

Strengthening Evaluation Practices

Navajo Epidemiology Center

Applying lessons from the University of New Mexico Evaluation Lab Summer Institute

Evaluation • Data Sovereignty • Learning • Action

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Presentation Purpose



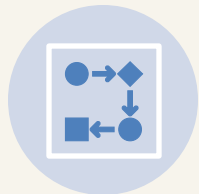
Describe current and emerging evaluation practices within the Navajo Epidemiology Center (NEC).



Connect lessons from the UNM Evaluation Lab Summer Institute to NEC's day-to-day evaluation work.



Highlight successes and challenges identified through the Institute experience.



Identify practical next steps for strengthening evaluation capacity, data governance, and use of findings.



Explain the value of returning to the UNM Evaluation Lab Summer Institute next year.

NEC Evaluation: More Than Reporting



Evaluation should support learning, accountability, program improvement, and better public health decisions—not only satisfy grant requirements.



NEC can use evaluation to understand whether activities are being implemented as intended, whether partnerships are working, and whether data are reaching decision-makers.



Evaluation should remain culturally responsive and grounded in Navajo priorities, community context, and tribal data sovereignty.



Findings should be translated into action: training improvements, SOP revisions, resource decisions, grant reporting, and stronger data-sharing agreements.

Key Lessons from the UNM Evaluation Lab

- Culturally responsive evaluation: design evaluation around community values, context, relationships, and meaningful outcomes.
- Community-based and participatory approaches: engage staff, partners, leadership, and communities in defining success and interpreting findings.
- Implementation matters: evaluate not only what was completed, but whether new practices are actually working in real-world settings.
- Use multiple methods: surveys, interviews, focus groups, routine program data, observations, and facilitated reflection can tell different parts of the story.
- Communicate findings for use: tailor results for leadership, staff, communities, partners, and funders.

Applying the Lessons to NEC

- ❖ Build evaluation into programs and grants early rather than adding it at the end.
- ❖ Use practical, low-burden measures such as activity logs, meeting logs, data-request tracking, training records, pre/post assessments, partner feedback, and quarterly completeness reviews.
- ❖ Assess whether staff can independently use new systems and tools after training—not simply whether training occurred.
- ❖ Examine whether data sovereignty protections are reflected in agreements, policies, SOPs, access controls, and daily practice.
- ❖ Track whether NEC is becoming less dependent on external systems for timely surveillance and public health decision-making.

A Practical NEC Evaluation Cycle

1. Define the purpose and the Navajo public health question.
2. Engage the people affected by or responsible for the work.
3. Identify meaningful outcomes, indicators, and feasible data sources.
4. Collect information using culturally appropriate and low-burden methods.
5. Review and interpret findings collaboratively.
6. Turn findings into program, policy, training, resource, or data-governance actions.
7. Reassess progress and adapt—the evaluation becomes a continuous learning cycle.

Successes and Strengths Reinforced by the Institute

- Greater emphasis on evaluation as a tool for continuous improvement rather than a compliance activity.
- Stronger understanding of stakeholder engagement and facilitation as part of the evaluation process.
- Recognition that qualitative information can explain the 'why' behind quantitative results.
- More intentional connection between evaluation findings and program decisions, training, SOPs, and resource allocation.
- Opportunity to strengthen repeatable evaluation tools and rubrics that can be used across NEC programs.
- Reinforcement of NEC's role in protecting and advancing tribally governed public health data.

Challenges Identified and Lessons Learned

- ❖ Limited staff capacity can make comprehensive evaluation difficult when teams also manage surveillance, grants, reporting, and technical responsibilities.
- ❖ Multiple reporting expectations can create duplication and increase administrative burden.
- ❖ Data access, interoperability, and technology limitations can delay evaluation and decision-making.
- ❖ External partner dependencies may affect timelines, data completeness, and NEC's ability to act independently.
- ❖ Legal, policy, procurement, and data-sharing review processes can slow implementation.
- ❖ Lesson learned: evaluation plans must be realistic, prioritized, scalable, and matched to available capacity.

Opportunities for Improvement

- ❖ Develop a shared NEC evaluation framework with common terminology, core indicators, templates, and reporting expectations.
- ❖ Clarify evaluation roles and responsibilities across programs and grants.
- ❖ Create a centralized schedule or dashboard for evaluation deliverables and recurring reporting requirements.
- ❖ Use standardized tools where appropriate while allowing program-specific and culturally relevant measures.
- ❖ Strengthen processes for documenting how evaluation findings lead to decisions or changes.
- ❖ Continue building staff skills in facilitation, qualitative methods, data visualization, implementation evaluation, and communicating findings.

Evaluation + Data Modernization

- Evaluation can help NEC determine whether modernization investments are improving access, timeliness, quality, usability, and governance of Navajo public health data.
- Possible measures include staff proficiency, data-request turnaround time, completeness, system use, partner responsiveness, and adoption of standardized workflows.
- Evaluate whether sovereignty protections are embedded in technical infrastructure, agreements, policies, and access procedures.
- Use findings to guide future cloud/data infrastructure decisions, workforce development, grant priorities, and responsible use of emerging technologies.

Why Return to the UNM Evaluation Lab Next Year?

- Build on the foundation from this year rather than treating evaluation training as a one-time activity.
- Bring NEC implementation experiences back to the Institute and receive feedback on what worked, what did not, and what should be refined.
- Deepen skills in culturally responsive evaluation, facilitation, qualitative methods, implementation evaluation, and communicating results.
- Learn from other evaluators facing similar capacity, partnership, and data challenges.
- Develop practical tools that can be brought back and adapted for NEC and the broader Navajo Department of Health.
- Strengthen a continuing relationship with UNM and a regional community of evaluation practice.

Proposed Focus for a Second Year

- ❖ Bring one or two active NEC evaluation projects as applied learning cases.
- ❖ Refine a standardized NEC evaluation framework and reusable toolkit.
- ❖ Develop approaches for reducing duplicate reporting while meeting funder requirements.
- ❖ Strengthen methods for documenting community and partner perspectives.
- ❖ Explore evaluation of data modernization, electronic case reporting, and data-governance initiatives.
- ❖ Return with specific products: revised templates, an evaluation workplan, implementation measures, and a staff knowledge-sharing session.

Closing: From Evaluation to Action

- NEC has an opportunity to make evaluation a routine part of how programs learn, improve, communicate impact, and protect Navajo public health data.
- The UNM Evaluation Lab Summer Institute provides practical methods and a learning environment that can strengthen this work.
- Returning next year would allow NEC to move from learning concepts to testing, refining, and institutionalizing evaluation practices across programs.
- Goal: a sustainable, culturally responsive, useful evaluation system that supports Navajo Nation public health priorities and data sovereignty.

Collaboration with Other Tribal Epidemiology Centers Is a Strength

- ❖ Working with other Tribal Epidemiology Centers (TECs) creates a community of practice where evaluators can exchange tools, lessons learned, and approaches that have worked in other tribal settings.
- ❖ Peer collaboration helps NEC compare evaluation processes, identify common challenges, and avoid recreating tools or systems that another TEC has already developed.
- ❖ TEC relationships provide opportunities to share strategies for grant evaluation, surveillance, data modernization, workforce development, and communicating findings to tribal leadership and communities.
- ❖ Collaboration strengthens collective advocacy by identifying evaluation and reporting challenges that affect multiple TECs, including duplicate reporting, federal requirements, data access, and technical assistance needs.
- ❖ Learning across TECs can strengthen NEC while still allowing evaluation methods to be adapted to Navajo-specific priorities, governance structures, culture, and community context.
- ❖ These relationships also expand NEC's professional network and create opportunities for mentorship, technical assistance, joint learning, and future partnerships.

Integrating Navajo Indigenous Evaluation Practices

Building evaluation around Navajo values, relationships, knowledge, and sovereignty

- NEC can strengthen evaluation by grounding the process in Navajo values, relationships, language, community knowledge, and Navajo-defined understandings of health and success.
- K'é can guide relationship-building, respect, accountability, and the way evaluators engage programs, partners, communities, and leadership throughout the evaluation process.
- Hózhó can support a holistic view of evaluation that considers balance, wellness, relationships, environment, culture, and community—not only numerical outcomes.
- Evaluation questions should reflect what Navajo communities and programs consider meaningful rather than relying only on externally defined measures of success.
- Storytelling, listening sessions, facilitated dialogue, community observations, and other qualitative approaches can complement quantitative public health data and provide important context.
- Navajo data sovereignty should remain central: NEC and the Navajo Nation should have meaningful authority over how Navajo data are collected, interpreted, accessed, shared, reported, and used.
- The goal is not to replace established evaluation methods, but to combine useful Western evaluation tools with Navajo knowledge and values in a culturally responsive and tribally governed approach.

Moving Toward a Navajo-Centered Evaluation Approach

- Start with relationships and purpose: Who is the evaluation intended to serve, and what Navajo public health priority is being addressed?
- Define success collaboratively with NEC programs, leadership, partners, and communities when appropriate.
- Use both quantitative evidence and qualitative knowledge to understand outcomes and context.
- Interpret findings with the people closest to the work before conclusions are finalized.
- Ask how findings can benefit Navajo communities, improve programs, strengthen policy, or support better allocation of resources.
- Document how Navajo data governance and sovereignty were considered throughout the evaluation.
- Return findings in understandable and useful formats so evaluation becomes part of a continuous cycle of learning and action.

Editable Discussion & Next Steps

- What UNM Evaluation Lab practices should NEC prioritize during the next 12 months?
- Which NEC programs or grants are best suited to pilot a shared evaluation framework?
- What evaluation practices should be standardized across NEC—and what should remain program-specific?
- How can NEC continue learning with other Tribal Epidemiology Centers?
- What Navajo values, concepts, language, and community-engagement practices should be further incorporated into NEC's evaluation framework?
- What specific project should NEC bring to the next UNM Evaluation Lab Summer Institute?

