Karen Benzinger, Centre for Career Education, University of Windsor

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

About 7 years ago I decided to take on evaluation in a more in-depth way. We were already doing the "standard" evaluation, things like tracking participation and general satisfaction measures (eg.  "would you recommend this activity to a friend"). I knew we had this covered, but I wondered how we were helping students learn.

We had changed our name to the Centre for Career Education, and we wanted to focus and align with contributing to the holistic development of students. So, our first focus for evaluation was setting and measuring learning outcomes.

We were not receiving institutional pressure to report on learning, but coming from a background in student development and education, I was motivated to ensure we had quality programming.

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

Our first step was to research what's been done about learning outcomes in co-op, career, and internships to look at what would be the best way to introduce this. Next we had a staff retreat to talk about learning outcomes, review some articles, and do lots of brainstorming about what this process could look like for us. We also brought in some students to the retreat to get their feedback on particular services. We then assigned team leads, one for co-op, one for VIP (our Volunteer Internship Program), and one for career services.

This turned into small working groups with regular meetings to start from scratch to identify learning outcomes for each of our offerings, and then identifying the educational strategies that would contribute to those outcomes.  After establishing learning outcomes and educational strategies, we looked at how we could assess learning. This was the hardest part and we consulted our centre for teaching and some faculty partners for their input.

Our next steps were establishing how we should track all the data we'd be collecting and we discussed the logistics of when to assess, how to store all this information, and so forth.

Finally we looked at how the different pieces fit with each other. By no means is the structure we've created perfect, but it has moved us significantly forward.

At the same time, on the co-op side we formed a research team with faculty members and did a research project evaluating learning outcomes, and presented and published the results.

At the present time I am now looking at how well we are covering the framework of inputs, processes, and outcomes. I didn't have this framework when we first started our evaluation work, so I'm now identifying any gaps that we can address. Also, one of the biggest struggles that we still have is how to pull it all together. We have many separate measurements and are still working on how to take all of this data and create a succinct report with useful analysis. Given the small size of our staff, we have decided to keep the whole process manageable by creating a cycle of assessment in which we are not evaluating everything every year, but still tracking what needs to be tracked so that when we are ready to do analysis, we have the data we need.

**Impact of Evaluation**
*How has evaluating impacted your centre?*

Our work on evaluation has had several impacts. First, the whole process has reinforced to staff what we are really about – which is education, facilitating learning, and making a difference. Second, I feel much more assured of the quality of our programming. At the very least I know every program has been intentionally designed and that students are benefiting from these programs.

In addition, we are in a better position for the conversations about strategic directions that are happening across campus with the recent appointment of a new president. We already have our own plan and are able to talk knowledgeably about evidence-based decision making.

The most difficult part of this process for us was just identifying a clear strategy for attacking assessment. We struggled through our work with assessing learning outcomes (and are still working to enhance it).  However, the framework has made it much easier for us to identify how to make our assessment work more robust by identifying and filling in gaps related to inputs, processes and outcomes beyond learning outcomes.

**Key Learnings About Evaluation**
*What have you learned about evaluation?*

We have learned several things about evaluation:

- Evaluation can't be an after-thought.
  - Evaluation has to be done up front and totally integrated; it can't be done as well as an add-on.  For example, how you structure the activities for the students is impacted by what you need in order to prove your outcomes.  It is also not solely linear, not as simple as first setting learning outcomes, then educational strategies, then assessment – these three are always intertwined.
- There's constant evolution.
  - We found that once we saw the data, we needed to make changes in what we were asking (because our first attempt didn't really get at what we needed it to).  Sometimes, that meant adjusting an educational strategy.   You're always evaluating data (for quality improvement etc) but also always evaluating your evaluation processes at the same time, for example asking "Did we get what we needed?" and if not, "How should we do things differently next time?"
- The future and big picture are not always clear.
  - This process in some ways reminded me of doing my thesis. The picture starts out totally grey, and you may not know exactly where it is going, what it will look like, but you gradually plod through, and with each step you take it becomes clearer. I also find that the more time you spend thinking and working on assessment, the easier it becomes to grasp.  Sometimes, staff struggle with this because they are busy providing service.   I have learned to think about what can I do to help make it clearer. For example, I have recently worked with several staff members on creating templates for reporting and program analysis.  These templates summarize the assessment data in one place and include sections which require analysis and recommendations.  I found that this helped staff connect the dots between the data they are gathering and program enhancement.
- It takes an extraordinary amount of patience.
  - You may believe this is so important that you want it done immediately, but it can't be done that fast. There are so many variables and you may need to make several attempts at a tool before you are satisfied. I remind myself I'm further ahead today, and know I'm moving forward.

**Future Plans**
*What are your next steps?*

First, we are looking at how to best use the data that we are collecting. We are creating a structure for reporting  that will give us insights into what is working, what is not working, and why.  From there, we will be able to make changes as part of a continual improvement process.

Second, we are filling in the gaps in the three part framework of inputs, processes, and outcomes. We have always done processes, and have done some work on inputs and outcomes, but want to look at what needs to be added.

Third, we will re-look at assessment processes related to co-operative education, especially related to learning outcomes.  We have struggled in this area due to its complexity.  How do you measure learning associated with several different academic programs that span three years, dozens of activities, multiple work terms, etc?  Initially, we tried to measure learning associated with each activity in addition to learning across the entire program.  This is proving quite difficult.  We may need to abandon this ideal and focus solely on the latter.