WHAT THE PROGRAM EVALUATION STANDARDS SAY ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE[1]

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House, (1990) defined the issues of social justice in program evaluation as the manner in which various interests are served. The *Program Evaluation Standards* were published in 1994 as a statement by professionals of what constitutes sound evaluation of programs and projects. The question to be addressed here is what The Joint Committee's *Program Evaluation Standards* say about the manner in which various interests should be served. As will become obvious, *The Program Evaluation Standards* has something to say about how various interests should be served, reflecting a philosophy of inclusion and providing certain safeguards when its guidelines are practiced. What follows is a listing of 88 guidelines and 67 common errors from the *Standards*, 155 direct statements woven throughout the *Standards* that provide direction to evaluators concerned about the manner in which various interests are served in any program evaluation.

Stakeholder Identification:

Guidelines

1. Identify persons in leadership roles first, as they can aid an evaluator to identify other stakeholders.

2. Contact representatives of identified stakeholder groups to learn how they view the evaluation's importance, how they would like to use its results, and what particular information would be useful. Where necessary, help them to develop realistic expectations that take into account the methodological, financial, and political constraints on the evaluation.

3. Use stakeholders to identify and contact other stakeholders.

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[1]The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. (1994) *The Program Evaluation Standards*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

4.   Reach an understanding with the client concerning the relative importance of the potential stakeholders and the information they desire, and plan and implement the data collection and the reporting activities accordingly.

5.   Throughout the evaluation, be alert to identifying additional stakeholders that should be served and, within the limits of time and resources, maintain some flexibility and capability to respond to their needs.

Common Errors

1.   Allowing clients to inappropriately restrict the evaluator's contact with other involved or affected stakeholders

2.   Implying that all stakeholder information needs will be addressed when, in reality, they cannot be

3.   Assuming that persons in leadership or decision making roles are the only, or most important, stakeholders

4.   Overidentifying stakeholders making it impossible to proceed

5.   Failing to distinguish between clients and other stakeholders

6.   Overlooking the needs and rights of stakeholders because of their gender, ethnicity, or language backgrounds

Evaluator Credibility:

Guidelines

1.   Carefully consider the appropriateness of the medium for reporting to the intended audience.

2.   Keep the presentation of reports as brief as possible, simple and direct, and focused upon addressing the evaluation questions.

3.   Use examples to help the stakeholders relate the findings to practical situations.

Common Errors

1.   Failing to take account of the audience's ability to understand technical terms or the English language

Information Scope and Selection:

Guidelines

1.   Interview representatives of major stakeholders to gain an understanding of their different and perhaps conflicting points of view and of their need for information (see U1, Stakeholder Identification and A3, Described Purposes and Procedures).

2.   Have the client rank potential audiences in order of importance and work with representatives of each stakeholder group to rank topics in order of importance to that audience (see A1, Stakeholder Identification).

3.   Work with the client to collate the ordered topics from each audience, to remove items at the bottom of the list, and to add items that the evaluator believes to be important even though not requested.

4.   Allow flexibility for adding questions and including unanticipated information that may arise during the evaluation.

Common Errors

1.   Failing to give voice to multiple stakeholder groups in the process of selecting priority evaluation questions

Values Identification:

Guidelines

1.   Consider alternative bases for interpreting findings: e.g., program objectives, procedural specifications, laws and regulations, institutional goals, democratic ideals, social norms, performance by a comparison group, assessed needs of a consumer group, expected performance of the sample group, professional standards, and reported judgments by various reference groups.

2.   Consider who will make interpretations: e.g., the evaluators, the client, the various stakeholders, a regulatory group, or some combination of these.

3.   Consider alternative techniques that might be used to assign value meanings to collected information: e.g., having different teams write advocacy reports; conducting a jury or administrative trial of the program being evaluated; or seeking convergence through a delphi study.

4.   Report options with advantages and disadvantages of each when there are different equally defensible value positions in an evaluation.

Common Errors

1.   Assuming that evaluations can be objective in the sense of being devoid of value judgment

2.   Failing to determine what value perspectives (e.g., educational, social, economic, and scientific) the client and stakeholders perceive to be important in interpreting the findings of the evaluation

3.   Designing the data collection and analysis procedures without considering what criteria, such as performance by a comparison group or performance in terms of a predetermined standard, will be needed to interpret the findings

Report Clarity:

Guidelines

1.   Provide sufficient contextual, program, and evaluation information to constitute a firm foundation for conclusions and recommendations (see A2, Context Analysis).

2.   Have the client and representatives of the intended audience(s) review report(s) for clarity, fairness, and understandability prior to their final release.

3.   Make evaluation results available in the languages of all stakeholders through oral explanation or translation at meetings and through translation of reports into the languages of all stakeholders.

Common Errors

1. Failing to report various perceptions even if this introduces ambiguity (see U2, Evaluator Credibility and A11, Impartial Reporting)

Report Timeliness and Dissemination:

Common Errors

1. Directing the report to the client or sponsor while ignoring other intended users

2. Failing to recognize stakeholders who do not have spokespersons

Evaluation Impact:

Guidelines

1. Demonstrate to key stakeholders at the beginning of the evaluation how the findings might be useful for their work.

2. Arrange for the involvement of stakeholders in determining the evaluation questions to be addressed and in assisting with the planning and, if appropriate, the conduct of the evaluation (see U1, Stakeholder Identification).

3. Be open, frank, and concrete in reporting to stakeholders, and be available and willing to assist in clarifying the reports (see U5, Report Clarity and P6, Disclosure of Findings).

4. Assess with stakeholders the merits of plausible alternative courses of action and discuss those in the final report.

5. Within limits of time, financial, and personnel resources, plan to help the stakeholders assess, interpret, and apply the evaluation findings following release of the final report.

Common Errors

1.   Exhibiting a lack of confidence in the stakeholders' abilities to make appropriate use of the evaluation findings; e.g., by commenting publicly that stakeholders will only believe those parts of the evaluation that reinforce their current beliefs and practices

2.   Becoming preoccupied with the theoretical value of the findings at the expense of their practical value

3.   Failing to consider the values of the stakeholders when making recommendations (see U4, Values Identification)

4.   Taking over the client's responsibilities for acting on evaluation findings

5.   Failing to intervene if evaluation findings are seen to be misused or misinterpreted

6.   Failing to target individual users

Political Viability:

Guidelines

1.   Before agreeing to do a potentially volatile evaluation, meet with as many interest groups as possible, provide them with an opportunity to express their positions and raise concerns regarding the evaluation, and assure them that it will be conducted fairly (see U1, Stakeholder Identification; U7, Evaluation Impact; and A3, Described Purposes and Procedures).

2.   Provide clients and other key audiences with periodic reports on the progress of the evaluation--through such means as advisory panels and newsletters--in order to ensure that reported outcomes of the evaluation are not total surprises to the audiences and that their reactions to the reports are not unanticipated by the evaluators (see U2, Evaluator Credibility and U7, Evaluation Impact).

3.   Within available resources, identify, assess, and report different perspectives, when they exist, among stakeholder groups.

4.   Discontinue the evaluation if political issues create such an unfavorable situation that it appears the interests of all concerned will be best served by withdrawal. However, be sure the public's right-to-know is upheld (see P6, Disclosure of Findings).

Common Errors

1.   Giving the appearance--by attending to one stakeholder group more than another--that the evaluation is biased in favor of one group

2.   Insulating the evaluation from the possible influence of special interest groups to the extent that key stakeholders are not consulted and/or provided timely feedback that addresses their particular questions (see U1, Stakeholder Identification)

3.   Assuming "objective" methodologies will ensure a fair evaluation

Service Orientation:

Guidelines

1.   Inform the stakeholders of the purposes of the evaluation (see A3, Described Purposes and Procedures).

2.   Focus evaluation efforts and resources on those program features most likely to impact participants and promote the organization's goals (see U3, Information Scope and Selection, and F3, Cost Effectiveness).

3.   Examine program effects against the assessed needs of the targeted participants or other beneficiaries.

4.   Periodically inform the stakeholders and the public about how program evaluation is promoting the best interests of the organization's constituents.

Common Errors

1.   Failing to monitor the effectiveness of programs

2.   Focusing on program goals and objectives identified only by program management and staff

3. Failing to include the perspectives of various stakeholders in evaluations

4. Recommending premature termination or curtailment of programs before attempting to improve their effectiveness

5. Failing to recommend termination of ineffective or detrimental programs

6. Advocating beliefs about the rights of participants or community when such beliefs represent a bias on the part of the evaluator

Formal Agreements:

Common Errors

1. Failing to consult with those who will be directly affected by the evaluation but who are not parties to the written agreement before the agreement is signed (see U1, Stakeholder Identification; U2, Evaluator Credibility; and F2, Political Viability)

Rights of Human Subjects:

Guidelines

1. Make every effort to understand the cultural and social values of all participants (see U4, Values Identification and P1, Service Orientation).

2. Be knowledgeable about due process and civil rights laws.

3. Before initiating an evaluation, determine the pertinent ethical and legal principles that are applicable.

4. Develop formal written agreements that explain the procedures to be followed by the client and the evaluator to ensure that the rights of participants will be protected.

5. Assure communications are appropriate for language minority participants and/or parents.

6. Inform subjects or participants of their rights in the evaluation.

7.   Secure appropriate written permission from relevant authorities (e.g., subjects, parents, guardians, relevant agency authorities) for access to individual records.

8.   Submit evaluation proposals for review by a human subjects committee.

9.   Inform the organization's staff and constituents of the purpose of the evaluation, e.g., monitoring, continuation or discontinuation, improvements (see A3, Described Purposes and Procedures).

Common Errors

1.   Failing to communicate clearly how the information contributed by the participants will be used

2.   Jeopardizing the self-esteem and reputations of participants by publishing a report that questions their professional ability or their personal ethics without giving them an opportunity to present their perspective

3.   Choosing methods that have a significant potential for violating the rights of human subjects

4.   Failing to attend to the needs of language minority participants or parents

Human Interactions:

Guidelines

1.   Make every effort to understand the cultural, social values, and language differences of the participants (see U4, Values Identification; P1, Service Orientation; and P3, Rights of Human Subjects).

2.   Take time to learn about particular concerns about the evaluation held by participants (see U1, Stakeholder Identification; U3, Information Scope and Selection; and F2, Political Viability).

3.   Maintain good communication through established channels with participants in an evaluation.

Common Errors

1.   Assigning greater or lesser importance to some persons because of their age, sex, ethnicity, cultural background, or language differences

Complete and Fair Assessment:

Guidelines

1.   Fully report findings that indicate both strengths and weaknesses, whether intended or unintended, and justify each (see U5, Report Clarity, and A11, Impartial Reporting).

2.   Solicit critical comments about the thoroughness and fairness of reports from knowledgeable parties representing diverse perspectives before submitting reports.

Common Errors

1.   Manipulating the reporting of strengths and weaknesses to please partisan individuals or interest groups or allowing deletion from the report weaknesses that might prove embarrassing or to further or protect the evaluator's personal interest or biases

2.   Furthering or protecting the evaluator's personal interest or biases

3.   Reporting a judgment about or interpreting findings as either a strength or weakness without considering alternative perspectives that might change that conclusion

4.   Reporting speculative or tentative findings for the purpose of achieving a balance of strengths and weaknesses

Disclosure of Findings:

Guidelines

1.   Reach a formal agreement with the client during the planning stages of the evaluation covering the client's and evaluator's roles in assuring compliance with right-to-know requirements, including: identification of stakeholders for interim and final reports; authority to edit reports; documentation of intents, procedures and outcomes; and when, how, and to whom information about the evaluation will be released (see P2, Formal Agreement).

2.   Report the evaluation completely in writing and, if possible, orally with full disclosure of pertinent findings and without omissions or other alterations.

3.   Show clearly the basis for the perceived relationship between the purposes of the evaluation, methods used, the data collected, and the findings (see A10, Justified Conclusions).

4.   Present relevant points of view of both supporters and critics of the program being evaluated (see U3, Information Scope and Selection).

5.   Report judgments and recommendations that represent broad, balanced, and informed perspectives.

6.   Report key factors that might significantly detract from or add to the evaluation's defensibility, whether discovered before or during the evaluation, and discuss frankly their implications for the findings and recommendations (see A2, Context Analysis).

7.   Encourage clients to provide all affected persons with information that is appropriate, timely, in appropriate linguistic form, and that helps them to be enlightened contributors, consumers, critics, and observers (see U6, Report Timeliness and Dissemination).

8.   Be prepared to recognize and affirmatively address situations in which information obtained in an evaluation may require an evaluator to exert an independent obligation to disclose information against the wishes of the client, such as the circumstances of discovering evidence of illegal or unethical conduct.

Common Errors

1.   Determining stakeholders for the evaluation reports on the basis of convenience or economy, rather than on the basis of ethical and legal considerations

2.   Failing to be involved in the control and release of information about, or resulting from, the evaluation

3.   Agreeing to allow the client to select and release parts of the evaluation report without consulting the evaluator

4. Giving the client unilateral authority to edit, censor, or in any other way change the evaluation report before its release

5. Providing selected information to some members of a group affected by the evaluation and not to other members of the group

6. Issuing reports that have been altered to reflect the self-interest of the evaluator, the client, or the program staff

7. Violating any individual's right to privacy (see P3, Rights of Human Subjects)

8. Failing to be considerate of the client's rights, responsibilities, and needs (see P4, Human Interactions)

9. Failing to consider pertinent social and political factors when designing evaluations and preparing and releasing reports (see A2, Context Analysis)

Conflict of Interest:

Guidelines

1. Seek advice from persons who have different perspectives on the evaluation in order to stay open to evaluation alternatives and philosophies and thus plan and conduct a more balanced evaluation.

2. When appropriate, release evaluation procedures, data, and reports publicly, so they can be judged by other independent evaluators.

3. Assess what advantages (monetary, social, moral, political) various parties may gain or lose as a result of the evaluation, and be prepared to resist pressures they might exert (see F2, Political Viability).

4. Arrange for metaevaluations in cases where conflict of interest is unavoidable.

Common Errors

1. Assuming that following well-established evaluation procedures will eliminate all conflicts of interest

2.   Assuming that independent, nationally known experts are unbiased and free from conflict of interest problems

3.   Excluding persons who are uniquely qualified to be involved in the evaluation solely because of the fear of conflict of interest allegations

Program Documentation:

Guidelines

1.   Ask the client and stakeholders to check the accuracy of recorded descriptions of both the intended and the actual program.

Common Errors

1.   Relying solely on the client's or the funding proposal's description of the program

Context Analysis:

Guidelines

1.   Describe the technical, social, political, organizational, and economic context of the program using multiple sources of information (logs, records, demographic studies, newspaper clippings, legislative bills).

2.   Maintain a log of unusual circumstances--such as a strike, a student protest, the passing of a tax increase, a snowstorm, or a breakdown of equipment--that might influence the findings.

Described Purposes and Procedures:

Guidelines

1.   Preserve (unless legal or contractual stipulations forbid doing so) field notes about the procedures followed in collecting and analyzing information, and make these notes available (unless legal or contractual stipulations forbid it) to persons engaged in reviews and in secondary analyses of the evaluation.

2.   Engage independent evaluators to monitor the purposes and procedures of the evaluation, and evaluate them whenever feasible, especially in the case of large-scale evaluations.

Common Errors

1.   Concluding that purposes and procedures are sound simply because they are carefully described

Valid Information:

Guidelines

1.   Check information collection procedures against the objectives and content of the program being evaluated to determine the degree of fit or congruence between them. This check should be informed at least in part by personnel responsible for the program and its operation and by representatives of important stakeholder groups.

2.   Report the reasons for selecting each procedure, and highlight the evidence that supports the use of each in a methodology section of the evaluation report, an appendix to the report, or in a technical report (see U5, Report Clarity).

3.   When collecting opinions, consider whether the respondents are motivated to tell the truth. Word questions to maximize understanding and minimize bias in responses.

4.   Assess the comprehensiveness of the information provided by the procedures as a set in relation to the information needed to answer the set of evaluation questions.

Common Errors

1.   Failing to allow qualified stakeholders the opportunity to review an instrument or procedure prior to its use

Reliable Information:

Guidelines

1.	Discuss developing propositions, interpretations, and conclusions with an impartial peer to help clarify own posture and values and their role in the inquiry.

2.	Periodically record what the evaluator expects to find throughout the evaluation as a check on a predominant influence of the evaluator's own perspective. Maintain sensitivity to the perspectives of the stakeholders and alternative explanations for the phenomenon observed.

Common Errors

1.	Assuming that the observations of one evaluator are not affected by the evaluator's perspective, training, or previous experience

2.	Failing to consider all relevant information in interpreting and drawing conclusions

Systematic Information:

Guidelines

1.	Monitor outside agencies or individuals responsible for information collecting, scoring and categorization, and/or quantitative or qualitative analyses.

2.	Maintain control of original information and results so that their integrity can be protected.

3.	Check with stakeholders routinely to make certain information collected from them is represented accurately, and allow time to do so.

Common Errors

1.	Failing to control access to information

Justified Conclusions:

Guidelines

1.	Develop conclusions that both respond to the audience's questions and faithfully reflect the evaluation procedures and findings.

2.	Report information that relates to the conclusions (see A5, Valid Interpretations).

3.   Generate, assess, and report plausible alternative explanations of the findings, and, where possible, indicate why these explanations should be discounted.

4.   Limit conclusions to those situations, time periods, persons, contexts, and purposes for which the evaluation findings are applicable.

5.   Advise the audience to be cautious in interpreting equivocal findings in the evaluation report.

6.   Solicit feedback from a variety of program participants about the credibility of interpretations, explanations, conclusions, and recommendations before finalizing the report. Point out common misinterpretations and inappropriate inferences that may be drawn from the information collected.

Common Errors

1.   Basing conclusions on insufficient or unsound information

2.   Failing to report the limitations of the evaluation study

Impartial Reporting:

Guidelines

1.   Reach agreement with the client during the initial stages of the evaluation about the steps to be taken to ensure the fairness of all reports.

2.   Clarify the nature of and authority for editing.

3.   Ensure the evaluation report includes perspectives independent of the perspectives of those whose work is being evaluated.

4.   Seek out and report alternative, perhaps even conflicting, conclusions and recommendations (see A10, Justified Conclusions).

5.   Strive to establish and maintain independence in reporting, using techniques such as adversary-advocacy reports, outside audits, or rotation of evaluation team members over various audience contacts.

6.   Describe and explain the steps taken to protect the integrity of reports.

Common Errors

1.   Assuming that all parties to an evaluation are neutral

2.   Failing to safeguard reports against deliberate or inadvertent distortions

3.   Surrendering the authority to edit reports

4.   Failing to be involved in public presentations of the findings as the situation warrants

5.   Wanting to please the client to the extent that it becomes difficult to report negative findings

Metaevaluation:

Guidelines

1.   Budget sufficient money and other resources to conduct appropriate formative and summative metaevaluations.

2.   Assign someone responsibility for documenting and assessing the program evaluation process and products.

3.   Consider asking a respected professional body to nominate someone to chair a team of external metaevaluators in large evaluations. Failing that, either (a) appoint a team and have it elect the chair, or (b) carefully and judiciously select as chair someone who will be competent and credible, and work with this individual to appoint other team members.

4.   Determine and record which audiences will receive the metaevaluation reports and how the reports will be transmitted (see P2, Formal Agreements).

5.   Expect that the metaevaluation itself will be subject to rebuttal and evaluation, and maintain a record of all metaevaluation steps, information, and analyses.

Common Errors

1.   Failing to record the full range of information needed to judge the program evaluation against each standard pertinent to its conduct

2.	Conducting only an internal metaevaluation when conflict of interest or other considerations clearly establish the need for an external metaevaluation

3.	Allowing a poorly performed or politically motivated metaevaluation to destroy a fundamentally sound program evaluation