

Research and Practice Note

REFLECTIONS ON THE CES CASE COMPETITION: THE COACHES' PERSPECTIVE

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As described by Obrecht, Porteous, and Haddock (1998), the impetus for starting the inter-university Case Competition was the desire to generate student interest for both evaluation and the CES. Getting the Competition off the ground in its first year, however, took the enthusiasm of a part-time lecturer to inspire a colleague in another university. As we will describe, the hardest part is often getting started. Once an instructor and his or her students try the Competition, and especially if they reach the finals, there is no stopping. Returning students want to enter again to reach the finals, win, or defend their title, and they will strong-arm their classmates, new students, and coaches as necessary to make this happen. Preparation for the Competition and use of previous cases become incorporated into the evaluation training curriculum. In order to assist and, hopefully, inspire more instructors to get involved in the Case Competition, this article describes how we got started, how we involve and prepare our students, and the rewards of the competition experience for the students, coaches, and university itself.

GETTING STARTED

Instructors who may be unsure of whether they can take on the workload of Case Competition coach or may not be currently teaching a program evaluation course should consider a joint coaching arrangement. Students from more than one department in the university can also be combined, if necessary, to achieve the critical mass of five for a team entry. First-time coaches should feel free to contact past coaches, as well as the case organizers, if they are con-

sidering entering their students in the Competition. The organizers were extremely helpful to us in answering all our questions, as well as supplying cases from the previous rounds and videotapes of the final rounds. The Competition web site now supplies a great deal of information, including the rules, the entries each year, judges' comments, previous cases, and so on.

Three features of the Competition make it both exciting and intimidating to first-time competitors (student and coaches alike). First, the cases can come from any field (e.g., health promotion, education, rural development, immigration, etc.). Second, the entries come from many diverse disciplines (departments or schools of public administration, social work, planning, health, psychology, etc). Third, the teams do not see the case until the day of the Competition itself. The strict time limit (a total of five hours) for reading, analyzing, discussing, and preparing a response to an often lengthy document would be intimidating to most of us, much less students. Accordingly, students must have a sound grasp of program evaluation principles and the confidence to apply these principles beyond their own primary discipline under severe time pressures and working together as a team.

INVOLVING AND PREPARING STUDENTS

While completion of formal course work in evaluation is not a requirement, such preparation is a distinct advantage, especially if the students do not have prior experience with evaluation. For many students, course credit is an important incentive for participating. The timing of the Competition (preliminary round in February; final round in May at the CES conference) is also an important consideration.

Our preference is to briefly describe the Case Competition to new students at the beginning of the fall course and to solicit interest near the end of the course. Subsequently, we hold a series of weekly or bi-weekly meetings with interested students for the explicit purpose of preparing them for the preliminary round of the Competition in late February. Students who go through the preparation, do additional readings, and participate in the Competition are given an additional course credit for their efforts. The enticement of being able to attend the national CES conference is sufficient for many. This became a reality in 2000, when sponsorship was found and the

final round was moved from Ottawa (late February) to the national CES conference in May. The new format also gives coaches and students more time to prepare, should they reach the final round.

We have found certain things helpful in preparing our students. We start by explaining the Competition, the rules, and the criteria the judges will be using. We then focus on the task for the preliminary round, that is, five hours to read and critique a case and write a short briefing report. It is essential to explore the various strengths of the team members and select roles (such as time keeper, discussion leader, report proofreader, etc.). Most importantly, we have them go through an actual simulated exercise using a previous case with strict time limits, submitting the report to their coach(es), and then meeting to critique and debrief. Invariably, students spend a great deal of the allotted time reading and discussing the case and are rushed near the end writing up the report. The simulation exercise is an eye opener for first-time participants.

Following completion of the first round, win or lose, debriefing presents an excellent, problem-based learning experience. Examining the submissions (blinded, of course) of all the entries and related judges' comments on the Competition website is a useful part of this experience. If your team is not successful in reaching the final round that year, they will undoubtedly learn from the experience and, hopefully, be motivated to try again.

If your team is fortunate enough to move into the final round, further preparation lies ahead. The tasks of reading, critiquing, and discussing the case remain the same. What changes is the focus from written to oral presentation, including visual aids. Having the students view some of the videos from previous finals is a good starting point. Once again, we put them through a simulation using a previous case. At the end of the five-hour limit, they give an oral, PowerPoint-assisted, presentation to the coach(es) and fellow students if possible (to increase the size of the audience). A question-and-answer simulation (with the coaches acting as judges) follows. Subsequent meetings are held to debrief, discuss teamwork issues, develop templates, and select roles (timekeeper, discussion leader, text and visual material developers, presenter(s), question period leaders, etc.). Final preparations before leaving for the CES conference and the final round include coordinating travel arrangements and equipment.

COMPETITION BENEFITS

The Competition offers a number of benefits to students, coaches, and the university. The intensity of the case experience is a very effective means by which students can apply, and reflect on, analytical and evaluation skills acquired in their education. Students learn how to work in high-pressure situations in which evaluators are often brought in and expected to produce on short notice. They learn to make the transition from perfectionist to “satisficer,” as Simon (1957) would say — learning how to do “well enough” in less than ideal circumstances. They learn to trust their capabilities and function independently (as coaches cannot assist them during the actual Competition). The Competition forces them to identify key stakeholders and issues, scope out “red herrings” (such as pages of extraneous statistics often included in the cases to distract them), think on their feet, and work as a team.

Effective teamwork is success. Win or lose, students (and coaches) derive a great deal of satisfaction from contributing to a team effort. The Competition provides a forum whereby members learn to recognize their individual strengths and weaknesses, and their role within the team. They recognize that inter-personal tensions waste precious time and energy; resolution and decision-making strategies are essential. They learn how and when to support (or constructively criticize) each other, and how to create a positive and healthy team culture. As described above, team meetings and real-time simulations using past cases are very effective in this regard.

Participating students have their way paid to the national conference, become CES members, and are introduced to national and international leaders in the evaluation profession. Finalists receive a high profile at the national CES conference, where team presentations are made before conference delegates and awards are presented at the CES Awards Luncheon. Offers of employment from conference attendees are not uncommon. Being a finalist or winner definitely enhances the student’s résumé as CES members become more aware of the high quality of the Case Competition. Being a coach also does not hurt the faculty member’s curriculum vitae when it comes time for annual performance reviews or university consideration for tenure or promotion.

POST-COMPETITION BENEFITS

Taking home the crystal trophy, and simply reaching the finals, are tremendous honors. The dean of our faculty (Applied Health Sciences) and the chair of the department (Health Studies and Gerontology) have both proudly displayed the trophy in their offices the past two years. Our university newspaper published an article on our team's success, and both students and coaches were recognized, along with scholarship winners, at an annual reception and through certificates. The sense of university pride has translated into financial support, when necessary, to assist students with supplies and travel, as well as technical support from staff. Educating other faculty and students about the Competition, however, is important. Bulk e-mail describing the Competition itself and the teams entered (during both the preliminary and final rounds) has generated a great deal of encouragement and congratulations for our students.

The sense of camaraderie, pride in representing one's university, and shared experience that develops during the Competition continues beyond the event itself. Former team members who graduate and go on to evaluation positions come out to support the current team and/or offer their services to assist in team preparation or organizing future Competitions. As we have discovered, continuing students pressure fellow and new students, and their coaches as necessary, to form a team to enter next year's Competition to make the finals, win the event, or defend their title. Once you get them involved and excited, there is no stopping. Whereas coaches might initially struggle to get a team together, they might face the new prospect of having to hold try-outs the following year. Our winning team thinks the next step should be to take on students from the US and other countries, if the American Evaluation Association and other evaluation societies would follow the lead of the CES.

Teammates often stay in touch with each other and their coaches/mentors, after they graduate. In fact, the Case Competition has inspired many of our graduate students to choose evaluation as their profession. Last, but not least, the Competition helps coaches (typically full-time or sessional instructors) hone their teaching skills. The Competition cases provide ready-made problem-solving exercises that can easily be incorporated into the regular curriculum and assignments of evaluation courses. The two of us are certainly happy we took the plunge to be involved with the Case Competition. We hope more instructors will get involved and reap the many re-

wards of the evaluation Case Competition. The CES is to be commended for its continued support of, and leadership in, this important learning experience.

REFERENCES

- Obrecht, M., Porteous, N., & Haddock, B. (1998). Casing out evaluation: Expanding student interest in evaluation through Case Competitions. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 13(2), 129–134.
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