

Research and Practice Note

**CES CASE COMPETITION:
A NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR
CHAPTER PERSPECTIVE**

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CHAPTER GOALS

■ The Newfoundland and Labrador Chapter of the CES was introduced to the Case Competition at the national conference held in St. John's in 1998. When organizers presented the winning team and challenged other universities and CES Chapters to get involved, the first author's immediate reaction was "we could and should do this." Our CES Chapter took this on as an initiative with the same enthusiasm.

The Chapter set two goals:

- We would build multi-disciplinary teams coming from various faculties at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Our aim was to give students as real a work world experience as possible, providing the opportunity to work on a common task with students possessing different academic orientations and skills.
- The Chapter would lead the coaching and other supports for our team. Our aim was to raise the profile of the Chapter with the university and students so that they would get involved with, and benefit from, our active Chapter program. We also saw this as an opportunity for our members to "pay forward" their expertise to future evaluators and program

managers. In return, we felt our members would learn much from the students (which we have).

Over the past four years of sponsoring and coaching, we have achieved both of these goals and learned much in the process. The following are our reflections on the Competition process and the returns we have gained from this investment of the Chapter.

HOW WE ATTRACT STUDENTS

The Competition essentially sells itself. Each September, we distribute a call for participants through a short, upbeat article sent to various university media, selected department heads and professors, and the listserv of the graduate students' union. We point out that this is an opportunity to practice team and technical skills for the world of work in a safe, high energy, yet fun environment. Personal contacts with professors with an interest in this concept are also important to getting the message out.

Over the years, the students themselves have become important ambassadors in encouraging their peers to get involved. For instance, we already have a team of new students interested for 2003 — all recruited through word of mouth by this year's team.

HOW THE TEAM PREPARES

We aim to develop both team and technical skills.

Team Skills

We have found that the students need a road map for working together if they are to make it through the preparation and the actual five-hour Competition as an intact team. We achieve this through a team-building session early in the process, facilitated by a Chapter member with this expertise. The students learn each other's strengths, areas in which they want support from other team members, and the norms that will guide how they treat each other and expect to be treated. These norms have been used by teams as a touchstone to keep communications and team dynamics on track. Those who have used the team norms more faithfully have found them particularly helpful when the going gets tough — which it usually does as the clock ticks on.

Technical Skills

Each year, we provide a mini CES Essential Skills Series (ESS) for the team, facilitated by a Chapter member. This helps provide a common understanding of evaluation language and process, important when members are from different disciplines and with limited previous exposure to program evaluation. The program is held over two sessions and focuses on the key elements of the ESS material.

Team members are invited to any workshops or other events offered by the Chapter. Students soak up any such opportunities to enhance their skills for evaluation work. These events also give the students opportunities to network and profile the Competition.

Team preparation typically includes a few group sessions in the fall focused on skill development, and dry runs of cases starting in January. Some years, the team chooses to start with mini cases based on selected aspects of program evaluation (developing questions, analyzing data, preparing logic models). We have developed these mini cases locally, drawing from documents related to actual evaluations completed by or for Chapter members. The results have been judged by coaches and volunteer members of the Chapter.

In the end, the cases used in previous years for the national Competition have proved to be the most useful dry run materials. Most teams completed at least two dry runs using these cases before the first round.

The feedback aspect of the dry runs is critical. Team member skills in debriefing and self-examination are important, as are the tone and substance of the feedback from coaches and judges. We have worked on both to ensure that this phase of the process is carried out in a critical yet supportive way.

THE VALUE ADDED FOR STUDENTS

Students say they gain skills, confidence, and contacts from the Competition.

Skills: The Competition complements the students' academic program by providing an opportunity to apply the research design and analytical skills they have learned to a real-world evaluation. From the outset, the team functions as a private consulting firm, think-

ing and communicating with the client's needs in mind. They learn to focus on the task, and to pay attention to the process to make sure it is supportive of the team. They also learn about time management — usually through running out of time in an early dry run, and then refining their game plan.

Confidence: Being able to cite this experience in job interviews has proven useful in demonstrating their ability to work under pressure in a team setting, often areas of interest for recruiters. The goal of coming home with the crystal trophy is a motivator from day one. However, the real winning happens when the team completes their first-round case submission, and feels good about the product they produced and how they worked together to get there.

Contacts: The Competition provides an opportunity to network with evaluation professionals and managers who use evaluations, both in the preparation process and at the national conference for those making the final round. This networking is invaluable in terms of employment prospects and sharing ideas. As a result of the contacts made in the process, some team members have been hired as part-time research assistants by Chapter members in the private sector during the busy January to March consulting period. Some have become active members of CES, and helped with coaching later Case Competitions. All in all, the Competition helps students make a smooth transition to the work world.

THE VALUE ADDED FOR THE CHAPTER

The return on investment for our Chapter has been tremendous.

Opportunity for involvement: Members have been involved throughout, either as coaches or in one-off sessions as judges. Essentially, it allows for broad participation by members, suited to their availability and interest level. It has also helped us sharpen our skills in coaching and evaluation — although we haven't yet ventured to tackle an actual case ourselves!

It is a true "give to feel good" project: There is great satisfaction in seeing students feel good about what they have accomplished with the help of Chapter members.

Advocacy: The initiative helps promote awareness of evaluation, the Society, and the local Chapter with leaders in the university, among

government and private sector sponsors who assist with costs of travel for the team to the final round, and with students. The Competition has proven to be a practical way to advocate and demystify program evaluation to a broad audience of potential users.

Students also raise the profile of their institution by participating. In 2002, the team was able to inform Government of Canada recruiters at the annual national conference about the applied social psychology program at Memorial University and how it fits with government evaluation objectives. As a result, Memorial will likely be added to their recruitment itinerary.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The national Case Competition has come a long way in a short while. The enhancements to the web site in 2002 were invaluable in providing comprehensive information and assistance in a user-friendly way. And every year, the organizers have done superb professional work in all aspects of the Competition. Their commitment, creativity, and attention to details are obvious and essential to making this a positive learning experience for students and CES members.

As for the future, we suggest that the Competition might evolve to using video conferencing technology for the initial round. This would enable both rounds to be an interactive presentation to judges, allowing for assessment of the teams' approach to analysis, teamwork, and communicating as consultants with the client. It might also heighten interest at more universities and colleges.

We encourage other Chapters to take this on as an initiative. We are confident they will gain as much as we have through this partnership with students.