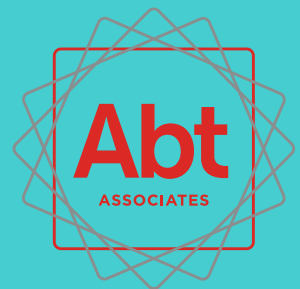


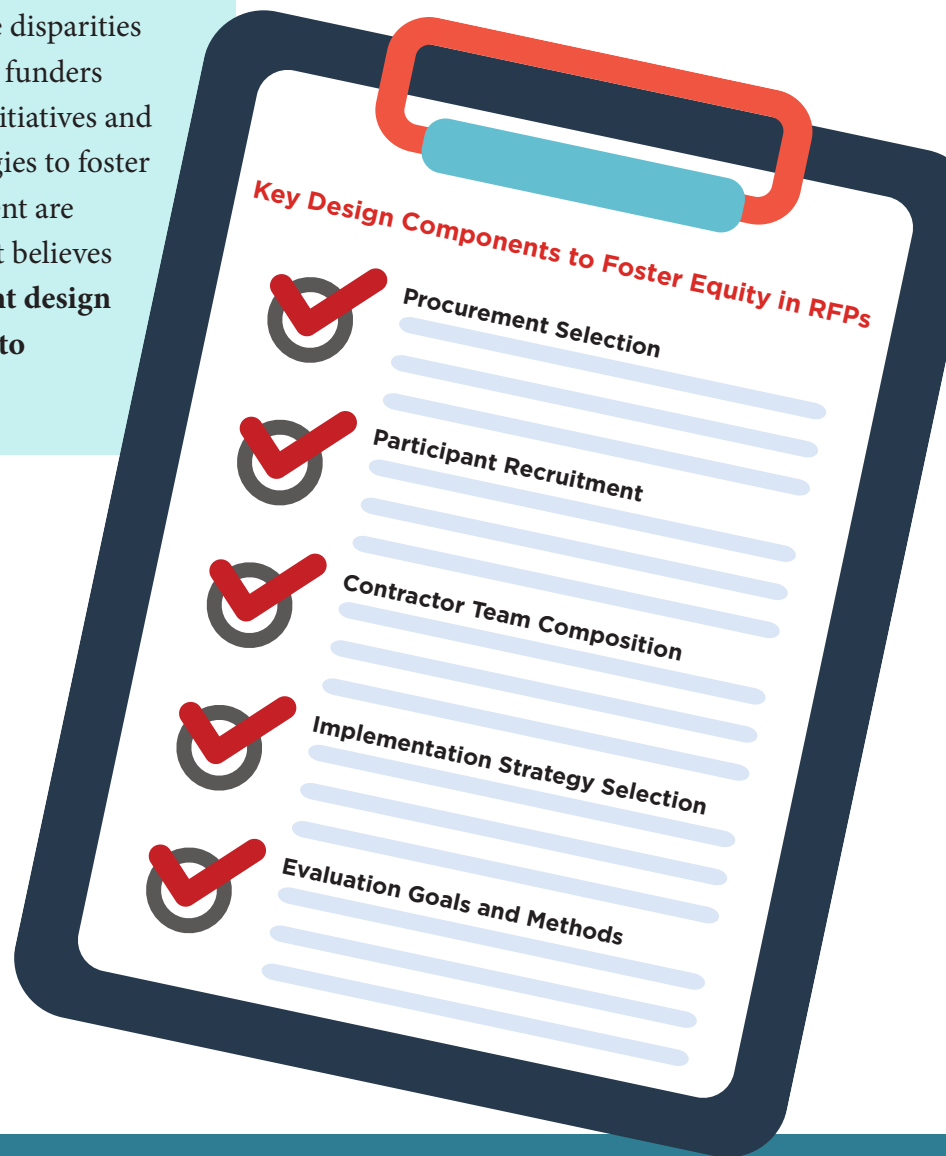
Promoting Equity in Implementation and Quality Improvement Procurements



INTRODUCTION

While promoting equity through government-funded implementation and quality improvement procurements is a top priority for agencies, HOW to achieve this goal is often less clear. The most important decisions that affect how much these procurements promote equity frequently occur in the design phase, before the procurement is even put out to bid.

Abt's extensive experience leading such projects and working to promote equity and reduce disparities points to **five key design components** funders should assess when developing new initiatives and drafting requests for proposals. Strategies to foster equity related to each design component are summarized in the sections below. Abt believes that **building equity into procurement design is foundational to the broader effort to achieve equitable outcomes.**



This document was produced by Abt Associates with input from our Domestic Division portfolio managers and experts from Abt's Equity Center, Technical Assistance & Implementation Center, and Health Policy & Systems Center.



Key Design Component 1: Procurement Selection

Question: Will the procurement positively impact equal or higher percentages of black, indigenous, or persons of color (BIPOC), under-resourced populations, rural, or other historically disadvantaged groups? If not, how can its design be adjusted so that its success will benefit these groups as others?

Procurement Selection Criteria to Avoid . . . and Alternatives to Promote Equity

❌ **Avoid selecting interventions based on proven impact**

Evidence of positive impact based on what is considered to be rigorous research and emerging best practices should inform resource allocation. But if the basis of this evidence is primarily research conducted in organizations or communities that are predominantly white and well resourced, then you may be picking interventions that will not work within under-resourced or more racially and ethnically diverse settings. This approach is more likely to promote inequity than equity.

✅ **Instead:**

- Choose interventions developed or demonstrated to work within organizations and communities with diverse backgrounds and disadvantaged populations.
- Look for interventions proven to raise performance where it is lowest instead of focusing on "raising the bar" for already relatively high performers.

❌ **Avoid using narrowly focused return on investment (ROI) assessments**

Narrowly focusing ROI assessments on a single government funding mechanism like the Medicare Trust Fund can result in different priorities than will emerge when government costs and revenue generation are examined more holistically. Procurements that enable persons from disadvantaged populations to become healthier and more self-sufficient can increase Medicare contributions and reduce federal and state costs for other health and human services programs. Improved quality of life also should be accounted for.

✅ **Instead:**

Examine ROI holistically, accounting for revenue gains, costs, and cost savings to all affected federal and state programs, and factor in the financial and nonfinancial benefits of improved quality of life.

❌ **Avoid prioritizing service outcomes more than service access**

When projects focus on service outcomes more than service access, improved outcomes will expand the gap between those that can access the service and those that cannot. Though well intentioned, such projects expand inequities.

✅ **Instead:**

Select procurements that emphasize expanding access to care as well as (or instead of) just improving care quality.

**Language used to describe non-white and historically under-resourced groups continues to evolve as the implications of specific terminology are better understood and ways to avoid "otherizing" these groups continue to improve.*



Key Design Component 2: Participant Recruitment

Question: Will the procurement be as relevant, appealing, and accessible to indigenous communities, participants of color, those historically under resourced, or those from other disadvantaged groups? If not, how can the project recruitment criteria be adjusted to ensure equitable participation by all groups?

Participant Recruitment Approaches to Avoid . . . and Alternatives to Promote Equity

❌ **Avoid expecting all participants to have “skin in the game”**

Persons or organizations from disadvantaged communities are unlikely to be able to invest the same amounts of time or money—and unlikely to be able to take the same financial risks—that can be assumed by counterparts from more affluent areas. If these differences and the need to overcome prior trauma, mistrust, and discrimination experienced by their communities are ignored during recruitment, inequities will be perpetuated. If they are recognized and participation criteria are adapted to broaden participation from all groups, the project will be more equitable.

✅ **Instead:**

Adjust participant eligibility criteria and expectations to make project participation as attractive and feasible for organizations or communities supporting disadvantaged populations. Allowing enrollment to occur in phases will provide time to develop the trust needed to engage with underrepresented populations.

❌ **Avoid selecting participants based on which are most likely to succeed**

While evidence of positive impact is important, if success criteria fail to account for both differences in initial levels of performance and reasonable rates of progress, then projects will almost always prioritize recruiting participants most capable of succeeding. When these projects “succeed” the result is greater inequities between those who were recruited to participate and those who were not.

✅ **Instead:**

Require recruitment criteria that account for variability linked to participants’ backgrounds, context, and economic status. Incent bidders to adjust participant costs, requirements, and goals, and to submit recruitment plans that ensure broad participation from underrepresented groups. These steps can leverage recruitment activities with efforts to drive equity outcomes.

❌ **Avoid emphasizing the use of recruitment channels and strategies that have met recruitment goals on past projects**

If prior recruitment approaches have yielded predominantly affluent and homogenous groups of participants, then continuing to use them will promote further inequity. Achieving equity requires approaches that account for historic mistrust, real and perceived discrimination, and resource limitations that impact disadvantaged communities.

✅ **Instead:**

Create an expectation and evaluation criteria that reward proposed strategies to recruit underrepresented communities or organizations. Recruitment strategies that build the trust and understanding needed to attract underrepresented people or organizations may be less established, but if more community oriented and bottom-up approaches are expected by the funder, the recruitment processes can support the goal of advancing equity.



Key Design Component 3: Contractor Team Composition

Question: Does the proposal's evaluation criteria explicitly encourage a diverse implementation team and prioritize diversity in key roles that have lacked diversity in the past?

Team Compositions to Avoid . . . and Alternatives to Promote Equity

⊗ Avoid evaluating contractor teams without explicitly accounting for their diversity

Evidence is very clear that diverse implementation teams can more effectively promote equity and avoid implicit biases and stereotypes. Implementation teams lacking diversity may achieve positive results but be less successful ensuring positive outcomes for non-white populations.

✓ Instead:

Make authentic team diversity an explicit, stand-alone evaluation criterion. Bundling diversity with other evaluation criteria will reduce the attention bidders pay to this important driver of equity.

⊗ Avoid making past experience with the funder a key factor in evaluating proposed key personnel

While it is reassuring for funders to select contractor teams led by directors and project managers they have worked with before, this approach can perpetuate project teams and approaches that are less diverse and less likely to produce equitable results. Funders may not be familiar with the personnel who have relevant experiences acquired in more varied contexts, but using broader criteria to evaluate proposed staff is both more equitable and necessary to plan, implement, and evaluate projects seeking to promote equity.

✓ Instead:

Treat relevant experiences acquired in more varied contexts as functionally equivalent to experience with your agency. While this approach may be unsettling, it will support efforts to plan, implement, and evaluate projects seeking to promote equity.

⊗ Avoid using compliance with MBE requirements as the primary criteria for selecting contractors.

When bidders meet MBE requirements by adding minority consultants or thought leaders with small roles and hire minority businesses to run meetings or manage other project logistics, equity considerations are less likely to guide daily strategy and implementation decisions. Tokenism is an inadequate alternative to expecting genuine diversity within the strategic and operational leadership core of contractor teams.

✓ Instead:

Prioritize the hiring of contractors with a diverse core leadership team guiding strategy and operations. This is a much better method of ensuring inclusion, and that equity remains an ongoing priority.



Key Design Component 4: Implementation Strategy Selection

Question: How are best practices or other improvement strategies identified and used to promote improved performance? Is evidence of positive impact the major determinant of what is promoted to participants? Are contextual factors that affect outcomes taken into account?

Implementation Strategies to Avoid . . . and Alternatives to Promote Equity

❌ **Avoid requiring contractors to capture and promote best practices based solely on evidence of positive outcomes**

Most best practices selected using this approach will originate in homogenous and comparatively affluent areas and organizations. These approaches may be inappropriate and ineffective in other contexts. Promoting best practices based solely on evidence of improvement is more likely to expand the performance gap between those high performers and participants based in more diverse and economically disadvantaged areas.

✅ **Instead:**

Require contractors to identify and promote best practices developed within and to support disadvantaged populations. If the project's leadership is not explicitly looking for best practices developed in and for disadvantaged communities, they will almost never find or promote them.

❌ **Avoid promoting solutions without understanding WHY they are successful**

Without understanding WHY a best practice works, you cannot know whether it will work for other project participants with different backgrounds and life contexts. Appointment reminder emails may work very well to prevent people from forgetting upcoming appointments but have no effect at all when the reasons for missed appointments are lack of childcare, transportation, or money for a co-pay or when the intended recipient lacks email or struggles with written English.

✅ **Instead:**

Expect contractors to use logic models that identify the underlying factors that the best practice is addressing. Understanding WHY best practices work will enable projects to promote solutions that lead to more equitable outcomes.

❌ **Avoid assuming that the contractor and funder are the best judges of which strategies will be successful**

Top-down approaches to problem solving will fail to produce solutions that will work in local contexts represented by project participants. They also will fail to encourage the buy-in and ownership necessary for success.

✅ **Instead:**

Elicit feedback on the value of potential best practices from participants supporting disadvantaged populations. If they articulate clear reasons why best practices developed elsewhere will not work in their settings, then promoting these best practices may not be warranted. Best practices co-created with persons from the targeted communities are most likely to be successful.



Key Design Component 5: Evaluation Goals and Methods

Question: Do the procurement's goals and evaluation plans include reducing inequities in targeted processes or outcomes?

Implementation Strategies to Avoid . . . and Alternatives to Promote Equity

Avoid making improved financial or clinical processes or outcomes the primary evaluation criteria

Saving money, increasing the use of recommended services, or preventing patient harm are all desirable goals but they do not necessarily promote equity. Sometimes these goals can be achieved even when inequities are expanded. Unless equity considerations are co-equal evaluation criteria, the main objectives may be achieved by promoting inequity rather than equity.

Instead:

- Include goals directly related to reducing observed process or outcome gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged persons or communities. If reducing these inequities is not a project goal, then specific strategies for achieving greater equity will not receive much attention and the impact of these efforts may not be explored in the evaluation.
- Directly evaluate the impact of the project on participants representing disadvantaged groups or communities. If all of the overall project impact is achieved by participants from more affluent or homogenous areas, then the project may be promoting inequity rather than greater equity.

Avoid excluding incomplete data from persons or organizations

These exclusions disproportionately impact persons of color and those who are under resourced, making it even more difficult to ensure that the project is promoting more equitable outcomes.

Instead:

Acknowledge and use appropriate statistical adjustments to avoid excluding disadvantaged persons from project evaluations because they have more missing data due to missed appointments, provider changes, or insurance coverage gaps.

Avoid limiting financial analyses to the impacts on purchasers and providers

Some improvement strategies may simply shift costs from purchasers or providers to the persons they are caring for. These shifts expand inequities and make it harder for economically disadvantaged persons to afford required care.

Instead:

Require discussions of financial impact to account for patient costs such as transportation, co-pays, work absences, and childcare that could be impacted by the implementation or improvement initiative.

Abt's goal is to advance health and economic well-being for all, and we recognize that doing this requires identifying, understanding, and proactively addressing inequities, which manifest in many different ways, across all sectors. We seek to intentionally and collaboratively identify factors that affect inequitable access and opportunity, and strive to integrate equity into project design so we can address the impact of activities on all members of society, particularly those that are most vulnerable and often bear the brunt of the impact. If you're a federal, state, or local agency, or a foundation, we're available to discuss how we can collaborate with you to incorporate equity into all aspects of the design, implementation, and dissemination of your programs and policies.

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