Using Dissemination Research Approaches to Understand the Awareness, Adoption, and Use of the Program Evaluation Standards

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Background: The adoption and use of effective, legally defensible, and ethically sound practices relies on the successful dissemination of evidence-based practices and professional standards. The field of program evaluation has standards, competencies, and principles, yet little is known about how these are utilized by education-focused program evaluators.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine the dissemination and use of the program evaluation standards established by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, relative to the dissemination and use of the American Evaluation Association's (AEA's) guiding principles and AEA's evaluator competencies.

Setting: The SIGnetwork, a network of evaluators of State Personnel Development Grants (SPDGs) funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Special Education Programs (OSEP).

Intervention: NA

Research Design: Descriptive research.

Data Collection and Analysis: Data collection involved administering an online survey to members designated as evaluators in the SIGnetwork directory. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data collected via the online survey.

Findings: Using the formative audience research approach to understanding dissemination, the results of the study support previous findings that awareness of the standards was inconsistent among a sample of AEA members. Respondents self-reported low to moderate levels of familiarity with The Program Evaluation Standards and the other two guidance documents: Guiding Principles for Evaluators and AEA Evaluator Competencies. Using the audience segmentation research approach to understanding dissemination, the results of this study indicate that participants who were AEA members were more likely than those who were not members of AEA to report being familiar with the standards and to have earned an advanced degree related to their role as an evaluator.

Keywords: *Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, American Evaluation Association, program evaluation standards.*

Introduction

Although program evaluation was established formally as an occupation within the United States with The National Defense Act of 1958, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 is credited with elevating the nascent field of program evaluation by incorporating evaluation functions within ESEA's policy language (Madaus et al., 2012). Following these two acts, evaluation has gained prominence over the past half-century as a requirement of almost every federal grant (King, 2003; Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009), positioning the field as an emerging profession (Ayoo et al., 2020; House, 1990; Mertens, 1994; Shadish et al., 1991; Worthen, 1994). Given that evaluation is a standard in grant proposals and grant-awarded projects, evaluators are essential to successfully securing and maintain funding to fuel innovation in this country and globally. Trends indicating a rising demand for services in both the public and private sectors have led program evaluation scholars to conclude that the demand for evaluators outweighs the current supply and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future (La Velle & Donaldson, 2015; Stockmann & Meyer, 2016).

The demand accompanying grants is currently being met—at least partially—by university pipelines. In 2017, there were 27 doctoral programs, 42 certificates, and 42 master's degrees offered in program evaluation theory, practice-based standards, and methodology. Despite an increase in the number of evaluator education programs in universities in the United States since the 1980s (La Velle, 2020), research suggests a need for more evaluator education programs providing high-quality training, citing the lack of uniformity in evaluators' knowledge, skills, and abilities (Ayoo et al., 2020; Christie et al., 2014; Davis & MacKay, 2014; Dewey et al., 2008). Although the evaluation field has experienced tremendous growth in recent decades, there is some debate as to whether evaluation has attained status as a profession (Ayoo et al., 2020). The defining features of a profession include (1) an accreditation process for training programs, (2) professional credentialing through licensing or certification, and (3) standards of practice. Within the United States, there is neither an accreditation process nor a recognized professional credential, unlike in Canada, where the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) has developed a process for professionals to reach a CES Credentialed Evaluator designation. The need for standards of practice is emphasized in the James Irvine Foundation's (2009) *Strong Field Framework: A Guide and Toolkit for Funders and Nonprofits Committed to Large-Scale Impact*, which posits five broad components that include: (a) a shared identity, (b) standards of practice, (c) a knowledge base, (d) leadership and grassroots support, and (e) funding and supporting policy. Ayoo and associates (2020) contend that professional standards, ethical principles, and recognized professional competencies are all the more imperative in the absence of an accreditation process and in countries without professional credentialing for evaluators. Fournier (1994) asserts that the program evaluation standards are evidence of the professionalization of the evaluation field.

This study focused on participant evaluators' engagement with the professional standards (i.e., *The Program Evaluation Standards* (Yarbrough et al., 2011)) and two complementary, foundational documents: the American Evaluation Association's *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* (2018a) and the American Evaluation Association's *AEA Evaluator Competencies* (2018b). These documents will be referred to simply as *Standards*, *Guiding Principles*, and *Competencies* throughout the paper. Together, these three documents are uniquely foundational to the field of evaluation. It is critically important that those working in the field of evaluation are familiar with and use these standards in informing and guiding their practice. This study examined the extent to which a defined sample of evaluators supporting K–12 education projects are familiar with and use the established standards, guiding principles, and/or competencies, as informed by advances in dissemination research.

This study is unique, as it is conceptualizing three premier program evaluation guidance documents as interventions that can be implemented in evaluators' practices to forward high-quality, disciplined evaluation work that is respectful and culturally responsive to the community where the evaluation is located. It also extends the research literature, as it forwards the evaluation field's understanding of the state of dissemination of the standards relative to that of the guiding principles and the competencies.

Literature Review

This literature review is divided into two parts. The first section provides an overview of the foundational documents the American Evaluation Association (AEA) promotes as guidance documents: (1) *The Program Evaluation Standards* (Yarbrough et al., 2011), (2) *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* (AEA, 2018a), and (3)

AEA Evaluator Competencies (AEA, 2018b). In the second part, we review articles from the corpus of published research on how professional information and norms are disseminated among individuals within a field and the factors that limit and facilitate dissemination.

Standards, Guiding Principles, and Evaluator Competencies

Guidance documents about standards, ethical principles, and professional competencies exist for many fields. These anchor expectations, with the aim of ensuring the consistency of desired practices among those sharing that professional identity (Gullickson et al., 2019). Professionals use standards to advance their own knowledge and technical skills and, in doing so, promote a sense of professionalism as members of a community with shared standards—members who have objectively validated individual competence (Baer, 1986).

In the field of program evaluation, three foundational and guiding documents (*The Program Evaluation Standards*, *Guiding Principles for Evaluators*, and *AEA Evaluator Competencies*) structure evaluator preparation and training and guide evaluators' practice. The three resources position evaluators to engage in rigorous, high-quality program evaluation practices to generate findings that contribute to program improvement efforts. We present a brief description of each of the three in turn.

The Program Evaluation Standards

The program evaluation standards (Yarbrough et al., 2011) identify and define evaluation quality and provide guidance to evaluators and those who use evaluation services (see Table 1). The standards were intended by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (JCSEE) to serve as voluntary consensus statements to be applied, as professional judgment dictates, in each unique evaluation setting. According to the JCSEE, "In implementing the program evaluation standards, stakeholders must decide how to create the best quality evaluation based on prioritized needs. The standards can be applied to all evaluations, but the exact ways they are applied will differ" (Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. xxii).

The standards were first developed in 1981, then revised in 1994 and 2011 (with updates following advances in the field and as required by the American National Standards Institute, which oversees standard-setting nationwide) (JCSEE, 1981, 1994; Yarbrough et al., 2011). The third edition of *Standards* incorporated extensive feedback from the field, including the AEA diversity committee's critical review of the previous edition with respect to its coverage of cultural diversity, treatment of cultural concerns, and attention to cultural competence.

Table 1. The Program Evaluation Standards (without Descriptions)

Standards category	Standard
Utility standards	U1 Evaluator Credibility
	U2 Attention to Stakeholders
	U3 Negotiated Purposes
	U4 Explicit Values
	U5 Relevant Information
	U6 Meaningful Processes and Products
	U7 Timely and Appropriate Communicating and Reporting
	U8 Concern for Consequences and Influence
Feasibility standards	F1 Project Management
	F2 Practical Procedures
	F3 Contextual Viability
	F4 Resource Use
Propriety standards	P1 Responsive and Inclusive Orientation
	P2 Formal Agreements
	P3 Human Rights and Respect
	P4 Clarity and Fairness
	P5 Transparency and Disclosure
	P6 Conflicts of Interests
	P7 Fiscal Responsibility
Accuracy standards	A1 Justified Conclusions and Decisions
	A2 Valid Information
	A3 Reliable Information
	A4 Explicit Program and Context Descriptions
	A5 Information Management
	A6 Sound Designs and Analyses
	A7 Explicit Evaluation Reasoning
	A8 Communication and Reporting
Evaluation Accountability standards	E1 Evaluation Documentation
	E2 Interval Metaevaluation
	E3 External Metaevaluation

Note. From *The Program Evaluation Standards: A Guide for Evaluators and Evaluation Users* (3rd ed.), by D. B. Yarbrough et al., 2011, pp. 3, 71, 105, 157, 225, Sage. Copyright 2011 by JCSEE.

Consequently, the JCSEE built upon AEA's cultural reading of the standards and revised the standards with significant attention to issues of culture and context (Symonette et al., 2020). The standards are described in detail in a book for purchase (https://evaluationstandards.org); however, multiple other resources based on the text are available at no cost (e.g., Western Michigan University Evaluation Center's evaluation checklist).

Previous research indicates that the dissemination of the standards has been wanting. A 2018 survey of 141 members of the AEA (self-identified as "evaluators" and/or "consultants") indicated that awareness of the standards was inconsistent across the field (Harnar, 2019). Nearly a third (32.6%) of the respondents reported being "Not familiar at all" with the standards. A fifth (20.6%) of the respondents reported being "Slightly familiar," and a similar percentage (21.3%) indicated that they were "Moderately familiar." Among the respondents who reported being "Very familiar" (14.2%) or "Extremely familiar" (11.4%), the majority (that is, 71.0%) had five or fewer years

of experience in program evaluation. Thus, it was early career program evaluators rather than more experienced professionals who reported greater familiarity with the standards.

Guiding Principles for Evaluators

The second foundational document of focus, *Guiding Principles for Evaluators*, promotes AEA's core values and serves as a guide for the professional conduct of evaluators. According to the AEA (2018a), "The *Principles* govern the behavior of evaluators in all stages of the evaluation from the initial discussion of focus and purpose, through design, implementation, reporting, and ultimately the use for the evaluation" (p. 2). The five guiding principles emphasize systematic inquiry, competence, integrity, respect for people, and common good and equity (see Table 2).

The guiding principles were ratified by the AEA membership in 1994, 2004, and 2018. Per AEA policy, the guiding principles are subject to review at least once every five years. *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* is available as a free resource. [1] Although evaluators are encouraged to use the guiding principles to inform their professional actions, a 2019 follow-up study of members found that most respondents lamented the lack of enforcement of the guiding principles and recommended establishment of a code of ethics and minimum standards of professional behavior (Ayoo, 2020).

AEA Evaluator Competencies

The competencies were developed to improve evaluator preparation and ongoing professional learning, ensure the use of quality evaluation practices, promote evaluation research, and enhance the professionalization of the field of evaluation (King & Stevahn, 2020). The competencies were developed and adopted by AEA in the interest of establishing

> a common language and set of criteria to clarify what it means to be included in the definition of evaluator. The competencies serve as a roadmap for guiding evaluator education and training and encourages critical self-reflection about the strengths and limitations of evaluators. The competencies identify ways to improve practice in the field. They reflect the services evaluators are called upon to perform in multiple contexts and recognize the

> interdependence and overlap of the domain. (AEA, 2018b, para.1)

The competencies, listed by domain in Table 3, were designed to align with the standards and the guiding principles. Moreover, the competencies also offer alignment to other respected evaluation principles utilized in the medical field, broadening their applicability. For example, Moss and Crewe (2020) cross walked the AEA competencies with the Black Perspective Health Evaluation framework's principles of evaluation for the medical field; they demonstrated each AEA competency's alignment with them. The competencies are available as a free resource. The AEA views the development of a self-assessment tool for evaluators to use to reflect on their evaluation practice as a natural progression in the pursuit of building evaluator competencies (see Stevahn et al., 2020).

From the espoused purposes of the standards, principles, and competencies, it is evident that despite not having all of the components of a "profession" (Ayoo et al., 2020), there are expectations for practicing evaluators and those who prepare them. How these expectations are disseminated and integrated into evaluation practices, however, is largely unknown. Given the topic of this study, it is worth noting that dissemination considerations of the latest edition of *Competencies* were specifically suggested by Tucker and King (2020), as a recommendation for future planning. We now briefly turn toward literature centered on dissemination research, including challenges to dissemination and a promising consideration to facilitate dissemination: peer networks.

Knowledge-to-Practice Theories: Dissemination

The awareness, adoption, and use of effective, legally defensible, and ethically sound practices relies on effective dissemination of evidence-based practices and professional expectations (e.g., industry standards). Understanding how dissemination manifests across fields such as program evaluation is key to maximizing adoption and use. Purtle and colleagues (2020) suggest three approaches to researching dissemination efforts. The present study uses the *formative audience research* approach. In this approach, the researchers aim to "characterize a target

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[1] https://www.eval.org/About/Guiding-Principles

Table 2. Guiding Principles for Evaluators

1. Systematic Inquiry: Evaluators conduct data-based inquiries that are thorough, methodical, and contextually relevant.

2. Competence: Evaluators provide skilled professional services to stakeholders.

3. Integrity: Evaluators behave with honesty and transparency in order to ensure the integrity of the evaluation.

4. Respect for People: Evaluators honor the dignity, well-being, and self-worth of individuals and acknowledge the influence of culture within and across groups.

5. Common Good and Equity: Evaluators strive to contribute to the common good and advancement of an equitable and just society.

Note. From *Guiding Principles for Evaluators*, by the American Evaluation Association, 2018 (https://www.eval.org/About/Guiding-Principles). Copyright 2018 by AEA.

Table 3. AEA Evaluator Competencies

Domain and Domain Description

1.0 Professional Practice
Focuses on what makes evaluators distinct as practicing professionals. Professional practice is grounded in AEA's foundational documents, including the *Program Evaluation Standards*, the AEA *Guiding Principles*, and the AEA Statement on Cultural Competence.

2.0 Methodology
Focuses on technical aspects of evidence-based, systematic inquiry for valued purposes. Methodology includes quantitative, qualitative, and mixed designs for learning, understanding, decision making, and judging.

3.0 Context
Focuses on understanding the unique circumstances, multiple perspectives, and changing settings of evaluations and their users/stakeholders. Context involves site/location/ environment, participants/stakeholders, organization/structure, culture/diversity, history/traditions, values/beliefs, politics/economics, power/privilege, and other characteristics.

4.0 Planning and Management
Focuses on determining and monitoring work plans, timelines, resources, and other components needed to complete and deliver an evaluation study. Planning and management include networking, developing proposals, contracting, determining work assignments, monitoring progress, and fostering use.

5.0 Interpersonal
Focuses on human relations and social interactions that ground evaluator effectiveness for professional practice throughout the evaluation. Interpersonal skills include cultural competence, communication, facilitation, and conflict resolution.

Note. From *AEA Evaluator Competencies*, by the American Evaluation Association, 2018. Copyright 2018 by AEA.

audience's awareness about, adoption of, and attitudes toward an intervention, and preferences for receiving information about it, as well as other individual attributes that may influence practice behavior and perceptions of context (e.g., self-efficacy, injunctive social norms)" (p. 1057). This type of research approach can offer practitioners an empirical basis from which to inform the future designs of and distribution approaches to dissemination efforts.

The second approach used in the present study is what Purtle and associates describe as *audience segmentation research*. Here, the objective is to "identify discrete and meaningful sub-groups within an audience that vary in terms of their awareness about, attitudes toward, adoption of, and preferences for receiving information about an intervention" (p. 1057). Findings from this research approach can inform the development of dissemination materials and the delivery strategy for varying stakeholders.

A third approach, *dissemination effectiveness research*, is beyond the scope of this present study. Future research by the program evaluation field could extend what the field understands about evaluation, as this approach's objective is to "test dissemination strategies to determine which are most effective at changing an audience's awareness about, attitudes towards, and adoption of an intervention" (p. 1057). Data from this approach can offer disseminators guidance regarding thoughtful scaling-up efforts (Purtle et al., 2020).

Critical to any field is the communication across the professional network. Knowledge creation or information dissemination will not gain wide acceptability and implementation if the dissemination of created knowledge for purposes of adoption is not effective (Proctor et al., 2011). Dissemination of information in organizations travels through both formal channels (e.g., meetings) and informal channels (e.g., hallway conversations, unplanned conference interactions) (Hoe & McShane, 2010).

Within the field of implementation science, which focuses on strategies to integrate evidence-based interventions into practice, the dissemination process has been relatively neglected (Purtle et al., 2020). In the present study, we name the "intervention" as the application of *The Program Evaluation Standards* (Yarbrough et al., 2011), *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* (American Evaluation Association, 2018a), and *AEA Evaluator Competencies* (American Evaluation Association, 2018b), because those are the documents that their developers anticipated would be disseminated and used widely across the field. The "specific settings" the NIH references

include program evaluation firms, organizations, and projects. An exploratory examination is needed to determine how and to what extent program evaluators use these resource documents to inform their professional practice. From there, other explorations of resource utility and other dissemination strategies can follow.

Challenges to Information Dissemination

The use and non-use of professional guidelines is a decades-old concern (Gagliardi et al., 2011). House (1990), for example, noted that the endorsement of the standards by the Joint Committee for Standards of Educational Evaluation (JCSEE) and the standards' acceptance in the program evaluation field did not necessarily translate to their use in evaluation work and reporting.

Existing research offers possible factors to explain why dissemination has been a challenging endeavor for the field of program evaluation. A challenge in knowledge generation and dissemination is that there may be different "epistemic cultures" present within a common field. These are distinct subgroups that may exhibit preferences to particular work practices and guidance norms to carry out their tasks (Robertson et al., 2003). The disparate professional and personal backgrounds of evaluators make the presence of epistemic cultures likely. Within the transdiscipline that is evaluation, there is not a designated pathway or process to uniformly share field-based changes, information, or expectations to all evaluators, especially those who may not be actively connected with AEA. Although the mandated use of guidance resources, in the form of federal grant requirements for evaluations, could help mitigate inconsistencies across the field, stipulations within federal grants requirements currently do not include utilization of any of the foundational evaluation documents (i.e., *Standards, Principles,* or *Competencies*) in structuring a high-quality evaluation (Ayoo et al., 2020).

There is a very large body of research on information dissemination in the field of health care, where studies reveal challenges in the dissemination and implementation of guidance documents for occupational practice. For example, implementation of professional practice guidelines was found to be stymied by a number of factors such as lack of time, lack of supervision, lack of opportunities for training, and emotional constraints (Michie et al., 2007), as well as inconsistent accountability, guideline complexity, and lack of clarity (Gagliardi et al., 2011). In

alignment with Purtle and colleagues' (2020) description of audience segmentation dissemination research (identifying discrete subgroups of information-dissemination recipients), Michie and colleagues also observed that different stakeholder groups encountered different implementation challenges.

Dissemination of Information: Leveraging Peer Networks

Diverse stakeholder groups speak to the potential importance of peer networks as channels for information dissemination across evaluation groups. Various network configurations or purposes exist in professional and occupational spaces. A broad type of this nature is known as a community of practice (CoPs). CoPs are comprised of individuals who work in a common domain who come together as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2010, p. 1). Three elements of a CoP are (1) the domain, (2) the community, and (3) the practice. In other words, those involved in this network are practitioners working in a shared space or field, who help one another and learn together, and who use common resources in their practice (e.g., tools). House (1990) noted that evaluators come to evaluation work from a number of different disciplines. Thusly, due to the nature of the evaluation field, there will undoubtedly be numerous CoPs within it. The topical interest groups (TIGs) within AEA alone are evidence to this, as there are TIGs for assessment in higher education, behavioral health, crime and justice, disaster and emergency management evaluation, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues (AEA, n.d.). It is entirely possible that these CoPs have their own norms and approaches to the evaluation work that may or may not include the standards, guiding principles, and competencies, or may include them to different degrees.

CoPs can transcend the formal structures of an organization, as they can effectively connect people across organizations and geography (Wenger, 2010). Applying Purtle and associates' (2020) audience segmentation research approach is apropos because the subgroups that we aim to identify vary not only in the information they might be aware of, but also in their considerations for the adoption and use of the aforementioned information. Special interest groups (SIGs), TIGs within an organization like AEA, or other formal networked groups, such as collections of evaluators who are contracted with a common grant funder,

may exhibit unique professional characteristics pertaining to what tools or practices are used in their evaluation projects. As such, CoPs and other peer-to-peer networks, such as professional collaboration networks (e.g., Sage et al., 2020) or professional learning communities (PLCs) (e.g., Vescio et al., 2008), offer potential means through which occupation-centric information is shared, and these existing structures may be important collectives to leverage for field dissemination objectives.

Results from dissemination research indicate professional-peer networks may serve the evaluation profession well (e.g., Bunger et al., 2016; Cramer et al., 2021; Nahikian et al., 2013; Robertson et al., 2003). Cramer and colleagues, for instance, found that early childhood educators shared information (e.g., information learned during professional development) with one another through both formal channels and informal channels, where formal channels covered more top-down information sharing and the informal opportunities for connections were characterized as more advice-seeking conversations.

Another example is Robertson and colleagues' (2003) study on the work practices, knowledge claims, and social identities of two disparate professional organizations, which revealed that as part of knowledge creation (i.e., science) in one professional entity, interpersonal networks were necessary to disseminate relevant knowledge through face-to-face exchanges and thus served as key channels of information sharing and acquiring.

Professional-peer networks may be all the more critical in fields in which practitioners experience a high degree of autonomy, such as in evaluation. The ability to balance autonomy in the work with a sense of connectedness within a professional network is yet another benefit of a peer network (Robertson et al., 2003). In this study, we examined one network of evaluators' awareness about, adoption of, and attitudes toward the standards, relative to the guiding principles and the competencies.

Method

The purpose of this study is to apply two novel research approaches proposed by Purtle and associates (2020) to the study of the dissemination and use of the standards established by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. The first approach, formative audience research, explores evaluation practitioners' awareness about, adoption of, and attitudes toward the standards, and preferences for receiving

information about them, as well as other individual attributes that may influence practice behavior and perceptions of context (e.g., self-efficacy, social norms). The second approach, audience segmentation research, seeks to identify discrete and meaningful subgroups within a defined sample of evaluation practitioners who may vary in terms of their awareness about, attitudes toward, adoption of, and preferences for receiving information about the standards. The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. To what degree are evaluation practitioners within a discrete network of professionals supporting state-level special education initiatives aware of, using, and holding favorable attitudes toward the standards, relative to the to the guiding principles and the competencies?
2. To what degree are there discrete and meaningful subgroups among evaluation practitioners within this network of professionals who vary in terms of their awareness about, attitudes toward, adoption of, and preferences for receiving information about the standards?

Participants

The participants in this study included 19 individuals who served as evaluators on projects funded by a State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Special Education Programs (OSEP) from 2021 to 2022. There were 37 individuals listed as evaluators in the directory of the SIGnetwork, a community for project directors and evaluators of SPDG projects. Thus, the survey's response rate was 51.4%. Among the respondents, 79.0% identified as female and 21% as male. The race/ethnicity of the respondents was as follows: White (94.7%) and Asian (5.3%). In terms of their primary professional role, 36.8% were university-based faculty or staff, 26.3% were consultants/evaluators with a state department of education or state agency, 21.1% were self-employed as consultants/evaluators, 5.3% were consultants/evaluators employed by an evaluation firm, and two responded "Other" and specified "Consultant/Evaluator with Non-Profit Research Foundation" and "Internal Evaluator with a County Office of Education."

In preparation for their role as evaluators, one participant earned a Ph.D. in evaluation studies, two earned Ph.D.s in statistics, four earned Ph.D.s in psychology (e.g., school psychology, developmental psychology), two earned Ph.D.s in special education, and two had graduate degrees (i.e., Ph.D, master's) in public policy and administration. Notably, 42.1% of the participants did not specify a degree or certificate they had earned that directly related to their preparation as an evaluator.

The participants reported the number of years of evaluator experience ranging from less than 1 year to 28 years, with an average of 12.2 years of experience ($SD = 7.9$ years). With regard to professional organization memberships, 57.9% were members of the American Evaluation Association (AEA), 15.8% were members of the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) Division H: Research, Evaluation, & Assessment in Schools, and one respondent noted they were a member of AERA but not a member of Division H. No participants were members of the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES).

Procedures

The Institutional Review Board of the first author's institution approved this research study. The procedures involved administering an online survey to members designated as Evaluators in the SIGnetwork directory. Potential respondents were recruited via an email message inviting them to complete the online survey centered on the evaluation practitioners' awareness about, adoption of, and attitudes toward the standards, the guiding principles, and the competencies, participants' preferences for receiving information about them, and additional information that may influence practice behavior and perceptions of evaluation context. Invited participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, the identity of the participants would remain anonymous, and their responses would be confidential. The electronic survey remained open for 19 days, beginning with the first recruitment email message. A reminder prompt was sent via email 6 days after the initial recruitment email message was distributed.

Instrument

The online survey consisted of 32 questions, with the first 6 questions dedicated to descriptive information about the respondent's background and professional qualifications. The remaining questions asked participants to rate their familiarity with and judgment of the quality, relevance, and usefulness of the three foundational documents.

Design and Analysis

This was a descriptive research study. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data collected via the online survey.

Results

The results of the survey largely address questions aligned with a formative audience research approach to understanding dissemination in describing the participants' awareness about, adoption of, and attitudes toward an intervention, and preferences for receiving information about it, as well as other individual attributes that may influence practice behavior and perceptions of context. The results section ends with a finding relevant to an audience segmentation approach to understanding dissemination; it highlights a distinction in the preferences for receiving information about the standards between participants who are and are not members of AEA.

Familiarity with The Program Evaluation Standards

In order to assess the respondents' familiarity with the standards, participants were asked to identify the five standards from a list that also included the domains from *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* and *AEA Evaluator Competencies*. The percentage of participants who accurately identified each of the standards was as follows: Utility (63.2%), Feasibility (57.9%), Propriety (52.6%), Accuracy (68.4%), and Evaluation Accountability (68.4%). Only 31.6% of the participants were able to correctly identify all five standards from the list that also included domains from *Guiding Principles* and *Competencies* as distractors. On a slider scale from 0 to 100, with 0 representing "Not Familiar" and 100 representing "Very Familiar," the respondents self-reported low to moderate levels of familiarity, with a mean rating of 38.5 (SD = 26.27, N = 17) with ratings ranging from 0 to 85. The respondents reported similarly low to moderate levels of familiarity with the guiding principles (M = 32.4, SD = 29.76, N = 16), with ratings ranging from 0 to 85, and with the competencies (M = 36.5, SD = 31.21, N = 15), with ratings ranging from 0 to 91. When asked how they have used a provided list of the standards in the past 2 years, 31.3% selected "I have referred to *The Program Evaluation Standards* to guide my evaluation activities," 25.0% selected "I have cited *The Program Evaluation Standards* in an evaluation report or brief," 18.8%

selected "I have cited *The Program Evaluation Standards* in a grant proposal," and 6.25% selected "I have participated in professional learning on *The Program Evaluation Standards.*" Selecting "Other," two respondents specified: "I have recommended the Checklists to others" and "Used to discuss role of evaluator and evaluation ethics with project director." More than half (56.3%) of the respondents selected "I have not used *The Program Evaluation Standards* in the past 2 years."

Self-Reported Knowledge and Skillful Application and Professional Learning

None of the respondents identified themselves as having mastered the standards, operationalized as being "both competent and confident in my use of *The Program Evaluation Standards.*" Nearly one-third (31.6%) of the participants identified themselves as competent, operationalized as being "competent in my level of learning ... having a growth opportunity in applying knowledge in my work." Just over half (52.6%) of the participants characterized their knowledge and skill application as representing a growth opportunity, operationalized as "neither fully competent nor confident in my use of *The Program Evaluation Standards.*" A notable finding was that among the respondents who were members of AEA, just over a third (36.4%) rated themselves as competent in their use of the standards, whereas only 25.0% of the respondents who were not members of AEA judged themselves to be competent.
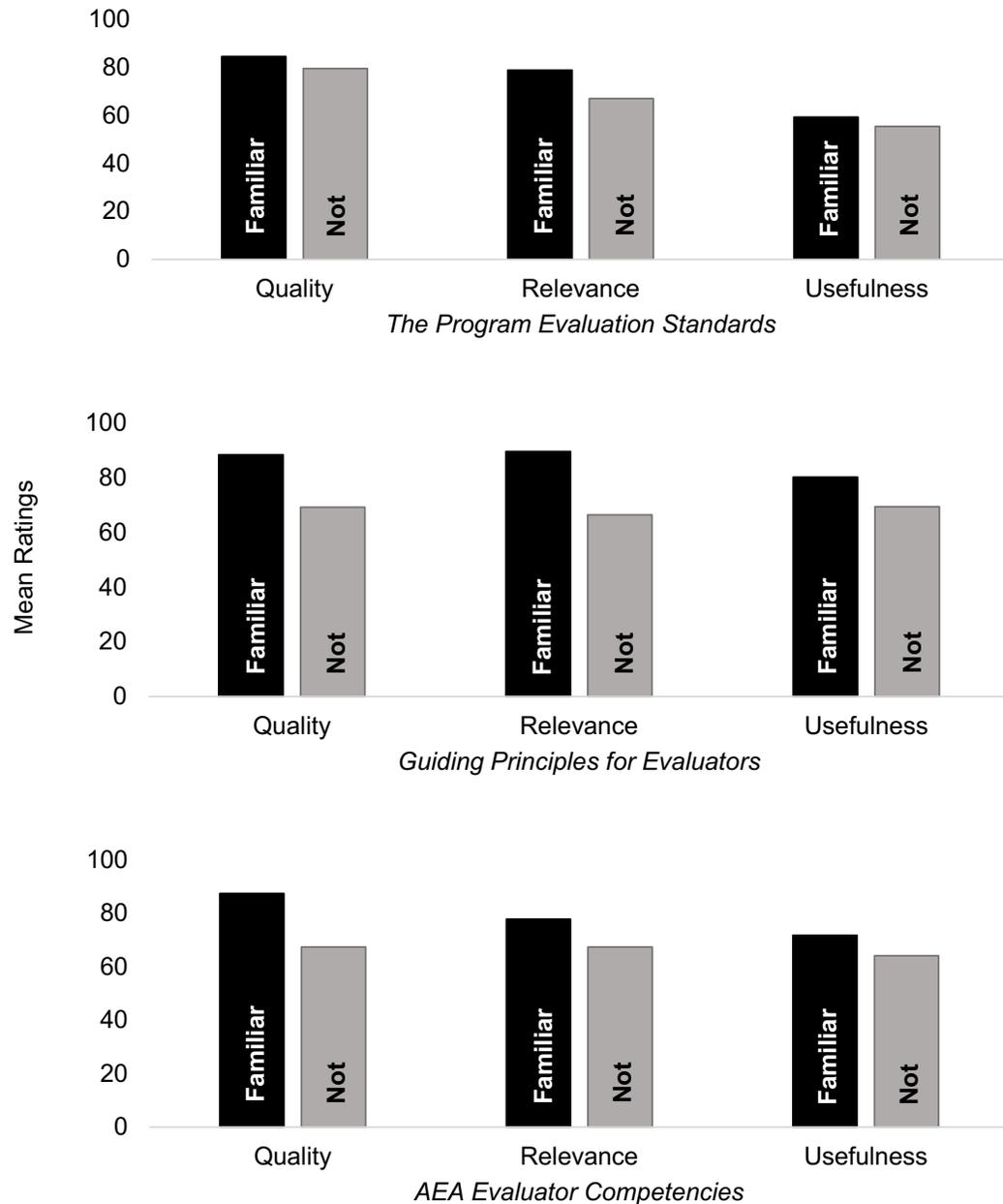
Perceptions of Quality, Relevance, and Usefulness

Survey participants were asked to rate the quality, relevance, and usefulness of the standards, guiding principles, and competencies on a scale of 1 to 100, with 100 being the highest level on each dimension. After providing the rating on each dimension, the respondents were asked to identify whether they were familiar enough with the foundational document to judge its worth or not. Understanding the perceptions of individuals who claim to be unfamiliar with the guidance documents is important, as this is the target audience for dissemination and adoption. The results indicate that, of the three documents, *Guiding Principles* had the most favorable ratings of quality, relevance, and usefulness among those who judged they were familiar with it (see Figure 1). Those who identified they were familiar with *Guiding Principles* rated

the document more highly than did those who reported they were not, and this held true across all three dimensions: quality ($M = 88.4$, $SD = 7.92$ vs. $M = 69.3$, $SD = 13.25$), relevance ($M = 89.6$, $SD = 6.58$ vs. $M = 66.5$, $SD = 13.63$), and usefulness ($M = 80.2$, $SD = 9.15$ vs. $M = 69.5$, $SD = 13.92$).

Figure 1. Mean Ratings of Quality, Relevance, and Usefulness of Each Foundational Document for Respondents who Identified as Either "Familiar" or "Not Familiar" with the Document to Judge Its Worth ($N = 19$)

The Program Evaluation Standards

Guiding Principles for Evaluators

AEA Evaluator Competencies

The *Competencies* received slightly less-favorable ratings of quality, relevance, and usefulness among those who were not familiar with the *Competencies*. The distinction in ratings for those who identified themselves as familiar with the *Competencies* versus those who were unfamiliar

held across the dimensions of quality (M = 87.3, SD = 11.15 vs. M = 67.3, SD = 17.79), relevance (M = 77.7, SD = 21.55 vs. M = 67.3, SD = 17.79), and usefulness (M = 71.7, SD = 21.82 vs. M = 64.0, SD = 14.93).

Of the three documents, *Standards* received the least favorable ratings of quality, relevance, and usefulness among those who judged they were familiar with it. As with the other two documents, those who identified they were familiar with *Standards* rated the document more highly than did those who were not, across all three dimensions: quality (M = 84.5, SD = 15.42 vs. M = 79.5, SD = 12.53), relevance (M = 78.8, SD = 20.01 vs. M = 67.0, SD = 23.25), usefulness (M = 59.3, SD = 13.74 vs. M = 55.4, SD = 23.34).

Means of Dissemination of The Program Evaluation Standards

Although the standards are only available in their entirety in book form, only 26.3% of the participants had a copy of the third edition book in their personal professional library, with an additional 15.8% stating that the book was available to them through their center or agency (see Table 4). The majority of the respondents reported accessing the standards online, although only the standard statements, not information describing their application, are available on the internet. A fraction (15.8%) of the evaluators reported accessing the checklist of program evaluation standards developed through Western Michigan University's Evaluation Checklist Project (https://wmich.edu/evaluation/checklists). None of the respondents reported participating in a professional learning session on the standards.

Table 4. Participants' Responses to the Question: How Do You Currently Access Information about the Program Evaluation Standards? (N = 19)

Means of Dissemination	Percentage of Respondents
I have accessed *The Program Evaluation Standards* statements online.	36.8%
I have *The Program Evaluation Standards*, 3rd Edition in my personal professional library.	26.3%
The *Program Evaluation Standards*, 3rd Edition book is available at my office/center/agency.	15.8%
I have accessed the checklist of *The Program Evaluation Standards* developed through Western Michigan University's Evaluation Checklists Project (https://wmich.edu/evaluation/checklists)	15.8%
I have participated in professional learning on *The Program Evaluation Standards* and retained the materials provided.	0.0%

Respondents also identified online access as the means by which they most commonly accessed *Guiding Principles* (selected by 42.1% of the respondents) and *Competencies* (also selected by 42.1% of respondents). When asked to describe their preferences for staying current with the professional standards, principles, and competencies relevant to the field of program evaluation, AEA members emphasized courses and webinars that were delivered virtually or face-to-face with an emphasis on application through case studies. Notably, non-AEA members expressed no preferences for staying current with the professional standards, principles, and competencies relevant to the field of program evaluation.

Results by Audience Segmentation

The audience segmentation approach to dissemination research involves identifying discrete and meaningful subgroups within an audience that varies in terms of awareness about, attitudes toward, adoption of, and preferences for receiving information about a resource or innovation (Purtle et al., 2020). The results of this

study indicate that membership in AEA is the most salient subgroup. Participants who are AEA members (N = 11) were more likely than those who were not members of AEA (N = 8) to report being familiar enough with the standards to judge their worth (36.3% vs. 0%). Likewise, AEA members were more likely to report being familiar enough with the guiding principles (45.5% vs. 0%) and the competencies (54.5% vs. 0%) to judge their worth. The subgroup of AEA members had considerable overlap with a second meaningful subgroup; that is, participants with advanced degrees directly related to preparation as an evaluator. Among the participants who were AEA members, all but one (90.0%) reported earning an advanced degree directly related to their role as an evaluator. Among the participants who were not members of AEA, only one (12.5%) held a relevant advanced degree. Given the high degree of intersectionality, it is difficult to establish whether AEA membership or earning an advanced degree in a discipline relevant to evaluation is more important for adoption and use of the standards, guiding principles, and competencies. This combined subgroup of AEA members with advanced degrees relevant to evaluation, however, were distinct in their awareness about, attitudes toward, adoption of, and willingness to express a preference for receiving information about the standards, guiding principles, and competencies.

Discussion

Evaluation is considered a transdiscipline, with individuals from a variety of professional backgrounds and experiences laying claim to professional identities as evaluators (House, 1990). Given that evaluation has not attained the distinction of being a full-fledged profession, as it lacks an accreditation process for preparation programs and credentialing for practitioners within the United States, the dissemination and use of professional standards and other guidance documents is critical to ensuring the quality and consistency of evaluation practice. This study examined evaluators' awareness about, adoption of, and attitudes toward the standards, relative to the guiding principles and the competencies, within one network of evaluators using two approaches to dissemination research.

Using the formative audience research approach to understanding dissemination, the results of the study support previous findings that found awareness of the standards was inconsistent among a sample of AEA members, with nearly a third (32.6%) of the respondents reporting being

"Not familiar at all" with the standards, and another fifth (20.6%) reporting being only "Slightly familiar" with the standards (Harnar, 2019). In the current study, only 31.6% of the participants were able to identify correctly all five standards. Respondents self-reported low to moderate levels of familiarity with *The Program Evaluation Standards* and with the other two guidance documents, *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* and *AEA Evaluator Competencies*. The reported use of the standards to guide evaluation activities; as a citation in an evaluation report, brief, or grant proposal; or as a target for professional learning was limited. More than half of the respondents indicated that they had not used the standards in the past two years.

Using the audience segmentation research approach to understanding dissemination, the results of this study indicate that those who hold membership in AEA and advanced degrees directly related to evaluator preparation constitute meaningful subgroups with a high degree of intersectionality. Participants in the study who were AEA members were more likely than those who were not members of AEA to report being familiar with the standards and to have earned an advanced degree related to their role as an evaluator. The results suggest AEA membership and relevant evaluator preparation are necessary, but not sufficient, for the awareness, adoption, and use of the standards, as even among the AEA member subgroup, dissemination was limited.

Several limitations of this study warrant attention in drawing conclusions from its findings. The primary limitation is a small sample size that is restricted in its representation of the rich diversity of the field of evaluators. The sample of 19 individuals was predominately White (94.7%) and female (79.0%). Although the demographics of this sample may reflect the composition of the broader SIGnetwork, a community for project directors and evaluators of federally funded personnel development grants in special education, the demographics are not representative of the national and evaluation community. Future research should examine patterns of dissemination across a broader evaluator base representing different professional disciplines. A second limitation of the study on the dissemination of the standards was that less than a third (31.6%) of the participants were familiar enough with the standards to correctly identify the five standards and only 31.3% reported that they had referred to *The Program Evaluation Standards* to guide their evaluation activities in the past two years. Despite the obvious limitation of soliciting judgments of quality, relevance, and usefulness from individuals who are unfamiliar

with the object of that judgment, such an inquiry does provide insights into the perspectives of the target audience for future dissemination efforts. Future research could explore patterns of actual use (rather than claims of use) of the standards by evaluators who feature the standards in their evaluation practice, along with evidence from case studies of the impact of that use on the quality of evaluation services.

Implications

The results of this study add credence to the need to advocate for greater dissemination of the standards, along with the guiding principles and competencies. Survey respondents expressed a preference for accessing resources online, a finding that may inform future dissemination planning. Simply increasing the ease of access, however, without the addition of a sense of personal professional accountability, will not likely have a significant impact on uptake. Increasing engagement with AEA and other professional organizations dedicated to the evaluation field is clearly beneficial for greater dissemination of the standards, along with the guiding principles and competencies. Sponsors of federal grants should be strongly encouraged to prioritize membership in a professional organization such as AEA as a desirable qualification for evaluators. However, multiple studies have shown that AEA membership is not in and of itself sufficient to ensure awareness, adoption, and use of the standards.

Peer networks may hold promise as vehicles for dissemination of the standards and other guidance resources by bringing together groups of otherwise fairly autonomous evaluators to share a desire to improve their individual and collective capacity. For independent evaluators embedded within a community of practice, the peer-to-peer network structure may provide the positive interdependence, individual accountability, interaction, and opportunity to reflect on the group process and progress characteristic of cooperative teams (Rogers et al., 2021) that is needed to change professional behaviors in support of greater use of the standards, principles, and competencies.

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