This mini-guide is one of a series designed to provide recipients of the OAC's Connecting Students to the World of Work grants with guidance for conducting evaluations of their funded programs. Each mini-guide offers basic information on a specific topic to help grantee organizations build capacity to implement evaluation activities.

This mini-guide focuses on data collection. Before you begin gathering data for your project, you should develop a **data collection protocol**. This protocol will outline how and when data are being collected. Having a data collection protocol clearly articulated and closely followed by staff will help ensure your data are valid, reliable, and gathered efficiently. It will save time and effort in later analysis and reporting processes.

When should we collect data?

The timing of your data collection should reflect when you would expect to see change in your outcomes. Many programs choose to do a basic "pre/post" design in which they assess students before and after program participation. These pre/post data are later compared statistically to see if there is demonstrable change in outcomes over time.

Also, data can be collected at points relevant to your program implementation. For example, if your program curriculum requires students to create a work of art mid-way through the program period, or to complete a journal periodically throughout the program period, rating these works may be a viable source of data on program outcomes. It is helpful to create a timeline that illustrates program and evaluation activities.

How should we collect data?

Once you have identified the data you plan to collect and the measurement methods and tools you plan to use (see Evaluation Mini-Guides #1 and #2), you will need to determine the project staff responsible for each data collection method. In some cases, a single staff person may be responsible for multiple instruments—that is, the same person administers surveys with students and conducts focus groups with parents. In some cases, multiple staff members may be responsible for the same instrument—that is, several staff members take turns administering the student surveys or rating student works of art. In both cases, it is important that the staff members are fully trained on the data collection protocol and follow its guidelines closely.

Training staff on the data collection protocol is important because:

(1) It increases the likelihood that data are collected in a manner consistent with project goals;

(2) It increases the likelihood that important procedures (e.g., confidentiality and data security) are followed; and

(3) Most importantly, *it standardizes the data collection processes over time and across staff.*

This standardization is critical to the usability of the data. Specifically, the way data are collected can impact the information provided. For example, if one staff person introduces a survey to students as "no big deal" and "nothing to take seriously" and another staff person introduces the survey as "very important" and emphasizes the need to "get the answers right," you can imagine that these two groups of students might answer the same survey questions differently—and these differences would have nothing to do with the program's impact.

Implementing protocols that standardize data collection procedures help prevent such sources of error. For example, programs may write a script for staff to recite before every survey administration, interview, or focus group. This will ensure that all students get the same instruction and receive the same information about the project. For focus groups, it will set the tone for the group interaction (see example script below).

> **Sample Script for a Focus Group**
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> Good afternoon. Thank you for coming. My name is [name]. As you might know, [agency name] is implementing the Connecting Students to the World of Work program. We would like to know about your experience with that program. We will use your feedback to report on the progress and effectiveness of the program. No names or individual comments will be revealed to anyone outside of the research office (not even program staff); the report will be a summary of what was said by the group. Our goal is to help [agency name] provide the best effective programs for students interested in the arts, and your input will help us to that. Because we understand that talking in a group setting can sometimes be uncomfortable, and we want to make sure that everyone feels comfortable enough to be honest (your honest feedback will help us the most), we will be encouraging the use of CHAT guidelines to help make the environment safe and welcoming:
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> - **Confidentiality**—What is said in this room should stay in this room. Please don't refer to the focus group as a place where you heard certain information (even if you don't think the person who said it would mind).
> - **Honor**—If someone says something that you disagree with, we ask that you respond respectfully. We are very interested in what everyone has to say, whether positive or negative, so please try and find a way to express yourself.
> - **Anonymity**—If you choose to talk about actual experiences related to yourself or others, please do the best you can to refrain from mentioning any names including any information that could be used to identify who you may be speaking about.
> - **Team Trust**—We ask that you give each other the opportunity to speak. It is important that we let one person finish their thoughts before someone else speaks.

Another example of standardization, programs may develop a rubric to rate performances, works of art, papers, and other qualitative data. This will establish criteria against which the artworks will be rated, thus ensuring that all staff members are attending to the same elements of the artworks, using the same criteria in their assessments, and rating artworks the same way.

Who is providing the data? What do they need to know?

Data can be collected from persons varying in age, educational level, language ability, position, and relationship to the program. For example, your program may plan to collect data from students, parents, and teachers. Among the students served by your program, there may be a wide range of characteristics that may impact their ability or desire to provide data such as grade level, literacy skills, cognitive capacity, racial/ethnic background, and/or familiarity with English. Your data collection instruments should be accessible to the population of students you are serving (i.e., written at an appropriate reading level and in the languages necessary). Further, before collecting data from program participants, it is important they are fully informed about the evaluation (e.g., what they will be asked to do, how the data will be used), and that they autonomously decide to participate (i.e., they are not coerced in any way). Adults may provide consent for themselves, but minors often require parental consent in addition to their own. (Guidelines for obtaining permission and consent can be found in Evaluation Mini-Guide #3).

Data Collection Procedures

Good data collection protocols will also outline the specific procedures employed when administering data collection instruments, specifically guidelines for interacting with participants and handling data. For example, the protocol for the administration of a student survey would outline specific procedures for how to ensure respondent privacy (e.g., setting up the room so that students are comfortably spaced apart), how to introduce the survey and the evaluation (e.g., using a pre-written, standardized script), how to respond to student questions (e.g., fielding inquiries without impacting survey responses), how to prepare for potentially problematic situations (e.g., handling a disruptive student), and how to handle data securely and confidentially (e.g., having students turn in completed surveys in closed envelopes, keeping all completed surveys in a locked, supervised receptacle until they are secured in a locked office). Ideally, this protocol would cover all of the steps from preparing the room to just before data are entered into the database.