Where do we stand? Recent AEA member views on professionalization

Scott I. Donaldson

Claremont Graduate University, 123 East 12 Street, CA 91711, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The professionalization of evaluation continues to be debated at numerous conferences in the U.S. and abroad. At this time, AEA member views on the potential benefits and negative side effects of professionalization are essential as the discussion evolves. This study provides recent views on major topics in professionalization, including potential benefits, negative side effects, processes, competencies, and procedures. Results from in-depth interviews and an online survey demonstrate that AEA members view potential benefits of professionalization to be stakeholder trust, evaluator reputation and identity, while concerns about a potential negative side effect known as the "narrowing effect" (i.e., some evaluators will be alienated based on their background, competencies, etc.) were expressed by participants. These recent findings can inform the ongoing discussion of professionalization, and suggest new directions for future research on evaluation.

1. Introduction

In terms of conceptualizing evaluation as a profession, Morell (1990) suggested evaluation is a loosely knit group of practitioners with an ill-defined set of "core professional tenets." Seven years later, in his 1997 American Evaluation Association (AEA) presidential address, Leonard Bickman asserted the field of evaluation has a unique set of skills and theories but does not control who enters and/or practices the profession—essential aspects for defining a profession. He went on to conclude, "we need to move ahead in professionalizing evaluation or we will just drift into oblivion" (p. 8). Close to thirty years have passed since these assertions, and the evaluation community continues to have ongoing discussions about the benefits, potential negative side effects, and possible pathways for the AEA to take toward professionalizing evaluation. The aim of this paper is to highlight where AEA members currently stand on major topics in the professionalization debate, and provide informative directions for future research.

1.1. Socio-graphic and analytical approaches to professionalization

Sociologists have long debated the nature of professions, largely guided by the need to form occupations into professions (Meyer, 2016). Two schools of thought, in sequential order, emerged around the growing debate – the socio-graphic approach and the analytical approaches (i.e., structural-functional and power). Schmeiser (2006) outlined the universal socio-graphic elements of professionalization: professional expertise, professional awareness, supplier's monopoly, system inherent self-determination, and extraordinary rewards (see

Meyer, 2016 for definitions). However, defining relevant standards on each socio-graphic element presented challenges in terms of measuring performance, inspiring two novel analytical perspectives – the structural-functional and power approach.

The structural-functional approach focuses on the process of professionalization (e.g., expert-client relationship). For example, Meyer (2016) points out that clients grant autonomy, power, and respect to doctors in the medical profession, whereas the opposite is true in evaluation. That is, clients of evaluation services are more informed about details of the process and feel they can solve their own problems. This creates a driving force toward professionalization on the part of evaluators, addressing the need for scientific expertise in their expert-client relationships (Oevermann, 1996). On the other hand, the power approach analyzes professionalization from a political perspective, viewing professionalization not as an internal process, but as a result of external social relationships in the job market. Scholars that implement a power approach are interested in how some professions establish autonomy and expert power compared to others, and how this is managed both within professional organizations and between evaluators and clients. One key element of the power approach includes training and education, which provides a platform for practitioners to build knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to perform essential service-tasks (Meyer, 2016). In summary, the sociology of professions can encourage evaluators to think about professional beliefs and values; especially values that AEA wants to establish or embrace.

1.2. Possible pathways for the AEA – definitions and procedures in professionalization

Huse and McDavid (2015) outlined key mechanisms for facilitating professionalization that are possible pathways for the AEA to consider. The first procedure that has been discussed in evaluation since the 1990′s, and frequently implemented in higher education, is *accreditation*. Usually, accreditation is a mechanism for assessing university programs, led by an external panel that grades the institution on several specific criteria (e.g., faculty, courses, and student competencies). Upon receiving accreditation, the university program is granted a formal document indicating that it is accredited for a fixed period of time (Huse & McDavid, 2015). Another possible procedure is *certification*, which attests to a person's skills and competencies in a field, assessed by a professional society through formal examination (Huse & McDavid, 2015, p. 57). For example, the Human Resources Certification Institute's (HRCI) is an independent organization responsible for certifying HR professionals in their respective field.

Another procedure that has been used in the professionalization of evaluation outside the AEA is *credentialing*, which demonstrates that an individual has attained competence through a set of courses, experiences, and educational activities (see Canadian Evaluation Society, Professional Designation Program, n.d.). The educational requirement focuses on postsecondary schooling and professional development (e.g., graduate degree and training received at university), which may require judgment from a panel or professional society. Lastly, another procedure in professional societies is *licensure*. However, rather than a professional society or panel rendering a judgment, a license is awarded by states/provinces, branches of government, and legal jurisdictions. For example, The United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) is a three-staged exam for medical licensure in the United States. One must have a license to practice the profession and penalties are assessed for those practicing without one (Huse & McDavid, 2015, p. 57).

Seidling (2015) surveyed AEA members (N = 150, 15.3% response rate) about the feasibility, need, and potential of professionalization procedures in the AEA. Approximately 65% (n = 98) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a reason for certification/credentialing would be to improve the quality of the profession, 60% (n = 90) agreed or strongly agreed for the protection of consumers, and 60% (n = 90) agreed or strongly agreed that it would support the marketability of evaluators. Thus, a majority of AEA members already perceive associated benefits with professionalization; however, it unclear how AEA members view other major topics in the discussion on professionalization.

1.3. The role of evaluator competencies and professional development in professionalization

There currently exists 227 Voluntary Organization for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs), 170 of which are verified, that define standards, professional norms, and competencies of the evaluation profession (EvalPartners, 2017). These VOPE's serve as a pathway of communication between practicing evaluators and the outside world of evaluation consumers, providing information on recent professional developments. In general, evaluator competencies refer to the "knowledge, skills, and dispositions program evaluators need to be effective as professionals" (Stevahn, King, Ghere, & Minnema, 2005, p. 48), and while the AEA has yet to endorse an official set of competencies, there is an AEA Competencies Task Force responsible for drafting the AEA Core Evaluator Competencies (King, 2015). Montrosse-Moorhead and Griffith (2016) recently developed the first framework for assessing evaluation quality and credibility that could serve as a tool in promoting professional evaluation. The Checklist for Evaluation-Specific Standards (CHESS) functions as a list of standards that can be used to report evaluations, including contextual information, systematic inquiry activities, and stakeholder involvement, among others. This checklist is attempting to introduce quality control in evaluation practice, a clear aspect undergirding the growing discussions on professionalization in the AEA.

In tandem with the development of competency frameworks include a host of training and professional development opportunities open to evaluators in the AEA. LaVelle and Donaldson (2010), 2015) found enormous growth in the amount of professional opportunities available to practicing evaluators. For example, there currently exists 48 training programs in the United States, including university programs (i.e., certificates, masters, doctorates), professional developments workshops, webinars, etc. that serve as the site to educate professional evaluators (LaVelle & Donaldson, 2015). In addition, Galport and Azzam's (2017) recent gap analysis identified field-specific competency training needs, focused on the improvement of existing training, education, and professional development programs offered to professional evaluators. Evaluator competencies and professional development offerings are central to the establishment of evaluation as a profession and toward advancing discussions on professionalization in the AEA. However, before discussions continue within the AEA it is useful to garner insight from professionalization efforts outside the AEA.

1.4. Recent developments in professionalization outside the AEA

EvalPartners/International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) defined professionalization as "a gradual, long term, context dependent process" contingent on six pillars (see EvalPartners, 2016, pp. 83, for entire list). In line, several evaluation associations around the world have adopted strategic initiatives to advance professionalization efforts in an attempt to promote professional evaluation. Some of these evaluation associations include the Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association (ANZEA), United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), and Australasian Evaluation Society (AES).

One interesting framework is The European Evaluation Society's (EES) Voluntary Evaluator Peer Review (VEPR) initiative to promote professionalization. The goal of VEPR is to ensure safe evaluation practice for clients of evaluation services (Oksanen, 2016, September 2), and is a peer review process focused on continuous learning and capability development, rather than testing and assessment. The VEPR process aims to pair the reviewer with the reviewee based on common evaluation roles, experiences, and competencies. The VEPR views professional development as a crucial pathway in professionalization, and uses peers as facilitators of reflexive practice. The EES VEPR can serve as a potential framework for the AEA to consider in ongoing professionalization discussions, in addition to the major professionalization effort in the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES).

1.5. Insights gleaned from professionalization in Canada

Discussions regarding the professionalization of evaluation in the AEA to date have required hypothesizing about "what might be" should the field embark upon this path. However, current discussions can benefit from initial efforts to professionalize the field within Canada and lessons learned from formal evaluations of the effort. After several decades of debate about professionalization, the CES officially launched the Credentialed Evaluator (CE) professional designation in June 2009 with the goal of promoting ethical, high quality, and competent evaluation in Canada (Kuji-Shikatani, 2015). As part of the process, applicants are asked to provide evidence of a graduate-level degree, evidence of two years of full-time evaluation work, and indicators of education and/or experience related to 70% of the five competency domains (Canadian Evaluation Society, 2010b).

In 2015–2016, a formative evaluation was performed on the designation effort with an emphasis on five principles: effectiveness, relevance/utility, efficiency, unintended impacts, and sustainability. This evaluation provides early information about the extent to which several

unintended and intended outcomes are arising as well as insights about the procedural challenges that actually arose when professionalization was initiated. Fierro, Galport, Hunt, Codd, and Donaldson, (2016) found that the CE designation made strides toward achieving near-term intended outcomes. For example, CES members that received the designation thought it improved the level of awareness and recognition as a profession among key target audiences. In addition, the application process helped CES members learn how to improve their work as a process of participating in the CE designation. However, some unintended side effects did arise, such as cost/time associated with completing the application process and the fact that employers/commissioners thought it was "nice to have," while considering multiple factors when making decisions about evaluators.

Fierro et al. (2016) suggested several important recommendations for ensuring the sustainability of the CE designation moving forward: (1) *tailor the offering to increase value among evaluation consumers,* noting that participants often suggested a tiered system (i.e, beginner, intermediate, advanced) would enhance the value of the CE, (2) *improve the transparency of the process* to ensure that the applicant review process is of the highest quality, and (3) *create a clear value proposition for consumers of evaluation services* to increase the uptake and demand for the CE designation.

1.6. Potential benefits and negative side effects of professionalization

Arguments for the potential benefits of professionalization include its role in establishing boundaries by clearly delineating the unique knowledge and skills of evaluation and in doing so creating a unique professional identity distinct from similar professions such as auditing and quality management (Altschuld, 1999a,b; Jones & Worthen, 1999). Additional hypothesized benefits of professionalization include affording the field an opportunity to exemplify shared values that are articulated in the standards and guiding principles, as well as develop trust from consumers of evaluation services (e.g., stakeholders such as program participants and commissioners; Beywl & Harich, 2007; Levin-Rozalis & Shochot-Reich, 2009). Among other proposed benefits are improving the quality of the profession and maintaining the overall reputation of the field (Fierro et al., 2016; Schwandt, 2015).

While the arguments in favor of professionalization are compelling, Jacob and Boisvert (2010) and more recently Schwandt (2017), raise concerns about potential negative side effects and some unexamined issues. One suggested negative side effect of professionalizing evaluation is that it would homogenize the field (e.g., harmonize ethical principles, standards, and competencies)—professionalization could have the unintended effect of deeming one approach to evaluation superior to others and in doing so could narrow evaluative approaches that we have to draw upon as professional evaluators (Altschuld & Austin, 2005). Scholars have also highlighted some potential procedural challenges that evaluation may face in embarking upon professionalization. One of these challenges relates to defining satisfactory professional norms that would apply to evaluators across multiple contexts (Jacob & Boisvert, 2010), and agreeing upon how that could vary within and between sociocultural contexts (Dent, Bourgeault, Denis, & Kuhlmann, 2016, p. 6).

Furthermore, Schwandt (2017) contends that discussions on the topic of professionalization have over emphasized technical aspects of evaluation (e.g., competencies, capacity building, etc.), and ignored the *professional ethos of evaluation.* He argues that professional evaluation should be grounded in the ideas of democratic professionalism, focused on societal good and steeped in co-owned, collaborative work with consumers of evaluation services. Moreover, Scriven (M.S. Scriven, personal communication, June 29, 2017) forewarns of legal problems with the professionalization of evaluation in the AEA, under the circumstances that evaluators decide to pursue legal action against unfavorable professionalization outcomes. As such, it is clear at this time that we need to gain a contemporary understanding of where AEA

members stand on the topic of professionalization as it continues to evolve, further exploring potential benefits and negative side effects.

2. The current study

The purpose of this study was to highlight recent trends on major topics in the discussion on professionalization that can be used to inform decision-making and inspire further research on evaluation. This study extends previous work by interviewing a diverse range of AEA members on major topics in professionalization and administering an AEA member survey. The following research questions were examined:

Research question 1: To what extent do AEA members view potential benefits of implementing a professionalization system?

Research question 2: To what extent do AEA members view potential side effects of implementing a professionalization system?

Research question 3: How do AEA members rank the possible professionalization procedures the AEA could consider in a professionalization system?

Research question 4: Which competency domains do AEA members believe are the most and least important for including in a professionalization system?

Research question 5: Which components of the professionalization process do AEA members consider to be the most and least important when considering a professionalization system?

3. Method

3.1. Design

This study used a multiphasic mixed methods design to answer the research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Integration of the findings was done sequentially between the interviews and survey, and concurrently between the survey and open-ended responses. More specifically, phase-one (exploratory pilot) helped inform the survey instrument and open-ended questions administered in phase-two. The first phase was an exploratory qualitative phase that used in-depth interviews to explore the research questions. Phase-two included the administration of a primarily quantitative survey instrument with open-ended questions. The questions included in this survey were designed to provide answers to the five research questions. Open-ended questions were paired with each of the five research questions on professionalization to help explain trends identified through the analysis of quantitative survey data.

3.2. Sampling strategy and survey structure

3.2.1. Phase-one (exploratory pilot)

Maximum variation sampling strategies were used to recruit a convenience sample in phase-one of the study. The purpose of maximum variation is to document a diverse range of perspectives to gain a better understanding of the importance of the research questions within each subgroup of evaluators, as well as identify themes that cut across subgroups (Patton, 1990a,b). In order to obtain diverse perspectives, the researcher selected ten prospective participants from his professional network at Claremont Graduate University, including two AEA Past Presidents, CEO of evaluation firm evaluation, Director of evaluation firm, two evaluation practitioners, auditor, manager at a credentialing agency, evaluation PhD student, and critic of professionalization who were invited to take part in a 15–30 minute phone interview. After sending two follow up emails a week and then two weeks later the final sample consisted of six participants, including two AEA Past Presidents, CEO of evaluation firm, PhD student, practitioner, and an auditor. The researcher used a semi-structured interview protocol to address central topics in the professionalization of evaluation (Altschuld & Engle, 2015). For example some questions in the interview asked, "Do you believe professionalization can improve the quality of

evaluation in the AEA?" Are there any unintended negative side effects of professionalization? The purpose of phase-one was to identify key themes that cut across respondents, regardless of their background or views on professionalization, as well as explore emerging themes. This information was used to create a survey instrument that was administered to a sample of the AEA member population.

3.3. Phase-two (survey and open-ended questions)

A simple random sample of 1000 AEA members was used in phase-two of the study. Of the 1000 AEA members who were initially sent the survey and followed up with one week later, the final sample consisted of 131 participants (13.1% response rate). The items on the survey consisted of agreement or importance statements on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree/Extremely unimportant*) to 5 (*Strongly agree/Extremely important*), or in the case of professionalization procedures, participants were asked to force-rank from 1 (*best option*) to 6 (*worst option*). The statements on the survey were created from themes developed in phase-one and recommendations from extant literature (Altshuld & Austin, 2005; Jacob & Boisvert, 2010; Jones & Worthen, 1999; Kuji-Shikatani, 2015). There was also an open-ended question on each major topic to allow participants to elaborate on their quantitative responses. Responses on potential benefits ($n = 35$), negative side effects ($n = 34$), professionalization processes ($n = 50$), procedures ($n = 62$), and competencies ($n = 38$) were content analyzed and compared with the quantitative findings. Before the survey was administered it was piloted to 12 colleagues to garner feedback on the face validity, content validity, and construct validity of the instrument.

3.4. Survey structure

The survey started with a table that outlined the possible *procedures* the AEA could consider, based on McDavid and Huse's (2015) key terms and concepts in professionalization. The participants were then asked to rank-order the six options (from best option to worst option), and comment on why they choose to rank the procedures in that way. The next seven survey items asked about the potential *professionalization processes* (e.g., incorporate a tiered system – beginner, intermediate, advanced, etc.) building off evaluation results from the CES evaluation (Fierro et al., 2016). Again, participants were given an open-ended question to include their thoughts on the quantitative items pertaining to the professionalization process. Next, participants were asked which of the *Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators* would be important in a professionalization system (Galport & Azzam, 2017; Stevahn et al., 2005), and how they thought the competencies could best be incorporated in a professionalization system (if at all). The researcher then included seven items and an open-ended on the potential benefits of professionalization, using insight from extant literature and results from phase-one of the current study (Fierro et al., 2016; Jacob & Boisvert, 2010; Seidling, 2015). Lastly, participants were asked four items and an open-ended question on the potential side effects of professionalization, based on emergent themes from phase-one (see Table 1). The final part of the survey asked participants for any final insight they may have followed by ten demographic and background questions.

3.5. Analysis procedures

3.5.1. Qualitative analysis

Qualitative software package Atlas.ti was used to code for a priori themes from the interview protocol (e.g., thoughts on professionalization), and themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews (e.g., the narrowing effect). Secondary codes were further identified based on common responses to the primary codes. For example, under "thoughts on professionalization (primary code)" there were 12 quotations on the secondary code "outcomes focused." This same procedure was used on

the open-ended questions from the survey instrument to help explain trends in the data. Please see Table 1 for more information.

3.5.2. Quantitative analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the survey data. Basic descriptive statistics were used to analyze the background and demographic characteristics and percent agreement/importance for each professionalization topic. For example, the percent important describes the respondents who selected 4 or 5 on a 5-point importance/agreement Likert-type scale. For the forced-rank order question, percent best option were respondents who ranked one or two on a six item force rank-order scale, and percent worst option were respondents who ranked five or six on a six item force rank-order scale.

In order to analyze the relationship between evaluator background characteristics and their views on professionalization, a series of chi-square tests were conducted. The grouping variables were based on majority representation within groups, especially when sample sizes were small. For example, the grouping variable for education was doctorate degree versus less than doctorate degree (i.e., associate, bachelors, masters), and internal evaluator versus external evaluator for professional identity. The grouping variable for age was evaluators over 50 years old and evaluators under 50 years old.

4. Results

4.1. Exploratory pilot

As shown in Table 1, four primary codes emerged from the exploratory pilot interviews. Respondents "thoughts on professionalization" emerged as most frequently quoted primary code, with the largest associated secondary code (i.e., 12 quotations) being outcomes focused. The primary code "personal insights" had the largest associated secondary being the intended impact of professionalization (i.e., 6 quotations). In terms of the side effects primary code, the largest associated secondary code was a potential "narrowing effect" whereby professionalization could potentially alienate evaluators based on their background characteristics, competencies, etc. Other codes that emerged were the importance of including a grandfather clause and benefits in the short run versus the long run. Primary and secondary codes from the exploratory pilot helped define potential benefits, negative side effects, processes, competencies, and procedures, which then informed development of items on the quantitative survey. For example, the themes of a potential narrowing effect, expenses, and legal ramifications that emerged in the interviews were developed into statements for the survey (e.g., see Table 3).

4.2. Survey demographics

As demonstrated in Table A1, The majority of the sample (75.4%, $n = 89$) identified as female, and 71.6% ($n = 83$) identified as white. In terms of evaluation field of practice, the most represented group was nonprofits (24.4%, $n = 29$) followed by higher education (16.8%, $n = 20$). The professional identity of the majority of respondents was internal evaluator (33.3%, $n = 39$) or external evaluator (30.8%, $n = 36$). Most respondents reported an age of 30–39 (29.9%, $n = 35$), 40–49 (23.1%, $n = 27$), or 50–59 (20.5%, $n = 24$). Most respondents reported high educational attainment, having either a master's (51.7%, $n = 61$) or doctorate (40.7%, $n = 48$) degree. Their methodological training was primarily focused on mixed methods (51.7%, $n = 61$) and quantitative methods (21.7%, $n = 32$). Lastly, the majority of respondents (57.8%, $n = 37$) reported they spend 75–100 percent of their time at work conducting evaluations.

Table 1
Exploratory Pilot Summary Table.

Primary Codes	Secondary Codes	Selected Quotations
Thoughts on Professionalization	Outcomes focused (12) Necessary for identity (9) Market driven (6) Inclusive (6)	"Without a doubt, I think it is the future and the best way to improve the quality." "It signals to the market that we are serious."
Personal insights	Intended Impact (6) Process (5) Identity (3)	"The number one thing is trust from the public." "The CPA exam is like a police officer with a gun and a badge. It is a right of passage. Does evaluation have that?"
Side effects	Narrowing effect (4) Money (3) Legal problems (3)	"There is a risk of alienation that makes it inaccessible to others." "It will be contested and flawed; it is not fiscally responsible." "What happens when someone flunks? There is a legal problem."
Other	The importance of a grandfather clause for older evaluators (1) Benefits in the short run vs. long run (1)	

Note: The numbers refer to frequency of quotations on a given secondary code.

Table 2
Potential Benefits of Professionalization.

I think the following could be a potential benefit of professionalization…	Agreement n (%)	N	Selected Open-Ended Responses (*n* = 35)
Clear professional identity	114 (87.0)	131	"There is something to be said for defining the profession and upholding a consistent set of values."
Improved reputation for the field	109 (83.3)	131	"The biggest benefit will be improved reputation, and valuation of certified evaluators
Trust from the consumers of evaluation services (e.g., commissioners, stakeholders, program participants, etc.)	109 (83.3)	131	to potential commissioners or employers. I doubt that professionalization will eliminate "bad apples" in evaluation any more than it eliminates dead-wood teachers, mediocre lawyers, or poor quality CPAs."
Higher quality evaluation conducted in the long-term (5 + years)	97 (74.0)	131	"Take it slow and roll this out over years."
Clear value proposition for commissioners/employers of evaluation	88 (67.2)	131	"Clients that I've spoken with say they have had difficulty in the past with applicants to proposals claiming they are trained as an evaluator, but their experience has been that they put a survey together one time in the past and that they took a stats course. Similar to Project/Program Management (e.g., PMP designation), professionalization helps define evaluation as a specialty that requires developed skills rather than a task for administrative assistants. Helps add value to what we do."
Safeguard against poor evaluation	88 (67.2)	131	"The many pseudo evaluators abound in the profession will be exposed and forced to either quit or study evaluation proper. Evaluation currently is not respected because of these fly by night so called evaluators. I will rather live with few highly professional and respectable evaluators as members of AEA than many pseudo evaluators who abuse their AEA membership to get evaluation work and do shabby work."
Higher quality evaluation conducted in the short-term (< 5 years)	63 (48.1)	131	"It would be nice to have a higher confidence and create a higher confidence in others in the abilities of evaluators (that it's not a hokey, expensive way for an organization to get no useful results). However, a more regulated system can become very frustrating to new practitioners and may discourage them from being involved or taking their career very far."

[a]Agreement corresponds to the selection of a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale, where 1 is "strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree.".

4.3. Views on benefits and side effects of professionalization

4.3.1. Benefits

As demonstrated in Table 2, a clear professional identity was the most agreed upon potential benefit of professionalization (87%, *n* = 114), followed by improved reputation for the field (83.3%, *n* = 109), and trust from consumers of evaluation services (83.2%, *n* = 109). One respondent noted, "there is something to be said for defining the profession and upholding a consistent set of values," while another participant thought the biggest benefit would be "improved reputation and valuation for commissioners/employers." The open-ended responses on benefits of professionalization revealed similar sentiments. For example, ten participants made reference to improving the quality of the profession, and four revealed a desire to gain confidence from the public. On other hand, several participants suggested there are no benefits to field, and professionalization may even confuse matters further.

4.3.2. Side effects

The majority of respondents (77.7%, *n* = 101) thought a potential side effect of professionalization could be a narrowing effect (i.e., some

evaluators will be alienated based on their background, competencies, etc.) One participant stated, "professionalization can alienate or divide the evaluation community," while another alluded to the risk of shutting out good evaluators. Furthermore, thirty (*n* = 30, 88%) open-ended responses expressed concern about the "narrowing effect," highlighting the consequences of alienating evaluators with potential to be in the field. In contrast, several participants noted that if "legitimate core competencies are established, there shouldn't be a narrowing effect." Another potential negative side effect was the expense for AEA members (77.7 agreement, *n* = 101), wherein one participant stated, "who's going to pay for this?" Others concerns involved the AEA's capacity (i.e., available staff and resources) to review and assess applications. A theme that emerged in the open-ended responses concerned bias in the process. For example, several participants noted professionalization is a potential gateway for racism, sexism, and Ivy League elitism among other forms of bias. In addition, some participants expressed that people in the AEA who decide important competencies and how to measure them are the people who benefit from narrowing the field.

Table 3
Potential Side Effects of Professionalization.

I think the following could be a potential side effect of professionalization…	Agreement n (%)	N	Selected Open-Ended Responses (*n* = 34)
A narrowing effect (i.e., some evaluators will be alienated based on their background, competencies, etc.)	101 (77.7)	131	"Professionalization can alienate or divide the evaluation community if credentialing and licensing does not maintain flexibility, understanding and appreciation of the wide range of disciplines, skills, backgrounds, fields, etc." "High risk of shutting out good evaluators - especially those who come to the field with professional expertise in the sector and minorities."
Expensive for AEA members	101 (77.7)	131	"This would require a significant expansion of AEA staff capacity to review and assess applicants."
Not systematic/careful enough	62 (47.4)	131	"Excluding people who can do good work would be a terrible side effect. I also think that professionalization could be a gateway for racism, sexism, ivy league elitism and other forms of bias." "Rather than being not systematic or careful enough I would anticipate it being unnecessarily complex and overdone."
Legal problems for the AEA	45 (34.4)	131	"If a lot of requirements were added beyond my job duties, I would need to do them on my own time and I do not have the capacity for that. I would likely terminate my AEA membership and search for a different professional organization that brought value to my work for my organization and could reasonably be accomplished during the work day."

[a] Agreement corresponds to the selection of a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale, where 1 is "strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree.".

4.4. Views on pathways for the AEA

4.4.1. Procedures

As seen in Table 4, the majority of respondents thought the best option to consider was certification (54%, *n* = 68), followed by credentialing (45.2%, *n* = 57), and a combination of procedures (41.3%, *n* = 52). On the other hand, an overwhelming percentage of respondents thought licensure (76.2%, *n* = 96) was the worst option for the AEA to consider. One respondent noted, "licensure seems too burdensome and difficult to implement."

4.4.2. Process

In alignment with the recommendation offered in the evaluation of the CES credentialed evaluator designation (Fierro et al., 2016), the majority of respondents (48.1%, *n* = 63) agreed the AEA should incorporate a tiered system. Several respondents noted the importance of including all levels of evaluators in the process (e.g., junior evaluators, experts, etc.). In contrast, one participant suggested labeling evaluators could be misleading and impose too rigid a system, whereas offering sector-specific credentials makes more sense. Other important views were around a fast-track system (46.6%, *n* = 61) and not hiring an external agency (11.5%, *n* = 15). Table 5 displays AEA members' views on the professionalization processes. Themes that emerged in the

content analysis reflected the desire for the professionalization process to be inclusive, optional, and focused on growth opportunities. Other participants suggested testing strategies, such as a written exam, board review, performance assessment, and short-form exam.

4.4.3. Competencies

Consistent with recent findings on the most important evaluator competencies (Galport & Azzam, 2017), the majority of respondents (90.9%, *n* = 199) thought methodology/systematic inquiry activities should be included in a professionalization system. One respondent even stated, "except for methodology and systematic inquiry activities, NONE of these should be incorporated." Evaluation and project management was also perceived as highly important (89.3%, *n* = 117). For example, one participant stated "All the training in the world will not make a great evaluator if you have no interpersonal skills, no project management abilities and do not truly understand the point of evaluation." On the other hand, 32.9% (*n* = 43) of respondents thought personal dispositions/attributes should be included, with one participant noting their low mark for this item in the scale. Findings for views on evaluator competency domains are shown in Table 6. The content analysis revealed scattered opinions on the professional competencies. For example, several participants noted the importance of including competencies, yet agreement on which competencies are important,

Table 4
Professionalization Procedures.

The AEA should consider…	Best option n (%)	Worst option n (%)	N	Selected Open-Ended Responses (*n* = 62)
A CERTIFICATION system	68 (54.0)	28 (22.3)	126	"I think any professionalization process must have "teeth" in that it does effectively differentiate between the qualified and not or under-qualified. That's why I'm in favour of certification over credentialing."
A CREDENTIALING system	57 (45.2)	24 (19.0)	126	"Credentialing would allow the recognition of skills regardless of how/where they were developed."
A COMBINATION of procedures (e.g., accreditation for universities and credentialing for individual evaluators)	52 (41.3)	27 (21.4)	126	"This is a diverse field so a mix of measures will work best." "My ranking of "combination" first and my subsequent rankings reflect the diverse needs of professional evaluators." "I am in favor of a combination of accreditation and credentialing. Given the wide variety of skill sets and approaches under the rubric of evaluation, I don't see how certification or licensure would work."
An ACCREDITATION system	36 (28.6)	27 (21.4)	126	"How about just an accreditation system and leave it at that?"
Not implementing a professionalization system	28 (22.2)	71 (56.3)	126	"I think the more rigor the better."
A LICENSURE system	11 (8.7)	96 (76.2)	126	"Licensure seems too burdensome and difficult to implement. I believe it would be best to start with credentialing."

[b] Best option corresponds to respondents who ranked 1 or 2 on a 6 item force-rank order scale, where 1 is "worst option and 6 is "best option.".
[c] Worst option corresponds to respondents who ranked 5 or 6 on a 6 item force rank-order scale, where 1 is "worst option and 6 is "best option.".

Table 5
Professionalization Processes.

I think the AEA should…	Agreement n (%)	N	Selected Open-Ended Responses ($n = 50$)
Incorporate a tiered system (e.g., beginner, intermediate, advanced, expert)	63 (48.1)	131	"I believe its key to offer multiple avenues for accreditation, to account for junior individuals coming into this field and for expert-level evaluators that have a wealth of experience and training. For more seasoned evaluators, credentialing should be viewed as an opportunity to continue growing in the field, not a qualifier." "I would not want to see high barriers to basic credentialing. The idea of different levels would allow people to choose how far they want to go."
Incorporate a fast-track system (i.e., streamlined application process)	61 (46.6)	131	"Need to have professional recognition processes for various specialties and career stages."
Require everyone, including expert evaluators, to participate in a professionalization system	60 (45.8)	131	"Initially, the process should focus on transparency and inclusivity but be rigorous and challenging to demonstrate immediate value to the public and the evaluation community. Experienced evaluators should see value in the process."
Customize the process to each sector of work	47 (35.9)	131	"Labeling evaluators using a hierarchical system (beginner, …expert), rather than offering credentialing based on diverse needs may be misleading and could impose too rigid a system. Offering various tracks for different sectors makes much more sense. Also, instituting a way to highlight an evaluator's key competencies may be useful."
Professionalize based on a portfolio system (e.g., evaluations conducted, publications, etc.)	41 (31.3)	131	"It needs to consider the wide range of experiences of potential applicants."
Incorporate a peer review system for new applicants	37 (28.2)	131	"I like the ideas above of peer review and for assessments to be based on portfolios. Probably there would have to be one general AEA professional designation for evaluators, but I think it would be helpful to somehow establish credentials in different sectors/skills. e.g., if someone is an expert in education vs. technology, or quantitative analysis vs. data visualization."
Hire an external agency to conduct the application process	15 (11.5)	131	"Needs to be done by outside/external group. Peer reviewed or expert review may cause bias and unfair reviews. The external would provide a more even "playing field."

[a]Agreement corresponds to the selection of a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale, where 1 is "strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree.".

and why, deserves more attention in future research.

4.5. Views on professionalization and evaluator background characteristics

Chi-square tests of independence revealed several significant relationships between respondents' views on professionalization and highest degree earned, professional identity, and age. There were no significant relationships between respondents' views on professionalization and gender, ethnicity, evaluation field of practice, or methodological training.

4.5.1. Benefits

There was a significant relationship between respondents' highest degree earned and views on the benefits of professionalization $\chi^2(1) = 4.468, p = 0.035$. Evaluators who earned less than a doctorate (i.e., associate, bachelors, & masters) viewed higher benefits with professionalization than evaluators with a doctorate degree. The association was small to moderate (Cohen, 1988), Cramer's $V = .194$. Finally, there was a significant relationship between the most represented professional identities (i.e., internal vs. external evaluator) and views on the benefits of professionalization, $\chi^2(1) = 4.701, p = .030$. Internal evaluators viewed lower benefits with professionalization than external

evaluators. The association was moderate (Cohen, 1988), Cramer's $V = .250$.

4.5.2. Side effects

Results showed that there was a significant relationship between evaluators age and views on the side effects of professionalization, $\chi^2(1) = 4.503, p = .035$. Evaluators who were under 50 years old perceived there to be higher side effects with professionalization than evaluators who were over 50 years old. The association was moderate (Cohen, 1988), Cramer's $V = .245$.

5. Discussion

This study offers information about recent AEA member views and extends previous work by examining the potential benefits, negative side effects, procedures, processes, and competencies related to professionalizing evaluation. Results from in-depth interviews and an online survey inform the evaluation community as to where its membership currently stands on these important topics.

AEA members view the most important potential benefits of professionalization to be improved reputation for the field, trust from consumers of evaluation services (e.g., commissioners, stakeholders,

Table 6
Evaluator Competency Domains.

The following competency should be included in a professionalization system…	Importance n (%)	N	Selected Open-Ended Responses ($n = 38$)
Methodology/Systematic inquiry activities	119 (90.9)	131	"Except for methodology and systematic inquiry activities, NONE of these should be incorporated."
Evaluation and project management	117 (89.3)	131	"Project management, especially understanding p/m language, is really important."
Professional practice	104 (79.3)	131	"Performance assessment like other professions."
Evaluation theory	94 (71.8)	131	"As noted above, knowledge of and experience in evaluation theory is critical. If courses do not include this, then they should not be listed!"
Interpersonal skills	91 (69.5)	131	"All the training in the world will not make a great evaluator if you have no interpersonal skills, no project management abilities and do not truly understand the point of evaluation."
Context-specific knowledge	65 (49.6)	131	"Many evaluators work in partnerships that provide support for their own expertise while benefiting from the content expertise of others."
Personal dispositions/attributes	43 (32.9)	131	"Personal attributes should not matter in terms of professionalization. Doctors aren't certified or licensed based on their interpersonal skills or personal dispositions."

[a]Agreement corresponds to the selection of a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale, where 1 is "strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree."

program participants), and a clear professional identity. These sentiments were stronger than what was observed in previous work by Seidling (2015), and point toward the growing attractiveness of a professionalization scheme among a sample of AEA members. Moreover, views on the potential benefits of professionalization were dependent on evaluator education and professional identity. For example, evaluators without doctorate degrees and who primarily worked in internal versus external roles viewed higher benefits. More research is needed to understand how a professionalization scheme might impact various subgroups of evaluators.

The participants also expressed concern about several potential negative side effects of professionalizing evaluation. There was consensus that a "narrowing effect" could occur, whereby evaluators that possess adequate talent to contribute to the evaluation community are alienated based on a set of criteria (e.g., background, education, competencies). On the other hand, several respondents commented that the whole point of professionalizing evaluation is to achieve a narrowing effect, by clearly stating professional competencies. Furthermore, it was found that evaluators under 50 years old were more concerned about potential negative side effects than evaluators over 50 years old. In line, findings from both the interviews and survey revealed inclusivity and flexibility should be integral components of professionalization if it is going to be successful in the AEA. Thus, future work might investigate the balance between quality control and inclusivity in the professionalization discussion.

AEA member views on the procedures and processes yielded several insights. First, participants found licensure to be the worst option out of all the procedures. Second, and consistent with Fierro et al. (2016), was the mention of a tiered system (beginner, intermediate, advanced, etc.) in a professionalization scheme. One participant highlighted that "its key to offer multiple avenues, to account for junior individuals coming into the field and for expert-level evaluators that have a wealth of experience and training. For more seasoned evaluators, it should be viewed as an opportunity to continue growing in the field, not a qualifier." Thus, inclusivity and flexibility should be integral components of professionalization if it is going to be successful in the AEA.

In terms of the evaluator competency domains, the vast majority of AEA members in this sample thought systematic/methodological inquiry and project management were the most important competencies for a professionalization scheme. One respondent suggested that if professionalization is implemented in the AEA, "it must have teeth, maintain rigor, and add value to the evaluation community and public trust." Galport and Azzam's (2017) research yielded similar views on the importance of systematic inquiry and project management for training evaluators, which further demonstrates the role of technical expertise and project management in evaluation.

Content analysis of the open-ended responses helped explain statistical trends and reveal AEA members' deep views, complex opinions, values, and criticisms of professionalization. One key insight, also described in the quantitative findings, included the juxtaposition of perspectives on the "narrowing effect." On one hand, evaluators believe you can't weed everyone out, especially young professionals with talent and passion. On the other hand, some evaluators suggested the "narrowing effect is the whole point of professionalization," because not just anyone should be able to call themselves an evaluator. Other evaluators fear the professionalization system will be elitist and bureaucratic in nature. Finally, a "needs for the field" theme emerged whereby seven participants expressed the need to address multiple group needs if professionalization is going to be successful. Other needs included getting membership involved, particularly high profile evaluators, and ensuring that the process is cost-prohibitive. While the findings of this study provide some of the most recent empirical information on professionalization, the results should be viewed with caution. For example, purposive sampling strategies used in the interviews and the low sample size of the survey raise concerns about generalizing the results to the entire AEA membership.

5.1. Implications

It is clear from this research that some practicing evaluators in the AEA believe professionalizing evaluation is a viable option. Their views on creating a clear professional identity, reputation for the field, and trust from the consumers of evaluation services demonstrate the attractiveness of a professionalization system in the AEA. However, there are also concerns that professionalizing evaluation can have unintended negative side effects that could restrict talented evaluators from entering the field. For example, people who enter the field of the evaluation do not always study to become evaluators. Instead, they come from an array of backgrounds (i.e., geographic locations, industries, work experiences, etc.) and it is important to capture this diversity of perspectives as evaluation becomes more established as a profession. Thus, further discussions on professionalizing evaluation should make clear for whom, why, and under what conditions a professionalization system best serves. Additionally, while this study suggests growing consensus in favor of professionalizing evaluation, there are still many evaluation professionals who are undecided about whether moving the profession in this direction will ultimately improve practice. For example, thoughts on professionalization procedures showed that evaluators are still unclear on how each type of professionalization mechanism could improve the quality of their evaluation work. Nonetheless, more research is needed to better understand AEA member perspectives to more accurately depict where the evaluation community stands.

5.2. Informative directions for future research

The findings from this study suggest several informative directions for future research. First, more research on evaluation (e.g., focus groups, interviews) is needed to solicit perspectives from a diverse group of AEA members on the topic of professionalization. If a "narrowing effect" does indeed serve as a barrier to a potential professionalization system, it is important to learn from which subgroups of evaluators this is most relevant. A great place to start would be the AEA TIG's (Topical Interest Groups). Future research would also benefit from perspectives of evaluators who view the "narrowing effect" as a good thing in professionalizing evaluation. That is, research on why some evaluators believe a professionalization structure will prevent unqualified evaluators from committing malpractice. Second, interviews with commissioners of evaluation would help the AEA better understand the demand for a professional designation, and whether or not a professional designation would be suitable for hiring practices. Third, it would be useful to interview experts in neighboring fields to understand how a professional designation would work from an operational perspective. For example, the CES professional designation and HRCI competency-based HR certification could glean insight into the time and resources needed to build a professionalization infrastructure. Finally, it is imperative that the AEA acknowledge that professionalization is a long-term process and should continue to be studied carefully, leveraging insights from research and evaluation done outside of the U.S. (see Fierro et al., 2016).

6. Conclusion

As demand for knowledge on professionalization continues to grow in the evaluation community, more systematic research on evaluator and other stakeholder perspectives will be needed. It is clear from this sample that AEA members see potential benefits being associated with professionalization. However, there is also consensus that potential negative side effects loom if a professionalization system does not incorporate input from as many relevant stakeholders as possible. Future research should expand on these findings to include the voices of other stakeholders with the intention of developing a deeper understanding of how best to further develop the field of evaluation and enhance its positive impact on society.

Appendix A

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Table A1
Survey Respondents Demographic Characteristics.

Demographic variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	22	18.6
Female	89	75.4
Declined to state	7	5.9
Ethnicity		
Asian American/Asian	7	6
Black/African American	7	6
Decline to state	6	5.2
First Nations Peoples (or, Native American/Alaskan Native	1	.9
Hispanic (or, of Spanish Origin)	3	2.6
Latino	3	2.6
Multi-racial	4	3.4
Other	2	1.7
White/Caucasian	83	71.6
Evaluation field of practice		
Adult education	2	1.7
Childcare/early childhood education	4	3.4
Evaluation methods	3	2.5
Government	8	6.7
Health/public health	12	10.1
Higher education	20	16.8
Human services	3	2.5
K-12 education	14	11.8
Non-profits	29	24.4
Other	17	14.3
Public policy/public administration	3	2.5
Highest Degree		
Bachelor	9	7.6
Master	61	51.7
Doctorate	48	40.7
Primary professional identity in evaluation		
College faculty	3	2.6
External evaluator	36	30.8
Multiple	23	19.7
Graduate student	7	6.0
Internal evaluator	39	33.3
Other	4	3.4
Researcher	5	4.3
Age		
20–29	12	10.3
30–39	35	29.9
40–49	27	23.1
50–59	24	20.5
60–69	15	12.8
70–79	4	3.4
Methodological training		
No formal methods training	6	5.1
Focused on quantitative methods	32	27.1
Focused on qualitative methods	9	7.6
Focused on mixed methods	61	51.7
Other	10	8.5
Percent of work spent on conducting evaluations		
0–24.99	8	12.5
25–49.99	9	14.1
50–74.99	10	15.6
75–100	37	57.8

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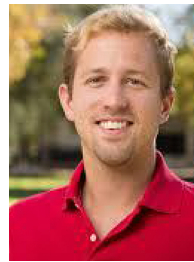
Scott I. Donaldson is a doctoral student in Evaluation and Applied Research Methods with a co-concentration in Positive Organizational Psychology at Claremont Graduate University. He received his BA in Psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles, and his MS in Organizational Psychology from the University of Southern California. His interests include research on the professionalization of evaluation science and positive psychological approaches to organizational interventions. Scott is currently an Adjunct Professor at Chapman University where he teaches inferential statistics and research methods.