

EDITORS' NOTES

The chapters in this volume explore the hard realities increasingly faced by evaluation practitioners today.¹ Evaluators must supply services that meet a broad array of stated and sometimes unstated needs, many of which are inherently social and political. Evaluators must address an increased demand for more services in fiscally constrained environments where “overhead” and “administrative activities” have a hard time competing with the provision of direct services. Further, given the variety of evaluation sponsors (authorities or clients who pay for an evaluation or employ the evaluator) and stakeholders (parties, including program clients who may be affected by evaluation processes and results), evaluators may find themselves in a bit of quandary when responding to the question, “For whom are we doing this evaluation anyway?”

One gauge of success of an evaluation is sponsors' and stakeholders' use of the knowledge gained from it, with the hope that evaluation use will lead to a social good of some kind. Most successful evaluators can provide timely, compelling, readily understood, fair, and useful knowledge to key players (sponsors and stakeholders). To the extent that the success of an evaluation is contingent on its use by sponsors and stakeholders, it becomes necessary to understand the authorizing sociopolitical environment in which evaluators operate, which will be referred to in this volume as the “evaluation authorizing environment” or “authorizing environment.”

The authorizing environment is the situational and practical context within which evaluations are funded and expectations are set for evaluative activities, products, and use of evaluation results. The authorizing environment can be characterized along several dimensions, including formality, complexity, and the degree to which evaluative information is needed. The authorizing environment includes explicit stakeholders, namely the agency or elected body that initiates, authorizes, or sponsors an evaluation, as well as the agencies that operate the programs or services being evaluated. The authorizing environment also includes implicit stakeholders, including program staff, service recipients, community members, interest groups, and others who may have little control over the initiation of an evaluation but who, as we shall see in several of the chapters that follow, have a great deal of control over the process of planning and conducting an evaluation; in extreme cases, they may control whether an evaluation can be conducted

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effectively. The relationships contained within the authorizing environment among various stakeholders are as important as the particular individuals or entities, because these relationships can also influence the funding, planning, conduct, use, and acceptance of the evaluation.

Authorizing environments of state and local government evaluators are further complicated by two key factors: (1) state and local government evaluations affect the way public policies are formulated and funds are used, and (2) the potential interplay of three levels of government—federal, state, and local—includes the coexisting and functioning of differently sized government bureaucracies and the delicate issues of federal versus state versus local rights and responsibilities.

The importance of understanding these multifaceted relationships is captured to some extent in the American Evaluation Association's (AEA) Guiding Principles for Evaluators (American Evaluation Association, 1995), particularly Principle Five, which describes evaluators' responsibilities for general and public welfare. This guiding principle requires evaluators to consider the diverse values and interests of all stakeholders and to consider those values and interests along with the needs of the evaluation client. Existing literature accepts the criticality of politics in the practice of evaluation, as discussed in Chelimsky's seminal article titled "The Politics of Program Evaluation" (1987). Palumbo (1987) graphically represents the distinctions between developmental cycles for information and policymaking but does not clearly delineate the dynamics between the two or determine when or if they interact. Even the conceptual framework presented by Lester and Wilds (1990) for understanding knowledge utilization does not fully address the layers of complexity introduced by consideration of evaluators' authorizing environments. An appreciation of this complexity begins with acknowledging multiple sponsors and stakeholders operating within the authorizing environment. Also to be acknowledged is how the actions and interactions of sponsors and stakeholders have the potential—independently, collectively, and over time—to influence the evaluation scope and methodology, as well as the identification and reporting of findings and results and the use of evaluation results.

Readers of this volume will learn about the influence that authorizing environments have on state and local government evaluation; in particular, how internal and external evaluators respond to the challenges in the face of potentially conflicting and competing interests of various evaluation sponsors and stakeholders. Each of the five chapters addresses the real and potential effects that the authorizing environment can have on evaluation as a discipline and in practice.

In Chapter One, Fredericks, Carman, and Birkland discuss the historical development and evolution of evaluation practice. The authors describe the challenges to evaluation posed by political and institutional environments, particularly as they relate to implementation and management of program evaluations. The authors draw on public policy implementation models to offer readers strategies for overcoming these barriers.

Boser's story of evaluation use, in Chapter Two, is a delightful contrast with the all-too-common view that federal requirements are the primary driver of state and local evaluation efforts. Boser suggests that responding appropriately to an authorizing mandate does *not* guarantee adequate representation of program effects; she challenges the notion that local-level officials passively implement policy and report evaluation results as an exercise in placating evaluation sponsors. Using the evaluation of Even Start family literacy programs as a case example, Boser advocates involving stakeholders and integrating multiple intergovernmental perspectives in developing evaluation objectives and criteria.

In Chapter Three, Tang and colleagues provide an example of how adaptive responses to a highly complex and minimally resourced authorizing environment led to an array of systemic dividends and efficiencies. Specifically, these authors apply a combination of methods, including strategically empowering local programs over time to engage in self-assessments to fulfill state requirements for a comprehensive evaluation of the California Tobacco Control Program, or TCP. The combination not only strategically positions the state agency staff to respond fully to legislative requirements within resource constraints but is associated with better planned, more effective, and more accountable local interventions.

In Chapter Four, Guzmán and Feria examine the dynamics of a community-based organization (CBO) that becomes the medium for delivering services to individuals and for assessing and reporting on the effectiveness of those services. The authors make clear that the ecosystem within which their evaluation was conducted was crucial to the evaluation's effectiveness. They found it necessary to re-examine the hierarchical relationships within that ecosystem and renegotiate the evaluation plan to facilitate the conduct of their evaluation.

In Chapter Five, Berry, Turcotte, and Latham explore the evolution of legislative evaluation offices in the United States. As we become increasingly accustomed to living in a morass of real-time data in the information age, the need for extracting fair, thoughtful, valid, timely, and decision-oriented information from the data for sponsors and stakeholders becomes more acute than ever. These authors identify six niches that legislative program evaluation offices must fill to maintain their relevance and viability in the public policy environment.

The overarching concept of evaluation authorizing environments, as well as evaluators' ability to adapt to the needs of various sponsors and stakeholders, are developed more fully in the concluding chapter. Themes that cut across the five previous chapters are identified and interwoven to give readers a sense of both the enduring and malleable traits of the evaluation profession as it anticipates continuing its contributions to societal well-being.

Rakesh Mohan
David J. Bernstein
Maria D. Whitsett
Editors

Note

1. The views expressed in the Editors' Notes are those of the editors and do not necessarily represent those of the Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, Montgomery County, Maryland, or the Austin Independent School District, Texas.

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RAKESH MOHAN is a staff member of the Washington State Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee. He is current chair of the State and Local Government Topical Interest Group of the AEA.

DAVID J. BERNSTEIN is the administrative coordinator for the Montgomery County, Maryland, Department of Finance. He is former chair of the State and Local Government Topical Interest Group of the AEA, a member of the board of directors of the American Society for Public Administration Center for Accountability and Performance, and adjunct professor of public administration at The George Washington University.

MARIA D. WHITSETT is the chief accountability officer for the Austin Independent School District, Texas. She is former chair of the State and Local Government Topical Interest Group and is current chair of the PreK–12 Educational Evaluation Topical Interest Group of the AEA.