Chapter 1: Key Concepts and Issues in Program Evaluation and Performance Measurement

Preview Questions

1. What is the difference between a policy and a program?
2. What are the key concepts for program evaluation?
3. What are key questions to ask when evaluating programs?
4. What is the difference between formative and summative program evaluations?
5. What is the difference between *ex ante* and *ex post* program evaluations?
6. How do you analyze cause and effect when evaluating programs?
7. What is the process for conducting a program evaluation?

Reading Summary

Introduction

* Evaluation is a structured process for judging a policy or program.
* There are many methods for conducting evaluations.
* Challenges in conducting evaluations:
  + Often random experiments are not feasible.
  + The program may already be implemented.
  + There may be no baseline data for comparison.
  + Mechanisms for collecting data on outcomes may not be in place.
* There is some debate as to whether or not performance measurement is really a part of the evaluation field.
  + Some consider it just a part of organizational management.
  + The principles, practices, and challenges of performance measurement are similar to program evaluation.
* Program evaluation and performance measurement inform performance management.
* Performance management is also referred to as results-based management.
* Performance management cycle is the framework for organizing evaluation activities.
  + State objectives
  + Develop strategies (i.e., design program)
  + Align management systems (i.e., implement program)
  + Measure and report performance
  + Make decisions regarding the program (e.g., accountability phase)
* Conceptualizing program evaluation
  + Fitting round pegs into square holes.
  + The round pegs may go into the square holes but there will be gaps.
  + Evaluators must adapt the tools to each unique situation.
  + Conclusions and recommendations produced by an evaluation are influenced by what the evaluator brings to the table.
* There is a gray area between pure program evaluation that has a minimum level of methodological sophistication and program review.
* There is no one dominant view of what evaluation methods are correct.
* Important points about program evaluation
  + Often relies on triangulating evidence from different points of view.
  + Typically uses data collection and analysis methods that are well-understood.
  + Recommendations often intended to improve a program.
  + Evaluator options are often constrained.
  + The methodology chosen must be defensible.
  + The conclusions and recommendations must be credible and useful.
  + The evaluator must use his or her own professional judgement throughout the process.

Definition of a program

* A group of related activities intended to produce at least one specific outcome.
* An open systems approach is used to describe and model programs.

Program evaluation key concepts

* Program evaluations enable us to:
  + Determine to what extent, if any, a program produced the observed outcomes.
  + Determine to what extent, if at all, are the observed outcomes consistent with the intended outcomes.
* Program evaluation compares intended outcomes with observed outcomes.
* Effectiveness is an indication of whether or not a program produced its intended outcomes.

Key evaluation questions

* Was the program efficient?
  + Technical efficiency (i.e., is the ratio of program outputs to program inputs acceptable?)
  + Economic efficiency (i.e., is the ratio of program outputs to economic costs acceptable?)
* Was the program cost-effective?
  + ***What’s the difference between technical efficiency and cost-effectiveness?***
  + ***What is the difference between an output and an outcome?***
* Was the program appropriate?
  + i.e., Does the program structure make sense?
* What is the rational for the program?
  + Relevance
  + Fit with priorities and policies
* Was the program adequate?
  + Visibly affecting the overall issue being addressed.
* Was the program implemented well or poorly?
  + ***What are the criteria for a “well implemented” program?***

Formative and Summative Program Evaluations

* Formative evaluations focus on how a program can be improved where the existence of the program is not in question.
* Summative evaluations focus on whether a program produced the intended outcomes.
* Evaluations are not nearly so binary in actual practice.
* Third type focuses on acquiring a better understanding about the factors that underlie public problems and the fit of programs designed to address them.

*Ex Ante* and *Ex Post* Evaluations

* *Ex ante* evaluations are done when programs have been operating for some time.
* *Ex post* evaluations are done before programs are implemented.

Analyzing Cause and Effect

* Three conditions of causality:
  + Program occurred before the observed outcomes.
  + The outcomes tended to occur when the program occurred.
  + There are no other plausible explanations for the observed outcomes.
* Not always possible to rigorously rule out other possible explanations.
* The relationship between a program and observed outcomes is probabilistic.
* All program evaluations require a substantial number of judgement calls by the evaluator.

Program Evaluation Process (see Table 1.1 on p. 26)

* Evaluation assessment questions
  1. Who are the clients for the evaluation?
  2. What is driving the evaluation?
  3. What resources are available to do the evaluation?
  4. What has been done previously?
  5. What are the characteristics of the program?
  6. How will environmental factors influence the evaluation?
  7. What are the appropriate research design alternatives?
  8. What information sources are available?
  9. Which evaluation alternative is likely to be least problematic?
  10. Should the program evaluation proceed?
      + ***What are the reasons that would cause an evaluation not to proceed?***
* Evaluation study steps
  1. Develop the measures
  2. Collect the data
  3. Analyze the data
  4. Write the report
  5. Disseminate the report
  6. Implement changes to the program as appropriate based on the evaluation
     + Improvements
     + Scale (increase or decrease)
     + Scope
     + Eliminate and replace
     + Eliminate without replacement