

# Evaluation Essentials: From A to Z (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)

Alkin, M., & Vo, A. (2018). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

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According to Alkin and Vo (2018), the purpose of *Evaluation Essentials: 2nd Edition From A to Z* is to “provide [readers] with concepts- the ability to engage in evaluation” (p.1). To accomplish this purpose, Alkin and Vo use a conversational dialogue approach to outline both processes and purposes for the effective planning and implementation of a program evaluation. The structure, content, and casual yet informative style makes this a necessary read for those currently engaging or interested in beginning their professional exposure to the field of program evaluation.

Given the framework, subject matter, and clearly identified purpose provided for this edition of the book, the target readers are novice evaluators, graduate students and those professionals looking for a refresher in evaluation strategies before engaging in their next program evaluation. Alkin and Vo suggest that those new to the evaluation field may benefit from gaining a foundational and holistic understanding of program evaluation, which may be further supported through examination of their end-of-chapter suggested readings and activities, while those with some experience may benefit from the book as a complementary resource to other evaluation writings providing a sound understanding of program evaluation purposes and strategies.

The second edition of *Evaluation Essentials from A to Z*, like the first edition, is written in a conversational style and provides a fundamental understanding of program evaluation processes, uses, and resources. Alkin and Vo divide the material into 26 sections following an A-to-Z

themed approach, and each section is further subdivided and associated with the four primary stages of evaluation plan development: pre-planning, getting started on the plan, writing the plan down, and executing the plan. In the first section, (Chapters A-C), Alkin and Vo provide a high a high-level view of what evaluation is and is not, discuss why it is necessary to perform evaluations, and provide descriptions for the types and roles of evaluators. The next section of the book (Chapters D-V) addresses evaluation activities including: contracting for the evaluation, identifying and strengthening relationships with stakeholders, describing and understanding the program and the contexts under which it is being evaluated, identifying initial issues and evaluation questions to be addressed, considering quantitative and qualitative evaluation instruments to be used, identifying and finalizing the evaluation plan design, managing the evaluation, analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, answering the established evaluation questions and reporting evaluation results, and helping stakeholders to use these results for continuous program improvement. The subsequent section (Chapters W and X) addresses the necessary ethical codes, standards, and behaviors to be demonstrated by an evaluator in performing an honest, equitable, and responsible evaluation. The remaining chapters (Y and Z) provide a referential element to the themes of the book and additional strategies that encourage the reader’s growth as an evaluator including metaevaluation, further supplemental reading, and participation in formalized evaluation training programs.

Among the strengths of this edition is the revised RUPAS evaluation case study helping to bring evaluation concepts and activities into practical application for both students and facilitators alike. The expanded case study includes ideas relevant to education, social welfare, community building, and health. Further, the case study is woven throughout the entirety of the text through the implementation of “Gaining Additional Understanding” activities at the end of each chapter. These provide clear illustrations of each chapter’s concepts as they pertain to an evaluation process that is easily understood. The inclusion of the expanded case study provides an excellent point of dialogue among readers and facilitators to gain knowledge and demonstrate understanding of the evaluation concepts and practices prior to conducting evaluations in their own program areas.

One area that is lacking throughout the text is the clearly articulated distinction between the practical application of research and evaluation. In Chapter A, Alkin and Vo make distinctions between research and evaluation relating the end results to one which “seeks conclusions” and the other which “leads to decisions” (p. 9); however, much of the process focus does not clearly delineate between the two activities. While the concepts between the two tasks are relatively clear, the application of these concepts is somewhat muddled which can make executing the task challenging in a real world evaluation. For example, when performing an evaluation, Alkin and Vo focus on more traditional qualitative research designs and interpretations with little content devoted to the appropriate selection of equally important quantitative methods which lead to understanding the numeric data collected and the ability for evaluators to make informed decisions based on this data. This missing element here blurs the distinction between appropriate methods for designing and analyzing observations and data obtained throughout the process which will likely result in unidimensional rather than mixed methods evaluation studies which can be helpful in describing and “defending” the evaluation data and results obtained. The inclusion of citations from additional evaluation scholars such as Patton, Trochim, and Scriven (as cited in Mathison, 2007) who articulate these distinctive differences would also be helpful. The supplemental information creates a stronger, distinctive, and more clear understanding of the role of research in evaluation, and would aide readers in understanding the both the dependent and independent role of both practices, research and evaluation, thereby leading to the production of a sound evaluation product.

In addition to this terminology shortcoming, there is also minimal attention given to the importance of mixed methods evaluation. Alkin and Vo stress that evaluators may use a mixed methods approach because there is not a single appropriate data source or design and that evaluation questions may require both quantitative and qualitative measures; however, the justification and significance of using this approach is missing detail. This may be due to their suggested challenge of the approach in that it requires doubling or tripling the work or needing to identify where tradeoffs can be made in the process. Other evaluation writers and practitioners emphasize the importance of this approach, citing the reasons of enhancing the validity and credibility of evaluation findings, increasing the understanding reached by using one method to explain or expand upon the findings of the other, and increasing the buy-in and likely utilization of both quantitative and qualitative practitioners (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). It is further argued that by encouraging the use of mixed-methods approaches this will strengthen the credibility of evaluation designs and capture important unintended consequences which are not usually or easily identified in single methodology evaluations. When unintended consequences are not taken into consideration in the evaluation process, a number of possible negative conclusions may result including impacts on effectiveness and efficiency of programs, funding of programs that are not meeting identified objectives, and the possibility of inequity of access to programs creating a potential power differential among groups receiving or eligible to receive program services (Bamberger, Tarsilla, Hesse-Biber, 2016). By using a mixed methods approach, each method, quantitative and qualitative, strengthens the other and allows for a fuller understanding of both the program evaluation and findings (Greene & Caracelli, 1997). Mertens and Hesse-Biber (2016) emphasize that “the evaluation community stands at an important point in history in which the need for methodological and methods strategies with which to examine and achieve the range and diverse perspectives of credibility is of utmost importance”(p.8) and “innovations in the mixed methods field have the potential to move the field of evaluation toward a more inclusive, socially just process than is possible with a monomethod approach” (p.8). As such, Alkin and Vo’s heavy emphasis on evaluation use would have benefitted greatly from the increased articulation and discussion of the significance and possibilities of a mixed method approach.

Evaluation Essentials: 2nd Edition From A to Z clearly and concisely fulfills its objectives in a jargon-free approach providing students, novice evaluators, and others in the field with a rudimentary understanding of the key elements of program evaluation- planning, execution, and the significance of its use. In studying this text, readers are provided with a robust resource to develop their skills or refresh their knowledge before undertaking a program evaluation. Both the depth and breadth of knowledge gained through the reading and application of skills gained through this text are sure to provide a solid foundation in preparation for one's first or next program evaluation and would make a great addition as an evaluation resource to any bookshelf

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