



Evaluation for Accountability: An Overview¹

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The title of this publication indicates that evaluation is a prerequisite to the process of accountability. This, of course, is not correct. One can account to some extent without having evaluation data. However, having evaluation data available greatly increases the depth and scope of the whole accountability process.

The concept of accountability has been with us for a long time. Demosthenes said, "I claim that through my career I have been subject to public audit in all the posts I have held" (*The Accountability of Government Departments*, 1955), thus revealing the accountability to which leadership in early Athens was held. Historians note that accountability was practiced by not only the early government of Athens, but also by the early governments of the Nile kingdoms and medieval Rome. So when in the fall of 1973 Walter Mondale delivered a speech, "The Presidency and Watergate," calling for a higher degree of accountability for a runaway presidency, he was not calling for anything unheard of before.

Now we hear so much talk emphasizing the need to provide accurate and effective evaluation and accountability. Considering economic trends from the national level to county and municipal levels, we may be in the era of "survival accountability." If we don't account for the impact of our programs, we may not survive. This is an era when rapid, continuous, effective evaluation and accountability data are not only desired and useful, but are also mandated by

many funding bodies. Accountability is essential as tight budgets increase the pressure for the more efficient use of limited resources.

MEANING OF EVALUATION

There are many definitions of evaluation and they are generally tied to the use or purpose of the process. In education, evaluation is commonly defined as an "assessment of merit" or assessment of quality or value. Evaluation is a process of determining how well we did what we set out to do, or whether our programs achieved the specified goals and objectives.

Evaluation is built upon (1) indicators, (2) criteria, (3) evidence, and (4) judgement. The process of evaluation includes identifying important components (indicators) of the program to be evaluated and making decisions (judgement) based on information (evidence) that has been systematically gathered, examined, and related to some standard (criteria).

PURPOSE OF EVALUATION

Evaluation serves to improve decision making about the value or merit of programs, decision making that determines if programs have met their objectives and that is the basis for the revision and improvement of existing programs.

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MEANING OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Leon Lessinger (1971) stated that "accountability is the product of a process." Accountability means that a public or private agency entering into a contractual agreement to perform a service will be held answerable for performing according to agreed upon terms, within an established time period, and with a stipulated use of resources and performance standards.

Traditionally in western societies accountability has focused on management, efficiency, and productivity. Accountability also focuses on justifying, reporting, and explaining (Anderson 1975), "proving," as it were, that the results specified have been accomplished. Western cultures, though not necessarily all cultures around the world (Taylor et al., 1979), generally acknowledge that the public has a right to know what actions those they have entrusted have taken. For example, citizens have a right to know what those entrusted with public education, including Extension, have accomplished with their resources. In a way, accountability is similar to an audit: it requires results in relation to incurred costs and established objectives.

Accountability implies a subordinate-superordinate relationship. For example, the county Extension agent is accountable to the board of county commissioners, and the federal Extension service is accountable to the Congress of the United States. Under certain situations, knowing that one is to account for his/her productivity may actually reduce performance (Schlenker, 1986). When held accountable, one's identity may be threatened. That is, when stakeholders consider an actor's performance relative to standards of "right or wrong," "success or failure," the performance has implications for the actor's identity (Weigold, 1987). When performance meets or exceeds standards, the actor's reputation is enhanced. However, if performance fails to meet standards, the actor's image is tarnished and the actor may even incur blame or punishment.

On the other hand, being held accountable may encourage one to perform, including assuming responsibility for accountability. If an actor perceives the standards to which he/she is being held as relevant to his/her performance, he/she is more likely to accept responsibility for accounting for the events' or actions' results. Similarly, an actor is more likely to assume responsibility for accountability if he/she perceives an event or action as important.

Extension must account to many groups and individuals, including government and private agencies, funders and clientele. For Extension, accountability deals with such things as the number of clients involved, the number of meetings held, and the days expended on a program. Also, accountability would be interested in reporting a program's impact as shown by end results and changes in knowledge and behavior.

PURPOSE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Friedman (1973) suggests there are three basic reasons why an agency, institution, or individual should account to the public or stakeholders. He feels agencies are accountable for their (1) management practices. That is, they need to show they are doing what their mission indicates they should be doing. It is also important, according to Friedman, for an agency to account for (2) its efficiency and productivity: has maximum output been achieved with minimum input? Finally, an agency must demonstrate its (3) honesty and integrity to the public or stakeholders.

Accountability places the burden of responsibility on an agency, institution, or individual and mandates a reporting of the results of that responsibility. In short, it prevents passing the buck. It makes Extension responsible for what it does with what it has. Furthermore, it enables others to make equitable, impartial decisions about Extension's efforts to evaluate its efforts—based on program input and output. Extension's programs are a product bought and paid for by the taxpayers, and taxpayers want to know what their money is buying. If the product is inferior or if the price is too high, the taxpayers will not continue to buy.

Accountability is realized when those responsible for justifying, reporting, and explaining a program can describe a program's input, quantify the program's output, and identify and relate the process costs to the program's accomplishment and worth.

LEVELS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Process evaluation has to do with evaluating a program's educational events and activities. Product evaluation has to do with evaluating the outcome or impact of the educational process. One can categorize accountability in four levels. One can account for the educational process by describing what and how it was implemented; this we will call

LEVEL 1 ACCOUNTABILITY. One can also account for the educational process in an evaluative context. That is, one can account for the extent to which the educational process was implemented according to the plan; this we will call **LEVEL 2 ACCOUNTABILITY.**

One can account for product evaluation by describing outcomes or impacts of the educational process; this we will call **LEVEL 3 ACCOUNTABILITY.** Then one can account for product evaluation by comparing outcome or impact with the objectives and standards established in the program; this we will call **LEVEL 4 ACCOUNTABILITY.**

Accountability that takes place in the context of **LEVELS 2 and 4** is much more valuable for policy and decision makers than that which takes place in the context of the other two levels. Information from **LEVELS 2 and 4** will provide information for placement of responsibility, which will reveal the degree of congruence between input and output and between output and program objectives or standards established in the plans.

SUMMARY

From their inception, the concepts of evaluation and accountability have suffered from the problem of having too many definitions. A review of literature will reveal numerous definitions, purposes, and applications for each of these concepts. Today, though, there seems to be a much clearer definition for each and more consensus regarding the purposes.

Evaluation is considered the specifying, obtaining, and interpreting of data to provide meaningful information for making decisions about program improvement. Evaluation requires the (1) identification of objectives, (2) the collection of data on the accomplishment of objectives, and (3) the judgment of program effectiveness. The four elements essential to the evaluation process are (1) indicators, (2) criteria, (3) evidence and (4) judgment. The evaluator is usually involved in the total process, collecting the evidence, comparing the evidence against standards or criteria, and making concluding judgments influencing the decision making process for program improvement.

Accountability requires that program results be reported, justified, and explained to those with decision-making power. The decision makers, on the

basis of the explanation, reporting, and justifying—all of which require data or evidence—will make judgments that vitally affect the program. Accountability in the simplest form is an accounting of what is done with what was given. Others, those reported to, in turn make judgments regarding program success.

Evaluation data permits the educator to account for a program. The accountability process is more than reporting and explaining the program's process and outcome, but is reporting and explaining in relation to plans and standards.

Evaluation and accountability must be seen as a tool for the educator. Without evaluation there is little basis for program change; without accountability there is little basis for program support.

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