



COST ANALYSIS FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

December 2020

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The development of this FAQ list was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305U200002 to Teachers College, Columbia University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

CONTENTS

Contents	1
About the CAP Project	1
How to use this document	1
Frequently asked questions	2
Cost analysis requirements for different IES grant types	2
Follow-up or Systematic Replication Grants	2
Measurement Grants	3
Development & Innovation Grants	3
Is a Cost analysis or cost-effectiveness analysis plan required in my D&I proposal?	3
Do I need to include cost data in my D&I proposal?	3
Should I plan to measure incremental costs or total costs for a D&I Proposal?	4
Transformative Research grants	4
Questions about who should conduct cost analysis	4
Do I need to hire someone to conduct my cost analysis?	4
Can I hire a CAP Project cost expert as a cost analysis consultant on my project?	5
Questions about what to include in a cost analysis/CEA	5
What ingredients should be included?	5
Do I include the cost of training?	5
Questions about how to measure or estimate costs	6
How do I value textbooks when different schools/districts use different books?	6
How do I measure costs for a technology-based intervention at sites that vary in tech-readiness?	6
What salary data do I use for staff time?	7
Do you provide tools for collecting cost data?	7
Can I use budget data to estimate costs?	8
Questions about how to present cost data	8
What unit do I use for reporting costs?	8
How to summarize and report cost data	8
CAP Project: Cost Analysis Frequently Asked Questions	1

What is the difference between a cost-effectiveness ratio and cost per output ratio?	9
Questions about how to incorporate cost analysis into a grant proposal	10
How do I weave cost analysis throughout my proposal?	10
Can CAP Project experts review our cost analysis plan?	10
Questions about cost-benefit analysis	11
Can you provide support for my cost-benefit analysis?	11
Questions about what kind of cost analysis to conduct	11
Should I be doing a cost analysis (CA), cost-feasibility analysis (CFA), cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA), cost-benefit analysis (CBA), or cost-utility analysis (CUA)?	11
Questions about evaluating the credibility of existing effectiveness studies	11
How can I assess the rigor of studies that have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions?	11

ABOUT THE CAP PROJECT

The Cost Analysis in Practice (CAP) Project is a three-year initiative funded in May 2020 by [the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education \(IES\)](#). The CAP Project team provides free, on-demand tools, guidance, and technical assistance to researchers and practitioners planning or conducting cost analysis for IES-funded work and/or to inform the delivery of education to students in the United States. The project specifically supports cost-feasibility and cost-effectiveness analysis of educational programs and practices.

In addition to creating resources such as this document, the CAP Project team offers on-demand technical assistance through the CAP Project Help Desk. Researchers and practitioners can submit requests for cost analysis support at [capproject.org](#). Inquiries will be assigned to a [CAP Project team](#) member within two business days.

The CAP Project team includes three cost experts: Dr. Fiona Hollands from Teachers College, Columbia University; Dr. Jaunelle Pratt-Williams from SRI International; and Dr. Robert Shand from American University. Collectively, they have over 20 years of experience conducting and supporting cost analysis as part of research studies and to inform decision-making at education agencies. To learn more about the CAP Project experts, please go to [capproject.org/whoweare](#).

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

This document contains answers to common cost analysis questions received via the CAP Project Help Desk. These FAQs are intended to serve as a resource for education researchers and practitioners who are considering, designing, or conducting cost analyses in an educational setting. While many questions are directly related to IES-funded projects and/or the K–12 setting, much of this information will be relevant to cost analysis in any education project or setting.

How to use this document:

1. Look for a header in the table of contents that is similar to your question.
2. Ctrl+click on the header and move to the portion of the document to determine if the response is relevant to your question.
3. **If you do not find an answer to your question, submit a Help Desk Request at [capproject.org](#).**

This document will be updated periodically. If you have suggestions for improving on this resource, please email helpdesk@capproject.org.

Please note: Answers to questions regarding IES grant proposal requirements are based on the 2021 RFA cycle. These answers will be updated in 2021 once the 2022 RFA requirements are available.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Cost analysis requirements for different IES grant types

FOLLOW-UP OR SYSTEMATIC REPLICATION GRANTS¹

The 2020 cost analysis requirements for follow-up grants can be confusing, especially if your project is not implementing the intervention but simply collecting and analyzing additional results. Here are some possible scenarios and the CAP Project's suggestions for what you could propose:

- If you are implementing the intervention and comparing results to a counterfactual condition, you can propose a cost analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA).
- If you are not implementing the intervention but only conducting data collection and analysis, determine whether an adequate cost analysis and/or CEA was conducted during or soon after the original efficacy trial.
 - If yes:
 - You could briefly summarize the results or refer to them in your follow-up grant proposal and argue that another cost analysis/CEA is not needed because no new implementation is taking place.
 - If no:
 - You could propose to conduct a retrospective cost analysis and/or CEA during the follow-up project. This means you would outline in the proposal how you would collect new data or analyze existing data (e.g., from detailed implementation reports from the original trial) to estimate the costs of implementing the intervention during the original trial period.
 - If you can also plan to gather retrospective cost data on the counterfactual, you could propose to calculate the cost difference between treatment and control conditions and match that to the effect size obtained in the original trial to produce a cost-effectiveness ratio.
 - If many years have passed since the original trial and you are unable to identify reliable sources of detailed information on how the intervention was implemented during the trial, you should explain in your proposal that you cannot conduct an accurate cost analysis based on the original trial. Instead, you could indicate that you will provide information on what resources (personnel, materials and equipment, facilities, and other inputs) would be needed by schools and districts to implement the intervention with fidelity. You could also propose to estimate the costs of a typical implementation scenario that you describe, specifying a realistic number of schools and/or students served.

¹ Information regarding IES grant proposal requirements is based on the 2021 RFA cycle. Recommendations may be updated in 2021 once the 2022 RFA requirements are available.

If you do propose a cost analysis or CEA, you may find our [step-by-step guidelines helpful](#). Additionally, the [IES 2021 Cost Analysis Requirements](#) will allow you to see what other project types are being required to do in this area.

MEASUREMENT GRANTS²

A cost analysis plan is recommended for strong Measurement grant applications but not required (see the [IES 2021 Cost Analysis Requirements](#)). If you decide to include a cost analysis plan in your proposal, the analysis you propose should focus on the costs to the end user to implement the tool, not on the costs to you for developing the tool.

If you will be implementing the measurement tool you develop with actual schools and students during the grant period, you can propose to estimate the costs to implement it for these schools. If you are not implementing the tool in any typical school scenario, you could propose to outline a typical scenario for implementation and estimate the costs for this scenario. For example, if you foresee the tool being adopted district-wide and used four times each year, you could propose to estimate the costs per district, per school, and per student for a small, medium, and large school district. If the tool will be adopted on a school-by-school basis, you could estimate the costs per school and student for different sized schools.

For additional information, refer to the [CAP Project Resources](#). The [Cost Analysis Standards and Guidelines](#) will be of particular interest if you would like more information about how to design your cost analysis.

DEVELOPMENT & INNOVATION GRANTS³

IS A COST ANALYSIS OR COST-EFFECTIVENESS ANALYSIS PLAN REQUIRED IN MY D&I PROPOSAL?

In the 2021 RFA proposal cycle, Development and Innovation (D&I) applications do not need to propose a cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA) (see the [IES 2021 Cost Analysis Requirements](#)). You are, however, required to conduct a cost analysis during the pilot study to estimate the costs of the intervention. You may still decide to calculate a cost-effectiveness (CE) ratio, in which case you will also need to estimate the costs of the counterfactual as implemented during the pilot study so that you can determine the difference in costs (incremental costs) between the treatment and control (T and C) conditions. The average difference in costs between T and C conditions is divided by the average effect size to obtain the CE ratio for the intervention being studied. If you are able to find CE ratios of similar interventions studied in similar contexts, you will be able to comment on how cost-effective your intervention is relative to these others.

DO I NEED TO INCLUDE COST DATA IN MY D&I PROPOSAL?

² Information regarding IES grant proposal requirements is based on the 2021 RFA cycle. Recommendations may be updated in 2021 once the 2022 RFA requirements are available.

³ Information regarding IES grant proposal requirements is based on the 2021 RFA cycle. Recommendations may be updated in 2021 once the 2022 RFA requirements are available.

The cost analysis section of your D&I proposal should describe your plans to conduct a cost analysis during your pilot study rather than actually attempt a cost analysis in the proposal stage. Specify your cost analysis method—for example, the “ingredients method” (Levin et al., 2018)⁴—and identify what you expect to be the important ingredients. In addition, your proposal should describe how you will collect data about the quantity, type, and prices of resources needed for implementation. This should include the sources of information and data collection strategies such as document reviews, interviews, surveys, and time logs.

SHOULD I PLAN TO MEASURE INCREMENTAL COSTS OR TOTAL COSTS FOR A D&I PROPOSAL?

For D&I applications, IES suggests providing total costs of the intervention in its Recommendations for Strong Applications. This means accounting for personnel time (which should include fringe benefits), materials/equipment and facilities use, and any other inputs even if these items are already paid for out of the regular school/district budget. It is likely that education decision-makers would find incremental costs helpful, as well as total costs, but this is not a requirement for D&I. The incremental costs would be the difference in costs between the treatment and control conditions in your D&I pilot study.

TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH GRANTS

For Transformative Research grants, the RFA recommends, but does not require, that applicants incorporate SEER Principles, one of which is [Analyze Costs](#). Given the wide range of ideas/study designs that are likely to be submitted for this RFA, it is possible that cost analysis may not make sense for all of them. To determine if a cost analysis makes sense for your proposal, consider whether a cost estimate of whatever you are investigating would a) be useful to education decision-makers and b) be feasible to conduct given whatever research you are planning. If yes to both, we recommend you propose some sort of cost analysis. If you don't end up including one, provide a justification in your proposal, even if just a sentence somewhere, as to why a cost analysis would not make sense or be feasible. Applications will not be screened out by IES as non-responsive if a cost analysis is not included which means it will be up to the reviewers to decide whether they feel you should have included one and to reflect this in their scoring.

Questions about who should conduct cost analysis

DO I NEED TO HIRE SOMEONE TO CONDUCT MY COST ANALYSIS?

It is ultimately up to you to determine whether you need a cost expert. For IES grant applications, the 2021 RFA does recommend that, in the personnel section, you identify the person who will be responsible for conducting the cost analysis/CEA and describe their relevant expertise and experience. This does not have to be an outside expert or consultant. In fact, we think it is stronger if the analysis is conducted by someone who is more central to the evaluation so the cost analysis/CEA is well integrated into the project. In this case, you can select a person and mention that they will be engaging in capacity-building activities (like taking

⁴ Levin, H. M., McEwan, P. J., Belfield, C., Bowden, A. B., and Shand, R. (2018). *Economic Evaluation in Education: Cost-Effectiveness and Benefit-Cost Analysis*. SAGE Publications.

advantage of the [CAP Project Help Desk](#) and/or applying to attend the [IES-funded Methods Training in Economic Evaluation](#) starting in summer 2021).

If it would be helpful to your team and you think it might assuage concerns reviewers might have about cost expertise, you can hire someone in a more advisory capacity to provide guidance, training, and feedback to the team members who are executing the cost analysis. Many projects have advisory boards or technical advisory groups, and you can consider a cost expert as part of that group. In this case, the budget would be similar to that for any other advisors you might have who are consulting for a few days per year at standard consulting rates in academic research. The rates are typically around \$1,000–1,500 per day (sometimes as low as \$750 per day and as high as \$2,000+ per day), depending on experience.

CAN I HIRE A CAP PROJECT COST EXPERT AS A COST ANALYSIS CONSULTANT ON MY PROJECT?

You are welcome to inquire as to whether one of the cost experts is available, independent of the CAP Project, to act as a consultant on your project. We may also be able to recommend a consultant. However, one of the CAP Project’s main goals is to reduce the need for outside consultants by providing relevant resources, tools, and technical assistance to build capacity among PIs and their teams to conduct economic evaluations themselves. IES has also recently funded a [Methods Training in Economic Evaluation](#), which will offer its first session in summer 2021.

Questions about what to include in a cost analysis/CEA

WHAT INGREDIENTS SHOULD BE INCLUDED?

When estimating costs of an intervention, you want to include all of the resources, or “ingredients,” needed to implement the intervention even if those resources are not new expenditures. This includes personnel, materials and equipment, physical space, and other inputs such as transportation or travel expenses. These resources still have value and could be used in other ways if they were not used for the intervention. You are accounting for the opportunity cost of these reallocated resources.

DO I INCLUDE THE COST OF TRAINING?

Yes, you need to include the costs of organizing and delivering training, whether that involves paying an outside provider or using staff time to plan, coordinate, create, and deliver the training sessions. You will also need to document the time spent by participants attending the training sessions and estimate the costs of their time, ideally using salaries and fringe benefits to place a value on the number of hours/days spent in training. Alternatively, you can use the value of any stipend paid if this is a fair reflection of the value of staff time (note that salary and fringe benefits reflect the true economic costs of staff time while stipends represent expenditures by the school/district or other payer). Don’t count both!

Remember also to consider whether costs are incurred for substitute teachers if teachers are being trained on school days, and whether there are any costs for materials and equipment, travel, lodging, parking, facilities, refreshments, etc. You may find CAP Project’s Event Log (at capp.project.org/resources) useful for collecting these data.

Questions about how to measure or estimate costs

HOW DO I VALUE TEXTBOOKS WHEN DIFFERENT SCHOOLS/DISTRICTS USE DIFFERENT BOOKS?

1. **Publishing company websites:** Search the publishing companies’ websites to identify the market price of each known textbook or a sample and average these to serve as the costs per textbook. If you have good reason to believe the districts for which you are estimating costs are able to negotiate discounts for bulk purchases, you can reduce the market price by the relevant percentage and state this in your reporting, or use reduced prices in a sensitivity analysis. In practice, costs of materials tend to be so small relative to personnel costs that these differences are not substantive in the context of the overall cost results.
2. **District contacts:** See if a few of your district contacts or curriculum experts in the participating districts can share the prices with you. They will probably need to request this information from their purchasing department.
3. **Publishing companies:** Call or email the various publishing companies to request the prices in the quantity relevant to your study. Admittedly, it can be challenging to get a response if you are not a buyer. Unless you are a potential client, the answer is often “it depends.”

Considering that you will collect multiple prices, you could choose to include either the mean or median of the textbook prices (use the median if there appear to be outliers or conduct sensitivity analyses using mean in one analysis and median in another, or the lowest and highest prices).

HOW DO I MEASURE COSTS FOR A TECHNOLOGY-BASED INTERVENTION AT SITES THAT VARY IN TECH-READINESS?

In a scenario in which sites are at varying levels of readiness for an intervention, we would anticipate that the total cost of implementation may vary by site. To address this issue, you can break out start-up costs from maintenance or ongoing costs (and IES encourages this). The start-up costs are going to vary greatly across sites depending on what they already have in place, but the maintenance costs are likely to be more homogeneous. You do not need to estimate initial costs of developing the intervention if these costs would not be incurred by new sites implementing your innovation. For example, if you are developing an online algebra unit that schools would eventually acquire by purchasing 2 days of training and a school license for access to the materials, you would not need to estimate the time spent by your project team developing the unit. But you should include an estimate of the costs to schools for acquiring the unit in addition to other implementation costs. The implementation costs may include start-up costs, such as upgrading the technology infrastructure to provide wireless internet access throughout the school, and ongoing costs such as teacher time to deliver the unit during math class.

If you are implementing an intervention at a small number of sites, you could estimate costs for each of them and present an average cost per site. If you have many sites, you may need to collect cost data through a combination of surveys (ideally integrated with fidelity of implementation data collection) and time logs, with a sample of more in-depth interviews of personnel. Either way, you could then present costs of all resources needed to implement the most resource intensive implementation and the least resource intensive implementation to convey the range of possible costs.

WHAT SALARY DATA DO I USE FOR STAFF TIME?

There are a few decisions that you need to make about the best salary rates to use, but the choice should be driven by who you are trying to inform with the cost information. Our [Cost Analysis Standards and Guidelines](#) provide more details throughout the document including on p. 16 and pp. 19–20. Appendices II and III provide suggestions and links to reliable sources of national average and local salaries.

One of the first decisions you need to make is whether you want to include national average prices or local prices in your analysis. You also can decide to include both in two separate analyses for comparison. You could also collect the local data from the school district if you are not able to locate a public source or think the public source is not as precise. As explained in the guidelines, it is possible to convert salaries from national averages to local equivalents and vice versa using geographical indices.

DO YOU PROVIDE TOOLS FOR COLLECTING COST DATA?

The [CAP Project Resources](#) site currently provides the following data collection tools:

1. A template for an interview protocol that we developed for interviewing program developers/implementers to elicit information about the resources required to implement educational interventions. These questions can be adapted for different types of interventions and/or for use in surveys.
2. An event log to collect information relevant to a cost analysis from events such as training or professional development sessions.
3. A facilities calculator to estimate the cost of physical space (facilities) in your analysis.
4. A simple time log in an Excel spreadsheet. The log is for weekly recording and is shown in two different orientations. It can be adapted for different time periods and shared with respondents in Google Sheet format so you can keep an eye on whether it is being completed. You could pre-populate the activity descriptions if you know what you are looking for.

Additionally, CAP Project's [Cost Analysis Standards and Guidelines](#) include templates for recording the data you will need to estimate costs (see Tables 3–6). One table is for general program information, followed by one each for personnel, facilities, and materials and equipment. Collecting this information precedes calculating the costs of these ingredients, which you can do by entering the ingredients information into [CostOut](#).

CAN I USE BUDGET DATA TO ESTIMATE COSTS?

Levin et al. (2018) provide several reasons to explain why budget data are not sufficient for estimating costs of implementing educational programs:

- Budgets are unlikely to include cost information on every resource used in an intervention, for example, volunteer hours or donated equipment.
- A single agency's budget will not include relevant contributions made by another agency. For example, a school may conduct an intervention in a building operated by the district. Accordingly, the facility costs of the intervention will not be included in the school budget.
- Standard budget practices might distort an estimate of actual costs. For example, replacing the roof of a building may show up in a single year instead of being amortized. This will lead to an overestimate of facilities costs in the year of installation and an underestimate of facilities costs for the subsequent years.
- Standard budget practices rely on broad function and object codes that are unlikely to allow the cost analyst to isolate the costs of a particular intervention. In other words, budget data are not likely to provide the level of detail needed to identify costs that are specific to your intervention.
- Similarly, budget data are unlikely to distinguish between start-up vs. maintenance costs in a meaningful way. Without understanding which costs are associated with which phase of the intervention, you will not be able to distinguish the costs of initiating a program from the costs of maintaining it.

Questions about how to present cost data

WHAT UNIT DO I USE FOR REPORTING COSTS?

It depends on the level of the outcomes. If your impact estimates/effect size will be at the classroom level, then you will report the per class costs. If they are at the student level, you should report the per student costs. You can report costs at more than one level if it is useful (e.g., per student and per class), but you need to include the one that correlates with the impact analyses to be able to calculate a cost-effectiveness ratio.

HOW TO SUMMARIZE AND REPORT COST DATA

You can use Excel, Google Sheets, or a tool like [CostOut](#) to calculate the total cost and average cost per student by combining the quantity of each ingredient with its associated price, summing up all of the costs, and dividing by the number of students served. You might consider whether any further breakdown of costs makes sense for decision-makers:

- startup vs. ongoing operational/maintenance costs;
- by type of resource/ingredient (personnel, materials and equipment, facilities, other outputs);
- by site;
- by sub-group;
- by program component;

CAP Project: Cost Analysis Frequently Asked Questions

- by year;
- by who pays for or provides the different resources;
- whether the resources require new expenditures, are provided in-kind, or are reallocated from other purposes (like teacher time, classroom space, and device usage);
- fixed, variable, and lumpy costs; and/or
- by funding source (e.g., Title II grant, general funds).

These are all just options—it really depends upon what would be most useful to decision-makers in your context and based on your intervention.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A COST-EFFECTIVENESS RATIO AND COST PER OUTPUT RATIO?

If you have one treatment arm (T) and a comparison condition (C) which may be another intervention or business as usual, the cost-effectiveness (CE) ratio is the incremental costs of T compared to C divided by the effect size: $(\text{Average T costs} - \text{Average C costs}) / (\text{Average T outcome} - \text{Average C outcome})$.

If you express your costs and outcomes in absolute or “raw” terms and not as the difference between treatment and comparison groups, you are reporting costs per output, not a CE ratio. For example, if your intervention seeks to improve the high school graduation rate, you could report the following ratios:

$$\frac{\text{Total costs per student served in the T condition}}{\text{Number of students graduating from the T condition}}$$

and

$$\frac{\text{Total costs per student served in the C condition}}{\text{Number of students graduating from the C condition}}$$

to show which condition costs least per graduate. The CE ratio reports:

$$\frac{\text{Difference in costs per student served in T and C conditions}}{\text{Difference in number of graduates between the T and C conditions}}$$

To determine whether your high school graduation intervention is “cost-effective,” you need to compare its CE ratio to the CE ratios of other interventions that aim to increase the graduation rate. If you cannot find reliable CE ratios for comparable interventions, you may be able to comment on how your CE ratio compares to that of other types of intervention, acknowledging that they are not direct alternatives.

Questions about how to incorporate cost analysis into a grant proposal

HOW DO I WEAVE COST ANALYSIS THROUGHOUT MY PROPOSAL?

In addition to a dedicated section of the proposal describing your cost analysis or cost-effectiveness analysis (see the CAP Project's [Checklist for Cost Analysis Plans](#) for what should be in this section), do the following:

- Include a research question about resource requirements and costs of implementation. If you are conducting an impact study, you can include a question about incremental costs of the treatment condition compared to the control condition and one about cost-effectiveness of your intervention relative to similar interventions.
- Include cost data collection in plans and instruments for collecting data about fidelity of implementation.
- Discuss what you will report about costs/cost-effectiveness in your dissemination plan and how the information might be used to inform decisions.
- Include cost analysis in any timeline and/or management plan for the grant. See the CAP Project's Timeline for Cost Analysis (at capproject.org/resources).
- Be clear about which personnel are responsible for conducting the cost analysis and what experience/expertise they have, or will obtain.

It can sometimes help to add a cost expert as a technical advisor, part of an advisory board, etc., but we also recommend integrating the cost work into your core team. You can mention that they will be engaging in capacity-building activities (like taking advantage of the [CAP Project Help Desk](#) and/or applying to attend the [IES-funded Methods Training in Economic Evaluation](#) starting in summer 2021).

CAN CAP PROJECT EXPERTS REVIEW OUR COST ANALYSIS PLAN?

Yes, a CAP Project cost expert can review the cost analysis/CEA section of your study design document or grant proposal. Before you send it to us, please review the CAP Project's [Checklist for Cost Analysis Plans](#) and use it as a guide for possible revisions to your current plan. Once you have completed your own review against the checklist and made any necessary revisions or have questions about how to do so, you can send your draft to the [CAP Project Help Desk](#) for feedback. In addition to the section on cost analysis/CEA, it would be helpful to also send a two-page abstract or a summary of your project and description of the intervention and the comparison condition. Any materials shared with the Help Desk are treated as confidential and only used to provide the owners with advice and technical assistance.

Questions about cost-benefit analysis

CAN YOU PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR MY COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS?

Yes, although we primarily support cost analysis and CEA, we may sometimes recommend that a cost-benefit analysis (CBA) or even a cost-utility analysis (CUA) is more appropriate to address your research questions. We generally focus on the cost component of your evaluation, but can provide general guidance on economic evaluation principles that will apply to CBA and CUA. You are welcome to submit your questions to the [CAP Project Help Desk](#).

Questions about what kind of cost analysis to conduct

SHOULD I BE DOING A COST ANALYSIS (CA), COST-FEASIBILITY ANALYSIS (CFA), COST-EFFECTIVENESS ANALYSIS (CEA), COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS (CBA), OR COST-UTILITY ANALYSIS (CUA)?

The type of analysis should depend on the research question and/or on the requirements of your research funder. The term “cost analysis” can be confusing because it sometimes refers to the estimation of costs and sometimes serves as an umbrella term for several types of economic evaluation: CFA considers the costs and feasibility of implementing a program given the resources available, while CEA, CBA, and CUA all consider academic and other returns in addition to costs, often comparing these across two or more programs. See Table 1 in the [CAP Project’s Cost Analysis Standards and Guidelines](#) for further details on when each type of analysis is most appropriate.

Questions about evaluating the credibility of existing effectiveness studies

HOW CAN I ASSESS THE RIGOR OF STUDIES THAT HAVE BEEN CONDUCTED TO EVALUATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERVENTIONS?

You might be interested in looking at the [Relevance and Credibility Indices](#) that some of our team members developed under a different grant to help consumers of research assess the rigor of research studies and relevance to their own context. These scoring rubrics are available as a Word document, PDF, or an auto-scoring Excel tool.