ONGOING PROGRAM EVALUATION: CONSIDERATIONS AND APPROACHES

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PART ONE: THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Whether because of the Commission d'évaluation de l'enseignement collégial's new operating procedures or the budget cuts that have affected Quebec's education system for some time now, several stakeholders from the college community are questioning the program-management process, especially as regards effectiveness and optimization. In other words, they want to know how to do more with less.

One of the main issues involved is the in-depth program-evaluation cycle, which often takes several years. Although most educational institutions have established procedures either for updating programs or for providing post-implementation follow-up aimed at making any necessary adjustments, it would seem both possible and necessary to review the length of this cycle and react on a more regular basis. In a social and technological context in which everything is changing rapidly, institutions of higher education should have the means to formally review their programs and adapt more quickly to prevailing circumstances. Accordingly, ongoing program evaluation, an approach that is gaining popularity in the college network, might be a worthwhile option, as, given the much shorter cycles involved, the evaluation process would be considerably more streamlined, and programs of study could be improved more frequently. While, to date, not all colleges have adopted this type of evaluation, many are considering the relevance of modifying their practices and wondering if this type of approach is advisable. This was the case with Collège Montmorency, which asked me to suggest avenues for further reflection and provide support for its final decision.

In October 2014, in an effort to study the approaches adopted by the college network to evaluate programs, identify related models, and determine the advantages and problems involved in ongoing evaluation, we organized a one-day intercollegiate meeting at Collège Montmorency. Participants included several educational advisors who were accustomed to participating in this type of evaluation. In the hope that these individuals could discuss their experience and interest other colleagues, we also invited other educational advisors, by using the local PERFORMA representatives network to join people. More than 20 colleges were represented, seven of which sent speakers to discuss their experience and operations. Both the number and the quality of the discussions exceeded our expectations, and were much appreciated by those present. This article was written so the ideas explored at the meeting might inspire others who were unable to attend.

Before going into the outcome of these deliberations, we will first put the issue into context and identify some of the principles that should, according to certain Quebec authors, govern any evaluation process. We used these theoretical foundations in presenting the information contained in part two of this article—which, we hope, will help each college determine which evaluation process best meets its needs.

In the second instalment, which will appear in the Summer 2015 issue of *Pédagogie collégiale*, we will provide a summary of the remarks exchanged at the meeting in October. That summary is not intended to consist of an exhaustive depiction of the current situation, but rather a report of our personal observations. In any event, it would be impossible to summarize all the discussions held, as they were extremely numerous and varied. Certain trends did emerge over the course of the day, however, and several common issues deserve to be explored by the college network as a whole.

THE EVALUATION PROCESS

The need to evaluate collegial programs is the result of a requirement that the Commission d'évaluation de l'enseignement collégial (CEEC), an organization established in 1993, has imposed on the entire college network.[1] When the CEEC began to examine the issue, the colleges had neither models nor an evaluation framework with which to work; accordingly, various social-science research methods were implemented and adapted to the imperatives of evaluation. In other words, models designed specifically for the evaluation process were developed only over time (Hurteau, Houle, and Guillemette 2012). While a program-evaluation culture has now been established in most colleges, a "scientific-research" mindset still remains, which may give rise to cumbersome procedures that are not always advantageous for all stakeholders.

As generally accepted in the field, the definition of evaluation is as follows:

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[1] Before the CEEC was created, the Conseil des collèges had already begun to deliberate on program evaluation. The basic framework used by the Conseil (*L'évaluation de programmes de formation au collégial*) can be found at [cse.gouv.qc.ca/fichiers/documents/publications/ConseilCollege/2220-0008.pdf]. This 1991 document also shows where the existing CEEC criteria originated (in French only).

> "...a process of enquiry during which evidence-based data are gathered and summarized in order to establish conclusions on the situation at hand—i.e., the scope, merit, value, and significance of the quality of a given program. Such conclusions involve perspectives that are both empirical (demonstrating that the situation is real) and prescriptive (passing judgment on the value of an object) in nature. Making judgments constitutes the key factor that distinguishes this activity from other types of enquiry, such as basic scientific research" (Fournier 2005, quoted by Hurteau, Houle, and Guillemette 2012).

Despite the fact that the research and evaluation share the values of rigour and systemization, the goal of evaluation is not to produce scientific data, but rather to provide useful information on program functioning, so as to reduce uncertainty and allow stakeholders to make decisions (Ridde and Dagenais 2012). Unfortunately, as stated by Levin-Rosalis:

> "...the efforts made by evaluators to apply research criteria to evaluation [wrongly] obliges them to abandon the distinctive features of evaluation—and, as a result, the unique nature and quality of evaluation are compromised" (in Ridde and Dagenais 2012).

We feel it is extremely important to take this situation into consideration and remind ourselves of the ultimate goal of program evaluation—i.e., to assess the quality of programs of study and make any necessary improvements, so as to offer up-to-date courses that promote student success and meet the needs of society.

Given these facts, it would perhaps be more accurate to talk about the "program-improvement process" (a simple suggestion that may be worth pondering).

▌ EVALUATION OF COLLEGE PROGRAMS OF STUDY

Now that these main principles have been established, more detailed questions about college-program evaluation must be asked. Why is evaluation necessary, exactly? For whom are evaluations carried out? In accordance with what criteria? Who does what during the process? What should be done with the results? And, more particularly, how are programs to be evaluated?

In the following paragraphs, we will suggest a few answers.

WHY IS EVALUATION NECESSARY?

In response to this question, Blain and Chouinard[2] (2014) identified four objectives common to any evaluation process. Accordingly, colleges should be evaluating their programs with a view to:

- examining the situation so as to understand it (for example, by establishing the anticipated and unexpected effects of measures that have been taken or changes that have been made);

- determining what is working and what is not (to maintain or propagate best practices, correct those that should be improved, or eliminate obstacles);

- conducting further reflections on college programs, disciplines, and departments; and

- fulfilling internal or external requirements like those of the CEEC.

By extension, the efforts made to reach these goals will help promote program curriculum development, improve teaching practices, bolster student success, and also allocate resources needed to carry out projects. It is understood that the importance of these objectives may vary depending on the circumstances and needs in question. The reasons for evaluation will determine the specific objectives, evaluation activities and mechanisms to be used. This is why it is important to ask *Why is evaluation necessary?* from the very outset.

The literature on the subject also emphasizes the fact that any evaluation process must involve the collaboration of all individuals concerned, right from the time the evaluation activities are implemented. In this way, guidelines can be set out for the program in question, and these people can be made aware of the process and the nature of the decisions that will have to be made. This will add credibility to all the information gathered in the eyes of stakeholders, thereby enhancing its importance and facilitating informed decision making (Hurteau, Houle, and Guillemette 2012).

WHAT SHOULD BE EVALUATED?

Credible information is accompanied by judgments—the leitmotif of any evaluation process—that should be based

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[2] At the "Journée Repcar" meeting of the *Carrefour de la réussite* in September 2014, which bore on the evaluation of measures designed to help students succeed, Marie Blain (CÉGEP Marie-Victorin) and Line Chouinard (Conseil régional de prévention de l'abandon scolaire, Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean) described the tools developed to evaluate such measures. As their work dealt with topics that had already proven useful to the entire college network, we felt it relevant, in order to provide some answers to the questions posed previously, to apply part of their findings to the program-evaluation process.

on numerous and varied data. While we might think that the more information on a given subject, the better, this would mean overlooking the fact that an overabundance of unsuitable data is almost as detrimental as a complete lack of information, as emphasized by Perret (in Ridde and Dagenais 2012). Useless data may cause us to focus on an aspect that is less important, or even totally without significance. Under such circumstances, it becomes costly to process information simply because it is available. Perret also states:

> "...that, to be useful, evaluative information must be structured and formatted to reflect specific requirements. The list of questions to be explored must be established in keeping with stakeholders' expectations; similarly, those expectations must be taken into account when evaluation reports are written, with findings, conclusions, and recommendations placed in order of priority. Reports should call attention to the most important data. The human brain spends most of its energy on answering its own questions. Readers of such documents, like all thinking beings, use the information at their disposal selectively, in keeping with their personal needs and interests, meaning evaluations will be worthwhile if they speak users' language and reflect their concerns" (Perret, in Ridde and Dagenais 2012).

WHICH CRITERIA SHOULD BE USED?

Most colleges organize their program evaluations on the basis of the six CEEC criteria (2014). While the latter are familiar to many, we felt it pertinent to discuss the essentials here. Many of them can easily be used for ongoing-evaluation purposes (as we will see in part two of this article).

RELEVANCE

- Programs that reflect the expectations and needs of the labour market, university community, students, and society in general.

COHERENCE

- A clear description of program objectives in relation to the skills to be developed (program specifications).
- Relevance of learning activities and logical organization of their structure in relation to objectives (course list).
- Realistic, clearly defined requirements for each learning activity (framework plan and syllabus).

VALUE OF TEACHING METHODS AND STUDENT SUPERVISION

- Teaching methods appropriate to program objectives, learning activities, and student characteristics.
- Measures designed to detect learning disabilities and provide guidance, support, and follow-up to enhance student success.

APPROPRIATE HUMAN, MATERIAL, AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

- Skills of teachers and technicians reflective of program specifics and learning activities, allowing students to reach all their goals.
- Quantity, quality, and accessibility of classrooms, equipment, and other material and financial resources appropriate to the specific nature of each program.

EFFECTIVENESS

- Relevant methods and tools to assess learning, thereby establishing whether students have met specific requirements and achieved specific goals.
- Effective learning and assessment activities, as measured by course-completion rate.

PROGRAM-MANAGEMENT QUALITY

- Management methods and structures, as well as communication methods, promoting proper functioning of program and the program approach.
- Clear, efficient procedures to allow for ongoing regular evaluation of program strengths and weaknesses, as well as of the associated learning activities, based on reliable qualitative and quantitative data.

Several colleges establish their evaluation objectives and data-collection tools using the above criteria, attempting, insofar as possible, to incorporate them all; others organize their evaluations in accordance with the issues and problems raised by stakeholders during the pre-evaluation period, and then relate these factors to the CEEC criteria afterwards. In our view, this latter method is preferable, as the process is likely more relevant and significant to the parties involved. (At some point in the future, it would also be worthwhile to explore the Commission's criteria, which were the object of a rigorous selection process, being chosen from among several examined over time. After that period of deliberation, the existing criteria were consolidated into the reference framework the CEEC now proposes). While it is important to be accountable and demonstrate that college programs are of

high quality, stakeholders' main priority should be providing students with the best possible education and making every effort to ensure they succeed. Considering the evaluation process from the standpoint of the issues and needs of the moment, rather than basing it on blind adherence to the CEEC criteria, seems a good way to convince stakeholders of the need for program evaluation.

Moreover, because of its new approach (quality assurance), the CEEC no longer requires colleges to directly submit the results of their self-evaluations, instead advocating the implementation of program quality-assurance mechanisms and the establishment of an institutional information system that enables each college to gather the decision-making data needed for proper program-quality management.

Strictly speaking, therefore, the Commission no longer expects colleges to report to it by submitting self-evaluations; rather, it requires that they ensure that locally implemented mechanisms designed to critically examine programs are working properly. The CEEC now encourages colleges to identify the strengths and weaknesses of these mechanisms, perform a self-evaluation and issue a report, and, more particularly, make any necessary improvements, so that program quality is constantly enhanced. This distinction should influence the way college programs are evaluated—at least, in the future.

FOR WHOM ARE EVALUATION RESULTS INTENDED?

If the results of program evaluation are no longer to be sent directly to the CEEC, who, then, are the intended recipients? As we see it, the first group that should be interested in such results is the program committee. Depending on the institution concerned, the latter may consist of teachers of specialized-education courses, others from contributing disciplines as well as cross-curricular courses, an educational advisor, the counselor, and the program's associate academic dean. In some colleges, this committee also includes students, who act as representatives for their program. In our view, this is extremely advantageous, as such representation involves students in activities (evaluation, for one), aimed at ensuring the program functions properly. In the final analysis, they are the main beneficiaries of a quality education. As they have a stake in their program's evaluation process, it would seem logical that they be included in these procedures.

WHO DOES WHAT DURING THE PROCESS?

The assignment of roles and the division of duties are very important to the mechanics of evaluation, as the latter is the focus of a policy or procedure common to all programs.

Although the colleges (and, more specifically, the academic deans) are primarily responsible for examining their programs of study, a large part of the work, as we see it, falls to the program committee. Although each institution varies, the committee generally is in charge of establishing educational quality; vouching that learning has been properly integrated into each program; participating in program development, implementation, and evaluation; seeking the opinion of representatives of the various disciplines concerned; and making recommendations to improve program quality (CPNC 2011).

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE WITH EVALUATION RESULTS?

Once the data have been collected and analyzed, the program committee can suggest solutions and prioritize implementation. These recommendations might involve a number of dimensions, such as the review of course lists, updating of framework plans, purchase of equipment and software, refurbishment of premises, collective professional development for teachers and technicians, and modification of teaching and learning activities. Key to ensuring the relevance and the success of the changes made is, obviously, the joint action of all stakeholders concerned, as well as the establishment of a consensus—two conditions requiring that discussions be held to ensure informed decision making in the light of evaluation results. Several decisions will oblige teachers to take the initiative, to be responsible for the changes made; others will necessitate formal monitoring. The latter actually constitutes the second key to the success and relevance of the self-evaluation process: the establishment of suitable, efficient follow-up procedures and mechanisms.

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The forms that such mechanisms can take and the composition of the program-committee are not absolute; they can vary from one college to the next, and even from one program to another. As long as the changes made have positive effects and students can expect to get the best education possible and count on quality programs, the main objective of the evaluation process will have been met.

HOW SHOULD EVALUATIONS BE CONDUCTED?

While the mechanisms involved may differ from college to college, the process remains essentially the same, regardless of the context and diversity of programs and institutions. According to Ridde and Dagenais (2012), the evaluation

process can be divided into three stages: the pre-evaluation phase, the evaluation phase, and the results-implementation phase. The first stage is the most complex, as it is here that decisions on the issues and questions involved in evaluation, related model and criteria, data required to meet the criteria, data-collection tools to be used, individuals to be contacted in this regard and their location, time at which data-collection tools will be used, parties who will be doing so, data-analysis methods to be implemented, involvement of stakeholders, and possible conflicts are all made. It should be stressed that a poorly planned evaluation can result in the collection of useless or invalid data.

Blain and Chouinard (2014) have proposed a process divided into even more steps. Inspired by their work, we have adapted it to suit any program-evaluation process; the latter is comprised basically of a synthesis of the aspects discussed previously. Below are the steps in question:

- Review or identify the evaluation objectives.
- Target the issues or problems to be explored.
- Develop an evaluation plan[3] (including the roles of all individuals involved).
- Collect data (making sure not to ignore unexpected information).
- Analyze data.
- Evaluate and come to a decision (the heart of the process).
- Develop an action plan.
- Ensure the action plan is monitored (a crucial step that gives the approach its entire meaning).

While the theoretical and critical considerations explored in this article apply to all forms of program evaluation, the matter of *evaluation frequency* must also be taken into account when determining how evaluations are to be carried out. It is here that one of the more dramatic shifts has taken place: the conduct of ongoing program evaluations. ◗

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What approaches are used in colleges now conducting on-going program evaluations? What advantages are gained by carrying out evaluations more frequently? What are the associated pitfalls to be avoided?

These are a few of the questions we will attempt to answer in part two of this exposé, entitled "Ongoing Program Evaluation", which will be published in the Summer 2015 issue of *Pédagogie collégiale*.

3 Ridde and Dagenais advise using the term "plan" rather than "design", which is used in the field of scientific research (2012).