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CASING OUT EVALUATION: EXPANDING STUDENT INTEREST IN PROGRAM EVALUATION THROUGH CASE COMPETITIONS

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Abstract: This paper describes the authors' experience in organizing bilingual evaluation case competitions for the National Capital Chapter of the Canadian Evaluation Society in 1996, 1997, and 1998. It covers the structure of competitions, eligibility rules, and the judging of student presentations. The authors also share lessons learned about recruiting contestants and preparing cases.

Résumé: Ce document décrit l'expérience des auteurs dans l'organisation des concours bilingues de cas en évaluation pour la Section de la Capitale nationale de la Société canadienne d'évaluation en 1996, 1997 et 1998. Il traite la structure des concours, les règles d'admissibilité et l'évaluation des présentations des étudiants. Les auteurs présentent aussi les leçons tirées du recrutement de concurrents et de la préparation de cas.

The National Capital Chapter of the Canadian Evaluation Society (NCC-CES) has long been interested in raising the profile of evaluative activities among university students. In the late 1980s, the chapter created the annual Student Essay Contest, offering prizes for outstanding student writing on evaluation issues. In 1995, having established the essay contest as an annual, national event, the NCC-CES arranged that it be thenceforth administered by the National Council of the Canadian Evaluation Society. The Board of the National Capital Chapter then turned its attention to

developing further mechanisms for involving university students in program evaluation.

The chapter wanted a highly visible event that would be accessible not only to participating students and evaluation professionals but to the general public as well. The ideal event would be one that allowed students to experience the intellectual satisfaction that comes from skilfully using evaluative information as input to decision-making, and it would require the close co-operation and teamwork that underlies most successful evaluative work. From these general considerations, the idea of an evaluation case competition took shape.

AND 'TWAS NOT UNLIKE CASE COMPETITIONS IN OTHER AREAS

The NCC-CES Evaluation Competition is similar to case competitions that have been around for decades in areas such as business management, information technology, and strategic planning. Here is how it works. Universities assemble teams of three to five students who are willing to commit some time to analyzing evaluation case files and preparing advice on the policy or program involved. A preliminary round of competition takes place in each participating university. Copies of a case file, in the language chosen by the team, are sent to coaches for release to the students at a prescribed time, say 10:00 a.m. on a Saturday. The team has five hours to work on the case and prepare a written brief that it sends by fax to the competition organizers for forwarding to a panel of bilingual judges. The three top-ranked teams from the first round of competition are invited to participate in a final round that is held in the National Capital Region. Early in the day of the final round they are provided with a second case file, a list of assessment criteria, a small room in which to work, a computer, presentation software (such as PowerPoint), and projection equipment. Again, the case must be read, analyzed, and summarized in a five-hour period. Presentations are made to a live audience, in the language chosen by the team. Each team is allowed 15 to 20 minutes to present their analysis and recommendations, then 5 to 10 minutes to respond to questions from the audience and judges.

While the judges deliberate in camera, the audience and students hear from someone who was directly involved in the evaluation study. That person provides a behind-the-scenes view of the evaluation, of great interest both to the students who have wrestled with the case material and to the audience who have seen it treated three differ-

ent ways. At a subsequent reception, judges speak to the strengths and weaknesses of each presentation and announce their decision. The top-rated team takes possession of the case competition trophy for a year.

COMPETING TEAMS HAVE COME FROM A VARIETY OF DISCIPLINES

The competition is open to currently registered students, full-time or part-time, at any level and in any discipline. For the three case competitions held to date, the teams have been uni-disciplinary, coming from business administration, education, nursing, political science, psychology, public administration, rural planning and development, and social work. Cross-disciplinary teams would be warmly welcomed, but none have emerged so far.

The case competition can be a useful adjunct to a course in evaluation by providing a focal point for lectures, exercises, and discussions. However, completion of formal course work in evaluation is neither an official nor a practical requirement for participants. Success depends less on knowledge of a theoretical evaluation model or framework than on teamwork, common sense, good judgement about the relative importance of issues, organizational ability, and presentation skills. The top-rated teams in all three competitions used conceptual frameworks of elegant simplicity.

ASSESSING THE STUDENTS' PRESENTATIONS

A list of the criteria used by the judges in assessing case presentations, and the weights assigned to each criterion, are made available to contestants, coaches, and members of the audience. Underlying the rating scheme are two basic principles. The first is that information provided in an evaluative report must be regarded critically, almost skeptically, and the second is that no matter how good evaluative information might be, it is virtually useless until effectively communicated to decision-makers.

PREPARING CASES IS A BIT LIKE PURPOSEFULLY LOSING PIECES FROM A JIGSAW PUZZLE

The principal document in each case file is an actual evaluation report or proposal that has been perversely edited by the organizers

of the competition. Sections that render the document accessible to the reader are removed to test the ingenuity of the case teams. Conclusions and recommendations are cut out. Charts that would simplify understanding of data or wonderfully explicative prose will disappear from the source document. The goal is to make interpretation of the evaluative information feasible but challenging.

To give the cases context and colour, the edited evaluation reports or proposals are supplemented with additional material such as newspaper articles, photographs, or snippets from technical reports. Some irrelevant information may be included to test the teams' ability to distinguish signal from noise. Cases have covered: the effects of varying the level of taxes on tobacco products, the benefits of a needle exchange program for intravenous drug users, the results of a research program aimed at improving simple agricultural technologies in rural India, designing a plan to evaluate a counselling program for problem gamblers, and a program to assist military families. A memo introducing each case to the case team outlines a scenario that explains why the evaluation file must be analyzed on extremely short notice.

MAKING IT FLY

Assembling teams for the first competition was slow going until a part-time lecturer picked up the idea of integrating the case competition into a course on program evaluation. That person's enthusiasm inspired a counterpart in another university and the competition took off. For the second and third competitions, recruiting was considerably easier. News of the competition had been spread through articles and presentations. There is now a growing network of people who know about the competition and its benefits.

What is in it for the students? There is the crystal trophy and prizes. For example, in 1998, generous donations from government departments, business and non-profit organizations enabled an award, to each member of the winning team, of registration and travel expenses to the CES Conference in Newfoundland. Further, some professors have recognized participation in the contest as equivalent to an essay or group project. But, perhaps most importantly, the competition offers participants an intense experience of fellowship, confidence building, challenge, and an opportunity to demonstrate their potential to possible future employers. And it is fun. Several par-

ticipants have avowed that it was the best learning experience in their entire university program.

FREE FRANCHISES NOW AVAILABLE

Feedback on the first three competitions has been good and there are plans to continue the event annually. Students, coaches, observers, and organizers have significantly strengthened and expanded their professional and social networks. Some participants, previously unaware of the Canadian Evaluation Society, have enthusiastically registered as members. Five fully elaborated case files, all involving Canadian organizations, have been prepared and are now available for teaching purposes from the authors.

Case competitions are a powerful teaching tool that can help give meaning to program evaluation theory and rivet students' attention on the merits and limits of evaluative information. They can be set up at any level, with competing teams drawn from different courses, departments, faculties, universities, or regions. They require tracking down a case file, recruiting teams, and organizing an event, but as a way of raising student interest in program evaluation come very highly recommended.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The following people would be pleased to discuss the NCC-CES Evaluation Case Competition with anyone who is interested in participating or would like to set up a similar competition elsewhere.

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