

EVALUATOR COMPETENCIES IN UNIVERSITY-BASED EVALUATION TRAINING PROGRAMS

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Abstract: In this article we revisit the comprehensive taxonomy of *Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators* and explore its utility in university-based evaluation training programs. We begin by briefly summarizing the development of the taxonomy, then elaborate on how it can be used to enhance evaluation training through six decision points in graduate degree or certificate programs. We then discuss the challenges of credentialing/licensure and accreditation within the field of program evaluation and end with a proposal for the development of standards for program evaluation training programs.

Résumé: Dans cet article, nous nous penchons à nouveau sur la taxonomie des compétences essentielles pour les évaluateurs de programme et explorons son utilité dans les programmes de formation universitaires. Nous commençons par résumer brièvement le développement de la taxonomie, puis nous expliquons comment elle peut servir à rehausser la formation en évaluation à six points de décision dans les programmes menant à un grade supérieur ou à un certificat. Nous discutons ensuite des défis liés à l'agrément et à l'émission de titres, certificats, et permis d'exercer dans le domaine de l'évaluation de programme

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et terminons par une proposition pour l'élaboration de normes pour les programmes de formation en évaluation de programme.

■ We recently came across a photograph taken in the early 1900s that pictures a Charlie Chaplin-like character ready to board a locomotive, arms overflowing with odd-sized suitcases, all skillfully balanced one upon the other. The caption reveals this traveller's foremost concern: "I wonder if I have everything I need for this trip."

The well-equipped traveller becomes a helpful metaphor for our work as program evaluators and as educators in university-based evaluation training programs. An effective evaluation study shares the attributes of a successful journey. Each requires knowledge, skills, and dispositions in a decision-making process aimed at achieving a specific purpose. Equipped with tools such as maps, gear, navigational skills, and perseverance, the traveller targets a geographic destination. Similarly, the program evaluator targets a successful evaluation study by applying an array of tools, including evaluation approaches and designs, technical skills, management know-how, contextual savvy, interpersonal competence, standards of practice, and so on. In both cases, it is common to wonder throughout if all of the necessary tools are on hand and ready for use.

An extensive travel industry provides guides and manuals detailing what is needed for successful trips, regardless of the destination. By contrast, the field of program evaluation surprisingly has not to date agreed on one important category of tools — a comprehensive set of competencies for effective practice — applicable to all evaluators. Although *The Program Evaluation Standards* (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994) specify what constitutes effective program evaluations and *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* (American Evaluation Association, 2004) offer general guidance for conducting them, neither the standards nor the principles articulate competencies necessary for evaluators who conduct such evaluations. Believing that a set of core evaluator competencies would prove valuable for a variety of purposes — particularly in formal training and professional development programs — we developed a process for constructing, validating, and refining a comprehensive taxonomy of core competencies for program evaluators (see King, Stevahn, Ghere, & Minnema, 2001; Stevahn, King, Ghere, & Minnema, 2005). The primary purpose of this article is to discuss the potential utility of that taxonomy for formal evaluator education/training¹ in university programs.

We begin by describing how we developed the taxonomy of *Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators* (ECPE). We then elaborate on its potential for use in university-based graduate degree or certificate programs in evaluation studies. Finally, we discuss what we believe is an opportunity that could affect university-based evaluation training: whether to credential or license those who practice professionally, and whether to accredit training programs. In doing so, we will present ideas that emerged as we developed the taxonomy of ECPE and applied it both inside and outside of university settings — insights that lead us to believe we should no longer avoid addressing these issues.

ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES FOR PROGRAM EVALUATORS

The comprehensive taxonomy of *Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators* (ECPE) presented in Figure 1 (originally published in Stevahn et al., 2005) emerged from our interest in determining the extent to which evaluators — representing diverse roles, work contexts, training levels, and years of experience — could reach agreement on the perceived importance of a set of competencies central to program evaluation practice. Although noted experts had offered lists of important evaluator tasks and skills (e.g., see Anderson & Ball, 1978; Covert, 1992; Mertens, 1994; Sanders, 1979; Torres, Preskill, & Piontek, 1996; Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2001; Worthen, 1975) and core content for evaluation training programs (e.g., see Altschuld, 1995; Caron, 1993; Ingle & Klauss, 1980; Sanders, 1986), none of the proposed frameworks appeared to be systematically derived or empirically validated through consensus building among diverse professionals across the field. We set out to do both, believing that if a comprehensive set of evaluator competencies could be constructed and if consensus on such a taxonomy could be reached, practical applications would be possible — such as improving training, enhancing reflective practice, advancing research on evaluation, and further professionalizing evaluation by establishing a core foundation from which program accreditation and/or evaluator credentialing could be pursued. A complete description of how the ECPE evolved appears in King et al. (2001) and Stevahn et al. (2005). We briefly summarize its development here.

Our work on evaluator competencies began in 1997 as we reviewed the program evaluation literature and noted the knowledge, skills, and dispositions (attitudes) deemed important for professional practice. We used that information to construct a comprehensive

Figure 1.
Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators (ECPE) (Stevahn et al., 2005)

1.0 Professional Practice

- 1.1 Applies professional evaluation standards
- 1.2 Acts ethically and strives for integrity and honesty in conducting evaluations
- 1.3 Conveys personal evaluation approaches and skills to potential clients
- 1.4 Respects clients, respondents, program participants, and other stakeholders
- 1.5 Considers the general and public welfare in evaluation practice
- 1.6 Contributes to the knowledge base of evaluation

2.0 Systematic Inquiry

- 2.1 Understands the knowledge base of evaluation (terms, concepts, theories, assumptions)
- 2.2 Knowledgeable about quantitative methods
- 2.3 Knowledgeable about qualitative methods
- 2.4 Knowledgeable about mixed methods
- 2.5 Conducts literature reviews
- 2.6 Specifies program theory
- 2.7 Frames evaluation questions
- 2.8 Develops evaluation designs
- 2.9 Identifies data sources
- 2.10 Collects data
- 2.11 Assesses validity of data
- 2.12 Assesses reliability of data
- 2.13 Analyzes data
- 2.14 Interprets data
- 2.15 Makes judgements
- 2.16 Develops recommendations
- 2.17 Provides rationales for decisions throughout the evaluation
- 2.18 Reports evaluation procedures and results
- 2.19 Notes strengths and limitations of the evaluation
- 2.20 Conducts meta-evaluations

3.0 Situational Analysis

- 3.1 Describes the program
- 3.2 Determines program evaluability
- 3.3 Identifies the interests of relevant stakeholders
- 3.4 Serves the information needs of intended users
- 3.5 Addresses conflicts
- 3.6 Examines the organizational context of the evaluation
- 3.7 Analyzes the political considerations relevant to the evaluation
- 3.8 Attends to issues of evaluation use
- 3.9 Attends to issues of organizational change
- 3.10 Respects the uniqueness of the evaluation site and client
- 3.11 Remains open to input from others
- 3.12 Modifies the study as needed

4.0 Project Management

- 4.1 Responds to requests for proposals
- 4.2 Negotiates with clients before the evaluation begins
- 4.3 Writes formal agreements
- 4.4 Communicates with clients throughout the evaluation process
- 4.5 Budgets an evaluation
- 4.6 Justifies cost given information needs

- 4.7 Identifies needed resources for evaluation, such as information, expertise, personnel, instruments
- 4.8 Uses appropriate technology
- 4.9 Supervises others involved in conducting the evaluation
- 4.10 Trains others involved in conducting the evaluation
- 4.11 Conducts the evaluation in a nondisruptive manner
- 4.12 Presents work in a timely manner
- 5.0 Reflective Practice**
 - 5.1 Aware of self as an evaluator (knowledge, skills, dispositions)
 - 5.2 Reflects on personal evaluation practice (competencies and areas for growth)
 - 5.3 Pursues professional development in evaluation
 - 5.4 Pursues professional development in relevant content areas
 - 5.5 Builds professional relationships to enhance evaluation practice
- 6.0 Interpersonal Competence**
 - 6.1 Uses written communication skills
 - 6.2 Uses verbal/listening communication skills
 - 6.3 Uses negotiation skills
 - 6.4 Uses conflict resolution skills
 - 6.5 Facilitates constructive interpersonal interaction (teamwork, group facilitation, processing)
 - 6.6 Demonstrates cross-cultural competence

Note. From "Establishing Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators," by L. Stevahn, J.A. King, G. Ghre, and J. Minnema, 2005, *American Journal of Evaluation*, 26, p. 49–51. Copyright 2005 by the American Evaluation Association. Reprinted with permission.

taxonomy of essential evaluator competencies. We then conducted a face validity study involving 31 evaluators in or near Minneapolis-St. Paul (Minnesota) in a Multi-Attribute Consensus Reaching (MACR) process (see King et al., 2001). The quantitative and qualitative findings indicated consensus among the participants on the perceived importance of more than three-fourths of the competencies in that initial taxonomy. Areas where consensus did not emerge tended to reflect the role- and context-specific aspects of the participants' evaluation practice. These findings gave us hope that common ground might exist on core evaluator competencies for the field at large, despite the diversity that exists across the content and context of program evaluation practice.

Following publication of the taxonomy in 2001, we pursued its systematic development in several ways. First, we reviewed the list of suggestions and rationales provided by those who participated in the original study concerning what they believed should be added to (or omitted from) our list of competencies. We then set out to generate critical discussion and further input from professionals and students. We did this by (a) presenting the taxonomy at professional conferences, including annual meetings of the American Evaluation

Association (AEA) and the Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute (MESI), (b) conducting a one-credit course on the taxonomy in the University of Minnesota's graduate-level Evaluation Studies Program, (c) facilitating professional development sessions for evaluators (including one in Manitoba) using the taxonomy as a tool for self-reflection, and (d) formally consulting with Professor James Altschuld, who had led a competencies task force for AEA. We purposefully recorded the comments, issues, and suggestions of more than 100 individuals who participated.

Next, we analyzed the input from these events and, based on recurring themes, revised the original taxonomy. Specifically, we added several competencies to support existing evaluation standards more fully (see Stevahn et al., 2005). We also reorganized the taxonomy into a more user-friendly format by clustering the competencies into the following six major categories (see Figure 1):

1. *Professional practice* — competencies that focus on foundational norms and values that underlie program evaluation, such as adhering to standards and ethics.
2. *Systematic inquiry* — competencies that focus on the more technical aspects of program evaluation, such as designing studies, collecting and analyzing data, interpreting and reporting results.
3. *Situational analysis* — competencies that focus on analyzing and attending to the unique interests, issues, and contextual circumstances of any given program evaluation.
4. *Project management* — competencies that focus on the nuts and bolts of conducting program evaluations, such as budgeting, coordinating resources, and supervising procedures.
5. *Reflective practice* — competencies that focus on one's awareness of evaluation expertise and needs for growth, including knowing oneself as an evaluator, assessing one's needs, and engaging in professional development for enhanced evaluation practice.
6. *Interpersonal competence* — competencies that focus on the people skills used in conducting program evaluations, such as communication, negotiation, conflict, collaboration, and cross-cultural skills.

Finally, we gave the taxonomy a new name — the *Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators* (ECPE) — to distinguish it from the earlier version.

In addition, as a step toward validating the ECPE, we searched for evaluation standards or guidelines with which to conduct a crosswalk comparison. We included sets of standards, principles, or skills adopted by major evaluation associations in North America aimed at advancing professional practice in the field of program evaluation at large. We excluded sets that did not meet that criterion, such as those adopted by organizations with a narrower evaluation focus (e.g., the *Professional Competencies* of the Qualitative Research Consultants Association, 2003) or that used evaluation to accomplish other primary responsibilities (e.g., the *Evaluation Standards* of the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2001; the *Responsibilities and Competencies* of the National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, 2002). Ultimately, the inclusion criterion led to cross-referencing the ECPE with (a) *The Program Evaluation Standards* endorsed by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1994), (b) the *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* endorsed by the American Evaluation Association (1995),² and (c) the *Essential Skills Series in Evaluation* endorsed by the Canadian Evaluation Society (1999). The results showed substantial overlap between the ECPE and the standards/principles/skills specified above, thereby also indicating that the crosswalk process served as a functional alternative to the expert panel method typically employed when constructing taxonomies. Note, for example, the alignment that the cross-reference revealed among the following items that deal with attending to stakeholders (see Stevahn et al., 2005, p. 50):

- Identifies the interests of relevant stakeholders (*Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators*, item 3.3).
- Stakeholder Identification: Persons involved in or affected by the evaluation should be identified, so that their needs can be addressed (*Joint Committee Program Evaluation Standards*, 1994, item U1).
- When planning and reporting evaluations, evaluators should consider including important perspectives and interests of the full range of stakeholders in the object being evaluated (*AEA Guiding Principles*, 1995, item E.1).
- Identifying who the client is and what the client needs (*Canadian Evaluation Society Essential Skills Series*, 1999, item 2.a).

Our future research involves a comprehensive validation study that will determine the extent to which program evaluators across the field can reach consensus on a set of essential competencies for professional practice. In pursuing consensus on core competencies for

program evaluators, we see the following needs: (a) agreement on how competencies are framed and formatted (i.e., the language and structure used to write competencies), (b) clarity around the meaning of terms (i.e., common definitions), and (c) standardized rubrics and illustrative examples specific to each competency.

Ultimately, whether or not consensus is reached on every competency in a comprehensive taxonomy, striving to establish this taxonomy should spark meaningful discussion on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions people perceive to be essential for effective practice. Doing so invites critical analysis, reasoned judgement, and better articulation of who we are and what we do as evaluators. We believe that future clarification of various evaluator roles and the competencies needed to enact them will emerge through grounded dialogue. In fact, the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) already has engaged the evaluation community in an Internet-based version of such a dialogue aimed at determining what evaluators do and what skills they need (see Zorzi, McGuire, & Perrin, 2002). The project comprised several components, one of which was a literature review that presented themes relevant to the “core body of knowledge required by evaluators to enable them to conduct evaluations competently and ethically” (McGuire, 2002, p. 9). University-based educators in evaluation training programs may be uniquely positioned to assist in other such endeavours by (a) spearheading literature reviews on competency development (or investigating how other professions have developed competencies) to become more aware of various formats and the implications of each, (b) hosting forums to bring greater clarity to the meaning of terms and/or posting glossaries online (such as the Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University), and (c) proposing rubrics for review and revision that can be used by evaluators to determine levels of proficiency and target relevant professional development. In the meantime, we are using the ECPE presented in Figure 1 in a university evaluation training program — the University of Minnesota’s Evaluation Studies Program — and in professional development sessions for practicing evaluators. In the section that follows, we elaborate on the utility of the ECPE for such purposes, focusing on higher education programs.

USING COMPETENCIES IN UNIVERSITY-BASED EVALUATION TRAINING PROGRAMS

Over a quarter of a century ago, Cronbach and his associates at Stanford University outlined their ideal program for educating evaluators of social programs, including

four major components: (1) disciplinary preparation — at the doctoral level — in a social science; (2) participation in dozens of interdisciplinary seminar sessions that examine evaluations; (3) an apprenticeship to practicing evaluators; and (4) an internship in an agency where policy is formulated. (Cronbach et al., 1980, p. 341)

Stufflebeam (2001b) discusses the development of an interdisciplinary program, now headed by Michael Scriven, that builds on this structure across four colleges at Western Michigan University. Owing perhaps to the difficulties of collaborative programming across collegiate units and the coordination and expense associated with extensive internships, most university evaluation programs, even those of long standing, have not pursued this ideal. To our mind, the ECPE offers a pragmatic and more general solution to the challenge of improving evaluation education.

Regardless of their structure, program evaluation training programs in university settings face similar challenges, among them answering the following questions: What courses should constitute the program? What content, skills, and attitudes should each course strive to teach? What should distinguish doctoral, master's, and certificate-level programs? How should program faculty assess students' prior evaluation experiences for graduate program planning, internship placements, and other important faculty-student advising decisions? What research endeavours should students pursue to advance theory and practice? To what extent does the program equip graduates to meet the demands they will face as professionals/practitioners?

The difficulty in answering such questions lies in the oft-touted diversity that exists in our field. Two factors make it difficult to determine what is most necessary in designing formal training programs that will adequately serve this range of needs and circumstances: (a) the array of unique contexts in which program evaluation takes place — government, business, health, education, social service, and nonprofit settings, to name a few (consider, for example, the lengthy list of topical interest groups within the American Evaluation Association); and (b) the multiple roles that evaluators play — internal versus external, short-term versus long-term, and traditional versus participatory (see Ryan & Schwandt, 2002).

By identifying a core set of evaluator competencies to which every evaluator should attend, we believe that the ECPE can enhance formal university-based evaluation training programs. While it may

not be possible in all settings to enact the ideal that Cronbach and his associates envisioned, the ECPE can play a vital role in programmatic decision making, enabling every university-based certificate and degree program to identify a set of required experiences and, perhaps, areas where students may need to look beyond the university to develop specific competencies. In the sections that follow, we highlight six types of decisions that commonly occur within such programs — program, course/instructional, faculty-student advising, research, self-reflection, and employment — and the ways that the ECPE can assist each.

Program Decisions

What should a formal university evaluation training program encompass? What should be its mission, vision, values, and outcomes? How can it best be organized to meet the multiple needs of its constituents? What should distinguish doctoral versus master's versus certificate-level programs in evaluation studies? These are primary issues that faculty and administrators who plan, implement, and assess the effectiveness of formal university graduate evaluation training programs face. A comprehensive taxonomy of evaluator competencies like the ECPE can be a helpful tool in making decisions to resolve these issues.

First and foremost, the competencies can ground faculty discussion on what is most essential or valued in constructing (or revising) an evaluation training program. Broadly conceived programs, for example, would strive to offer a wide array of courses and practicums that provide training on nearly all of the competencies. In contrast, specialty-oriented programs would strive to offer courses more narrowly focused on only those competencies most needed in a given area or context, such as business, education, government, health, or social service. Similarly, courses may be offered to help students master the methods that specific types of practice predominately use — such as quantitative methods in large-scale survey studies or qualitative methods in small-scale case studies — or master particular approaches that certain types of practice predominately use — such as objectives-oriented, utilization-focused, participatory, or transformative evaluation, to name a few. Regardless of a program's scope, however, competencies can play a vital role in helping faculty articulate desired student outcomes (i.e., what students should know and be able to do through successfully completing the program) as well as determine the types of courses and practical experiences stu-

dents need to achieve those outcomes. For example, a faculty could target the six competency categories of the ECPE as desired program outcomes, then orchestrate experiences through coursework, internships, and so on, in ways that would enable students to acquire those competencies. Accordingly, systematically assessing students' mastery of the competencies at various points throughout the program would enable faculty and administrators to engage in ongoing evaluation of their program's effectiveness.

In addition, evaluator competencies can assist program faculty and administrators in determining which university courses at large — i.e., outside of the program — students may pursue to support their studies. For example, interpersonal competencies such as those in the ECPE become important targets for students who primarily plan to conduct participatory evaluation studies in future professional practice. Typically, however, formal university evaluation training programs do not offer courses on interpersonal skill development. The ECPE, therefore, guide educators in seeking courses that deal with interpersonal competencies in other programs across the university, such as humanities, education, communication, or other relevant disciplines, or in settings outside of the university. In essence, a taxonomy like the ECPE provides a foundation for exploring what an entire university has to offer an evaluation training program.

Course and Instructional Decisions

Once faculty determine the courses an evaluation studies program will offer and which courses are required at various levels of study (e.g., doctoral, master's, or program certificate), instructors who teach those courses must determine their content. This points to a number of decisions about how each course will be implemented. What will be the purpose of the course — its goals, objectives, outcomes? What content will be included? What strategies, activities, assignments, and assessments will best enable participants to achieve the specified purposes? Where will the course fall in the overall sequence of courses offered? A comprehensive taxonomy like the ECPE can assist instructors in such decision making, as well as assist program coordinators at the onset in determining who should teach which courses based on faculty expertise relevant to the various competencies. Grounding these and other relevant course decisions in a common taxonomy of competencies also enables the faculty to determine which competencies are being covered where, thereby seeing the “big picture” to better assure that graduates will indeed

acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for successful professional practice. Important competencies may well be offered in several courses. For instance, instructional content pertaining to data collection methods is germane to introductory overview courses, specialized evaluation methods courses such as survey or focus group techniques, and courses on evaluation theory.

At the instructional level, the competencies can become framing objectives for individual units or class sessions. Consider, for example, the program management competencies, which bring to mind specific instructional strategies — having students review and outline responses to RFPs, inviting evaluation clients as guest speakers to discuss what they like and dislike while negotiating a contract, reviewing formal agreements from different areas of practice, practicing oral communications or drafting budgets, learning software available for managing timelines, and so on. The competencies provide an easy agenda for classroom instruction that will teach novice evaluators what they need to know for effective practice.

Competencies are also useful as an instructional tool for facilitating deeper analysis and integration of course content. We have used the ECPE, for example, as a framework for analyzing evaluation case studies (see Ghere, King, Stevahn, & Minnema, in press; Patton, 2005), thereby enabling individuals to consider the breadth and depth of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of program evaluators. We also have used the competencies in an integrative activity at the end of various courses, inviting students to review course content, reflect on their learning, then consider their progress in relation to accomplishing the competencies (e.g., where are they in their professional journey toward developing the competencies to conceptualize, manage, and complete effective program evaluations?). Additionally, in advanced courses, the competencies can be used to promote rigorous discussions on connections between standards and practice, such as the ECPE and the Joint Committee Standards.

Faculty-Student Advising Decisions

A student's tenure in a graduate evaluation studies program involves numerous choices, some of which require faculty advising or approval. Here, again, a core set of evaluator competencies can provide a solid foundation for decision making. The ECPE, for example, are a constructive tool in the advising process, providing a common framework for advisor-advisee discussions about the student's prior

experiences and future needs for advancing professional goals. With each student's background qualifications and professional aspirations in mind, faculty advisors can use core competencies to counsel them regarding appropriate elective courses. Similarly, competencies may assist faculty advisors in determining whether a required course should be waived for a student who has substantial professional experience or prior coursework in that area. We envision the ECPE, for example, as a viable framework for tracking progress on evaluator competency development at every advisor-advisee meeting throughout a student's graduate program, thereby serving as a constant touchstone.

Beyond coursework, most university evaluation training programs require an internship, some type of formal practicum experience, or a culminating "capstone project" that challenges students to apply their knowledge and skill comprehensively in the field. As Trevisan (2004) notes, "One of the most enduring recommendations in literature about the teaching of evaluation is that students receive hands-on or practical experiences during their education" (p. 256). In structuring practical experiences, this taxonomy of competencies can be used to consider which competencies a student has mastered versus which need further development. Such an analysis can help determine the type of internship experience a student should pursue — one that will be advantageous both to the student and to the organization that will host the placement. Internships, for example, may be designed to emphasize the acquisition of new skills, further refine skills already attained, or accomplish both purposes equally. Whatever the focus, we envision interns, internship supervisors, and university professors alike using the taxonomy to track accomplishments and document areas of concentration. We also believe that the ECPE enable hosting organizations to articulate in advance which competencies interns must bring to the experience (i.e., designating the background qualifications necessary for success) as well as which competencies will be nurtured developmentally throughout the internship experience (i.e., communicating expectations for growth).

Research Decisions

For those in doctoral or master's degree programs that require a thesis, core evaluator competencies may be helpful in framing appropriate research on evaluation. The ECPE, for example, provide abundant possibilities for determining questions or problems of practice to investigate, identifying independent and dependent variables, formu-

lating hypothesized relationships, and examining various aspects of effectiveness. Doing so has the potential to enhance the entire field of program evaluation through the development and validation of descriptive theories for refining, extending, and guiding effective practice. Although such research generally has not been pursued in the field of program evaluation as in other social science disciplines (e.g., see Alkin, 2004; Christie, 2003; King, 2003; Stufflebeam, 2001a), the ECPE clearly set forth concrete components from which to begin. Several possibilities for research include (a) examining the role of evaluator competencies in effective evaluation practice — such as framing evaluation questions, remaining open to input, or resolving conflicts constructively; (b) investigating the impact of training on skill acquisition and application — such as identifying what types of professional development experiences facilitate skill development and transfer of training; and (c) determining variables that mediate successful evaluation practice — such as identifying conditions that facilitate or hinder the use and effectiveness of specific competencies within particular contexts or models of practice.

Self-Directed Student Decisions

Ultimately, those who participate in formal university evaluation training programs must navigate their own paths and judge their own progress in relation to their professional goals. To do so successfully, a set of core competencies like the ECPE can provide a comprehensive guide for self-reflection and self-assessment. To facilitate this aim, we developed the ECPE Self-Assessment Instrument (see Ghore et al., in press), which includes a rating scale that can be applied to each competency. The scale, displayed in Figure 2, ranges from 0 to 6 on a continuum that designates various levels of experience — i.e., entry/novice, proficient/skilled, mastery/expert. By using this scale to judge the degree to which each competency has been developed, student evaluators can self-assess their personal progress across the entire taxonomy. The assessment results are then useful for reflecting on which competencies to pursue in additional experiences. By doing so, individuals can determine their personal strengths, limitations, and professional growth needs associated with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that underpin effective program evaluation practice.

Employment Decisions

We also see an important role for evaluator competencies as university programs prepare participants to pursue employment opportu-

nities. Graduates (as well as practicing professionals) can use taxonomies like the ECPE to frame their resumés, highlight their areas of competence or specialization, prepare for job interviews, and pose questions during interviews that elicit information for better understanding a job's dimensions. In reciprocal fashion, organizations conducting job searches and university placement centres that post available positions for program evaluators may also find the ECPE helpful. Hiring organizations, for example, may use the ECPE to focus job descriptions, articulate desired skills, plan interview questions, and identify particular needs associated with various evaluation roles, projects, or tasks.

University placement centres may additionally find the competencies helpful in developing a systematic format for posting positions (i.e., in ways that highlight required competencies) or in matching candidates with certain qualifications/skills to various available positions. Finally, evaluators who operate as independent consultants may especially find the ECPE valuable for providing insights

Figure 2
Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators (ECPE) Self-Assessment Rating Scale (Ghere et al., in press)

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|--|---|--|---|------------------------|
| <i>Entry/Novice</i> | | <i>Proficient/Skilled</i> | | <i>Mastery/Expert</i> | | |
| • Developing awareness/building knowledge | | • Applying knowledge routinely | | • Using knowledge fluently and effectively | | |
| • Limited repertoire | | • Basic repertoire | | • Advanced repertoire | | |
| • Limited experience | | • Moderate amount of experience | | • Extensive experience | | |
| • Unaware of potential problems | | • Solves problems as they arise | | • Anticipates problems before they arise | | |
| • Unaware of questions to ask | | • Aware of questions to ask and able to access resources to answer the questions | | • Poses questions to the field | | • Sought out for input |

Note. From "A Professional Development Unit for Reflecting on Program Evaluator Competencies" by G. Ghere, J.A., King, L. Stevahn, and J. Minnema, *American Journal of Evaluation*, in press. Copyright 2002 by Gail Ghere, Jean A. King, Laurie Stevahn, and Jane Minnema. Reprinted with permission.

into the types of questions that will be fruitful during the preliminary discussions that take place prior to accepting (or declining) program evaluation projects. In sum, when job providers and job seekers interface, a common set of evaluator competencies can foster greater clarity, communication, and understanding of particular needs associated with various evaluator positions, roles, and the necessary evaluation tasks therein.

AN OPPORTUNITY AND A MODEST PROPOSAL

In this article, we have described six ways that evaluator competencies may prove helpful in university-based evaluation training programs. From the perspective of a glass half full, one could adopt a positive attitude toward the future of university training in program evaluation. The existing taxonomy will no doubt be revised, but, for now, those charged with responsibility for university certificate or degree programs, as well as those outside of universities who offer formal training in evaluation (e.g., the Evaluators' Institute), can use the ECPE both formatively for program improvement and summatively for determining outcomes. The competencies hold the potential to become a useful tool for university-based programs. In addition, the interdisciplinary doctoral program at Western Michigan University marks a bold effort to bring an ideal program to life. Donaldson and Christie (2004) are exploring the role of universities in advancing evaluation practice, and, under their leadership, an AEA task force will explore the possibility of ongoing collaboration on this topic.

But the perspective of a glass half empty may finally be more compelling. As EvalTalk, the Internet discussion group of the American Evaluation Association, routinely documents, evaluators do not agree on a common definition of evaluation or even on the distinction between evaluation and research. There is no unifying theory that is widely accepted, little empirical research undergirding evaluation practice, no common requirements or preparation for extensive numbers of people engaged in evaluation practice — and little evidence to suggest finally whether or not this is a problem. The taxonomy of ECPE may be a beginning, but much work remains. In our opinion, this situation, similar to the condition of both pre-collegiate and medical education a hundred years ago, creates an opportunity for those in the evaluation community who seek to improve its standing. In some ways program evaluation has moved toward professional status (e.g., journals and professional associations exist), but

two key gaps remain: individual credentialing and program accreditation. Building in part on the taxonomy of ECPE, each of these offers a path for moving the field forward, one by targeting individual practitioners, the other by targeting formal training programs. Although a thorough discussion of these options is beyond the scope of this article, we believe that exploring possibilities — and doing so soon — represents a signal opportunity for further professionalizing the field.

Credentials for Program Evaluators? Accreditation for Evaluation Programs?

Discussions of credentialing and accreditation can easily generate lengthy lists of concerns. Summarized as questions in Figure 3, these multiple concerns reveal the complexity of the issues (see also Altschuld, 1999a, 1999b; Altschuld & Bickman, 1998; Jones & Worthen, 1999; Love, 1994; Smith, 1998, 1999; Worthen, 1999). The basic distinction between credentials (i.e., some evidence of one's

Figure 3.
Questions Concerning Evaluator Credentialing and Program Accreditation

| <i>Evaluator Credentialing</i> | <i>Program Accreditation</i> |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would be the explicit benefits of developing formal credentials for program evaluators, and to whom? • What are the associated risks? • What broad forces support credentialing, and why? • Who might oppose credentialing, and why? • Is a national credential feasible, or would individual state or provincial licensure make better sense? • What forms might credentialing take? • What would constitute accomplishment, and how would it be assessed? • What entity and who within it would be responsible for administering, maintaining, and revising credentialing procedures? • What are the financial considerations? • How would credentialing affect experienced professionals in the field? • What would state licensing or some other form of credentialing mean for university evaluation training programs? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would be the explicit benefits of accrediting evaluation training programs? • What are the associated risks? • What broad forces support program accreditation, and why? • Who might oppose program accreditation, and why? • What group or agency might be interested in serving as an accrediting body? • In what ways might professional organizations play a role? • What accrediting options would be feasible and sufficiently flexible? • What are the financial considerations? • To what extent might accreditation become another layer of bureaucracy, and how could safeguards be provided? • To what extent would accreditation especially benefit university programs? • To what extent might accreditation constrain program evaluation training options? |

authority) and a license (a legal credential that a government agency issues) points to different adoption and implementation challenges. While we can argue that establishing standardized credentialing, possibly including licensure, might strengthen the field by more clearly articulating what constitutes “professional” status, the challenges confronting anyone seeking to do so are daunting. Can we envision a standardized evaluator’s examination paralleling the physician’s medical board examination or the attorney’s bar examination? Louisiana, the only state in the USA to ever issue licenses to program evaluators, has since ceased to do so. It is difficult to imagine, however, how the field will mature into a full-fledged profession without taking steps toward designating certain standards of accomplishment and recognizing those who achieve them.

Similarly, competing notions of accreditation — voluntary or mandatory, linked to licensure or not, at the course or program level — offer multiple options to those interested in advancing this cause. Experiential resources exist; accreditation is already commonplace for many educational programs, especially in university settings. But, in our opinion, while the field can no doubt learn from accreditation structures already in place, significant differences between evaluation and other professional practice will unavoidably lead to a challenging development process. The fact that we have not yet moved to any formal accreditation may well stem from this and related challenges.

Remember the heavily burdened traveller in the opening paragraph? Even with his arms full, he was worried that he might not have everything needed for his trip. We wonder finally whether our field is a bit like that traveller, arms filled with many resources and yet still concerned about beginning the trip, but falling short. In North America, we now have five documents available as we continue to discuss licensing, certification, and accreditation possibilities: (a) *The Program Evaluation Standards* endorsed by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1994), (b) the *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* endorsed by the American Evaluation Association (2004), (c) the *Essential Skills Series in Evaluation* endorsed by the Canadian Evaluation Society (1999), (d) the *Canadian Evaluation Society Project in Support of Advocacy and Professional Development* (Zorzi et al., 2002), and (e) the subject of this article, the taxonomy of *Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators* (Stevahn et al., 2005). Surely this is enough material to engage the topic of accreditation and certification.

Our proposal therefore is straightforward: to convene a group of individuals representing evaluation education and training in its many forms, university-based programs and non-university training options alike, and develop a set of standards for the education of program evaluators. Just as the original Joint Committee created a set of standards to guide program evaluation, this group would develop standards to guide evaluation training programs. We believe that evaluator competencies would prove useful in such an endeavour. We also envision a voluntary accreditation process similar to the process that began in high schools at the turn of the 20th century and continues today in schools and universities at all levels. Evaluation training programs interested in receiving accreditation would prepare a self-study documenting the extent to which the evaluation training program standards are met, and a team of experienced evaluation educators would then make a site visit to verify the self-study and offer recommendations. The details for implementing this process could be developed and then piloted, most likely in university settings, enabling these institutions to play an important role in establishing and refining feasible accreditation processes and procedures. We look forward to beginning this journey.

NOTES

1. Although we recognize the distinction between education and training conceptually, we will use the terms interchangeably since it is common practice to refer to “evaluation training programs.”
2. In 2004 AEA approved a revision of the *Guiding Principles for Evaluators*, at which time our crosswalk conducted with the 1995 version was in press.

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