

META-EVALUATION: EXPERIENCES IN AN ACCELERATED GRADUATE NURSE EDUCATION PROGRAM



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Most schools of nursing are engaged in some form of program evaluation and recognize the potential benefits in using program evaluation outcomes to influence continuous improvement in program quality. A number of factors exist that may negatively influence program evaluation quality and adversely affect the ability to make sound decisions based on program evaluation outcomes. The potential limitations that threaten program evaluation quality underscore the importance of evaluating the evaluation process itself, also known as meta-evaluation. However, there is an absence of discussion in the nursing literature of the importance of program meta-evaluation. This article seeks to address this gap in the nursing literature and illuminate the need for more schools of nursing to engage in the meta-evaluation process. By introducing 1 model of program meta-evaluation and describing our own endeavors in the program meta-evaluation process, we hope to inspire other schools of nursing to consider using a systematic and formalized process to evaluate their own program evaluation processes to ensure that data obtained from program evaluation are of optimal quality to influence sound, data-driven decisions to promote continued quality and excellence in nursing education programs. (Index words: Nurse education; Program evaluation; Evaluation; Meta-evaluation; Continuous quality improvement in nursing education) *J Prof Nurs* 31:508–515, 2015. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

PROGRAM EVALUATION, AS a process, systematically and critically examines programs and organizations for the purpose of providing measurable, accurate, and useful information about the worth of a particular program or organization. As a process, program evaluation generally involves methodical collection, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of data. There are a number of key drivers for conducting program evaluation including the ability to use evaluative information to make better informed decisions regarding programmatic changes, to assess or reassess the program

initiatives and objectives, to improve program efficiency and effectiveness, to provide transparency, and to satisfy accountability requirements of evaluation sponsors and pertinent stakeholders. The ultimate intention of program evaluation is to enable organizations to engage in an intentional and continuous process of rigorous and systematic self-study that supports responsible and informed decision-making strategies for overall program and organizational success.

The use of program evaluation in establishing accountability for educational outcomes is widely accepted as a fundamentally important means for measuring success, relevance, and sustainability. The relatively recent transformation of education in general and, particularly, the even more dramatic transformation of nursing education, underscores this fundamentally important need for ongoing program evaluation and quality improvement. This educational transformation in both general education and, more specifically, in nursing education began with a shift from a teacher-centered environment to a learner-centered environment. This more contemporary learner-centered educational environment is characterized by diverse student populations,

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technology-infused educational enhancements, innovative delivery content, and a variety of new program options—including accelerated programs, requiring schools of nursing to rely more heavily than ever on program evaluation to inform and sustain program success. To promote optimal outcomes and stakeholder satisfaction, nursing schools must systematically evaluate the school's mission, faculty, students, curriculum, resources, and services. Evaluation of these components helps to detect congruency between the school and parent institution's mission and goals; facilitate faculty efforts in achieving excellence in teaching, practice, and research; evaluate the quality and success of students; determine the sequencing and suitability of curriculum and content delivery; and assess the appropriateness and value of resources and services being provided, providing information about system processes.

Program evaluation, within schools of nursing, is generally a system-wide process, engaging multiple stakeholders, and is conducted as formative and/or summative. Student course evaluations, preceptor evaluations, and employer surveys are example of formative evaluations. These evaluations are often used to assess curriculum revision and direct future curriculum changes to meet indicated educational needs. Testing at the conclusion of a unit of study or comprehensive examination at the end of a semester are examples of summative evaluations measuring learner proficiency.

Background and Review of Literature

Meta-Evaluation

To avoid producing unsound program evaluations and potentially deceptive findings, it is necessary to evaluate the evaluation, also known as meta-evaluation. *Meta-evaluation* is the term applied when helping to assure that program evaluation is sound and meets relevant evaluation standards. Thoughtful and systematic meta-evaluations help to establish program evaluation quality by detecting and addressing evaluation limitations. Meta-evaluation provides a venue to judge evaluation integrity, relevance, trustworthiness, and applicability to the program.

Meta-evaluation was initially described in educational literature (Scriven, 1969) as a method to systematically evaluate educational products. Meta-evaluation, considered a hallmark of good evaluation processes for almost 50 years, has been publicized as imperative for ultimately providing credible and dependable evaluation outcomes. Lipsey (2000) provides a conditional explanation pointing out that if one of the functions of evaluation is to improve program quality then a core function of meta-evaluation is to improve evaluation quality. Meta-evaluation enables evaluators to identify factors that contribute to continuous evaluation improvement (Oliver, 2009). When incorporated as part of the evaluation process, meta-evaluation promotes quality assurance and organizational learning and increases the probability that evaluation findings will be put to effective use (Henry, 2001; Widmer, 2004). Meta-evaluation has been found to decrease research bias and thereby enhance the defensibility of the evaluation's findings (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

Despite the importance of accurate and reliable evaluations, both the extent and quality to which meta-evaluation is conducted is unclear (Cooksy & Caracelli, 2005; Scriven, 2001; Stufflebeam, 2001). Supporting literature indicates that the term *meta-evaluation* is sometimes and inappropriately used interchangeably with meta-analysis. Meta-analysis is an important research endeavor synthesizing findings from multiple studies focusing on a similar topic. Whereas, meta-evaluation is a systematic review of the evaluation process to determine both the quality and integrity of the evaluation findings in comparison to established standards of what constitutes optimal evaluation (Bickman, 1997; Cooksy & Caracelli, 2005).

In practice, various models of meta-evaluation criteria have been used, ranging from highly structured formats to unstructured presentations (e.g., modest audits, narratives). Meta-evaluation may be accomplished through the use of internal human resources with a designated internal evaluator or group of evaluators conducting a peer review or through the use of external resources with a professional evaluation consultant or agency (Leeuw & Cooksy, 2005). Not surprisingly, different meta-evaluation models and goals provide differing levels of evaluation quality. Meta-evaluations may and have been used to assess the quality of a single evaluation or multiple evaluations.

According to Stufflebeam (2001), the meta-evaluation process should provide both descriptive and judgmental information regarding the utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy of the evaluation. In addition, the systematic nature, competent conduct, honesty, respectfulness and social responsibility should be assessed as part of the meta-evaluation process. These meta-evaluation standards are outlined in the American Evaluation Association's Guiding Principles for Evaluators and the Joint Committee for Standards for Educational Evaluation.

General History of Program Evaluation

Developing an accurate historical timeline of evaluation is a challenging task because humans have been practicing informal evaluation since the beginning of time (Hogan, 2007). Scriven (1991) maintains that there is no occupation without some form of evaluation and describes evaluation as a discipline founded in an ancient practice. Perhaps, the earliest record of formal evaluation in education is a contract between a schoolmaster and the town fathers of Treviso, Italy, in 1444, linking salary with student performance (Madaus, Russell, & Higgins, 2009). Printed tests administered to students in the Boston, Massachusetts, school system in 1845 mark the beginning of formal educational evaluation in the United States (Stufflebeam, Madaus, & Kellaghan, 2000).

The initiation of program evaluation in U.S. education did not occur until 1897 when educational reformer, Joseph Rice, wrote and published an article detailing the findings of his decade-long comparative study of educational instruction in spelling (Stufflebeam et al., 2000). However, Ralph Tyler, referred to as the father of

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