

HOW CAN INFORMATION ABOUT THE COMPETENCIES REQUIRED FOR EVALUATION BE USEFUL?

Burt Perrin
Independent Consultant
Vissec, France

Abstract: This article explores the main themes and implications arising from the three articles in this thematic segment regarding evaluation competencies. It identifies five potential uses for competency information: (a) basic education and training, (b) self-evaluation, (c) professional development, (d) information and advocacy about the skills required for competent evaluations, and (e) assisting evaluation commissioners in choosing and managing evaluators. The article identifies the need for more attention to the competencies required by evaluation commissioners as well as those needed by evaluation practitioners. It also urges caution in moving toward accreditation or certification, suggesting that there are less drastic effective alternatives.

Résumé: Cet article examine les principaux thèmes et répercussions découlant des trois articles dans ce segment thématique portant sur les compétences en évaluation. Il présente cinq usages potentiels pour les renseignements sur les compétences : (a) éducation et formation de base, (b) auto-évaluation, (c) perfectionnement professionnel, (d) information et intervention sur les compétences requises pour effectuer des évaluations compétentes, et (e) assistance aux commissaires à l'évaluation dans le choix et la gestion des évaluateurs. L'article traite le besoin d'accorder une attention plus soutenue aux compétences requises par les commissaires à l'évaluation ainsi que celles dont les praticiens en évaluation ont besoin. Il met aussi en garde contre la prise de mesures trop rapides en matière d'agrément ou de reconnaissance professionnelle et suggère qu'il existe des solutions de rechange efficaces et moins drastiques.

Interest is increasing in the identification of competencies required for evaluation. Recently, there have been two major investigations to identify the skills and knowledge required by evaluators. One of these, the Core Body of Knowledge (CBK) project, which

Corresponding author: Burt Perrin, La Masque, 30770 Vissec, France;
<BurtPerrin@aol.com>

also documented the benefits and outputs that can result from evaluation, was sponsored by the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES; Zorzi, McGuire, & Perrin, 2002; summarized in Zorzi, Perrin, McGuire, Long, & Lee, 2002). The other, the Essential Competencies of Program Evaluators (ECPE), has been undertaken by Stevahn and her colleagues in the United States (e.g., see Stevahn, King Ghere, & Minnema, 2005). In addition, the Essential Skills Series (ESS; see the Nagao, Kuji-Shikatani, & Love article for a brief description) that the CES has developed and is delivering represents a four-day set of training sessions intended to provide a systematic introduction for new evaluators, based upon an assessment of what are considered to be core information needs and skills of new evaluators.

Each of the articles in this thematic segment of the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* (CJPE) includes authors very much involved in the above developments. These articles represent approaches in three countries that reflect differing but complementary attempts to build upon the work to date and that specifically explore ways in which information about competencies required for evaluation can be used. In my view, this work and its profile in this journal represent an important step in moving forward the discussion and debate about the potential role and usefulness of competencies as a means of further development of evaluation as a profession and as an aid to improving the quality of evaluation undertakings.

There is interest in this topic in other countries as well. For example, the Société Française d'Évaluation (SFE, French Evaluation Society) has established a workgroup that is actively exploring the skills required by evaluators and what is needed to contribute to the development and recognition of these skills (see Baslé & Tourmen, 2005, for the latest working paper from this group). There is also a close relation between evaluation competencies and the increasing interest in evaluation standards and principles in many parts of the world (e.g., see Russon & Russon, 2005). A working group within the Deutschen Gesellschaft für Evaluation (the German Evaluation Society, DeGEval, 2004) had developed recommendations for training of evaluators that are intended to be consistent with the DeGEval's evaluation standards.

Numerous statements of principles or ethical guidelines indicate specifically that evaluators undertaking evaluations must have the required knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences (e.g., American

Evaluation Association, 2004; Australasian Evaluation Society, 1997; Canadian Evaluation Society, 2005; Société Française d'Évaluation, 2005). Nevertheless, none of these statements or others that I have reviewed specifies what these required competencies are, how their existence can or should be determined, and how they can be developed and applied in practice. The CES has recognized this need, which led to its activities on identifying evaluation benefits, outputs, and knowledge elements (Zorzi, McGuire, et al., 2002) and which has served as the impetus behind follow-up activities, at least in Canada, such as this special thematic segment of CJPE.

In my own view, competency information can be very useful in a number of ways in helping to improve the quality of evaluations. These three articles help to lay the groundwork for further consideration of how evaluation competency information can be used. But also, as I shall note, there remain some important gaps as well as concerns about the potential of misuse of competency information. Given this, I am uneasy about moves toward certification of individuals, and feel that accreditation of evaluation education and training programs should be undertaken with care.

POTENTIAL USES FOR COMPETENCY INFORMATION

How can information about evaluation competencies be used? Table 1 identifies five main uses that are touched upon by the three articles in this issue of CJPE. One can address these potential uses in a variety of ways.

Table 1
Potential uses of information about evaluation competencies

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1. Basic education and training
 2. Self- (or auto-) evaluation
 3. Professional development
 4. Information and advocacy about the skills required to do competent evaluations
 5. A tool to assist evaluation commissioners in choosing and managing evaluators
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1. Basic Education and Training

This category refers to the education and training of new or would-be evaluators. This category can cover a lot of ground. For example, the Stevahn et al. article discusses how a core set of agreed-upon evaluation competencies such as the ECPE can enhance formal university-based evaluation training:

[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. (p. 110)

Formal university-based courses of study would be of particular relevance to those considering a career in evaluation and who expect to be considered “evaluators.” In contrast, the Nagao et al. article suggests using evaluation competencies for a very different target group, specifically educators who are now required to undertake self-evaluation of their own programs. The level of training in this second case is limited to a four-day training program, recognizing that the level of competencies that can be expected in such a situation would need to be at a very basic level. This does raise the question as to whether the same set of core competencies can be applicable across the board, or alternatively if it would be more appropriate to define somewhat different sets of competencies for those taking on different evaluation roles.

One of the findings of the CES CBK study (Zorzi, McGuire, et al., 2002) was that “soft” skills such as effective listening, questioning, negotiation, and interpersonal communications are particularly important across the entire evaluation process. Because of the applied nature of evaluation, evaluators need more than just technical skills, such as in research design, to be effective. This illustrates how competency information can be useful to evaluator training. As the Stevahn et al. article indicates, formal university evaluation training programs typically do not offer courses on interpersonal skill development. Formal (and informal) training programs, as well as professional development initiatives, might wish to consider how they can provide sufficient attention to the importance and development of “soft” skills that are essential to evaluation.

2. Self- (or Auto-) Evaluation

Evaluation competency information can assist would-be and neophyte evaluators in identifying what competencies they need to develop. Likewise, it can assist experienced evaluators in assessing, and perhaps affirming, their own areas of expertise, in highlighting areas in which they may need to improve, and in identifying new sets of skills or areas of expertise that may be needed to stay cur-

rent and competent. Competency information can help individuals, who may or may not consider themselves as professional evaluators, in assessing their own capability to take on given evaluation tasks. It can serve as a guide for lifelong learning.

In my view, this can represent one of the most valuable, and perhaps less controversial, uses of evaluation competency information. It does not necessarily require a single set of evaluation competencies; indeed, there can be competing lists that individuals can draw from, depending upon the context in which they work and their own views about what is most relevant.

McGuire and Zorzi propose a self-assessment tool, based upon the CES's work (Zorzi, McGuire, et al., 2002), that can be used by individuals on their own or as part of a team (such as in a consultancy organization) to assess their level of competence. This in turn can be used as part of a self-reflection process, whereby individuals reflect upon their own knowledge, skills, and practices and identify strengths as well as areas that require improvement. This can also serve as a basis for determining which evaluation exercises it would or would not be appropriate to undertake, so that one does not practice beyond one's area of competence, as required by the various statements of evaluation principles or ethical guidelines referred to above. Stevahn et al. also touch upon the potential to use the taxonomy that they have developed in this manner.

3. Professional Development

Information about competencies required for evaluation can be useful for professional development in a variety of ways. At the professional level, one can note that an objective of many evaluation associations is to assist in the professional development of their members. Information about evaluation competencies can serve as a frame of reference for identifying the skills and knowledge needed to carry out evaluations, where there may be gaps or where the learning needs are greatest, and how these can be fostered among evaluation practitioners.

Many evaluation associations, such as the CES, the European Evaluation Society (EES), and the United Kingdom Evaluation Society (UKES), offer various forms of professional development training or events to their members and others interested in further developing their skills in evaluation. For example, the CES, as indicated

previously, has developed the ESS introductory training course. The EES offers a residential summer school (the focus of the September 2005 course is on evaluating innovative policy instruments: change, complexity, and policy learning). The UKES offers various ad hoc events and training sessions to its members. As the Nagao et al. article indicates, the Japanese Evaluation Society (JES) aims to develop standardized evaluation training programs for specific sectors, to be delivered by other training providers. In all these cases, competency information at a minimum can assist in assessing needs and in establishing priorities.

In a similar vein, competency information can be used by public, private, and nonprofit training providers as a frame of reference in assessing requirements among those who do and use evaluation, and in designing and structuring their offerings.

At the individual level, competency information can guide evaluators in further updating their skills and perhaps filling in some gaps. I have already referred to the diagnosis of development needs above under the self-evaluation heading. This can provide a basis for individuals to identify needed strategies for addressing these professional development needs. One potential means, of course, can consist of seeking out formal education or training courses. But all three of the articles acknowledge that there can be many different routes to professional development and ongoing learning, including self study, working with others, and so on. Stevahn et al. indicate that coursework or classroom training is not sufficient and that some form of internship or practicum experience is also essential. Nagao et al. identify the role of informal (coaching, secondments) as well as formal (courses) means of developing competencies. McGuire and Zorzi refer to the development of skills by evaluators through working in combination with others.

McGuire and Zorzi also provide an illustration of how evaluation competency information can be used at the organizational level. They indicate how this can be used by a small evaluation consultancy in a variety of ways, including hiring, ongoing development of staff, identifying organizational competencies, and assembling teams for specific projects. As they suggest, similar approaches can be taken by other organizations that employ staff, whether on a full-time or part-time basis, to carry out evaluation functions.

McGuire and Zorzi use the term “performance development” in their article. This perhaps subtle use of language nevertheless places a

results orientation on the work of evaluators, suggesting that competencies should not be viewed as an end in themselves, but as a means toward improved performance. In my view, this is a critical distinction.

4. Information and Advocacy about the Skills Required for Competent Evaluations

One of the objectives of many evaluation organizations is to promote the effective practice and use of evaluation. Russon and Russon (2005, p. 1) indicate: “Quality of evaluation is an issue that transcends regional and national boundaries.” As they say, several strategies are required to address this concern, including statements of evaluation standards or principles. Information about required evaluation competencies can represent a means of indicating to others, such as potential clients and users of evaluation, what skills may be required for a competent evaluation.

For example, the CES identified advocacy on behalf of the evaluation function, along with professional development, as a key priority area and one of the main reasons for undertaking the CBK project. Similarly, Nagao et al. suggest that the main driving force behind its scheme is the recent requirement for evaluation in Japan, but with limited understanding of what is required to carry out effective evaluations and capacity to do so.

As the CES CBK study found, many evaluators are uncomfortable about advocacy. At the same time, however, there appears to be increasing concern that the particular benefits that can accrue through evaluation (as opposed to, for example, through the work of auditors or management consultants with rather different skill sets and approaches) are not always well understood. This concern seems to be behind much of the current interest in evaluation standards, competencies, and even certification of evaluators.

Statements of needed evaluation competencies can assist in demonstrating why skilled evaluators are required to carry out evaluations. Nevertheless, for effective advocacy, this would need to be expressed in the language of the users. More than just competency (input) information is needed for effective advocacy of evaluation. There is a danger of competencies taking on a life of their own. It is also necessary to identify the outputs and benefits (outcomes) that users or clients of evaluation can obtain, and how competencies specific to evaluators

can help to bring these about. The CES CBK study attempted to explore all these components and their interrelationships.

5. A Tool to Assist Evaluation Commissioners in Choosing and Managing Evaluators

In my view, this represents one of the most immediate and practical uses of evaluation competency information. At a minimum, it can aid evaluation commissioners¹ in thinking about the particular set of skills that may be required when designing an evaluation study and developing the terms of reference or call for proposals. It could help in the development of a checklist in assessing the competencies of potential evaluators — hopefully based upon a shortened and prioritized list specific to the requirements of a particular evaluation exercise. Competency information can also serve as an aid to evaluation commissioners in developing appropriate selection criteria and in warding off the all-too-frequent bureaucratic criteria that may be more relevant for the selection of contractors to build highways or buildings than to the necessary competencies for an effective evaluation.

Evaluation competencies used in this way can apply not only to hiring of external evaluators, but to internal evaluation as well. For example, as the McGuire and Zorzi article suggests, competency information can assist in the hiring of internal evaluators and also in assessing if internal evaluators have the requisite skills to carry out a given assignment. Aside from the above, the articles in this special issue give scant attention to this use of evaluation competencies (although Stevahn et al. [2005] identify this as one of the central reasons for developing competencies for program evaluators).

COMPETENCIES FOR EVALUATION COMMISSIONERS – A SIGNIFICANT GAP

The above leads to what strikes me as a major gap in current taxonomies of information about evaluation competencies.² Competent, quality evaluations require competencies among evaluation commissioners as well as among evaluation practitioners.

It is evaluation commissioners who normally are responsible for identifying what specifically should be evaluated and at what point in time and with what resources and over what period of time. Evaluation commissioners are responsible for development of the terms

of reference, including specification of at least the main questions to be addressed, and frequently are responsible for development of the basic evaluation design and overall methodological strategy. It is evaluation commissioners who are responsible for selection or creation of the evaluation team (external consultant[s] and/or internal staff), for the overall management of the process, and for approval of the detailed methodology and workplan and of all interim and final reports. It is the evaluation commissioner who has lead responsibility for ensuring the relevance and use of the evaluation.

Given the above, one could well argue that the evaluation commissioner has at least as much to do with the quality, success or failure, and certainly meaningful use of evaluation as the evaluation practitioner, and that competencies of commissioners thus are at least as important. At a minimum, the commissioner is responsible for putting into place the conditions under which an evaluator can work and how well, and the conditions under which the evaluation is likely to be used or not. From my experience as an evaluation consultant, as a former commissioner, and as an advisor to others involved in developing and managing evaluations, many if not most of the problems that may arise with evaluations are at this level.

Fraser (2005) indicates that participants at a recent Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) workshop prepared a comprehensive list of risks and challenges faced by evaluation practitioners in Australia and New Zealand. He observed that these risks are primarily:

[t]hreats that have to do with the way evaluation is managed, planned, supported, and above all, used. ... The great majority of threats lie outside the control of the individual evaluator or even of the evaluation team. (2005, p. 73)

There appears to be more attention outside North America to the role of the evaluation commissioner and what this requires. The *AES Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations* (Australasian Evaluation Society, 1997) is the only statement of evaluation principles or standards I am aware of that specifically includes guidelines for commissioners as well as for evaluation practitioners. A recent book considering approaches to evaluation in New Zealand (Lunt, Davidson, & McKegg, 2003), unlike most texts from elsewhere, emphasizes the practical rather than the theoretical and includes a major section discussing the commissioning process. This is also a topic generating considerable attention within Europe. For exam-

ple, the European Evaluation Society has a workgroup considering this issue, and EES conferences regularly feature sessions discussing the commissioning process.

Competencies required by evaluation commissioners are not identical to those needed by evaluation practitioners. It is beyond the scope of this article to do more than to touch upon these (but see Perrin & Boschen, 1991). One should note in particular the importance of effective management and communication skills. Successful evaluations require far more than selecting a “competent” evaluator and then sitting back to wait for the final report. Yet this still seems to be all too common.

While information about evaluation competencies can serve as a useful tool, there is the potential of misuse unless commissioners know how to use this information appropriately. For example, commissioners need to be able to identify the particular set of competencies most relevant for the particular evaluation task. Inappropriate or overly rigid application of a list of competencies can perversely result in less rather than more qualified evaluators being chosen. Another common error is to put too much weight on abstract competencies and credentials when choosing an evaluator, rather than on identifying those most appropriate to the particular evaluation context, as well as the willingness and ability to take a practical approach.

Approaches to selection frequently contain implicit or explicit criteria that, sometimes unintentionally and unknowingly, result in the selection of less qualified and less experienced evaluators. One obvious example of this is when selection is based upon price. But other aspects of the selection process can have the same result, such as over-emphasis on the proposal per se, or complex (one might even say convoluted in some cases) tendering procedures and requirements extraneous to evaluation quality (e.g., demonstration of financial reserves) that favour large firms with the machinery to churn out proposals and to conform to all the bureaucratic requirements of complex bid procedures, even though their actual evaluation expertise may be limited (e.g., see Davidson, 2005). Another common selection criterion that can interfere with competency is to award more points to proposals that conform most closely to the terms of reference — thereby penalizing the more competent and experienced evaluators who have the ability to suggest better ways of carrying out the evaluation.

As I have indicated, statements of required competencies for evaluation issued by respected evaluation societies potentially can assist commissioners in the development of appropriate selection and contracting procedures and criteria, and in fighting off at least some of the demands of bureaucracies that can be inconsistent with these. But at a minimum, this requires commissioners to be aware of how some selection criteria can result in lower rather than higher quality evaluations and to have the management skills to work around these to the extent possible. For these and other reasons, establishing guidelines with respect to approaches to the commissioning and management of evaluation are at least as important to quality and competent evaluations as the competencies of practitioners who actually carry out the evaluation. But the taxonomies that have been developed thus far only concern themselves with practitioners.

ACCREDITATION AND CERTIFICATION — SOME CAUTIONS

The proposal to this thematic segment suggested that a logical progression in applying competencies is to move toward accreditation of evaluation training programs and certification, or even licensing of individual evaluators, as a means of providing for greater professionalization and regulation of evaluation. All three of the articles in this thematic segment touch upon a potential move in the above direction.

But all three articles also identify some potential concerns and questions about credentialing (e.g., see Figure 2 in Stevahn et al.). Many more concerns could also be identified. In my view, these and related questions and concerns are not addressed sufficiently to warrant a move to accreditation or certification.

I can only touch upon a few of these considerations and their implications in this article. First, it is important to distinguish between accreditation of training courses or programs on the one hand, and certification (or even licensing) of individuals.

Accreditation

A major use of competency information is in identifying what knowledge and skills should be fostered by education and training programs of various forms. Given this, there can be some value in developing standards to guide evaluation training programs, and in identifying in some way (e.g., accreditation) those programs that address these standards.

Nevertheless, as all three articles acknowledge, competencies can apply to different audiences (e.g., university students considering careers as professional evaluators, educators required to carry out self-evaluation as part of their regular job, managers wishing to learn more about evaluation) and at different levels (e.g., neophytes vs. experienced evaluators). One would expect some programs (e.g., comprehensive university programs) to be all-inclusive in nature, whereas others (e.g., professional development sessions) might only address some selected aspects of evaluator (or commissioner) competencies. Courses can require years to complete (e.g., Stevahn et al.), a few days (e.g., Nagao), or even less. Does it make sense to speak of a single approach to accreditation that would be appropriate in such varying circumstances?

Accreditation may perhaps be most appropriate in a very prescribed situation. The Nagao et al. article presents an example of this, with a common target group (Japanese educators), a common need (to evaluate their own activities in some way in accordance with new regulations), a common institutional framework, and a common starting point (limited or no knowledge of evaluation). As Nagao et al. indicate, the JES recognizes that something different would be required for other target groups, such as workers in development aid. This example also raises the danger of accreditation, based just upon participation in a short-term training course, creating an illusion of competency and the ability to carry out effective evaluations.

Nevertheless, even this example illustrates some challenges that accreditation approaches can face. Thus far a pilot course has been developed and tested. The next stage is to expand this to other organizations that wish to deliver this training. Some of the strengths of the pilot course identified by Nagao et al. include: support from the top (e.g., top-level officials attending parts of the course), very experienced high level presenters/trainers, and committed and excited participants who volunteered to take part in the new initiative. Experience with pilot projects of various forms, however, suggest that characteristics such as these that can help make a pilot successful are notoriously difficult to replicate when it is subsequently rolled out across the board.

There is also a danger of unintended effects. For example, even if a particular training program is exemplary in nature, this does not mean that every participant in it will necessarily be fully competent. Yet participants, and potential employers/contractors, may

erroneously equate the two. And having skills and abilities and applying them appropriately may not be the same things. As the CES CBK study indicated (Zorzi, McGuire, et al., 2002), evaluator knowledge and skills are inputs to the evaluation process, necessary conditions that nevertheless do not necessarily lead to evaluation outcomes — use of evaluation outputs resulting in increased program efficiency and effectiveness, more relevant and appropriate policies, and so on.

Stevahn et al. suggests that an appropriate goal for accreditation might be a voluntary approach. This makes sense to me.

Certification

There is increasing interest, at least among some evaluators within North America, in moving toward some form of certification (or even licensing) of evaluators. Certification (literally the issue of a certificate) can range from being required to pass an examination or to otherwise demonstrate one's competencies, to successful participation in an accredited course of study, to certification of attendance at a course (even if someone sleeps throughout the entire course, or perhaps slips out the door after signing the attendance registry).

A certificate could be optional or mandatory (e.g., licensing) to practice evaluation. Note that “voluntary” certification could de facto become mandatory in practice, if major clients of evaluation, such as governments, have a policy of only hiring as internal evaluators or as evaluation consultants those who are formally certified.

As Stevahn et al. indicate, the first question one must ask before moving to any form of certification is what would be the explicit benefits of developing formal credentials of program evaluators, and for whom. The main arguments in support of certification fall roughly into the following two categories:

- to provide for greater quality control, so that evaluations are only carried out by those with the requisite knowledge and skills (i.e., competent, certified evaluators), and to provide a means of keeping others (e.g., non-evaluators) from doing so.
- to help establish the legitimacy, identity, and credibility of the evaluation profession and of evaluators. A corollary to

this is to distinguish evaluators from others (e.g., auditors, management consultants) who (falsely) claim competency in evaluation, and to keep others from pouncing upon “our” turf. In other areas, certification often serves as a means of restricting entry to the profession and to those who are permitted to practice.

In my view, information about competencies (see in particular Uses 4 and 5 in Table 1) can address the above considerations so that there is no need to resort to the nuclear option of certification. The only possible legitimate rationale for certification can be to assist users (including clients, and perhaps the objects) of evaluation rather than to benefit service providers (i.e., evaluators). I disagree with the use of certification if its major purpose or consequence would be to restrict entrance to “the club.” Rather than take a negative approach implied by certification (you must hire us because you can’t hire anyone else), why not use competency information to be positive (engage evaluators because we have these unique competencies that will result in benefits to you that others without these competencies cannot produce)?

Following are some concerns and considerations that I feel need to be taken into account before moving towards any form of certification of evaluators.

Evaluation as a transdiscipline. There are multiple routes by which one can become an evaluator. Many people “fall” into evaluation. Evaluators come from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds and frequently differ among themselves about the best ways, or even the only right way, to do evaluation. While others may view this as a potential limitation, I view this diversity as one of the major strengths of evaluation. It would be a major drawback if an accreditation or certification approach would limit, directly or indirectly, the many different pathways by which individuals currently become evaluators and the range of approaches that can be taken by evaluation.

Not all evaluators need to know everything. Most frequently, it is teams rather than individuals who carry out evaluations and who need collectively, rather than individually, to have the required competencies that are most appropriate for the particular evaluation context. As Zorzi, McGuire, et al. (2002, p. 31) emphasize in their list of evaluation knowledge elements:

*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. [emphasis in original]*

Not all evaluation is carried out by people who are full-time professional evaluators. Many evaluations, particularly outside the United States, are carried out by individuals who (partly out of choice, but mainly out of necessity) wear many hats (e.g., group facilitator, management consultant, policy analyst, or content specialist) in addition to evaluation. For example, Fraser (2005) has indicated that this is the case in Australia and New Zealand, and a recent survey of members of the German Evaluation Society confirmed that a large majority of its members are not full-time evaluators. And what about self-evaluation, for example by program staff without any evaluation background? As Patton (1997), for example, has illustrated, evaluation in some form goes back to biblical times. Certification would need to address these basic realities.

Over-reliance on credentials. Evaluation is a practical enterprise. Getting through an accredited program may — or may not — make one a good evaluator in practice (even if one stays awake throughout the program and can demonstrate acquisition of knowledge and skills). Competencies represent inputs only, not outputs or outcomes. Neophytes in any area, out of necessity, need to emphasize their training and credentials, while those with experience can point to what they have done and accomplished. Certification reverses this emphasis by focusing on inputs rather than on the outputs and outcomes of evaluation (e.g., improved public policies and programs).

There can be a danger of some evaluators thinking too highly of themselves and their abilities, or feeling that once they can add a certification to their curriculum vita, they can stop learning and developing. This was a theme that I addressed (Perrin, 2001) in a response to an ethical challenge posed in a recent issue of the *American Journal of Program Evaluation*. Conversely, certification can make it too easy for commissioners, especially among those with a limited understanding of evaluation, to avoid thinking through the competencies required for their own particular situation and what they themselves need to do to make an evaluation successful, and to think that if they hire someone who is a certified evaluator, then it could not possibly have been their own fault if something goes wrong.

Danger of certification restricting “evaluation” activities undertaken by certified evaluators. Such an outcome would be the opposite of the intended objective of certification and professionalization of evaluation. But a requirement that evaluations be done only by certified or licensed evaluators potentially could lead to even further resistance to evaluation. There can be other means of getting around this requirement, such as calling “evaluation” by a different name (e.g., policy analysis, applied research, program or organizational review, performance assessment, or audit). This potentially could result in poorer quality “evaluations” — and less work for certified evaluators.

Certification of skills required for yesterday rather than for tomorrow. The evaluation field, along with the competencies needed by evaluators, is dynamic rather than static. The lists of competencies developed by Stevahn et al. (2005) and Zorzi, McGuire, et al. (2002) are different from those that would have been accepted not that many years ago, when mainstream thinking was that the purpose of evaluation was to use “scientific” (i.e., randomized experimental) designs to judge, and that any considerations of utilization represented management consulting rather than evaluation. Fraser (2005) suggests that the “guild mentality” can result in certification reflecting the competency set of existing members rather than the skills that might be most needed.

While I do not have a crystal ball, the evaluation field and the requisite competencies are certain to continue to change and to evolve. For example, Rist and Stame (2005) argue that evaluation in the future will consist more of steady streams of information than of one-off discrete studies. Skills in synthesis will become at least as important as those in design and data analysis. Rather than assessing the impact of discrete interventions in isolation, it will become increasingly important to give fuller consideration to the interaction of multiple interventions happening simultaneously and the role of networks. This is likely to mean that evaluators will require more competencies with respect to complexity and systems thinking. The reality is that it is difficult in practice to update certification requirements on a timely basis. There is a very real danger of standards for certification, in spite of all the best intentions, serving as a bar to innovation and to further development of the field.

Who decides? Stevahn et al. indicate that they found strong consensus in developing their taxonomy of evaluation competencies. But

consensus about broad categories of competencies is hardly the same as agreeing to criteria that could restrict who can be allowed to practice evaluation. Who can make this decision? Is it appropriate for service providers (i.e., evaluators, and by proxy their associations) to determine this, as opposed to the users of evaluation? Is it appropriate for anyone to decide this on behalf of others?

How serious is the problem? Is there really a burning need for certification and accreditation? Before taking such a drastic step that could potentially have unintended consequences, it is first necessary to document the nature and seriousness of the problem and also to establish that no lesser option could address these concerns, such as the other uses of evaluation competency information discussed in this article. For example, how much do we know about the state of the evaluation art? Are shoddy evaluations done predominantly by non-evaluators who might be screened out by certification? In my experience, I have seen both some very good and not-so-good evaluations carried out by individuals with no formal training in evaluation. By the same token, I am aware of questionable evaluations carried out by individuals who would have no trouble qualifying for most any form of certification.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to identify a number of different ways in which evaluation competency information can assist in improvements in the quality and usefulness of evaluations. The three articles in this thematic segment illustrate how competency information could benefit evaluators, training providers, and users of evaluation. But as I indicated, there is a need to identify competencies required for evaluation commissioners as well as practitioners, given the key role that they play themselves with respect to the quality and use of evaluation. There should be a user as well as a provider perspective on how evaluation can be most useful and what this implies for the competencies that those undertaking evaluation need to possess.

I personally prefer guidelines to be used as guidelines as opposed to fixed requirements, where competency information is used to inform rather than to prescribe. In particular, given the large number of unanswered questions and potential for unintended consequences, I would urge caution in moving toward accreditation of evaluation

training programs, and in particular toward certification (or even licensing) of individuals. As Stevahn et al. say:

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. (p. 108)

NOTES

1. The evaluation commissioner, manager, client, and user may or may not be the same person. For example, an evaluation specialist in a large organization may take the lead in designing and commissioning an evaluation on behalf of a program unit, who may or may not continue to take the lead in managing the evaluation once an evaluator has been selected. While I personally prefer the term “evaluation manager,” in this article I bow to the more common usage and use the term “evaluation commissioner” to refer to all the above roles.
2. The attentive reader will have noted that I have spoken of *evaluation*, rather than *evaluator*, competencies, in contrast to the other articles in this thematic segment.

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Burt Perrin is an independent consultant based in France, with over 30 years practical experience assisting organizations internationally with evaluation and planning. He has numerous publications and presentations about how evaluation can be practical and useful. Burt is a Fellow of the Canadian Evaluation Society and currently Secretary-General of the European Evaluation Society.