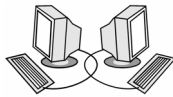


## **Chapter XIII**

# **Evaluating Distance Education Programs Using Best Practices**

with

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## **Making Connections**

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*In the previous chapter, we explored a variety of administrative issues relevant to distance education. One important component is to determine if the program being offered at a distance is successful. Systematic evaluation allows the program planners and administrators to make this determination. The process of determining the merit, worth, or value of something, or the product of that process is evaluation. Terms used to refer to this process include “appraise,” “analyze,” “assess,” “critique,” “examine,” “grade,” “inspect,” “judge,” “rate,” “rank,” “review,” “study,” and “test” (Scriven, 1991, p. 139). What are indicators of quality or best practice? What tools or strategies can you use for program evaluation?*

## Introduction

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In section III, Systematic Instructional Design, we offered suggestions for measuring learning outcomes based on the instructional objectives, in other words, learner assessment. Here, we differentiate learner assessment from program evaluation. As discussed in the previous chapter, distance education courses and programs should undergo multilevel evaluation: functional, managerial, and instructional. This chapter will operationalize models for gathering evaluation data for distance education courses and programs.

Informal evaluation is an everyday affair in our lives, both personal and professional. We make judgments of merit, worth, and value throughout our waking hours. Our ability to evaluate our environment is necessary for survival and this activity has been hardwired into our lower brain stem for millions of years.

Evaluation as a systematic process applied to educational programs became a formalized endeavor on a national basis in 1965 when President John F. Kennedy signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) mandating a formal evaluation for all federally funded educational programs. Title 1 (later Chapter 1) of the ESEA mandated educators to evaluate their programs and was the “largest single component of the bill . . . destined to be the most costly federal education program in American history” (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2003, p. 32). Since that time, hundreds of models for evaluating educational programs have been developed to address the need for accountability for government and privately funded programs.

Professional evaluators founded an organization called the American Evaluation Association and continuously improve their trade through professional development activities. Evaluators adhere to a set of guiding principles developed to support quality evaluation work and ethical behavior and apply uniform and systematic standards to conducting an evaluation.

The Program Evaluation Standards include the concepts of *utility* (will the evaluation serve the information needs of intended users?), *feasibility* (was the evaluation conducted in a realistic, prudent, diplomatic, and frugal manner?), *propriety* (was the evaluation conducted in a legal and ethical fashion, and were human subjects protected?), and *accuracy* (is the evaluation accurate and the best representation of the merit and worth of the program?).

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