NANCY A. VAN HOUSE

Acting Dean and Associate Professor
School of Library and Information Studies
University of California
Berkeley, California

Evaluation Strategies*

ABSTRACT

Evaluation is used for two major purposes: internal decision making and communication with the external environment. An organization may need very different approaches and strategies for these two. Much of the work that has been done in library evaluation has been for internal purposes. Evaluation is also important for an organization's relationship with the environment that provides the resources the organization needs to survive. A manager must convince the environment that the organization's mission and goals are of value to the parent organization's larger mission and that the organization is capable of achieving them.

INTRODUCTION

Bart Giamatti, discussing the state of higher education, says that the greatest danger to the university is "the smugness that believes the institution's value is so self-evident that it no longer needs explication, its mission so manifest that it no longer requires definition and articulation." Instead, he says, universities must be continually challenged to justify themselves, to themselves and to the society that they serve. They must be held accountable and urged to continually

*This paper has benefited substantially from my work with Thomas Childers and Charles McClure on measurement and evaluation. Many of the ideas presented in this paper are further developed in Childers and Van House (in press).

reexamine their presuppositions and their actions, lest "they stiffen up and lose their evolving complementarity to other American institutions" (Giamatti, 1988, p. 25).

One could easily substitute "library" every time Giamatti says "university." Evaluation is the process by which an organization examines, not only its actions, but its presuppositions, values, and mission. It is the process by which an organization holds itself accountable and by which it justifies its actions to its members and clients, to its funding agency, and to the larger public. Thoughtful evaluation can form the basis both for a careful self-examination of a library and for its conversation with its environment.

Evaluation is used for two major purposes: internal decision making and communication with the external environment. An organization may need very different approaches and strategies for these two (Childers & Van House, in press).

People make informal evaluations all the time, of all kinds of events, people, organizations, and objects. They compare their experiences with their expectations. Evaluation is made more formal and objective by making the process and the decisions more explicit and by collecting data on performance. A major rationale for formal, objective evaluation is to resolve, or at least to reduce, the differences in assessment that may result when more than one person is involved in an evaluation: agreement on the process, criteria, and evidence can reduce disagreement on conclusions.

THE EVALUATION PROCESS

The basic questions an organization must answer as a prerequisite to doing evaluation follow:

- What are the desired results of the program or activities being evaluated?
- How does the organization measure progress toward those ends?
- What produces the desired results?

This last question is the most difficult because it is a question of causality. How does an organization know what caused the results observed? How does management know whether, and which of, their actions created those results? How does the organization know what to do, or to do differently, in the future?

Figure 1 is the idealized evaluation process. It is idealized because an organization rarely performs all these steps in this order. Frequently, an organization begins evaluation only after a new program or service is implemented or when problems are suspected. But at that point it is assessing a moving target: the evaluation may miss the first effects of the project or program or lack evidence of how things were before problems developed.

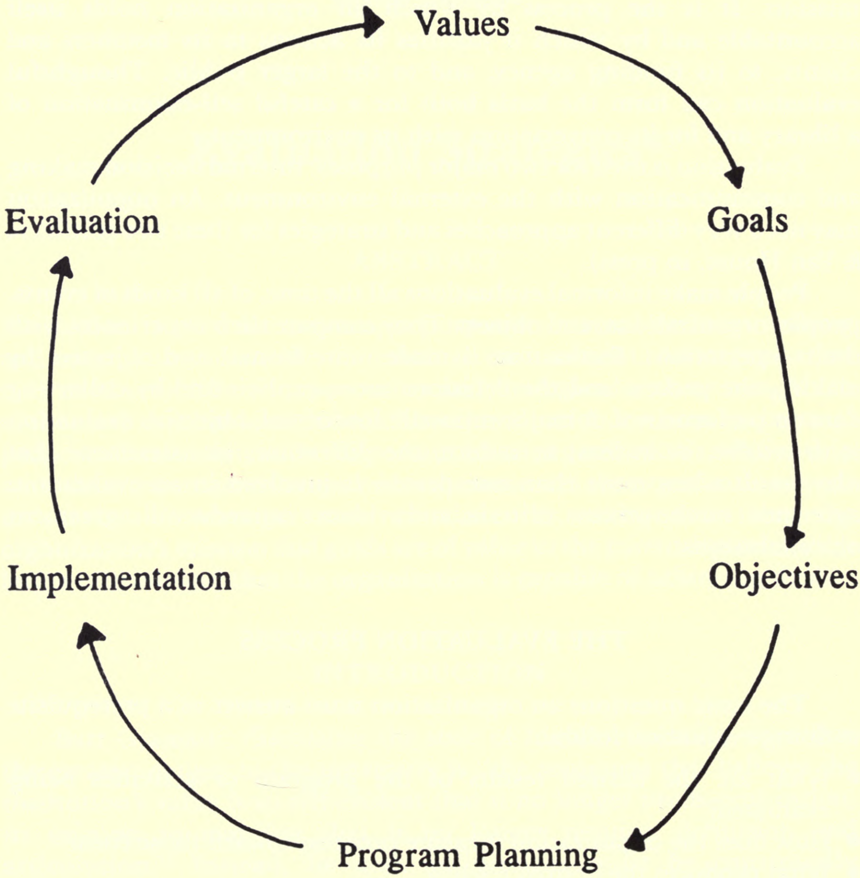

Figure 1. Evaluation process

The process portrayed in Figure 1 begins with values. These are determined by organizational or professional cultures. Wilson (1989), for example, notes that many organizations are composed primarily of people from one profession, which determines that organization's values and priorities. He uses the example of the Tennessee Valley

Authority, which was initially composed almost exclusively of engineers. They were interested in building dams and power plants, not environmental preservation.

Disagreement on values is most likely when more than one point of view is represented. Within an organization, disagreement is most likely when more than one profession is involved. Wilson gives the example of the U.S. Forest Service, in which the meaning of the "yield" of a forest is very different depending on who is talking: a biologist, a forester, an economist, or an engineer.

Based on their values (which may never be fully articulated, particularly if there is no disagreement within the organization) and on the politics of the situation (discussed below), decision makers establish an organization's mission and goals. Objectives make these concrete and measurable. How will the organization know whether it has met its goals? What is the evidence, the data, on which the evaluation will be based? Ideally, only once the mission, goals, and objectives have been identified does the organization determine the activities that it will undertake to achieve those goals.

Ideally, again, if the organization has not already collected data as part of a needs assessment, it collects baseline data before implementing a program: how can it know whether things have improved if it has not assessed where it is in the first place? Next, the organization evaluates the program or activities in question by collecting data to assess its progress on its goals and objectives.

Finally, the organization reconsiders its values, goals, objectives, and activities. Now that decision makers see what happened, are modifications needed? Are there unanticipated consequences? Unsuccessful activities?

An organization rarely follows this idealized process, however. An existing organization is a jumble of prior practice, ongoing programs, individual preferences and beliefs, and interest groups. What is useful about this idealized schema, however, is how it illustrates the underlying evaluation process.

In evaluation, disagreements are possible, even likely. A major use of the idealized, explicit evaluation process is that it often helps the participants to determine the roots of disagreement. Disagreement on an assessment, for example, may be a function of disagreement on values, unclear goals and objectives, differing assumptions about causality, or contradictory evidence on outcomes.

Several issues that are not addressed by this idealized description follow:

- How are values, goals, and objectives decided upon?
- Who are the decision makers, and whose preferences do they consider? What weight is given to different groups' preferences?
- Does an organization have a unified, identifiable set of goals and objectives? What about competing priorities? How are trade-offs made among them?
- How does the organization assess progress? What and how does it measure? What about goals that are not measurable?

These questions point out an important aspect of the evaluation process: evaluation is ultimately political. It depends on who is making the decisions and whose values and priorities are considered.

INTERNAL USES OF EVALUATION

The evaluation process of Figure 1 works best when the purpose of evaluation is to assess the success of activities in achieving identified goals and objectives. Evaluation is then used to inform resource allocation decisions. Should a program be instituted? Continued? Get more resources? Fewer? Is one course of action more successful than another? More cost-effective?

Other purposes (adapted from Weiss, 1972) include the following:

- Attention directing
- Problem solving
- Scorekeeping (How are we doing? Are we doing better or worse than before?)
- Conflict resolution (If two groups disagree on the value or effectiveness of activities or programs, an objective evaluation may resolve that disagreement.)
- Complacency reduction (An organization may overestimate its own effectiveness—objective evaluation may indicate problems.)
- Postponement or ducking responsibility (No action need be taken while an evaluation is being made.)
- Public relations
- Fulfilling grant requirements

These last two purposes lead into a discussion of the external uses of evaluation.

EXTERNAL USES OF EVALUATION

Evaluation is important for an organization's relationship with the environment that provides the resources the organization needs to survive

(Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). An organization may use evaluation to communicate a variety of messages to its external environment for the following reasons:

- To justify its existence and its budget
- To explain what it does (What an organization measures determines to some degree what it can say about itself to others.)
- To demonstrate its priorities and concerns (The areas in which it sets objectives and monitors performance tell observers what its priorities are.)

Heymann (1987) says that a manager must convince his or her environment of two things: that the organization's mission and goals are of value and that the organization is capable of achieving them. This second point is worth emphasizing. Coming up with an acceptable mission is only the first step. The organization must also demonstrate its capacity to succeed.

Heymann (1987) goes on to say that those deciding whether to support an organization look at three things:

- What the organization does that affects their interests
- What its activities and interests say about what is important and whose interests are being considered
- What alliances the organization seems to be trying to build

Heymann's subject is the public sector, but his observations apply to any organization that needs the support of its environment. Special libraries in firms, for example, are generally not themselves profit centers, so they need the support of other parts of the organization in affirming the value of the library/information center to the parent organization's mission.

The related but separate processes of performing evaluation and reporting evaluation results are the means by which an organization communicates with and seeks to build support from its environment. For example, a police department that measures response time to calls demonstrates its concern for timely reaction. One that reports its educational contacts with the community demonstrates that its mission extends beyond crime detection and punishment to crime prevention and that it is building alliances with the public. A library that subdivides use figures by type of user (e.g., child versus adult) or type of service (branch versus main) implies that it is concerned with the types and distribution of services. A library that cannot report the time required to fill requests suggests that it does not care about timeliness of service.

The library's stakeholders include a wide range of groups with varying levels of interest in the library. Prominent among a library's stakeholders are the following:

- Users, who can be subdivided into numerous groups with differing needs and priorities
- Funders or the parent organization: the university, local government, the firm, whoever provides the library's support
- Staff, who are a critical resource and whose effort and energy are necessary for the library's success
- The public: members of the larger organization who are not necessarily library users (For academic libraries, this is faculty, students, and staff; for public libraries, this is the general public, especially taxpayers.)

What are stakeholders' concerns? Their concerns are of two types: library-specific concerns and more general concerns. For libraries that are public or quasi-public (e.g., libraries in private universities probably function more like publicly funded libraries than like corporate libraries), even people with no interest in the library per se examine the library through the lens of a set of ongoing concerns about the public sector (Heymann, 1987; Chase & Reveal, 1983). These include waste, corruption, and incompetence. The public and the press are always on the lookout for these failings in any public enterprise. In fact, people with no specific interest in the library are more likely to consider the library in this context because they may be more skeptical about the value of the library's services. The recent lengthy examination of university overhead charges, for example, has been front-page news because public money is at stake.

Public sector libraries also have to win the support of legislators at the appropriate levels of government. According to Heymann, legislators' major concerns are (a) the merits of the program or proposal, (b) what their stand would mean for their electoral support and influence on other matters, (c) the continued health of the legislative process itself, and (d) the demands of loyalty and friendship.

Similarly, appointed officials are concerned about the library's effect on their priorities: accomplishing their goals, being effective (and being seen as effective) in their jobs, and winning the support of the legislators. What this means is that the merits of the library itself are only one of several sets of concerns on which decisions are based.

More generally, libraries of all types are evaluated based on their contribution to their parent organization's larger mission and their effect on decision makers' other concerns, including power and influence relationships and the process by which decisions are made.

Every funder asks the larger question of why (and whether) the organization should support a library and at what level. What is the return on the investment in the library? Would those funds be better spent elsewhere? More than ever, the public sector—and the private sector as well—face endless, difficult trade-offs. Decision makers continually have to choose between allocating resources to the library or using them to meet other pressing needs.

For academic libraries, the question is what is the magnitude of their contribution toward the university's teaching and research (McClure, Van House, & Hert, 1991; Van House, 1990a; Koenig, 1990). For public libraries, the issue is their contribution toward solving community problems.

Tom Childers and I learned from the Public Library Effectiveness Study that public officials are concerned about the library's contribution to their larger community agendas (Van House, 1990b; Childers & Van House, in press). For example, one official was most interested in the library's literacy program. His priority was bringing jobs into the city, and employers need a literate work force. He did not care whether public libraries "should" be involved in literacy; his community had an urgent need that its library was addressing.

Decision makers are also concerned about how the library fits into ongoing patterns of power and influence. Typically, the library is just one of many areas in which they are making an ongoing series of decisions. The library is, in a sense, a temporary player in a continuing game by which resources are allocated and influence is exercised. A city council member in a city with district elections answered our questions about a controversial plan for a branch library by saying that he would defer to the council member in whose district the branch was located—as he would expect her to defer to him on decisions affecting his district (Van House, 1990b). The issue was not the library, but rather the power of council members over decisions affecting their districts.

External stakeholders also have concerns about library functions specifically. These concerns vary, but a major one is the collection. Does the library have the books and journals that people want? The prevailing public image of libraries of all types is as suppliers of materials. Librarians may see this as a naive and limited view, but that will not change the fact that this is most external observers' primary expectation of the library.

A critical issue in evaluation, particularly but not exclusively evaluation for communication with the external environment, is that the choice of the criteria by which an organization is to be evaluated is ultimately political. Each stakeholder group may have its own expectations and priorities. In fact, it is an oversimplification to assume that members of a group agree among themselves. The stakeholders may not themselves have consistent, rational, considered preferences, particularly if the library is not salient to their interests. And it is likely that different groups present the library with competing, equally valid preferences. The library has to decide which and whose preferences are to be considered, discover what those preferences are, and balance competing preferences and limited resources. All of which is likely to change rapidly, requiring a rapid, flexible response from the library.

INFORMATION FOR EVALUATION

Data are the objective evidence on which evaluation is based. Libraries typically measure the following:

- Resources
- Intensity of use of resources (e.g., circulation per volume)
- Internal processes (e.g., items cataloged)
- Output (e.g., circulation, reference transactions)
- Adequacy of performance relative to need (e.g., user success rates, circulation per capita)
- Availability
- Accessibility
- Cost to library
- Cost to client
- Outcomes

Moving down this list from inputs (resources) to outputs to outcomes, these concepts become more interesting and more difficult to measure. Traditionally, libraries have measured inputs and processes. More recently, they have begun to look more systematically at outputs (Van House, Lynch, McClure, Zweizig, & Rodger, 1987; Van House, Weil, & McClure, 1990).

What external evaluators are most interested in is outcomes, that is, the consequences of the library's actions, the effects of the library on the larger environment. Has the library made a difference in people's lives? For example, because of the library have the following occurred:

- Are students learning more?
- Are people finding jobs?
- Are workers more employable?
- Are people coping better with their life circumstances?
- Are researchers more productive?

The problem of demonstrating value is not unique to libraries, of course. In service organizations, in particular, where the outputs are intangible, the goals unclear, and effects often long delayed, it is difficult to measure results (Hasenfeld, 1983). Yet the commonly accepted model of rational resource allocation assumes that decision makers are searching for an optimal solution to the problem of maximizing goals (Feldman, 1989). Evaluation as libraries and other organizations have traditionally defined it is based on this model, which is of limited applicability.

OTHER INFORMATION FOR EVALUATION

If libraries cannot always measure the factors most of interest, particularly outcomes or impacts, and if they cannot define a unitary set of objectives to be maximized, what can be done?

First, research on library outcomes is needed. There is little, and most of it relates to special libraries or information in science and technology (Koenig, 1990). More needs to be done. This requires some serious thinking by librarians about what those impacts are, and how they can be identified and described to the library's external audience. This is not an easy task, but added efforts in this direction are essential.

Second, objective data are needed wherever possible. But the lack of objective measurement data in some areas does not mean that we have no information. In our interviews, Childers and I met city managers and city council members who had been youth-at-risk and attributed their success at least in part to the public library. They were now ardent supporters of the public library. Their own experiences had convinced them of the library's value, and they told persuasive stories.

Personal experience makes powerful stories. Anecdotal information can be used effectively with external decision makers (Childers & Van House, in press). It can also be used to guide research, to identify kinds of impacts to be assessed.

Third, even when information does not guide decision making, that does not mean that the information is not used. Often its greatest contribution is in interpretation, that is, in determining how people frame issues. Feldman (1989), in a trenchant discussion of the role of the policy analyst, points out that data gathering and analysis often precede or lag decision making. The model of rational decision making, by which decisions are based on data, is only one possible model, and it is often not applicable. However, what analysts often succeed in doing is affecting how people define and structure an issue and the alternatives that they consider—in short, the meaning that is assigned to the situation and the information.

The evaluation process and evaluative information can be useful in framing the discussion about what the library is and does and its contribution to the larger organization. Quantitative and qualitative information—measurement and anecdotes—can be used to guide the internal and external discussion and interpretation about the library, its outputs, and its contribution to the larger community.

REFERENCES

Chase, G., & Reveal, B. (1983). *How to manage in the public sector.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Childers, T., & Van House, N. A. (in press). *What's good? Describing the public library's effectiveness.*

Feldman, M. S. (1989). *Order without design: Information production and policy making.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Giamatti, A. B. (1988). *A free and ordered space: The real world of the university.* New York: W. W. Norton.

Hasenfeld, Y. (1983). *Human service organizations.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Heymann, P. B. (1987). *The politics of public management.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Koenig, M. E. D. (1990). Information services and downstream productivity. In M. E. Williams (Ed.), *Annual review of information science and technology* (Vol. 25, pp. 55-86). New York: Elsevier Science.

McClure, C. R.; Van House, N.; & Hert, C. (1991). *A new strategic direction for the AAHSLD annual statistics: Planning, service roles, performance measures, and management information systems for academic health science libraries: Final report for phase I.* (Prepared for Association of Academic Health Science Library Directors). Manlius, NY: Information Management Consulting Services.

Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. (1978). *The external control of organizations: A resource dependence perspective.* New York: Harper & Row.

Van House, N. A. (1990a). Library resources and research productivity in science and engineering: Report of a pilot study. In *Communications in support of science and engineering: A report to the National Science Foundation from the Council on Library Resources* (pp. IV B-1 - IV B-54). Washington, DC: Council on Library Resources.

Van House, N. A. (1990b). The public library effectiveness study: The unpublished story. *California Library Association Newsletter, 32*(12), 1, 13.

Van House, N. A.; Lynch, M. J.; McClure, C. R.; Zweizig, D. L.; & Rodger, E. J. (1987). *Output measures for public libraries: A manual of standardized procedures* (2nd ed.). Chicago: American Library Association.

Van House, N. A.; Weil, B. T.; & McClure, C. R. (1990). *Measuring academic library performance: A practical approach.* Chicago: American Library Association.

Weiss, C. H. (1972). *Evaluation research: Methods of assessing program effectiveness.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Printice-Hall.

Wilson, J. Q. (1989). *Bureaucracy: What government agencies do and why they do it.* New York: Basic Books.