Evaluation theory and practice: A report from the field

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Many nonprofit and evaluation scholars have observed that nonprofit organizations are under increasing political and resource-based pressure to demonstrate effectiveness and document program outcomes. As a result, there has been both increased scholarly and practitioner-oriented attention paid to how program evaluation might be used as an accountability tool. However, the extent to which this interest has translated into increased monitoring and oversight by resource providers and increased evaluation practice among nonprofit organizations remains unclear. A review of the literature and research on evaluation practice among nonprofit organizations reveals that while there is considerable rhetoric about the importance of doing evaluation, measuring outcomes, and monitoring performance, there is little agreement about the extent to which nonprofit organizations in the United States have actually embraced these ideals in practice.

Some authors have suggested that more evaluation and performance measurement has indeed been occurring (Billitteri, 1998; Hendricks, 2000; OMB Watch, 1998; Wholey & Hatry, 1992). Others have suggested that government and other funders devote very few resources to monitoring, oversight, and evaluation (Alie & Seita, 1997; Ashford & Clarke, 1996; Kettl, 1993; Wolch, 1990). Still, others have identified a variety of shortcomings that have accompanied the accountability and outcomes movement (Frederickson, 2000; Hoefer, 2000). For example, Frederickson (2000) argues that the difference between the theory of performance measurement and current practice has not been specified, that critical issues such as organizational capacity and the allocation of sufficient resources to evaluation have not been addressed, and that insufficient attention has been paid to the subjective, fragile, and political process for developing outcome measures. Hoefer (2000) further notes that the program evaluation movement fails to recognize that an increase in evaluation practice does not necessarily mean an increase in the quality of evaluation. Given the lack of consensus and mixed messages about evaluation use and practice among nonprofit organizations, additional empirical research is needed.

The research reported in this paper fills a substantive gap in the literature by detailing the ways in which nonprofit organizations in New York and Ohio are engaging in program evaluation, how they use evaluation information, and the rationale they offer for conducting program evaluation. While a rational approach (nonprofit organizations would engage in program evaluation practices if they knew more about how to do it or what the benefits were) is often assumed, this research demonstrates that nonprofits offer multiple explanations for and interpretations of their behavior, not all consistent with a rational choice perspective. In fact, the ways in which decision-making is described is consistent with the assumptions of four mainstream organizational theories, strategic management, agency theory, resource dependence theory, and institutional theory. Interestingly, each of these theories builds from rational choice theory; however, each takes into account the critical relationship between the organization and its environment, and each offers a unique contribution toward advancing a comprehensive understanding of why nonprofit organizations engage in program evaluation and how they use it.
This paper describes current evaluation use and practice among US nonprofit organizations in New York and Ohio. Based upon data gathered from a mail survey of a large, random sample of nonprofit organizations providing human services in both states, this paper identifies: current evaluation practices and procedures; the types of evaluation data being collected; who is conducting evaluation; how evaluation is being funded; how evaluation results are used; the challenges faced during implementation; and the resources and supports that are needed.

The findings from this survey make important contributions to program evaluation research and practice. Academically this research advances two key findings. First, the research makes a formal link between organizational theory and evaluation practice making explicit interorganizational dynamics and the relationship between the organization and the environment. Second, while there seems to be a general consensus about the theoretical value of program evaluation as an accountability and management tool, there has been little empirical research that describes the extent to which nonprofit organizations are actually engaging in program evaluation (Fine et al., 1998; GAO, 1998; Hoefer, 2000).

More practically, this research has three important implications for nonprofit administrators and program evaluation professionals. First, by presenting a clear understanding of why nonprofit organizations engage in program evaluation efforts, government policy makers, foundations, and others are able to develop better incentives to encourage more evaluation among nonprofit organizations. Second, because this research describes why nonprofit organizations do program evaluation, evaluators and nonprofit organizations can do a better job of predicting (and, consequently avoiding) the many barriers that arise during the implementation of program evaluation efforts. Third, by systematically identifying how nonprofit organizations actually use evaluation, evaluators have information necessary to develop better evaluation systems and more useful mechanisms for nonprofit organizations to improve evaluation information.

Partial Bibliography


