

General Principles for Engaging Students in Evaluation and Assessment

Students' involvement in evaluation and assessment benefits everyone, whether they are engaging through formal staff roles or volunteer work. Their perspectives bring valuable context and open doors to data collection options that might otherwise be difficult. Further, students' engagement provides opportunities to apply and grow their analytical skills. Here are some ideas for engaging students in evaluation and assessment work, as practiced in the Center for Democracy and Civic Life.

Start Small and Build

Students need time not only to develop evaluation skills, but also to understand the organization's mission and vision so they can make sense of information. You shouldn't start by giving them the most time-sensitive, mission-critical evaluation tasks you needed done yesterday. A good starting point is to have them analyze existing assessment data (e.g., an end-of-program survey) and write a short brief on what they see, which also helps you gauge their interests and support needs. From there, you can provide training, expand their responsibilities gradually, and engage them in more complex work.

Model Curiosity

Students are more likely to be curious if you model curiosity yourself. Frame evaluation projects around the question, "What can we learn from this data?" rather than simply, "We need to write this report." When students raise questions about the organization or suggest new areas to explore, validate their curiosity and share your own wonderings so they see evaluation as creative and open-ended. Be vulnerable and be open about the things you don't know or are unsure about in the work: "I don't actually know the answer to that question, but I'd like to." If you show genuine interest in the work, they will too.

Double Dip: It /s Research

Many UMBC students are required or encouraged to engage in research as part of their courses and degree programs. Giving them leadership roles in evaluation projects can be empowering while also helping them meet these requirements without overextending themselves. With a faculty co-sponsor, students may even present their work at venues like URCAD, further reinforcing that evaluation and assessment are meaningful forms of research. If there are opportunities for students to present or co-present work – whether that is in a staff meeting, in Divisional opportunities, or conferences – invite students to participate.

Segment the Process

Typical stages of a research project, outside the evaluation and assessment world, generally include: background reading and writing, developing research questions, designing data collection plans, gathering feedback on those plans, collecting data, cleaning the data, analyzing the results, documenting findings, and generating implications. Structuring evaluation projects in this same way both reinforces what students are learning about research elsewhere and allows the work to be broken into manageable stages. This approach helps prevent students from becoming overwhelmed while moving projects forward.