
**Reviewed by Robert G. Brunger**

Program evaluation appears to be an expanding field. Conference attendance, association membership, and academic enrollment are all reportedly rising, and the list of job titles that are associated with evaluations continues to grow, too. One beneficial byproduct of this professional growth is that the catalogue of books available to serve this growing network of individuals is expanding as well. It is now possible to acquire books on specialized analytical skills, esoteric computer programs, and elaborate refinements of methodologies that would have been unimaginable even a decade ago. The frontier of program evaluation advances, and, for seasoned veterans, that advancement brings the happy circumstance of more book choices being available now than ever before.

In any expanding field, however, there will also be a number of emerging new practitioners whose requirements will be somewhat different. They need new books that can present the fundamentals of program evaluation in a way that will provide an initial understanding of basic concepts and practices as well as a solid base for future reference. Adding a context that includes examples illustrating the range of contemporary evaluation practice would be even better. This is the challenge that Brun, the chair of the Department of Social Work at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, has taken on in his aptly titled book. His “practical guide” begins with the observation that “social work practice cannot exist without evaluation” (p. xiv), and he uses many examples from his own experiences as a social work practitioner, evaluator, and academic researcher to make the connection. His primary audience is social work students (both undergraduate and graduate level), with some additional references to social work practitioners who are taking on additional responsibilities for program evaluations at their workplaces (whether by choice or by a requirement associated with the award of program funds). These examples are all drawn from a social work context, so this book would probably be less useful for those who want to learn more
about evaluation but whose interests are rooted in other fields, such as education or public health or criminal justice.

The book’s strongest feature is its organization into six chapters that represent a rational sequence of thinking about, organizing, implementing, and presenting the results of an evaluation. Brun characterizes this sequence as being “organized in the order in which I myself prefer to conduct an evaluation” (p. xvii). The sequence begins with a chapter that defines social service evaluations and explains their scope and purpose. It discusses the uses of evaluation to guide program planning and practice, contribute to knowledge building, answer different types of questions (exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory), and contribute to public policy development. The second chapter discusses the fact that many people have an interest in a particular program’s evaluation, and those stakeholders must be actively engaged to identify what those interests are and develop a consensus on expectations for the evaluation. The third chapter argues that the values included in the evaluation will reflect personal, agency, and community values. Examples and guidelines are provided for adhering to what Brun calls SCREAM values, a somewhat labored, but useful, acronym for measuring strengths, respecting cultures, working within the limits of resources, following professional codes of ethics, reaching agreement with stakeholders about decisions, and measuring change across multiple systems. This chapter also discusses client confidentiality and provides advice about securing approval from institutional review boards.

The remaining three chapters describe how to plan and conduct the evaluation and report the results. These important topics are often treated at book length elsewhere, so their presentation here is necessarily in the nature of an overview. This makes the inclusion of the topically organized lists of “suggestions for further reading,” which occur in every chapter, especially useful here. The fourth chapter discusses the uses of program theory to guide evaluation decisions, and this discussion specifically mentions dissenting opinions among some contemporary evaluators (whose works are cited for further reading). This chapter describes the uses of literature reviews, providing many practical tips for conducting and organizing them, and provides a concise discussion, with examples, of the practice of logic modelling. The fifth chapter discusses data collection decisions and practices, and it is, not surprisingly, the longest chapter. All information in a social service setting is transformed into data, which may be qualitative or quantitative in nature, and both types of data are useful for
answering questions about the program. Sampling techniques are described briefly, and there are also descriptions and examples of various commonly used data collection methods, such as interviews, surveys, observations, focus groups, and file reviews. Data analysis techniques and the importance of maintaining data credibility are also covered. The concluding chapter focuses on evaluation reports. Final evaluation reports do not stand alone, but are the product of a meticulous process of focused data collection, analysis, and documentation that covers the life of the evaluation project, thus "coming full circle," in Brun’s phrase (p. 186). Any written report must describe the scope and purpose of the evaluation, make note of underlying values, assumptions, and key decisions, and summarize all activities, results, and analyses; recommendations may be included if that was part of the initial agreement among the stakeholders.

Toward the very end of the book, Brun asks the reader (p. 203), as part of a reflective journal activity, "Do you see this book helping you with future evaluations?" The answer is that it certainly has that potential. An experienced practitioner can almost certainly identify topics that could be covered differently or spot minor omissions. However, such quibbles are readily offset by the strong likelihood that, for most readers, this book will probably be just one part of a classroom environment that will also include an experienced instructor who can readily supplement the topics in the text with her or his own lectures, readings, guided discussions, and class assignments. With this book, Brun has made a constructive contribution to the needs of emerging practitioners.