This is the second of a two-part essay. The first part, “Getting Started with Evaluation Reports: Answering the Questions,” appeared in this column in the previous issue of ETC.

GETTING STARTED WITH EVALUATION REPORTS: Creating the Structure

PHILIP VASSALLO, ED.D.*

Once a writer of an evaluation report has considered all the questions his readers might ask, as described in the previous installment of this column, he is ready to ground himself in the challenging task of framing the document into the narrowest yet most useful possible perspective; thus, he establishes the evaluative scope and criteria, collects and analyzes data, and organizes the report. For a hypothetical example to illustrate the elements featured in this article, I use a public school district’s pilot project of a voucher program, in which parents may choose whichever school in the district they wish their child to attend.

Establishing the Scope and Criteria

Determining the scope of the report helps the writer go far in creating a structure. Having no boundaries for the report, on the other hand, will lead to labored drafting and unnecessary revisions. To structure the evaluation report efficiently, answer these three questions about the project.

* Philip Vassallo holds a doctorate in education and provides communication consulting services to corporate, government, nonprofit, and academic organizations. His book The Art of On-the-Job Writing is available from the IGS. He accepts e-mail at Vassallo@aol.com.
1. What central issue is the project or program addressing? The answer to this question should appear in one clear sentence. For example, the school superintendent assigning the evaluation report might answer this question with the statement, “The project seeks to increase student standardized test scores by 20 percent, decrease student retention (repeating the same academic year) by 30 percent, and increase parental participation in school activities by 40 percent by the end of two school years.”

Writers should not underestimate the power of the stating the issue in one clear statement. Doing so — and then keeping the statement at the fore of their mind — keeps them focused on all aspects of the project and helps them organize the report.

2. Who are all the stakeholders? The stakeholders are those who would be interested in reading the school’s evaluation report because of a social, moral, intellectual, professional, or financial interest in the project. Among the many parties with a stake in the voucher project would be other school administrators, teachers, students, parents, legislators, and political organizations such as think tanks and teachers’ unions.

The key word of the question to remember is all. Writers should remember that they must communicate to their least informed reader. While the superintendent may reasonably assume that a member of the general public would not be a reader of the report, she should ensure that the evaluation include terminology familiar to the media and potential funding sources not directly involved in the field of education, because school choice programs have traditionally captured the attention of news organizations, which may interpret the report for their audience.

3. What is the evaluation perspective? What institutional aspect is under examination? At least five evaluative viewpoints come to mind: system, process, performance, efficiency, and causality. Of course, a writer may be evaluating from more than one of these perspectives in a given report. Definitions and examples of each appear below:

- the system designed for achieving the objective (e.g., administrative structure, governing bylaws)
- the process by which the objective was achieved (e.g., the methodology by which students were taught or the frequency of classroom instruction)
- the performance, or effectiveness, in executing the process (e.g., classroom facilitation or student evaluation)
• the *efficiency*, or value of achieving the objective relative to its cost (e.g., time frame involved, cost-benefit analysis)

• the *causality*, or reason the objective was or was not achieved (e.g., the cause of an increase in student performance on standardized tests or a decrease in the student retention rate). If the superintendent were to focus on student retention, for example, she may want to include in the study a control group composed of students of similar demographic background who did not enroll in the school choice program so that she could determine the retention rate in contrast with the choice program student group.

After limiting her scope and selecting her evaluative criteria, the superintendent is ready to gather and assess the project data.

**Collecting and Analyzing Data**

Many issues arise during the data collection stage. First, management should be aware of the evaluation perspective and criteria established by the project leaders. Those criteria should be comprehensive, and the measurement techniques and instruments (e.g., questionnaires, direct observations, interviews, measurement tools such as tests) should hold up to a close examination for reliability and validity. The efficacy of the evaluation team should be assured, and its members should be appropriately deployed at the evaluation site to avoid causing disruptions and influencing results. They should also adhere to a strictly set timetable for collecting data.

What validity and reliability data problems pose threats to the integrity of a study? Numerous sources of bias can affect the conclusions drawn from the evaluation and undermine its credibility. Awareness of biases will improve an evaluator’s chances of determining whether changes in the project or program were due to their administration or other influences. Some of the threats to validity include:

• *History effects*, or changes in external events occurring during the project that affect it. In the case of the voucher program, if student enrollment increases or decreases significantly, or if the municipality reduces or expands funding, it would be difficult to make equal comparisons.

• *Maturation effects*, or changes occurring because of participants’ natural growth in the project and not because of the efficacy of the activ-
ity or task in which they participate. If, for example, students’ average reading scores increase by three grade levels during the two-year period, then the improvement might have been expected in any program.

- **Testing effects**, in other words, changes in participants’ knowledge caused by testing procedures administered to them during the program and not caused by the project itself. Perhaps students are continually being “taught to the test,” repeatedly drilled for the testing event at the expense of learning more critical curricular topics.

- **Instrumentation effects**, that is, poorly designed or inconsistent surveys, tests, or observation methods, resulting in biases. For instance, the questionnaire might ask questions that do not precisely yield the desired response, or the control group students may be observed at dissimilar marking periods from the voucher students.

- **Selection effects**, or dissimilarities between the evaluated group and control group, resulting in meaningless comparisons and interpretations. Perhaps the control group students are weaker performers on standardized tests than their voucher group counterparts, or the control group has a population far lower or higher than the voucher group.

- **Situation effects**, those circumstances that may influence the outcomes and are related to the evaluation but not necessarily to the ongoing project. For example, administrators trained in such projects might be involved in the evaluation; however, teachers, who are already busy designing lessons, teaching, and assessing, might inherit this task for which they are not qualified.

- **Involvement effects**, that is, activities, tasks, or other programs involving evaluated participants that may influence outcomes. Maybe the evaluated students’ improvement may be the result of their participation in extracurricular or community activities not accounted for in the assessment.

Data are valid when they are accurate and appropriate for the situation being evaluated, but the list above shows that many factors might contribute to tipping the delicate balance of a valid report.

Another critical concern is reliability. Data are reliable when a measurement gives the same results over repeated applications. Factors that may have an adverse effect on reliability include *instrumentation* (e.g., the phrasing and
ordering of the questions and comprehensiveness of the surveys or questionnaires) and methodology (e.g., the timing of observations, selection of data sources, bias of interviewer or evaluator, and completeness of observation).

A final safeguard for ensuring accuracy and value of the collected data is to answer the following ten critical questions about the results:

1. What progress is being made toward achievement of outcomes?
2. Do the results contribute to the project’s overall objectives and goals?
3. What unintended outcomes or side effects have emerged?
4. How could the project have been implemented better?
5. Is the relationship between costs and results reasonable?
6. How well has the project utilized the resources available?
7. Do the results align with the established objectives and goals?
8. Are these outcomes worthwhile?
9. What policy changes would stakeholders benefit from?
10. Will the results continue after the evaluation’s end?

Organizing the Report

Finally, the time has come to structure the evaluation report. While outlines for evaluation reports may vary by organization, the outline below is a workable one to jump-start the drafting phase of the composing process.

**INTRODUCTION**

*Purpose.* The reason for writing the report.

*Authorization.* The person or group requesting the report.

*Situation.* A description of the problem or opportunity that led to the need for the report.

*Background.* The historical information that the reader needs to understand the report.

*Methods.* The means (interviews, research, experiments, etc.) by which the information was collected.
Sources. The authors, authorities, test subjects, publications, electronic media, etc. from which information was collected.

Scope. The areas that the report covers.

Definitions. Any technical term used that requires reader clarification.

Results. A brief statement of the conclusions and recommendations.

Limitations. A disclaimer describing any factor that prevented the report from being thorough, current, and conclusive, such as limited time, help, and money.

**DISCUSSION**

The discussion should include a point-by-point, in-depth analysis of the findings (a general comment about a condition observed), the standards on which the findings are based, the specific observations, the implications of the findings on the program, the causes of the findings, conclusions drawn from the discussion, and recommendations to sustain or modify the findings.

**SUMMARY**

The summary should be written as a stand-alone section so that the reader may literally “jump to conclusions” and still capture the essence of the evaluation report. It should include a review of the project’s conclusions, lessons learned, recommendations, and, if appropriate, management response.

**APPENDICES**

The back matter of the evaluation report typically contains information such as a list of references, glossary, evaluators, rating matrices, and project-related documents.

The first part of this essay, “Answering the Questions,” offers a means of addressing the task of the evaluation report. Once the writer purposefully answers those questions listed in Part One, he would emerge from the exercise with a virtual report structure. This part of the essay merely piggybacks on the inductive approach described in Part One, when the writer grounds himself in the theoretical underpinnings of reporting. Now he has moved through the engagement phase, when the materials he has collected crystallize into reportable data. Once the structuring is complete, the rest of the writing should come easily.