



Learning from PACE:

Program Staff Reflect on Participation
in a Rigorous Evaluation

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PACE Overview

- Separate evaluations of 9 promising employment and training approaches, within a common conceptual framework: career pathways
- Impact study used a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design
 - Eligible applicants assigned at random to treatment group (access to PACE program) or control group (business as usual)
 - Differences in outcomes between the two groups can be directly attributed to the program intervention
 - RCTs considered the gold standard for program evaluation
- PACE team recruited programs to participate
 - Non-HPOG programs volunteered

Sub-study Purpose and Methodology

- Documenting why programs participate in an RCT can provide insight into how programs perceive benefits and challenges
- Methodology
 - Telephone discussions with 8 programs in late 2017
 - Topics covered
 - Factors weighed in decision to participate, including perceived benefits
 - How program identified and addressed challenges, including getting stakeholder buy-in
 - Unanticipated benefits of participating
 - Advice for other programs

Perceived Benefits

- Opportunity to build evidence of the program's effectiveness
 - Inform program modifications
 - Demonstrate value of continued funding
 - Build on promising evidence from earlier, smaller evaluation

The evaluation team talked to us about random assignment being the gold standard, which I hadn't seen at a community college before. More importantly, I knew our population needed to be studied, and there was no data to show us that years of experience using certain strategies were successful or not, and we needed it.

Getting Stakeholder Buy-in

- Key challenge: addressing internal and external stakeholder concerns about random assignment (RA)
- Promising strategies include:
 - Identifying a champion
 - Getting buy-in from frontline staff who will be responsible for study intake and RA:

We went to each of the sites and met with the entire local teams. We had a presentation on why we were doing this, the long-term benefits, and creating opportunity to demonstrate powerful impacts. We framed the long-term gain versus short-term pain, and long-term funding.

Getting Stakeholder Buy-in (2)

- Facilitate stakeholder meetings
 - Hear and address concerns, discuss misconceptions about RA, explain the benefits of the study, acknowledge emotional challenges associated with RA
- Have proactive and frequent discussions with referral and service partners:

We had some regional meetings to educate community partners on what we were doing and why we were doing it. We did this with a lot of care and attention. We had two in-person group meetings with 30 or so people from the city, colleges, development groups, and other non-profits.

Getting Stakeholder Buy-in (3)

- Programs that partnered closely with their local TANF programs put in dedicated work to keep the partnership strong
- One program worked with the TANF provider to agree on a process for referring applicants and informing them of the evaluation:

The process took longer than was expected, but it was worth it. If we didn't take that time, we would have lost momentum with referrals.

How Programs Addressed Ethics of RA with Stakeholders

- Program ultimately will be able to serve more participants
 - Foundation funding to scale up or serve participants in a different community
- RA is a fairer way to distribute program slots
 - All eligible applicants have the same chance to being selected; first come first served penalizes those who learn about the program later than others
- Control group is not barred from receiving services
 - Survey found that many control group members did receive education and training
- Design intake & RA procedures to address concerns
 - Bring study procedures in house from partners

Unexpected Benefits

- Positioned program for larger state initiative
- Improved relationship with local partners:

[The study] ...changed the program, [the] relationship with the county. The process of it was beneficial regardless of anything else.

- Effected important change at institution
- Improved internal research and evaluation capacity:

Prior to PACE a lot of the resources were coming from foundations, and we did evaluations to get funding. This has been a shift: we are doing evaluation now because we believe its valuable, not because of funding.

And Advice to Programs Considering an RCT

- It is hard but worthwhile work
- There is value in the process regardless of the outcome:

If the outcomes don't come out as expected, you listen to them and learn from them to make the program work.

- Transparency and communication are key
- Use available resources: the evaluation team's expertise, funding, partners and programs that have gone through it before

Where to Find Additional Information

Websites

For more information on the PACE evaluation and publications:

- <http://www.career-pathways.org/acf-sponsored-studies/pace/>
- <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/pathways-for-advancing-careers-and-education>

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