Leslie Lumsden, Student Success Centre, University of Western Ontario

Getting Started With Evaluation
Why and when did you start tackling evaluation?

The career area at UWO historically had a very basic evaluation plan. The career area was part of The Student Development Centre and this centre had a simple survey looking at student satisfaction with services received. The student was asked to identify what service they were evaluating and then submit the form in a sealed box in the centre. The staff were encouraged to hand out these forms (mostly in group/workshops) a few times during the year, but then encouraged to blitz evaluations around annual report time. The results were simple and often boiled down to a statement such as "The Career area achieved an overall satisfaction rate of 4.2 out of 5 for services to students. This is up from 4.1 achieved last year". This was the only internal measure or evaluation used until 2007.

At the same time there were national surveys that were being used to evaluate student services at universities by various media (Globe and Mail, Macleans etc). UWO was not evaluated highly in the career area. Although the university administration was aware that these surveys had some problematic methods (and thus results) but also coupled with the career area's lack of internal data, it was decided that career development needed to be a greater focus for the university and thus more data was needed to build this. With this commitment came a new influx of funding and the promise of more resources to come. Thus the career team was lifted out of The Student Development Centre and a new centre was formed called The Career Centre @ Western.

With all eyes watching (at least it seemed that way), we needed a way to talk about our work and results. We also desperately needed data that showed the administration what they were getting for their return on investment. Also, as a new centre we really wanted to know what we were doing well and what we could do better.

Key Evaluation Activities & Major Steps
What are some of the key evaluation activities and major steps you've taken?

The first steps were basic. We started to talk about data and evaluation – a great deal. The entire team was engaged in this ongoing conversation. It was quickly identified that despite most staff having a masters degree (and thus having experience with data collection and evaluation), we were stumbling when it came to how to evaluate what we were doing. We had many questions and used the questions as a basis to forming a plan. So for example, we asked: What do WE want to know about our work vs what administration wants to know vs what students want to know? What methods could be used and not take so much time in an already time crunched service? What theory or tools could we use? What has been published on this? Who had already done this work and what could we learn from them?

At the same time we were building a new internal data management system for all of our services (student bookings, recruiter scheduling etc). This was a very exciting time as it encouraged us to think about all the data we could build into the system for later evaluation and insight. A couple of significant epiphanies occurred at that time in our service model. First and foremost, we as practitioners needed to understand clearly what we were asking "from" all of the data we were now excited to collect. It turned out that our tech programmers (who were building the system) did not always agree what needed to be collected or how. We learned a great deal during these months and were challenged by many staff changes that started the questions and debates all over again. We also learned that programming costs to collect this data was high and we needed to be very clear about what our end goal was. It is an ongoing process we continue to engage in to this day. But it did lead us to also ask, what other low cost, high impact, evaluation could we do?

We decided to revamp a satisfaction evaluation form for students. We talked about what we wanted to know and what we would do with the information. Several forms were used and modified over a period of 3 years. The entire team was

involved and we had the resource of a few hours upon request of a researcher from The Teaching and Learning Centre. We also engaged other centres on campus and asked for input.

Many of the team felt very overwhelmed by the entire evaluation process and at times the project has ground to a halt citing that "there just isn't time". Again, more discussions and modifications were made. Within the last two years we decided we needed to adopt a framework and have tried to filter our thinking and methods of evaluation around the Inputs, Processes and Outputs framework. We had several workshops to learn this framework and help to integrate this thinking into all we do. The team continues to find new methods to do this but is constantly looking for tools and strategies to assist with this quest.

Impact of Evaluation
How has evaluating impacted your centre?

There has been a tremendous impact on our centre in the last 5 years by simply including a discussion of evaluation within everything we do. There is now a basic understanding by the entire team that every activity we do will be measured and evaluated. It is also part of the norm of our centre that once the evaluation is done, we need to use this data for improvements and changes (as well as to celebrate our successes). Sometimes we do a great job at this and other times we are aware that we have much to learn.

Key Learnings About Evaluation
What have you learned about evaluation?

We have learned many things about evaluation, including:
- Evaluation is a challenging but very rewarding process.
- It is extremely empowering to have more data and information to share with each other but also with administration.
- Data and information allow us to be much more purposeful and proactive when we start to do our annual strategic planning.
- Data and information also allow us to report with more accuracy. We are now building a historical perspective to track trends and changes that we had previously only been able to do anecdotally.
- It is a challenge to not feel like evaluation is an "additional" chore, but rather an important tool for our work and our future.
- It is important to not become too concerned about doing it "right" and instead just jump in and learn on route.

Future Plans
What are your next steps?

Each area within the centre has been asked to put forward a strategic plan that includes a five-year plan around evaluation. Each program will have completed an evaluation using the Inputs Process and Outputs by the end of the five-year plan. There will then be a rotational method used to reassess each of these within the following five years. This goal has challenges, but we feel very comfortable that by aiming high and keeping it at the top of our priorities we will develop more skill, knowledge and information to achieve this goal.