
Program Performance Assessment

Both the executive branch and congressional committees need evaluative information to help them make decisions about the programs they oversee--information that tells them whether, and why, a program is working well or not. In enacting the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), Congress expressed frustration that executive and congressional decisionmaking was often hampered by the lack of good information on the results of federal program efforts. To promote improved federal management and greater efficiency and effectiveness, GPRA instituted a governmentwide requirement that agencies set goals and report annually on performance.

Many analytic approaches have been employed over the years by the agencies and others to assess the operations and results of federal programs, policies, activities, and organizations. Most federal agencies now use performance measures to track progress towards goals, but few seem to regularly conduct indepth program evaluations to assess their programs' impact or learn how to improve results. Individual evaluation studies are designed to answer specific questions about how well a program is working, and GPRA explicitly encourages a complementary role for these types of program assessment. The GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 aims to improve program performance by requiring agencies to identify priority goals, assign officials responsibility for achieving them, and review progress quarterly. Complete and accurate information on how well programs are working and why will be key to its success.

This glossary describes and explains the relationship between two common types of systematic program assessment: performance measures and program evaluation. Based on GAO publications and program evaluation literature, it was first prepared in 1998. Major contributors were Stephanie Shipman and Joseph Wholey. Please address any questions to Stephanie Shipman at (202) 512-4041 or shipmans@gao.gov.



Nancy R. Kingsbury, Managing Director
Applied Research and Methods

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PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION

Definitions and Relationships

Types of Program Performance Assessment

Performance Measurement

Performance measurement is the ongoing monitoring and reporting of program accomplishments, particularly progress toward preestablished goals. It is typically conducted by program or agency management.

Performance measures may address the type or level of program activities conducted (process), the direct products and services delivered by a program (outputs), or the results of those products and services (outcomes).

A “program” may be any activity, project, function, or policy that has an identifiable purpose or set of objectives.

Program Evaluation

Program evaluations are individual systematic studies conducted periodically or on an ad hoc basis to assess how well a program is working. They are often conducted by experts external to the program, either inside or outside the agency, as well as by program managers.

A program evaluation typically examines achievement of program objectives in the context of other aspects of program performance or in the context in which it occurs. Four main types can be identified, all of which use measures of program performance, along with other information, to learn the benefits of a program or how to improve it.

Relationship between Performance Measurement and Program Evaluation

Different Focus

Performance measurement focuses on whether a program has achieved its objectives, expressed as measurable performance standards. Program evaluations typically examine a broader range of information on program performance and its context than is feasible to monitor on an ongoing basis.

Depending on their focus, evaluations may examine aspects of program operations (such as in a process evaluation) or factors in the program environment that may impede or contribute to its success, to help explain the linkages between program inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. Alternatively, evaluations may assess the program’s effects beyond its intended objectives, or estimate what would have occurred in the absence of the program, in order to assess the program’s net impact. Additionally, program evaluations may systematically compare the effectiveness of alternative programs aimed at the same objective.

Different Use

Both forms of assessment aim to support resource allocation and other policy decisions to improve service delivery and program effectiveness. But performance measurement, because of its ongoing nature, can serve as an early warning system to management and as a vehicle for improving accountability to the public.

A program evaluation’s typically more in-depth examination of program performance and context allows for an overall assessment of whether the program works and identification of adjustments that may improve its results.

Types of Program Evaluation

Process (or Implementation) Evaluation

This form of evaluation assesses the extent to which a program is operating as it was intended. It typically assesses program activities’ conformance to statutory and regulatory requirements, program design, and professional standards or customer expectations.

Outcome Evaluation

This form of evaluation assesses the extent to which a program achieves its outcome-oriented objectives. It focuses on outputs and outcomes (including unintended effects) to judge program effectiveness but may also assess program process to understand how outcomes are produced.

Impact Evaluation

Impact evaluation is a form of outcome evaluation that assesses the net effect of a program by comparing program outcomes with an estimate of what would have happened in the absence of the program. This form of evaluation is employed when external factors are known to influence the program’s outcomes, in order to isolate the program’s contribution to achievement of its objectives.

Cost-Benefit and Cost-Effectiveness Analyses

These analyses compare a program’s outputs or outcomes with the costs (resources expended) to produce them. When applied to existing programs, they are also considered a form of program evaluation. Cost-effectiveness analysis assesses the cost of meeting a single goal or objective and can be used to identify the least costly alternative for meeting that goal. Cost-benefit analysis aims to identify all relevant costs and benefits, usually expressed in dollar terms.