

PROGRAM EVALUATION

A FIELD GUIDE FOR ADMINISTRATORS

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with

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Program Evaluation

A Field Guide for Administrators

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Program Evaluation

***A Field Guide
for Administrators***

This book is dedicated to our wives, Susan and Kate, to program administrators who provided much of the material and all of the purpose for the book, and to the airports and telephone booths that made our collaboration possible.

Preface

This book is written to help human service program administrators either interpret or conduct program evaluations. Our intended audience includes administrators and those students being trained for careers in human services administration. Our focus is on persons interested in assessing programs in which people work with people to improve their condition.

The book's title, *Program Evaluation: A Field Guide for Administrators*, describes how we hope you use this book—as a tool. In writing the book, we have attempted to meet the needs of persons who have to conduct program evaluations as well as those who must use those evaluations. Hence, we have attempted to make the book “user friendly.” You will find, for example, numerous guidelines, cautions, and specific suggestions. Use the book actively.

Our primary motive is to help administrators make better decisions. In fact, the primary reason for program evaluation is to help program administrators make good decisions. These decisions often must balance the goals of equity (or fairness in the distribution of goods and services among people in the economy), efficiency (obtaining the most output for the least resources), and political feasibility. Take, for example, the administrator who must decide between a new program favored by some of the program's constituents, and maintaining the status quo, which is favored by other constituents. The administrator's decision, which is made within the framework of equity, efficiency, and political feasibility, must also be made in an uncertain world whose resources of money, manpower, time, and experience are frequently changing. Our proposed approach to program evaluation guides analysts to select what information to get, and in what ways to obtain and use the information so as to reduce uncertainty and thereby make better decisions.

Recent years have seen a huge growth in the number of human service program evaluations, with the vast majority of these studies reporting positive findings. An administrator trying to sort through these evaluations is often faced with the task of determining not only the relative effectiveness of the various programs, but also the relative accuracy of the evaluations. The book's format and discussions are designed to provide the quick access to information about analytic techniques and interpretations that an administrator needs.

In the end, administrators must make decisions that reflect their assessment of the political and social implications of programs as well as of the objective evidence about program impacts. Furthermore, administrators will never have complete information and certainty; thus, decisions must be based on experience and value judgments in addition to evaluation information. The real benefit of the analytic procedures we present is to help the administrator organize and interpret available data. Analytic techniques cannot make decisions; they can only help smooth and clarify the decision process.

Program analysis therefore provides rules of evidence for organizing information to make judgments. In this regard, we provide more of an approach to decision making than a precise prescription. We do not ask that all programs be evaluated using large-scale, comprehensive, state-of-the-art methods, or that all aspects of the program be quantified. In most cases, such an intensive effort would be unwarranted, and in any event, there will always be some residual uncertainty due to the impossibility of obtaining information about all aspects of a program or course of action. What we do ask is that analysts be systematic in their collection and analysis of program data, and that their conclusions be based on thoughtful, careful, and honest analysis.

Research into the effectiveness of human service programs has a mixed record, at best. A few studies have shown the potential for program analysis by illuminating policy and helping us organize the available resources to best serve the needs of society. Nevertheless, many studies fail to realize their potential by using flawed methods and inadequate observation, overstating their conclusions, or unintelligibly presenting results. We hope that this book will serve to improve this situation by increasing awareness and understanding of analytic methods as they can be used in the human services field.

Our secondary motive for writing the book is to help administrators match resources to evaluation questions asked. Both authors are called on to provide technical assistance to programs that are attempting to conduct some type of program evaluation. What we find frequently is a misallocation of evaluation resources, wherein the program does not have adequate resources to answer large-scale evaluation questions that are frequently asked of it. A common example is a funding agency that requests an impact evaluation study, but adds only a token amount of funding for that evaluation. This situation leads frequently to both a bad evaluation and a frustrated administrator. Hence, our motive is to help guide the administrator in matching resources with evaluation questions, and in knowing which questions to go after if evaluation resources are limited.

In this regard, it should be noted that the tools and tasks should be matched. You would not go deep-sea fishing with a bamboo pole. If you only have the equipment for catching bass, you are better off to go to the lake where there are bass and fish there successfully and enjoyably. Similarly, program evaluation

can be done successfully with limited resources, if the goals and tools are appropriately matched.

Writing a book such as this is both challenging and rewarding. Our own evaluation efforts and this book have benefited from the advice and experiences of many colleagues. In particular, we want to thank Charles Mallar, Peter Kemper, David Long, and other researchers at Mathematica Policy Research; human service program personnel and participants from throughout the country who have shared their evaluation data with us; and Gloria Mills, who has provided deeply appreciated technical support.

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Hastings and Princeton

Program Evaluation

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Program Analysis

This book is written to help human service program administrators be better producers and consumers of program evaluations, and therefore be able to answer the frequently asked question, “How am I doing?” We anticipate that reading the book and using it actively as a field guide will enable administrators to match resources to evaluation questions and thereby use program evaluation information to make better decisions. The primary purpose of Section I is to build the foundation for your role as either a producer or consumer of program evaluation, so that when you read Sections II–IV you will be in a better position to follow the evaluation process and to draw on the various types of evaluation activities.

Chapter 1 discusses decision making and evaluation in program administration. It is organized around four areas that set the stage for the remainder of the book. We examine programs, perspectives, and the decision environment; some of the administrator’s decision-making dilemmas regarding evaluation; programmatic decisions and evaluations; and the three types of program analysis—process, impact, and benefit–cost—that we will cover in the book. Throughout the chapter, we present guidelines and cautions that should be helpful in either your producer or consumer role. We also introduce you to evaluation studies that will be used throughout the book to provide examples of significant program evaluation issues and techniques.

Chapter 2 permits you to play the producer’s role by having you describe your program’s purpose, population, and process. As a producer, you are asked to answer five questions frequently asked in program evaluation, including the problems addressed, the persons served, what services or interventions are provided, the expected outcomes, and the justification for why you think your program is going to work. The chapter also proposes a test that any evaluation report produced should be able to pass. It’s called the “mother-in-law test,” and it asks, can a reader who is willing and careful, but also nontechnical and somewhat skeptical, understand what you are saying? This is not only an issue of presentation but also one of logic and common sense. We recognize that in some cases complex procedures will be needed, but a good report will present the

basic underlying logic in a way that makes sense to an interested, yet non-technical audience. Just as in the case of a stereotypical mother-in-law, such an audience is more likely to be convinced by a straightforward logical explanation than by appeals to esoteric theories and techniques. Also, by stepping back from your program and its evaluation and trying to sort out what you are trying to accomplish, you can avoid many of the evaluation pitfalls produced by over-familiarity with the program and its basic assumptions.

Chapter 3 is a critical chapter and in a sense represents the book's fulcrum. The chapter includes a discussion of a number of guidelines governing program evaluation that we feel apply to any type or intensity of program analysis. The rules are presented within an analytical framework that stresses three evaluation phases: the setup, marshalling the evidence, and interpreting the findings. The setup defines the evaluation goal, context, and rationale that links the services provided to the expected outcomes. Marshalling the evidence requires collecting evidence to support the setup and to justify the contention that the intervention produced the desired effects. Interpreting the findings involves addressing the correspondence between the setup and the evidence, determining whether the effects can be attributed to the intervention, and evaluating the results in light of the program's context and limitations. Chapter 3 should provide you with the conceptual framework to begin your active role as a producer or consumer of process, impact, or benefit-cost analyses, which are presented in Sections II–IV.

Throughout Section I, we stress that program evaluation is undertaken to facilitate decision making. Decisions are choices such as between two programs, between a new program and the status quo, or between a new and an old policy. In each of these cases, a comparison is being made. Structured comparisons are at the heart of evaluation. If there was no comparison, there would be no choice or decision and therefore no need for evaluation. Thus, as the first step, the evaluation must specify the program or policy being evaluated and the program or option with which it will be compared. This specification should include information on such factors as the persons being served, the services being offered, the environment in which the program or policy will operate, and the environment in which it will be compared. These two alternatives—the program and the comparison situation—define the scope and ultimately the results of the evaluation. All components of the evaluation, including interpretation of the findings, must be undertaken in relation to these two alternatives. In reading these three chapters, we trust that you will become more familiar with program evaluation and more sensitive to your role as a producer or consumer of it.

Decision Making and Evaluation in Program Administration

I. Overview

Program administrators are decision makers. Others may set program goals, gather information, carry out policy, or deliver services, but it is the administrator who must make the decisions as to who will be served and how they will be recruited, screened, and enrolled; what services will be provided over what time period and through what means; and who will staff the program and provide specific types of services. These are the types of decisions administrators make and remake as programs are initiated and then operated over time.

These decisions require evaluation, which is the systematic collection and analysis of information about alternatives. The evaluations may be informal and quick, or they may be complex, highly structured efforts. When a decision involves few resources or can easily be researched, little evaluation is required. Decisions about where to lunch, where to purchase office supplies, or whether to include someone on a mailing list are often made with little systematic evaluation of the options. In contrast, office location, staff hiring, program development, and program funding involve decisions that have far-reaching implications and so are generally made on the basis of more careful evaluations.

These decisions and evaluations are inescapable parts of all programs and, in fact, all life. Thus, it is worthwhile to consider the efficiency of decision making and evaluation. This involves assessing the appropriate types and intensities of evaluation efforts, their accuracy, and their limitations. It involves developing guidelines and rules of thumb to assist in evaluation. It also involves examining specific evaluation applications, since the trade-offs inherent in the day-to-day practice of evaluation are not easily seen in the context of actual evaluations. Throughout this and subsequent chapters, we review the general guidelines and rules of evidence that underlie all evaluations and examine the methods for using these to assess the types of decisions that arise in human service programs.

At this point, you might be wondering, why do I need another book on program evaluation? Aren't there enough? We don't think so, for we have observed an unmet need which this book attempts to fill. The need is that program administrators are seldom trained in program evaluation, and yet they are frequently expected to either conduct evaluation studies or interpret others' evaluations. Thus, at the outset we make a distinction between administrators as producers and consumers of evaluation. As producers, administrators need to know the analytic techniques to use, given the questions asked and the available resources. As consumers, administrators need to know if they can act on the reported findings of other studies. In reference to both roles, we review the range of evaluation activities, introduce you to certain rules of evidence, and suggest approaches for getting the most out of your own evaluations as well as those done by others.

There is considerable program evaluation literature on how to make big decisions, and little literature is needed with regard to small decisions such as buying a new typewriter or this book. In this book we focus on the middle, wherein the administrator doesn't have the resources to do large program evaluations, but the decision is important enough to have systematic review and thought. Examples of decisions an administrator might face include:

- Whether to fund a sheltered workshop, or undertake a supported employment initiative that would switch state resources from one program model to another.
- Whether to reduce the dosage of medication in patients within a mental hospital as suggested by advocates and accreditation groups, and if this is done, what will be the effects.
- What evaluation activities are appropriate to include in a small demonstration program with a limited budget.
- Whether to attempt to convince others that a program looks promising and may be feasible for wider implementation.
- Whether to staff a program with bachelors-level rather than masters-level personnel.

Administrators are faced constantly with these types of decisions, which they often must make under substantial time pressures. As an administrator makes the day-to-day decisions relating to program operations, reports to funders, coordinates staffing and supervision and reacts to the other exigencies of human service programs, the thought of undertaking a program evaluation must appear particularly daunting. This is true even if the administrator can hire an evaluation specialist to conduct the work, since the administrator must still pose the appropriate questions to the evaluator and assess the resulting evaluation to determine its accuracy and relevance.