

Chapter 1: What Is Program Evaluation and Why Is It Needed?

Essay Exam Questions

1. What is systematic evaluation and what are some of the challenges in conducting one?

Ans: Systematic program evaluation is the application of social research methods to systematically investigate the effectiveness of social intervention programs in ways that are adapted to their political and organizational environments and are designed to inform social action to improve social conditions. One such challenge is the relativity of program effects. With rare exceptions, some program participants will show improvement on the outcomes the program targets, but that does not necessarily mean these gains were caused by participation in the program. It follows that program effects are often hard to discern. Most program effects are not black or white but in the gray area, in which the influence of the program it is not obvious. A direct approach to this ambiguity would be to ask the participants if the program helped them. They will almost certainly have opinions to offer, but they will not be reliable informants about program effects. Alternatively, we might ask the program providers about how effective the program is. The line staff who deliver the services and interact directly with recipients certainly seem to be in a position to provide a good assessment of how well the program is working. Here, however, we encounter the problem of confirmation bias—the tendency to see things in ways favoring preexisting beliefs. The approaches of evaluating the performance of a program that may seem most natural and straightforward, therefore, cannot be counted on to provide a valid assessment. If program evaluation is to arrive at valid conclusions about program performance, systematic methods structured to avoid bias and misrepresentation must be used as much as possible.

2. Discuss some of the reasons that evaluations are undertaken.

Ans: Evaluations are initiated for many reasons. They may be intended to help management improve a program; support advocacy by proponents or critics; gain knowledge about the program's effects; provide input to decisions about the program's funding, structure, or administration; or respond to political pressures. One of the first determinations the evaluator must make to identify the most relevant evaluation questions is the purpose of the evaluation. This is not always a simple matter. A statement of the purposes may accompany the request for an evaluation, but those announced purposes rarely tell the whole story and sometimes are only rhetorical. The evaluator often must dig deeper to determine who wants the evaluation, what they want and why they want it. There is no cut-and-dried method for doing this, but it is usually best to approach the task in a manner a journalist would dig out a story. The evaluator can examine source documents, interview key informants with different vantage points, and uncover pertinent history and background. Generally, the purposes of the

evaluation will relate mainly to program improvement, accountability, or knowledge generation, but sometimes quite different motivations are in play.

3. Explain the role of stakeholders and provide some examples of key stakeholders in evaluations.

Ans: Every program is necessarily a social structure in which various individuals and groups engage in the roles and activities that constitute the program. In addition, every program is a nexus in a set of political and social relationships among those with involvement or interest in the program, such as relevant decision-makers, competing programs, and advocacy groups. The nature of the evaluator's relationship with these and other stakeholders who may participate in the evaluation or have an interest in it will shape the way the evaluation questions are framed. The primary stakeholders potentially influential in this process may include the following:

Decision-makers: persons responsible for deciding whether the program is to be initiated, continued, discontinued, expanded, modified, restructured, or curtailed

Program sponsors: individuals with positions of responsibility in public agencies or private organizations that initiate and fund the program; they may overlap with decision-makers

Evaluation sponsors: individuals in public agencies or private organizations who initiate and fund the evaluation (the evaluation sponsors and program sponsors may be the same)

Target participants: persons, households, or other units that are intended to receive the intervention or services being evaluated

Program managers: personnel responsible for overseeing and administering the intervention program

Program staff: personnel responsible for delivering the program services or functioning in supporting roles

Program competitors: organizations or groups that compete with the program; for instance, a private organization receiving public funds to operate charter schools will be in competition with public schools also supported by public funds

Contextual stakeholders: organizations, groups, and individuals in the environment of a program with interests in what the program is doing or what happens to it; e.g., other agencies or programs, journalists, public officials, advocacy organizations, or citizens' groups in the jurisdiction in which the program operates

Evaluation and research community: evaluation professionals who read evaluations and review their technical quality and credibility along with researchers who work in areas related to that type of program.

The most influential stakeholder will typically be the evaluation sponsor, the agent that initiates the evaluation, usually provides the funding, and makes decisions about how and when it will be done and who will do it. Various relationships with the evaluation sponsor and other stakeholders are possible and will largely depend on the sponsor's preferences and whatever negotiation takes place with the evaluator. The evaluator's relationship to stakeholders is so influential for shaping the evaluation process that a special vocabulary has arisen to describe the major variants.