

Summary of Findings for Eval^2 Focus Group with Fellows
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Background:

The Eval^2 focus group was performed on May 4, 2017 with 12 of 12 students from this year's cohort of Evaluation Lab Fellows. One student left early. The focus group was interactive in nature, so activities involved a variety of expression methods such as drawing, speaking, sharing with a partner, and individual writing. Questions were created to evaluate the following goal: The NM Eval Lab's Goal 1.1: "To support **students** in developing the knowledge, skills, and tools they need to design and implement program evaluations that reflect organizations' values and missions." Collaboratively, we decided on the following:

- a) What did the course feel like for students?
- b) What did students experience in course/curriculum vs. in practicum?
- c) What did students experience in relationships with organizations? What were the challenges and benefits?
- d) What did students learn from their mentors?
- e) What was the experience of working as a team member? (Was everyone valued, did everyone contribute?)
- f) What skills can be attributed to the students' participation in the lab?
- g) Would students recommend the program to other students?
- h) How could it be better?

Findings:

a) What did the course feel like for students?

The answer to this question was achieved through a drawing activity, where students could draw what the course felt like on a gingerbread person. Overall, students either felt that the course was overwhelming and confusing (often represented with question marks over the eyes or brain, or the brain be "fried"), represented by Figure 1. or they felt empowered, engaged, and stimulated by the course (represented by smiles, hearts, and feelings of success) as shown in Figure 2. In some cases, illustrated in Figure 3., students felt confused at first, but empowered in the second semester. Most students mentioned stress and exhaustion.

Figure 1. Student's experience in course (confusing and overwhelming)

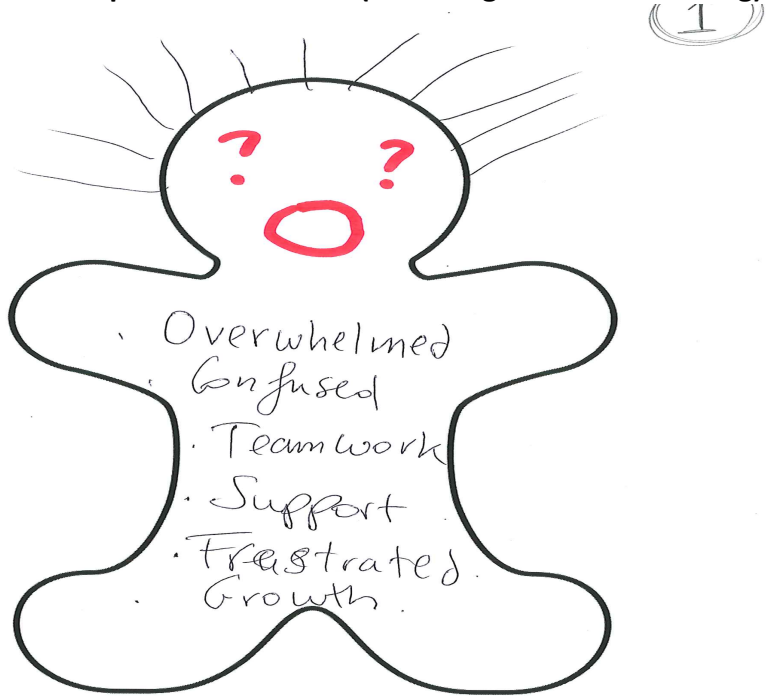


Figure 2. Student's experience in course (empowering & stimulating)

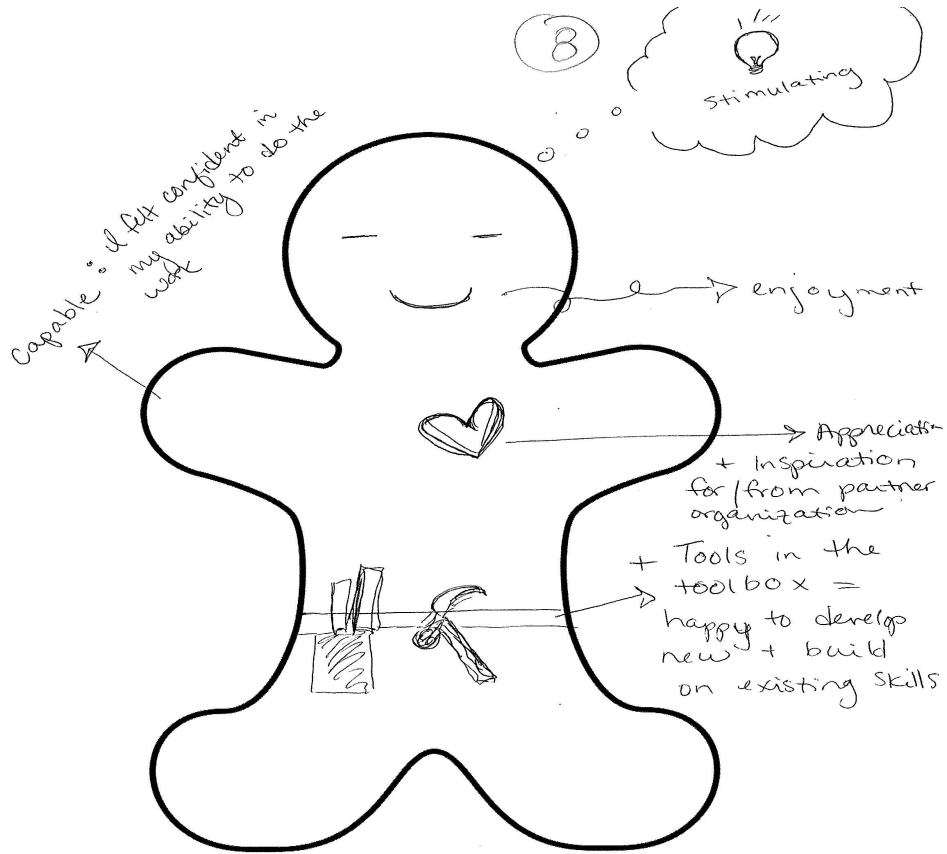
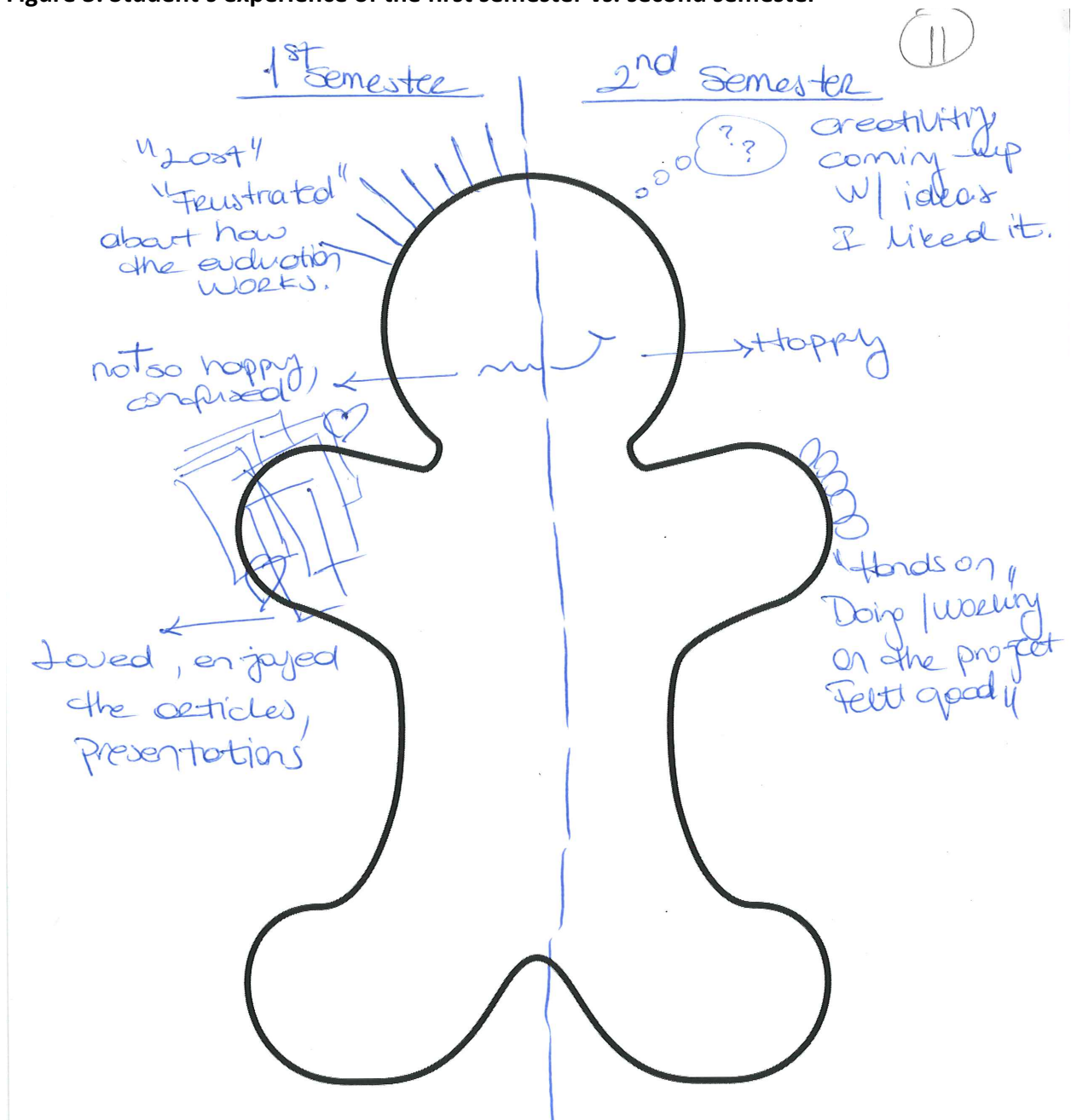


Figure 3. Student's experience of the first semester vs. second semester



The gingerbread person activity brought to light the knowledge difference between all participants, which was mentioned again in the focus group activities that followed.

b) What did students experience in course/curriculum vs. in practicum?

Students frequently highlighted guest presenters, conferences, workshops, and personal feedback from Sonia and Melissa on projects as benefits to the curriculum portion of the Eval Lab. Within the curriculum, students commented that the discussion board was not as

helpful and that having a diverse cohort meant **students were at different levels of understanding (some think it was boring, others think it was overwhelming).**

During the practicum portion of the course, students enjoyed working and building relationships with organizations and having information entrusted to them. However, students felt one of the more difficult parts of the practicum came from organization within the organizations (as in the organizations can be or seem disorganized). Overall, fellows reported communication between teams and organizations as the number one issue in the practicum.

c) What did students experience in relationships with organizations? What were the challenges and benefits?

By working with community organizations, students gained practical/real world use for academic/evaluation research, were able to bridge their academic training into the community, and felt proud to have an impact on the community. Students felt the biggest challenge in the relationship with the organizations was the time schedules (the fact that organizations are busy and scheduling was hard). Some also noted that it was hard to figure out what the organizations really wanted evaluated.

d) What did students learn from their mentors?

Overall, students responded very positively about their mentors, mentioning that their mentors helped them improve their writing skills, professionalism, time management, and presentation skills. Their biggest concerns about the mentoring process were that it was sometimes unclear who was responsible for what and some felt that all members of their team were not treated equally. One student mentioned frustration with the mentor by saying, “[I was] frustrated by the treatment from mentor in team. [I] felt she overstepped me every time and treated me as someone who was unintelligent.” There was no comment on how to alleviate this in the future.

e) What was the experience of working as a team member? (Was everyone valued, did everyone contribute?)

In most cases, responses about working as a team were positive. In the positive responses, students mentioned learning from their team, balancing the work, and feeling like they were contributing and supported. However, there were a few students who reported that there was frustration because they felt they were dominated by the other team members. Students also mentioned that the change in class schedules from one semester to the next was uncomfortable/inconvenient.

f) What skills can be attributed to the students’ participation in the lab?

The number one skill students attribute to their participation in the Eval Lab is communication. Students also highlighted data visualization, presentations, public speaking skills, excel skills, among a few others though communication was by far the most repeated. In Figure 4, the Wordle below, communication is evident as the greatest skill students attributed to their participation in the Eval Lab.



g) **Would students recommend the program to other students?**

Every student who answered this question, answered in the affirmative that yes, they would recommend the Eval Lab to a friend/fellow student. However, some mentioned they would only recommend if the suggested changes were made or would recommend but with the disclaimer that there is a lot of work, meetings, obligations, etc.

One fellow wrote, “I would [recommend it]. However, I would also let them know of all of the challenges. The organizations may not be easy to work with, working with a team can be great, but also challenging. All of the time requirements (site visits, poster presentations, etc). I would also say to not take more than 12 credit hours and not to do another internship while doing the Evaluation Lab. Not only for your sanity, but also to enable you to be more flexible.

Meanwhile, others were thankful for the experience they had:

“Yes, I would recommend the Eval fellowship to most people. It was a rich and helpful experience. Thank you.”

“Thank you for the blessing and opportunity to work with Eval Lab. The program and the facilitator, professors of the Eval Lab have made this experience a blessing. Pushing me harder to work and understand how to do research and organize with community organizations.”

h) How could it be better?

Here is what students really liked:

- Having a choice in aligning with organization
- Not feeling constrained by evaluation examples
- Site visits
- Mentors
- Melissa and Sonia
- Poster session
- Money/stipend (laughter) "but really it was one of the reasons I applied"
- Working with organization (will continue to work with them hereafter)
- Diversity of cohort
- Senior Fellows (helpful but not totally necessary—others who didn't have them didn't feel like they missed out)
- Happy hours with the organizations
- Guest presenters
- Data visualization

Here is what students suggest be done differently:

- Centralize group feedback on reports, maybe in a chain (one person at a time)
- Examples of evaluations could offer outlines to wrap head around what it [evaluation] could be
- Clearly state expectations for site visits ahead of time in class
- Change time of site visits (hard to fit around class schedules)
- Calendar should be published from beginning of semester to end with outside events (site visits, workshops, presentations, etc.)
- Should offer class time to discuss/introduce marginalization as institutional problem (not just mentioned as surface issue or demographic issue) --> "just as important as IRB training"
- Discussion boards need to be more specific if continuing to use "seemed like some people just responded because they had to, wasn't productive" (this is also repeated from the speed round of activities)
- Give option to choose partner/who you want to work with
- Workflows/materials outlines to support all levels of learning in class (came from discussion of some students thinking the course was too slow while others thought it was too fast/overwhelming)

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Returning to the goal of this focus group, to determine if the Eval Lab is meeting Goal 1.1 “To support **students** in developing the knowledge, skills, and tools they need to design and implement program evaluations that reflect organizations’ values and missions,” I believe the answer is yes. Though the students did have a few recommendations for improvement—they clearly felt the frustrations of working with overworked community organizations and in

teams—overall, they felt that the Eval Lab helped them grow in communication, public speaking, working with Excel, and presenting, among others.

Students enjoyed their work with the Eval Lab. In many cases, students felt stressed but also supported and by the end they were very proud of their products. It appears that **the stress and confusion did not prohibit students from performing well in the Eval Lab overall, since many reported that their organizations were very satisfied with the final product.** Students were also very thankful and very willing to recommend the experience to their peers. This is very positive because, while students may have found the course challenging, they ultimately felt it was a positive experience that caused them to grow.

On the other hand, some students didn't feel overwhelmed, and instead felt the curriculum of the course moved too slowly and was boring at times. Students noticed that there was a large divide between those who already knew a lot about evaluation and those who were starting from scratch. In the case that students felt underwhelmed, they suggested that perhaps workflows or additional material could be supplied to those that are struggling in order to support all levels of learning in the class. This was a topic that surfaced in drawing, writing, and speaking in pairs.