A Point of No Return Finally Reached: 
The Journey Ahead

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Abstract: By offering a collective approach to the guidance of evaluation practice in Canada, the CES designation program creates a new environment for program evaluators. Its identification of competencies related to program evaluation and its requirement for ongoing professional development should facilitate the successful application of evaluation theories and models. This, in turn, is bound to enhance the quality of program evaluation and its relevance as an effective management and decision-making tool.

Keywords: designation program, evaluation practice, evaluation quality, professional development

Résumé : Par le biais d’une approche collaborative visant à guider la pratique de l’évaluation de programme au Canada, le Programme des titres professionnels de la SCÉ transforme l’environnement dans lequel cette discipline se pratique. L’établissement d’une liste de compétences en évaluation de programme et l’exigence relative à la formation continue, qui sont à la base du programme, devraient faciliter l’application réussie de théories et de modèles d’évaluation, contribuant ainsi à rehausser la qualité de l’évaluation de programme et à consolider sa pertinence dans le processus décisionnel et de gestion.

Mots clés : programme des titres, pratique de l’évaluation, qualité de l’évaluation, perfectionnement professionnel

This special issue of the Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation documents what may well be described as the most ambitious project ever undertaken by the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES). As some of the other articles suggest, the initial odds of successfully launching a designation program for Canadian evaluators were rather slim. But the program is now fully operational, allowing for a reflection on its expected impact on the future of evaluation practice in Canada. This article offers some insights, based on the experience that led to the adoption of the program.

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© 2015 Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation / La Revue canadienne d’évaluation de programme 29.3 (Special Issue / Numéro spécial), 154–159 doi: 10.3138/cjpe.29.3.154
GUIDING THE EVALUATION PRACTICE

In a remarkable address as President of the American Evaluation Association, Professor William Shadish (1998) summed up the essence of evaluation theories or models by stating that “evaluation theory is who we are.” He remarked that evaluation theory “is what makes us different from other professions,” and he reminded us that “it is in our own self interest to be explicit about this message and to make evaluation theory the very heart of our identity. Every profession needs a unique knowledge base. For us, evaluation theory is that knowledge base.” This theory-oriented knowledge base ultimately defines how program evaluation is to be executed and the purposes it is expected to serve. As each evaluation assignment unfolds in a unique set of circumstances, a variety of models or theories of evaluation have emerged and continue to do so, thus strengthening the relevance and value of program evaluation in supporting sound public policy decision-making.

In light of these expectations for the continuing evolution of evaluation theory, how do we ensure that those practicing program evaluation possess the required knowledge and skills? This question has haunted and continues to haunt all countries that have embraced program evaluation as part of their management and accountability procedures and tools. Canada is no exception to this, as illustrated by the endless debates that have risen over time on the quality (or its lack) of evaluation reports being produced and published.

In the absence of regulatory frameworks, such as those applied to traditional fields such as medicine or law, it is a rather loose set of learning opportunities that has been made available to individuals wishing to become program evaluators in Canada. To this day, most of us possess no formal education in program evaluation. Rather, the focus has largely been placed on the acquisition of the skills required to carry out methodologies typically associated with social sciences. In other words, the ability to undertake quantitative and qualitative research has been seen as the required foundation to engage in program evaluation. As the literature on program evaluation theories or models illustrates, these skills are undeniably important but, in themselves, fall short of ensuring that program evaluators can successfully engage in assessing a program, policy, or initiative.

Under this scenario, it is the responsibility of each program evaluator to seek out learning opportunities that can provide a more comprehensive understanding of what program evaluation entails. The CES—and particularly all its regional chapters—have provided learning opportunities through workshops and other learning events. The CES’s annual national conferences, as well as this journal, have also provided opportunities to share and discuss best practices and innovative approaches to conducting program evaluation in Canada. Finally, other partners of CES, particularly the American Evaluation Association, have offered worthwhile learning opportunities.

All in all, however, the guidance offered to program evaluators in Canada has, for the longest time, remained largely unstructured, at best incremental, and undeniably incomplete. Far worse, access to learning opportunities has remained systematically uneven across Canada. The unequal distribution of program
evaluators across regions, combined with variation in policy environments at the provincial and territorial levels with respect to the use of program evaluation, have considerably limited the ability of regional chapters of CES to offer comprehensive learning opportunities. As the saying goes, if all program evaluators in Canada are equal, one can hardly deny that some are more equal than others.

In this type of environment, should one be surprised that the practice of program evaluation has not always met expectations in terms of quality and usefulness?

MOVING TOWARD A COLLECTIVE JOURNEY

In launching its designation program, CES presented both program evaluators and the users of program evaluation with the opportunity to engage in a collective structuring of evaluation practice in Canada. To be clear, the goal of the designation program has never been to dictate how each evaluation assignment should be conducted. Rather, it is about strengthening the capacity of program evaluators to design evaluation strategies that can better meet the expectations of the ultimate users of program evaluation. Moreover, the guidance offered through the designation program is also expected to reach users of program evaluation and thus help them understand what this discipline can and cannot deliver.

From the scattered environment in which program evaluators were forced to navigate, the designation program shifted the ground significantly by offering a comprehensive framework for the practice of evaluation, as well as a process in which each program evaluator may engage to guide his or her practice and ongoing professional development. As documented in this special issue, the three pillars of the designation program (a code of ethics, standards, and a set of competencies) offer a comprehensive description of the range of skills and knowledge required for the sound practice of program evaluation. Of the three pillars, the set of competencies is by far the component that has required the most extensive developmental work and, not surprisingly, has raised the most intense debates among evaluators. Now that the dust has somewhat settled and we can look back at this list of competencies, we know it is bound to evolve and be improved over time. Regardless, by covering five dimensions of evaluation practice that go far beyond the mastering of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this list of competencies presents a remarkable portrait of what a program evaluator is expected to master to successfully carry out evaluations.

It is worth emphasizing that the determination of the required competencies to be covered by a designation program is probably the most difficult step that any professional organization offering such a program is required to tackle. In that regard, it is rather unfortunate that some program evaluators, in Canada and in other jurisdictions, take refuge behind the veil of perfection-seeking to oppose or sabotage attempts to create a comprehensive listing of these competencies. This thinking—that a community of evaluators is better off having no competency listing than having what is bound to be an imperfect one—is precisely what has led to
such variations in the quality of evaluations, something that can ultimately weaken the argument that program evaluation is a worthwhile tool to support good management and decision-making. In fact, how could we possibly echo the message of Professor Shadish that evaluation theory “is what makes us different from other professions” if we find ourselves unable to declare what competencies are required to engage in this so-called different profession called program evaluation? Any one of the existing program theories or models that are currently advanced requires an adequate code of ethics, standards, and competencies on the part of its practitioners if it has any hope of being successfully applied. With these three pillars, one can argue that the CES designation program creates a remarkably fertile ground to test and refine current and future evaluation models and theories.

THE IMPACT OF ISSUING THE DESIGNATION

Right from the get-go, the voluntary nature of its designation program placed CES in a difficult and vulnerable position. CES simply had no choice but to embrace the belief that “if you build it, they will come.” The first few brave souls who sought the designation of credential evaluator had to believe that it would, over time, pay off. The designation was providing no immediate advantage, was largely unknown by the users of program evaluation, and had yet to prove that it would provide greater guidance for the practice of evaluation. At best, the project represented a risky proposition for CES, as it required a phenomenal level of volunteer resources to initiate, without the certainty that it was in fact viable. This initiative could have quietly folded and been remembered as a brave attempt by CES to do what no other professional organization in the field of program evaluation had been able to achieve. But a different scenario has already unfolded. With over 250 credentialed evaluators on board and an increasing number of users of evaluation services seeking the leadership of credentialed evaluators to undertake their assignments, the program has already left a mark on the practice of evaluation in Canada, and there are good reasons to believe that this trend will continue to expand.

As noted by other contributors to the special issue, the impact of the designation program reaches beyond the group of practitioners. Since the launching of the program has coincided with the expansion of formal program evaluation studies in an increasing number of Canadian universities, curriculum planners for academic programs in evaluation have been able to take into account the three pillars of the CE designation. These pillars also provide plenty of material for academics to explore, challenge, and contribute future enhancements.

THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT REQUIREMENTS

For good reasons, much of the effort and attention given to the program have focused on the initial step, that is, the issuance of the designation. Having a credible framework to process applications from those seeking the designation had to
be the priority. However, it has long been my view that the actual benefits of the program will derive not so much from this initial step, but rather from its associated requirement for ongoing professional development.

Logically, this requirement has triggered a fundamental obligation for CES to ensure that proper professional development opportunities are offered and, just as importantly, are made available to evaluators and all regions of the country. This is no small task, considering both the distribution of evaluators across so many regions of Canada and differences in the regional or local policy environments in which these evaluators operate. At the time of this article, much has yet to be done to adequately meet this challenge. An increasing use of technology, particularly as it relates to webinars, combined with more traditional learning activities can be expected to widen the range of learning opportunities that Canadian evaluators will be able to access. But more will be required. This is where one hopes that CES, the Canadian Consortium of Universities for Evaluation Education (CCUEE), and the Canadian Evaluation Society Educational Fund (CESEF) will be in a position to strengthen their relationship. This triangle of partners offers our best hope of ensuring a lasting and profound impact of the designation program on the practice of evaluation in Canada. The CCUEE should not only promote new educational opportunities in program evaluation to be offered to students, but also target current practitioners by offering advanced learning opportunities. The Professional Development Workshop Series in Evaluation and Applied Research Methods offered annually by Claremont University’s Evaluation Center in California offers an excellent illustration of how universities can support practitioners and their ongoing learning. As for the CESEF, it is expected to play a critical role in expanding the availability of professional development opportunities to those facing financial barriers.

By triggering an expansion of learning opportunities, the requirement for ongoing professional development to maintain the credentialed evaluator designation will reveal its true value. For an individual to have been issued the designation of credentialed evaluator is one thing, but for this person to demonstrate that he or she has engaged in meaningful and ongoing professional development over a sustained number of years will stand as a far greater indication of his or her commitment to uphold the highest standards of practice. This is where we could see the practice of evaluation in Canada being transformed in ways that would have been simply unthinkable without the designation program.

ENSURING THE VIABILITY OF THE PROGRAM

Not surprisingly, the lasting viability and sustainability of the CES designation program requires ongoing efforts covering both the process leading to the issuance of the designation and the requirement for professional development. The ongoing promotion of the program among practitioners and users of evaluation services should be somewhat facilitated by the presence of a growing number of credentialed evaluators and the fact that the program has successfully completed its initial launching period.
It certainly has some ways to go before it can acquire the status of a mature program, but one could argue that it has now become a more familiar feature of evaluation practice in Canada for an increasing number of stakeholders.

A NOTE ON PROCESS

This article has intentionally focused on the future of the designation program. It may be worth adding a note on the actual process that led to the adoption of this program. Qualifiers such as challenging, difficult, chaotic, and nerve-racking would serve well to describe the process that led to the adoption of the program. The CES has courageously faced a barrage of initial criticism and opposition from its members, including myself. And, as is often the case with profound changes being pursued, luck—that vital and yet so unreliable companion—played its critical role. CES has indeed been extremely lucky that so many volunteers would emerge and offer countless hours of their time to something that otherwise could never have seen the light of day. In their capacity as core members of the Professional Designation Committee, Heather Buchanan, along with Keiko Kuji-Shikatani and Brigitte Maicher (all contributors to this special issue), have successfully steered a ship that was intentionally built large to be inclusive. They laid the foundation that allowed the CES National Council to unanimously adopt the program. Now that the program has reached its point of no return, others will come on board to write the next chapters of this remarkable journey that Canadian evaluators have, against many odds, made possible.

REFERENCE


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