EVALUATION DESIGN CHECKLIST

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The logical structure of evaluation design includes elements that commonly apply to a wide range of evaluation assignments and alternative evaluation approaches. This checklist is intended as a generic guide to decisions one typically needs to at least consider when planning and conducting an evaluation. The checkpoints are especially relevant when responding to a potential client's request for a demanding, complex evaluation. However, the checklist is intended for use across a broad range of evaluation assignments—both small and large—and for use with a number of different approaches to evaluation.[1] It may be used alone or in combination with other checklists. When the contemplated evaluation is small in scope and will have only a modest budget, evaluators and their clients can find it useful to consider the full range of evaluation design issues before setting aside those that are not feasible, not particularly relevant to the situation, nor especially important. Since this checklist is intended for evaluators who work under very different circumstances and constraints, the user will need to exercise good judgment and discretion in determining and applying the most applicable parts of the checklist pursuant to the needs of particular evaluations.

This checklist is intended both as an advance organizer and as a reminder of key matters to be considered before and during an evaluation. An ordered list of elements commonly included in evaluation designs follows. These elements are not necessarily intended to be treated in a strict linear sequence. Often one cycles through the elements repeatedly while planning for and negotiating an evaluation and also during the course of the evaluation. In each such cycle some elements are addressed, while others typically are set aside for attention later or abandoned because they don't apply to the particular situation. Evaluation design is as much process as product. In using this checklist the objective should be, over time, to evolve an evaluation plan to undergird a sound, responsive, and effective evaluation.

In some cases, the evaluator initially is restricted to planning based mainly on what is in a published request for proposal. Even then there are often opportunities to clarify the client's needs and predilections through attending bidders conferences, contacting persons who are designated and willing to answer questions, and/or reviewing relevant past evaluations of the evaluand or similar evaluands. It is emphasized that evaluators and their clients are wise to revisit evaluation design decisions throughout the evaluation, especially as new questions and circumstances emerge. The following, then, is an ordered set of issues to consider when planning, conducting, and reporting an evaluation.

A. Focusing the Evaluation

1. Determine and clarify the object of the evaluation (evaluand) and the main client.

2. Considering that different audiences need different information from an evaluation, identify the major level(s) of audiences to be served, e.g., local, state, and/or national or, within an organization, governance, administration, staff, funders, beneficiaries, other constituents.

3. For each level, identify the main intended users of evaluation findings.

4. As feasible, engage representatives of the user groups to identify their priority questions, desired information, preferred evaluative criteria, preferred evaluation approach, intended uses of findings, nature and timing of needed reports, and concerns related to the projected evaluation.

5. Identify parties who might be harmed as a consequence of the evaluation and invite and seriously consider their input before deciding to conduct the evaluation.

6. Ask about the logic underlying the evaluand; identify factors that led to the need for the evaluation; and examine the relevant policy, political, cultural, organizational, and historical contexts.

7. Identify and address potential barriers to the evaluation, e.g., human subject review requirements; needs and possibilities of assuring confidentiality and anonymity; ethical considerations; potential conflicts of interest; opponents of the evaluand and/or evaluation; issues of race, culture, and language; need for information from "vulnerable" populations; need to gather highly sensitive information; and the availability of needed funds.

8. Identify and review previous evaluations of the evaluand; evaluations of similar evaluands in similar settings; pertinent literature; any previous, relevant needs assessment; and other information having relevance to the evaluation.

9. Clarify the nature of needed evaluation reports, e.g., diagnostic, formative, summative, and/or metaevaluation.

10. Determine the extent to which the evaluation should and practically can present recommendations as well as conclusions.

11. Determine the evaluation model or approach that will guide the evaluation, taking into consideration client/stakeholder preferences and previous similar evaluations.

12. Determine the extent to which the evaluation will receive needed cooperation and assistance from the client and other stakeholders.

13. Make a realistic appraisal of the feasibility of proceeding with the evaluation, as projected by the sponsor and under a possible reduction in scope.

14. With the client clarify standards for judging the evaluation, key evaluation questions, information requirements, interpretive criteria, general time frame, needed evaluator qualifications, possible arrangements for a metaevaluation, and a ballpark allowable cost for the evaluation.

15. Make clear to the client and other stakeholders what realistically can be accomplished in the projected evaluation, given the context and relevant constraints, and agree on an appropriate scope for the study.

B. Collecting Information

1. Consider collecting a wide range of information about the evaluand, e.g., context, history, beneficiaries, benefactors, goals and structure of the evaluand, contrast to similar evaluands, schedule, resources, staff qualifications, implementation, main effects, side effects, reputation, judgments by stakeholders, sustainability, and transportability.

2. Project the methodological framework(s) within which information will be collected, e.g., case study, sample survey, comparative experiment, and/or multimethod field study.

3. Identify the sources of the needed information, e.g., documents, filed information, institutional information systems/databases, financial records, beneficiaries, staff, funders, experts, government officials, and/or community interest groups.

4. Determine the instruments and methods for collecting the needed information, e.g., interviews, participant observers, focus groups, literature review, search of archives, Delphi, survey, rating scales, knowledge tests, debates, site visits, photography, video records, log diaries, goal-free study, and/or case study.

5. Specify the sampling procedure(s) to be employed with each method, e.g., purposive, probability, and/or convenience.

6. As feasible, ensure that each main evaluation question is addressed by multiple methods and/or multiple data points on a given method.

7. Project a schedule for information collection, depicting times when each information source and each information collection device will be engaged.

8. Specify who will be responsible for collecting the respective sets of information.

9. Provide the client with a rationale for why the projected range of data is needed and identify those data that are most important.

10. Review the data collection plan in relationship to available resources and other constraints and, with the client and as appropriate, consider reducing the projected data collection to what is both feasible and most important.

C. Organizing Information

1. Develop plans for coding, verifying, filing, keeping secure, and retrieving obtained information.

2. Consider setting up a database for the obtained information.

3. Itemize the computer software, equipment, facilities, materials, etc. required to process, maintain, and control access to the evaluation's information.

D. Analyzing Information

1. Identify bases for interpreting findings such as assessed needs of beneficiaries, objectives, mandated standards, national norms, costs and performance of the evaluand at a previous time, costs and performance of similar evaluands, judgments by experts, and judgments by beneficiaries and other stakeholders.

2. Determine the needed quantitative analysis procedures and devices, e.g., descriptive statistics; trend analysis; cost analysis; main effect significance tests; tests for interactions; a posteriori significance tests; effect parameter analysis; meta-analysis; item analysis; factor analysis; regression analysis; and/or charts, tables, and graphs.

3. Determine the needed qualitative analysis procedures, e.g., qualitative thematic analysis, content analysis, summaries, scenarios, and/or contrasts of photographs.

4. Select appropriate computer programs to facilitate both the quantitative and qualitative analyses.

5. Plan to search for trends, patterns, and themes in the qualitative information.

6. Plan to contrast different subsets of qualitative and quantitative information to identify both corroborative and contradictory findings.

7. Plan to address each evaluative question by referencing and citing the relevant quantitative and qualitative information.]

8. Plan to use qualitative information to elaborate and explain quantitative findings.

9. Plan to state caveats as appropriate in consideration of any inconclusive or contradictory findings.

10. Plan to synthesize quantitative and qualitative information, e.g., by embedding quantitative information within a qualitative narrative or by embedding interview responses and other qualitative findings in the discussion of quantitative findings.

11. Anticipate that the client or other stakeholder groups may require recommendations to correct problems identified in the findings, and be prepared to explain that the same data that uncovered the problems are unlikely to provide valid direction for solving the problems.

12. Consider providing in the evaluation plan for a follow-up project to generate and validly assess alternative courses of action for solving identified problems; such procedures might include a follow-up evaluation of available alternative solution strategies, creation and evaluation of new solution strategies, engagement of experts with substantial experience in the area, review of relevant literature, and/or a working conference to chart and assess possible courses of action.

E. Reporting Information

1. In consideration of the client and different audiences, project needed evaluation reports (e.g., interim, final, and/or component-specific reports; technical appendices; executive summary; an independent metaevaluation report) and reporting formats (e.g., printed, oral, electronic, multimedia, storytelling, sociodrama, etc.)

2. Outline the contents of at least the main reports, giving special attention to how findings from different sources and methods will be synthesized to answer the main evaluation questions.

3. Consider dividing final reports into three subreports: *Program Antecedents* (for those who need background information), *Program Implementation* (for those who might want to replicate the program), and *Program Results* (for all members of the audience).

4. Plan to provide helpful summary tables, e.g., for each evaluative question summarize findings from each data collection procedure and also show the findings that are in agreement across different procedures.

5. In technical appendix documents, plan to include such items and information as resumes of evaluation staff, consultants, and an independent metaevaluator; data collection instruments and protocols; plans associated with specific data collection activities; reports of findings specific to particular data collection instruments and procedures; data tables; a log of data collection activities and interim reports; a summary of costs for the different evaluative activities; a summary of key issues that emerged during the evaluation and how they were addressed; and internally and externally produced explanations of how the evaluation met or failed to meet professional standards for sound evaluations.

6. As appropriate, provide for prerelease reviews of drafts and feedback workshops, as well as the issuance of finalized reports. (See the Gullickson and Stufflebeam *Feedback Workshops Checklist* at www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists.)

7. Develop a plan and schedule for conveying the needed reports to the different audiences, e.g., the client, the program staff, a pertinent policy board, beneficiaries, and the general public.

F. Administering the Evaluation

1. Delineate the evaluation schedule.

2. Define staff and resource requirements and plans for meeting these requirements.

3. Evaluate the potential of the projected evaluation to meet relevant professional standards and principles, such as the AEA 2004 *Guiding Principles for Evaluators*, the 2003 GAO *Government Auditing Standards*, and The Joint Committee (1994) *Program Evaluation Standards.* (See Stufflebeam's *Program Evaluations Metaevaluation Checklist* at www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists.

4. Provide for at least internal formative and summative metaevaluations and advise the client to arrange for and fund an independent metaevaluation.

5. Delineate a budget for the evaluation. (See Horn's *Checklist for Evaluation Budgets* at www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists.)

6. Draft an evaluation contract, defining especially right-to-know audiences, pertinent evaluator responsibilities and protocols, evaluator's editorial and report dissemination authority, and client and staff evaluation responsibilities. (See Stufflebeam's *Evaluation Contracts Checklist* at www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists.)

7. Provide for reviewing and updating the evaluation plan and contract as needed (as new opportunities and constraints arise, such as those related to information access and budget).

[1] A previous version of the checklist was applied by evaluation teams that responded to the same evaluation assignment while using different evaluation approaches. These approaches included Ralph Tyler's objectives-based approach, Michael Scriven's consumer-oriented approach, Michael Patton's utilization-focused approach, Robert Stake's responsive evaluation approach, and the CIPP Model. The participants in this exercise had access to and used checklists that had been designed specifically for given approaches. However, they requested a generic checklist that would be more akin to requirements seen in typical requests for evaluation proposals. They were provided a previous version of this checklist and found it to be a useful supplement to checklists oriented specifically to particular evaluation approaches or models. The checklist has been revised in response to valuable critiques by independent reviewers. It is offered for use as a stand-alone checklist or as a supplement to one or more other checklists.