



Sustaining a Networked Approach to Evaluation Capacity Building in Canada: Insights from CES 2026

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Overview

For over a decade, the Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN) has brought together emerging scholars, community leaders, academics, and practitioners from across Canada to strengthen evaluation capacity in the early childhood field. In the last few years, our scope has broadened to the broader health, education, and social-serving sectors. This work was made possible by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Grant.

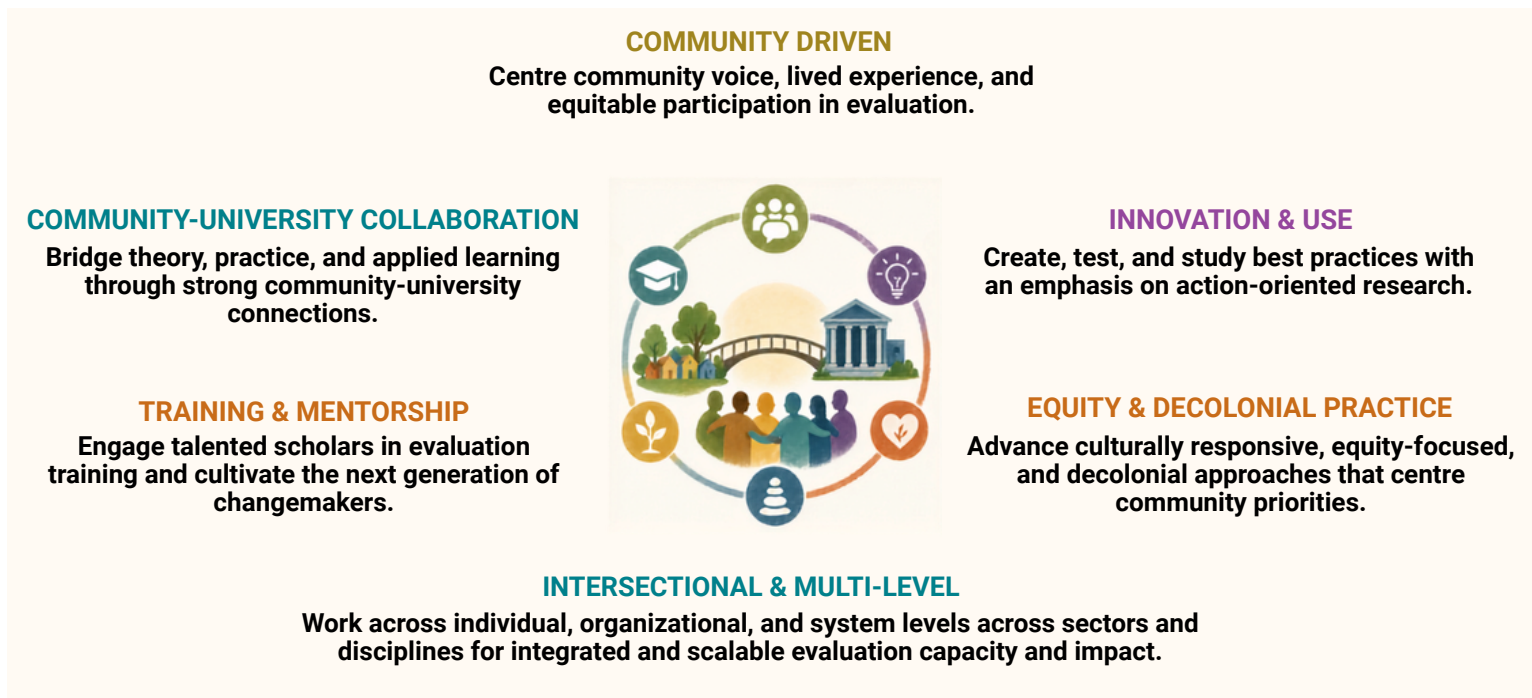


Figure 1. An illustration summarizing the Evaluation Capacity’s evaluation approach and niche areas

The ECN now enters into a period of transition, as we close the chapter on a 7-year SSHRC Partnership Grant funded initiative and envision a sustainable networked approach to evaluation capacity building. At this juncture, we are reimagining how the ECN will continue to be responsive to community, thrive, adapt, and drive systemic impact. Conversations about the future of the ECN have been underway for over a year and will continue into the coming months.

Celebrating Our Shared Impact

Since we came together as a network in 2018, we have had widespread impact on the evaluation field and community:

- Trained **400+** emerging evaluators, equipping them with the knowledge, skills and confidence needed for effective evaluation in diverse community settings.
- Responded to **150+** community-based evaluation capacity needs through our experiential learning courses, such as UEval, a one-week intensive that has now been successfully offered eight times ([UEval](#)).
- Partnered with the refugee-, and immigrant-serving sectors to improve culturally responsive evaluations for newcomer communities ([New Canadians Health Centre](#), [Settlement Evaluation Hub](#))
- Co-hosted the [Evaluation Capacity Case Challenge \(EC³\)](#) four years in a row, with McGill University's Max Bell School of Public Policy.
- Formed the **Decolonial Evaluation Learning team** to promote learning about equitable, culturally responsive, and Indigenous-informed approaches to evaluation.
- Continuously developed and shared resources including webinars, newsletters, resource hubs. We built the [ECN repository](#), an online platform where we have created and curated over **600+** tools and resources for real-world evaluation.

Today, the ECN is actively deciding how to sustain and grow its programs and offerings to continue filling evaluation gaps and responding to emerging community needs in innovative and meaningful ways. Over the past year, we have examined the broader Canadian evaluation landscape, held ongoing conversations with collaborators, and worked through key strategic questions about priorities, partnerships, and direction.

What We Heard: ECN at CES 2026

In May, the ECN team attended the Canadian Evaluation Society's 2026 National Conference (CES 2026) in Edmonton, Alberta. Through many of our sessions and events, including leading edge panels, presentations, evening networking, and a thematic breakfast, we listened closely to real-world challenges facing the national evaluation community.

We heard about an evaluation system torn between traditional funder reporting and complex community realities. Representatives from government ministries, funding organizations, and community shared similar challenges with rigid “logic models” that oversimplify social realities and persistent pressure on non-profits to keep overhead costs low. In this climate, very few agencies bake evaluation into their project proposals, leading to depleting internal resources to gather, access, and use sector-specific data to make evidence-based decisions.

Despite these challenges, dialogue at the conference kept returning to the potential of collaborative innovation. Attendees suggested that the ECN is well-positioned to address these gaps by moving away from isolated training and agency-level evaluations and toward a system-wide, network-based approach to evaluation capacity building in Canada. Government bodies and fellow capacity-building organizations expressed a desire to partner with the ECN to build new approaches that better support fundees in reporting meaningful evaluative information, rather than limiting them. Private evaluation firms identified an opportunity to partner with the ECN to access niche expertise, such as community-engaged design.

The main take-away from CES 2026 was that Canada's evaluation field has a shared hope for a partnership-driven future where evaluation can help resource-strapped community organizations navigate rising complexity and “do more with less.”



Image 1. Attendees of the ECN's Dine Around Town event



Image 2. Leading Edge Panel with the New Canadians Health Centre

Take-Aways from CES 2026: Strategic Opportunities

The Funder-Fundee Divide:

The ECN is positioned to enter into the gap between funders who aren't getting useful data and non-profits who are afraid to ask for evaluation budgets, designing customized frameworks that satisfy both.

Network-Scale Support:

There may be opportunity and interest for the ECN to pivot from training individual agencies to supporting sector-level cohorts and non-profit networks.

Request For Proposal (RFP)

Partnerships:

Private consulting firms are among the groups who may benefit from partnering with the ECN to access specialized expertise for RFPs, such as community-engaged approaches.

Student Talent:

By scaling experiential programs, like the highly successful UEval, the ECN can continue to create a new generation of community-engaged evaluators while providing capacity to resource-strapped groups at little or no cost.

Join the Conversation: Shape What Comes Next

CES 2026 highlighted a shared hope for an increasingly collaborative, partnership-driven evaluation field that is innovative and can "do more with less".

You are invited to share your insights, experiences, and questions as we keep this conversation going.

Share your thoughts:

Add your thoughts and ideas about the future of evaluation to our Jotboard:

- [Share your thoughts!](#)

Need support?

Submit a request for research or evaluation support through the [CUP Connect](#) portal, run by the ECN and the Community-University Partnership (CUP).

Stay updated:

Follow us on [LinkedIn](#) or email us at ecninfo@ualberta.ca to learn about joining our mailing list.