Evaluation Training for Physical Activity Practitioners

Course Evaluation Results – May 2022

"This course has given me a renewed confidence in my capability to conduct an evaluation for projects I'm involved in, or to prepare an evaluation plan for those I'm proposing."

"The course had a strong overall value. Resources provided in advance were very helpful/useful, overview from presentations helped support their context, small group work was great for bouncing ideas and recaps helped to see other perspectives. It was well organized and continued to build upon previous learnings, which helped to bring it all together. Thank you for this!"

Research Power Inc.

Course Overview

Course Description

Evaluation Training for Physical Activity Practitioners was a virtual training in evaluation for people working in the physical activity sector (in areas such as sport, recreation, health promotion) across Canada. The course was developed and delivered by an evaluation consultant, Clare Levin from Research Power Inc., on behalf of the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (CFLRI) with funding from the Government of Canada. The goal of the course was to increase the evaluation capacity of physical activity providers, a strategy identified in *A Common Vision for increasing physical activity and reducing sedentary living in Canada: Let's Get Moving*. Participation was free of charge.

The course consisted of five, two-hour live sessions covering the following content:
- **Session 1**: introduction to evaluation, including steps in the evaluation process, engaging stakeholders, and considerations in evaluation design
- **Session 2**: logic models and theories of change
- **Session 3**: developing an evaluation plan including identifying evaluation questions and performance indicators
- **Session 4**: data collection and analysis, including data collection methods/data sources and content covering one of three topics (qualitative analysis, conducting interviews and focus groups, developing and implementing surveys)
- **Session 5**: reporting, learning and application, including communicating evaluation results and potential challenges and solutions in evaluation

This virtual course incorporated best practices in online learning and engagement including a mix of theoretical and experiential learning as well as small and large group activities and discussion. Virtual tools including MURAL, a Learning Management System (LMS), and use of breakout rooms in Zoom for small group work were incorporated to facilitate participation and learning.

Courses & Participation

Evaluation Training for Physical Activity Practitioners was offered 12 times between April 2021 and April 2022 in English. A course in French was also offered and promoted at two different times (fall 2021 and winter 2022) but did not have any participants register and had to be cancelled. The course was offered either once a week for five weeks (seven courses), or in an intensive format with the five sessions over five days from Monday to Friday (five courses).

A total of 178 individuals registered for a course and 86% (154) participated. Participation by course is provided in Figure 1 below. An average of 15 people registered and 13 attended across the 12 courses offered in English.

Figure 1: Participation by Course
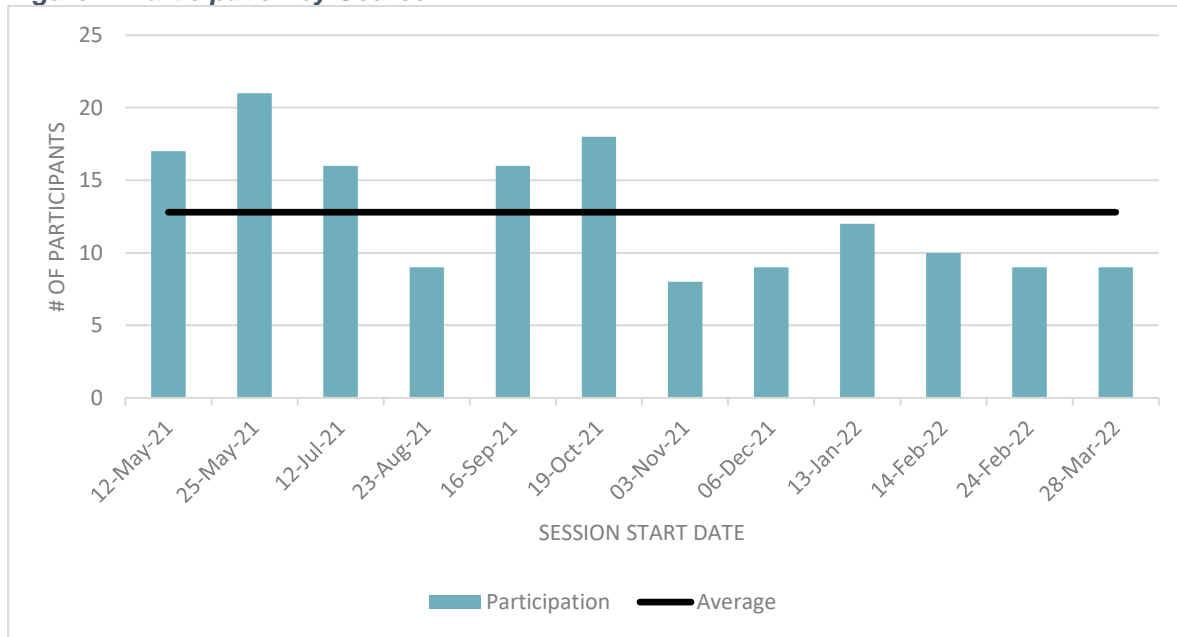
Because participation in the course was free, it was common for a few participants to register but then later withdraw from courses, typically because they no longer had time/capacity to participate. There was high interest in the initial courses offered in 2021, but interest and participation was more limited for the later sessions. For future courses, it may be preferable to offer courses less frequently to maintain interest and engagement (potentially 2-4 times per year).

Participants

Almost half of participants (39%) were from municipal government, and participants from not-for-profit organizations and provincial, territorial, or federal government were also common (see Figure 2). Almost half of participants (47%) rated themselves as advanced beginners in evaluation, and about a third (29%) rated themselves as competent. Data on participant location across Canada was not collected for privacy reasons.

**Figure 2: Course Participants by Sector**
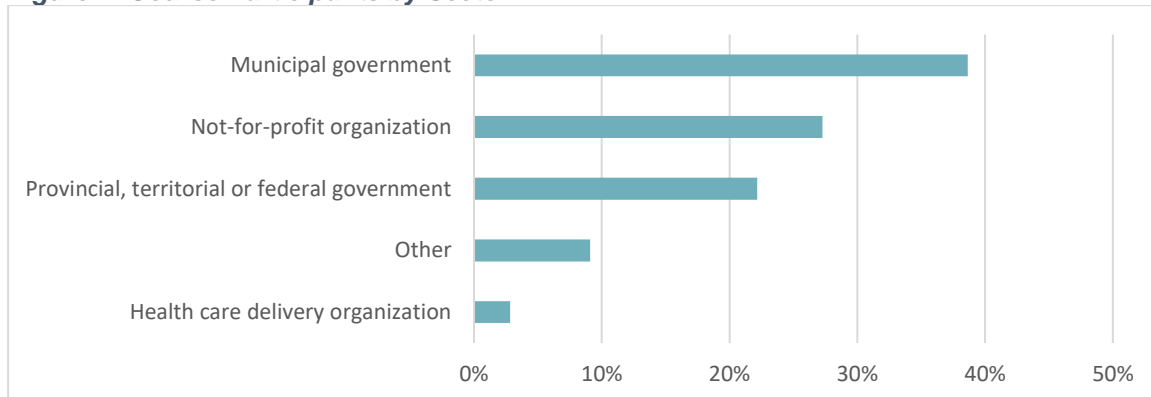
Evaluation Results

When participants registered for the course, they were asked to rate their level of confidence in implementing evaluation practices in their organization as well as their level of knowledge in a number of evaluation topics. At the end of each course, all participants were asked to complete an evaluation survey during the last live session, with an email reminder also sent out to participants. The evaluation survey response rate was 41% (73 people).[1]

Change in Confidence in Implementing Evaluation Practices

Participants were asked to rate their level of confidence in implementing evaluation practices in their organization on a scale of 1 to 10 (1=not at all confident, 10=completely confident). As seen in Figure 3, the percentage that rated their level of confidence as 7 or above increased from 27% before the course to 85% after.

Figure 3: Confidence of Course Participants in Implementing Evaluation Practices
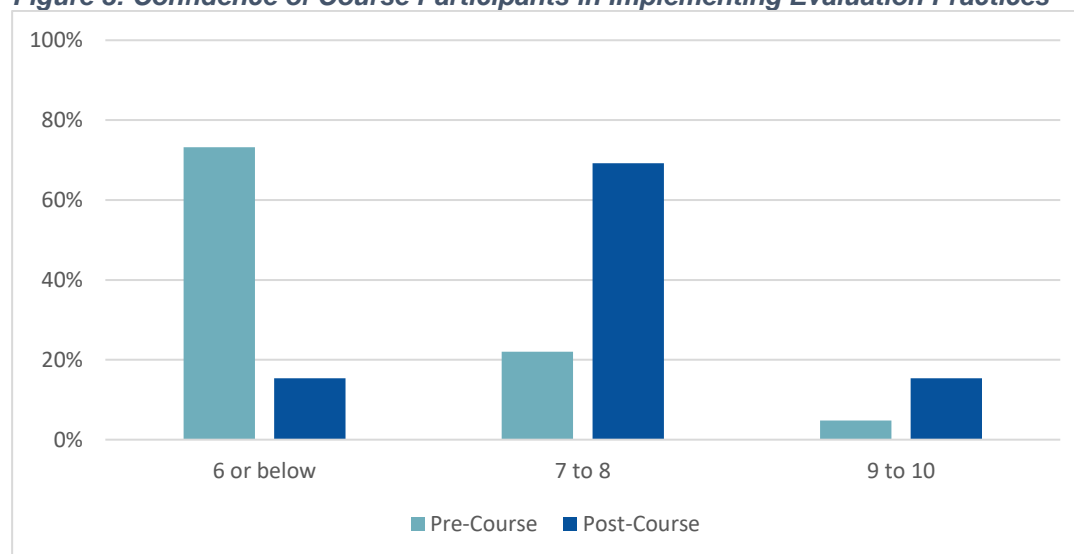
Participant Quotes

"This course was a great refresher on evaluation training I had taken a while ago- it helped build up confidence and reinforce the fundamentals of evaluation. This will help me lead the upcoming evaluation at our physical activity and recreation centre!"

"I feel more confident in planning evaluation processes and think I will be able to apply this learning to the evaluation of projects/initiatives and take a more critical eye to our evaluation framework for some of our strategic plans."

"I will approach evaluation with much more confidence and will prioritize it in my work."

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[1] There is a potential risk of positive bias in the evaluation survey results as fewer than half of all participants (41%) completed the evaluation. For example, it is possible that participants who did not enjoy the course or who did not feel they learned much chose not to reply to the survey.

"I feel more confident in my abilities to produce well rounded evaluation questions and figure out how to distribute the information learned from evaluations."

"This course has given me a renewed confidence in my capability to conduct an evaluation for projects I'm involved in, or to prepare an evaluation plan for those I'm proposing."

"I feel more confident starting the process and know to take the time to develop and use the logic model tool to start the evaluation project."

Change in Level of Knowledge about Evaluation Topics

Across all participants that responded to the evaluation survey, 96% agreed or strongly agreed that the course helped them gain new skills in evaluation. Participants were also asked to rate their level of knowledge in various areas of evaluation on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=know nothing, 5=expert) before and after the course. As seen in Figure 4, 20% or fewer rated themselves a 4 or 5 in each topic before the course, and this increased to over 50% of respondents rating themselves a 4 or 5 after the course.

Figure 4: Percentage of Respondents Rating their Knowledge in Evaluation Topics a 4 or 5
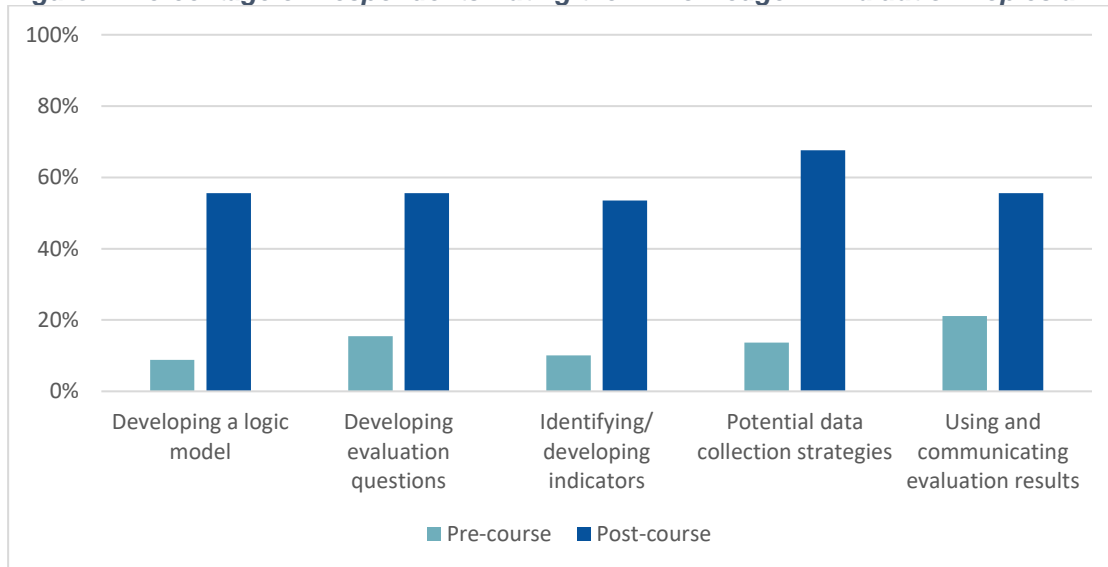
Participant Quotes

"I have some experience in conducting evaluations and evaluation planning; this course really helped me identify how to build on my current knowledge and resources to support ongoing learning."

". . . I feel I have a more concrete understanding of the subject area."

"Learnings around logic models and analyzing data were the most valuable."

"I think I have gained knowledge that will stick with me long past 6 months to provide better evaluations and project proposals in my work."

". . . I actually know what a logic model is (and the difference between a logic model and theory of change)!"

Course Elements with the Greatest Value

The evaluation survey asked participants to comment on the parts of the course that provided them with the most value. The elements identified were:

- Many participants mentioned small group activities and discussions as helping to increase their understanding of the material and enable connection and networking with other participants.
- Some participants highlighted the Learning Management System (LMS) and take-home materials as helpful resources for the course and for future reference in their work (e.g., information handouts, templates).
- Some respondents noted that the MURAL platform supported small group activities and increased engagement with the course content.
- Some participants indicated that the facilitator's teaching skills and understanding of and experience with evaluation added value to the course. For example, the facilitator was able to explain complex evaluation concepts using plain language and provide examples to illustrate concepts.
- A few participants found that the physical activity examples/case studies helped increase the relevance and applicability of the information.
- A few participants commented that having a combination of presentation style delivery and small group work helped support their learning.
- A few participants mentioned that they found value in opportunities to network and meet people from across Canada through course. Across all participants that responded to the evaluation survey, 69% agreed or strongly agreed that the course helped them to make connections to others in their field also doing evaluation work.

Specific topics that were most frequently mentioned by participants as being valuable included logic models/theories of change, data collection and analysis, communicating and using evaluation results, and developing evaluation questions.

Participant Quotes

"Getting a better overall understanding of the evaluation process from start to finish was of great value. As someone coming into this course pretty green, I felt a bit overwhelmed at times at the amount of information and the complexity of the evaluation process, however the group work and brainstorming activities were incredibly beneficial . . . [as was] having access to a multitude of valuable resources to assist me in the workplace when I leave the course."

"… meeting people from across Canada and learning about their experiences with the evaluation process. I also enjoyed learning and using the Mural...it was awesome."

"The group work we were able to do to actually go through how to do something and discuss stuff was quite impactful."

"Overall, I loved how this course was set up. The LMS [Learning Management System] and the in-person sessions supported each other. I am thankful for the resources you have identified in LMS and how you demystified "Evaluation"."

"[The facilitator] is very good at using plain language to explain the evaluation concepts. I think her knowledge and slides provided the most value. She was very good at incorporating our examples into the course material."

"…the number of great links/tools/resources to the information I can now use when completing work. I was struggling to know where to look for this information prior to this course."

"I was impressed with the virtual course, as they usually are more difficult to interact with than in-person, but I thought it was really well done for the virtual delivery!"

"I loved the course. Very well organized and delivered. Excellent balance and diversity of tactics to share information. It was exactly the information I needed. I can't think of any improvements."

Suggestions for Improvement

Participants were asked to comment on how the course could be improved. RPI regularly reviewed participant feedback especially after the first few courses were delivered, and incorporated lessons learned from participant feedback into future courses. Participant suggestions for improvement (each mentioned by a few individuals) included:

- Incorporate more teaching time on specific topics such as conducting surveys and focus groups, theory of change, quantitative data collection tools, and provide concrete examples.
  - *Evaluator note:* This was incorporated to the extent possible within the context of the 10 hours of live training time. Participants were also provided with relevant resources that they could explore further on their own time. One option might be to expand the course or offer additional optional modules on specific topics of interest to participants.
- Ask participants to review materials and complete 'homework' before each class to help participants prepare for each session and to increase engagement with the material.
  - *Evaluator note:* Specific tasks for preparation and homework for participants were added after the first couple of courses. However, this had varied success as typically it appeared that most participants did not take the time to complete the suggested pre-work. It is a good option to have available for those that would like to do more to support their learning, but given the small number of people that seemed to actually complete pre-work, it is not worth investing a lot of effort in this area.
- The use of technology was challenging for some as there were new platforms and several different websites to access (Mural, the learning management system, the Bench, Zoom).

- o *Evaluator note:* The facilitator offered to assist participants with trouble-shooting or provide a mini session to build familiarity with the virtual tools, although no participants requested this support during the course. Initially, use of the Bench was incorporated into the course activities, but in later courses that was discontinued in an attempt to keep the content more streamlined (fewer sites/platforms for participants to access).
- Offer more networking and sharing opportunities to learn about the work of others in the course.
  - o *Evaluator note:* Some of this was incorporated through small group work and large group discussion, but given the limited time in the live sessions and the content to be covered, only so much time is available for this kind of activity. This is also more challenging to support effectively in virtual courses vs. in person.
- Provide opportunities for participants to work on/apply the course learnings to their own specific evaluation plans.
  - o *Evaluator note:* Participants did have the opportunity to submit ideas for case studies/examples from their own work for the session on logic models and theories of change. It would be an added value to offer participants the opportunity to work on their own evaluation as 'homework' and submit this to the course facilitator for review and feedback; however, this was not feasible given the time/resources available for this course.
- Time of day matters to participant energy level and ability to participate effectively, and times early in the day were noted as preferable.
  - o *Evaluator note:* This was challenging as course times were typically only available in the afternoon and evening for those in the eastern half of the country in order to offer the courses at times that would work for all time zones across Canada (i.e., a course that started at 9 or 10 am in Ontario would be too early for those in BC). For future offerings it might be preferable to target some courses for eastern time zones and some for western time zones and provide more options for participation at different times of the day.
- The intensive course option (the full course offered each day over five days rather than once a week over five weeks) was overwhelming/too intense for a few participants, especially those that were new to evaluation.
  - o *Evaluator note:* In future it may be better to indicate that the intensive option is preferable for those with at least some starting knowledge/experience in evaluation. It could also be helpful to inform participants that they should block at least three hours a day for course participation (two hours for the session and one hour for prep and follow up) to ensure they have enough time to absorb the materials.

Impact on Evaluation Practice

The goal of the course was to increase the evaluation capacity of physical activity providers. In the course evaluation survey, participants were asked to share how they

thought the course would change their evaluation work in the future. The following changes were discussed:

- Many participants indicated that they will plan for and build evaluation into program development more intentionally and/or strategically.
- Many participants said they will implement new evaluation practices and concepts from course (e.g., evaluation questions, evaluation matrix, logic models) into both program evaluation activities and other planning work (e.g., strategic plans).
- Some participants said they will make changes/improvements to existing evaluation processes based on the learnings from the course (e.g., changing their data collection tools, more effectively communicating results).
- Some participants mentioned that they will approach evaluation in their organization with increased confidence and leadership. A few participants said they will advocate for evaluation in their organization's work.
- A few participants plan to find and participate in other opportunities to continue to build their evaluation capacity.

Participant Quotes

"It will take time, but I would like to implement data collection and evaluation for all of our programs. I'm looking forward to using what I learned!"

"I think my evaluation work 6 months from now will improve and my rec programming/ delivery will improve because of this course. I think that myself and coworkers will think twice before sending out the standard evals we have always sent out and really consider the things we need to know."

"By following the format taught, I will be able to ask the right questions, analyze the data received and then effectively report it. Not only will I use this framework on programming but also any projects."

"I will be implementing the knowledge used to create and revamp evaluation tools within my organization."

"I now intend to build/map out some logic models and evaluation questions for my specific areas of work, based on activities and outcomes identified in the project proposals. I think that in itself will really help to focus and wrap my head around the evaluation, without overcomplicating it. The course also inspired me in terms of the evaluation/data collection methods. I felt stuck in a survey rut when it came to identifying how we would consult program participants, and while I'm sure we will still do surveys, the course pushed me to think more creatively about data collection methods."

"I think it will be more top of mind with potential pathways for plans and realistic resources to support."

"I will have logic models for all program models and makes changes to how we currently collect data to ensure our data collection supports what we are attempting to achieve in outcomes."