

The Director's Perspective

Yvonne Rodney, Career Centre, University of Toronto, St. George campus

Getting Started With Evaluation

Why and when did you start tackling evaluation?

Roughly eight years ago when the government started to hint at more accountability from public sector organizations including universities, I began thinking about the implications for us in the Career Centre. We would need to 'prove' how our work contributed to students' career success overall and not solely on students' post-graduation employment rates. We had always used 'evaluation' forms in our workshops and events but how to justify that career education made a difference? Understanding the issue was one thing but in my search, I could find little assessment information targeted to our work in career development.

We teach our students about the importance of planning in their career development and we also talk about the role 'happenstance' plays in even the best laid plans. So it was with us. A number of seemingly unrelated events came together and acted as a catalyst to our action plan. (1) Our Teaching Assistants' Training Program (TATP) was at the time developing tools to equip new TA's and faculty in assessing the learning outcomes for their classes (2) Our then Vice Provost for Students returned from a NASPA conference eager to engage staff in "Learning Reconsidered" and (3) the National Association for Career Educators and Employers (NACE) released an article on the topic of evaluating career services. I then contacted the folk in our TATP office who agreed to offer an all-day professional development session for our staff on developing and writing learning outcomes. That was the pivotal moment for us.

Key Evaluation Activities & Major Steps

What are some of the key evaluation activities and major steps you've taken?

Our first plan of action was to attach learning outcomes to everything we did. To that end we began examining all our programs and services. How do such and such an activity contribute to our work as career educators? What are we aiming to teach students? While these might seem like simple questions, what quickly became apparent was that some components of our work were not easily measurable -workshops or any other kind of facilitated learning activities – yes, but what about the important but ad hoc conversations that happen daily at our front desk or in our resource library between staff and students? How did we write learning outcomes for these important pieces of our work? What about career fairs or employer hosted information sessions where we act more as facilitators of the events and not the ones who delivered the content?

We decided to focus first on creating learning outcomes for all our "career educational activities" for which there was an intentional focus on skill building or knowledge acquisition. As director, I worked on drafting up career centre level learning outcomes and then worked with team leaders to write learning outcomes for workshops and seminars.

One area we found particularly challenging to write learning outcomes for was 1-1 career counselling sessions. Given the qualitative and process-oriented nature of career counselling, how do we assess whether students have changed? We brought in an outside expert to share some tools. Since then, twice a year, for a one week period, career counselling clients are surveyed on the learning outcomes that every career counselling appointment should address: identification of career concerns, short/long-term career goals, and use of self-assessment information in planning one's career. While this is still self-reporting and not the most robust tool, we do feel it is helping us know the value students are deriving from the service. The next step in this process is to create a more robust intake instrument where the student can identify at the outset of the career counselling process the areas s/he would like to work on. Then we could follow up 4-6 months later letting them know what they identified as their needs at the beginning, and asking them where they are at now.

In addition to looking at learning outcomes, the associate director began an examination of inputs; however, this has been put on hold to dedicate staff time to a visioning process currently underway at our Centre. Of note, there is now a

university-wide emphasis on, and a divisional wide expectation of, departments to align their work with key performance indicators – which means that more resources are now available to aid departments in this process.

Impact of Evaluation

How has evaluating impacted your centre?

Our work on evaluation has several impacts at our centre:

- The language of learning outcomes has become part of our work culture
- Staff are articulating the learning outcomes for their programs much more effectively, that is, moving beyond using words like “participants will have a better understanding of...” to more action oriented outcome statements
- We are asking ourselves some good questions about evaluation. For example, are all aspects of our work measurable? If we want to position our work as focused on career education, should all our programs and services have an educational component? If we are spending time in activities that are not ‘educational’ in nature, should we?
- Evaluation has also highlighted for us the fact that students’ career outcomes are not the sole responsibility of the Career Centre. That we need to find ways to intentionally align our work within divisional and university-wide mandates.

Key Learnings About Evaluation

What have you learned about evaluation?

We have learned the following things about evaluation:

- Evaluation takes a long time and a lot of resources
 - It takes dedication to make evaluation happen when there are so many other demands on your time.
 - As the director you know accountability is important, but it’s important to remember that you’re working with staff whose focus is service delivery. It can be a challenge to help them embrace it and make time in schedules for this. We need to build it into the culture and create pockets of time to do it.
- You can’t measure everything every year
 - Create an annual cycle of what activities you’re going to evaluate
 - You have to make decisions about what assessment activities are the priorities at this time. For example, the division may be requiring different assessments than what you need within your centre.
- Recognize that things change
 - You develop a 3-year strategic plan and set up corresponding benchmarks and then things change. You have a new leader who wants you to move in a different direction. It can feel like you never get a chance to finish what was started. How do you factor unplanned directional changes into your strategic plan, let alone evaluate their effectiveness?
- It is easy for evaluation to get pushed to the back burner
- You need time along with skilled and motivated staff to not only analyze your evaluation data but to use the findings to inform future planning.
- Training on evaluation must be a part of new staff orientation to ensure consistency and continuity

Future Plans

What are your next steps?

Our future plans are tied into changes at the divisional level. The Student Life portfolio is currently going through a new visioning process. Out of this will come strategic initiatives, goals and performance indicators. We will then choose what to measure at the Career Centre to contribute to these divisional goals. For example, we may contribute to a division learning outcome on effective communication by demonstrating that students develop communication skills through resume writing and interview skills. This will help ensure the Career Centre priorities are in sync with divisional priorities.

In addition, we are conscious of not over-surveying students, so will be looking for opportunities to work in collaboration with other units.

So far we are mostly using surveys and have not gotten into other kinds of assessments. We can see the improvements from where we were in the past. More work is needed to refine the tools we currently use and to explore other methods.