

*Research and Practice Note*

## STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE OF THE CES CASE COMPETITION

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### DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE COMPETITION

■ The Case Competition is open to university students (undergraduate and graduate) across Canada. Teams of three to five students, from any discipline, analyze an evaluation case and present their findings to a panel of judges. The competition consists of two rounds — the preliminary and the final. The preliminary round takes place at each team's home university. The teams are presented with an evaluation case and asked to address specific issues. The team may be asked to comment on a completed evaluation, make recommendations for partially completed work, or design a full evaluation. The time limit is very strict, and the teams have no idea ahead of time what the content or nature of their task will be. During the preliminary round, the report is e-mailed or faxed to the case organizers within five hours of receiving the case material. Volunteer judges affiliated with the CES read the submissions and invite three teams to participate in the final round. Their decision is based on specific criteria: content (relevance of material), accessibility (ease of absorption of information), impact (strength of argument), and overall impression of the presentation.

The final round is similar to the preliminary round, except that the competition (since 2000) takes place at the annual national conference. The teams are provided with an evaluation case and asked to

prepare a 15-minute presentation instead of a report. A panel of judges, case sponsors, and delegates from the CES conference attend the presentations and are invited to ask questions of each team. These presentations are also videotaped by the CES. The pressure and excitement during the five-hour preparation time and 15-minute presentation are enormous!

## EVALUATION TRAINING

Our Waterloo Case Competition Team has been made up of both Masters and Ph.D. students who are at different stages of their program (some have recently enrolled while others are near completion). For most of us, our first exposure to evaluation was in a graduate studies program evaluation course at the University of Waterloo. There we were introduced to the key concepts, theory, methodologies, and practice of evaluation and benefited from rigorous, community-based practical projects.

Although we completed this course in different years, each of us acquired a strong foundation in the concepts of evaluation. We experienced many of the challenges associated with data collection in the field and learned to work as part of a real-world evaluation team. Our instructor, Dr. Myers, introduced us to the CES and its Case Competition, and her encouragement led us all to become proud CES members within the first month of class.

In 1999, an advanced program evaluation course was developed and offered to graduate students at the University of Waterloo. This course was designed to advance student knowledge and applications of evaluation and to prepare them for participation in the Case Competition. Assigned readings and practice sessions, combined with the insights of our coaches and team members from previous years, helped to orient new members and build a strong, communicative team. The evaluation experiences and training of our team takes place not only in the classroom, but also in the community through part-time employment, research and teaching assistantships, and practicum courses.

## THE CASE COMPETITION EXPERIENCE

Although we all have completed coursework and have often had additional experience in evaluation, it is impossible to be completely

prepared for the Case Competition. The topic of the case, scenario, and questions to be addressed are unknown until the day of the Competition.

Before receiving the case on the day of Competition, we set up our laptops, printers, and flip-chart paper, and lay out some textbooks, articles, and tips from our coaches. We know the case is about to arrive when the coach offers a handshake along with good luck and encouragement. During the preliminary round, we come to the table with our ideas, anticipation, and plans. We spend time reading the case, discussing the issues, and writing the report. Although this seems like an easy and straightforward task, the five hours always seem to pass in a blink of an eye as we frantically pull together and send our brief to the judges. One of our new team members describes her experience as a competitor:

As a first-time participant in the CES Case Competition, I was rather nervous about “keeping up” with the more experienced members of our team. During the preliminary and final rounds, however, there was no time for worrying! The five hours seemed like five minutes! There was never enough time to get everything done perfectly, but somehow we managed to pull it all together. Working as a team member on the entire case, and also within the team as an individual on smaller tasks, I learned a great deal about working under pressure, drawing upon team members’ experiences and skills, and applying educational and evaluation knowledge to “real life” case scenarios. The CES Case Competition has heightened my interest in the field of evaluation and encouraged me to seek further evaluation training and experience.

There is no single correct answer to any evaluation scenario, and this is exemplified in the Case Competition. For three years, our team has been fortunate to participate in the final round of the Competition against some very strong teams from other universities. On the day of the final Competition, our anticipation and excitement have built up so much after months of preparation that the intensity of the experience is unbelievable. As in the preliminary round, we are faced with difficult decisions on how best to proceed with the limited time at hand. Decisions are made through the application of evaluation principles, sound judgement, and critical thinking (or if

that fails, we use “rock, scissors, paper”). The key component for us is teamwork. Participation means learning to negotiate, co-operate, and plan while discovering the importance of group dynamics and respect. A true sense of camaraderie and university pride is built among our team members and coaches.

In the final round, our thoughts and suggestions are presented to the judges, case organizers, sponsors, and an audience from the CES conference. In the past, we have had one team member handle the brief oral presentation, while the remainder of the team was responsible for addressing the judges’ questions. The question and answer period allows us to clarify and/or elaborate on our suggestions and recommendations.

The benefits of participating in the Case Competition remain long after the Competition is over. A team member describes her experience:

Conducting research in a field setting as a graduate student can be isolating ... thus, working on the Case team with other students was a welcome change. It was great to be able to discuss issues like theory-driven evaluation and program logic models during preparation for the Competition. I learned more about the theory and practice of evaluation, and working with other students toward common team goals brought us closer together. Throughout the rest of my formal education, I felt comfortable talking to these team members when I needed someone to bounce ideas off of or advice about my work. Once we participated in the Competition, I became more confident in my own instincts and understanding of evaluation issues. As a team, we learned to work quickly without the guidance of our coaches and recognized the strengths and unique contribution that each team member could make. We realized that we needed to be flexible with plans and schedules, and learned to revise them depending on the individual cases that we were examining.

## VALUE AND IMPACT OF THE EXPERIENCE

The Case Competition was an enriching experience for all of us, from both evaluation and personal perspectives. From an evaluation per-

spective, we were able to apply the skills and knowledge gained from our coursework to a real-world case. Evaluators are often called upon to provide rapid debriefings to deputy ministers, medical officers, organization heads, or boards of directors, and we were given the opportunity to perform this challenging task. From a personal perspective, we enhanced our self-confidence and practical skills of time management and teamwork. Our written and oral presentation skills were challenged, and it enhanced our problem solving, quick thinking, and communication skills. Moreover, it was just plain fun!

Another benefit of participating is that the case organizers and sponsors invite the three finalist teams to attend the CES national conference. We have been fortunate to receive travel sponsorship from the CES, case sponsors, SSHRC travel grants, and the UW Health Studies and Gerontology Department. Attending the conference provided us the opportunity to see the latest work in the field, and to present our own work and network with future colleagues and employers.

Sponsors of the Case Competition attend the presentations of the final round, and afterwards they meet and interact with us. In fact, some of us have even been offered jobs as a direct result of winning the Case Competition.

Participating in the Case Competition has also led various team members to become actively involved with the CES as members of Chapter Boards of Directors and as volunteers for Chapter initiatives, the CES national conference, the Case Competition, and the Essay Contest. Many of our past and current team members have also presented papers or posters at the national CES conference and in other professional forums.

## CONCLUSION

Although there is a wide range of research and evaluation interests among us, being a part of the Case Competition team has provided us with a unique and invaluable learning experience. Our involvement has made our graduate education more rich and enjoyable, and resulted in lasting relationships with our fellow students and faculty members. The Case Competition is a “high impact,” hands-on learning situation that allows us to apply our knowledge in a realistic and meaningful way. We were provided with a “real-world” evaluation scenario, and, through the combination of our individual

strengths and teamwork, we were able to provide suggestions and recommendations to community agencies. Their interest in our comments has given us confidence as future evaluators and inflamed our passion for the field of evaluation (including our thesis and dissertation work and career choices). The opportunity to attend the national conference as part of the Competition has given us the chance to network with other evaluators and to establish contacts for future employment. From all of our positive experiences, it should not be surprising that we strongly recommend other schools participate in the CES Student Case Competition!