

## **Title: The Diversity of the Evaluation Enterprise Influences Its Use in the United States**

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### **History and Organization of Evaluation in the United States**

Public program evaluation began in the United States in the 1960s with the advent of President Lyndon Johnson's new programs to address the causes and consequences of poverty. This legislation required programs to be "evaluated," a new term then. Those early efforts were generally conducted by university-based researchers in the fields of education, psychology, and sociology, hired by public agencies to fulfill the requirements to assess their success. Many early evaluators also worked closely with the programs in order to provide evaluation information for program improvement as they tested out new policies and practices.

In its organization, evaluation in the United States today reflects its beginnings. Evaluation continues to primarily be the province of the social sciences. The field is not centralized, but quite diffuse, performed by university faculty members, evaluation contract organizations, self-employed evaluators, and public agency personnel. This diversity also reflects the variety of parties involved in program decision making and the decentralized structure of political power in the country. In many policy areas, the 50 states and localities have primary responsibility for public policy and programming, while the federal government provides limited financial and technical assistance. In addition, private charities also fund and provide health and social services. Thus, federal, state, and local public agencies, as well private charities or foundations all may request or conduct evaluations to address accountability and program improvement concerns.

In the federal government, individual agencies typically contract with evaluation professionals to assess: (1) the implementation or outcomes of federal programs and policies, (2) the quality of agency or program management, or (3) the effectiveness of specific practices employed within a federal program. Federal agencies are not generally legally required to conduct evaluations of their programs; although many individual programs do have legislated evaluation requirements. In fact, a recent survey of federal managers showed that only 37 percent reported that an evaluation had been conducted on a program, policy, or activity they worked on in the last five years (U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-13-570). However, since the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), all federal agencies are required to establish annual performance goals and report on their progress in achieving them (performance monitoring). In the legislative branch, the U.S. Government Accountability Office

(GAO) also conducts audits and evaluations of federal agencies, programs, and policies to support the Congress' oversight responsibilities.

The federal government's interest in evaluation has waxed and waned over the years. Although progress has been made since reforms were enacted in the 1990s to improve financial and performance management in the federal government, more work remains to increase the use of program evaluation in government. Although the recent survey showed only a little over one-third had had evaluations in the last five years, of those that did, 80 percent reported they contributed to a moderate or greater extent to improving program management or performance. Thus it would appear that agencies' lack of evaluations may be the greatest barrier to their ability to inform program management and policy making.

## **Efforts to Further Evaluation Use**

The literature has identified distinct challenges to the use of evaluation and evidence by politicians and agency managers: (1) the characteristics of the evaluation study (for example, its quality or relevance), (2) agency evaluation capacity (skills and understanding), (3) stakeholder involvement in the evaluation, and of course (4) the policy context of decision making.

The Office of Management and Budget within the Office of the President has encouraged agencies both formally and informally to expand their evaluation efforts and use evidence, performance information, and evaluation in budget, management, and policy decisions to improve government effectiveness. However, progress has been uneven. As identified in a recent GAO study, selected agency evaluation officials recommended three basic strategies to facilitate use of their studies: (1) demonstrate leadership support of evaluation for accountability and program improvement, (2) build a strong body of evidence by attending to rigor in whatever methods are used; and (3) engage program stakeholders throughout the evaluation process (U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-13-570).

GAO and the American Evaluation Association (AEA) aim to compliment these efforts to further program evaluation and its use in the U.S. government through promoting evaluation as a key management function and helping organizations and individuals develop evaluation capacity. With 7000 members and two academic journals, AEA is the primary organization of evaluation professionals in the United States and supports evaluation capacity development through a variety of national and international activities.

## **Promoting Evaluation as a Key Management Function**

GAO encourages agencies to conduct evaluation by holding them accountable for reporting to the public and using data to improve program performance. The GPRA planning and reporting activities are intended to provide both congressional and executive decision makers with more objective information with which to make tough choices to reduce government costs and better link resources to results. In an era of shrinking federal resources, Congress expects agencies to provide evidence of effectiveness in achieving meaningful outcomes for taxpayers, and holds them accountable for making the most efficient and effective use of public resources.

Primarily in response to congressional requests, GAO has reviewed the quality, coverage, and relevance of agency evaluations.

AEA task forces promote agency evaluation policies and legislative authorizations through consultations with congressional and executive branch parties and international evaluation organizations. AEA published a white paper encouraging federal agencies to adopt several evaluation policies and practices to help improve government effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability (American Evaluation Association, 2010). This paper stresses the importance of: establishing policies and procedures to safeguard the objectivity and independence of the evaluation process from political interference; ensuring evaluation credibility through commitment to the evaluator's objectivity and use of the most rigorous, appropriate methods available; and addressing program stakeholders' concerns and information needs to ensure evaluation are useful for program management and policy making.

### Assisting Evaluation Capacity Development

GAO promotes high quality, useful agency evaluations by identifying effective practices in the areas of performance monitoring and evaluation and publishing guidance on evaluation methods and practices (see for example, U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-12-208G).

AEA helps develop organization and individual competence through publishing two academic journals, an ethics code and evaluation standards, and supporting a variety of skill development opportunities. Around 3000 people attend the annual conference which provides opportunities to share knowledge, experience, and innovative evaluation approaches, as well as numerous formal workshops for skill development. The organization also supports on-line learning opportunities throughout the year.

Both AEA and GAO participate in national and international organizations and networks to share and develop information and resources. Informally, GAO staff support a knowledge sharing network of federal evaluation officials (Federal Evaluators) and participate in national and international audit- and evaluation-related professional organizations and conferences. For example, GAO participates in the International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI) which has a Working Group on Program Evaluation that seeks to extend program evaluation to other national audit organizations around the world. AEA has long collaborated with international evaluation organizations in the discussion of evaluation policies in the public and private nonprofit sectors.

## **References**

American Evaluation Association, *An Evaluation Roadmap For a More Effective Government*, (Fairhaven, Mass.: September 2010).

U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies' Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making*, GAO-13-570 (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013).

U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Designing Evaluations: 2012 Revision*, GAO-12-208G (Washington, D.C.: June 2012).