

DILEMMAS IN EVALUATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS OF SOCIAL ACTION PROGRAMS

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This paper suggests four basic questions that administrators of social action programs should consider in making decisions about program evaluation: Evaluation for what? For whom? By whom? At what cost? In addition, the authors introduce a notion of differential evaluation for different stages of program development.

Administrators and program planners have given considerable attention in recent years to the modification of existing programs and the development of new programs to meet the needs of selected segments of the population.^{15, 27} Termed social action programs,* these new approaches are based on the assumption that traditional programs have not been satisfactory in providing services or in promoting social change.

But, while the search for innovation and relevance in program planning has increased, demands for evaluation have also increased.²⁰ Administrators are

being asked by funding sources, professional groups, their clientele, and a more sophisticated general public to demonstrate the need which their programs serve and the impact that they make on social problems.²² Questions about relative cost and efficiency of programs are raised.^{1, 8} From an administrative point of view, the availability, appropriateness, and adequacy of program evaluation can determine the success and/or survival of a program.

Paradoxically, this increasing demand for evaluation has paralleled a general distrust and skepticism about the merits

* Social action programs can be conceived broadly as having the objectives of providing health, education, or welfare services for the promotion of social change. A program may refer to the entire range of objectives within a particular agency, such as the Office of Economic Opportunity's community action programs, or to an innovative aspect of an agency's activities.

of program evaluation.²¹ Administrators have been confused by the claims and counterclaims of research consultants representing different schools of organizational research. And while the professions press for more scientific study, some social scientists suggest that truly scientific evaluation is difficult, if not impossible, to execute.^{4, 5} In addition, legislators and clients alike have questioned the costs of evaluation—the former in terms of the lack of success in providing significant feedback of information to programs, and the latter in terms of the direct services that these funds might otherwise provide.^{21, 28}

The purpose of this paper is to provide the administrator with some guidelines for decision-making about program evaluation. In it we present selected dilemmas of evaluation which confront administrators of social action programs and suggest several factors that administrators should consider in making decisions about program evaluations.

CONFLICTING CONCEPTIONS OF EVALUATION

Program administrators and professional evaluators have different conceptions of evaluation, and the failure to articulate such differences may result in inadequate planning regarding evaluation studies.^{3, 6, 19, 32, 35, 36} Some differences appear to arise from varying conceptions of the word "scientific." What is scientific, objective, and value-free for one person may be nonscientific, subjective, and value-laden for another. Among evaluators, for example, Suchman³⁶ uses "scientific" to refer to the incorporation of experimental and control groups in evaluative research; Hayes¹⁷ discusses the art of evaluation and implies that "scientific" refers to the

obtaining of objective, systematic, and comprehensive evidence related to program activities; and Sherwood³³ broadens the definition of evaluation research to include strategies and skills other than those of social research.

Another potential source of variation in conceptions of evaluation pertains to different emphases which are placed on one or more of the following objects of evaluation: program efforts, program effects, and program efficiency.^{6, 19, 36} Evaluation of *program efforts* refers to the documentation of the quantity and type of program activities. Evaluation of *program effects* is concerned with whether or not intended objectives and unintended consequences have been attained as a result of program activities; and evaluation of *program efficiency* is devoted to the problem of determining which of one or more alternative program goals is the least costly.

We view *evaluation* as the use of a variety of facts for providing information about the achievement of objectives pertaining to any aspect of programs.^{20, 33} The facts of evaluation may be obtained through a variety of relatively systematic techniques, and they are incorporated into some designated system of values for making decisions about programs. Moreover, we regard evaluative research as an evaluation technique limited to the use of experiments or approximations to experiments for assessing program outcomes. Other systematic techniques which can also be used for the evaluation of social action programs are epidemiologic and survey research methods, the management audit, the clinical or case study approach, time and motion studies, cost-benefit analyses, and the general systems ap-

proach as used in the study of management activities.^{6, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 23, 33, 35}

SELECTED DILEMMAS OF EVALUATION

Administrators or program directors of social action programs are often in the position of deciding whether or what kind of evaluation of their programs should be conducted. Even in those instances in which they have little choice with respect to the decision for evaluation, administrators must consider the possible consequences on program management that might be brought about by an evaluation.¹¹ We have identified four major dilemmas of evaluation which confront administrators: what kind of evaluation; evaluation for whom; evaluation by whom; and evaluation at what cost. We will consider each of these in turn, and then we will specify several factors which may be relevant for administrative decisions about evaluation.

WHAT KIND OF EVALUATION?

What kind of evaluation should there be for the particular program being evaluated? What is an acceptable evaluation? What is the purpose of evaluation, and what can it accomplish? These are the kinds of questions which confront the administrator and the evaluator.

Typically, more "scientific" evaluators try to approximate an experimental methodology. An attempt is made to articulate a hierarchy of program objectives so that criteria for measurable outcomes can be delineated.^{4, 36} Following this, an experimental design is devised, and the administrator is often led to believe that his program will then be evaluated rigorously. The use of experimental design for evaluation implies that the program is already operative and that

the objectives and the programmatic means to accomplish such objectives are relatively static.¹⁹ In fact, however, the social action administrator may appropriately view his staff's function as one of developing and refining the means to accomplish program goals.^{15, 16} Thus, an experimental design imposed on a social action program may lead to conflicts among administrators, practitioners, and evaluators.^{12, 13}

Such conflicts and barriers to evaluation are described in the literature—with evaluators often taking the position that administrators need to be more rigorous, while administrators perceive the evaluator as overly rigid and, perhaps, unrealistic.^{1, 2, 4, 12, 26, 31, 32} Solutions to those conflicts are usually put in terms of accommodation to the evaluation design. *Either* there should be no evaluation because it is premature due to the lack of standardization of the independent variable (program input)^{12, 19}; *or* there should be an approximation to an experiment,²⁰ such as the use of selected comparison groups, with evaluation and program staffs accommodating to each other within the constraints of the evaluation plan.

Rather than advocating one particular mode of evaluation, we propose what might be called "differential evaluation." Since social action programs are by definition in a state of flux and development,⁷ we believe that different stages of program development can be articulated which require different evaluation designs and techniques.^{23, 25, 30} Recognizing that development stages are overlapping and that different aspects of a program can be operative at different stages of development, we present these program development stages for purposes of discussion: program initia-

tion, program delivery, and program implementation.

Program initiation focuses on the planning of the program. In this initial stage of development administrators are most concerned with the procurement and selection of material resources, staff, technology, and clientele.

Program delivery is that program phase which is devoted to the provision of relevant services by staff to its designated clientele. Administrators are concerned with the location of obstacles, such as transportation, in the delivery of services; a determination of the relevancy of program services for the intended beneficiaries; and the location of other community resources which would aid, impede, or substitute for the program's services.

The final stage, *program implementation*, is that phase of the program which deals with the extent to which the program content accomplishes its intended effects. It is the development stage in which the program is fully operative, and it is this stage which evaluators often assume that programs have attained.*

All stages of program development can be evaluated with respect to the effectiveness in achieving program goals and the efficiency in achieving such goals.^{13, 17, 23, 34} At any stage of a program's development, the question of program maintenance can be asked: should the program be altered, modified, or abolished? For purposes of illustrating evaluation questions for different stages of development, we will consider briefly one aspect of a social action program. In developing a Head Start program²⁹

in a small rural county in the United States, the following evaluation questions can be asked for different program stages: (1) Program initiation: Are the physical resources available? Will low income residents in the community be willing to participate in the program? Is there an available population which is eligible for the program? What is the most efficient and effective way for recruiting staff and clientele? Etc. (2) Program delivery: Are transportation facilities available? Are health examinations relevant if no adequate followup treatment is provided? What is the most strategic site for the most efficient rendering of services? Etc. (3) Program implementation: To what extent are reading readiness skills and vocabulary increased as a function of the program? What are the relative costs in relation to program goals in using such devices as teaching machines as opposed to teaching aides and professional teachers? Etc.

Viewing this program in terms of stages of development suggests that evaluative research and cost benefit analyses may be most appropriate for the evaluation of program implementation; survey methods and the case study approach, for program initiation; and epidemiologic or survey methods and the management audit, for program delivery.

EVALUATION FOR WHOM?

A second major dilemma is centered on this question: who is the consumer of evaluation? Different groups who are the consumers of evaluation may have diverse values and discrepant notions of

* Indeed, for experimental methodology to be used appropriately it is necessary for programs to be fully operative. Otherwise, the experimental designs may lead to results that are uninterpretable.

what program objectives should be.²⁶ For example, a group which has fiduciary responsibility for a program may be most concerned about the potential mismanagement of funds and program efficiency; while a group which is representative of the target population may be most interested in the extent to which the program services are meeting their most pressing community needs. What is an acceptable evaluation for one group of consumers may not be acceptable to another group. In particular, criteria for acceptable evaluations may differ for consumers who have vested interests in the maintenance of a program as opposed to consumers who are in competition with the program.²⁷

In our view then, it would be unrealistic for an administrator to assume that all consumers of evaluation have equivalent values and to ignore the sociopolitical context in which an evaluation might take place.^{15, 18, 21, 24, 27, 33} No single evaluation can serve all consumers in the same way. And even if all groups of potential consumers are known prior to an evaluation, it may be impossible for those groups to agree on program objectives and the criteria for assessing them. However, evaluations might be perceived by consumers as more useful if the following steps are taken prior to an evaluation:

1. Determine who the potential consumers are.
2. Determine whether there are groups with vested interests in the success of the program and competing groups with vested interests in the failure of the program.
3. Determine those groups to whom the program is most accountable.
4. Solicit the involvement of as many of

the above groups as practically possible in clarifying objectives and criteria for evaluating program objectives at different stages of development.

EVALUATION BY WHOM?

A third major dilemma which an administrator must face deals with the evaluator. Who should conduct the evaluation? Who has the necessary competence to perform rigorous evaluations, and who is available and willing to do them?^{12, 17, 33, 36} In addition to these questions which deal with the technical competencies of the evaluator, there are two important questions which should be asked: (1) What are the evaluator's values (or preferences) regarding the content of the program being evaluated? (2) What is the methodological approach of the evaluator?

An evaluator may be in agreement with program goals and he may view evaluation as a strategy to force the program staff to operate in desired ways.²⁷ Such an evaluator may be a social reformer who is more interested in program development than in providing rigorous information regarding the achievement of program goals. Alternatively, another evaluator may view social action programs as essentially wasteful. He may believe that rigorous evaluations usually lead to no significant differences as a function of program activity, and it is possible that he might sacrifice program substance for rigorous experimental designs. Thus, we propose that different evaluation designs employed by evaluators are, in part, a function of the values of the evaluator.

Evaluators may also differ in their methodological preferences. Thus, one evaluator may emphasize cost account-

ing methods,¹⁴ while another may emphasize experimental methods.¹⁰ In addition to preferring selected techniques, evaluators may differ in their conceptions of the kinds of knowledge that should be derived from evaluations. Evaluation of a program can be viewed as a field situation in which new insights and hypotheses will be developed for the refinement of theory. Such information might be useful to the evaluator who is a theoretician, but it may not be practicable for the program staff. An alternative conception of knowledge is that an evaluation can provide facts and verified hypotheses pertinent to the specific program which is being evaluated. In this instance, the evaluator's role may be similar to that of the engineer. He devises and executes an evaluation design to test program hypotheses.

The implication for the administrator is that he should be knowledgeable about what kind of evaluation is desired for what stage of program development. Moreover, the administrator should be aware of the possibility that different evaluators may emphasize divergent values and methodological approaches to evaluation. Prior to an evaluation, the administrator should ascertain the conceptual and methodological biases of the evaluator. Then, he should correlate that information with his knowledge of what kind of evaluation is most appropriate to the problem for evaluation and the potential consumers.

EVALUATION AT WHAT COST?

Perhaps the most persistent dilemma confronting administrators is that of cost.^{1, 33} The administrator may desire an evaluation, but he has a limited amount of available funds. The chief question is what are the administrative

costs of evaluation in relation to the need of evaluation?

There are two major kinds of cost: primary and secondary. *Primary costs* are direct costs involved in the procurement of evaluation manpower, time, physical resources, and operational facilities for conducting the evaluation. *Secondary costs* are those indirect costs which occur when an evaluation is taking place, i.e. the effects on program operations and the required commitments of time and effort by program staff to implement the evaluation. An administrator should be concerned about the secondary costs as well as the primary costs because program staff time used for evaluation purposes may detract from the necessary manpower and time for the staff to carry out its program. However, an implementation of an evaluation may be beneficial, and it may reduce some program costs. For example, the rendering of services for all clientele may be stimulated, and procedures for the efficient allocation of program resources may be developed. Indeed, it is possible that an administrator may perceive evaluation, particularly if it is funded through other sources, as an extension of program operations at minimal costs.

The implication for the administrator is that he should clarify the reasons for desiring an evaluation, and he should determine whether his staff can maintain the necessary commitments required for an evaluation. Otherwise, he may be dissatisfied with the implementation of the evaluation because he neglected to consider both primary and secondary costs in his initial deliberations with the evaluator. Such dissatisfaction could lead to unanticipated conflict between the administrator and the evaluator. This could

result in the failure to utilize the results of evaluation, particularly if the administrator himself is the chief consumer of evaluation.

CONCLUSION

Although administrators are not always in the position to decide what are the relative merits of a particular evaluation, they are invariably held accountable for the results of their programs. They should be knowledgeable about the use of evaluation as a management device for the provision of program feedback. Therefore, the following questions are presented as a guide to the administrator who is considering an evaluation of his program.

1. *What is the current state of program objectives?*
 - a. What are current program objectives?
 - b. Are the program objectives likely to change?
 - c. What is the current state of knowledge regarding the program?
 - d. What aspect of the program, and what stage of development is to be evaluated?
2. *What is the purpose of the evaluation?*
 - a. What use is to be made of the evaluation?
 - b. Would the program be altered as a function of feedback from the evaluation?
3. *Who are the potential consumers of evaluation?*
 - a. What are the priorities regarding program goals and content?
 - b. Is there any existing controversy regarding any aspect of the program?
 - c. Is it urgent that an evaluation be conducted?
4. *What are the evaluator's values and*

conceptual biases regarding the program evaluation?

- a. Does the evaluator have a strong bias in favor of or opposed to the content of the program?
 - b. Does the evaluator have a vested interest in the program or in competing programs?
 - c. What is the evaluator's conception of evaluation?
5. *What is the cost of evaluation?*
 - a. What are the primary costs?
 - b. What are the secondary costs?
 - c. What are the potential benefits of the evaluation if it is implemented?

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