

CES-ONTARIO COMMUNIQUÉ, OCTOBER 2003  
FEATURE ARTICLE

**New Perspective on Evaluating Aboriginal Community Programs**



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As an Evaluator working in the Aboriginal community, I have grown from what I would term a more rigid approach to evaluation to a more open-minded egalitarian approach. My roots or training in evaluation are founded in the Logic Model. While this tool does not fully encompass how to go about actually doing an evaluation, it is often thought to be the means for evaluation. As I grew both in my confidence in conducting and understanding evaluation, I began to realize that the Logic Model is more of a skeleton on how evaluation could be conducted and exactly how to carry-out the steps is grey. Through discussions with other evaluators at annual evaluation conferences I was able to broaden my outlook and began to re-think my approach to evaluation.

As a sociologist and Anishnawbekwe I have always held strong ethics about the utility and effectiveness of evaluation for the advancement of Aboriginal people, not just the findings but also the processes. As an Evaluator I take it upon myself to be responsible for ensuring that Evaluation is best understood by all levels involved in the evaluation process.

The ultimate question is: How do you meaningfully involve the various evaluation stakeholders in the evaluation process and ensure that they can walk away with some sort of benefit from being involved in the experience? For the *Ka:nen – Our Children, Our Future 2003 Evaluation* Johnston Research Inc. developed and implemented a methodology which attempts to address the Reach issue.

Due to the scope of the program being evaluated we chose a case study approach. Ka-nen administers multiple sites and funding streams with 48 Community Action Programs for Children (CAPC) and 28 Canadian Pre-natal and Nutrition Programs (CPNP) for off-reserve Aboriginals in Ontario. Fifteen sites were included in the eight community case studies of both CAPC and CPNP funding streams. First, Johnston Research Inc. sent out correspondence explaining the evaluation methodology to all projects and then set-up community consultations in the eight communities. This involved providing tobacco when appropriate and an honorarium to Elders in exchange for speaking on behalf of the evaluation at the community feasts we sponsored. Program community network contacts, program participants, and all levels of program personnel were invited to attend the noon-hour feasts.

Step two was to conduct a community consultation session where we were able to gather indicators for the evaluation. Community Advisors included the program staff, program management, community network contacts, and participants. In turn the indicators were used to develop the data collection tools. The tools were diversified for ease of triangulation and stakeholder reach – current and previous participant interviews, staff outcomes focus groups,

project process surveys, program environmental checklists, and community contact interviews. Finally, the evaluation is designed to provide a confidential individualized report to each project which illustrates their process survey answers against those of other categorized projects (e.g., level of programming/site development).

The significance of this process is that the community is made aware of the evaluation and the results are going to be meaningful to the stakeholders because they are driven and designed from the ground-up. This makes for more meaningful decision making on the management and funders part because the information gathered is valued in terms that are important in the real world. An important preliminary finding was that the CAPC and CPNP sites held important many of the goals and objectives of their respective funding streams. This demonstrates that the two-worlds are not that dissimilar and that funders can trust sites and communities to determine what indicators are important in the evaluation.

**CES-ONTARIO NEWSLETTER, OCTOBER 2003  
PROFILE OF A MEMBER**

**A Chat with Dr. Rhonda Cockerill from the University of Toronto**

*by Dina Franchi, Columnist  
College of Nurses of Ontario*

**Can you tell me how you first became involved in evaluation?**

In 1985 I moved to Toronto taking a position in the Health Care Research Unit. My main focus there was to help groups conduct community-based evaluations. My graduate training in Social Demography from Edinburgh University gave me a good foundation for this type of work.



**What has been your involvement with CES?**

I was a member of *CES Ontario* since it was first formed in 1986. Since then I've had the opportunity to watch it grow and change over the years. I remember attending the very first meeting at McLean House on Sunnybrook Estates and at the time there were only about 30 members. Joining *CES* created opportunities to become actively involved. I was the Ontario representative for CES National as the Secretary Treasurer. I was also involved in professional development activities first as the Program Chair for two international conferences then working with a number of individuals to develop the Essential Skills Series. I continue to teach sessions sporadically. Through my work on *CES* I learned about the American Evaluation Association and now sit on their planning committee.

**What is your role at the University of Toronto?**

I am a professor at the Department of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation and I teach planning and evaluation to students in professional programs. I also do research. Right now I'm doing an evaluation of the networks required for caregivers to get resources for dementia care. This project is funded by a shared CIHR-CHSRF grant and is the kind of evaluation that needs community partners to sustain it. It really fits nicely within an applied department because of its impact in the community.

**What are the most important skills an evaluator needs in order to be successful?**

I'm not convinced there is a specific group of skills. I can say that the most important thing is to make the time to never stop learning. And with this, I think that evaluators need to be committed to maintaining their expertise. Staying current by reading, going to conferences and interacting with evaluators is very important. This is why *CES'* role is critical. They must encourage members to continually update their skills and provide the necessary forums for them to keep up-to-date.

### **How have you seen the field evolve over that last several years?**

I've noticed there is a much greater emphasis on managers assuming responsibility for evaluation. This is a good thing, however, the reality is that many managers don't have the skills or the time to conduct evaluations and so it becomes a real struggle. I am also noticing an increasing trend to partner with stakeholders in funded research. Stakeholders are more involved in academic research than in the past.

### **What opportunities exist for the future in evaluation?**

Evaluation needs to move toward a climate of priority – where it's not a task or an add-on but rather something that feeds decisions and improves programs on an ongoing basis. I also believe there is a lot of untapped potential for use of the Internet. There is a whole world out there that has the same services we have. We should be able to use the Internet to gain an international perspective on what's working and not working around the world and learn from this.

### **What can CES do to support these opportunities?**

In continuing to offer workshops, *CES* can explore more innovative ways to deliver the information, for example, Internet-based self-study courses. The networking opportunities *CES* offers are also excellent and can be expanded to include Internet-based discussion forums – perhaps a Canadian version of *EvalTalk*. There is valuable information for evaluators out there—we just need to figure out a way to share it!