

Conducting Frugal Evaluations of Programs

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Scholarly evaluations of criminal justice programs can sometimes leave public officials and justice professionals frustrated. Although they recognize the general value of evaluation, the cost and the occasional lack of practical results often make practitioners and policymakers long for a more economical and functional analysis.

Enter Michael G. Maxfield of the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University. He has taken what he describes as the first step toward an "evaluation 101" primer by creating a guide describing "frugal" evaluation

methods, that is, "approaches to design, measurement, data collection, and interpretation that produce useful findings at relatively low cost."

Maxfield lists three elements essential to frugal evaluation. Evaluations must be (1) purposive, (2) analytic, and (3) empirical.

Purposive Evaluations

"Purposive" means that an evaluation should have a specific goal or objective—a reason for doing the evaluation. Maxfield acknowledges that this may seem obvious. However, "just as many programs are launched without clear goals, evaluations are too often begun without some clear view of what is to be learned." Busy practitioners may simply assume that

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the academic experts conducting the evaluation know what their goal is. The experts, in turn, may assume they know what the practitioners' needs are. Maxfield suggests laying aside such assumptions and explicitly spelling out the purpose prior to the start of the evaluation.

Analytic Evaluations

"Analytic" refers to the logic of the evaluation. All aspects of the evaluation should be rationally connected to one another as well as to the program. Evaluation objectives should be derived from program goals. Similarly, data collection methods should reflect program goals and activities.

Take, for example, a program designed to reduce the amount of graffiti in a city's business district. If the objective in evaluating this program is simply to compare the number of spray-painted walls preprogram to the number of similar walls postprogram, a direct observation of the walls would suffice. Conducting more costly and time-consuming interviews with business owners would be unnecessary.

If, however, the evaluation was intended to measure business owners' satisfaction with the antigraffiti program, such interviews would become essential. The first step would then be to determine the most frugal method of obtaining the business owners' opinions—perhaps through focus groups.

Empirical Evaluations

"Empirical" means that evaluation results will be based on real-world experience—on actual data, not expert judgments. Maxfield emphasizes that empirical evaluation does not have to mean a quantitative evaluation with precise numbers. "Experience comes

in many forms, some more readily quantified than others."

Think Flexibility

Frugal evaluations can take a wide variety of forms, and the ability to remain flexible can be a great asset. "Traditional approaches emphasize control through formal evaluation designs, most notably random experiments. More flexible approaches to evaluation recognize that the three evaluation elements can be applied in situations where traditional, formal designs are not possible."

One situation in which staying flexible is an improvement over traditional evaluation methods is when the program being evaluated has undergone several program changes. "Innovative justice policy is rarely implemented in the kind of stable environment assumed by traditional evaluation designs. Instead, officials often tinker with new interventions after they have been implemented." A frugal evaluation must allow changes in evaluation goals and methods in order to reflect changes in the program being evaluated and to avoid wasted effort in reviewing an original program that is no longer in force.

Finding Out What Works

Maxfield believes that as the number and variety of innovative programs increase, it is becoming "more important to distinguish effective from ineffective directions. This is especially true in a time when public organizations at all levels are being asked to do more with less and being held accountable for whatever they do." Evaluating new programs through simple yet potentially powerful evaluation methods can identify what really works and, just as importantly, what really doesn't.

For more information

- Contact Michael G. Maxfield at the School of Criminal Justice, Rutgers University, 123 Washington Street, Newark, NJ 07102, maxfield@andromeda.rutgers.edu.
- Download *Guide to Frugal Evaluation for Criminal Justice* online at <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/187350.pdf>.