

9-23-1997

## Performance and Accountability in Human Services: Ownership and Responsibility of Professionals

Anna-Marie Madison  
*University of Massachusetts Boston*, [anna.madison@umb.edu](mailto:anna.madison@umb.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [Health and Medical Administration Commons](#), [Health Policy Commons](#), and the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Madison, Anna-Marie (1997) "Performance and Accountability in Human Services: Ownership and Responsibility of Professionals," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 12. Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol13/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New England Journal of Public Policy* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@umb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@umb.edu).

# Performance and Accountability in Human Services

# Ownership and Responsibility of Professionals

*Anna-Marie Madison*

---

*The recent frenzy of grant makers and government agencies in requiring impact evaluations of all grant recipients has created consternation among human service providers. To ensure their agencies' survival and worker job security, the leaders are faced with meeting the demands of funder-driven programming. Agencies seeking funding must comply with funder-defined needs and accountability criteria rather than their public missions. This article describes the use of mission-based performance evaluation rather than funder compliance to demonstrate accountability for mission accomplishment.*

---

Within the business, public, and nonprofit sectors, no topic has been discussed more in the past five years than performance and accountability. The chain of events leading to this attention began with many American companies' loss of market share to foreign competitors. This realization led to the rise of total quality management and other management concepts as means to increase American companies' quality of performance.<sup>1</sup>

With the release of the 1993 *Report of the National Performance Review* and the passage of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, performance measurement and accountability became management tools in the federal government. Several of the more progressive states have taken the lead in implementing performance reviews at the state level. The International City Managers Association is working with cities to design performance measures at the local level. United Way, one of the largest sponsors of nonprofit agencies, has initiated a major nationwide effort to introduce its agencies to the logic model of result-oriented programming and performance evaluation.

The proliferation of interest in performance and accountability is accompanied by numerous unresolved problems. Some of the questions most frequently raised are: Who defines performance? To whom is the organization accountable? and How should performance evaluation be used? In the human services, with its multiple constituents and imprecise measures of outcomes, there is a high degree of consternation and trepidation

*Anna-Marie Madison, associate professor of human services, College of Public and Community Service, University of Massachusetts Boston, specializes in performance monitoring and evaluation.*

about the intent and possible consequences of performance evaluations.<sup>2</sup> Many organizations fear that performance evaluation will be used to penalize them if their performance does not meet the stakeholders' expectations. Such fears are reinforced by uncertainty concerning the future of human service funding.

A major reason for apprehension among human service providers is that evaluation, requested by program sponsors, is externally controlled. Providers funded by multiple sources might be asked to conduct impact evaluations for each sponsor, but receive no increase in financial support. Agencies are forced to use funds from their operating budgets to hire outside evaluators. Ordinarily, for the amount of money available to them, human service providers cannot hire an experienced, competent evaluator. Consequently, they hire people who, in most cases, know less about evaluation than they themselves do. The quality of the evaluations is poor, offering scanty useful information for the service providers.

From the human service worker's point of view, evaluation is used as a tool for political expediency rather than for furnishing useful feedback on improving service delivery. This means that providers are literally held hostage to funders' definitions of performance and accountability. To ensure their agencies' survival and workers' job security, leaders are willing to relinquish ownership of their responsibility to shape the future of human services. The question most frequently raised by human service providers is: How can we reclaim ownership of shaping and guiding activities to achieve the organization's mission, rather than responding to external controls?<sup>3</sup>

If they are to use evaluation as a tool to guide agencies in strategic decision making about their future, human service professionals must reclaim ownership of performance and accept responsibility for results in accordance with the mission of the organization. The first step is to take control of the process. Because providers are responsible for accomplishing their agency's mission, they must determine how to recognize progress. The standards they set for themselves must be challenging, but achievable. The measurement criteria should allow the providers to realize when things are not going well, to determine what changes must be made, and to decide how to make them.

I present a mission-focused evaluation strategy, one which illustrates how service providers can use evaluation to demonstrate accountability and improve performance. I use action research and participatory evaluation theory to explain the role of human service professionals in a community of inquiry in which the mission of the organization is the focus of evaluation. Finally, I offer suggestions for graduate education in human service management to prepare professionals to meet the requirements for assuming ownership of performance and taking responsibility for results.

---

### **Mission, Performance, and Accountability**

The first step for professionals in taking control of evaluation is to change the focus of evaluation so that it reflects agency accomplishment and accountability based on agency-generated criteria. It is important to replace the compliance-based model of accountability, which emphasizes program activities and outputs rather than impacts. Compliance-based evaluations tend to address questions related to adherence to rules and regulations, measurement of agreed-upon outputs, and efficiency measures of output units per resource expended.<sup>4</sup> Less likely to demonstrate the quality of the services provided and the impact of the service on the community, compliance-based evaluations are not clearly

distinguishable from performance audits that evolve from accounting and financial auditing traditions.<sup>5</sup> The weakness in these evaluations is their representing an accounting process rather than demonstrating accountability. An alternative to compliance-based accountability is mission-based performance accountability.

The mission-based approach to demonstrating accountability incorporates the concepts of performance-based accountability, which emphasizes results,<sup>6</sup> and mission-based accountability, which focuses on the context of the mission and the results of the intervention relative to the mission of the organization.<sup>7</sup> Accountability is determined when the organization has demonstrated responsiveness to its public mission.<sup>8</sup>

Evaluation of program success should demonstrate the impact of the services delivered on the accomplishment of the mission, with rewards distributed according to the results that advance the goal. Mission-based performance accountability allows an organization to demonstrate progress toward a predetermined purpose, to establish a baseline to measure achievement attainment of the purpose, and to make adjustments to increase the efficacy of the intervention.

For example, the mission of a nonprofit, community-based agency serving youth might be “to end the neglect of youth in our community by providing consistent, supportive, caring adult guidance so that youth can make a successful transformation from adolescence to adulthood and reach adulthood equipped to achieve successful adult lives.” This statement outlines the problem, the need to be addressed, the target population, and the ultimate goals. The *problem* is the neglect of youth, which might include lack of adult involvement in their lives and of community-based services that provide constructive activities to engage the creative energies of adolescents. The *need* is to provide such activities, under the supervision of supportive, caring adults, to focus the interest of youth. The *target population* is youth between the ages of ten and eighteen. The *ultimate goal* is to equip youngsters to achieve successful adult lives.

To examine the mission, an arts intervention program provides community-based support to youth through the integration of traditional social services and cultural arts programming. In a safe environment, youth receive the nurturing, protection, and guidance essential to developing social competence, self-confidence, and positive attitudes about their futures. The delivery system provides opportunities for creative expression and the exploration of personal skills and abilities that are critical to the adolescent stage of human development.

The focus of the program evaluation is on growth toward the ultimate goal rather than absolute success or failure. Effort is channeled through a logical hierarchy of results arranged so that the achievement of the lower goals leads automatically to the achievement of the higher ones. Thus, the efforts are aligned toward the common purpose of accomplishing the mission of the organization.<sup>9</sup> Exhibit 1 details the youth program hierarchy of goals.

If during the first year only Goal 1 is achieved, the agency is not considered to be a failure. Likewise, if a youth enters the program at age ten, the degree to which the ultimate Goal 6 is approached cannot be determined until the individual reaches adulthood. However, completion of Goals 2, 3, 4, and 5 is essential to attainment of Goal 6.

A major advantage of mission-based performance accountability is its design to improve performance rather than to penalize poor performance, the aim being at higher performance toward the fulfillment of the mission. Even with poor performance, mission-based accountability has the potential to create pressure on improvement of poor performers.<sup>10</sup> High-performing human service agencies seek to retain their positions as leaders, and low performers seek to improve their standing in the community of providers.



*Exhibit 1*

**Youth Program Hierarchy of Goals**

---

- Goal 1 To create a safe environment to engage youth in constructive activities under the supervision of supportive, caring adults
- Goal 2 To provide a range of cultural arts activities that allow creative expression and social and psychological development and growth
- Goal 3 To effect change in the perceptions and attitudes of youth
- Goal 4 To effect change in the behaviors of youth
- Goal 5 To effect the successful transformation from adolescence to adulthood
- Goal 6 To effect the achievement of a successful adult life

Mission-based evaluation is compatible with the dynamic nature of human services, which deal with open-ended and ever-changing complex human conditions. Success in most cases depends on many micro- and macroenvironmental factors beyond the control of the providers. Human service organizations must constantly adapt to change created by the turbulent environment in which they exist. Therefore, to increase outcomes, there must be opportunities to monitor performance and to make changes at various intervals. Mission-based performance evaluation allows this to occur.

It also clarifies the question: To whom is the organization accountable? Accountability implies two elements involved, "those giving account" and "those holding to account."<sup>11</sup> The problem for human service providers is the diversity of those holding to account. To demonstrate accountability, providers feel that they must furnish visible executions that satisfy sponsors, the communities they serve, and the public at large, the last of whom want to know if their tax dollars have any impact on the defined problems. Clients, also members of the public at large, are concerned about the quality of and the degree to which the services match their needs. Public officials and philanthropic sponsors are concerned about the cost-effectiveness and cost-benefits of services.

The definition of accountability as responsiveness to the public mission allows an organization to circumvent some of the problems inherent in the demonstration of responsibility to multiple constituencies. First, this definition confines accountability to the parameters delineated in the mission. Second, measurement indicators must assess the impact of the intervention toward accomplishment of the mission. This allows human service professionals to challenge performance measurement criteria that are not germane to the discharge of the mission. Even cost-effective and cost-benefit evaluation questions must be framed within the context of the mission.

When combined with strategic planning, mission-based performance evaluation strengthens accountability.<sup>12</sup> The strategic plan provides the opportunity to demonstrate accountability based on the relationship between mission, strategic input resources, strategic actions, and performance results. Providers are able to isolate input factors that contribute to overall mission accomplishment, such as lack of strategic resources to implement the plan. This information is useful as feedback to adjust funding, which can improve the overall results of action. The match between inputs and results can demonstrate productivity even though progress toward the ultimate mission is slow.

Performance monitoring of strategic actions also provides feedback regarding achievability of the mission. For example, the public mission of the Massachusetts Department of Human Services is “to end poverty among women and children by providing educational and job training opportunities and social supports to women so that they can obtain employment that provides them and their children economic independence.” In this case, the indicator of success is the number of poor women who become economically independent. The number of women participants in the program and the types and quality of activities provided, while inappropriate measures of impact, can demonstrate the relationship between input resources, strategic actions, and probable results. Performance monitoring detects the adequacy of resources and whether the service delivery system is capable of producing the desired results. If it is determined that the training offered will not lead to good-paying jobs or that less than full provision of funds for tuition and fees will prevent women from attending college, one can assume that the ultimate goal of financial independence is probably unreachable.

Even though strategic planning and mission-based performance evaluation are power tools to demonstrate accountability, there are limitations to their utility. Service providers must be cognizant that demonstrating accountability for a public mission does not guarantee that an agency will receive broad-based public support. Those who oppose the intent of the mission in most cases do not approve of it for ideological and political reasons. Therefore, evaluation should be for the purpose of accomplishing a mission, and gaining support for it should be left to the political process. This is not to contend that efforts should not be made to secure support but that evaluation is not the best vehicle for changing political ideological stances. For this reason, demonstration of accountability should be targeted to supporters of the public mission.

---

### **Action Research and Human Service Professionals as Participants**

It is advocated that human service providers be primary participants in the mission-based performance evaluation process. Action research theory, which provides a useful framework for examining the role of human service professionals in evaluation, is based on the notion that agents design action to achieve intended consequences and monitor themselves to learn whether their actions are effective.<sup>13</sup> One goal of action research is to engage the community of practice in becoming active participants in inquiry about the consequences of its actions. This approach to inquiry differs from traditional evaluation methods in that a human service professional is both the agent of and a participant in judging the results of action. The concept of practitioner as inquirer calls for the professional to assume the ownership of defining how actions are to be assessed and to share responsibility for evaluation with other stakeholders.

Participatory evaluation provides a conceptual framework for examining the roles of the various participants in the evaluation process, postulating that human service clients, professionals, and professional evaluators be included in the evaluation process.<sup>14</sup> Through their intersecting roles they form a partnership to promote learning for action and change. Within this community the evaluation specialist’s role varies according to the needs of the human service professionals. The evaluator may be an advocate, a coach, a facilitator, a trainer, or a technical adviser. Together the clients, professionals, and the evaluator shape the questions, establish measurement indicators and the rules of inquiry, identify data sources and collection methods, collect and analyze data, and interpret the meaning of findings.

The first step in creating a community of inquiry is to create a risk-free environment in which trust can be built. To that end professionals, the communities they serve, program sponsors, and evaluators must establish core values concerning the role of evaluation, which become the building blocks for developing a trust relationship. In this community the human service professional must take ownership of the delivery effort and the success or failure of strategic actions. Ownership requires that this professional be given the authority to decide how to accomplish the agency mission and the responsibility for achieving results. Accountability is determined by performance, as measured by indicators of success toward the accomplishment of the mission, and the indicators of success are established by the community of inquiry.

The questions most often raised are: How should performance be measured, who should define the measures of performance, and whose interpretation of the results should prevail? Performance questions concern the way reality will be constructed, which relates to observation methods and requirements for the validation of reality. Questions about defining the measures of success concern whether the persons most affected by the program (clients), service providers (human service professionals), or the expert evaluation authorities (evaluators) should establish the measurement indicators. Questions concerning interpretation of findings relate to competence in understanding their meaning within the context of completion of an organization's mission. Forming the community of inquiry eliminates potential tensions among them by inclusion of all three groups, each of which has valuable competencies in establishing valid performance measures.

The client contributes the validity of personal experience and the legitimacy of contextual definitions of reality in the discovery of truth,<sup>15</sup> input that provides an understanding of the consequences of actions on the lives of the targeted population. The client's perspective is critical to determining the need for adjustments in program actions or the mission of the organization. The clients furnish an opportunity for the providers to reconcile the difference between the intended and the real consequences of actions.

For determining measurement indicators, human service providers contribute their technical competency in understanding the actions taken to achieve the mission. They are the most competent to define performance results in the context of the intent of the mission and to explain actions in the context of the community of practice. However, agency actions in pursuit of its mission cannot be viewed in isolation from the values, beliefs, and interpretations of the community of practice.

A major contribution of the evaluation specialist is bridging the gap between practice and theory, whose constructs are based on the realities of the clients, and the providers are useful in explaining actions. These all allow observations of phenomena to identify the sequence of actions that lead to a particular result. The theoretical construct helps to link causal assumptions, intervention strategies, implementation actions, and impact outcomes, a process that helps to clarify the mission and determine whether the desired results are realized.

A major value tension in evaluation arises in choosing the methods appropriate to explaining the effects of human service interventions. The focus of the evaluation questions determines the observation methods and the requirements for the validation of reality. The most likely source for the validation of the consequences of interventions to individuals is the client. The most acceptable approach to capturing the essence of a client's experience is through qualitative methods. Providers are most likely to produce



baseline information concerning the conditions prior to intervention, performance monitoring data regarding the service delivery process and outputs, and data concerning the changes brought about by the intervention. These data are most apt to be quantitative. For example, if community norms are used to verify change, quantitative data are more likely to be prepared by the providers. Therefore, descriptive and explanatory measurement indicators are used to validate reality in the discovery of truth. Similarly, both the clients' and the providers' constructions of reality are included in the interpretation of achievements directed toward the mission of the organization.

---

### **Add Evaluation to Human Service Management Graduate Programs**

The trend toward result-oriented programming and performance evaluation has implications for graduate education in human service. Professionals in that field should have the technical skills to identify the strategic options available to them to consummate an agency's mission. They must be able to define and plan operations for performance measurement criteria to monitor the ongoing programs and to assess the performance directed toward the success of a mission. Therefore, graduate education in human services management should include performance monitoring and evaluation in the academic core.

Such courses should be designed to develop proficiency in the application of analytic techniques to establish realistic, measurable performance indicators and measurement criteria for the assessment of overall results. Suggestions for course content and sequencing to develop these skills are offered in Exhibit 2.

The human service management curriculum should present evaluation as both a feedback and a feedforward tool to improve performance. To this end, the curriculum should be arranged in a progression linking strategic planning, performance monitoring and evaluation, and resource allocation decision making. This configuration would attach performance monitoring to the development, monitoring, and assessment of the strategic plan. Evaluation as a feedback tool defines the results of actions taken to bring a mission to fruition, and it is a feedforward tool for planning. Integration of the three elements to form a comprehensive body of knowledge and skill development presents a systematic approach to the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the public mission of programs.

Technical skills in these three subjects should be merged with behavioral knowledge concerning the political and organizational context of evaluation.<sup>16</sup> Inclusion of the political dimension in teaching evaluation does not suggest that managers become politicians, but it requires that they understand and incorporate the affect of public policy and other political dimensions when establishing a mission, goals, and objectives and in explanations for the result as they relate to the mission. Particularly in public agencies, it is essential that human service professionals also understand and explain the affect of public policy and organizational issue tensions on attaining a mission.

It is important for human service professionals to assume ownership of the process so that evaluation has meaning beyond the political agendas of the sponsoring agencies. Mission-based performance evaluation, which establishes boundaries for determining accountability and allows the human service professionals to define the measures by which they are to be judged, is the best method for demonstrating accountability.



Exhibit 2

**Strategic Planning, Performance Monitoring, and Evaluation  
Content and Sequencing**

---

*Research Methods:* Research methods and techniques relevant to human service management, including the logic of design, measurement, data collection, processing, and analysis. The focus should be on the application of a systematic approach to investigation and problem solving.

*Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations:* The strategic planning process as a systemic approach to identifying and resolving issues through the assessment of the environment inside and outside the organization. The focus should be on strategic planning for the purpose of making strategic decisions that shape and guide an organization's activities.

*Performance Monitoring:* Principles and techniques of performance monitoring to track the implementation of the strategic plan and to provide feedback to improve implementation. Focus should be on principles and methods for determining reliable, valid measurement indicators of performance, the appropriate intervals to measure performance, and designing information systems for the collection and retrieval of performance data.

*Outcome Evaluation:* The application of research methods to the evaluation of human service programs. Topics include evaluation design, measurement indicators of success, data collection requirements, and data analysis, presentation, and reporting. Focus should be on service delivery outputs, impact, and cost-effective evaluations.

---

It places them in a definitive position when they are confronted with external judgments about performance and accountability. Service providers can release themselves from the grips of external control. Rather than being funding-driven, agencies are able to shape service delivery in the best interests of their clients and of the communities they serve. The fear and threat of accountability to their funders rather than to their communities abate when agencies seek funding that supports their mission and are held responsible for its accomplishment.

Because most human service professionals have little or no training in evaluation, it is essential for their graduate education in management to include the development of competency in the analytical skills required to monitor practices undertaken to complete missions and to assess the overall effects of aggregate actions. ❧

---

## Notes

1. E. Deming, *Out of the Crisis* (Cambridge: MIT Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1986).
2. A. Madison, *Preliminary Report: Study of Evaluation Focus and Utilization in Public and Nonprofit Organizations* (Boston, 1997), 2.
3. Ibid.
4. R. C. Nyhan and H. A. Marlowe, "Performance Measurement in the Public Sector: Challenges and Opportunities," *Public Productivity and Management Review* 18, no. 4 (1995): 333–348; M. A. DuPont-Morales and J. E. Harris, "Strengthening Accountability: Incorporating Strategic Planning and Performance Measurement in Budgeting," *Public Productivity and Management Review* 17, no. 3 (1994): 231–239; and P. Light, "Performance Measurement," *Policy Analysis and Management* 16, no. 2 (1997): 328–333.
5. D. F. Davis, "Do You Want a Performance Audit or a Program Evaluation?" *Public Administration Review* 50, no. 1 (1990): 35–40.
6. Light, "Performance Measurement."
7. DuPont-Morales and Harris, "Strengthening Accountability," and Richard Lynch, *Lead* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).
8. DuPont-Morales and Harris, "Strengthening Accountability."
9. Lynch, *Lead*, 97.
10. Light, "Performance Management."
11. K. P. Kearns, "The Strategic Management of Accountability in Nonprofit Organizations: An Analytical Framework," *Public Administration Review* 54, no. 2 (March/April 1994): 185–192.
12. DuPont-Morales and Harris, "Strengthening Accountability."
13. C. Argyris, R. Putnam, and D. Smith, *Action Science* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985).
14. A. M. Madison, "Primary Inclusion of Culturally Diverse Minority Program Participants in the Evaluation Process," *New Directions in Program Evaluation*, no. 53 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 35–43.
15. A. M. Mertens, J. Farley, A. Madison, and P. Singleton, "Diverse Voices in Evaluation Practice: Feminists, Minorities, Persons with Disabilities," *Evaluation Practice* 15 (1994): 123–129.
16. A. M. Madison, "The Status of Management-oriented Evaluation in Public Administration and Management Programs," *Evaluation Practice* 17, no. 3 (1996): 251–259.