

PLS 506
Program Evaluation

Summer I & II 2009

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Course Objectives

Program evaluation is a common form of policy analysis that is practiced widely in the public and nonprofit sector. Program evaluations supply information that program managers and policymakers use to make decisions about which programs to fund, modify, expand, or eliminate. In other words, its focus is on helping public managers and policymakers determine whether the policy or program is working. Therefore, it is an important accountability tool used by program managers and funders. Thus, it is important for public managers and policy analysts to be well versed in the basic concepts and techniques used in the evaluation of program processes and impacts.

All evaluations have weaknesses, and some have more than others. A great deal of money is also spent on evaluations and they are often very difficult to conduct successfully. The primary goal of this course is to help students become informed consumers of the products of evaluation research and to learn the basic skills needed to design and conduct high quality evaluations. Students will be exposed to the common forms of policy and program evaluation such as needs assessments, monitoring social programs, and assessing the effectiveness or efficiency of their impacts. At its core, program evaluation requires the use of social science research methodology to determine whether policies and programs make a difference. Accordingly, much of the course content revolves around methodological issues related to proper research design. However, evaluations often raise important social, political, and ethical issues. These will be discussed as well. Specifically, the course is designed to:

- Develop a familiarity with the range of methods and research designs employed in program evaluation in order to critically evaluate the quality of a program evaluation;
- Improve your ability to articulate program objectives and logic models that can be used in process or outcome evaluations;
- Develop your expertise in framing evaluation questions and developing a research design that is most appropriate for answering these questions;
- Develop your appreciation of the complexity of the methodological challenges and political, social, ethical, and practical issues associated with evaluating policies and programs;
- Learn how to communicate the results of your program evaluations to managers, decisionmakers, and the general public; and,
- Ultimately, help you become a more effective policy analyst or public manager.

These objectives will be met by exposing you to the theories and concepts associated with policy and program evaluation as well as practical analytical tools and techniques derived from these theories. We will also discuss the political and ethical implications associated with program evaluations the use of different research designs. The course will develop your critical thinking abilities by analyzing case studies and actual program evaluations. Your oral communication skills will be enhanced through class presentations. Writing assignments will be used to improve your ability to communicate your ideas and arguments in written form.

Readings

The following books are required for this course and can be purchased at local bookstores or through vendors on the Internet:

- Rossi, Peter H., Mark W. Lipsey, and Howard E. Freeman. 2004. *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach*. Seventh Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. ISBN 0761908943
- Wholey, Joseph S., Harry P. Hatry, and Kathryn E. Newcomer (eds.). 2004. *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*. Second Edition. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. ISBN 0787967130

Additional required and recommended readings have been placed on reserve in the library or have links on the class web site. Copies of the lecture notes and overheads used in class can also be found on the class web site.

Expectations & Approach

This is not a lecture-dominated class where the instructor speaks and the students passively listen. While new theories and concepts may be introduced through lectures, the majority of the course is structured as a seminar. Students are expected to do the reading in advance and course time will be spent discussing and applying the readings by discussing program evaluations or case studies. Course readings are supplemented with videos or occasional guest speakers. Individual and group exercises will also be used to analyze the theories and concepts in the readings. While part of your learning will also be cognitive or factual in nature, much of what you learn in this course will involve developing your analytical skills on your own and enhancing your self-awareness of the organizations in which you work or the programs that are of interest to you. I encourage you to share your professional experiences with others in the class during formal and informal discussion. Supplemental information to stimulate your learning experience is available on the class web site. I encourage you to make full use of these resources and suggest other web sites that can be shared with your fellow students via the course web site. I also encourage you to discuss the cases and program evaluations with your fellow students outside of class. In short, students are expected to take an active part in their learning and course discussions will largely be shaped by the issues in the readings that are of most interest to students. Thus, you are encouraged to prepare yourself for, and be open to, the variety of ways that you can learn during this course.

Course Requirements

Your grade in this class will be based on your ability to understand and apply the theories discussed in the course readings. More specifically, your grade will depend on your performance on the following course requirements:

Class Participation

Students are expected to complete the assigned readings and come to class prepared to discuss all readings, handouts, and assignments that are due. To ensure that students are prepared to discuss the readings, I will randomly ask students to summarize a reading, describe a theory, or discuss a case. Each student should also be prepared to share with the class questions that the readings raised and be able to identify the most significant point or contribution that the author makes to the practice of public administration.

While attendance will not be taken on a regular basis, poor classroom attendance will result in a failing participation grade since you cannot participate if you are not in class. Therefore, you should notify the instructor when you are unable to attend class. If you should miss a session when a video is shown, it may be possible to make arrangements to view the film privately at the library or to borrow the video. In certain circumstances it may also be possible to make-up other in-class activities with a written assignment if frequent absences have become a problem. Your participation grade will also be lowered due to the frequent inability to respond to the instructor's questions, poor class preparation, lack of enthusiastic participation in class exercises, or the failure to treat others in the classroom with respect (e.g., talking while others are talking, ridiculing other students, etc.). Simply put, in order to receive an "A" in this class you must be a civil, active contributor to class and not merely score well on exams and assignments.

Exam

There will be one exam at the end of the class during final exam time. It will be an objective exam consisting of some combination of multiple-choice, short answer, and essay questions. Several readings may be provided in advance of the exam that will be used for exam questions.

Critique of Evaluation Reported in the Popular Press (Individual)

It is not uncommon that the findings of some major evaluation are reported in the popular press. However, it is also common that the findings are misreported or exaggerate the positive or negative findings from the evaluation. This assignment is designed to help you learn how to read the news related to such findings with a critical eye. For this assignment you are to find a report of a major policy or program evaluation that was reported in the popular press (e.g., New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, Time, etc.) and critique the evaluation in a 2 – 3 page memo. Since virtually every evaluation has a weakness, you should approach your review assuming that the evaluation was poorly done and try to look for possible weaknesses to critique. Does the news report suggest any problems? Does it potentially oversell the findings? In short, be critical. Your memo should provide a concise summary and critique of the study. Your critique should be based strictly on the information contained (or not

contained) in the article. It should also identify the relevant information that should have been included for the reader to make a proper judgment and interpretation of the evaluation findings. You are not to read the original study. You are required to submit a copy of the article (preferably in electronic form) that you reviewed that is suitable for distribution to your classmates at a later date.

Case Analysis (individual)

It is not uncommon for evaluations to raise a variety of social, political, and ethical issues. In order to explore these issues, we will analyze a case study. Since case analysis is essentially self-learning through simulated experience, its success depends on the lively exchange of information, ideas, and opinions during case discussions. Students must come prepared to discuss all aspects of the case, apply the concepts in the readings to the case, and be able to answer questions posed by the instructor or fellow classmates or it will adversely affect your class participation grade. Your analysis of the case will be in the form of a memo limited to no more than 2 pages in length. The course website will provide additional guidance for completing this assignment.

Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) Training (Individual)

RCR training has become more and more commonplace in graduate schools across the country, not just in the sciences. In fact, the National Science Foundation will soon mandate RCR training for any graduate student who is supported on an NSF grant and many instructors require this training as part of regular course requirements. There is no better way for you to familiarize yourselves with the responsibilities for the responsible conduct of evaluation research than to have you complete the same training module used by thousands of faculty and students around the country. This assignment requires completing the RCR online training course offered through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) at the University of Miami. The directions for registering for and completing the training can be found at the bottom of the following webpage: <http://www.uncw.edu/orssp/Responsible-Conduct.html>. You then need to submit a copy of your completion certificate to get a grade for this assignment.

Critique of a Program Evaluation (Group)

Even if you never do a program evaluation, it is important for public managers and policy analysts to be a good consumer of evaluations and be able to communicate complicated evaluation findings to a lesser informed audience of policymakers or the public. For this assignment, your group must identify a major evaluation of a policy or program implemented in the public or nonprofit sector. The evaluation should be from a reputable governmental or nongovernment organization (e.g., Brookings, Urban Institute, etc.) and be available for download on the internet. Your group should prepare a short concise critique of the evaluation in the form of a 4 - 5 page memorandum. The critique should describe the treatment (i.e., program), its intended targets, the intended benefits, the program's causal model/program logic/theory, the research design, methods, and conclusions. You should then critique the evaluation's major strengths and weaknesses with a critical eye and highlight any major sources of potential bias or problems related to the study's validity. You will present your findings

during the second half of the semester. The week before your presentation you should circulate to the rest of class your memo, a hyperlink to the final report, and if available a link to an executive summary. Your presentation is limited to 12 minutes and should be prepared as if you were briefing an audience of policymakers and the public.

Program Evaluation Project (Individual or Group)

In order to learn how to apply the theories and concepts from the readings, students will also complete a Program Evaluation Project either individually or as a group of no more than 3 students. If you elect to do the project as a group, it should reflect the work of the additional group members. You have three options for completing the assignment:

- Conduct an empirical study that evaluates a policy or program; *or*
- Research Design for a policy or program; *or*
- Conduct a meta-analysis of evaluation studies.

The course website describes the requirements associated with each option in greater detail. Regardless of the option selected, students will be required to complete two short written assignments based on the policy or program. First, students will be required to submit a short 1 - 2 page Program Memo that summarizes the program, problem, intervention, and intended beneficiaries. The Measurement Memo uses the program's causal model/program logic/theory developed in the first memo to specify the research questions, operational definitions, and specific measures used to gauge program success. While ungraded, your effort on these assignments will be factored into your participation grades. The memos will also provide a chance to provide constructive feedback prior to submitting the final report.

All students will then prepare a final report consistent with the options chosen. It should be professional in appearance and include a cover, table of contents, executive summary, the main body of the evaluation report (e.g., discussion of program, the causal model/program logic/theory, research questions/hypotheses, research design, data collection, data analysis procedures, and where applicable findings and conclusions), supporting tables and figures, a bibliography, and any necessary appendices or supporting materials. The report is expected to be clear, concise, and professional. It should communicate your findings effectively to your client. Final reports will probably be around 25 double-spaced pages in length but will vary based on the option, program, and analysis. All students will present their evaluation reports in class. Students will have 10 minutes for your presentation. Your presentation should be designed as if you were briefing a potential funder or evaluation sponsor.

Grading

All written work will be evaluated based on your analysis of the readings and cases, the organization of your ideas, the strength and substance of your arguments, your ability to properly apply the concepts discussed in class, and the quality of your writing (e.g., spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc.). Failure to complete an assignment or failing to follow directions will result in a 0 for the assignment. The final course grade will be calculated based upon the following weights:

Class Participation	10% (100 Points)
Critique of Popular Press Article	10% (100 Points)
Critique of Program Evaluation	10% (100 Points)
Case Memo	10% (100 Points)
RCR Training	10% (100 Points)
Program Evaluation Project	25% (250 points)
Exam	25% (250 points)

Course grades will be calculated based on the following: A (920 – 1000), A- (900 – 919), B+ (880 – 899), B (820 – 879), B- (800 – 819), C+ (780 – 799), C (720 – 779), C- (700 – 719), D+ (680 – 699), D (620 – 679), D- (600 – 619), and F (0 – 599). There is no rounding up or down. In the event that an assignment is given a letter grade, points are allocated by using the midpoint of the grade range and multiplying it the number of possible points. For example, an A for a 5% memo would equal 95% of 50 points or 47.5 while a B+ would equal 89% of 50 points or 44.5. There is no rounding up or down.

Be advised that I have a zero tolerance policy for cheating. Anyone caught cheating will receive a failing grade for the course.

Late Assignments/Incompletes

Tentative due dates for course assignments are listed on the attached course schedule and are subject to change based on class progress and student preferences. You should check the course schedule and announcements pages on the course web site periodically for changes in due dates. Students may bring forward requests for changing the dates of major assignments for class approval with a minimum of one-week advance notice to the class.

Unless I have agreed in advance, all assignments are due at the end of the class period they are due. Informing the instructor of your intention to be absent does not waive your obligation to submit the work that is due. Late assignments lose one full letter grade per class they are late. An incomplete will only be granted when there are serious extenuating circumstances that occur after the withdrawal period.

Other Class Policies

All cell phones are to be turned off in class. If your phone rings, the Professor reserves the right to answer the call and/or to confiscate the phone.