

*The American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles and the Joint Committee Program Evaluation Standards have stated intentions that sound alike, but are they? This analysis leads to the conclusion that they are different in important ways.*

## Standards and Principles

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The question of overlap between the American Evaluation Association *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* (1994) and the standards published by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (*Personnel Evaluation Standards*, 1988; *Program Evaluation Standards*, 1994) has been raised. Why do evaluators need two documents to guide their professional practices? Is this a sign of standards proliferation? After all, the American Psychological Association (APA) has a Code of Ethics. The National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) has a Code of Fair Testing Practices. These organizations and the American Educational Research Association (AERA) have the AERA/APA/NCME Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing. The purpose of this chapter is to provide one response to these questions and to invite comment. A healthy professional dialogue can be productive if new issues or insights emerge from the discussion.

### Background

The AEA Guiding Principles were developed in 1993–1994 by a task force of four AEA members (Dianne Newman, Mary Ann Scheirer, William Shadish, chair, and Christopher Wye). This task force was created by the AEA board to develop general guiding principles rather than specific standards of practice.

The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation was created in 1975 as a spinoff of the AERA/APA/NCME test standards committee. Its charge was to develop standards for educational evaluation generally, not just for using tests in evaluation. It published the *Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects, and Materials* (1981), *Personnel Evaluation Standards* (1988), and *Program Evaluation Standards* (1994). There are fifteen

sponsoring organizations of the Joint Committee, including AEA and the founding three, AERA, APA, and NCME. The Joint Committee became a continuing, self-standing body in 1981, and its operating procedures (Sanders, 1994) were accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) in 1989. Standards approved by ANSI become American National Standards. The Joint Committee *Program Evaluation Standards* were approved by ANSI in 1994.

### **Comparison of the AEA Guiding Principles and Joint Committee Standards**

At first glance when comparing the *AEA Guiding Principles for Evaluators* and the *Joint Committee Program Evaluation Standards*, some obvious differences appear between the two documents. The five principles take up a six-page document. The thirty standards take up a 222-page book. A closer inspection, however, reveals that the five AEA principles are accompanied by twenty-three normative statements to guide evaluation practice. The Joint Committee standards are also normative statements to guide evaluation practice, and each is tied to one of four attributes of sound program evaluation: utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy.

The AEA principles are intended to be general guiding principles, rather than specific standards of practice. The intention of the task force was stated to be “to articulate a set of principles that should guide the professional practice of evaluators, and that should inform evaluation clients and the general public about the principles they can expect to be upheld by professional evaluators” (American Evaluation Association, 1994, p. 2).

The Joint Committee standards are intended to be principles “that, if met, will enhance the quality and fairness of [the] professional practice [of] evaluation” (1994, p. 2). “The Standards are an effort to provide guidance to effective evaluation” (1994, p. xviii). Intended audiences are “people who commission evaluations, conduct evaluations, and/or who use the results of evaluation” (1994, p. 4).

Certainly some striking differences and similarities exist. The differences in document size can be attributed to the support material provided for each standard by the Joint Committee: overviews with clarification, guidelines, and common errors collected from the field, illustrative cases showing how the standard may be violated and achieved, and supporting documentation for the standard. The similarities in intent do raise questions about whether there is also similarity in substance.

The analysis provided in Table 5.1 is an attempt to look at similarity in substance between the two documents. Having done the analysis, I can safely say that there are no conflicts or inconsistencies between the two. Although there may be some minor disagreement about where AEA statements should be placed within the framework of the Joint Committee standards, the overall advice is very consistent, with both documents strongly emphasizing accuracy

of results, inclusion of stakeholders in the evaluation process, regard for the welfare of evaluation participants, and a concern for service to stakeholders, the community, and society.

Some AEA normative statements are broad and general (that is, III.A.1, III.D.5, III.E.1). One principle is specific and focused (III.B, Competence). The AEA Guiding Principles do not get into methodology and procedures, as is evident from Table 5.1. They do highlight appropriate professional behaviors of evaluators. As one would expect, the greatest overlap is between the Joint Committee propriety standards and the AEA principles III.C, III.D, and III.E.

One area covered by the AEA Guiding Principles is not dealt with explicitly in the Joint Committee Standards. AEA normative statement III.B.3 asserts that evaluators should continually seek to maintain and improve their competencies. This is good professional advice that does not apply directly to a particular evaluation study.

## Questions and Answers

The questions posed at the beginning of this commentary deserve some discussion. I will provide a response here but invite further open discussion in forums such as AEA's annual meeting, *Evaluation Practice*, or AEA's new electronic networking offerings.

**Why Do Evaluators Need Two Documents to Guide Their Professional Practices?** AEA normative statement III.B.3 provides one clue about a difference between these two documents. Some expectations for professionals do not apply to any one specific study. Instead they are part of an expected professional lifestyle: lifelong learning in the case of III.B.3. The AEA principles promote a lifestyle of systematic inquiry, professional development, honesty, respect, and concern for society. These are characteristics expected in all that we do as professionals. They permeate day-to-day activities. In this way the documents are different because the focus of the Joint Committee standards is on the particular (evaluation) and its soundness. Both documents provide important guidance for the evaluation community.

**Why Not Merge the Documents?** The overlap shown in Table 5.1 reflects consistency, not redundancy. There are no disagreements, but each document provides guidance for different aspects of professional behavior: AEA principles for professional values and Joint Committee standards for professional performance. AEA has provided leadership to the evaluation community through its role as developer of the principles and collaborator on the Joint Committee standards. The documents serve different purposes and, consequently, should remain separate.

**Is This Standards Proliferation?** One of the characteristics of a profession is that it has its own self-imposed standards that are accepted by members of the profession. Scriven (1993) has described evaluation as a transdisciplinary profession, and there is a danger that discipline-based evaluators, probably

Table 5.1. A Comparison of the AEA Guiding Principles and the Joint Committee Program Evaluation Standards

		A. Systematic Inquiry	B. Competence	C. Integrity/Honesty	D. Respect for People	E. Responsibilities for General and Public Welfare
Utility	U1 Audience Identification				D-5	E-1
	U2 Evaluator Credibility		B-1, B-2		D-5	E-1
	U3 Information Scope and Selection	A-2			D-5	E-1
	U4 Valuational Interpretation				D-5	E-1, E-5
	U5 Report Clarity				D-5	E-1, E-2, E-3
	U6 Report Dissemination				D-5	E-1, E-3
	U7 Evaluation Impact				D-5	E-1
Feasibility	F1 Practical Procedures					
	F2 Political Viability			C-3, C-6	D-5	E-1, E-4
	F3 Cost Effectiveness				D-4	
Propriety	P1 Service Orientation				D-5	E-1, E-4, E-5
	P2 Formal Obligations			C-2, C-6		E-4
	P3 Rights of Human Subjects				D-1, D-5	E-1
	P4 Human Interactions				D-2, D-3, D-5	E-1
	P5 Full and Fair Reporting			C-1	D-5	E-1, E-4
	P6 Disclosure of Findings			C-5	D-2, D-3, D-5	E-1, E-4
	P7 Conflict of Interest			C-3, C-4	D-5	E-1, E-4
	P8 Fiscal Responsibility			C-1, C-7		

		A. Systematic Inquiry	B. Competence	C. Integrity/Honesty	D. Respect for People	E. Responsibilities for General and Public Welfare
Accuracy	A1 Object Identification					
	A2 Context Analysis	A-3				
	A3 Described Purposes and Procedures	A-2, A-3				
	A4 Defensible Information Sources	A-2				
	A5 Valid Measurement	A-1		C-6		
	A6 Reliable Measurement	A-1				
	A7 Systematic Data Control	A-1				
	A8 Analysis of Quantitative Information	A-1				
	A9 Analysis of Qualitative Information	A-1				
	A10 Justified Conclusions	A-3		C-6		E-2
	A11 Objective Reporting			C-5	D-5	E-1, E-4
	A12 Metaevaluation	A-1-3	B-1-2	C-1-5	D-1-5	E-1-4

Note: The entries in the cells are the normative statements associated with each AEA Guiding Principle.

because they are not members of AEA, may not be aware of applicable standards developed outside of their primary professional organization. In such cases, new and redundant standard setting projects may be undertaken. Standards proliferation currently does not seem to be a problem. AEA has an important role to play in communicating its standards and guiding principles to an increasingly multidisciplinary membership who can then inform their discipline-based colleagues of their existence.

## Conclusion

Stufflebeam (1991) discussed the relationship between the Joint Committee standards and ethical issues in evaluation and concluded that the standards provided some guidance to evaluators for dealing with ethical issues, but that the issues were complex, not well understood, and not well documented. The AEA principles move the profession of evaluation ahead by bringing to the attention of its members certain expectations of professional behavior. By identifying and stating professional values, the *AEA Guiding Principles for Evaluators* do contribute to the socialization of members of the evaluation profession.

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