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Research and Practice Note

CES STUDENT ESSAY AWARD: STUDENT AND PROFESSOR PERSPECTIVES

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Editors’ Comment: In this Note, the authors provide an account of their experience with the Student Essay Award respectively from student, then instructor perspectives.

THE STUDENT’S PERSPECTIVE

As a Ph.D. student in psychology at Carleton University I have an interest in program evaluation. After some persuasion from my program evaluation professor, Dr. Shelley Borys, I submitted the program evaluation framework I completed for academic credit to the CES Student Essay Award competition. This framework focused on a substance abuse program for federal offenders on release in the community. My submission won first prize at the graduate level in 2000. First prize consisted of an all-expense-paid trip to the 2000 CES annual conference in Montreal, Quebec, a prepaid membership to the CES for one year, and a $500 cash award.

The invitation to the CES conference was an excellent opportunity for me both academically and professionally. At the conference I presented my evaluation framework. The questions and feedback I received from the audience helped crystalize the implementation of this evaluation, which will become my doctoral dissertation. Due to the limited exposure to program evaluation offered by the psychology department at Carleton University, I found that the conference provided an invaluable opportunity to meet many different people involved in program evaluation. Not only did I meet students from

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across Canada pursuing degrees in this discipline, but I also made contacts with program evaluation professionals. In addition, CES gave me the chance to publish my framework, which was recently accepted to the Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation. The CES is an extremely hospitable organization, and as a result of numerous invitations I continue to participate in social functions and workshops.

The CES has proven to be a great resource and has provided a forum for me to learn more about program evaluation. My involvement with the CES Student Essay Award, the 2000 conference, and the CES has been extremely rewarding and valuable. I am grateful to the CES for offering me so many opportunities that have resulted in personal achievements and experiences, many of which will assist me in my pursuit of a career in program evaluation.

THE INSTRUCTOR’S PERSPECTIVE

Students in the graduate-level program evaluation course I teach complete an evaluation framework as part of their course requirements. For many, this course is a first exposure to evaluation, and, despite a real-world focus in the discussions and assignments, it appears that the topic is still rather academic to students as we work through concepts and applications during the term. From this perspective, a key benefit of the Student Essay Award is the opportunity to demonstrate to my students that evaluation is not just another in a long series of courses to have under one’s belt, but is a tangible field with a vibrant and active community involved in its pursuit and advancement. In particular, the responsibility CES has accepted for encouraging and involving students in the field of evaluation provides support for messages I try to deliver to my students about the excitement and challenge of a career in evaluation.

Watching how Chantal was received by the CES at the conference and later, by the local chapter, filled me not only with pride in her accomplishment, but also with pride in the warmth and inclusiveness of the CES. I know this award solidified her interest in evaluation, and the field will be the better for it.

From a personal perspective, Chantal’s award also offered benefits to me that I had not anticipated. First, it was gratifying to realize that what I felt was an excellent evaluation framework was also recognized as such by my peers — a little validation, if you will.
And second, I was approached shortly after the conference by someone who has become a client, who commented that she saw that I had been able to teach evaluation skills to Chantal and wanted me to do the same for individuals within her organization. So there were even some tangible benefits from the exposure afforded by the award.

From my perspective, the CES Student Essay Award offers benefits not only to the student and the professor, but also to the field as a whole, by encouraging bright young professionals to affiliate themselves with the practice of evaluation.