

Principles of Evaluation

Adopted by the National Sea Grant Communications Network Steering Committee 2009

1. **Evaluation is a key element of professionalism.**

Evaluating what an individual practitioner does according to objective standards is one distinguishing feature of a profession. Sea Grant communicators undertake and promote evaluations of products, projects, and programs for two main reasons: to improve our work and to determine its quality and value.

2. **Evaluation is not a unitary concept: Evaluations differ in purpose, focus, and methods.**

Evaluations vary as to *why*, *when*, and *how* they are done and *who* does them. Both external evaluations and self-evaluations can be valuable when done appropriately.

3. **Evaluations are designed to be useful.**

What is evaluated—product, project, or program—depends upon the evaluators’ purposes. However, evaluations should provide useful information to those whose work is evaluated. Individual Sea Grant communications programs have flexibility in determining what kind of evaluations they conduct, and how often, in keeping with standards of best practice.

4. **Evaluations may be most useful as process.**

Sea Grant communications programs build evaluation into the normal development of projects, products, and the program. Evaluation may be integrated *throughout* the lifespan of a project, product, or program, guiding its development. Evaluations done as part of project design, those done during the life of the project in order to refine it, and those done upon completion to track results all can be useful.

5. **The methods and findings of evaluations should be systematic, objective, and transparent.**

Broadly, the methods and findings of any evaluation should be step-by-step and thorough (*systematic*), free from unacceptable bias (*objective*), and easy to follow (*transparent*).

6. **External evaluations take program differences into account.**

Sea Grant communicators recognize that their products and program may be reviewed and evaluated by funding agencies, institutional authorities, and others, for reasons and with criteria that will change over time. Our knowledge of good principles and standards of evaluation can help these evaluations be relevant and useful to us.

- The disparate character of the state programs suggests that each program be evaluated on its own merits. External evaluations should recognize and respect that Sea Grant communications programs are different from many other university and government communications programs. Moreover, Sea Grant communications programs vary considerably with respect to how they are integrated in the state program, and their specific objectives, staffing, and financial resources. Accordingly, it is not appropriate to expect identical results from different programs. Communication plans submitted for NOAA Sea Grant funding as part of an institutional (omnibus) plan will be reviewed by standardized criteria, as endorsed by the national communicators steering committee, and revised as needed.
- Program evaluators should be familiar with all Sea Grant guidance as well as the *Guiding Principles for Evaluators of the American Evaluation Association* (2004): Systematic inquiry, Competence, Integrity/honesty, Respect for people, and Responsibilities for general and public welfare.

7. **Improving evaluation capability requires program and network support.**

Management at the state and national levels should support the professional development of Sea Grant staff in evaluation. The national communicators steering committee shares professional practices among the network, via an interest group, committee, or other mechanism.

8. **Evaluation consumes resources, and the cost and benefit of evaluation must be weighed against alternative uses of those resources.**

Communications projects, products, and programs are often difficult to evaluate. An evaluation method should promise to be both valid and affordable, with reference to alternative uses of resources, before it is pursued. Some communications efforts may not find methods that pass this test.

Principles of Evaluation - Background

The National Sea Grant Communication Network established a subcommittee in 2005 to address the need for communication program evaluation principles that would apply to each state program. The 2004 Sea Grant Communications Review Task Force recommended the following:

All Sea Grant Communication offices will work to actively assess and update systems of evaluating their program efforts. These systems will be founded on principles [and standards] of evaluation developed by the Sea Grant Communications Network. Individual Sea Grant programs will apply those principles/ standards with the goal that evaluations be widely understandable, comparable between and among programs, fair and credible.

Members of the communications subcommittee identified several benefits from evaluating communication program performance through the development of widely accepted and consistently applied principles and standards, such as those below:

- The expectation from a variety of external stakeholders (e.g., NOAA, universities and constituents) that Sea Grant communications efforts be evaluated by credible standards is ever increasing;
- The standards by which communication efforts have been evaluated in the past are unclear, inconsistent and/or not rigorous. In addition, research program evaluation criteria that did not seem to apply to outreach (communications and extension) or education efforts have been used to evaluate some communication efforts; and
- There are a number of opportunities to engage in discussions with Sea Grant about how to collectively improve evaluation for communication, extension and education programs.

Members of the subcommittee conducted an online survey of Sea Grant communicators in 2006 to assess current evaluation practices and to solicit interest in additional training, prior to the upcoming Sea Grant outreach meeting.

Results of the survey were presented and a training workshop about evaluation was held during the Sea Grant Outreach Meeting of communicators and extension personnel in Puerto Rico, 2006.

Prior to the next national meeting, the subcommittee drafted principles of evaluation based on the preceding work. The draft principles were presented and discussed by communicators at the National Sea Grant Meeting in San Diego, October 2007.

The principles document that was drafted in San Diego was revised and adopted by the National Sea Grant Communications Network Steering Committee, July 2009.