ONGOING PROGRAM EVALUATION: CONSIDERATIONS AND APPROACHES

PART TWO: ONGOING EVALUATION IN THE COLLEGES

STÉPHANIE CARLE
Educational advisor
Collège Montmorency

An in-depth evaluation cycle that takes place over seven, eight, or even ten years cannot always facilitate program improvement or be conducive to the changes required, especially given that needs often make themselves felt over a much shorter time span. Determined to maintain or enhance the quality of the education they offer on a more frequent basis, some colleges have already modified their self-evaluation practices in order to better "take the pulse" of their programs more regularly and, if necessary, remedy a situation more quickly.

In part one of this article (published in the previous issue of *Pédagogie collégiale* under the title "The Evaluation Process" [Vol. 28, No. 3], we placed the question of program evaluation in context and discussed some of the principles that, in the view of certain Quebec authors, should govern any evaluation process. These theoretical perspectives determined the way in which we have presented the information in part two, which consists of a summary of the remarks exchanged at an intercollegiate meeting held at Collège Montmorency in October 2014.[1] As mentioned in the last issue, that summary is not inclusive of all present situations, but rather a report of our 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 (Carle 2015).

▶ EVALUATION METHODS THAT VARY CONSIDERABLY FROM COLLEGE TO COLLEGE[2]

Almost all colleges collect annual statistics on the admission, success, graduation, and job-placement rates associated with their programs; some enhance those findings by adding perceptual information from students,[3] whether annually, biennially, or solely during program development. This helps them monitor matters closely and rapidly make any necessary corrections; it also provides an accurate overview of the situation, which they can then be used to better orient in-depth evaluations, so as to target the latter more effectively. This type of evaluation can be categorized as *hybrid*.

A few colleges, have completely transformed their procedures, and now conduct ongoing evaluations only, a process during which data accumulate from year to year, in keeping with various criteria. Two methods stand out. The first involves an annual evaluation of one of the six criteria established by the Commission d'évaluation de l'enseignement collégial (CEEC), and, in the seventh year, the emission of a comprehensive evaluation report. The second allows for a more modest evaluation, conducted yearly or bi-yearly, of all CEEC criteria (or at least most of them, depending on program requirements). This option, which makes it possible to approach ongoing evaluation by tackling a particular program issue or problem and then establishing connections between the resulting analysis and the CEEC criteria, emphasizes program needs and uses the aforementioned criteria as tools (rather than as a protocol), thereby promoting a much less bureaucratic vision of the evaluation process.

Of those colleges that have modified their practices, whether in whole or in part, several have been urged to do so by the Canadian Medical Association, which requires accredited healthcare programs to be evaluated on an ongoing basis. Once having developed the tools to meet this requirement, many of these institutions took the opportunity to implement the ongoing evaluation process in other programs.

---

[1] "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, 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" (Carle 2015).

[2] We would like to thank the following individuals for sharing their personal experience with ongoing evaluation at the meeting: Catherine Paquin-Boivin and Angela Mastracci (Collège Marie-Victorin), Robert Nicol (CÉGEP Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu), Jean-François Dumouchel (Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf), Nadyne Bédard (Collège de Maisonneuve), Guy Corriveau (Collège Shawinigan), Lee Anne Johnston (Cégep Heritage College), and Monica Lopez (Marianopolis College).

[3] Developed several years ago at the Collège Marie-Victorin by Hélène Allaire and François Lasnier, the questionnaire is used in a number of colleges to gather these types of data.
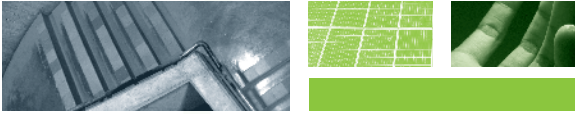
Program data gathered on an ongoing basis also affect cross-curricular courses, and are compiled regularly and submitted to department coordinators for the disciplines concerned (the departments themselves usually being represented on the general-education committee).

APPROACHES

The concept of *ongoing program evaluation* would therefore seem fairly broad, embodying various approaches that have been implemented to differing degrees. The frequency with which it is conducted can vary from college to college, from program to program, and even from one criterion to another. At this point, 'ongoing evaluation' appears to be locally defined and implemented, and its scope and processes at one college could be quite different from those at another. Because the approaches used are numerous and designed to meet the needs of each college, identifying them all or clearly setting out their principles is a complex endeavour. Nevertheless, they do seem to have a few points in common. We have attempted to classify them into three main groups (see Table 1) and compared them to in-depth evaluation, which is conducted in seven-to-ten year cycles. These are approaches that have already been, or eventually could be, adopted by the colleges. Combining them in accordance with the particular needs or characteristics of a given institution or program would also be possible.

AVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF EVALUATION METHODS

In-depth evaluation that is conducted over a cycle of seven-to-ten years produces an extremely complete and detailed program profile. While it helps to free up one or more teachers to take part in the process over a clearly defined interval, the work may become intense for the team responsible, especially if no support is provided, as there is large quantity of data to be collected and processed. Drafting the self-evaluation report is also laborious, and, once it is published, often few people will take time to read it in its entirety, given the length of the document. Furthermore, although updates may be made between two evaluation cycles, the main improvements needed may not be made for a considerable length of time.

Ongoing evaluation, on the other hand (regardless of the form it takes), simplifies matters by breaking up the data-collection process into smaller units introducing a process of constant "scanning" to identify potential "warning signs". This enables the causes of a problem to be quickly pinpointed, and action taken. This system also provides a continuous overview of all programs concerned, and makes it possible to review the background of each. The use of ongoing evaluation can also reduce the bureaucratic appearance of the process, and, thanks to the speed at which improvements are made, enhance its perceived usefulness. Regular data collection can also make it possible to eliminate the final report; in some cases, the latter will no longer be necessary, as monitoring is carried out throughout the ongoing-evaluation process. Moreover, this type of evaluation also helps establish momentum for making changes to programs, keeping them consistent and mobilizing teams around a given project by promoting joint action. The approach also makes for extremely independent program committees (the degree of such independence being negotiated differently from one college to the next).

> *...by means of constant "scanning" to identify potential "warning signs", the causes of a problem can be quickly pinpointed and action, taken.*

Although it might appear that the Commission's criteria gave rise to ongoing evaluation, this is not exactly the case. The quality-assurance system involved promotes simplified procedures, making ongoing evaluation just one of several mechanisms that can be used. The CEEC has never required the colleges to use this type of self-evaluation; rather, it has simply instructed them to ensure program quality. Regardless of the method selected, what matters is that evaluation policies are followed.

Modifying evaluation policies requires time and resources to develop tools, make the necessary cultural changes, and implement a new philosophy. If the process is not streamlined as much as possible, there is a considerable risk that a certain amount of bureaucracy will creep in, especially from the viewpoint of teachers and educational advisors. One of the strongest fears about ongoing evaluation remains—for good reason—that everyone involved will end up overloaded. While this type of self-evaluation can be easily carried out in small colleges that offer only a few programs, for those that offer 20 to 30, changing ingrained habits can have much more significant consequences on program management. The adjustments envisaged should be extremely well thought-out and planned, and implemented only gradually. Colleges, large and small, should focus particular attention on designing and managing questionnaires, so as not to burden students

with long surveys every year or asking for their opinions too often. This is especially important as, in a given institution, several departments could unknowingly inundate students with surveys.

Ongoing evaluation also encourages teachers to get involved more frequently, however, the repetitive tasks risk becoming less interesting for stakeholders, especially if the teams in charge are small and the same individuals always do the work. On the other hand, the recurring procedures involved may make scheduling the process more complicated. Furthermore, if the process does not provide an in-depth interpretation of certain program aspects, there is a higher risk of making *ad hoc* improvements rather than solving a problem once and for all.

▶ AVOIDING POTENTIAL PITFALLS

At the intercollegiate meeting mentioned at the beginning of this article, several considerations and recommendations were mentioned concerning the need for a change of culture and more frequent action. With a view to avoiding the pitfalls and minimizing the risks that may be involved in such a process, participants[4] suggested the following measures. Some of them have already been carried out in the college system and others which are idealistic. These comments, which will be of particular interest to those responsible for organizing and implementing the self-evaluation process, include some that apply to all forms of evaluation. In an ongoing-evaluation context, however, these aspects deserve special attention.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Potential risks

- *Teachers may feel threatened by an attempt to "control" them.*
- *The line between faculty performance appraisals and program evaluation may be a fine one.*
- *The term "ongoing evaluation" could be poorly perceived or confused with "in-depth evaluation".*

Possible solutions

- **Emphasize the fact that ongoing program evaluation is a choice left up to the colleges that the starting point of any evaluation reflects the needs of each program, and that evaluation will never be used to eliminate a program.**
- **Merge the Institutional Policy for the Evaluation of Programs (IPEP) and program-management guide into a single document (e.g., an institutional program-management policy), in order to standardize practices.**

- **Modify the vocabulary used in order to distinguish it from that employed by the CEEC.**
- **Consider that the perception of evaluation may not be the same for everyone; some concepts may need to be defined beforehand (evaluation, issue, etc.).**
- **Provide for discussions, reflect on the emotional issues at stake, and expect to see some healthy anxiety when identifying the priorities, issues, and criteria to be considered in planning an evaluation.**

WORKLOAD

Potential risks

- *Program committees and teams of educational advisors may be overworked.*

Possible solutions

- **Use existing methods and resources (data already gathered, tools, etc.), and acknowledge that new mechanisms will have to be developed, which will require time; plan accordingly.**
- **Consider creating an analyst or technician position for processing the data collected during evaluations.**
- **Properly plan the duties of each party involved, and make sure certain teachers have release time.**
- **Establish two teams of teachers responsible for evaluating a given program, with each assuming the related duties for one year (out of two), the first year being dedicated to evaluation and the second, to ensuring follow-up. This will ensure continuity.**
- **Conduct evaluations once every two years.**

DATA COLLECTION AND PROCESSING

Potential risks

- *Student participation rates can fluctuate considerably, which could affect data validity.*
- *A lack of variation in responses from one year to another could indicate poor questionnaire design and cursory questions.*

Possible solutions

- **For each program, involve a certain number of students in planning the evaluation process.**
- **Impress on stakeholders the significance of completing the questionnaires, and show them how useful these tools can be.**

---

[4] These suggestions were made during an activity involving all participants at the intercollegiate meeting, both those who discussed their personal experience with ongoing evaluation and those who were there to listen.

- Reassure students and faculty about process, confidentiality and validity, and ensure they know there will be no reprisals if their comments are negative.
- Work with a measurement expert to develop a bank of relevant, well-worded questions that program committees can use to design questionnaires that reflect their own needs.
- Ask different questions every year, or only survey graduates annually.
- Propose three types of questions—mandatory, important but optional, and optional—in order to give respondents some latitude. In addition, leave room for written comments.
- Set aside class time to allow students to complete the questionnaire, and even build a mobile computer lab to facilitate questionnaire distribution and reduce the time needed to organize and manage the process.[5]
- Use social media as continuous sources of information.
- Provide students who have completed questionnaires with follow-up by discussing the evaluation results, ensuing recommendations, and action plans in class.

Potential risks

- *The self-evaluation report might not be read by many, or not considered important.*

Possible solutions

- Examine what is not working, or at least not working properly, in a given program, but also remember to review its strengths so as to continue building on them, enhance certain program aspects, and transfer others. Ensure the report mentions which factors should be retained or incorporated into other contexts.
- Present the information in summary form, using colour codes to facilitate visual identification.
- Restrict the number of recommendations in order to prioritize those that are most important and urgent, so as to facilitate follow-up.
- Submit the work of program committees annually to the academic council, so as to keep the latter informed of all efforts made to maintain program quality.
- Assess the evaluation process and make required adjustments.

▶ CHANGE OF CULTURE

Is it preferable to use a seven-to-ten year evaluation cycle, or adapt an approach with a shorter timeline? A number of colleges have asked this question in attempting to organize their evaluation process to make it more effective and more

relevant. As can be seen, the various aspects to be considered are numerous. However, three factors seem paramount if a change of culture is to be successfully brought about.

First, the academic community must endorse the design of the process to be implemented; this may be bolstered by forthright, transparent communication, the constant search for a consensus, and the maintenance of a feeling of mutual trust among stakeholders. Second, whether applied to objectives, issues, tools, data, or recommendations, the streamlining and flexibility of the self-evaluation process and sub-processes concerned would also seem to constitute a gauge of success. Third, it is essential that follow-up for each self-evaluation report be ensured. As these documents are issued more frequently in an ongoing-evaluation context, the action taken to implement the recommendations they contain will occur at a more rapid pace. If, after a certain length of time, stakeholders feel that shorter evaluation cycles are not productive and fail to lead to the desired changes, they may justifiably quickly lose motivation and even hamper the change of culture desired.

Furthermore, for any institution, the number of programs offered has a major effect on the choice of the approach and mechanisms to be implemented. Similarly, the number of instructors associated with each department, as well as their openness to change, will affect the adoption of any new method. Different approaches could be selected for each program, which would ensure that they are consistent with each department's particular circumstances.

A new evaluation system could be implemented gradually, which would enable the teams involved to explore and experiment in order to determine which mechanisms should be established. Large-scale, college-wide implementation, however, would have the advantage of creating a would create economies of scale, as the administration, educational advisors, teachers, and students would all be involved at the same time; this would facilitate the holding of an internal communication campaign, the establishment of a collective discourse, the organization of training, and the development of common tools.

---

[5] Accordingly, there would no longer be any need to reserve a lab, require students to travel, or block their access to Omnivox or Col.NET. As we see it, the purchase of about 30 tablets and a cart intended primarily for program-evaluation and -implementation assessments would be extremely advantageous. These tablets could also be used for other purposes outside of data-collection periods.

TABLE 1	COMPARISON OF PROGRAM-EVALUATION APPROACHES		
IN-DEPTH EVALUATION (EVERY 7-10 YEARS)	**OPTION A (HYBRID EVALUATION)**	**OPTION B (ONGOING EVALUATION)**	**OPTION C (ONGOING EVALUATION)**
APPROACH			
In-depth evaluation conducted over the long term + annual statistical-data collection = infrequent improvements to all program aspects.	Annual or biannual program review + in-depth evaluation every 7-10 years = improvement of major program aspects if required (the need may be pressing) + improvement of all program aspects over the long term.	Annual or biannual evaluation of one issue and all related criteria = annual improvement of different program aspects as a function of that issue.	Evaluation of one criterion per year + publication of a final report in the seventh year = annual improvement of certain program aspects as a function of that criterion.
PRINCIPLES			
Keep the focus broad so as having the information under hand if necessary.	Stagger data collection over time so the latest findings can be used in planning an in-depth evaluation.	Organize the evaluation on the basis of the particular needs of a given program.	Organize the evaluation on the basis of CEEC criteria, establishing the order in which they will be examined in keeping with the particular needs of a given program.
	• Make the overall evaluation process less cumbersome by staggering it over time, rendering it more meaningful. • Regularly gather information (perceptual and descriptive) that completes simple statistical data. • Identify existing practices in order to properly target the information needed. • Be responsive in order to react quickly. • Adjust to the requirements and issues of the moment.		
PRE-EVALUATION			
Plan the evaluation in keeping with all CEEC criteria and sub-criteria.	On the basis of recent information, including perceptual data, target the issues to be explored (over 7-10 years) and relate them to the CEEC's six criteria.	Annually target a priority issue and associate it with the corresponding CEEC criteria, without necessarily considering them all.	Annually identify which of the CEEC criteria will be evaluated, in keeping with program needs.
DATA COLLECTION (Depending on the approach selected, the time and frequency of data collection may change.)			
• Descriptive data specific to programs are identified (changes, exit profiles, framework plans, etc.). • Statistical data are gathered. • Interviews or discussion groups are organized, and questionnaires are designed in an effort to identify perceptions on certain particular aspects of a given program (perceptual data). • Questionnaires may be the same for two or more programs (which facilitates data collection) or tailored to the needs and criteria of each program (the information gathered is more specific, but adapting tools requires time and resources).			
REPORT PUBLICATION			
Long report issued at the end of the process, once every 7-10 years.	Short annual or biannual report + long report issued after the in-depth evaluation.	Short annual or biannual report.	Short annual report + long report issued at the end of the process, in the seventh year (must take account of changes made along the way).
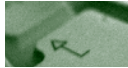
▶ CONCLUSION

As program evaluation takes place, stakeholders must make decisions, whether to organize the process or to provide follow-up. At the outset of that process, especially, some of these choices will be based on the knowledge and experience of the teams involved, as well as on stakeholder intuition and sensitivity. In an ongoing-evaluation context, the summary data collected by monitoring systems results in comprehensive deliberations and analysis, which then make it possible to identify the main problems and rapidly identify the necessary corrective measures, or plan other evaluation measures. Lastly, the findings of more in-depth evaluations of a specific aspect, issue, or criterion allow the parties involved to make particular recommendations once informed decisions have been made (the latter being facilitated by ongoing evaluation). All these points may encourage colleges to consider a change of approach in order to increase the effectiveness of their program-management process.

While the depiction of ongoing evaluation contained in this article may, because of its many advantages, appear to sway the balance in favour of this approach, it can also give rise to certain difficulties. During our meeting, the representative of one college questioned the relevance of continuing down this road, given a number of unproductive experiences.

Regardless of the time cycle involved, the evaluation process should *bring together* all parties concerned with a given program, both diploma or certificate programs also be perceived as a welcome opportunity for those involved to examine the different facets of the program in order to improve it. It is therefore vital that these stakeholders be asked to participate in evaluation activities and that students and faculty from contributory disciplines, as well as from cross-curricular courses, be included. All these key players should realize the relevance of the evaluation process, as well as the fact that the time they spend on it will be profitable; they will be all the prouder of their everyday work in the classroom. Ongoing evaluation will also do justice to constant efforts to improve programs that have perhaps not been recognized to date.

The ideas contained in part two of this article do not represent a comprehensive overview of the subject of ongoing evaluation; neither are they intended to reflect current college practices in their entirety. Other approaches may exist, and other concerns may emerge. Nevertheless, we hope this exploration will prove useful, and set out avenues for stakeholders in the evaluation process that assist them in easily selecting the approach that can best meet the needs of their team and college. ◗

A doctoral student in Education at the Université de Sherbrooke and holder of a Master's in Communication Sciences, Stéphanie CARLE has been active in Quebec's college network for almost 15 years. She currently works as an educational advisor at Collège Montmorency, and as Editor-in-Chief of *Pédagogie collégiale*. She has also been a PERFORMA resource person for about ten years. Ms. Carle taught office automation at the CÉGEP régional de Lanaudière in Joliette for six years, in both the regular- and continuing-education sections.

stephanie.carle@cmontmorency.qc.ca

REFERENCE

CARLE, S. 2015. Ongoing Program Evaluation: Considerations and Approaches. Part One: The Evaluation Process. *Pédagogie collégiale 28* (3), 41-46.