

The Director's Perspective

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Getting Started With Evaluation

Why and when did you start tackling evaluation?

When I first started at Trent in 2001 I was responsible for creating a stand-alone career centre and knew that I wanted to do so deliberately. Early in the process, I went to a strategic planning workshop and then with my team of two, wrote a strategic plan for the centre. This process allowed me to more clearly state what we were doing or wanted to be doing, but I wasn't able to actually see if we were achieving our goals.

A year or two later I joined the University Career Centre Metrics Working Group when it first met and at that meeting confirmed my belief that evaluation is important. By this time the Trent Career Centre was a staff of three, plus myself. As a team we started to apply and test the framework that the Metrics group was in the early stages of developing. About a year into this process I was able to do something significant about evaluation when I received funding to hire an intern for a year.

Key Evaluation Activities & Major Steps

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

In our new department we started on a small scale, doing satisfaction surveys, reading about evaluation, and speaking with other career centres who were already involved in this.

When we hired the intern we started on a year of concerted evaluation planning. Our first steps were, as a team, looking at the Blueprint for Life/Work Designs, and a half day training session about evaluation and learning outcomes.

We used a learning outcomes tool that the working group had created to start mapping out the learning outcomes for each of our workshops. We started by doing the resume workshop as a team, which got everyone on board. The intern was then able to take our current evaluation forms, the Blueprint, our facilitator guides, and then map out draft learning outcomes and educational strategies for each of our services. She would then meet with the staff who were the main facilitators for each service to review her drafts, and then meet with me so that I could review for continuity across all services.

After creating learning objectives for workshops, individual services, events, and our library, we then developed evaluation forms. We started by creating a paper evaluation based on our learning objectives. We quickly decided that we wanted the evaluations to be completed online, which required some formatting revisions.

There was a lot of time invested. Our intern was a recent Trent grad who was able to devote her time to this project. She also created a manual with some teaching tools for us including sections on how to write learning objectives, steps for analyzing data, and a cycle of assessment.

Through this year with the intern, we mostly looked at process variables, and learning, personal attribute and impact outcomes, but did not look much at inputs. Afterwards I did do some work on inputs, specifically staff time. I used a capacity planning spreadsheet, created by the career centre at York, to plot out staff time use. We have used this to clarify time use expectations, for example, setting that our career counsellor will do four hours a day of counselling, and then calculating how much time is available for workshops. This has helped with conversations with staff about how they are spending their time. However, we have not used this for evaluation and are not at the point where we could relate inputs to processes and outcomes, which feels unfinished for me.

Impact of Evaluation

How has evaluating impacted your centre?

The work we have done on evaluation has had several impacts on our centre. First, our work now feels more deliberate. While we are doing a lot of the same things that we were doing before, we are now more clear about what we are trying to accomplish, and are able to evaluate how well we are meeting those learning goals with students.

We also have a clear structure for quality improvement conversations. At the end of each term we are able to review our evaluation data from the services we've evaluated that term. We discuss the data, and then decide if we need to make any changes, for example, are we going to drop a workshop topic, or do we need an additional workshop. Some of this feedback we may have gotten anecdotally and irrespective of this process, but having this process in place means we always catch these things. We now have a mechanism to catch information in a provable way; while we still incorporate facilitator observations, the rest of the process gives more backup and evidence for our decision making.

We found that establishing our evaluation practices took a significant amount of time, but that using these practices does not take a tremendous amount of time now. We are able to have one work study student work on the logistics, such as activating new online surveys and sending emails to participants. They also may do the first level of pulling and summarizing data. Staff spend two half days each year looking at their own results and preparing for meetings, and then two half days at meetings reviewing our results and recommendations. Occasionally more time is needed if we decide to make a major change in learning outcomes which needs to be thought through, but minor changes are relatively easy to make.

Key Learnings About Evaluation

What have you learned about evaluation?

- It's easier than it looks.
 - We have found that evaluation may look daunting, and there is an investment of time at the beginning, but at end of the day it feels easier than I thought it might have.
- There is a difference between research and practice.
 - It is important to decide what works for the centre and what will serve your needs. Not all evaluation needs to be like a research or PhD project. It is good to think about how to keep it understandable, manageable, and transferable so that someone else can do it as well.
- The process was even more valuable than the final documents.
 - The learning that the team gained around evaluation and learning outcomes was invaluable. Now when considering changes or new ideas, the conversation is grounded in both does this fit with our strategic plan and how will we evaluate it.
- The importance of being able to prove your value.
 - While I have not specifically been asked for learning outcomes evaluation yet, it is a powerful tool to demonstrate that you are making a difference for students.

Future Plans

What are your next steps?

For the foreseeable future my plan is to maintain our current process and run the cycle through. I would love to be able to share what I have done with other units on campus. In addition, one trend at Trent is an increasing focus on more experiential education programs. I see the potential for using this framework to inform both the creation of new experiential education programs (for example incorporating variables such as inputs into program proposals) and for evaluating the programs.