

## *Evaluation Essentials: From A to Z* by Marvin C. Alkin, 2011. New York, NY: Guilford Press. \$40.00

Reviewed by Kristin A. Hobson  
*Western Michigan University*

The purpose of *Evaluation Essentials: From A to Z*, according to Alkin, is to equip readers "...with concepts—the ability to engage in evaluation," enabling them to "...walk the walk' instead of just 'talk the talk'" (p. 1). Alkin accomplishes the book's purpose by outlining processes that focus on a user-oriented perspective for conducting program evaluations.

Under consideration of the book's purpose and content, the ideal readers are people with limited knowledge of evaluation. As such, the book is written for the novice evaluator, program staff members who wish to gain a basic understanding of program evaluation, people who use or commission program evaluations, and students enrolled in an undergraduate-level evaluation course. One may also use the book as a supplemental textbook for students enrolled in an entry-level graduate evaluation course. The first set of readers will benefit from the book in that they will gain an understanding of program evaluation and the processes employed in conducting evaluations. The latter group, graduate students, will acquire a solid foundation of program evaluation.

Organized into 26 sections, using A to Z as a mnemonic device, the first three sections, A, B, and C, overview what is evaluation, why do evaluation, and who is the evaluator, respectively. The remaining sections focus on evaluation essentials, which Alkin divides into four categories: evaluation activity, aids to getting it done properly, additional evaluation options, and potential avenues for future learning. Sections D through V, excluding E, discuss 13 evaluation activities: identifying stakeholders, gaining understanding of the organizational/social/political context, describing the program, understanding the program, developing initial evaluation questions, considering possible instrumentation, determining evaluable questions, finalizing the evaluation plan, determining procedural aspects of the plan, analyzing data, answering evaluation questions, reporting evaluation results, and helping stakeholders to use the results. Sections E, W, and X provide aids to getting it done properly, which involve maintaining relationships with stakeholders, managing the evaluation, and abiding by appropriate evaluation standards. Section

Y presents a type of an additional evaluation option, conducting a cost analysis, and the last section Z offers potential avenues for future learning.

Strengths throughout the sections include, but are not limited to, philosophies of theorists and professional advice. Alkin, perhaps unintentionally, equips the reader with the names of theorists and their main contributions to evaluation by citing quotes and coined terms, such as Robert Stake's analogy between formative and summative evaluation: "When the cook tastes the soup, that's formative. When the guest tastes the soup, that's summative." Likewise, Alkin offers guidance, ultimately providing professional advice, for dealing with evaluation essentials that possess varying perspectives or entail methodological latitude.

Another strength of the book is the inclusion of a program evaluation case study in sections C through X. At the end of each section, Alkin presents a case study exercise that asks questions or outlines a group activity that encourages the reader to apply concepts learned in the sections. For example, after reading about who is an evaluator in section C, Alkin (2011) prompts the reader to consider "...who might do an evaluation of [the] program..." presented in the RUPAS case (p. 38). Alkin also provides suggestions for instructors in using the case study in class. For example, "If you are reading this book in class, you may wish to discuss this with other readers" (p. 38). The case study helps reinforce evaluation essentials discussed in each section.

Also presented at the end of each section are supplemental readings. Because each section briefly discusses an evaluation essential, Alkin recognizes the potential interest to learn more and

therefore offers further readings, including specific pages within books and journal articles. Many of the suggested additional readings are short, easily comprehended, and either reinforce or augment the evaluation essentials discussed.

Throughout the book, Alkin discusses the essentials for conducting an evaluation, predominately centering on use-oriented program evaluation. In other words, the book lacks examples from methods- and value-oriented perspectives as well as the other evaluation "Ps:" personnel evaluation, performance evaluation, product evaluation, policy evaluation, portfolio evaluation, and proposal evaluation. Consequently, a better title for the book might be *User-Oriented Program Evaluation: From A to Z*. This way, the title better reflects the content of the book.

Despite the heavy focus on user-oriented program evaluation, *Evaluation Essentials: From A to Z*, fulfills its stated purpose and is structured clearly and concisely in a manner that gives the reader a basic understanding of program evaluation, including a method for designing and implementing evaluations. Upon reading the book, *Evaluation Essentials: From A to Z* could serve as a reference tool that one may consult when designing and implementing program evaluations. Thus, novice evaluators, program staff who wish to gain a basic understanding of program evaluation, people who use or commission evaluations, and students enrolled in an undergraduate-level evaluation course should purchase and read *Evaluation Essentials: From A to Z*.