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Guiding Principles for Evaluators

American Evaluation Association, Task Force on Guiding Principles for Evaluators

I. Introduction

- A. *Background:* In 1986, the Evaluation Network (ENet) and the Evaluation Research Society (ERS) merged to create the American Evaluation Association. ERS had previously adopted a set of standards for program evaluation (published in *New Directions for Program Evaluation* in 1982), and both organizations had lent support to work of other organizations about evaluation guidelines. However, none of these standards or guidelines were officially adopted by AEA, nor were any other ethics, standards, or guiding principles put into place. Over the ensuing years, the need for such guiding principles has been discussed by both the AEA Board and the AEA membership. Under the presidency of David Cordray in 1992, the AEA Board appointed a temporary committee chaired by Peter Rossi to examine whether AEA should address this matter in more detail. That committee issued a report to the AEA Board on November 4, 1992, recommending that AEA should pursue this matter further. The Board followed that recommendation and on that date created a Task Force to develop a draft of guiding principles for evaluators. The AEA Board specifically instructed the Task Force to develop general guiding principles rather than specific standards of practice. This report summarizes the Task Force's response to the charge.
- B. *Process:* Task Force members reviewed relevant documents from other professional societies, and then independently prepared and circulated drafts of material for use in this report. Initial and subsequent drafts

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(compiled by the Task Force chair) were discussed during conference calls, with revisions occurring after each call. Progress reports were presented at every AEA Board meeting during 1993. In addition, a draft of the guidelines was mailed to all AEA members in September 1993 requesting feedback, and three symposia at the 1993 AEA annual conference were used to discuss and obtain further feedback. The Task Force considered all this feedback in a December 1993 conference call and prepared a final draft in January 1994. This draft was presented and approved for membership vote at the January 1994 AEA Board meeting.

C. *Resulting Principles*: Given the diversity of interests and employment settings represented on the Task Force, it is noteworthy that Task Force members reached substantial agreement about the following five principles. The order of these principles does not imply priority among them; priority will vary by situation and evaluator role.

1. *Systematic Inquiry*: Evaluators conduct systematic, data-based inquiries about whatever is being evaluated.
2. *Competence*: Evaluators provide competent performance to stakeholders.
3. *Integrity/Honesty*: Evaluators ensure the honesty and integrity of the entire evaluation process.
4. *Respect for People*: Evaluators respect the security, dignity, and self-worth of the respondents, program participants, clients, and other stakeholders with whom they interact.
5. *Responsibilities for General and Public Welfare*: Evaluators articulate and take into account the diversity of interests and values that may be related to the general and public welfare.

These five principles are elaborated in Section III of this document.

D. *Recommendation for Continued Work*: The Task Force also recommends that the AEA Board establish and support a mechanism for the continued development and dissemination of these Guiding Principles.

II. Preface: Assumptions Concerning Development of Principles

- A. Evaluation is a profession composed of persons with varying interests, potentially encompassing but not limited to the evaluation of programs, products, personnel, policy, performance, proposals, technology, research, theory, and even of evaluation itself. These principles are broadly intended to cover all kinds of evaluation.
- B. Based on differences in training, experience, and work settings, the profession of evaluation encompasses diverse perceptions about the primary purpose of evaluation. These include but are not limited to the following: bettering products, personnel, programs, organizations, governments, consumers, and the public interest; contributing to informed decision making and more enlightened change; precipitating needed change;

empowering all stakeholders by collecting data from them and engaging them in the evaluation process; and experiencing the excitement of new insights. Despite that diversity, the common ground is that evaluators aspire to construct and provide the best possible information that might bear on the value of whatever is being evaluated. The principles are intended to foster that primary aim.

- C. The intention of the Task Force was to articulate a set of principles that should guide the professional practice of evaluators, and that should inform evaluation clients and the general public about the principles they can expect to be upheld by professional evaluators. Of course, no statement of principles can anticipate all situations that arise in the practice of evaluation. However, principles are not just guidelines for reaction when something goes wrong or when a dilemma is found. Rather, principles should proactively guide the behaviors of professionals in everyday practice.
- D. The purpose of documenting guiding principles is to foster continuing development of the profession of evaluation, and the socialization of its members. The principles are meant to stimulate discussion and to provide a language for dialogue about the proper practice and application of evaluation among members of the profession, sponsors of evaluation, and others interested in evaluation.
- E. The five principles proposed in this document are not independent, but overlap in many ways. Conversely, sometimes these principles will conflict, so that evaluators will have to choose among them. At such times evaluators must use their own values and knowledge of the setting to determine the appropriate response. Whenever a course of action is unclear, evaluators should solicit the advice of fellow evaluators about how to resolve the problem before deciding how to proceed.
- F. These principles are intended to replace any previous work on standards, principles, or ethics adopted by ERS or ENet, the two predecessor organizations to AEA. These principles are the official position of AEA on these matters.
- G. Each principle is illustrated by a number of statements to amplify the meaning of the overarching principle and to provide guidance for its application. These statements are illustrations. They are not meant to include all possible applications of that principle, nor to be viewed as rules that provide the basis for sanctioning violators.
- H. These principles are not intended to be or to replace standards supported by evaluators or by the other disciplines in which evaluators participate. Specifically, AEA supports the effort to develop standards for educational evaluation by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, of which AEA is a cosponsor.
- I. These principles were developed in the context of Western cultures, par-

ticularly the United States, and so may reflect the experiences of that context. The relevance of these principles may vary across other cultures, and across subcultures within the United States.

- J. These principles are part of an evolving process of self-examination by the profession and should be revisited on a regular basis. Mechanisms might include officially sponsored reviews of principles at annual meetings and other forums for harvesting experience with the principles and their application. On a regular basis, but at least every five years from the date they initially take effect, these principles ought to be examined for possible review and revision. In order to maintain association-wide awareness and relevance, all AEA members are encouraged to participate in this process.

III. The Principles

- A. *Systematic Inquiry*: Evaluators conduct systematic, data-based inquiries about whatever is being evaluated.
 - 1. Evaluators should adhere to the highest appropriate technical standards in conducting their work, whether that work is quantitative or qualitative in nature, so as to increase the accuracy and credibility of the evaluative information they produce.
 - 2. Evaluators should explore with the client the shortcomings and strengths both of the various evaluation questions it might be productive to ask, and the various approaches that might be used for answering those questions.
 - 3. When presenting their work, evaluators should communicate their methods and approaches accurately and in sufficient detail to allow others to understand, interpret, and critique their work. They should make clear the limitations of an evaluation and its results. Evaluators should discuss in a contextually appropriate way those values, assumptions, theories, methods, results, and analyses that *significantly* affect the interpretation of the evaluative findings. These statements apply to all aspects of the evaluation, from its initial conceptualization to the eventual use of findings.
- B. *Competence*: Evaluators provide competent performance to stakeholders.
 - 1. Evaluators should possess (or, here and elsewhere as appropriate, ensure that the evaluation team possesses) the education, abilities, skills, and experience appropriate to undertake the tasks proposed in the evaluation.
 - 2. Evaluators should practice within the limits of their professional training and competence and should decline to conduct evaluations that fall substantially outside those limits. When declining the commission or request is not feasible or appropriate, evaluators should make clear any significant limitations on the evaluation that might result. Evaluators should make every effort to gain the competence directly or

through the assistance of others who possess the required expertise.

3. Evaluators should continually seek to maintain and improve their competencies, in order to provide the highest level of performance in their evaluations. This continuing professional development might include formal coursework and workshops, self-study, evaluations of one's own practice, and working with other evaluators to learn from their skills and expertise.
- C. *Integrity/Honesty*: Evaluators ensure the honesty and integrity of the entire evaluation process.
1. Evaluators should negotiate honestly with clients and relevant stakeholders concerning the costs, tasks to be undertaken, limitations of methodology, scope of results likely to be obtained, and uses of data resulting from a specific evaluation. It is primarily the evaluator's responsibility to initiate discussion and clarification of these matters, not the client's.
 2. Evaluators should record all changes made in the originally negotiated project plans, and the reasons why the changes were made. If those changes would significantly affect the scope and likely results of the evaluation, the evaluator should inform the client and other important stakeholders in a timely fashion (barring good reason to the contrary, before proceeding with further work) of the changes and their likely impact.
 3. Evaluators should seek to determine, and where appropriate be explicit about, their own, their clients', and other stakeholders' interests concerning the conduct and outcomes of an evaluation (including financial, political, and career interests).
 4. Evaluators should disclose any roles or relationships they have concerning whatever is being evaluated that might pose a significant conflict of interest with their role as an evaluator. Any such conflict should be mentioned in reports of the evaluation results.
 5. Evaluators should not misrepresent their procedures, data, or findings. Within reasonable limits, they should attempt to prevent or correct any substantial misuses of their work by others.
 6. If evaluators determine that certain procedures or activities seem likely to produce misleading evaluative information or conclusions, they have the responsibility to communicate their concerns, and the reasons for them, to the client (the one who funds or requests the evaluation). If discussions with the client do not resolve these concerns, so that a misleading evaluation is then implemented, the evaluator may legitimately decline to conduct the evaluation if that is feasible and appropriate. If not, the evaluator should consult colleagues or relevant stakeholders about other proper ways to proceed (options might include, but are not limited to, discussions at a higher level, a dissenting cover letter or appendix, or refusal to sign the final document).

7. Barring compelling reason to the contrary, evaluators should disclose all sources of financial support for an evaluation, and the source of the request for the evaluation.
- D. *Respect for People*: Evaluators respect the security, dignity and self-worth of the respondents, program participants, clients, and other stakeholders with whom they interact.
1. Where applicable, evaluators must abide by current professional ethics and standards regarding risks, harms, and burdens that might be engendered to those participating in the evaluation; regarding informed consent for participation in evaluation; and regarding informing participants about the scope and limits of confidentiality. Examples of such standards include federal regulations about protection of human subjects, or the ethical principles of such associations as the American Anthropological Association, the American Educational Research Association, or the American Psychological Association. Although this principle is not intended to extend the applicability of such ethics and standards beyond their current scope, evaluators should abide by them where it is feasible and desirable to do so.
 2. Because justified negative or critical conclusions from an evaluation must be explicitly stated, evaluations sometimes produce results that harm client or stakeholder interests. Under this circumstance, evaluators should seek to maximize the benefits and reduce any unnecessary harms that might occur, provided this will not compromise the integrity of the evaluation findings. Evaluators should carefully judge when the benefits from doing the evaluation or in performing certain evaluation procedures should be foregone because of the risks or harms. Where possible, these issues should be anticipated during the negotiation of the evaluation.
 3. Knowing that evaluations often will negatively affect the interests of some stakeholders, evaluators should conduct the evaluation and communicate its results in a way that clearly respects the stakeholders' dignity and self-worth.
 4. Where feasible, evaluators should attempt to foster the social equity of the evaluation, so that those who give to the evaluation can receive some benefits in return. For example, evaluators should seek to ensure that those who bear the burdens of contributing data and incurring any risks are doing so willingly, and that they have full knowledge of, and maximum feasible opportunity to obtain any benefits that may be produced from the evaluation. When it would not endanger the integrity of the evaluation, respondents or program participants should be informed if and how they can receive services to which they are otherwise entitled without participating in the evaluation.

5. Evaluators have the responsibility to identify and respect differences among participants, such as differences in their culture, religion, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, and to be mindful of potential implications of these differences when planning, conducting, analyzing, and reporting their evaluations.
- E. *Responsibilities for General and Public Welfare*: Evaluators articulate and take into account the diversity of interests and values that may be related to the general and public welfare.
1. When planning and reporting evaluations, evaluators should consider including important perspectives and interests of the full range of stakeholders in the object being evaluated. Evaluators should carefully consider the justification when omitting important value perspectives or the views of important groups.
 2. Evaluators should consider not only the immediate operations and outcomes of whatever is being evaluated, but also the broad assumptions, implications, and potential side effects of it.
 3. Freedom of information is essential in a democracy. Hence, barring compelling reason to the contrary, evaluators should allow all relevant stakeholders to have access to evaluative information and should actively disseminate that information to stakeholders if resources allow. If different evaluation results are communicated in forms that are tailored to the interests of different stakeholders, those communications should ensure that each stakeholder group is aware of the existence of the other communications. Communications that are tailored to a given stakeholder should always include all important results that may bear on interests of that stakeholder. In all cases, evaluators should strive to present results as clearly and simply as accuracy allows so that clients and other stakeholders can easily understand the evaluation process and results.
 4. Evaluators should maintain a balance between client needs and other needs. Evaluators necessarily have a special relationship with the client who funds or requests the evaluation. By virtue of that relationship, evaluators must strive to meet legitimate client needs whenever it is feasible and appropriate to do so. However, that relationship can also place evaluators in difficult dilemmas when client interests conflict with other interests, or when client interests conflict with the obligation of evaluators for systematic inquiry, competence, integrity, and respect for people. In these cases, evaluators should explicitly identify and discuss the conflicts with the client and relevant stakeholders, resolve them when possible, determine whether continued work on the evaluation is advisable if the conflicts cannot be resolved, and make clear any significant limitations on the evaluation that might result if the conflict is not resolved.
 5. Evaluators have obligations that encompass the public interest and

good. These obligations are especially important when evaluators are supported by publicly generated funds; but clear threats to the public good should never be ignored in any evaluation. Because the public interest and good are rarely the same as the interests of any particular group (including those of the client or funding agency), evaluators will usually have to go beyond an analysis of particular stakeholder interests when considering the welfare of society as a whole.

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