Elements of Program Evaluation

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Basic vs Applied Research

• Basic research is typically initiated to satisfy intellectual curiosity & contribute to knowledge base. Applied research, on the other hand, is developed to solve a practical problem.

• Basic researchers are trained in one discipline, whereas evaluators tend to have multi-disciplinary training.

• Ethics concerns are more important and central in applied than basic research.

• A major difference in the audience for applied and basic research.
2 important consequences of having multiple stakeholders

• Evaluators must accept that their efforts are but one factor or input into the complex mosaic from which decisions and actions eventuate.

• Strains invariably result from the conflict of interests among stakeholders

• Organizational culture will dictate whether evaluations are utilized
Politics of Evaluation

• “In short, the proper role of evaluation is to contribute the best possible knowledge on evaluation issues to the political process and not to attempt to supplant that process” 407.
AEA’s Guiding Principles for Evaluators

• Systematic Inquiry
• Competence
• Integrity/Honesty
• Respect for People
• Responsibilities for general public welfare
Central Evaluation Questions

– the need for services
– program conceptualization/theory & design
– program implementation
– program outcomes
– program efficiency
5 Program Domains of an Evaluation:

• the need for the program
• the design of the program
• the program implementation and service delivery
• the program impact or outcomes
• program efficiency or cost-effectiveness
(Four) Aspects of Evaluation Research:

1. Design & Planning
2. Implementation
3. Utilization
4. Evaluation
5. Termination (rarely happens, but more frequent with budget shortfalls)
Design & Planning

A. Cannot design in a vacuum. Each site is unique
B. Must design programs in collaboration with partners
C. Conduct an evaluability assessment
   a. What is possible
   b. Who are stakeholders?
   c. What are goals?
Typical Design Goals

a. cost effectiveness/improvement (not success/failure)
b. more satisfied customers
c. control over caseload
d. quality measurements
Implementation

A. Lofty goals always fail: what promises can we keep/do we want to make?

B. The primary reason programs fail: macro implementation failure
   a. Mission creep
   b. Turnover in key personnel
   c. Rogue grant monies subvert original priorities
   d. Politics (turf wars, shifting leadership, new monies)
Utilization-focused Evaluation

A. Evaluations collect dust: findings never utilized
   a. focus groups determine priority issues/research questions
   b. evaluations must reflect the priorities of the stakeholders
   c. continuous process evaluation is key; flowchart mapping vital
10 STEP APPROACH TO PROGRAM EVALUATION

- What is the program to be evaluated? Who are the clients and what is the design/mission of the program? (That is, how does the program itself purport to achieve its objectives?)
- Why is the program being evaluated? Who are the key & rival stakeholders or primary evaluation sponsors?
- How are people to be prepared for the evaluation? Will there be resistance within or outside the organization to the evaluation process?
10 STEP APPROACH TO PROGRAM EVALUATION

• What are the main issues/questions with which the eval deals? *What does previous evaluation literature say about other similar programs?*
• Who will do what in the evaluation process?
• What are the resources for the eval?
• What data need be collected?
• How with the data be analyzed
10 STEP APPROACH TO PROGRAM EVALUATION

• What will be the reporting procedure?
• How will the report be implemented?
Key Characteristics of an Evaluation

• **Social science research methods** utilize random samples; blind focus groups; external evaluators = objective analysis not often possible from within ("Truth").

• **To assess**: 1) need for program; 2) program design; 3) implementation or service delivery; 4) impact assessment; 5) cost effectiveness

• **Politics of Evaluations**: Stakeholding is a reality. Evaluators are either slaves or murderers.
Key Characteristics of an Evaluation:

- **Assessing and Expressing Program Theory:** What do we think we’re doing? Stated objectives versus flowchart of actual activity.
- **Assessing and Monitoring Program Process:** Process evaluation for programs already working, over-developed, or needing scaled back.
- **Measuring Program Outcomes:** Cost & labor intensive; need reliable and valid data; longitudinal foundation. Identifying relevant outcomes.
Key Characteristics of an Evaluation:

- **Assessing program impact**: Randomized field experiments. When is an impact assessment necessary? Most infrequent and difficult type of evaluation. Not for pilot projects. Impact assessments always build on earlier forms of evaluation; experimental design with comparison and control groups: “data-driven” or “evidence-based” & randomized program designs.

- Units of Analysis: “targets” (families, children, arrests).
ASSESSING THE NEED FOR A PROGRAM

• KEY POINT: social problems are not themselves objective phenomena. Rather, they are social constructions that emerge from the interests of the parties involved as they relate to observed conditions. In this sense, community members, together with the stakeholders involved in a particular issue, literally create the social reality that constitutes a recognized social problem.”
Steps in Analyzing Need

- Identification of users and uses
- Description of the target population and service environment
- Need identification
- Need assessment
- Communication
Assessing Program Need

• ADEQUATE DIAGNOSIS OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS IS VITAL ELEMENT OF PROGRAM SUCCESS
• In other words, something isn’t a “problem” until it is defined as such.
• “Indeed, the social definition of a problem is so central to the political response that the preamble to proposed legislation usually shows some effort to specify the conditions for which the proposal is designed as a remedy.”
Assessing Program Need

• SPECIFYING THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM: WHEN, WHERE & HOW BIG
• Using existing data sources to develop estimates
• Estimating problem parameters through social research
• Forecasting Needs
Assessing Program Need

• DEFINING AND IDENTIFYING TARGETS OF INTERVENTION
• What is a target?
• Direct and indirect targets
• Specifying targets
• Useful concepts in target definition (incidence/prevalence; at risk pop; need and demand; sensitivity & specificity; rates)
Assessing Program Need

• DESCRIBING THE NATURE OF SERVICE NEEDS
  Qualitative methods for describing needs
• “There are many poorly designed social programs in operation with faults that reflect deficiencies in their underlying conceptualization of how the desired social benefits can be attained. This circumstance stems in large part from the fact that careful, explicit conceptualization of program objectives and how they are supposed to be achieved is not given sufficient attention during planning for new programs”