

30. UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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 programme evaluation began in the United States in the 1960s with the advent of President Lyndon Johnson's new programmes to address the causes and consequences of poverty. This legislation required programmes 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 fulfil the requirement to assess their success. Many early evaluators also worked closely with the programmes in order to provide evaluation information for programme 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 programme 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 as private

charities or foundations all may request or conduct evaluations to address accountability and programme improvement concerns.

In the federal government, individual agencies typically contract with evaluation professionals to assess: (1) the implementation or outcomes of federal programmes and policies; (2) the quality of agency or programme management; or (3) the effectiveness of specific practices employed within a federal programme. Federal agencies are not generally legally required to conduct evaluations of their programmes, although many individual programmes do have legislated evaluation requirements. A recent survey of federal managers showed that only 37 percent reported that an evaluation had been conducted on a programme, policy or activity they worked on in the last five years (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2013). However, since the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, 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 also conducts audits and evaluations of federal agencies, programmes 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 programme evaluation in government. Although a recent survey showed only a little over one-third of programmes 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 programme management or performance. Thus it would appear that agencies' lack of evaluations may be the greatest barrier to their ability to inform programme management and policymaking.

EFFORTS TO FURTHER EVALUATION USE

The literature has identified distinct challenges to the use of evaluation and similar forms of evidence by politicians and agency managers: (1) the credibility of the evaluation study; (2) agency evaluation capacity; (3) stakeholder involvement in the evaluation; and, of course, (4) the policy context of decision-making.

For example, studies must be timely, relevant and credible to decision makers. Credibility is influenced by the choice of study design, the competence of its execution and by the author's institutional affiliation and reputation for quality and objectivity. Ambiguity in study findings and lack of a clear, actionable message also hinder use. Of course, agency managers must also be familiar with research methods and be comfortable relying on that form of evidence to form and justify their decisions. However, findings that conflict with their experience, or strongly-held beliefs, may be brushed aside. Because so many choices must be made in defining the evaluation question, selecting a design and analysing results, these choices should be informed (but not dictated) by the questions and concerns of the anticipated decision makers. Finally, evaluators operating in a national government context are not naïve; budgetary, practical and political realities often constrain or preclude policy-makers' willingness or ability to act on evaluation findings.

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 and evaluation in budgetary, management and policy decisions to improve government effectiveness. However, progress has been uneven. As identified in the Government Accountability Office study discussed above, selected agency evaluation officials recommended three basic strategies to facilitate use of their studies: (1) demonstrate leadership support of evaluation for accountability and programme improvement; (2) build a strong body of evidence by attending to rigour in whatever methods are used; and (3) engage programme stakeholders throughout the evaluation process (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2013).

Agency leaders demonstrate support for evaluation fundamentally through forming and funding designated units with the necessary analytic expertise, and turning to them for advice on management and policy decisions. These units may conduct or oversee studies and can develop evaluation tools and guidance to ensure that consistent, high-quality work is done across their agency. It is rare, of course, that a single study will change policy. Instead, evidence accumulated over time, across locations, using various methods, provides stronger conclusions than does a single study, and thus, has the power to change assumptions and understanding of programme performance.

Because of the quick pace of policy discussions, developing a portfolio of studies over time better prepares an evaluator to answer whatever questions are posed. Experienced agency evaluators emphasize the importance of building good relationships and trust with programme managers to gain an understanding of their needs and build credibility for—and interest in—their studies. These evaluators consult programme managers while developing their work agendas and designing individual studies. They train programme staff in measurement and evaluation methods, and provide them with ongoing technical assistance in developing performance-monitoring systems and interpreting study results, which facilitates use.

The Government Accountability Office and the American Evaluation Association aim to complement these efforts to further programme evaluation and its use in the US government through promoting evaluation as a key management function and helping organizations and individuals develop evaluation capacity. With 7,000 members and two academic journals, the American Evaluation Association 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

The Government Accountability Office encourages agencies to conduct evaluation by holding them accountable for reporting to the public and using data to improve programme performance. The Government Performance and Results Act requires federal agencies to develop strategic and annual performance plans, performance goals for all their major programmes and to report annually on their progress in meeting those goals. Programme evaluations are not required, but their findings must be included in the annual performance reports. These 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, the Government Accountability Office has reviewed the quality, coverage and relevance of agency evaluations.

To inform congressional deliberations, the Government Accountability Office is often called on to summarize the available research evidence on existing programmes, practices or policy proposals. This, of course, requires assessing the quality of those studies and may result in a critique of the quality and relevance of the agency's research programme. The Government Accountability Office is often asked to assess the quality of agency performance data, their reliability, and whether they represent programme results as well as the quality and efficiency of programme activities. In subject areas such as education, where the federal government's primary role is to provide leadership rather than direct services, the Government Accountability Office has surveyed local programme administrators to assess their perspectives on the relevance, credibility and availability of a federal agency's published research and evaluation.

The American Evaluation Association works to establish the credibility of evaluation through its Evaluation Policy Task Force, a permanent task force within the American Evaluation Association that is intended to influence not only evaluation policy but also to enhance policymakers' and managers' understanding of evaluation practice. The Task Force promotes government evaluation policies and legislation through consultations with congressional and executive branch parties and international evaluation organizations. It developed *An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government*, which focuses on how evaluation can be organized and used within the federal government and promotes evaluation as a key management function (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 the use of the most rigorous, appropriate methods available; and addressing programme stakeholders' concerns and information needs in order to ensure evaluation is useful for programme management and policymaking. The 'roadmap' was revised slightly in 2013 and continues to be a major document for the Association to use in consulting with federal officials and elected decision makers.

ASSISTING EVALUATION CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

To support progress towards a more results-oriented federal government, the Government Accountability Office promotes high quality, useful agency evaluations by identifying effective practices in the areas of performance M&E and by publishing guidance on evaluation methods and practices. The Government Accountability Office reports have highlighted good practices in the areas of measuring impacts on long-term goals, forming effective collaborations with programme partners, building agency evaluation capacity,

setting policy-relevant research agendas and facilitating evaluation use. In addition, the Government Accountability Office published its own guide to designing evaluations in order to share its lessons with other agencies (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2012). That guide stresses the importance of developing background on the programme and policy issues and thoroughly exploring alternative design options in advance to ensure the study will meet decision makers' needs most effectively and efficiently.

The American Evaluation Association helps develop organization and individual competencies by publishing two academic journals, promoting *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* and *The Program Evaluation Standards*, and by supporting a variety of skill development opportunities. Around 3,000 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 online learning opportunities throughout the year and is beginning to explore certification of educational programmes for evaluators and credentialing of evaluators as another means to further the credibility of the profession, its practitioners and their work.

The American Evaluation Association's *Guiding Principles for Evaluators*, a code of ethics for evaluators, was developed in 1995 and is reviewed and revised every five years by the independent American Evaluation Association Advisory Group. These principles are organized into five categories: systematic inquiry, competence, integrity/honesty, respect for people and responsibilities for general and public welfare. Educating evaluators, major stakeholders and the public in the Guiding Principles and their application is one important way for the American Evaluation Association to maintain the credibility of the evaluation profession with its clients and other stakeholders. The Guiding Principles are published in every issue of the *American Journal of Evaluation*, brochures on the Principles are provided to evaluators to distribute to clients and training and discussion sections are held on the Principles at annual conferences.

The *Program Evaluation Standards*, developed and revised periodically by the Joint Committee on Standards, is another method the American Evaluation Association uses to maintain the quality and credibility of evaluations. The American Evaluation Association representatives and those of other professional associations concerned with evaluation and assessment developed the standards and continue to be involved in their revisions and dissemination. The standards are not an ethical guide for the behaviour of practitioners, but instead are standards for developing or judging an individual evaluation. The Joint Committee has identified five standards for a good evaluation plan: utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy and accountability. Each standard is defined and developed into sub-categories to be used in evaluation, and their application is illustrated through case studies (Yarbrough et al. 2011). The standards serve as another means for educating evaluators and users in what is expected in evaluation and, in so doing, helps maintain the credibility of evaluation.

Both the American Evaluation Association and the Government Accountability Office participate in national and international organizations and networks to share and develop information and resources. Informally, the Government Accountability Office staff support

a knowledge-sharing network of federal evaluation officials and participate in national and international audit- and evaluation-related professional organizations and conferences. For example, the Government Accountability Office participates in the International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions, which has a Working Group on Program Evaluation that seeks to extend programme evaluation to other national audit organizations around the world. The American Evaluation Association has long collaborated with international evaluation organizations in the discussion of evaluation policies in the public and private non-profit sectors.

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