful conversations about questions, so questions lead to substantive learning that improves practices, outcomes and environments.
- The process for question generation should be bottom-up, not top-down, with site leadership, school partners, families, and students being the drivers for determining research priorities and standards. Site leadership and school partners should have the authority to be active decision-makers in the process, shaping research questions and methods from the beginning stages of the work. As the organization develops its family engagement strategy, families should be involved in this process as well.

¹ This document reflects insights from the Equity Council and Advisory Group as well as best practices from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the [Chicago Beyond report](#), and the [Education Trust](#).

² Basic **research** is experimental or theoretical work undertaken primarily to acquire new knowledge of the underlying foundations of phenomena and observable facts, without any particular application or use in view. (OECD)

³ **Evaluation** is the systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance and fulfilment of objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. (OECD)

- Include MDIs, EDs, Dean’s Council and Equity Council (potentially VP of DBIE) in conversations about research questions for national evaluations. Other groups will be consulted as appropriate.
- Engage External Research Advisory Group—a diverse group of applied external researchers--to provide feedback on the questions identified internally.
- Gather input from AmeriCorps members, school partner staff, families, and students (as is possible and appropriate) on the activities that might be required to do an evaluation and the impact of those activities.
- For each question posed, have a clear sense of how the answer to that question will inform and improve practices moving forward.

2) Identify Research Partner

- Always conduct an RFP process.
- Request an equity statement as a part of the RFP process.
- Request equity commitments when it comes to the make-up of the evaluation team over the course of the evaluation.
- Ensure that research team reflects the community being studied.
- Assess research team’s openness to investing time in building trust.
- Ensure that the external research partner’s perspective on the community is evidence-based and untainted by bias and stereotype.
- Seek research teams that have experience working in schools and take an asset and equity-based approach to research that restores communities as authors and owners by⁴:
 - Exploring the research team’s motivations by asking questions like:
 - What motivates their interests in this work?
 - What interests them most about this collaboration?
 - Have they spent time in the community where you work?
 - What are their intentions for the research in the context of their professional work? (What is their agenda?)
 - Is the work with you supporting papers they intend to publish?
 - Is it enabling them to fundraise for their institution?
 - Is it meeting the requirements of funding they have already received?
 - Exploring the research team’s experience:
 - What stories can they share of their work that illustrate how they would work with you?
 - How has the community participated in identifying the goals of the research, design of the study, testing survey instruments, and interpreting results in previous projects?

⁴ *Why Am I Always Being Researched?: A Guidebook for Community Organizations, Researchers, and Funders To Help Us Get From Insufficient Understand to More Authentic Truth.* vol. 1, Chicago Beyond, 2019, pp. 1–112.

- How has the research team shifted its approach based on feedback from those who are being researched? Ask for concrete examples.

3) Manage Partnership / Oversee Evaluation

- At the start of the partnership, engage in shared conversation about how we as organizations hold students and schools at the center as we approach our work and how we will work together to internalize and critically engage with the implications of our work from the perspective of diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging.
- On an ongoing basis, have transparent conversations about how the evaluation is affecting our shared values of diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging with all groups participating in the evaluation.
- Ensure all interview protocols align with CY's DBIE values, and treat all participants as equal partners in the work.
- Ensure the researcher understands that she is not the center of attention. The researcher should view themselves as an active listener and a facilitator.
- Ensure the researcher does not assign value judgements to interview responses. There is no "right" or "wrong" answer. The interviewer's personal thoughts and beliefs should not influence the direction of the interview or be used to influence interview responses.
- Vet interview protocols with site staff, AmeriCorps members, community partners, and appropriate external researchers with relevant expertise for practitioner perspective.
- Collaborate with potential research partners to identify potential biases in the data or methodology and leverage their awareness of those biases to understand whether they are contemplating and actively working to root out bias in a deep way.
- Have strong accountability measures for DBIE in place for the research partner that convey that DBIE is not optional or periphery, but essential to the work's veracity and utility.
- Engage in community-building activities to build trust among sites, HQ research team, and external evaluators.
- Ensure that all content connected to the evaluation is first shared with and understood by students, families, schools, and communities involved in the evaluation.

4) Integrate Process and Results into Service Design and Implementation

- Collect feedback from site leadership, school leadership, families, and students involved in the study on the ways in which the research process made them feel heard and benefits of it as well as areas of improvement. Incorporate this feedback when selecting research partners, research questions, and research methodologies for subsequent studies.
- Gather Equity Council recommendations when integrating results into CY program design.
- Engage Equity Council in reviewing the proposed practice shifts based on research.
- Assess accessibility of resources to the students, families, schools and communities we serve connected to any shifts we might make in response to evaluation results.

- Engage site staff, and AmeriCorps members in the process of integrating results into program design.
- Share shifts with community partners involved in the evaluation and gather feedback on adjustments they may wish to see.

5) Leverage Results to Advance Field-Building Among External Audiences

- Account for how results and proposed changes would have impact across multiple lines of identity.
- Determine whose voice is shaping the narrative and if the community is fully represented.
- Use asset-based language.
- Leverage best practices in communicating results in an asset-based way that engages the community.

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