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Brandon W. Youker  
*Grand Valley State University*

Allyssa Ingraham  
*Grand Valley State University*

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# Goal-Free Evaluation: An Orientation for Foundations' Evaluations

Brandon W. Youker, Ph.D., and Allyssa Ingraham, B.S., Grand Valley State University

*Keywords:* Evaluate, evaluation, goal-free, goal, objective, foundation, philanthropy

## Introduction

Goal-free evaluation (GFE) is any evaluation in which the evaluator conducts the evaluation without particular knowledge of or reference to stated or predetermined goals and objectives. Goals are “broad statements of a program’s purposes or expected outcomes, usually not specific enough to be measured and often concerning long-term rather than short-term expectations” (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988, p. 528), whereas objectives are “statements indicating the planned goals or outcomes of a program or intervention in specific and concrete terms” (Weiss & Jacobs, p. 533). The goal-free evaluator attempts to observe and measure all actual outcomes, effects, or impacts, intended or unintended, all without being cued to the program’s intentions. As Popham (1974) analogizes, “As you can learn from any baseball pitcher who has set out in the first inning to pitch a shutout, the game’s final score is the thing that counts, not good intentions” (p. 58).

Historically, virtually all foundation-supported evaluations have been focused on goal attainment because it seems intuitive for a foundation to ask, What is the program (or project/intervention) that we fund proposing to do and, consequently, how do we as funders determine whether the program is doing what it says it is going to do? Many scholars

## Key Points

- Goal-free evaluation (GFE), in program evaluation, is a model in which the official or stated program goals and objectives are withheld or screened from the evaluator.
- Several obstacles must be overcome in persuading foundations and programs to consider GFE as a viable option, because both tend to view goal attainment as intuitively and inextricably linked to evaluation.
- This article presents the case for GFE as a perspective that belongs in a foundation’s toolbox. In particular, this article demonstrates GFE’s actual use, highlights aspects of its methodology, and details its potential benefits.

of philanthropy (e.g., McNelis & Bickel, 1996; Zerounian, Shing, & Hanni, 2011) assume that program goals are inherently relevant and therefore an examination of goals and objectives automatically should be included in program evaluation (Schmitz & Schillo, 2005). This is evident in the vast literature on logic models and theories of change attempting to connect intended actions to intended outcomes (e.g., Bailin, 2003; Cheadle et al., 2003; Flynn & Hodgkinson, 2001; Frumkin, 2008; Gargani, 2013; Gibbons, 2012; Knowlton & Phillips, 2013; MacKinnon, Amott, & McGarvey, 2006; Organizational Research Services, 2004; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004).

*The evaluator must overcome two ubiquitous misconceptions: that GFE is simply a clever rhetorical tool and that it lacks a useable methodology. Both of these beliefs are contrary to the fact that the Consumers Union has been successfully conducting goal-free product evaluations for more than 75 years while Consumer Reports magazine editors rarely solicit the product manufacturers' goals during their evaluations.*

In recent years, there has been a movement toward strategic philanthropy in which foundations select their own goals and activities to accomplish results (Coffman, Beer, Patrizi, & Thompson, 2013; Connolly, 2011). A result of this shift is the pitting of those who support measurement-heavy strategic philanthropy against supporters of a more humanistic-focused philanthropy, which often leads to contentious debates over which goals and associated outcome measures to use (Connolly, 2011). At the very least, GFE can mediate by helping to avoid arguments over which goals to choose. Besides, as Coffman et al. (2013) state in reference to evaluating a foundation's strategy:

One challenge is that strategy – with a clear goal and clear and sound theory of change – does not really exist at this level. It becomes too high-level or diffuse to fit together in a way that is more meaningful than just a broad categorization of activities and results. (p. 48)

Goal-free evaluation serves as a counter to evaluating solely according to goal achievement, yet before an evaluator can persuade funders and administrators to consider GFE, the evaluator must overcome two ubiquitous misconceptions: that GFE is simply a clever rhetorical tool and that it lacks a useable methodology. Both of these beliefs are contrary to the fact that the Consumers Union has been successfully conducting goal-free product evaluations for more than 75 years while *Consumer Reports* magazine editors rarely solicit the product manufacturers' goals during their evaluations. Hence, the purpose of this article is not to advocate for the use of GFE per se, but rather to introduce GFE to the philanthropic community, present the facts of GFE use in program evaluation, describe aspects of GFE methodology, and highlight some of its potential benefits to foundations.

### The Implementation of GFE

Goal-free evaluation has been conducted in program evaluation both by design and by default in the more than 40 years since Scriven (1972) introduced it, yet several evaluators criticize GFE as pure rhetoric and imply that it lacks practical application (Irvine, 1979; Mathison, 2005). Although evaluators know of GFE in theory, they have little knowledge of it in practice. Without knowledge of GFE's use, evaluators are less likely to believe it can be used. Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991) describe how this leads to a perpetuation of goal-based evaluation (GBE):

Goal-free evaluation may be one of the least intuitive concepts in any evaluation theory. Evaluators have difficulty accepting the notion that they can, much less should, evaluate a program without knowing its goals. As a result, while most evaluators have heard of goal-free evaluation, they may not see it as central to their thinking about evaluation, and they still use goals as the most common source of dependent variables. (p. 114)

Table 1 offers a chronological listing of GFEs that have been conducted (and subsequently referred to in publication) as well as the

**Table 1** Goal-Free Program Evaluations

Authors/ Evaluators	Year of Publication	Type of Program Evaluated	Benefit of Using GFE
Berkshire, Kouame, & Richardson	2009	Reduction of chronic unemployment and homelessness	GFE triangulated evaluation models via a separate and simultaneous GBE; GFE served as a consumer-needs assessment.
Belanger	2006	Disaster-relief response	GFE offered flexibility after a disaster led to disagreement about goals between national relief organizations and local systems.
Gustufson	2006 <sup>1</sup>	Training for staff at nursing home dementia unit	GFE served as a tool for developing the program's initial goals.
Youker	2005(a)	Middle school summer-school program	GFE triangulated evaluation models via a separate and simultaneous GBE; GFE uncovered several important positive effects that were not related to any stated goal.
Manfredi	2003	Consortium for new farmers	GFE identified a significant effect that was not stated as a goal, but that justified continuing the program.
Stufflebeam	2001	Early-childhood education program	GFE was used as metaevaluation approach.
James & Roffe	2000	Innovation training	GFE was used because goals were unclear and to avoid argument over what metrics should be used; GFE also uncovered serendipitous effects.
Matsunaga & Enos	1997	Self-help housing project	GFE identified "ripple effects;" GFE followed up on an earlier GBE.
Evers	1980	Four-year college cost maintenance/ reduction	GFE triangulated evaluation models via a separate and simultaneous GBE; GFE in examined a broad scope of program activities and emphasized the effects from the consumers' perspective.
Welch	1976, 1978	College textbook	GFE served as a supplement to a GBE.
Scriven (in Salasin, 1974)	1975	Elementary school curriculum	GFE served as a supplement to an earlier GBE; the evaluation started off goal-free and later became goal-based.
Thiagarajan	1975	Media education	GFE avoided the difficult and rhetorical process of setting goals and objectives.
House & Hogben (in Evers, 1980)	1972	Biology curriculum for teens with learning disabilities	Evaluators interviewed program staff at the end of the evaluation to cross-check the goals with their observations prior to drafting the GFE final report.

<sup>1</sup> Gustufson, O., personal communication, April 27, 2006.

*Goal-free evaluation is not a comprehensive stand-alone evaluation model, but rather a perspective or position concerning an evaluator's goal orientation throughout an evaluation.*

*Scriven (1991) claims GFE is methodologically neutral, which means that it can be used or adapted for use with several other evaluation approaches, models, and methods as long as the other approaches do not mandate goal orientation.*

claimed benefits of using GFE, thus proving that GFE is in fact practiced.

Goal-free evaluation is also used by default in situations where program goals have not been previously stated or the goals are not known. The case of the anonymous philanthropist who donates without direction or stipulation serves as an example of GFE by default. For instance, consider the university that receives money from an anonymous donor who gives to a university's endowment: The typical assumption is that the donor supports the existing goals of the university, but this is clearly an assumption. It is possible that the donor wants to improve the reputation of the school, increase aid and access to minority students, enhance the aesthetics of facilities, or to stroke his or her own ego. The point is that if the donor chooses not to elaborate on the intentions, no one can speak definitively on the "true" goals.

A famous philanthropic endeavor illustrates this situation well. In 2005 in Kalamazoo, Mich., population 74,000, anonymous donors pledged a huge undisclosed sum that guaranteed up to 100 percent of tuition at any of the state's colleges or universities for graduates of the city's two public high schools (*Kalamazoo Gazette*, 2012). The only stipulations were that students must have lived within the school district, attended public high school there for four years, and graduated to earn the minimum 65 percent benefit, whereas a full scholarship would be provided to students who attended the district's schools since kindergarten. Of course most community members have labeled what came to be known as the Kalamazoo Promise as an education initiative; almost immediately after its onset, however, others debated whether the true motive was economic revitalization or called it a social experiment (Fishman, 2012; Miller-Adams, 2009). The larger point concerning GFE is that the donors refused to specify their goals or objectives and consequently any claims about their goals are pure speculation. The subsequent studies and evaluations of the Kalamazoo Promise, therefore, are by default goal-free.

### **GFE Methodology**

As articulated by Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991), "goal-free evaluation has been widely criticized for lack of operations by which to conduct it" (p. 61). This criticism lies at the heart of one of the main misperceptions about what GFE is and is not. Goal-free evaluation is not a comprehensive stand-alone evaluation model, but rather a perspective or position concerning an evaluator's goal orientation throughout an evaluation. Scriven (1991) claims GFE is methodologically neutral, which means that it can be used or adapted for use with several other evaluation approaches, models, and methods as long as the other approaches do not mandate goal orientation such as Chen's (1990) theory-driven evaluation. Goal-free evaluation can be used with quantitative or qualitative data-collection methodologies, Success Case Method (e.g., Brinkerhoff, 2003); the Context, Input, Process, Product

model (e.g., Stufflebeam, 2003); utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 1997); constructivist evaluation (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1989); and connoisseurship (Eisner, 1985); among several others.

There are really only two methodological requirements of GFE. The first is that the goal-free evaluator be external from and independent of the program and its upstream stakeholders (program funders, designers, administrators, managers, staff, volunteers, vendors, etc.); the second is that someone be appointed as the goal screener. A screener is an impartial party (i.e., someone who is not assigned to GFE design or data collection), such as an administrative assistant, a third party, or even the evaluation client (Youker, 2005b). The screener intervenes between the evaluator and the program people to eliminate goal-oriented communications and documents before they reach the goal-free evaluator. The screener does not require extensive training; the screener should, however, have a basic understanding of GFE's purpose and methodology and be relatively familiar with the organization and its program to be able to identify program goals and objectives.

Although the goal-free evaluator is blinded from the program's predetermined goals or objectives, this does not mean that the evaluator simply substitutes his or her own goals in place of the program administrators'. Davidson (2005) writes,

As for the contention that goal-free evaluation involves applying the evaluator's personal preferences to the program, this would be true only if the evaluation were not being conducted competently. ... Of course, the evaluator needs to make sure that the sources of values used for the evaluation are valid and defensible ones. But replacing those with the preferences of program staff is not a great solution. (p. 234)

As a goal-free evaluator as well as a supervisor of goal-free evaluators, a lingering methodological issue persists. After accepting the

initial premise that a program can be evaluated without referencing its goals, the next seemingly inevitable question is: So what data do I collect? The goal-based evaluator typically receives the goals and objectives with a program description and then develops outcomes measures, whereas the goal-free evaluator often starts with data collection. Novice goal-free evaluators frequently experience considerable anxiety in determining which data to collect. The outcomes and indicators for judging products tend to be relatively apparent to the evaluator, but much less obvious with human service programs. Products like washing machines, paper towels, and toothbrushes are evaluated according to their teleological principles based on what they are designed to do. Product evaluators rarely struggle to identify criteria, related to such qualities as instrumental use, retail cost, and aesthetics, for example; the criteria and associated outcome measures for judging the merit of a camp for children with disabilities or a neighborhood revitalization program, however, seem vague and debatable. The fundamental difference between knowing where to begin when evaluating a toothbrush as compared to evaluating a neighborhood revitalization program is founded in the evaluator's understanding of what the subject is and what it is supposed to do. The goal-free evaluator is prevented from knowing what the program is supposed to do (goals and objectives), therefore the first task of the goal-free evaluator is to attempt to define and describe the program. This is accomplished by measuring, observing, and reviewing literature and documents regarding the program's actions and activities. Once the goal-free evaluator begins to understand what the program does and whom it serves, relevant outcome measures often reveal themselves and the evaluator's anxiety begins to subside.

To further the methods by which to conduct a GFE, Youker (in press) offers the following principles to guide the evaluator:

1. Identify relevant effects to examine without referencing goals and objectives.

*Goal-free evaluation can benefit foundations and their programs because it is more likely than GBE to identify unintended positive and negative side effects simply because the method allows for and encourages a broader range of outcomes as well as serendipitous outcomes (Thiagarajan, 1975). Mere knowledge of goals and objectives causes tunnel vision toward goal-related outcomes.*

2. Identify what occurred without the prompting of goals and objectives.
3. Determine if what occurred can logically be attributed to the program or intervention.
4. Determine the degree to which the effect is positive, negative, or neutral.

### **Potential Benefits of GFE for Foundations' Evaluations**

Numerous theoretical benefits of GFE are particularly relevant to foundations; six of them are discussed below. There are only two doctoral dissertations as research on GFE (Evers, 1980; Youker, 2011) and no empirical studies. For the most part, therefore, all arguments for or against GFE are prescriptive and theoretical.

Goal-free evaluation benefits are based on:

- controlling goal orientation-related biases,
- uncovering side effects,
- avoiding the rhetoric of "true" goals,
- adapting to contextual/environmental changes,

- aligning goals with actual program activities and outcomes, and
- supplementing GBE.

### *Controlling Goal Orientation-Related Biases*

One of the main benefits of GFE for foundations is the ability to control evaluation biases related to goal orientation, because it reduces biases and prejudices that inadvertently yet inherently accompany the roles, relationships, and histories that the upstream stakeholders have with program consumers. Scriven (1991) claims that through reducing interaction with program staff and by screening the evaluator from goals, GFE is less susceptible to some of the social biases than is GBE. Goal-free evaluation offers fewer opportunities for evaluator bias in attempts to satisfy the evaluation client because the evaluator is therefore unable to determine ways of manipulating in the evaluation client's favor (1991). Scriven (1974) uses the analogy of a trial juror who is approached by an interested party and offered a prestigious position or a large sum of money: Even if the juror is not swayed, the mere suggestion of bias threatens the juror's credibility. The judicial system has established protocol for minimizing this bias (juror sequestering); evaluation has GFE.

### *Uncovering Side Effects*

Goal-free evaluation can benefit foundations and their programs because it is more likely than GBE to identify unintended positive and negative side effects simply because the method allows for and encourages a broader range of outcomes as well as serendipitous outcomes (Thiagarajan, 1975). Mere knowledge of goals and objectives causes tunnel vision toward goal-related outcomes: "The knowledge of preconceived goals and accompanying arguments may turn into a mental corset impeding [the evaluator] from paying attention to side effects, particularly unanticipated side effects" (Vedung, 1997, p. 59).

In his analogy between GFE and double-blind pharmaceutical studies, Scriven (1974) justifies searching for side effects, stating, "No evalu-

ation of drugs today can avoid the search for side effects from the most remote area of the symptom spectrum” (p. 43). The goal-free evaluator, like the pharmaceutical evaluator, searches for all relevant effects and consequently the “negative connotations attached to the discovery of unanticipated effects” is reduced (Patton, 1997, p. 181). Thus, terms like side effect, secondary effect, and unanticipated effect become meaningless because the evaluator does not care whether effects are intended or not (Scriven, 1974).

#### *Avoiding the Rhetoric of ‘True’ Goals*

Goal-free evaluation circumvents the difficult rhetorical and often contaminating task in traditional evaluations of trying to identify true current goals and true original goals, and then defining and weighting them. Historically, goals were couched in professional fads, current jargon, or lists of priorities where “the rhetoric of intent was being used as a substitute for evidence of success” (Scriven, 1974, p. 35). Still today, the norm for foundations and their programs is that “program theory is built around the program designer’s assumptions and expectations, with little or no connection to an existing social science theory” (Constantine & Braverman, 2004, p. 245). Even when goals are well connected to theory, Scriven (1974) adds the following about an evaluator’s knowledge of program goals:

There is just no way around the fact that every evaluator has to face those “thousands of possibly relevant variables” and decide which ones to check in order to determine side effects. Having three or four or 10 identified for you is scarcely a drop in the bucket. (p. 50)

The obvious issue is that when goals are poorly founded, the goal-based evaluator will miss critical effects that may be detectable to the goal-free evaluator. “It is tragic when all resources go to goal-directed evaluation on a program when the stated goals do not even begin to include all of the important outcomes” (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004, p. 85). Goal-free evaluation is designed to investigate

*Identifying which goals the evaluator should use is one problem, while whose goals to consider and whose to consider most are related concerns. Patton (1997) claims that he has witnessed cases where the goal-setting process instigated a civil war where stakeholders battled for control of the program’s direction.*

all outcomes and, as Scriven (1991) has argued, if the program is in fact doing what it intends, then its goals and intended outcomes should be revealed and then recognized by the competent goal-free evaluator.

Identifying which goals the evaluator should use is one problem, while whose goals to consider and whose to consider most are related concerns. Patton (1997) claims that he has witnessed cases where the goal-setting process instigated a civil war where stakeholders battled for control of the program’s direction. Most programs have multiple stakeholders: program funders including individuals, foundations, and taxpayers; program administrators, managers, and staff; program consumers and their families; elected officials; program vendors; content-area experts, and so on. Do all of these stakeholders’ goals and objectives count, or do some matter more or less than others? Goal-free evaluation avoids this conundrum by eliminating the distraction of goals.

#### *Adapting to Contextual/Environmental Changes*

Scriven (1991) and Davidson (2005) assert that GBE is methodologically static, while GFE can be adapted to the sporadic changes in consumer needs, program resources, and program goals. Consumers, programs, foundations, and their environments are dynamic. What was

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once an appropriate goal or objective may, over time, become less relevant. In fact, these changes often come from within; scholars as early as the 1950s recognized that foundations and “their trustees have enormous discretion to define and change their goals and purposes” (Fosdick, 1952, p. 22).

There is little the goal-based evaluator can do when a program's goals change except start the evaluation over, overhaul the evaluation design and/or data-collection tools, or create excuses and apologies for evaluation report irrelevancies or omissions; the goal-free evaluator by definition can continue inquiry despite the changes. As long as changes in goals or objectives are reflected in the program's actions and outcomes, the goal-free evaluator recognizes and records these effects. If the outcomes related to the new goal are not recognized, either the evaluator is at fault or the outcomes are deemed trivial.

#### *Aligning Goals With Actual Program Activities and Outcomes*

There is value in frequently questioning the underlying assumptions of program goals and strategies (Argyris & Schon, 1978), and GFE serves as tool for doing so. According to Patton (1997), a “result of goal-free evaluation is a statement of goals ... a statement of operating goals becomes its outcome” (p. 182). The goal-free evaluator finds outcomes that are attribut-

able to the program intervention and renames these outcomes operating goals. All operating goals, therefore, have potential to become an official program goal or objective. Programs can use the goal-free evaluator's criteria as goals for basing objectives and outcome measures for future internal evaluations and program monitoring.

If the GFE is used to calibrate the goals of a program or foundation, a secondary evaluation task is to work with the program people to adapt the evaluator's criteria into a usable goals-and-objectives format. In adhering to GFE's methodological requirements, therefore, the adaptation of the criteria into goals and objectives should occur only after the completion of the data collection and analysis, and typically before the program's stated goals are revealed to the evaluator. In conclusion, GFE can be useful in aligning a program's goals with its actual activities and performance, potentially resulting in a broader, more comprehensive list of criteria for judging a program's merit and a more thorough examination of a program's outcomes.

#### *Supplementing GBE*

Goal-free evaluation is by design capable of supplementing and informing GBE. One way to accomplish this is based on the fact that GFE is reversible. An evaluation may begin goal-free and later become goal-based using the goal-free data for preliminary investigative purposes; this ensures that the evaluator still examines goal achievement (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985). The findings from the GFE can be used as baseline information for subsequent GBEs. Another example of GFE informing GBE is when GFE is used as a complement to GBE. A GBE and GFE “can be conducted simultaneously by different evaluators” (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, p. 317). When used as a supplement to GBE, GFE therefore serves as a form of triangulating evaluation approaches, evaluators, data-collection methods, and data sources. Lastly, GFE identifies criteria and outcomes useful for program-goal alignment and subsequent GBE designs.

Goal-free evaluation was intended to supplement other goal-based models in a grander evaluation strategy. Scriven (1974) advocates for GFE to “improve GBE in certain sites, not replace it” (p. 47); he writes that he is “arguing for GFE as only part of the total evaluation battery” (p. 49). In other words, GFE should be added to the foundation’s toolbox and the evaluator’s toolbox; this evaluation toolbox is described by Hall (2004):

Regardless of the many goals to which grantmakers were dedicated, today we have a toolbox containing a wide range of methods and techniques. These can be applied to different kinds of organizations and programs and for a wide variety of purposes. These are crafted to serve the needs of the constituencies within and beyond foundations, each of which has its own set of concerns about the effectiveness of grantmaking. (p. 49)

### Conclusion

Goal-free evaluation offers potential benefits to foundation-sponsored evaluations; it is crucial that foundations understand when and why GFE may be appropriate because foundations directly influence program evaluation. Both public charities and private foundations provide financial resources to programs, and most of these foundations require and fund program evaluation (Tucker, 2005). Regarding this sway on evaluation, Behrens and Kelly (2008) state:

One of the most significant influences on evaluations’ purpose and practice in the field has been the demands from the paying customer – most frequently, public and private funders. Through their control of resources, funders have determined many of the goals, uses, and methodologies of evaluation. (p. 38)

Not only do foundations finance internal and external program evaluations, they provide evaluation training – from the small Beldon Fund (n.d.) to the large W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2004). Thus, as Smith (1981) states: “foundations are a multibillion-dollar-a-year enterprise with vast potential for contributing

to the improvement of evaluation methods and practice” (p. 216).

According to Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991), “evaluation will be better served by increasing the more systematic empirical content of its theories” (p. 483); they add, however, that such efforts “have always been relatively rare” (p. 484). Today foundations continue to find themselves at forefront of shaping what evidence-based evaluation practice means and could mean, because they have the incentives, capacity, and resources to do so. Rather than maintaining the status quo, foundation executives should examine the merits and utility of GFE in comparison with GBE. Referring to such studies, Scriven (1974) writes, “It will take only a few such experiments ... to give us a good picture of GFE. I think its value will be demonstrated if it sometimes picks up something significant at a cost that makes the discovery worthwhile” (p. 47). Sadly, these studies have never come to fruition.

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**Brandon W. Youker, Ph.D.**, is an assistant professor of social work at Grand Valley State University and an independent evaluation consultant. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Brandon W. Youker, School of Social Work, Grand Valley State University, 353C DeVos Center, 401 West Fulton Street, Grand Rapids, MI 49504-6431 (email: [youkerb@gvsu.edu](mailto:youkerb@gvsu.edu))

**Allyssa Ingraham, B.S.**, is a graduate student in social work and public administration at Grand Valley State University.