

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE NOTES:

Special Feature Section on Evaluation Competitions for Students

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IMPACTS OF THE CANADIAN EVALUATION SOCIETY'S EVALUATION COMPETITIONS FOR STUDENTS

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■ Few tasks are as important as helping pass to the next generation our small amount of knowledge and wisdom about program evaluation, or raising awareness of evaluation as a rapidly evolving area that offers full intellectual challenges, both theoretical and practical. The next generation must be inspired to energetically push past us in the search for new ways to put evaluation to work improving life for all.

The Canadian Evaluation Society is actively promoting “la relève,” the development of the next wave of evaluation enthusiasts. The Society is linked to educators across the country, through this Journal and through monitoring of evaluation course offerings in universities and colleges. CES has developed, implemented, and sustained the modular evaluation training program known as the Essential Skills Series (ESS) in Evaluation. It has partnered with governments and nonprofit organizations in training evaluation specialists and developing evaluative thinking among managers. With the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, it has provided travel scholarships to enable students to attend evaluation conferences. And the Society has established two highly

successful competitions that allow students to test their emerging skills in evaluation against those of their peers – the Essay Contest and the Case Competition. The Essay Contest (originally called the Essay Award and now called the Student Paper Contest) calls for student papers on an evaluation topic, which are then judged. In the Case Competition, teams of students present their findings after a time-limited (five-hour) review of an evaluation case file. Readers can find more information on the two competitions at “Student Competitions” under the “Services” menu at www.EvaluationCanada.ca.

For this special edition of the Research and Practice Notes, we asked some former participants to write about their experience with the Essay Contest and the Case Competition. We hoped that documenting the competitions might inspire others to take up the challenge – as either participants or mentors. We hoped, too, that a good exposé of the benefits of student competitions may lead other evaluation associations around the world to organize similar activities. In addition to Research and Practice Notes from students who competed in past competitions, we invited manuscripts from people who had inspired students to submit essays, had coached teams in preparation for the Case Competition, or had helped judge the submissions. We also requested a report about a social service agency that we knew had launched a successful program evaluation based on frameworks generated by students in one of the competitions. And we invited a note to help readers understand why sponsors have found it worthwhile to provide financial support. Without doubt, our call for contributions was biased! We asked for articles only from people who we knew were enthusiastic about the Essay Contest or the Case Competition. This retrospective look at the competitions begins with an article by **Marie Gervais**, who won the CES Student Essay Contest in 1996. Marie’s account conveys the excitement of winning the award and the tremendous boost that recognition by the Society gave to her thesis defence and subsequent career development. Marie considers the recognition as a catalyst to her career. Now on faculty at Laval University in Quebec City, she is a model of the evaluation researcher-practitioner – teaching evaluation, consulting on health issues, and advising a Quebec ministry on evaluation. In touch with the latest thinking on evaluation through membership in evaluation associations around the world, she is already mentoring the next wave. What is her advice to students? Choose the competition that most interests you ... and try it. The experience will surely be personally and professionally broadening.

Marie's paper is followed by a note from **Chantal Langevin**, who won the Essay Contest in 2000 with her framework for assessing a substance abuse prevention program, and **Shelley Borys**, her evaluation mentor. Writing the essay crystallized Chantal's thinking about the project. She has since implemented the evaluation framework and is preparing a Ph.D. thesis on the results. Chantal describes the warm welcome she got from the CES, the contacts made with other students and evaluation practitioners following the competition, and her enhanced awareness of the many resources available to developing evaluation specialists. Shelley provides strong support for the competitions as a means of exposing students to evaluation as "a tangible field with a vibrant and active community involved in its pursuit and advancement" and as an important validation not only of the students' work but also that of the professors who inspired them.

The Student Essay Contest began in 1989. Seven years later, in 1996, CES added the Case Competition to its portfolio of programs for attracting students to evaluation. The first article on the Case Competition is by a group who participated in teams from the University of Waterloo over the period 1999 to 2001. **Candace Nykiforuk, Trisha Gavin, Jennifer Yessis, Adam Spencer, Nicki Lauzon, Nancy Pearce, and Liz Cyarto** describe their initial exposure to evaluation through a basic course that involved active participation in community-based evaluation projects. For some of them, this was followed by an advanced program evaluation course which likewise included significant field experience. They readied themselves for the Competition by working through old cases in a five-hour period and then having their product critically examined by their coaches. For the actual Competition, in which they found "the intensity of the experience is unbelievable," they indicate that rapid, effective resolution of differences of opinion is critical. The group's technique in this regard is both logical, in that "decisions are made through the application of evaluation principles, sound judgement, and critical thinking," and highly practical, for they go on to say, "or if that fails, we use rock, scissors, paper." That is, if a decision gridlock emerges during the Competition they let chance point the way out because "a decision allows you to move on." The competition helped them learn to negotiate, cooperate, and plan, always working from a foundation of mutual respect. For them, participation in the event has "inflamed our passion for evaluation" and provided the beginning of a lasting "intellectual companionship." Many have since done

volunteer work with the CES, and two of them are now working as management and evaluation consultants.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Chapter of CES has been organizing and coaching interdisciplinary teams of students from Memorial University since 1998. **Bea Courtney** and **Holly Etchegary** describe the Chapter's intensive promotion of the competition through university media and personal networks. Once interested students come forward, they are taught to "learn each other's strengths, areas in which they want support from others, and the norms that will guide how they treat each other and expect to be treated." Bea and Holly observe that "those teams that used the norms faithfully have found them particularly helpful when the going gets tough ... which it usually does when the clock ticks on." The Chapter develops the students' technical skills in two sessions that constitute a "mini CES Essential Skills Series" and inspires them to immerse themselves in other activities or events that will expand their understanding of evaluation. From the perspective of Chapter members, it is highly rewarding to pass on evaluation knowledge to the students. And the CES and evaluation now have a higher profile at the university. This Note highlights the crucial role that CES regional chapters play in promoting student competitions. At the time of this writing, students from eight Canadian provinces have been finalists in the Essay Contest or Case Competition. Finalists have come from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland.

Mark Seasons and **Anita Myers** have a combined 11 years of experience in coaching students for the Case Competition, including their work with the top-rated teams in 1996, 2000, and 2001. Developing teamwork and helping students see that "interpersonal tensions waste precious time and energy" is vitally important, according to these mentors. They suggest that students agree on specific roles within the team and master the art of being supportive and delivering criticism constructively. Students quickly realize that the five-hour time limit to the Competition is not kind to perfectionists searching for a correct solution to the case. There are an infinite number of ways in which a case might be approached. The requirement is to provide the best possible thinking about an approach while working with the very limited information and time available. Mark and Anita report that their university places high value on participation in the CES Competition. Students have received funding for travel to the site of the final round of the Competition. Successes

have brought media coverage, special recognition, and even a place of honour for the Crystal Trophy during its sojourn in the students' faculty.

Competitions require judging. In providing an assessor's perspective, **Benoît Gauthier** lauds the overall quality and depth of the students' submissions. He then gives us a sense of what is expected of a judge: experience, credibility, and a broad, holistic view of evaluation within which one has a clearly structured personal perspective coupled with a capacity to appreciate the perspectives of others. Judges must be prepared to spend many hours reviewing the submissions, discussing them, and preparing feedback for the students. But the fun of debating the merits of each submission with other lively, dynamic devotees of evaluation helps make it all very rewarding.

Natasha Bergeron and **Paul Welsh** report positive impacts that the Student Case Competition had on a community social service agency, Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services. In the 1998 Competition, five teams worked on a case that required development of a framework for evaluating Rideauwood's program for counseling people with gambling problems. The executive director of the agency used the students' frameworks to focus the agency's evaluation strategy for the program. Results of the evaluation helped Rideauwood raise government funding, and the program now serves more than five times the number of clients it did in 1998. Rideauwood's evaluation of the gambling treatment program has been presented at Canadian and U.S. conferences and was featured in a publication of the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy.

In the closing Research and Practice Note, **Natasha Bergeron** reports on interviews with people who have arranged that their organizations provide financial support for the Case Competition. Monies from sponsors are used to help pay the travel costs for students and judges, cover translation expenses, and purchase prizes. Sponsors are keenly aware of the shortage of evaluation specialists in Canada. They view the Competition as a means of raising student awareness of evaluation and the abundant career opportunities for evaluation specialists. Sponsors appreciate that, for the final round of Competition, they can observe the students in action and later speak with them about their career interests.

This wide-ranging set of perspectives on the Essay Contest and Case Competition suggests that they are very effective in building confi-

dence, enlarging vision, developing personal networks, increasing awareness of the CES, and even opening doors to careers in evaluation. This special edition of Research and Practice Notes did not examine the extent to which other factors contribute to these positive outcomes. Nor do we have a fully balanced reporting that includes negative outcomes. For example, we know of groups of students who have entered the Case Competition without first developing good interpersonal relations, building trust, or establishing a conflict resolution strategy. For them, participating in the Competition might well be remembered as five hours of stressful argument and struggling of egos. Likewise, dissatisfaction with the quality of the French language translation of a case file, or disagreement with the judges' choice of best essay or best case presentation, will have dulled the glow of the competitions for others. But we firmly believe that the positive benefits reflected in these notes predominate, and we highly recommend the events to other regional and national evaluation associations. Carefully managed, with a focus on fun and growth rather than that chimera called "winning," student competitions can exert a powerful positive influence on the adaptation and development of evaluation.

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Thank you to all of the volunteers and sponsors who help make CES student competitions possible each year. Responsibility for organizing the Essay Contest rotates among Chapter representatives on National Council. It is members of the National Capital Chapter of the CES who founded and continue to organize the annual Case Competition.