



An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government

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The American Evaluation Association (AEA) is an international professional association of evaluators devoted to the application and exploration of program evaluation, personnel evaluation, technology, and many other forms of evaluation. Evaluation involves assessing the strengths and weaknesses of programs, policies, personnel, products, and organizations to improve their effectiveness. AEA has over 6,500 members representing all 50 states in the United States as well as over 75 foreign countries.

Mission: *To improve evaluation practices and methods*

Increase evaluation use

Promote evaluation as a profession and

Support the contribution of evaluation to the generation of theory and knowledge about effective human action.

An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government

In keeping with our mission, the American Evaluation Association hereby describes its vision of the role of evaluation in the federal government. We provide a roadmap for improving government through evaluation, outlining steps to strengthen the practice of evaluation throughout the life cycle of programs.

Evaluation is an essential function of government. It can enhance oversight and accountability of federal programs, improve the effectiveness and efficiency of services, assess which programs are working and which are not, and provide critical information needed for making difficult decisions about them.

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The Challenge

Like all governments, the United States government faces challenges in both foreign and domestic policy arenas. Today, these challenges span subject areas such as national security, foreign aid, energy, the environment, health care, education, and the economy. Program or policy interventions are typically developed in response, in an effort to mitigate, resolve, or better understand the problems involved.

To determine the merit, quality, and usefulness of these interventions, credible information is needed about what the program or policy in question has achieved and at what cost. Such information is crucial if government officials are to ensure that the chosen interventions are working, that taxpayers' money is being spent wisely, and that the government is accountable to the public for the interventions and their results.

Why Program Evaluation Is Essential

Evaluation involves assessing the strengths and weaknesses of programs, policies, and organizations to improve their effectiveness. It provides a useful and important tool to address the need for credible information, well-grounded decision making, and governmental transparency. Within a government context, the legitimacy of evaluation can be seen as deriving from the structure of the government it serves and from the functions it fills.

In the United States, evaluation can serve information needs that arise within any of the three branches of government. For example, evaluation can provide information about a new program's initial outcomes, allowing for better management within the Executive Branch. It can also be used to assess the relative performance of a set of alternative policy options, informing legislative deliberations. The courts may cite evaluation findings as a basis for their judgments. More fundamentally, evaluation can contribute the evidence needed to support the system of checks and balances established by the United States Constitution. For example, evaluation enables congressional oversight and executive accountability, along with the development of new knowledge, innovation, and organizational learning in both branches. This commitment to accountability and transparency, on the one hand, makes evaluation essential to democratic government and, on the other, requires evaluation in a government context to be independent and to resist advocacy for particular positions.

Evaluation provides needed feedback for managing any program. It uses systematic data collection and analysis to address questions about how well government programs and policies are working, whether they are achieving their objectives, and, no less importantly, why they are or are not effective. Evaluation produces evidence that can be used to compare alternative

programs, guide program development and decision making, and reveal effective practices. By its very nature, it supplies the publicly accessible information that is at the heart of transparency and open government.

Since the inception of modern program evaluation, federal agencies have conducted many evaluations and applied their results to make reasoned program decisions. But for the most part, these evaluations have been sporadic, inconsistently applied, and inadequately supported. The units formed to conduct evaluations too often are short lived and under resourced. Training and capacity building for evaluation have been inconsistent across agencies and, in many cases, insufficient to achieve the needed evaluation capacity and sustain it over time.

Yet there is a strong case to be made for a commitment to evaluation as an integral feature of good government, whether the goal is better performance, stronger oversight and accountability, or more data-informed and innovative decision making. The lessons learned in agencies that have applied evaluation constitute a solid knowledge base upon which to build.

The U.S. government would benefit significantly from using program evaluation to

- Address questions about current and emerging problems
- Inform program and policy planning efforts
- Monitor program performance
- Provide timely feedback to decision makers to make changes when needed
- Increase accountability and transparency
- Reduce waste and enhance efficiency
- Improve programs and policies in a systematic manner
- Support major decisions about program reform, expansion, or termination
- Assess whether existing programs are still needed or effective
- Identify program implementation and outcome failures and successes
- Identify innovative solutions that work
- Inform the development of new programs where needed
- Examine the requirements for the transfer of promising programs to new sites
- Share information about effective practices across government programs and agencies

The key is to make program evaluation integral to managing government programs at all stages, from planning and initial development, through start up, ongoing implementation, appropriations, and reauthorization. In short, what is needed is a transformation of the federal management culture to one that incorporates evaluation as an essential management function.

Recommendations

We recommend that each federal agency adopt the following framework to guide the development and implementation of its evaluation programs.

Scope and Coverage

- Conduct evaluations of public programs and policies throughout their life cycles and use evaluation to both improve programs and assess their effectiveness
- Evaluate federal programs and policies in a manner that is appropriate for program stewardship and useful for decision making
- Build into each new program and major policy initiative an appropriate framework to guide evaluations throughout the life of the program or initiative
- For existing programs, assess what is already known and develop evaluation plans to support future decision making

Management

- Assign senior, experienced evaluation officials and managers to administer evaluation centers or coordinate evaluation functions at appropriately high levels of government agencies
- Prepare annual and long-term evaluation plans to guide decision making about programs
- Provide sufficient and stable funding to support professional evaluation activities
- Coordinate and communicate about evaluation efforts across agencies with overlapping or complementary missions
- Develop written evaluation policies across and within federal agencies that can guide evaluation efforts and help ensure their quality
- Ensure that evaluation units and staff receive high-level, public, and consistent support

Quality and Independence

- Develop and adopt quality standards to guide evaluation functions consistent with the American Evaluation Association's Guiding Principles for Evaluators
- Promote the use and further development of appropriate methods for designing programs and policies, monitoring program performance, improving program operations, and assessing program effectiveness and cost
- Safeguard the independence of evaluation design, conduct, and results
- Preserve and promote objectivity in examining program operations and impact

Transparency

- Consult closely with Congress and non-federal stakeholders in defining program and policy objectives and critical operations and definitions of success
- Disseminate evaluation findings and methods relating to public accountability to policy makers, program managers, and the public
- Create clearinghouses to share information about effective and ineffective program practices

In this Roadmap, we more fully develop these ideas. We describe the general principles that should guide a government-wide effort to strengthen evaluation functions. We propose broad administrative steps to institutionalize evaluation in federal agencies. Finally, we discuss how the

Executive Branch and Congress can jointly make the most effective and efficient use of evaluation.

General Principles

The following general principles should guide efforts to integrate evaluation into program management.

Scope. Evaluation should be integral to planning, developing, managing, and implementing government programs at all stages. Evaluation activities should be used to:

- Make sure that program designs are appropriate to achieve program goals
- Identify problems during start-up and correct them before they become entrenched
- Identify and share promising approaches that emerge during program implementation
- Assess the extent to which programs and policies are being well implemented
- To the extent feasible, establish expectations and performance standards at program inception and involve stakeholders in refining them as the programs mature
- Develop appropriate and efficient data collection and reporting systems and information technology support to provide a continuing flow of evaluative information to policy makers and program managers
- Examine the extent to which programs reach their intended beneficiaries
- Periodically examine selected program features to improve their effectiveness and efficiency
- Periodically assess program results and service quality
- Systematically examine whether an apparently successful program can be expanded to another setting before scaling it up

Coverage. In general, federal programs and policies should be subject to evaluation.

Analytic Approaches and Methods. Which analytic approaches and methods to use depends on the questions addressed, the kind of program evaluated, its implementation status, when the evaluation results are needed, what they are needed for, and the intended audience.

No simple answers are available to questions about how well programs work, and no single analytic approach or method can decipher the inherent complexities in the program environment and assess the ultimate value of public programs. Furthermore, definitions of “success” may be contested. A range of analytic methods is needed, and often several methods—including quantitative and qualitative approaches—should be used simultaneously. Some evaluation approaches are particularly helpful in a program’s early developmental stages, whereas others are more suited to ongoing and regularly implemented programs.

The broader policy and decision-making context also can influence which approach is most appropriate. Sometimes information is needed quickly, requiring studies that can use existing data or rapid data collection methods; at other times, more sophisticated long-term studies are required to understand fully the dynamics of program administration and beneficiary behaviors.

Over the years, the evaluation field has developed an extensive array of analytic approaches and methods that can be applied and adapted to a wide variety of programs, depending on the program's characteristics and implementation stage, how the results will be used, and the kinds of decisions that will be made. All evaluation methods should be context sensitive, culturally relevant, and methodologically sound. Evaluation approaches and methods include, but are not limited to:

- Case studies
- Surveys
- Quasi-experimental designs
- Randomized field experiments
- Cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses
- Needs assessments
- Early implementation reviews
- Logic models and evaluability assessments

Resources. Evaluation should be supported through stable, continuous funding sources and through special one-time funds for evaluation projects of interest to Executive Branch and congressional policy makers. The stable, continuous evaluation funds should be provided through appropriations or program fund set-asides. These methods can also be combined to support viable evaluation programs. Program managers should authorize and require periodic evaluations of each program throughout its life to provide rich evaluative information to policy makers during annual appropriation and cyclical reauthorization and amendment discussions.

Professional Competence. Evaluations should be performed by professionals with appropriate training and experience for the evaluation activity (such as performing a study, planning an evaluation agenda, reviewing evaluation results, or performing a statistical analysis). Evaluation is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses many areas of expertise. Many evaluators have advanced degrees in, and often work collaboratively with colleagues in allied fields, such as economics, political science, applied social research, sociology, anthropology, psychology, policy analysis, statistics, and operations research. Federal agencies should ensure that the required diversity of disciplines is appropriately represented in internal and independent evaluation teams.

Evaluation Plans. Each federal agency should require its major program components to prepare annual and multiyear evaluation plans and to update these plans annually. The planning should take into account the need for evaluation results to inform program budgeting; reauthorization; agency strategic plans; ongoing program development and management; and responses to critical issues concerning program effectiveness, efficiency, and waste. These plans should include an appropriate mix of short- and long-term studies to produce results of appropriate scope and rigor for short- or long-term policy or management decisions. To the extent practical, the plans should be developed in consultation with program stakeholders.

Evaluation questions can spring up unexpectedly and urgently in response, for example, to a sudden need for information to address a presidential initiative, a management problem, or questions raised by Congress. Therefore, evaluation plans should allow for flexibility in scheduling evaluations.

Dissemination of Evaluation Results. The results of all evaluations related to public accountability should be made available publicly and in a timely manner (except where this is inconsistent with the Freedom of Information Act or Privacy Act). They should be easily accessible and usable through the internet. Similarly, evaluations of promising and effective program practices should be systematically and broadly disseminated to potential users in federal agencies. Evaluation data and methods should also—to the extent feasible and with sufficient privacy protections—be made available to professionals and the public to enable secondary analysis and assure transparency.

Evaluation Policy and Procedures. Each federal agency and its evaluation centers or coordinators (discussed below) should publish policies and procedures and adopt quality standards to guide evaluations within its purview. Such policies and procedures should identify the kinds of evaluations to be performed and the criteria and administrative steps for developing evaluation plans and setting priorities, selecting evaluation approaches and methods to use, consulting subject matter experts, ensuring evaluation product quality, publishing evaluation reports, ensuring independence of the evaluation function, using an appropriate mix of staff and outside consultants and contractors, appropriately focusing evaluation designs and contracts, and promoting the professional development of evaluation staff.

Independence. Although the heads of federal agencies and their component organizations should participate in establishing evaluation agendas, budgets, schedules, and priorities, the independence of evaluators must be maintained with respect to the design, conduct, and results of their evaluation studies.

Institutionalizing Evaluation

Significant progress has been made in establishing evaluation as an integral component of government program management. However, additional steps are needed.

Background

Some federal agencies, such as the Department of Defense, established evaluation offices in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Others, including the Departments of Education and of Health and Human Services, developed their evaluation functions in the 1970s within the then-Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The authorizing statutes for some of these agencies set aside a fixed percentage of program funds for evaluation. Other departments have added evaluation offices to their organizations although these offices have grown and shrunk over the intervening years.

One relatively stable evaluation organization has been the Government Accountability Office (GAO), previously known as the General Accounting Office. It has remained the largest single government agency producing evaluations at Congress's request.

One of the most enduring evaluation-related functions has been the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993. This law encourages each agency to develop an agency-wide strategy and mission and also requires them to determine whether their programs achieve their goals and objectives. GPRA defines evaluation as assessing the "manner and extent to which" agencies achieve their goals, thus addressing both implementation and results. In practice, government agencies have implemented GPRA by using performance indicators and

measurement to determine whether they have reached a goal and have conducted few evaluation studies that might shed light on how programs reached their goals, why programs do or do not meet their goals and objectives, and how to improve programs. As a result, the GPRA process produces little information to guide programmatic or policy action.

We propose that government agencies, policy makers, and program managers build on the progress already made by embracing evaluation as an integral feature of good government. Agencies should consistently use program evaluation and systematic analysis to improve program design, implementation, and effectiveness and to assess what works, what does not work, and why. This comprehensive vision recognizes that evaluation is more than simply “looking in the rearview mirror” and needs to be used throughout a program’s life as an integral part of managing government programs at all stages.

For this approach to work, the Executive Branch and Congress will need to take action, as described below.

Executive Branch Role

As noted earlier, the infrastructure and practice of program evaluation in federal agencies is somewhat of a mixed story. Some agencies have well-developed and stable evaluation offices; others do not. The same can be said for evaluation funding, scope, policies, planning, and dissemination.

Different federal agencies and programs have different evaluation needs, and the maturity and breadth of their evaluation programs vary. In addition, the evaluation function might be a component of other offices focused on such functions as management, planning, research, and policy development, including legislative or regulatory development. For example, several agencies have offices of planning and evaluation, research and evaluation, or monitoring and evaluation, and some inspectors general have offices of inspections and evaluations. In some agencies, the evaluation function is highly centralized or within a large program area; in other agencies, the evaluation function is scattered in small offices throughout the agency.

No single best practice exists for organizing evaluation offices and functions. All of the arrangements described above have emerged in response to such factors as substantive area, kind of agency, or type of evaluation focus. They may or may not be the most effective models for current circumstances. Whatever model is chosen, the evaluation office must include the functions and possess the attributes described above under general principles.

Based on the general principles discussed in the previous section, we propose that agencies in the Executive Branch establish one of the following organizational frameworks to support evaluation.

Option 1: Evaluation Centers. Agencies could establish one or more evaluation centers to promote evaluation capacity and provide stable organizational frameworks for planning, conducting evaluation, or procuring evaluation advice or studies from outside organizations. Every program in the agency should be assigned to one of the centers for

program evaluation. The heads of these evaluation centers should report directly to the senior executive of their center's organizational component. Each of these centers would:

- Have a stable budget with sufficient funds to plan and carry out an appropriate level of program evaluation over several years
- Issue policies and procedures to guide its evaluation work, including guidance on appropriate methods for conducting formative and summative evaluations, as well as developmental evaluations to improve evaluative capabilities within agencies.
- Strategically plan a body of evaluation work for the agency and each agency component for which it has evaluation responsibility
- Consult with agency program and budget offices and, in concert with the agency's legislative liaison office, with Congress in developing evaluation plans
- Hire professional evaluators or engage consultants or contractors with the diverse skills necessary to plan and execute (or procure) independent evaluation studies
- Publish the results of evaluations related to public accountability of the programs within their jurisdictions
- Share information about effective programs and evaluation methods with other government agencies
- Promote and facilitate the ongoing training and professional development of the center's evaluators

Option 2: Evaluation Coordinators. Agencies that choose to distribute their evaluation offices, associating small evaluation offices with individual programs or small groups of programs, should promote evaluation capacity and performance by appointing one or more senior officials to:

- Advise the agency head or senior officials on matters pertaining to evaluation
- Ensure that each program or program group in the agency has a current annual evaluation plan.
- Promote, facilitate, and coordinate the development of evaluation plans for programmatic issues that cut across agency lines
- Facilitate the preparation of evaluation budgets
- Establish appropriate standards, frameworks, and procedures for evaluation activities in the agency
- Facilitate the development and efficient and effective production of evaluation plans, designs, instruments, and reports by government agency staff or outside evaluators
- Facilitate the dissemination of evaluation reports related to public accountability
- Share with other agency components information about effective programs and evaluation methods
- Promote and facilitate the ongoing training and professional development of evaluators in the agency

Option 3: Combined Approach. Federal agencies may find it advantageous to use Option 1 and Option 2—evaluation centers for large programs, program groupings, and overall evaluation support, and evaluation coordinators for distributed evaluation offices—to ensure the viability of the evaluation function.

Congress's Role

The GAO, Congressional Research Service, Congressional Budget Office, National Academies, and temporary commissions carry out evaluation and analysis for Congress, usually in fulfillment of their oversight role. Congressional committees or subcommittees also conduct some evaluative studies or investigations.

We do not propose to change these organizational structures. Instead, we offer recommendations to strengthen the connection between evaluations and the laws that Congress passes. This can be done by building evaluation expectations into authorizing legislation and explicitly setting aside adequate resources for evaluation.

Authorizing legislation. Program authorization and periodic reauthorization provide opportunities for Congress to establish frameworks for systematic evaluation of new and continuing programs. Congressional committees can, through authorizing legislation, provide guidance on or stipulate such activities and products as:

- Early implementation reviews to identify start-up problems in such areas as scheduling, contracting, and grant making and to correct them before they become more serious
- Requirements for developing evaluation plans
- Evaluation of promising approaches to share among program implementers
- Development of performance indicators and the means to collect meaningful data on them once the program starts
- Studies reviewing the efficiency of federal program management as well as the fidelity of program implementation to the congressional mandate that instituted the program
- Studies assessing program effects and identifying why programs are or are not effective
- Evaluations of topics of interest to Congress and reports on the results to Congress in support of its oversight and appropriations functions and to inform future reauthorizations
- Establishment, expansion, or amendment of ongoing surveys or other data-collection mechanisms to become permanent sources of reliable data
- Establishment of evaluation centers or evaluation coordinators, as described above
- Funding for evaluation activities

Collaboration Between Executive Branch and Congress

The utility of evaluation results may be maximized if Congress and the Executive Branch jointly specify broad evaluation expectations and concerns in authorizing statutes and appropriations. We recognize that such collaboration will not always be easy or even possible to achieve. Nevertheless, experience suggests that, when possible, a partnership of this kind can help increase the benefits that evaluation provides.

Looking to the Future

The U. S. government faces major challenges in the years to come, as well as significant opportunities to improve lives, protect the planet, and create efficiencies. With more thoughtful and more systematic integration of evaluation into the responsible planning, management and oversight of programs and the application of evaluation results to planning and decision making, the performance of today's programs can be improved. Institutionalizing evaluation can also help achieve a more accountable, open, and democratic system of governance for future generations.