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 outcomes (benefits) to economic costs acceptable?)
* Was the program cost-effective?
  + Are program outcomes greater than program costs, usually expressed in dollars.
  + ***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

Preview Questions

1. What is a logic model?
2. How are logic models constructed and used to evaluation policies and programs?
3. What are the different types of logic models?
4. What are program logics?
5. How do you construct program logics?
6. What are program technologies?
7. How do you determine program objectives, program environments, and organizational objectives?
8. What are the strengths and limitations of program logic models?

Reading Summary

Introduction

* Program logic models are visual representations of programs.
  + Show how program is supposed to work in theory.
  + Resources🡪Activities🡪Outputs🡪Outcomes
  + Communicate key parts of program and their intended relationships
* Means-end relationships are causal relationships among multiple factors
  + One factor causes the other
* Programs are means-end relationships.
* The open-systems metaphor is a way of conceptualizing and describing programs as similar to biological or engineering causal relationships that are bounded and both affect and are affected by the environment in which they operate (i.e., open systems).
* Implications of open-systems metaphor for describing programs
  + Programs have a conceptual boundary that cannot be directly observed, which affects how we perceive and model the programs.
  + The purpose of programs is to accomplish objectives that society values.
  + There is a causal relationship between program structures, activities, outputs, and outcomes.
  + Programs operate in environments, which both constraint and create opportunities.

Basic Logic Modeling Approach

* Goal is to describe programs in a way that helps develop measures of program activities, outputs, and outcomes.
* Program outputs are the immediate results of program activities.
* Program outcomes are the changes in the environment relevant to the issue the program is intended to address.
* Time-related sequence is implied in logic models.
* Not all effects of a program are observable immediately following the completion of the program or program activities.
* Sample program logic model shown in Table 2.1 on p. 46.
* Program constructs are words or phrases that describe the key features of a program.
* Limitations
  + Does NOT specify linkages among specific activities, outputs, and outcomes.
  + It only categorizes and describes activities, outputs, and outcomes but does not specify causal relationships.

Categorizing and Specifying Intended Causal Linkages

* Program inputs are the resources required to operate a program.
* Program components are related groups of activities in the program.
* Implementation objectives indicate what needs to occur to cause the program to begin producing outputs.
  + Not the same as program objectives.
  + Do NOT mix outcome-focused language with implementation objectives.
* Sample program logic model with implementation objectives and linking constructs shown in Table 2.2 on p. 48.
* Successful program implementation does not automatically lead to achievement of program outcomes.
* No need to evaluate program efficiency or effectiveness if implementation objectives are not achieved.
* Two kinds of negative evaluation results
  + Program failure is when program implementation is faulty or inadequate.
  + Theory failure is when the program outputs do not produce the intended outcomes.
* Linking constructs are factors that connect program outputs to program outcomes.
  + Non-program activities that must occur after a program output is produced to result in the intended program outcomes.
  + Linking constructs are bridging variables.
  + Not all program logic models have linking constructs.
* Environmental factors can influence the likelihood of success for a program.
* Logic models generally have the following features:
  + One or more components
  + At least one implementation objective for each component
  + At least one output for each component
  + Outcomes may be categorized as short-term, medium-term, and long-term
  + Linking constructs depending on how the program operates
  + Each linking construct is connected to one or more outputs
  + Each output is connected to one or more short-term outcomes
  + One-way causal arrows to avoid overcomplicating the model
* Logic models are templates which may not fit all situations well.
* Open-systems logic models work best when:
  + Objectives are clearly stated
  + Program has been implemented
  + Program has a track record
  + Administrative responsibility for the program is within the organization in which the program is operated
* Developing logic models is an iterative process

Flow Charts

* Flow charts can be used to represent program activities
* Flow charts depict how a program is intended to operate
* Generally used as a complement to program logic models

Constructing Program Logics

* Iterative, qualitative process
  1. Review documentation
  2. Interview program managers
  3. Interview stakeholders
  4. Prepare a draft logic model
  5. Obtain feedback on the draft logic model from program managers and stakeholders
  6. Revise the draft logic model as appropriate based on the feedback
  7. Repeat steps 5-6 as necessary
* Characteristics of program objectives
  + Specify the target population and domain in which outcomes should occur
  + Specify the direction of intended change (i.e., increase or decrease)
  + Specify the magnitude of the expected change
  + Specify the time-frame over which the change will occur
  + Specify measureable outcomes
* Politics is the allocation of values within an organization
* Politics is intrinsic to the environments in which programs operate
* Objectives are political statements by nature.
* It’s important to secure agreement on what a program is actually intended to accomplish before the evaluation begins.

Program Technologies

* Core technologies are causal relationships that define the competencies of an organization that are useful in accomplishing program and organizational objectives.
* Core technologies are combinations of knowledge, technique, and experience
* Instrumentally perfect technologies work every time
* Social programs often really on imperfect core technologies
* Program evaluators and managers should consider who should be held accountable if the program does not achieve its objectives.
  + ***Is this a productive approach?***
  + ***Does it negatively impact innovation and risk taking in program design?***
* Being held accountable for outcomes is problematic because causality is often unclear and the potential effects of environment.

Program Objectives, Program Environments, and Organizational Objectives

* See Table 2.4 on p. 66.
* Programs are open-systems embedded with organizations which are themselves open-systems.
* Behavioral goals are goals that reflect the self-interest of the individuals and the organization.
* Program objectives can conflict with behavioral goals (e.g., organizational objectives).

Strengths and Limitations of Program Logics

* Program logics do the following:
  + Categorize work
  + Depict causal relationships
  + Distinguish what is in the program from what is in the environment
* Organizational logic models are logic models for whole organizations that link organizational goals to objectives to strategies to performance measures.
  + Useful when trying to understand authority and responsibility
* Logic models can become an impediment to change if we don’t remember that they are imperfect representations of reality.
* General limitations of logic models
  + Some programs don’t lend themselves to logic models
    - e.g., lots of change in the environment
  + They are time-limited