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Why Evaluation?

The evaluation of career programs has become an increasingly common topic of discussion and is currently a priority for many career offices for “measuring the effectiveness of your office’s programs and services” and “demonstrating and validating the value of the career services” (NACE Journal, 2005, p. 28). A National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) 2008 Career Services Benchmarking Survey of four year colleges and universities found that nearly seven out of 10 respondents (67.8 percent) were planning to conduct an internal and/or external review/assessment of their career center within the next five years.

Purpose and Benefits of Evaluation?

The core purpose of evaluation is to **improve programming and services to our student clients**. In addition to this purpose, other benefits of evaluation include:

- To better understand the value provided by university career services and to demonstrate how these services contribute to student and graduate success;
- To understand and demonstrate how the career centre contributes to the overall strategic goals of the university;
- To inform quality improvement initiatives;
- To inform decision making with data;
- To provide accountability to clients, funders, and any other stakeholders;
- To recognize successes;
- To be proactive in establishing a rigorous assessment of services, recognizing that government or other stakeholders could impose measurements that may not be in line with career centre goals.

The University Career Centre Context

There may be agreement that evaluation has multiple benefits, but then the following question emerges:

What should a university career centre be evaluating?

There is no one answer to this question. Often, career centres are expected to measure their success based on graduate employment rates. There may be several reasons to track graduate employment, but as an indicator of career centre success this measure is insufficient, and possibly misguided. Why? Equating graduate employment rates with career centre effectiveness does not take into account that

- students’ experiences with the entire university (not just with the career centre) impact their future career successes
- graduate employment rates reflect not only the students’ entire educational and extra-curricular experience, but also other variables such as labour market conditions and other student variables (such as whether students choose to participate in activities and use services).

- employment rates do not provide data that can help inform quality improvement initiatives in the career centre. Post-graduation employment is so far removed from a student's participation in any particular career centre service (for example a half hour resume feedback session) that it is difficult, if not impossible, to make any programming decisions based on this kind of measurement.

To get a more sophisticated picture of career centre effectiveness, and to get information that can inform decision making and quality improvement, a more targeted set of measurements and evaluation practices are needed.

Current State of Practice

Evaluation is not completely new to career centres. Many have been doing some type of evaluation for a long time. Some of the common evaluation activities that have been occurring include:

Usage Statistics

For example, many career centres

- track phone calls, emails, and walk-in traffic of students/alumni, employer/recruiters, faculty/staff
- track appointment usage, including demographics (i.e. gender, year of study)
- track workshop and special event attendance
- track website visits to web sections and use of web tools

Feedback on Satisfaction

For example, many career centres collect satisfaction data from

- Workshops: feedback forms given to all participants
- Events: through online or print questionnaire
- Resume Critiques/Interview Practice Sessions: through feedback forms/surveys
- Online feedback forms for web events
- Counselling: periodic surveys of clients

Other

There are other tools some offices use to gather data, such as

- the [Learning to Work](#) annual survey from Brainstorm Consulting
- annual graduate employment surveys
- periodic target driven surveys

All of these activities have merit. However, there are far more options when it comes to creating more sophisticated evaluation strategies.

Why This Guide?

This guide is an attempt to help career centres think about, and choose, evaluation strategies.

To date, there has not been a lot of formal research conducted assessing the efficacy of career programs, and very little that speaks directly to university career offices. What career office leaders and practitioners require are tools and strategies to guide their own evaluation efforts, however they are constrained by the following:

(1) Very few relevant studies are available.

There are a handful of studies that can provide guidance for very specific evaluation projects within a career centre (for example: evaluating a career course: Brooks, 1995; Hung, 2002; Folsom & Reardon, 2001; Raphael, 2005; Reed, Reardon, Lenz, & Leierer, 2000; Stonewater, & Daniels, 1983; Ware, 1981; evaluating a job search club for

international students: Heim Bikos & Smith Furry, 1999), but these studies are limited to career courses and job search clubs.

(2) The published literature does not provide a great deal of guidance to career centres on how to evaluate their overall effectiveness.

In a review of the literature on the efficacy of career interventions, Magnussen and Roest (2004; Roest & Magnussen, 2004) report on the state of knowledge about the effectiveness of career services, and on the types of research published so far. The conclusion was that most articles were not relevant to career development practitioners. The majority of the reports contain little analysis of the impact or efficacy of specific treatment or program components; and even when positive treatment effects are found, very little description of the nature of the program, service or intervention is provided (information that career offices need in order to guide program development.) In addition, very little attention has been paid to aspects of career planning or career development processes other than exploration and decision-making behaviours when job search, work experience and other career supports are key elements of most university career offices. There are many textbooks on evaluation, but none targeted specifically to career centres.

(3) Lack of practical, easy-to-apply tools to guide evaluation.

The Canadian Research Working Group for Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development (CRWG), assessed the state of practice of the evaluation of career services in Canada (Magnussen & Lalonde, 2005). The research covered both a broad spectrum of career services and a range of settings including not-for-profit, provincial government, elementary and secondary schools, post-secondary institutions, private (for profit) agencies or private practices, and federal government agencies. Results of the surveys with career practitioners and agencies, and interviews with policy makers and employers, indicated that while all stakeholders see evaluation as important, career practitioners believe that current evaluation protocols are inadequate. The authors argue that “the data clearly suggest the need to develop better evaluation tools and processes” (p.47).

(4) Feelings of being inadequately skilled in conducting effective evaluation.

In addition, the survey of career practitioners in Canada mentioned above found that while some evaluation was occurring, participants indicated feeling an inadequacy in their evaluation competency, based not on a “lack of willingness” but on a “lack of knowledge” (Magnussen & Lalonde, 2005, p. 39). Magnussen and Lalonde (2005) contend that “making outcome assessment a reality will involve substantial improvements in our understanding of the nature of career services outcomes, the development of more accessible tools and processes for measuring those outcomes, and increased sophistication in how we use the data” (p. 48).

While there is limited published research literature that can guide career centre evaluation activities, tools and experiences are being shared amongst career offices and practitioners. Information is being shared amongst practitioners through articles in the NACE Journal (e.g. Greenberg & Harris, 2006; Ratcliffe, 2008a) and through presentations at professional conferences (e.g. Robertson, Pothier, Hiebert & Magnussen, 2008a) In addition, the University Career Centre Metrics Working Group (the authors of this guide) have created and shared a Learning Outcomes Tool as a template for setting and evaluating learning outcomes for career interventions (University Career Centre Metrics Working Group, 2006), have shared various surveys and forms developed by their member career centres, and have presented on measuring learning outcomes at a national conference (Keates & Kerford, 2007).

This guide will extend this practitioner to practitioner sharing of evaluation practices and learning.

Overall, the purpose of this guide is to help career centres

- demonstrate the impact of services to stakeholders – including clients/students, institutions, government, and the public
- make more informed decisions about program planning based on data
- learn more about the services and programs offered that are most valuable, appreciated, and efficient
- review examples of concrete tools that can be used and adapted to each career services context
- explore case studies to find out how several offices have designed and implemented evaluation practices

Terminology

A note about the terminology used in this guide:

If you review the literature, attend training sessions, or have conversations with other offices, you have likely noticed that terminology about evaluation is not used consistently. Some use the term “assessment,” others use “evaluation,” and others “metrics.” Not only are different terms used, but the same term often has different meanings depending on who is using it.

We have chosen to use the word “evaluation” in this guide in order to be consistent with the terminology used by the Canadian Research Working Group for Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development, whose theoretical framework (which will be explained in Sections 2 and 3) we are using.

Scope of the Guide

The particular emphasis of this guide is to explain a framework for evaluation that can help you create a plan for systematically collecting and using information in order to inform decision making and quality improvement initiatives. The guide will review each of the three components in the framework, inputs, processes, and outcomes, and provide example tools (such as surveys, rubrics, and spreadsheets) that have been used in the authors’ career centres. In addition, case studies will detail how five career centres have implemented evaluation and their reflections on what the authors have learned from their experiences.

The approach to evaluation covered in this guide is not the only option. Other ways of approaching evaluation include looking at **benchmarking** (comparing your career centre activities to the activities of other offices), **professional standards** (comparing your career centre procedures and activities to a set of professional standards), formal **research projects** (doing evaluation that is part of a research project, usually intended for publication in an academic journal), and considering the results of **external surveys** (such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the Globe and Mail Report Card). An in-depth review of these other four approaches is beyond the scope of this guide, but if you are interested in any or all of these approaches, below are some resources for helping you get started.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking is the act of comparing the activities at one location, to those of a set of comparable other locations, for example, comparing your staff to student ratio, with the staff to student ratio at career centres at other universities in Canada.

Sometimes benchmarking is done at a local level, for example when one career office contacts others to collect information. Benchmarking information at a broader level, is often provided by surveys conducted by professional associations, such as NACE and the Canadian Association of Career Educators and Employers (CACEE).

For example:

[NACE Benchmarking](#) Benchmarking reports available from NACE include the Recruiting Benchmarks Survey, the Career Services Benchmark Survey for Four-Year Colleges and Universities, and the Experiential Education Survey.

[CACEE Benchmarking](#) Benchmarking reports from CACEE include the Campus Recruitment and Benchmark Survey Report.

Professional Standards

There are two sets of professional standards available for career centres. These professional standards lay out the types of services, programs, and functions of a career office. These types of standards can guide an assessment of the overall elements and outcomes of a career office and help with questions such as “are we meeting professional standards?” and “Are there activities that are recommended that we are not currently providing?”.

1. [National Association of Colleges and Employers](#) (NACE)
 - a. NACE provides a set of Professional Standards for College and University Career Services (2006). Available to NACE members.
2. [Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education](#) (CAS)
 - a. *CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education* (7th ed.) 2009.
 - b. *CAS Self-Assessment Guide for Career Services*, 2006.

Research Projects

Some evaluation activities are carried out as part of a research project intended for publication. While many of the data gathering activities may be the same for a research study as they would be for an evaluation used for quality improvement, the level of scientific rigour (for example, ensuring reliability, validity, and sufficient sample sizes for showing statistical significance) is much higher for activities that are to be used for publication.

Before embarking on a research project, a valuable question to ask is whether the project will provide information and insight useful for decision-making. The answer will be unique to each situation. While there can be overlap between the activities for the two purposes (for example, for either purpose you may give surveys to students, or use rubrics to evaluate resumes), Magnussen and Roest (2004) concluded that studies appearing as published research may not provide information that is useful to help practitioners guide their work. This may only reflect limitations of past research, but can also alert us to how the outcomes of evaluation that will answer research questions may not always provide the outcomes needed for evaluation used to guide quality improvement.

For readers interested in conducting research studies:

- For support in designing your evaluation projects for future publication, career centre leaders often work with faculty members and graduate student research assistants to jointly design and implement the project.
- For examples of published Canadian research from university career services offices see:

Journal Articles

- Hung, J. (2002). [A career development course for academic credit: An outcome analysis](#). *The Canadian Journal of Career Development*, 1, 1, 22-27.
- McRae, N. (1999). Preparing for the work term: Online. *Journal of Cooperative Education*, 34(2), 49-53.
- Teles, L., & Johnston, N. (2005). Investigating online teaching of employability skills: The Bridging Online program at Simon Fraser University. *Journal of Cooperative Education*, 39(1), 1-10.
- Watters, M., Johrendt, J.L., Benzinger, K., Salinitri, G., Jaekel, A., & Northwood, D.O. (2008). Activities, Learning Outcomes and Assessment Methods in Cooperative Engineering Education, *International Journal of Technology and Engineering Education*, 5(2), 13-21

Papers Presented at Academic Conferences

- Johrendt, J. L., Northwood, D. O., Benzinger, K., Salinitri, G., & Jaekel, A. (2007, June). *Learning outcomes for engineering co-operative education*. Paper presented at the 11th Baltic Region Seminar on Engineering Education, Tallinn, Estonia.

- Johrendt, J.L., Singh, P.K., Hector, S., Watters, M., Salinitri, G., Benzinger, K., Jaekel, A., & Northwood, D.O. (2009). *The Co-Op Portfolio: An Essential Tool for Assessment and Student Development in Cooperative Engineering Programs*, Paper presented at the Australasian Association for Engineering Education, Australasian Association for Engineering Education Conference: Engineering the Curriculum.
- Johrendt, J.L., Hector, S., Watters, M., Northwood, D.O., Salinitri, G., Jaekel, A., & Benzinger, K. (2009). *A Learning Outcomes Survey of Engineering Cooperative Education Students: Preliminary Findings*, Proceedings of the 2009 ASEE Annual Conference and Exposition, Austin, TX, USA.
- Watters, M., Benzinger, K., Salinitri, G., Jaekel, A., Johrendt, J. L., & Northwood, D. O. (2008, May). *Activities, learning outcomes and assessment methods in cooperative engineering education*. Paper presented at 3rd North-East Asia International Conference on Engineering and Technology Education, Taichung, Taiwan, pp 53-59.

Career Centre Evaluation Projects Presented at Professional Conferences

- Benzinger, K. & Watters M. (2009, June). *Reflection and Assessment: The Dual Role of Learning Portfolios in Experiential Education*. Presentation at NACE National Conference.
- Mahoney, K., & Munteanu, A. (2009, June). *We Teach, They Learn ... or do They?* Presentation at CACEE 2009 National Conference, Vancouver, British Columbia.
- Robertson, I., Pothier, P., Hiebert, B., & Magnussen, K. (2008a, April) *Measuring career program effectiveness: making it work*. Presentation at CANNEXUS, Montreal, Quebec.
- Robertson, I., Pothier, P., Hiebert, B., & Magnussen, K. (2008b, June) *Measuring career program effectiveness: making it work*. Presentation at CACEE National Conference, Montreal, Quebec.

Submission Guidelines for the [Canadian Journal of Career Development](#)

External Surveys

In addition to the evaluation activities that career centres lead themselves, there are also surveys driven by organizations outside universities. These surveys gather data of possible interest for career centres.

Here is a list of some commonly referenced external surveys, with links to their own websites with further information.

- [National Survey of Student Engagement](#) (NSSE)
- [From Learning to Work](#)
- [Maclean's University Rankings](#)
- [Globe and Mail University Report](#)

Ethics Approval

Early in the process of creating your evaluation plan, it can be wise to investigate whether or not you will require ethics approval from your institution. The ethics approval process exists to ensure that data is collected and used within accepted ethical standards.

In general, ethics approval is usually

- **required** if the data will be shared for research purposes (eg in conference presentations or journal articles)
- **not required** if data is being collected solely to guide quality improvement

It is then important to determine: how and where you will be using, and sharing, the results of your evaluation(s), and how your own institution determines what requires ethics approval. As an example, the University of Waterloo defines [quality assurance/improvement projects](#) that are not subject to ethics approval as those that “assess how the

organization/faculty/department/program is doing or involve activities undertaken by the University for administrative or operational reasons”.

While these are general practices, the specific practices at your university may or may not conform to the above criteria. To check what expectations are at your institution, you can consult with your ethics committee (variously titled ethics board, ethics review committee, etc).

For more on ethics:

TriCouncil Policy Statement: [Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans](#)

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- Folsom, B. & Reardon, R. (2001). The effects of college career courses on learner outputs and outcomes (Technical report No. 26 Revised), Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University.
- Greenberg, R., & Harris, M. B. (2006). Measuring Up: assessment in career services. *NACE Journal*, 67(2), 18-24.
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- Magnusson, K., & Roest, A., (2004). The efficacy of career development interventions: A synthesis of research. Accessed at http://www.crccanada.org/crc/symposium2/nav.cfm?s=documents&p=doclists2&l=e&main_catid=193 on July 22, 2008.
- Mahoney, K., & Munteanu, A. (2009, June). *We Teach, They Learn ... or do They?* Presentation at CACEE 2009 National Conference, Vancouver, British Columbia.
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- Ratcliffe, S. (2008a). Demonstrating Career services success: Rethinking how we tell the story (Part 1 of 2). *NACE Journal* 69(1), 40-44.
- Ratcliffe, S. (2008b). Developing the career services story - overview of assessment strategy (Part 2 of 2). *NACE Journal* 69(2), 41-48.
- Reed, C., Reardon, R., Lenz, J., & Leierer, S. (2000). Reducing negative career thoughts with a career course (Technical Report No. 25). Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University.
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