

**CANADIAN EVALUATION SOCIETY PROJECT
IN SUPPORT OF ADVOCACY AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Canadian Evaluation Society Project in Support of Advocacy and Professional Development

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Introduction

The purpose of this project was to support the Canadian Evaluation Society's advocacy efforts as well as the development of a Core Body of Knowledge (CBK) for program evaluation by identifying a) the benefits that can be attributed to program evaluation, b) the outputs¹ necessary to achieve those benefits, and c) the knowledge and skills needed to produce the outputs.

Methods

Our methods included a literature review, two Internet consultations with the evaluation community, two discussion sessions with delegates at the CES 2002 National Conference, and on-line discussions among the members of an international expert reference panel.

One of the most exciting aspects of this project was getting evaluators engaged in discussing the nature of evaluation. The links that were forged between evaluators, and the thinking that was stimulated, were valuable in and of themselves. Through this engagement process, a number of important considerations were raised that relate to the definition of the field of program evaluation and its promotion. It is worth considering how CES can encourage continued discussion of these issues nationally, as well as on a global scale.

Suggestions for CES

- Post the report on the CES website.
- Provide a mechanism for commentary and input, such as an interactive website.
- Publish significant parts of the report in the Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation.
- Use the project as a means of engaging the international evaluation community in future collaborative work. Some associations are currently involved in complementary projects that could serve as a basis for collaboration (for example, the Australasian Evaluation Society's effort to identify evaluator competencies, and the Qualitative Research Consultants Association's set of draft professional competencies).
- Present the results at the conferences of CES chapters and other national evaluation associations.

¹ The term "evaluation output" is not commonly used in the literature, and may be new to many evaluators and evaluation users. For the purposes of this project, evaluation outputs have been defined to include the evidence, conclusions, and recommendations that are produced by an evaluation, as well as manifestations of stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process.

- Encourage dialogue about specific questions of interest, both between and within the various CES chapters.
- Collaborate with other evaluation associations when following up on specific questions of interest.
- Take a consultative approach when following up on specific questions of interest.

Considerations in Defining Evaluation

This project confirmed our belief that program evaluation is a diverse and evolving field. This is one of its strengths, as it allows for greater flexibility and adaptation. At the same time, some evaluators have suggested that there is an obligation to define evaluation, even if doing so means that certain activities are excluded by the definition. However, there is no widespread consensus about where the line that defines evaluation should be drawn, and how inclusive it should be. This makes it difficult to determine what benefits, outputs, and knowledge elements should be attributed to evaluation.

While there is no universally accepted definition of program evaluation, our consultation process did identify some basic characteristics of evaluation that appear to be widely accepted:

- Evaluation applies research design principles to answer practical questions about programs.
- Data is collected and processed systematically to provide evidence about what is happening in a program (processes and outcomes), why it is happening, and how the program can be improved. This evidence can be used to make judgements about the program's merit or worth.
- Evaluation is cross-disciplinary and draws methods from many different fields of study.

Benefits that May be Derived from Evaluation

We have identified twelve broadly stated benefits that may be derived from evaluation. These benefits are grouped into five categories:

- Accountability,
- Decision Making,
- Knowledge and Skills,
- Social Change, and
- Cohesion and Collaboration.

A summary of the benefits is shown on page vii. In this summary, you will see that many of the benefits have been stated in terms of the program being evaluated. This does not diminish the potential for larger-scale societal benefits that may result from the widespread use of evaluation. Over the long term, we believe that the local benefits of evaluation will contribute to more effective social programs, financial savings, and an improved human condition (better health, higher quality of life, cleaner environment, etc.).

CES hopes to use the identified benefits for advocacy purposes. The reference panel members raised the following issues for consideration in advocating for program evaluation:

- What some people perceive as a benefit of evaluation, others may perceive as unimportant, or even as a threat.
- What is a benefit in one situation may not be a benefit in another.
- Evaluation can have both benefits and negative impacts or costs.
- It is important to ensure that any claims we make about evaluation are substantiated so we don't "over-sell" the benefits of evaluation.
- Some evaluators are very uncomfortable with the idea of advocating for evaluation.

Suggestions for CES

- When determining next steps for advocacy and professional development, consider the concerns that have been identified relating to the promotion of evaluation and the limiting of the field.
- This report is based primarily on the input of evaluators. Other stakeholders may have different opinions. It would therefore be valuable to invite evaluation stakeholders to comment on the identified benefits and their relationship to evaluation outputs. For advocacy purposes, it would be valuable to determine what differences in perception exist between stakeholders who are experienced/knowledgeable about evaluation and those who are new to the concept of evaluation.
- Using the benefit descriptions and the descriptions of sample evaluations (Appendix G), develop advocacy materials tailored to specific audiences. The materials can be reviewed by evaluation stakeholders with two simultaneous goals: advocacy and refinement of the list.
- Update *The Value in Evaluation: A Statement for Managers* booklet that CES published in 1989, and post the updated version on the website.
- Develop a checklist or other assessment instrument that individual evaluators can use prior to an evaluation to determine what benefits their project stakeholders hope to derive from an evaluation.
- Develop a measurement tool to assess the benefits stakeholders actually derived from evaluation. Encourage evaluators to use this tool for meta-evaluative purposes, in conjunction with the above-mentioned checklist. CES may also want to collect Canada-wide data using such an instrument.

Evaluation Outputs

Evaluation outputs include the evidence, conclusions, and recommendations that are produced by an evaluation, as well as manifestations of stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process. They are an important link between the knowledge elements (inputs) and the benefits (outcomes) of evaluation. Specifically:

1. For the purposes of advocacy, outputs should help us determine if the benefits we have attributed to evaluation do in fact result from evaluation activities.
2. For the purposes of the Core Body of Knowledge, outputs help us determine which knowledge and skills people need to make certain evaluation benefits possible.

We have identified 27 evaluation outputs, grouped in the following seven categories:

- Needs Assessment Outputs,
- Evaluability Assessment Outputs,
- Process Evaluation Outputs,
- Outcome Evaluation Outputs,
- Efficiency Assessment Outputs,
- Outputs of Stakeholder Involvement, and
- Outputs Spanning all Types of Evaluation.

A summary of the outputs is shown on the page viii.

One school of thought says that how an evaluation is done can impact evaluation utilization and provide other benefits that are independent of the results. This is commonly known as *process use* of evaluation.² Stakeholder involvement is an important contributor to process use, and is tangible enough to be reflected in outputs. However, other processes may be more difficult to see and measure, and may have been inadvertently excluded by the model.

Evaluation Knowledge Elements

Knowledge elements are the knowledge, skills, and effective practices that are required to conduct evaluation activities. We identified 151 specific knowledge elements. Some examples include application of ethical guidelines, naturalistic inquiry, data collection using questionnaires, and active listening. Relevant texts, articles, or other resources were identified for each knowledge element. The specific knowledge elements were grouped into 23 more general knowledge elements, which are summarized on page ix.

Readers should keep the following important points in mind when reviewing the list of knowledge elements:

- Many knowledge and skill requirements vary from evaluation to evaluation. It may be helpful to view the list of knowledge elements as a toolkit from which evaluators can select the tools that are most appropriate for the specific evaluation, taking into account the context of the evaluation and the desired benefits.

² For example, see Patton, M.Q. (1997). *Utilization-focused evaluation: The new century text* (3rd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- This is **not** a list of what every evaluator should know. Evaluation has a wide range of methods and approaches. It is not possible, or even desirable, for any one person to have an in-depth knowledge of everything. Evaluators need to be:
 - a) aware of the different methods and approaches
 - b) able to realistically assess their own capabilities, and
 - c) able to assemble teams of people with the knowledge and skills needed for a specific evaluation.
- Because of the applied nature of evaluation, soft skills such as effective listening, questioning, and negotiation may be particularly important across the evaluation process.
- The list of knowledge elements and relevant resources will need to evolve along with the field.

The lists of outputs, knowledge elements, and resources will be a valuable guide for designing curriculum for evaluation programs and courses; designing professional development workshops to be offered by CES and other organizations; providing evaluators with ideas about alternative methods and approaches; and developing a self-assessment guide for use by evaluators.

Suggestions for CES

- Publish checklists of evaluation outputs, knowledge elements, and resources that can be used by individual evaluators for the purpose of self-assessment, continued competence, and evaluation planning.
- Post the lists on the CES website and allow evaluators to submit comments, suggest new items and/or suggest that obsolete or outdated items be removed.
- Use the list to develop workshops for CES members.
- Ensure the list reflects the diversity of the field by seeking verification from evaluators in different positions (academic, consulting, internal) and sectors, and with different approaches (particularly those who have less mainstream approaches to evaluation).
- Assess members' need for training in interpersonal, communication, and project management skills.

Relationships Between Knowledge Elements, Outputs, and Benefits

We had initially hoped to be able to describe how each output contributes to each benefit, and which knowledge elements are needed to produce which outputs. While the consultations provided interesting information about benefits, outputs, and knowledge elements, we were unable to draw conclusions about the relationships between them.

In retrospect, our initial hopes were likely unrealistic. The review of the literature, the consultations, and the discussions of our reference panel all underscored the incredible diversity and complexity of evaluation practice. Reference panel members, in particular, cautioned us

against getting too linear and specific, and questioned the initial assumptions that this would be possible — or even appropriate.

In our preliminary explorations of these relationships, we have found that in many cases, the relationship depended not only on the background of the evaluator, but also on the specifics of the evaluation situation. In other words, the relationships between knowledge elements, outputs, and benefits do not appear to be direct and linear. The model on which this project was based may therefore not be appropriate for future work in this area. A more complex, realistic model would help researchers identify the various routes by which an evaluation can produce benefits, and the various factors that help or hinder along the way. In our review of the literature, we did not come across any other explicit models of how program evaluation works, so the development of such a model could be a major contribution to the field in and of itself.

The process of thinking through the relationships between benefits, outputs, and knowledge elements may still be a useful activity within the context of a specific evaluation. It can help evaluators focus their thinking by guiding them through the following questions:

- What benefit is the client trying to gain? What other benefits are possible?
- What outputs does the client require? What other outputs are possible?
- What knowledge and skills are required to provide the benefits and outputs?
- Do we have the required knowledge and skills, or can we get them?

Suggestions for CES

- When training evaluators, provide exposure to a variety of approaches and build awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of each. Also teach evaluators how to deal with difficult choices and trade-offs.
- Develop a tool that evaluators can use to explore the benefits, outputs, and knowledge elements required for a specific evaluation.
- Seek funding for future exploration of the relationships between benefits, outputs, and knowledge elements.
- Begin the research by developing a more complex, realistic model of how program evaluation produces benefits.
- Ensure that evaluators with diverse backgrounds and approaches are involved in the process of exploring the relationships.

Conclusion

Evaluation is a developing field that will continue to evolve. This is one of the strengths of the field, placing evaluators in a position where they must constantly review and improve their practices. This document identifies some important issues for evaluators, and perhaps evaluation clients, to think about. Implementing the further steps suggested here will carry on the dynamic process started by this initiative.

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POTENTIAL BENEFITS AT A GLANCE

Accountability

Evaluation can support accountability for program performance and spending.

- Providing information for stakeholders
- Meeting the requirements of funders

Decision Making

Evaluation can help one make better decisions about program direction.

- Setting goals and priorities
- Reviewing goals and priorities

Evaluation can help one make better decisions about allocation of resources.

- Determining the value of programs
- Allocating resources to programs

Evaluation can help one improve programs.

- Improving program design
- Improving program implementation
- Improving program cost-effectiveness
- Supporting effective management practices
- Making more effective use of evaluation

Knowledge and Skills

Evaluation can increase understanding of the program being evaluated

Evaluation can build knowledge about existing/potential needs and about programming that addresses those needs.

- Increasing knowledge of needs and problems
- Increasing knowledge of effective practices and programs
- Increasing knowledge of programming

Evaluation can develop capacity for effective program design, assessment, and improvement.

- Learning to think more critically about programs
- Improving attitudes toward evaluation
- Developing capacity to understand, use, and/or conduct evaluation

Social Change

Evaluation can be used to promote, defend, or oppose specific methods, approaches, or programs.

Evaluation can be used to shape public opinion.

Evaluation can be used to support pluralism and democracy.

- Exploring diverse perspectives
- Supporting a more democratic process for program decision-making

Cohesion and Collaboration

Evaluation can increase consistency and communication between departments or organizations.

Evaluation can build energy and enthusiasm within the program team.

- Building pride and confidence
- Building cohesion and enthusiasm

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OUTPUTS AT A GLANCE

Needs Assessment Outputs

- Description of unmet needs

Evaluability Assessment Outputs

- Description of program design and logic
- Articulation of standards for performance or criteria for success
- Description of the context of the program
- Determination of readiness for/appropriateness of evaluation

Process Evaluation Outputs

- Description of program implementation
- Comparison of actual events with the program plan or performance standards
- Explanations of why implementation has deviated from the plan

Outcome/Impact Evaluation Outputs

- Description of program outcomes
- Identification of unexpected/unwanted outcomes
- Attributions linking outcomes to specific interventions
- Identification of factors that affect the effectiveness of an intervention
- Determination of merit or worth

Efficiency Assessment Outputs

- Description of program costs
- Estimation of the value of program outcomes
- Comparison of value for money

Outputs of Stakeholder Involvement

- Involvement of stakeholders in some or all evaluation activities
- Integration of the evaluation with the customs the stakeholders' or the program's culture
- Consultation with stakeholders to solicit their views of the program
- Sharing of results with stakeholders
- Positive relationships between the evaluator and the program stakeholders
- New partnerships
- On-the-project training in evaluation for program managers and other stakeholders

Outputs Spanning all Types of Evaluation

- Performance indicators and indicator systems
- Evaluation tools
- New questions about the program
- Syntheses of previous research
- Suggestions of good practices
- Recommendations

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KNOWLEDGE ELEMENTS AT A GLANCE

Ethics

- Ethical conduct
- Competence and quality assurance

Evaluation Planning and Design

- Understanding the program
- Assessing readiness for the evaluation
- Focusing the evaluation
- Systems theory, organizational development, and change
- Specific types of evaluation
- History of evaluation, evaluation theory, and evaluation models
- Research design
- Constructing meaning
- Selecting appropriate data collection and analysis methods
- Effective practices in applied research

Data Collection

- Sampling
- Measurement issues
- Data collection methods

Data Analysis and Interpretation

- Qualitative analysis
- Quantitative analysis
- Determining merit or worth
- Critical thinking skills

Communication and Interpersonal Skills

- Interpersonal skills
- Reporting skills
- Other communication skills

Project Management

- Managing evaluation projects