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Guest Editors' Introduction

Process of evaluation: Focus on stakeholders

Stakeholder involvement in evaluation has played a prominent, and increasing role in both evaluation theory and evaluation practice. Evaluation perspectives of all types now address the need for stakeholders to be involved. There is, however, a diversity of views both about the nature and definition of stakeholders and the reasons for their involvement.

Most generally, stakeholders are all of those individuals who have a vested interest in the program. This covers a wide spectrum of individuals—including those with program decision authority, program providers, program recipients and the community at large. Depending on one's evaluation theoretic perspective (see [Alkin, 2004](#)), different individuals or groups are assigned higher or lower priority as important stakeholders.

There are two contrasting points of view about the primary reason for involving stakeholders. [Greene \(2005\)](#) defines these disparate rationales as “(a) to enhance the usefulness of the evaluation results, processes, or both and (b) to advance values related to equity, empowerment, and social change within the evaluation context” (p. 397). In the first instance, it is assumed that creating a sense of ownership will enhance the possibilities that evaluation findings will be used for program improvement and also that engagement in the evaluation process itself provides potential benefit to stakeholders. The second rationale recognizes that evaluation is a value-laden activity and, given the potential for political influence typically present in an evaluative process, concerns about equity, justice and empowerment demand diverse stakeholder participation. In essence, obtaining the participation of stakeholders is the equitable and just way of conducting an evaluation.

The nature and extent of stakeholder participation and the specific activities stakeholders are engaged in differ based on evaluation perspective. [Alkin, Hofstetter, and Ai \(1998\)](#) provided an analysis of stakeholder involvement under different evaluation theoretic approaches. That is, the way that an evaluator views his world not only influences the extent of stakeholder participation sought and permitted, but also the particular aspects of the evaluation in which the stakeholder will participate. An evaluator who views evaluation as a kind of applied research activity, while likely to encourage stakeholders to help define the evaluation questions, may be less inclined to invite stakeholder participation in instrument selection or data analysis, for example. Evaluators who hope to attain a high degree of utilization of both the evaluation process and evaluation findings or those who are motivated by social justice concerns would each seek high levels of

stakeholder participation in most stages of the evaluation—although perhaps in different ways.

The focus of this issue of *Studies in Educational Evaluation* is not on evaluation studies and their results, which are typically found in this journal. Rather, the concern is with depicting the breadth and depth of stakeholder involvement in particular evaluations. We recognize that only infrequently can evaluators conduct their studies in a manner that they consider to be “ideal.” The process of evaluation requires continuous adjustment to the specific factors faced not only at the beginning of the evaluation but during the course of its conduct as well. In this regard, we have focused on the nature of stakeholder involvement and, particularly, the role of the evaluator in encouraging and managing this involvement. In calling for papers for this issue, we asked authors to consider: To what extent and during which parts of the evaluation were stakeholders involved? What actions did the evaluator(s) take to encourage stakeholder involvement? What difficulties were encountered and what actions were taken to resolve those difficulties?

The papers selected provide evaluation case examples in a variety of settings—not all of which are school-based. We considered this appropriate since, in this issue, we are hoping to provide understandings about evaluation that are cross-disciplinary in nature, but remain firmly rooted in the helping disciplines.

Jean King and John Ehlert provide examples from three evaluations they conducted to show the manner and extent to which stakeholders were involved during various phases of an evaluation (Chapter 1). In one of the three school district evaluations discussed, measures taken to ensure the quality of stakeholder involvement included providing a convenient meeting place and time as well as childcare. These considerations allowed stakeholders to engage in meaningful and productive conversations, particularly around issues of framing evaluation questions, developing data collection strategies, and making inferences from the data.

Tanner LeBaron Wallace describes the process of introducing stakeholder participation into an effectiveness evaluation. Wallace's study (Chapter 2) revealed challenges associated with managing stakeholder involvement in a theory-driven, participatory-based effectiveness evaluation of a case management intervention. Specifically, she indicates how facilitating the logic modeling process among involved stakeholders could be combined with sophisticated quantitative methodology to produce findings able to evaluate effectiveness.

John Sylvestre and colleagues (Chapter 3) examined mechanisms for engaging stakeholders in the planning of a collaborative multi-agency evaluation. They described issues that not only should be considered in the planning of an evaluation, but also took different stakeholder perspectives into account by touching on strategies to involve stakeholders whose roles might be viewed as peripheral in the conduct of an evaluation.

Billie Gastic and colleagues present an interesting chapter (Chapter 4) describing a stakeholder “gone wild”. In this instance, the nature of “facilitating stakeholder participation” takes on a different form. When stakeholder actions are potentially injurious to the project, “facilitation” can mean being aware of and working with the stakeholder to modify or reduce their participation.

Cheryl Poth and Lyn Shulha, in their case study of evaluator behavior, framed the discussion of stakeholder involvement around the issue of increasing trust, understanding, and close engagement between evaluators and stakeholders through participatory evaluation. In their chapter (Chapter 5), they described the process of stakeholder engagement through interpretation of stakeholder cues, which altered the manner in which interactions between stakeholders and evaluators took place.

Sandy Taut, in the final chapter, provides a synthesis of concepts and practical ideas gleaned from the evaluation literature and previous chapters that demonstrate how stakeholder participation may be facilitated by evaluators.

Our hope is that this volume can serve as a pedagogical tool to advance evaluation practice in terms of stakeholder involvement. Each case example provides real-world situations where evaluators made influential decisions that directly effected stakeholder involvement in the evaluation. Furthermore, in describing their

experiences managing stakeholder involvement, the authors have provided pertinent material to develop relevant research questions that can frame future research projects aimed at understanding the impact of stakeholder involvement on important evaluation outcomes.

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