

Definitions of Evaluation

(common)

Several definitions of evaluation have been offered over the years. Michael Scriven (1967, 1991) developed one of the earliest definitions that is still commonly used today:

Evaluation refers to the process of determining the merit, worth, or value of something, or the product of that process. Terms used to refer to this process or part of it include: appraise, analyze, assess, critique, examine, grade, inspect, judge, rate, rank review, study, test. . . . The evaluation process normally involves some identification of relevant standards of merit, worth, or value; some investigation of the performance of evaluands on these standards; and some integration or synthesis of the results to achieve an overall evaluation or set of associated evaluations. (Scriven, 1991, p. 139)

Another definition, which stems from evaluation's long history with social programs and takes on a social science research perspective, comes from Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman (2004):

Program evaluation is the use of social research methods to systematically investigate the effectiveness of social intervention programs. It draws on the techniques and concepts of social science disciplines and is intended to be useful for improving programs and informing social action aimed at ameliorating social problems. (p. 28)

A definition used by many evaluation practitioners is from Patton (1997), who emphasizes the use of evaluation findings:

Program evaluation is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming. (p. 23)

Preskill and Torres (1999) offer a definition that focuses on evaluative activities specifically conducted within organizations for the purpose of organizational learning and change:

We envision evaluative inquiry as an ongoing process for investigating and understanding critical organization issues. It is an approach to learning that is fully integrated with an organization's work practices, and as such, it engenders (a) organization members' interest and ability in exploring critical issues using evaluation logic, (b) organization members' involvement in evaluative processes, and (c) the personal and professional growth of individuals within the organization. (pp. 1–2)