

# The Director's Perspective

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## **Getting Started With Evaluation**

*Why and when did you start tackling evaluation?*

It is hard to say when we first started to tackle evaluation in a significant way. We have been measuring a lot of things for a long time. When we became 100% student funded in the mid 90's, we felt it even more important to be able to demonstrate to students that they were getting good value for their money.

Around 2007 we became more interested in learning outcomes, and demonstrating that through our services, students were enhancing their career-related learning. While we had long counted participation numbers, we began to discuss how we could better measure our educational impact.

## **Key Evaluation Activities & Major Steps**

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

As noted, for a long time we have been tracking number of clients engaged in services and their demographics (such as faculty, level) in order to see if there were any groups who were not using our service who we should reach out to. We also gave out post-workshop evaluations, though in the past these were mostly "happy" sheets asking questions about satisfaction. Periodically we conducted focus groups on some specific topics.

Occasionally we have reached out to employers to get specific input from them as well. For example, we have questioned employers about their hiring practices so that we could confirm that our advice was in line with their practices. In addition, we have participated in the Learning to Work survey and periodically have conducted our own new grad survey.

We have invested a lot in creating online services and we developed ways to track students' use of these online education activities.

There are two particular significant evaluation activities that we have undertaken in recent years; first, a resume research project, and second a marketing/rebranding project. The resume research is described in greater detail within this guide in Case Study #4.

To provide a basis for our marketing/rebranding efforts, we wanted a better understanding of the different types of student career needs. We worked with two marketing firms who surveyed and interviewed our students and from this data we were able to create a model of student preparedness and engagement, which allowed us to identify three broad areas of student career need. This new understanding of student needs is driving our plans for services and programs and helping us to determine where to invest time and energy.

## **Impact of Evaluation**

*How has evaluating impacted your centre?*

Evaluation has had an impact on how we structure our services. For example, we require students to do some things online before they can participate in face-to-face services including workshops and individual advising appointments. Because we had evaluated the quality of the online activities we felt confident in making this a first step for students. In this way, evaluation drives practice – making online activities as a first step saves staff time. Evaluating the online services allowed us to have the confidence to make this business decision.

Another example is that we have a limit on the number of face-to-face appointments each student can have on a particular topic; for example students can have 3 resume critiques over the course of their degree program. Because we

have confidence that we are educating students through these appointments (based on our resume research project), we feel students should have the strategies they need so shouldn't need an endless series of appointments.

It is also interesting to look at the impact of our two recent larger evaluation projects. First, the resume research project had great results because it confirmed that what we are doing is working. However, this didn't result in a lot of change. We did tweak a few things online, but while these evaluation results were very affirming, we didn't need to take much action at all.

In contrast, the marketing/rebranding project has resulted in significant changes. For example, in our evaluation forms (for appointments, events, and workshops) we have inserted a brand tally form. Part of the initial market research was clarifying our brand attributes and we found that students see us as "professional, trustworthy, and honest". We decided that we want to be known as "professional, relevant, and motivating." With these as our target attributes, we can track if the changes we are trying in our materials and behaviours are actually changing student perception.

In addition, we have made other changes in our post-appointment survey. While it was previously mostly a measure of satisfaction we have now added questions about learning and motivation which tie with our goals.

We will continue to track the efficacy of our new strategy not just through the brand tally questions, but will look to see increased numbers of certain types of students participating in key programs/services.

### **Key Learnings About Evaluation**

*What have you learned about evaluation?*

The key things that we have learned about evaluation are:

- If we're waiting for time to do it, it will never happen.
  - For me this means both that there is never a "right" time and that waiting to find enough time won't work as it seems like plates are always full. So, to make evaluation happen, you have to keep it front of mind and commit to it, even when you are way too busy.
- Get staff bought in early.
  - I was reluctant to get staff too involved early on as I was so concerned that it had to have a well-constructed plan before I involved them. However I've learned that it will never be perfect and it is really important to get staff involved, even if it is in small ways like helping with survey question wording. If evaluation is to work, staff need to be on board so that they buy in and work to make evaluation a success. (e.g., getting students to complete surveys).
- There is a balance between depth/validity and practicality.
  - It is important that evaluation be well-done, but it must also be realistic. There is a balance to be found between statistical significance and research that is publishable, and making the evaluation real and practical so that it can inform decision making.
  - The bottom line is "Is it going to allow me to take some kind of action?" For example, I've learned that if you have a survey, for each question ask yourself "Why do I need to know this? Is knowing this likely to lead me to change something that we are doing? If not, why ask?"
- Pick an area and focus on it.
  - Focus on evaluating a particular area because time and energy are limited. For example, if you want to be the best at delivering services online, then focus there.

**Future Plans**

*What are your next steps?*

Because of the importance of, and the significant time invested in, our marketing/rebranding project, my primary future focus for evaluation is to keep working on this and making sure that we are successful.

In addition, I see regular outreach to employers as a gap, and in the future want to be more proactive than reactive with seeking input from employers. I have not yet decided how to go about this, but it is on my radar.