

# Building Evaluation Capacity in a Federal Research Funding Office, the NIH Common Fund

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## Abstract

The Common Fund of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) provides strategic, goal-driven investments to overcome key roadblocks and capitalize on emerging opportunities in biomedical research. Although performance monitoring has occurred continuously, formal evaluations of Common Fund programs have been ad hoc and conducted by contract evaluators. A recent process evaluation of the planning and management strategies for the Common Fund encouraged evaluative activities to be better integrated into the development and management of these programs. To address this need, the Common Fund is increasing internal evaluation capacity. We will share our efforts to build evaluation knowledge and skills among biomedical research scientists who are unfamiliar with evaluation practice. Capacity building prepares scientists to participate as team members and supporters of evaluation activities, paving the way for an evaluation friendly culture within this unique NIH research funding entity.

## Challenges to Building Evaluation Capacity within a Research Funding Agency

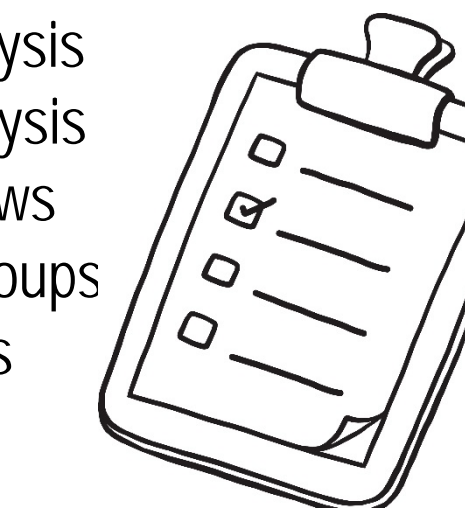
To build evaluation capacity, we must account for the organizational cultural context of evaluation within a federal research funding agency. NIH Common Fund working group members are frequently bench scientists by training and bring the perspective of their training and extensive experience in program administration to the management of Common Fund programs. However, their perspective on evaluation may differ from that of a program evaluator, so efforts are underway to build a shared understanding of evaluation as applied to Common Fund programs.

### Research and Evaluation Differ in Context



### Social Science Methods Used in Evaluation May Be Unfamiliar to Biomedical Bench Scientists

Quasiexperimental Design & Analysis  
Qualitative Data Collection & Analysis  
Designing & Conducting Interviews  
Designing & Conducting Focus Groups  
Designing & Validating Surveys  
Using Mixed Methods



### Parallels between Evaluation and Bench Research May Promote Understanding

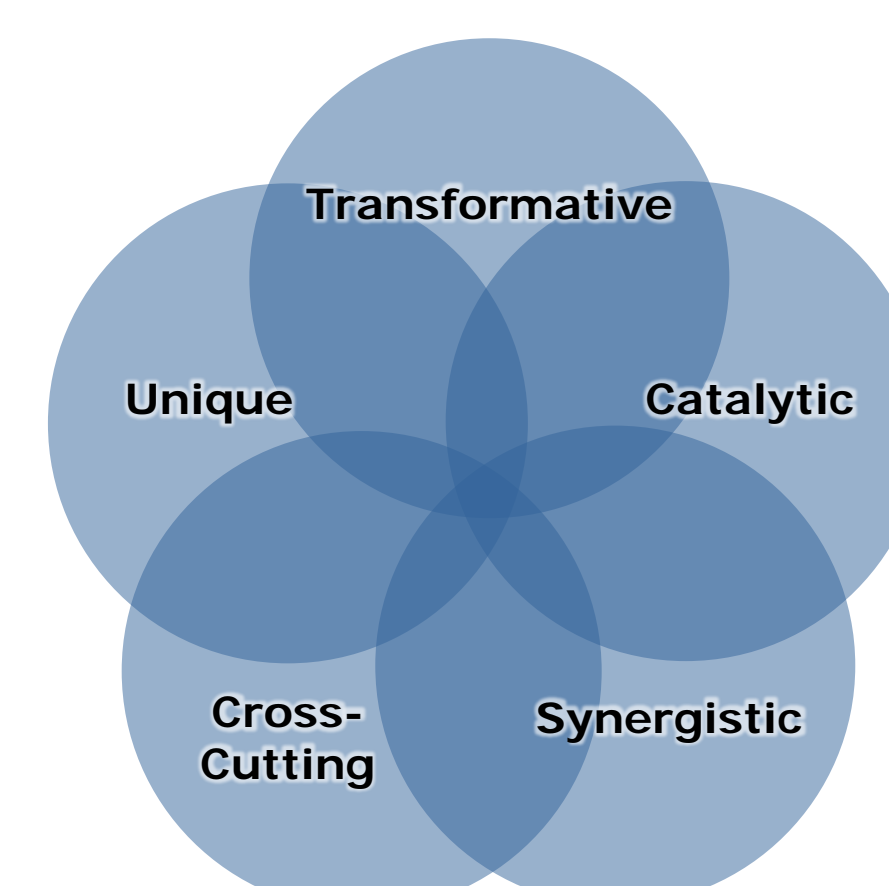
Evaluation	Bench Research
Utility	Adds to Knowledge Base
Feasibility	Appropriate Methods, Adequate Resources
Propriety	Complete & Faithful Reporting
Accuracy	Accuracy
Accountability	Reproducibility

## Introduction

### The National Institutes of Health (NIH)

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is a Federal Agency within the Department of Health and Human Services, and the premier funder of biomedical research in the United States. The agency is subdivided into 27 Institutes and Centers, each with a unique mission to advance an area of biomedical research and human health. Trans-NIH efforts that include participation by multiple Institutes and Centers are frequently organized by the NIH Office of the Director.

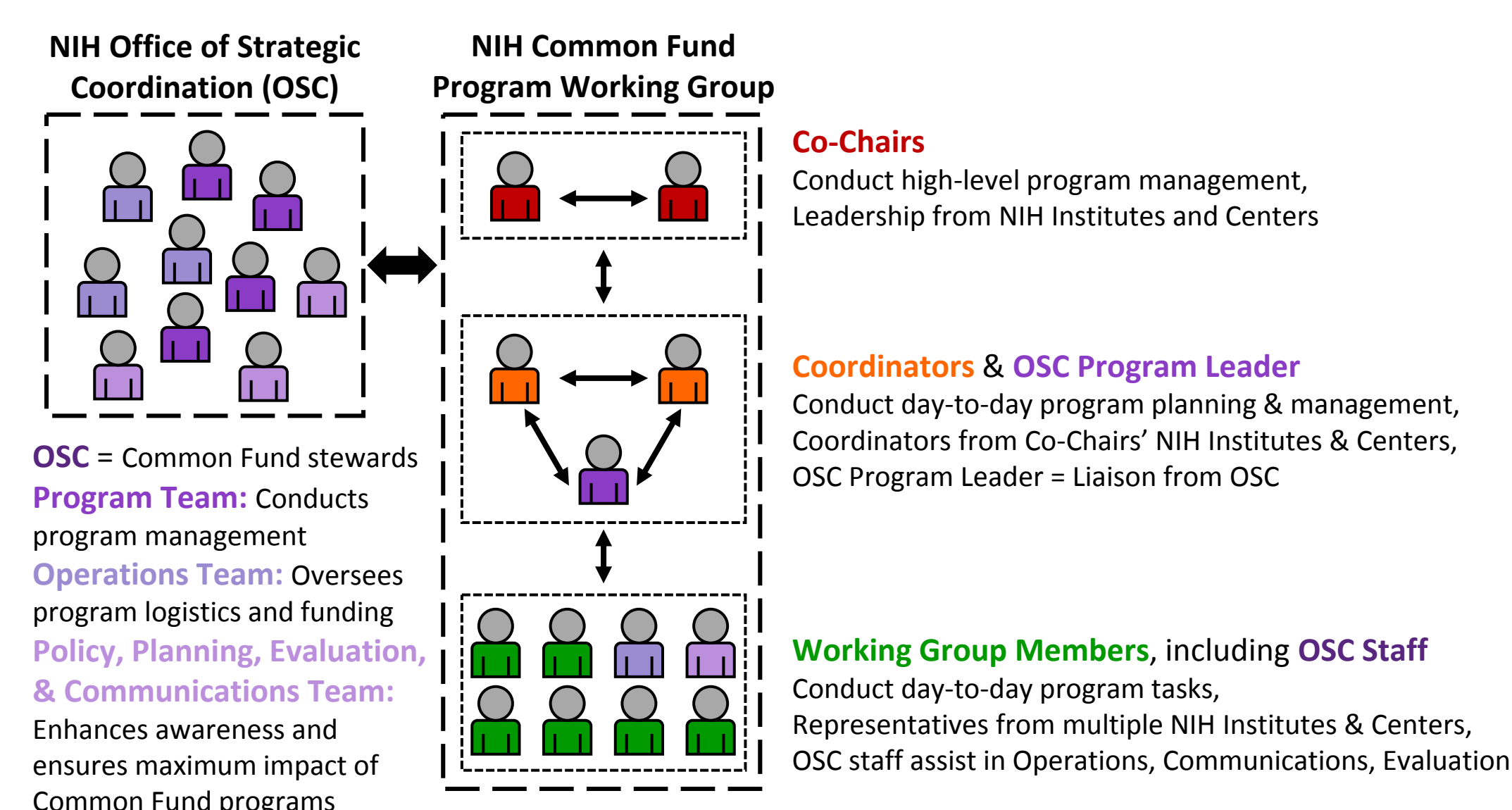
### The NIH Common Fund



The NIH Common Fund is a unique funding entity within the NIH Office of the Director. It was established within the Division of Program Coordination, Planning, and Strategic Initiatives and is overseen by the Office of Strategic Coordination. Its purpose is to remove key roadblocks to biomedical research and to capitalize on emerging scientific opportunities. The Common Fund supports a series of short term, exceptionally high impact, trans-NIH programs. Each program has a 10-year maximum life span in which to achieve specific goals, and is required to develop a set of milestones that are used to assess progress toward program goals. All Common Fund Programs are required to meet the following five criteria: transformative, synergistic, catalytic, cross-cutting, and unique.

- Transformative:** Must have exceptionally high & broadly applicable impact.
- Catalytic:** Must achieve a set of high impact goals within a defined period of time.
- Synergistic:** Must be value-added to the NIH Institutes and Centers while promoting NIH mission.
- Cross-Cutting:** Must address complex issues requiring management by trans-NIH teams.
- Unique:** Should provide new solutions to specific challenges.

### Management of Common Fund Programs



### Building Evaluation Capacity within the Common Fund

Performance monitoring of Common Fund programs has occurred continually. Now, in response to recommendations from a process evaluation of Common Fund strategic planning and management practices, the NIH Office of Strategic Coordination is looking to expand its capacity to conduct additional evaluative activities.

**The overall goal of Building Evaluation Capacity within the Common Fund is to ensure evaluative activities are better integrated into the development and management of Common Fund programs.**

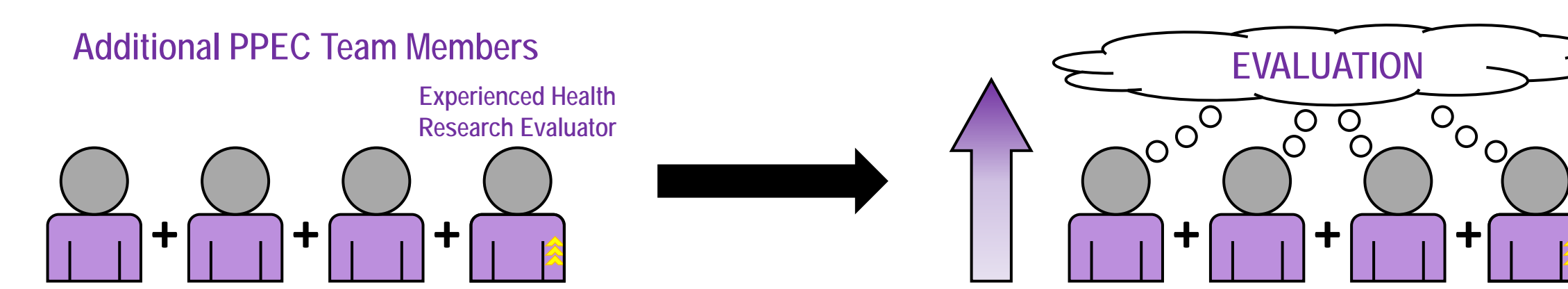
To achieve this goal, we are working to:

- Prepare NIH scientists to participate as team members and supporters of Common Fund-related evaluation activities.
- Lay the foundation for an evaluation-friendly culture among the NIH staff who plan and carry out Common Fund activities.

## Activities to Build Evaluation Capacity

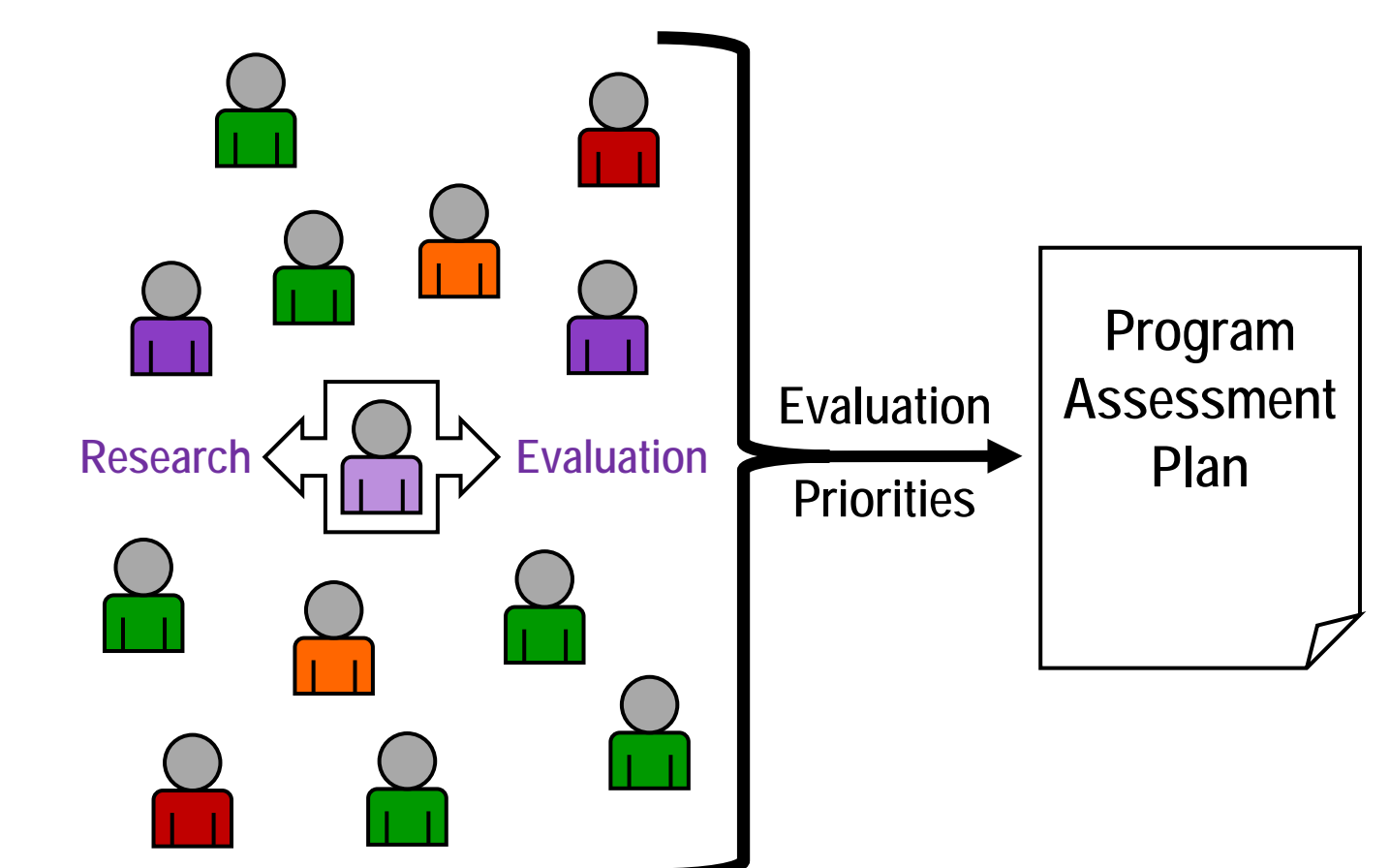
### Hired Personnel

Evaluation activities related to the NIH Common Fund are monitored by members of the Policy, Planning, Evaluation, and Communications (PPEC) team within the office that oversees the Common Fund. Additional members were added to the team to increase the time each member could devote to evaluative activities, including an experienced Health Research Evaluator to guide and coordinate Common Fund efforts in evaluation and to manage an evaluation contract.



### Team-Oriented Evaluation Priority Setting

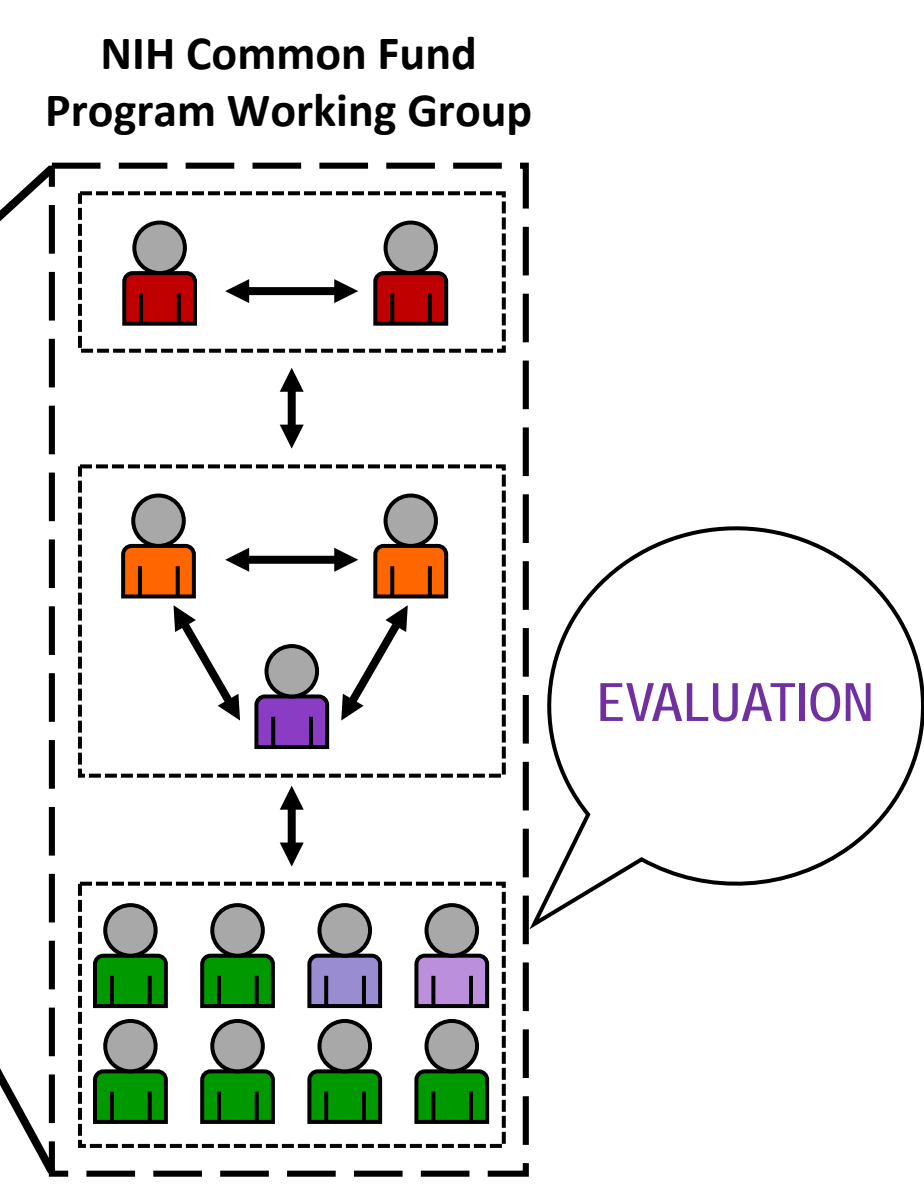
Evaluation priorities for a Common Fund program are set by the program's working group. A PPEC team member helps the group to articulate clear, evaluable goals for the program, and to develop milestones and metrics for monitoring program performance. The PPEC member is also steward of a program assessment plan which ensures evaluative activities are integrated into program planning and activities. Like the other working group members, most PPEC members are bench scientists by training. Serving as evaluation ambassadors to the working groups requires PPEC members to bridge the gap between research and evaluation terminologies and practices.



### Procedural Revisions to Boost Evaluation

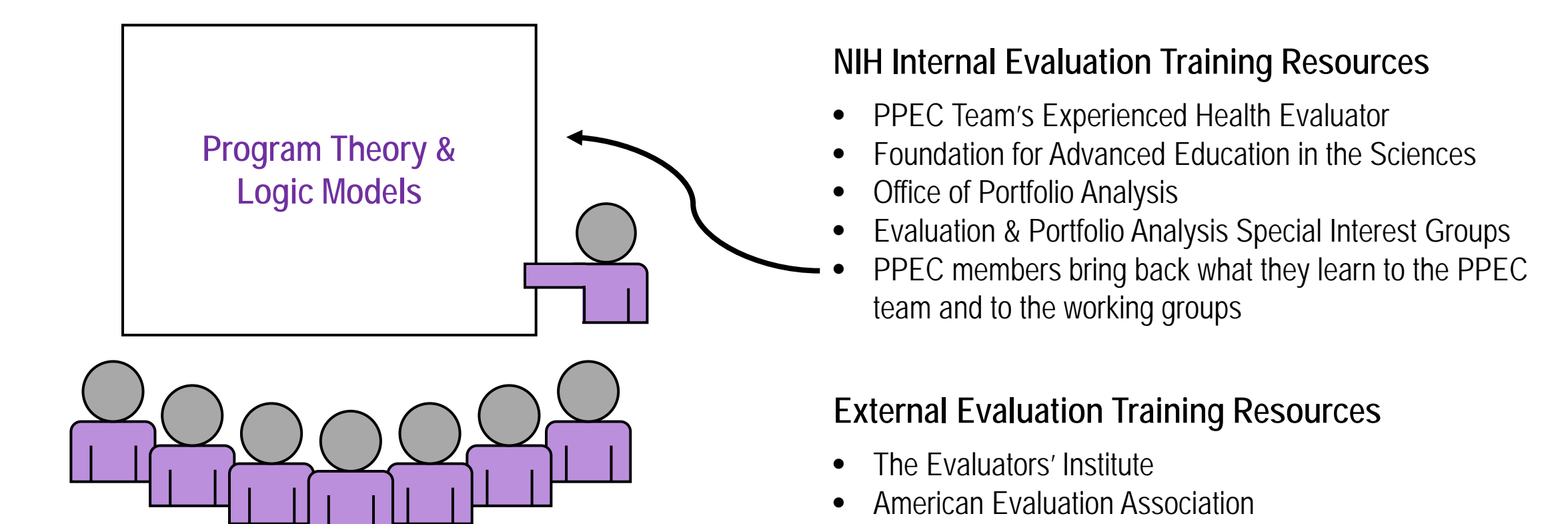
The office that oversees the Common Fund revised its procedures to better integrate evaluative activities into program planning and management. First, it solicited input from NIH colleagues on how to boost evaluative activities. Then, it conducted an iterative process of internal review and consensus-building on how to expand evaluation capacity.

- The responsibility of Policy, Planning, Evaluation, & Communications Team (PPEC) members to program evaluation was expanded and more clearly articulated.
- PPEC members were more deeply embedded in the working group structure to provide evaluation consultation.
- Program planning discussions and documents were designed to address evaluation.
- Each program was required to have an articulated plan to assess its progress toward achieving its goals.



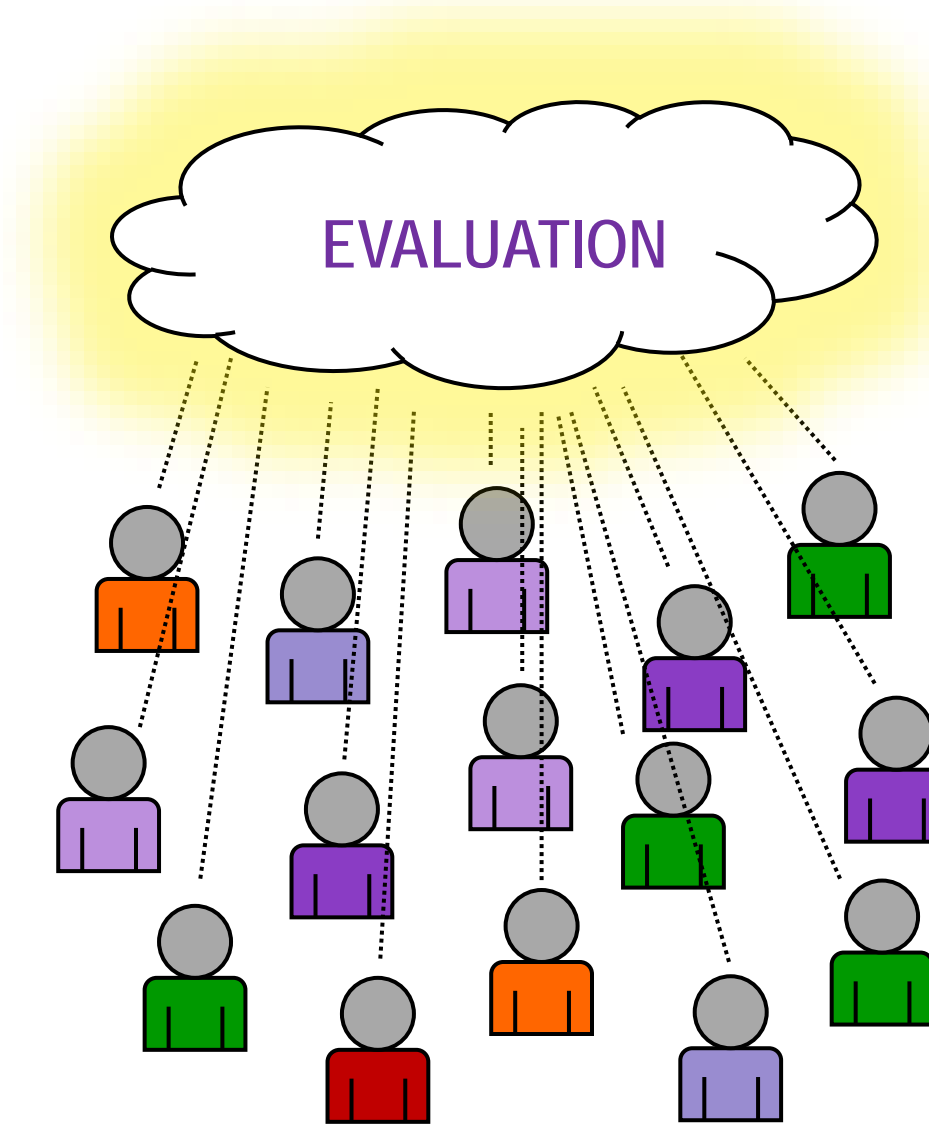
### Staff Training in Evaluation

To enhance their ability to consult on evaluative activities, PPEC team members receive evaluation training through a variety of internal NIH resources and external sources. PPEC members bring back what they have learned from external training and share with the team, building evaluation capacity through peer teaching.



## Signs of Success

- New Common Fund program goals and milestones are refined by working group members, including PPEC staff, to ensure they are evaluable.
- Implementation plans for new Common Fund programs now include a suite of metrics developed by the working group to help track progress toward program goals and milestones.
- PPEC members have received training on evaluation topics including components of quality evaluations, portfolio analysis, program theory and logic models, needs assessment, evaluation project management, evaluation framework development, and stakeholder engagement.
- Some Common Fund program working groups have begun to request evaluative activities or analyses without prompting from the PPEC team member embedded in the group.
- Evaluative activities have provided valuable information to NIH Common Fund leadership and decision-makers.
- Buy-in from leadership has resulted in requests for additional evaluative analyses and encouragement for data-driven decision making.



## Lessons Learned

