

Program Evaluation's Foundational Documents

Four foundational documents provide guidance to the program evaluation field on how to evaluate programs well and ethically. This brief introduces you to those documents and includes links and resources for further study.

Introduction

Program evaluation is an [essential public health service \[CDC 2023\]](#). It shares similarities with other tasks we carry out in public health, such as [performance measurement](#), quality improvement, research, and surveillance. However, program evaluation is a distinct undertaking, one that explicitly engages with values. Understanding and using the foundational documents for the program evaluation field helps public health practitioners, who often wear many hats, navigate their various roles. This brief introduces you to those documents and includes links and resources for further study.

These four documents provide guidance on how to evaluate programs well and ethically:

- The [American Evaluation Association's \(AEA\) Guiding Principles for Evaluators](#) provide direction for the ethical practice of evaluation. They guide the actions of evaluators.
- The Joint Committee for Standards in Educational Evaluation (JCSEE) [program evaluation standards](#) identify the characteristics of a high-quality evaluation.
- AEA's [Public Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation](#) sets out the professional association's "expectations concerning cultural competence in the conduct of evaluation."
- AEA's [Evaluator Competencies](#) are a "common language and set of criteria to clarify what it means to be included in the definition of evaluator."

Each document was created with extensive deliberation within either AEA or JCSEE and planned to be revisited regularly to reflect the evolution of the field and the contexts in which evaluations occur. All four of these documents were created in a U.S. context, although consultations during their creation included international input. Other countries and regions have developed their own guidance.

American Evaluation Association's Guiding Principles for Evaluators

AEA updated its [guiding principles](#) in 2018 [AEA 2018a]. Five principles are intended to guide evaluator behavior: 1) systematic inquiry, 2) competence, 3) integrity, 4) respect for people, and 5) common good and equity. Each of the principles comprises a series of sub-statements. The text box shows an example of this format.

Evaluators are expected to be familiar with the guiding principles so that they can plan for and identify ethical matters. In other words, the principles should be used proactively rather than merely referenced in a perceived ethical dilemma.

The guiding principles might not address every situation an evaluator encounters, and the principles do not directly provide guidance to other actors in the wider evaluation ecosystem, such as funders or other evaluation commissioners. They do, however, offer a means by which evaluators can model care for the common good and equity in the evaluation context.

In some practice contexts, the course of action suggested by one principle might contradict the action implied by another. In these cases, it's essential to consult with others to bring a range of viewpoints to the question. Additional helpful perspectives might come from evaluation peers unconnected to a particular project, from people connected to or interested in a particular evaluation, or from other trusted advisors.

Using the Guiding Principles

- Review the principles during the planning phase of an evaluation and periodically throughout the project. Discuss among the team members any issues that arise during the review.
- Share the principles with evaluation stakeholders. Reviewing the principles together might prompt some important conversations. It might also pre-empt inappropriate requests, such as limiting presentations of the findings to only the findings that show the program in a favorable way.
- Use the principles as a basis for individual and team reflection or as part of a meta-evaluation—an evaluation of your evaluation.
- Use the principles in combination with ethical standards from other professional fields; they are not meant to supersede others.

<p style="text-align: center;">American Evaluation Association’s Guiding Principles: Common Good and Equity Principle</p> <p>E. Common Good and Equity: Evaluators strive to contribute to the common good and advancement of an equitable and just society.</p> <p>E1. Recognize and balance the interests of the client, other stakeholders, and the common good while also protecting the integrity of the evaluation.</p> <p>E2. Identify and make efforts to address the evaluation's potential threats to the common good especially when specific stakeholder interests conflict with the goals of a democratic, equitable, and just society.</p> <p>E3. Identify and make efforts to address the evaluation's potential risks of exacerbating historic disadvantage or inequity.</p> <p>E4. Promote transparency and active sharing of data and findings with the goal of equitable access to information in forms that respect people and honor promises of confidentiality.</p> <p>E5. Mitigate the bias and potential power imbalances that can occur as a result of the evaluation's context. Self-assess one's own privilege and positioning within that context.</p>

Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation’s Program Evaluation Standards

The [JCSEE program evaluation standards](#) are often referred to as simply “the standards,” owing to their placement at the center of the image describing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC’s) 1999 Framework for Program Evaluation in Public Health. Most recently updated in 2010, the five standards are 1) utility, 2) feasibility, 3) propriety, 4) accuracy, and 5) evaluation accountability. Each of those standards has sub-statements (see text box for an example using the feasibility standard). The standards describe the characteristics of a high-quality evaluation. They keep the focus on the evaluation, rather than on an evaluator’s demonstration of their technical skills. Even though these standards originated in the educational context, they are applied broadly in the field of evaluation.

Designing and implementing evaluations often requires making choices that balance among the standards, which (as with the principles) requires evaluators to draw on their interpersonal and facilitation skills to elicit and reconcile varying stakeholder preferences. Application of both the principles and the standards intersects with evaluation’s necessary engagement with multiple perspectives — varying interpretations of “fair,” “just,” etc. — and evolving contexts.

**Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation:
Feasibility Standards**

The feasibility standards are intended to increase evaluation effectiveness and efficiency.

- F1.** Project Management Evaluations should use effective project management strategies.
- F2.** Practical Procedures Evaluation procedures should be practical and responsive to the way the program operates.
- F3.** Contextual Viability Evaluations should recognize, monitor, and balance the cultural and political interests and needs of individuals and groups.
- F4.** Resource Use Evaluations should use resources effectively and efficiently.

Using the Standards

- Consult the standards at decision points, for example, when deciding on the level of accuracy or rigor required in the study design relative to the programmatic decisions that will be based on the evaluation findings.
 - Share with evaluation stakeholders so they know and can apply the standards as criteria at decision points. Because many people are more familiar with research standards, it can be useful to share the standards so that stakeholders have a good understanding of what high-quality evaluation looks like.
 - For detailed examples of how to use the standards, consult the book in which they were published [[Yarbrough, et al 2011](#)].

AEA Public Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation

[AEA’s Public Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation](#) [AEA 2011] was approved by the association membership in 2011. It describes cultural competence as “a stance taken toward culture, not a discrete status or simple mastery of particular knowledge and skills.” The statement emphasizes the need for evaluator self-awareness and self-reflection, and it notes that culture has implications across the evaluation lifecycle.

Evaluators often strive to use culturally appropriate methods and language, which the statement addresses. The statement also calls on evaluators to be attentive to the dynamics of power and the complexity of cultural identity.

Cultural competence in evaluation is an ethical imperative. While the term “competence” has evolved to include other concepts (for example, cultural responsiveness or humility), use of the word “competence” situates cultural competence among the professional competencies, that is, not optional or a nice add-on. The statement explains the relationship between cultural competence and validity, and it reminds us that theories are not neutral.

Using the Cultural Competence Statement

- Share and discuss the statement with peers who might not have had occasion to consider how culture affects all that we do. For some people, the idea that theories and methods are not value-neutral might require some consideration, rethinking, learning, and unlearning.
- Use the statement contents as prompts for critical reflection. For example, consider the following statement. “Cultural privilege can create and perpetuate inequities in power and foster disparate treatment in resource distribution and access.” What does the assertion from that statement mean for your evaluation practice?
- The [Practical Strategies for Culturally Competent Evaluation](#) guide [CDC 2018] elaborates on the role of culture in evaluation and includes specific tips for each phase of an evaluation.

AEA's Evaluator Competencies

AEA's [evaluator competencies](#) were adopted in 2018, and they identify the important characteristics of professional evaluation practice. These characteristics fall into five domains: 1) professional practice, 2) methodology, 3) context, 4) planning and management, and 5) interpersonal. Like the guiding principles and standards, each overarching domain is broken down to elaborate on the broad topics. All three documents acknowledge the overlap and interdependence of their respective component parts.

AEA took care when releasing the list of competencies to emphasize that the competencies are not intended to exclude people from the field. Rather, they are intended to describe what makes evaluation distinct and to provide a map or pathway for entry into the field. Indeed, many people, regardless of their day-to-day jobs, are competent in multiple aspects of the competency domains.

When looking at the full set of competencies, it becomes clear that a competent evaluator listens, meets people and programs where they are, and works to mitigate potential harms that may result from an evaluation — all while being systematic.

Using the Evaluator Competencies

- Use the competencies to quickly identify gaps in an evaluation team's skills so the team can fill those gaps to respond to the needs of a particular evaluation.
- CDC has created an evaluator [self-assessment](#) [CDC 2018] that incorporates the competencies. Completing and reviewing the self-assessment on a regular basis can provide guidance for professional development.

Conclusion

Evaluation operates in a world where “values, personalities, evidence, information, feelings, sensitivities, emotions, affect, ambiguities, contradictions, inconsistencies, and so forth are simultaneously in play as we try to do the right thing and do it well” [Schwandt 2005]. Collectively, the foundational documents provide a touchstone for navigating these complexities.

Explicitly or implicitly, the documents call out the importance of self-reflection. Relationships rooted in trust support this sort of reflection, allowing us to gain additional perspectives on our work and providing help to identify assumptions and biases in our worldviews. Making time to cultivate these relationships is essential, although rarely reflected in evaluation work plans. The documents also identify the need for an evaluation team to possess strong interpersonal and group facilitation skills.

AEA's Cultural Competence Statement ends with an invitation to new conversations and connections. All four documents are part of a larger conversation about what it means to conduct evaluations in complex and evolving cultures and societies. Ethical evaluation practice requires us to take part in that conversation — to identify when the foundations that might have served us well no longer do and to question our assumptions about the relationships among programs, evaluations, and the common good. As the foundational documents call on individuals to reflect on their practice, so too should the field.

References

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