Evaluator Competencies

What’s Taught Versus What’s Sought

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This article explores the overlaps and disconnects between the competencies evaluators acquire during graduate school and those required and desired by employers. To investigate this relationship, two different surveys are administered, one for job seekers and the other for employers; 205 postings in the American Evaluation Association job bank were analyzed. The findings suggest that employers, job seekers, and job posters generally agree on the importance of some competencies, such as quantitative analyses and data management. However, some skills desired by employers, such as interpersonal, project management, and presentation skills, differ from skills that job seekers acquire in graduate school. Opportunities for additional experiences in real-world evaluation settings could fill these gaps. Implications for training and future research on training in evaluation are discussed.

Keywords: evaluator competencies; employers; graduate school; teaching-practice gap

Evaluation training, specifically requisite evaluation skills, has been a central concern since the field’s inception. Despite the proliferation of alternative training avenues for evaluators, continued deliberation persists of what knowledge and skills should be gained as well as where and how. For example, between 2003 and 2006, approximately 40 panels, debates, roundtables, think tanks, demonstrations, skill-building workshops, expert lectures, and multipaper sessions were offered at the annual American Evaluation Association (AEA) conference on the topic of evaluation competencies alone. Topics ranged from providing graduate evaluation training through an apprenticeship model, to how the context of evaluation affects the use of evaluation competencies, and to performance evaluation tools for rating evaluators’ knowledge and technical skills (American Evaluation Association [AEA], n.d. a).

One of these AEA conference sessions is a recurring metaroundtable sponsored by the Graduate Student and New Evaluators Topical Interest Group. This roundtable functions as a forum for novice evaluators in search of a first job or a different position, and it provides them with an informal venue for discussing career issues with seasoned evaluators. To provide a comprehensive perspective, session organizers invite practitioners from various sectors (e.g.,
higher education, government, health, business, industry) to present their perception of essential evaluation competencies.

A synthesis of the information highlighted at this roundtable over the past 7 years provides anecdotal evidence to suggest that a gap exists between the skills of novice evaluators, particularly those graduating from programs with an emphasis on evaluation and the skills required in entry-level evaluation positions (see Dewey, Mattox, Montrosse, Schröter, & Sullins, 2005; Dewey, Montrosse, Schröter, Sullins, & Mattox, 2006). As such, the current study adds to the discourse on evaluation training by addressing the following question: Are graduate programs with an emphasis in evaluation adequately preparing the next generation of evaluators?

**Relevant Literature**

Before describing the current landscape of evaluation training, this study must be situated within the larger evaluator training discourse, both past and present. The following discussion highlights the evolution of how the field has broadly debated the meaning of evaluation competencies.

**Evaluation Competencies: Past and Present**

Understanding how this discourse has developed since the birth of modern program evaluation is, like evaluation itself, complex. Throughout evaluation, theory, practice, and research have maintained a symbiotic relationship. Theoretical propositions and research on evaluation have demonstrated that the influences of theory, practice, and research on evaluation cannot be disentangled, so presenting a linear evolution is inaccurate and impractical (Alkin, 1991; Alkin, Daillak, & White, 1979; Alkin & Stecher, 1983; Christie, 2003; Cousins & Earl, 1999; Patton, Grimes, Guthrie, Brennan, French, & Blyth, 1977; Scriven, 1991; Shadish & Epstein, 1987; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007; Wholey, Scanlon, Duffy, Fukumoto, & Vogt, 1970; Williams, 1988; Worthen & Sanders, 1973). What follows is a discussion of the evolution of theory, practice, and research on evaluation, within the context of evaluation competencies.

Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991) have posited that evaluation theory has evolved in three distinct stages. Inherent in their discussion and description of prescriptive evaluation models are propositions on how to conduct an evaluation (or evaluation practice as the included theorists’ thought it ought to be) and identification of the skills required to conduct a particular brand of evaluation. Thinking about evaluation theory and practice in this way allows one to see how the required skills were first grounded in a knowledge of methods for reducing bias (Stage 1), then moved beyond traditional concerns for design and measurement toward a knowledge of quantitative and qualitative design and better client–evaluator relations (Stage 2), and finally reached a contingency-based perspective in which the skills and knowledge required are dictated by the focus and context of the evaluation (Stage 3).

Evaluation theory has influenced thinking surrounding evaluation competencies, but so has research on specific evaluation competencies and evaluation practice in general. During the early years of this discourse, a few studies developed and validated competency lists (Anderson & Ball, 1978; Brzezinski & Ahn, 1973; Davis, 1986; Sechrest, 1980), and a number of authors offered case descriptions of evaluation programs, courses, and course materials (Cary, 1977; Daudistel & Heddderson, 1984; Feldhusen & Hynes, 1976; Franco & DeBlissie, 1979; Gephart & Ingle, 1977). Embedded in these descriptions are notions about
the content of evaluation training. As a result, Davis (1986) argued that the field had attained a certain level of legitimacy, contained a body of knowledge, methods of inquiry, and accepted procedures, and that the actual training of evaluators had become less fragmented. More recently, the conversation on competencies has turned back to developing lists of evaluation competencies (King, Stevahn, Ghere, & Minnema, 2001; Russ-Eft, Bober, de la Teja, Foxon, & Koszalka, 2008; Stufflebeam & Wingate, 2005).

Translating evaluation theory into practice has been and continues to be a central concern for the evaluation field (Cousins & Earl, 1999; King, 2003; Scriven, 1991; Shadish et al., 1991; Smith, 1993; Worthen, 1990). Although little empirical evidence exists, a few studies have begun to illuminate evaluation practice that has a direct bearing on the discussion of evaluation competencies. For example, Shadish and Epstein (1987) demonstrated that practice was influenced by personal belief systems about the nature of evaluation. Williams (1988) found that there was a direct relationship between an evaluator’s theory and their practice. Chandler (2001) found that context was more influential on practice than theory. More recently, Christie (2003) and Barela (2005) found that evaluation theory does not guide practice. The contradictory nature of these findings may be due to the makeup of the samples. Approximately 70% of Shadish and Epstein’s sample included doctorates, and all were members of evaluation-related professional associations. Williams’ sample had only doctorates who were considered leading evaluation scholars. In contrast, Christie’s sample included a larger proportion of MAs (57%), whereas a little more than half of Barela’s sample (53%) had doctorates.

Regardless of the sample, these findings are important because they suggest that Davis (1986) was correct in her proposition that the field contains a body of knowledge, methods of inquiry, and accepted procedures, all of which serve as the basis for evaluation training. These findings also support the notion that a set of evaluation competencies can be developed and used to measure level of expertise.

**Overview of Current Evaluation Training Opportunities**

Perhaps in response to the decrease in the number of university-based training programs (Engle, Altschuld, & Kim, 2006), and the recognition that evaluators enter the profession in myriad ways, alternative training opportunities have emerged. Today, training in evaluation may be obtained through university degree programs, certificate programs, or professional development workshops.

*University degree programs.* University degree programs offer the most intensive education in evaluation, if for no other reason than their structure. According to AEA (n.d. b), there are 47 national and 7 international university-based evaluation programs, with few offering degrees specifically in evaluation. Most programs emphasize evaluation within a sister discipline, such as psychology, education, or public administration.

Despite consensus surrounding requisite evaluation skills and evidence offered by Davis (1986) suggesting that evaluation curricula had attained a certain level of standardization across programs, more recent evidence provides a slightly less positive perspective. For the past 30 years, the field has engaged in studies of graduate training programs in evaluation (Altschuld, Engle, Cullen, Kim, & Mace, 1994; Conner, Clay, & Hill, 1980; Engle & Altschuld, 2004; Engle et al., 2006; Gephart & Potter, 1976; May, Fleisher, Sheirer, & Cox, 1986). The most recent study (Engle et al., 2006) documents the structure of graduate education in evaluation and how it has evolved over the past 10 years. Engle et al. (2006) surveyed graduate evaluation programs in 2002 and compared results to an earlier survey conducted in 1992. Despite a low response rate, a number of interesting findings emerged.
The authors of this study identified a smaller number of programs in the most recent survey iteration, with a higher percentage of programs identifying themselves as having an evaluation emphasis. Most programs classified their disciplinary home as education, educational psychology, or psychology, and most of them identified their primary goal as preparing students to conduct evaluations. Subsidiary goals, in the order of highest to lowest ranking, were fostering a general understanding of evaluation, conducting research on evaluation, and teaching evaluation. More important, Engle et al. (2006) found only 10 programs considered medium to large, meaning that most students are completing only two or three courses in evaluation. Generally, these courses include training in basic evaluation knowledge and skills, models or theories of evaluation, and/or evaluation practice through an applied project.

Other training opportunities. Another venue for acquiring evaluation skills and knowledge is through certificate programs. A certificate program is a training program on a topic, in this case evaluation, that ultimately leads to a certificate of completion or attendance (Durley, 2005). The authors’ informal inquiry of evaluation certificate programs suggests that most of these programs are housed within universities and have varying levels of entry and completion requirements. Across all certificate programs, topics addressed include program evaluation, advanced study in evaluation, quantitative evaluation methods, evaluation and organizational development, school-based evaluation, assessment and evaluation, and educational policy and administration (Altschuld, 1999a, 1999b; Jones & Worthen, 1999; Smith, 1999; Worthen, 1999).

The final manner in which evaluators may develop their expertise is by professional development. Professional development workshops may be several hours to several weeks in duration. Well-established workshops include the Summer Evaluation Institute sponsored by AEA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, AEA annual conference workshops, The Evaluators’ Institute, and workshops sponsored by AEA affiliates.

Although all of these methods of training are important to investigate, the current interest lies in assessing aspects of the quality of graduate programs. The characteristics of various evaluation programs are well documented (Altschuld et al., 1994; Conner et al., 1980; Engle & Altschuld, 2004; Engle et al., 2006; Gephart & Potter, 1976; May et al., 1986), yet little is known about the graduates of these programs. To that end, this article explores competencies gained during graduate training and compares them with those that are required by a variety of organizations that employ evaluators.

A few assumptions underlie this study. First, although the authors of this study recognize that indicators of evaluation competence continue to be debated, they believe that there is a set of identifiable skills that novice evaluators graduating from evaluation programs should have. Furthermore, they presume that it is the role of the graduate program to teach these basic skills to would-be evaluators.

Method

To explore the knowledge and skills required to obtain a job in the field of evaluation, this study employed two data collection activities, both of which involved affiliates of AEA. Most data were obtained via two surveys that were conducted with AEA affiliates: one for job seekers in the evaluation field and the other for employers of evaluators. Survey data were supplemented by an analysis of evaluation-related job postings on the AEA job bank.
Job Seeker and Employer Surveys

These two surveys consisted of 19 indicators of competence concerning what skills were sought and what responsibilities potential positions may entail. The job seeker survey asked about respondents’ field of study, degree obtained, preferred organization for employment, job seeking activities, helping and hindering factors in the job search, and mentor relationships. Most of these questions had multiple-choice responses with an open-ended other option, although some, such as helping and hindering factors in the job search, were open-ended. Job seekers were asked to indicate, by selecting all that applied from a list of 19 competencies, the knowledge, skills, and abilities they obtained in their graduate program, competencies they wanted to apply in a job, and competencies they thought they had or did not have that were perceived as desired by organizations. Job seekers indicated their level of competence in each area through a scale of 1 (Novice) to 5 (Expert).

The employer survey asked respondents about their current type of organization and industry, recruiting experience and strategies, type of evaluation roles within their organization, and helpful or hindering applicant information. Some questions, such as organization and industry type and evaluation roles, had multiple-choice responses with an open-ended other option. Inquiries about their organization’s evaluation roles, helping and hindering applicant information, and recruiting strategies were open-ended. Employers rated the 19 competencies from 1 (Not at all needed) to 5 (Almost always needed) from entry-level positions. Employers also selected up to three competencies in which candidates had minor or major gaps.

An initial, larger list of competencies was reduced, and survey questions were improved through literature review, AEA job bank analyses, two focus groups conducted with students and faculty at Western Michigan University and Claremont Graduate School (Claremont Graduate University, n.d.) and a pilot test of the two surveys with 27 employers and 17 job seekers. The surveys for evaluation job seekers and evaluation employers were refined and finalized based on the information gathered during these processes. As shown in Table 1, most of the 19 competencies also were present in the Stufflebeam and Wingate (2005) and King and colleagues (Ghere King, Stevahn, & Minnema, 2006; King et al., 2001; Stevahn, King, Ghere, & Minnema, 2005, 2006) competency frameworks. Two additional competencies, (a) writing for practitioner or academic publications and (b) syntax writing (e.g., SQL, PERL), were included because they were mentioned in the survey development focus groups.

Survey participants. To ensure that the surveys would target employers and job candidates with a specific interest in evaluation, the survey links were disseminated exclusively to groups associated with AEA. Invitations to participate in the survey were e-mailed on September 11, 2006, to job seekers and employers with postings on the AEA job bank. To increase the sample size, the survey invitation was also disseminated to three e-mailing lists serving the evaluation community: EvalTalk (AEA’s official discussion list), EvalGrad (the former list for AEA’s Graduate Student and New Evaluators Topical Interest Group), and EvalJobs (i.e., AEA’s job posting list). Respondents were required to consent to participate prior to being directed to the Web-based survey. Both surveys remained open until September 30, 2006.

Eighty-seven individuals responded to the job seeker survey. Of these, 53 were job seekers; the remaining respondents did not belong to the job seeking category and were dropped from further analysis. Of those who completed the survey, 28 respondents were students or recent graduates seeking employment, and 25 were employed but seeking a new position.

Forty-seven employers responded to the employer survey. Of those, 44 indicated that they were involved in the recruitment process for their organizations, and their responses were used for further analyses. Involvement included reviewing resumes, interviewing candidates,
creating job announcements, and providing input to the recruitment process. The remaining three responses were dropped from the analysis for lack of involvement in hiring candidates who were recent graduates for entry-level evaluation positions.

### AEA Job Bank Analysis

To investigate evaluation competencies sought by employers, the authors retrieved 205 job postings that were publicly available from March to September 2005 from the AEA job bank. The primary variables of interest were the skills sought and the responsibilities of the position. Other variables of interest that were explored for potential relationships included job location, sector (e.g., academia, government, for profit), degree, and experience required.

Four researchers explored the job postings for recurring themes concerning skills and responsibilities. These themes were compared and common categories were created for later coding. Table 2 lists the final categories within the skills and responsibilities variables that were used in creating the job seeker and employer surveys.

To ensure consistency, all researchers coded the first 50 job postings and assessed inter-rater reliability by matching the degree of agreement on codings. Reliability assessment yielded more than 90% agreement on all but one of the skills and responsibilities variables: cultural competence had only 75% agreement among raters. When there was disagreement...
about how the contents of a posting were coded, the researchers discussed the discrepancies until they came to a consensus.

The remaining job postings were divided among the researchers for coding. Finally, all four researchers’ entries were merged into one database for analysis.

Results

Job Seeker Survey

Job seekers were asked to identify their fields of study during undergraduate or graduate training; more than one response was possible. Respondents most often reported evaluation (n = 18), psychology (n = 13), sociology (n = 8), and statistics (n = 8) as their fields of study. Fifty-four job seekers also indicated their highest degree obtained. Most had master’s degrees (67%), followed by doctoral (26%) and bachelor’s (7%) degrees. Given the responses to questions concerning graduate school, the authors assumed that those who reported having bachelor’s degrees had some graduate school experience.

Competencies taught. Job seekers were asked to (a) indicate which competencies they were taught during graduate school (Figure 1) and (b) rate their current level of competency in a list of areas relevant to evaluation (Figure 2). As shown in Figure 1, not all competencies were taught consistently to all job seekers, and only literature reviews and research design were indicated by more than 50% of the respondents. Fewer than 30% of the responding job seekers reported being taught the following competencies: project planning, content area expertise, client or stakeholder relations, project or team management, and syntax writing.

Self-reported competence. As illustrated in Figure 2, respondents’ self-reported skill levels approached 4 on a scale of 1 (Novice) to 5 (Expert) for most competencies. Respondents indicated competence levels of 3 or less for proposal writing, multivariate statistical analysis, and syntax writing. Respondents ranked literature reviews highest and syntax writing the lowest, both in terms of what was taught in graduate school and current competency levels. Relating to clients or other stakeholders was less frequently taught (see Figure 1); however, job seekers reported high competence levels in this category (see Figure 2).

Table 2
Categories of Competencies and Responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competencies</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative methods and analysis</td>
<td>Conceptualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative methods and analysis</td>
<td>Proposal writing/responding to RFPs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report writing</td>
<td>Planning and design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
<td>Instrument development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content area skills</td>
<td>Implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory and team management</td>
<td>Data collection/fieldwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data management</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation theory and methods</td>
<td>Report writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural competence</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note: RFP = request for proposal.
Perceived competency gaps. Thirty-nine job seekers indicated that they had reviewed job announcements or participated in interviews by phone or in person as part of their current search for an evaluation position. Respondents further indicated whether they thought they had the competencies perceived to be sought by these organizations. Figure 3 illustrates the degree to which respondents indicated that they possessed a required competency or lacked a required competency. No respondent reported lacking required competencies in conducting literature reviews, and in general, job seekers felt sufficiently competent for the jobs. Only syntax writing was frequently thought to be lacking, but perceived gaps were also reported in multivariate statistical analysis and proposal writing.

Relationship between taught and self-reported competence. A Spearman (rank-order) correlation was conducted to compare competencies taught during graduate school and self-reported competence level. Results indicate a moderate correlation between the two (Table 3), suggesting that these rank orders are correlated because graduate school is the primary
contributor to the respondents’ current level of competency. The largest discrepancy between
the rank-ordered lists is for relating to clients or other stakeholders. The difference was 15
(78% of the maximum difference), indicating that respondents did not gain this competency
during graduate school.

**Employer Survey**

The employer survey was completed by 47 individuals who hired evaluators from non-
profit organizations (39%), academic institutions (26%), for-profit organizations (21%), pri-
vate businesses/consultancy firms (7%), government (5%), and other organizations (2%).

*Evaluation positions sought.* Corresponding to the variety of organizations represented,
respondents provided a diverse list of roles to be filled by individuals with evaluation degrees,
skills, or experience. These roles included evaluation-specific titles (e.g., research and evalu-
ation specialist or associate), project management-related titles (e.g., project coordinator or
director), senior leadership positions (e.g., president, chief evaluation and planning officer),
Table 3
Spearman Rank-Order Correlations

<table>
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<th>Spearman’s ρ</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job seeker competencies gained during graduate school versus self-reported competence level</td>
<td>.575*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job seeker competencies gained during graduate school versus competencies needed by employers</td>
<td>.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job seekers’ self-reported competency versus competencies needed by employers</td>
<td>.791**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Pearson product–moment correlations were conducted and yielded similar results. 
*p < .10. **p < .001.
consultant roles (e.g., evaluation or principal consultant), educational roles (e.g., teacher, professor, instructor), and task-specific positions (e.g., data analyst or manager, quality assurance auditor, quality improvement analyst).

**Competencies sought.** Employers were asked what competencies were most needed by individuals in evaluation roles within their organizations. As shown in Figure 4, respondents most frequently indicated that report writing skills and abilities in relating to clients or other stakeholders were almost always or commonly needed, whereas syntax writing, multivariate statistical analysis, and writing for practitioner or academic publications were less needed or not needed at all.

**Perceptions of candidate quality.** Employers considered the match between applicants’ competencies and those needed to fill the positions. None of the employers indicated that candidates exceeded the requirements for evaluation positions; instead, most recruiters reported that candidates had minor (47%) or major (31%) shortcomings in the evaluation competencies needed by the organizations. Only 22% said that applicants met the requirements for evaluation competencies. When asked to indicate the minor or major gaps in evaluation competencies, employers most frequently reported the following: relating to clients or other stakeholders (28%), project and/or team management (23%), research design (21%), content area expertise (17%), and report writing, writing for practitioner or academic publications, and evaluation theory (15% each).

**Evaluation competencies versus content expertise.** Employers were asked whether they regarded (a) evaluation competencies as being more important than industry or content
knowledge, (b) evaluation competencies as being equally important as industry or content knowledge, or (c) industry or content knowledge as being more important than evaluation competencies. Most employers reported that evaluation competencies were more important (54%) or equally as important (43%) as industry or content knowledge. Few respondents (3%) reported that industry or content knowledge was more important than evaluation competencies, indicating that the job openings were clearly targeting evaluation competencies.

Impressions of applicants. Employers were asked what types of information job seekers provided that made them stand out from other candidates in a positive or negative way. The results are presented in Table 4, and they indicate the importance of making a positive impression as well as writing skills, ability to solve problems, and communication or interpersonal skills. A lack of communication or interpersonal skills, poor writing, lack of evaluation-specific training or understanding, and limited vision regarding methodology left negative impressions on employers.

Relationship between taught, self-reported, and sought competencies. A second Spearman (rank-order) correlation was conducted to compare competencies taught during graduate school (see Figure 1) and competencies needed by employers (see Figure 4). Results yielded a nonsignificant correlation (see Table 3), suggesting a weak relationship between the rank orders and results, showing that graduate programs are meeting few of the competency needs of employers. The largest discrepancies exist for relating to clients or other stakeholders (2 vs. 17), report writing (1 vs. 11), and project planning (6 vs. 15), suggesting that these skills are highly valued by employers but not given much attention in graduate programs. Conversely, graduate training places more emphasis on univariate statistical analysis (3 vs. 14) and literature reviews (1 vs. 10).

A final Spearman (rank-order) correlation was conducted to compare job seekers’ self-reported competence levels (see Figure 2) and competencies sought by employers (see Figure 4). Results yielded a strong correlation between the two (see Table 3), indicating that job seekers’ skills are aligned well (but not perfectly) with the job market. The largest discrepancy exists for literature reviews (1 vs. 10), which was previously indicated as more valued in graduate school. However, employers placed higher value on report writing (6 vs. 11) and project planning (9 vs. 13).
AEA Job Bank Analysis

Of the 205 analyzed job postings, two thirds (67%) were listed as full-time positions, 6% were part-time positions, and 2% were part- or full-time positions; the remaining 25% were unspecified. These positions were located in various cities throughout the United States, and some were international. Most postings were by for-profit (35%) or nonprofit (27%) organizations, followed by K-12 education (12%), higher education (11%), U.S. government (8%), and international organizations (7%).

Although a substantial proportion of postings (29%) did not mandate an educational level, 29% required doctoral degrees, 30% required master’s degrees, and 12% required bachelor’s degrees. Nearly half (48%) did not specify a required amount of prior experience, but 31% required between 1 and 5 years of prior experience, 18% asked for 6 to 10 years, and 3% required more than 10 years of experience.

Competencies sought. Most frequently sought competencies on the AEA job bank included quantitative methods and analysis (82%), reporting (81%), interpersonal skills (79%), data management (75%), content area skills (66%), supervisory and team management (53%), qualitative methods and analysis (49%), and evaluation theory and methods (43%).

Position responsibilities were consistent with needed skills, qualifications, and competencies. Analysis (84%), reporting (82%), planning and design (79%), implementation (75%), data collection or fieldwork (69%), instrument development (61%), conceptualization (53%), and management (40%) were the responsibilities mentioned most frequently in the job descriptions.

Discussion

Survey and job bank analyses clearly indicate that many of the competencies taught in graduate programs are sought by employers. Not surprisingly, data from employers, job seekers, and job postings all emphasized the importance of quantitative analyses, data management, and report writing, although quantitative analysis was mentioned by the employers less frequently than by the job bank announcements. Competencies in qualitative analysis and evaluation theory were less frequently reported by job seekers or sought by employers. There was a general agreement that syntax writing was not an important skill for evaluators, and most employers reported that evaluation skills were more important than content knowledge.

Despite these commonalities, the skills desired by employers sometimes contrasted greatly with the skills the job seekers reported having been taught in graduate school. Not surprisingly, data from employers, job seekers, and job postings all emphasized the importance of quantitative analyses, data management, and report writing, although quantitative analysis was mentioned by the employers less frequently than by the job bank announcements. Competencies in qualitative analysis and evaluation theory were less frequently reported by job seekers or sought by employers. There was a general agreement that syntax writing was not an important skill for evaluators, and most employers reported that evaluation skills were more important than content knowledge.

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Interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skills have been defined as competencies that “focus on the people skills used in conducting evaluation studies, such as communication, negotiation, conflict, collaboration, and cross-cultural skills” (Stevahn et al., 2005, p. 52), and this definition includes oral and written communication skills. This competency showed a substantial contrast between the expectations of employers and those of job seekers. Employers noted the need for interpersonal skills more than any other competency, and the AEA job bank postings also listed them frequently. However, employers often reported that their entry-level evaluation candidates lacked these skills, mentioning the skill relating to clients or other stakeholders as the most common deficit in evaluator competencies. In regard to skills taught, this competency was ranked third from the bottom among skills acquired in graduate school. However, interpersonal skills were ranked second from the top among job seekers’ self-reported competencies. Furthermore, when job seekers were asked about their own weaknesses, interpersonal skills were never mentioned.

Several hypotheses may explain this discrepancy. First, although in discussion for more than 20 years (Covert, 1987), interpersonal skills are not emphasized sufficiently in evaluation education programs (Stevahn et al., 2005). Second, individuals may be reluctant to admit, even in a confidential survey, that they lack such essential skills. Alternatively, people who lack such skills may be unaware of their deficits, especially as they pertain to evaluation. Much research on the importance of “interpersonal intelligence” (Leviton, 2001) and communicating and reporting (Torres, Preskill, & Piontek, 1997) discusses problems related to deficient interpersonal skills, reporting, and communication throughout evaluation processes. Evaluation experts provide detailed examples of the importance of these skills and how to implement them (e.g., Sanders & Sullins, 2005; Taut & Alkin, 2003; Torres et al., 1997). However, these skills are not emphasized in many evaluator training programs, although courses in communications, counseling, and qualitative research (Dewey et al., 2005; Leviton, 2001) can enhance these skills.

Writing. The importance of writing skills was emphasized by job seekers, employers, and positions listed in the AEA job bank. Employers ranked report writing as the most needed evaluator skill, although writing for practitioner or academic publication and proposal writing were less important. According to the employer survey, poor writing stood out as making a negative impression on potential employers. Employers frequently mentioned the importance of making evaluation findings clear to stakeholders, whether presented orally or in writing. Job seekers rated report writing fairly high but proposal and publication writing fairly low—both as subjects taught in graduate school and in self-reported competence.

Writing and presenting clear information to various stakeholder groups is a crucial, but sometimes overlooked, skill for evaluators to master (Sanders & Sullins, 2005; Torres, Preskill, & Piontek, 1997, 2005). It involves not only technical savvy but also interpersonal skills. For example, depending on how evaluation results are presented, negative findings can provide helpful guidance for improving a program, or they can promote defensive reactions against the evaluators (Sanders & Sullins, 2005). Evaluation programs can emphasize this area further.

Project and team management. Employers rated project and team management competencies as important but indicated that they are often lacking in new hires. This is supported by the responses from job seekers: Only 20% of job seekers noted that they were taught project and team management skills in graduate school, and fewer than 30% indicated that they were taught project planning. Project planning and project and/or team management were also rated 13th and 14th, respectively, out of 19 skills in regard to job seekers’ self-competence ratings.
Graduate students often have coursework related to project and team management, and many evaluation texts include chapters about evaluation project management issues (e.g., Owen, 2006; Sanders & Sullins, 2005; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). However, actual management experience is usually limited to experience gained in jobs, internships, fieldwork, and graduate assistantships. Evaluation project management as discussed by Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) includes identifying and pursuing evaluation opportunities, designing evaluations, budgeting evaluations, and contracting evaluations, along with data collection, analyses, and reporting. Owen (2006), in his chapter on project management, focused on contracting, briefing, proposal writing, internal and external evaluation management differences, and costing. Gaining the full range of evaluation project management skills would require a student to work outside of the university context or to collaborate with a professor or principal investigator inside the university. As such, actual experience gained is likely to vary, depending on the type of project work experience and the level of involvement. For example, classroom projects are usually limited to managing small-scale, low- or no-budget evaluations. Thus, a student usually manages himself or herself or collaborates with a small group of peers rather than managing people in varying capacities. Larger projects are usually run by professors who provide students with opportunities to work on teams and manage aspects of an evaluation. As such, graduate students who receive more extensive opportunities to lead evaluation teams or whole projects for university departments usually work with a mentor who guides the student through the management process, with the student’s responsibilities increasing over time. Therefore, project management experiences gained during graduate school may not be enough to prepare evaluators for the demands of a professional position.

**Research design.** Research design was another gap frequently mentioned by employers. This response is noteworthy, given that most job seekers had received training in this area and regarded themselves as being competent in research design. In addition, most advertised training efforts (whether university, certificate, or professional development-based) emphasize research design as a crucial evaluation competency (AEA, n.d. b.) However, the lessons concerning basic research design may contrast substantially with the realities of applied research designs that are feasible in complex settings and that may involve limited budgets and out-of-scope client demands. As in project management, graduate students may have limited opportunities to design real-world research projects. Mentors of fledgling evaluators can help their subordinates understand how their research plans were designed to overcome or minimize barriers and control for extraneous variables to the extent feasible.

**Evaluation theory.** Employers reported that evaluators often lacked knowledge of evaluation theory. This contrasts with the AEA job bank postings, less than half of which mentioned evaluation theory as a needed skill. Furthermore, evaluation theory was taught to less than half of the job seekers, which is consistent with the findings of Engle et al. (2006). This finding is particularly salient given how important these concepts are in the taxonomies developed by Stufflebeam and Wingate (2005) and King and colleagues (Ghere et al., 2006; King et al., 2001; Stevahn et al., 2005, 2006). One explanation may be that employers of evaluators may value knowledge of evaluation theory and methods on a practical rather than academic level, as reflected in how often employers decried evaluators’ lack of real-world experience or tunnel vision regarding methodologies. Thorough and preferably applied background knowledge of evaluation theory and methods can help prepare new evaluators for the job market, especially if they are able to articulate how this knowledge can be applied to job-specific situations.
Experience. Although nearly half of the AEA job bank postings did not specify criteria for prior experience, both the employer and the job seeker survey responses illustrate that relevant experience is paramount. Employers most frequently listed relevant experience as a desirable factor that made candidates stand out in a positive way. Consistent with this finding, job seekers listed lack of experience as the most frequent employment hindrance. Again, real-world experience appears to help evaluators navigate complicated interpersonal relationships, expand the possibilities (or acknowledge the limits) of research design, and target report writing and presentation of findings to specific audiences.

Most evaluator competency gaps reflect a disconnect between the conceptual and practical aspects of evaluation. Students may practice interpersonal skills in graduate school but mainly with like-minded individuals from their respective programs. Graduate students write numerous papers, but these are usually written for their professors, not for evaluation stakeholder audiences. Students may have coursework that includes project and team management but in a structured and guided setting rather than in an applied setting with real stakeholders and real budget and resource constraints. Most students take classes in research design, but these designs may not be feasible in real-world settings. Likewise, students of evaluation may be taught evaluation theory, but they may have little opportunity to translate these theories into practice.

Practical experience seems the sine qua non to overcoming these gaps. Such experience can be gained in practicums, internships, and graduate associateships. However, only 30% of programs offer some type of internship opportunity (Engle et al., 2006). Trevisan (2004) synthesized the available literature on practical evaluation training, in which simulation, role-play, project work, and practicums were discussed as modes that might provide more hands-on experiences.

Limitations, Implications, and Directions for Future Research

This exploratory study represents an initial attempt to illuminate gaps between evaluation training and subsequent employment. It was challenged by some general limitations, such as sampling frame, survey content, and the larger issue of the concept of evaluation.

Sampling frame. Survey results should be interpreted cautiously because of the limited sampling frame. Although a large group of evaluators can be reached through AEA electronic mailing lists, the sampling frame did not include all job seekers or employers in the field of evaluation.

Survey content. Although the job seeker and employer surveys were reviewed by two expert focus groups, they have limitations. For example, the competency list within both surveys was derived from the job bank analysis, a review of the currently existing competency taxonomies, and current practices in graduate programs. Although the categories derived from these sources are comprehensive, they are also somewhat overlapping. For example, the categories of project and/or team management and interpersonal skills have some overlap, and this may have confounded the results.

Other limitations pertain to the job seeker survey in particular. The survey asked only the job seekers about the skills they were taught during graduate school. Although it asked job seekers to rate their own competencies—and they often reported high competencies in areas not taught in their graduate programs—the survey did not ask how or where the respondents gained these competencies. Future studies should ask more specifically about other routes of training and education for evaluation job seekers, including certificate programs, professional
development workshops, and on-the-job training. Furthermore, asking job seekers to rate their own levels of competency is quite subjective.

Concept of evaluation. There is some disagreement within the discipline about what evaluation is or what it entails (Altschuld, 1999b; Smith, 1999). This is evident in the taxonomies as well as in the job descriptions posted to the AEA job bank. Although standardized evaluation skill assessments have been discussed in the literature—Pratt, McGuigan, and Aphra (2000) found that people in the lower portion of the group tended to overestimate their scores and those at the higher end tended to underestimate theirs—these tools are not necessarily available or commonly used in graduate programs. In addition, evaluators’ roles are complex and may include many responsibilities that are not directly related to evaluation (Owen, 2006).

Despite these limitations, the current study’s findings provide some basis for making recommendations for both graduate programs and job seekers.

Graduate programs. Graduate programs as well as certificate programs and professional development workshops can assist students to gain important skills by

- offering or enhancing courses focused on writing skills (report writing more so than proposal writing and writing for practitioner or academic publications), interpersonal skills, and project and/or team management;
- offering courses on research design and evaluation theory that relate to practical and applied contexts;
- creating in-depth opportunities to gain practical experience in evaluation settings.

In regard to applied opportunities, professors and other potential mentors in the evaluation field may argue that it is not always practical or advisable to put novice evaluators into design or management roles or assign reports to them to write. However, even seemingly trivial assignments can be opportunities for students to learn about the big picture of an evaluation project. Novices who engage in data collection or even data entry tasks can be shown how data are used within the overall evaluation. Students and mentees can be given assignments on how to translate technical findings into briefs that can be easily understood. These tasks, along with explanations of their real-world significance, can help to narrow the gap between academic preparation and practical application. These efforts may eventually lead to more in-depth experience in managing evaluations, communicating with clients, and writing reports. In turn, such experiences can help students build professional networks, giving them a better foothold in the evaluation profession.

Job seekers. Job seekers can make themselves more competitive for employment by

- assessing their strengths and weaknesses in relation to the competencies listed in this article and those listed by others (e.g., King et al., 2001; Stufflebeam & Wingate, 2005);
- enhancing skills that are most valued by employers, particularly interpersonal communication, writing, project and team management, and practical applications of research design, and evaluation theory; and
- seeking practical experience through internships.

Further research is necessary to determine which types of training are especially suited for preparing new evaluators for job demands. As job markets change frequently because of government policy, funding, theoretical shifts, and other factors, future studies must explore evaluation competencies that may be necessary in particular settings. Future research in this
domain should also attempt to explain why certain discrepancies exist between what is taught and what is sought, and how to narrow existing gaps through various types of training.

**Note**

1. A comprehensive list of training opportunities, including certificate programs and professional development opportunities, is available at the American Evaluation Association Web site (http://www.eval.org.). Most identified opportunities include links to developer Web sites that contain course descriptions, and if required, the application process and criteria for acceptance.

**References**


