

Reaping the Benefits of Evaluation: Self-Assessment in the Service Field

Public/Private Ventures
December 2000

INTRODUCTION

Last year, in Tucson, Arizona, a seventh-grader named Monroe began the school term by not attending school. He was absent for most of September and, not surprisingly, was well on his way to earning straight "F's." Meanwhile, in Jackson, Mississippi, Sammy, a quiet, bespectacled second-grader, was showing up regularly for school but making little progress in his special education classroom. He could not read a sentence without stopping to ask for help and seemed to comprehend almost nothing of what he did manage to read. And in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a shy third-grader named Teresa was also struggling with basic literacy skills. In fact, she had so little confidence in her ability to read that one adult said she seemed to be "afraid of the words."

School can be a defeating experience—or a rewarding one. Teachers are constantly seeking creative ways to address the academic needs of their students; and where poverty is high, resources are few and classes are large, addressing those needs can be an ongoing challenge. In response to that challenge, interested community volunteers are offering their time and energy to help students improve their skills, and schools are turning to volunteer-based tutoring, mentoring and other enrichment programs to assist the children and youth who are most likely to benefit from the additional one-to-one support.

Measuring the success of such programs might seem like a complex undertaking. Without a bottom line like "widgets produced" or "revenue earned," how is it

possible to know the extent to which a program is making a difference? In fact, though, the "bottom line" for youth-serving programs can often be phrased as some version of the same straightforward question: Have the life possibilities of the young people who participate been improved? For Monroe, the first step toward improving those possibilities might simply be attending school. For Sammy, that first step would include becoming competent with phonics so he can decode words without endless struggle and begin to concentrate on what those words mean. And for Teresa, it would require developing enough self-confidence in her ability to read so she is no longer paralyzed by her fear of failure.

Program operators, and the volunteers with whom they work, know through experience and observation that they do make a difference in the lives of at least some of their participants. Why, then, should they expend scarce financial and human resources to conduct formal evaluations, resources that might appear to be better spent on the provision of services? The answer, according to Rob Tietze, director of Philadelphia's Experience Corps, a program that provides intensive reading tutoring to children, is to "strengthen delivery

This is the third in a series of reports that examines approaches to uniting the efforts of paid national service participants and unpaid volunteers. Drawing on information generated through Public/Private Ventures' Spectrum of Service project, the reports are intended to illuminate the sometimes overly theoretical debate about the relationship between paid and unpaid service providers and the professional staff with whom they work, and to contribute useful information to program practitioners.

of services and increase delivery of services." In other words, ongoing self-evaluation is an essential "good practice" for understanding what is working well in your program and what components need to be strengthened; for improving outcomes for children and youth; and for giving your program legitimacy in the eyes of funders, partners and the community and, thus, generating increased support.

A SPECTRUM OF SERVICE

From 1998 through 2000, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) conducted the Spectrum of Service (SOS) demonstration project. Funded by The Ford Foundation, SOS examined the design and implementation of locally developed strategies at seven sites around the country for blending the work of paid and unpaid service providers in order to strengthen supports and outcomes for children and youth. All of the sites provided their services in schools. Four (Campus Link, in Mississippi; Leaps in Literacy, in Massachusetts; Philadelphia Experience Corps; and Volunteer Maryland) focused their efforts on tutoring primary-grade children whose reading skills were well below grade level. The other three (Connect Tucson; Providence Summerbridge, in Rhode Island; and the San Francisco AmeriCorps Collaborative) provided mentoring and tutoring to youth who were attempting to negotiate their way through the difficult middle-school years.

Acknowledgments

Linda Jucovy wrote this report, with much assistance from Kathryn Furano. They are indebted to staff at the SOS sites for their candor, insights and generous sharing of materials. They would also like to thank a number of people at P/PV for their help. Corina Chavez and Brian Kantorek conducted interviews at the SOS sites; Amy Arbretton, Jean Grossman, Gary Walker and Karen Walker contributed valuable feedback on drafts of the report; and Maxine Sherman proofread and produced it. The Ford Foundation generously funded this report and the Spectrum of Service project.

During the demonstration period, all the sites worked to improve the delivery of program services in order to enhance outcomes for participants. Several sites also increased the delivery of services, either by expanding to additional schools or by boosting the number of volunteers at a given school so they could reach more children and youth. This report explores ways that the sites used evaluation strategies and findings to help them achieve these multiple objectives. Its purpose is to draw on the sites' experiences to demystify the goals and processes of evaluation and to suggest approaches that can be readily adapted by other programs.

P/PV did not require that the SOS sites take a particular approach to evaluation. In fact, they had great freedom in deciding how they were going to use the funding they received through the project; they were not required to apply it to strengthening their evaluation practices. As it turned out, however, the sites took advantage of the funding to focus an increased amount of fiscal and staff resources on evaluation. The fact that all seven sites made this decision independently of one another suggests a recognition on the part of the field of the usefulness, and growing importance, of thoughtful evaluation strategies.

PLANNING APPROACHES TO EVALUATION

Program evaluation need not be complex and burdensome, but it does require a systematic planning process. As the SOS sites have demonstrated, using self-evaluation to collect essential information begins by asking (and answering) a few basic questions concerning "who, what, when, why, and how":

1. *What do you and your staff want to learn about your program?* What are the key questions you want the evaluation to answer?
2. *Why do you want to know it?* What are the purposes of the evaluation? Who are the audiences for the evaluation findings?

3. *What data do you need to collect?* What can you learn from data you are already required to collect for funders? What additional data will you need?
4. *How will you collect the data?* What are the best tools for gathering the data you need? When will you collect the data? Who will collect the data?
5. *How will you analyze the data so it provides useful information?* Who will be responsible for conducting the analysis?
6. *What will you do with your evaluation findings?* How will you get the information to external audiences? How will you use the information to strengthen your program?

Building on their responses to questions such as these, the SOS sites have developed a range of approaches to evaluation, depending upon their program structure, components and goals. The following pages explore a number of these approaches for measuring outcomes, gauging the strength of program elements, and learning from and using all of this information.

IDENTIFYING AND MEASURING OUTCOMES

The most fundamental information anyone wants to know about your program—funders and potential funders, partners and potential partners, volunteers and potential volunteers, and staff of the program itself—is "does it work?" What are the outcomes for children and youth who participate? How does the program make a difference in their lives?

While the answers to these questions will vary depending upon program goals, each of the SOS sites has identified the concrete outcomes it wants to measure. Connect Tucson, for example, aims to increase the number of youth connected with mentors in the

Tucson community and to have those mentoring relationships lead to positive changes in the youth's lives. To accomplish these goals, it has facilitated the creation of six Partnership Collaboratives—clusters of agencies, schools, neighborhood groups and businesses that develop or strengthen mentoring initiatives in their communities.

Connect Tucson collects ongoing data to measure its progress in increasing the number of mentors, and each Partnership Collaborative (with technical assistance provided by Connect Tucson) is responsible for defining the specific outcomes for youth that it wants to achieve through its mentoring program and collecting data to measure its own progress in those areas. Thus, the Sunnyside School/Native American Education Program, one of the Partnership Collaboratives, has such goals as youth's increased school attendance, improved grades and more positive interactions with peers. The tools it uses to measure progress toward those concrete outcomes include school records; reports from teachers, parents and peers; mentor progress reports; and youth self-reports. This two-level approach to evaluation allows Connect Tucson to capture both the breadth (the number of mentor-youth matches) and depth (the outcomes for youth) of its accomplishments.

Other SOS sites, with their own goals and program structures, have found the following strategies to be effective for developing a clear picture of their achievements.

Use a combination of methods to assess outcomes for participants.

Two of the SOS sites—Leaps in Literacy and the Philadelphia Experience Corps—have also been programs of the Corporation for National Service's Seniors for Schools initiative. That initiative worked with Project STAR (Support and Training for Assessing Results, a technical assistance provider in evaluation) to develop a multi-tool approach for

capturing the progress made by the children who were tutored. These tools included:

- *Standardized reading tests administered to the children before tutoring began and at the end of the school year.* Experience Corps used the Jerry Johns Literacy Assessment, while Leaps in Literacy used the Basic Reading Inventory (BRI) for its pre- and post-tests. In addition, Leaps administered the BRI part-way through the year and shared those results with interested teachers.
- *Surveys of teachers.* In order to understand benefits for children beyond the numerical increase in their reading scores, Experience Corps and Leaps in Literacy administered a survey to teachers whose students were matched with tutors. The survey asked about changes in such areas as self-confidence in reading, attitudes toward reading, writing skills and active participation in class. To capture some of the nuance and richness of the outcomes, there was also space for teachers to write in more detail about changes they observed in the children. To learn still more about growth in the students, Experience Corps has also conducted focus groups with the teachers.

Each of the sites also tried an additional approach to gathering information about outcomes for the children. Leaps in Literacy sought to add to its understanding of what the tutoring had accomplished by collecting what program director Melissa Gartenberg describes as "affective data" from the children—including, for example, how they feel about reading and their ability to read. Experience Corps informally surveyed the children's parents and guardians when they attended program breakfasts at the school. According to director Rob Tietze, these "oral surveys" were intended to find out whether the program's outreach efforts to parents had led to increased involvement with their children's reading and whether the children seemed more interested in books and were reading more at home.

What many of the adults spoke about, however, was their own desire to enroll in a literacy program—an important piece of information and one that led Experience Corps to try to identify adult literacy programs in the community.

Explore alternative approaches for collecting data.

In order to prove that the positive outcomes achieved by children and youth were a result of their participation in the program, several of the SOS sites explored the possibility of conducting control group studies. In such studies, outcomes for youth who participate in a program are compared to outcomes for comparable youth who are not in the program. However, as the sites discovered, control group designs are expensive and difficult to implement. In addition, schools are often reluctant to agree to them because it would mean withholding services from youth in the comparison group.¹

Using multiple tools to collect outcomes data—for example, the combination of standardized test scores and teachers' observations that Experience Corps and Leaps in Literacy employ—is one effective approach for accumulating convincing evidence that a program is successful when it is not possible to conduct a control group study. Mississippi's Campus Link AmeriCorps program recently tried yet another approach.

Until this year, Campus Link had numerically measured children's reading gains by having AmeriCorps members (ACMs) administer a pre- and post-test, called the Informal Reading Inventory, to each tutored student. While the results were consistently positive, the program wanted to find a more sophisticated approach that could indicate the extent to which the reading gains were actually a result of being tutored.

To accomplish this, Campus Link contracted with an external consultant, the University of Mississippi Center for Educational Research and Evaluation (UMCERE), which has expertise in the assessment of literacy

outcomes. UMCERE, in turn, trained a team of graduate students to administer the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test to a random sample of the children who were being tutored. Using data from the Gates-MacGinitie pre-test administered to the students in November 1999, the researchers developed an "expected" post-test score for each participant in the sample: an estimated level of achievement that each child would be expected to reach *without* tutoring.

In April 2000, the same children were administered the post-test. After analyzing the test results, the researchers compared students' actual reading improvement against the level they could have been expected to improve if they had not been tutored. The results were highly positive; and while the researchers note that the study cannot lead to a "definitive conclusion," it is highly likely that the differences between the expected and actual scores can be attributed to the effect of the tutoring.

While developing and implementing this new evaluation was a complex process, it has been more than worth the effort. Director Tom Schnaubelt notes that "the pre-and post-testing used to be very informal, with the people who were tutoring also administering the tests." The new approach, he says, "added a new level of legitimacy" to the program's demonstration of success.

Measure the benefits for teachers and schools.

Programs that operate in schools have found that positive outcomes can extend beyond the children and youth who are receiving one-to-one help from their tutor or mentor. In part, this is because students selected for the program are often precisely those students whose low skill levels and/or behavior problems have required a great deal of additional attention from their classroom teacher. A single student's improved skills or classroom behavior can, in fact, benefit everyone in the class because it means the teacher has more time to devote to other students. In addition, having the programs in the schools means

that the volunteers and paid service providers become a presence in the school. Whether they are AmeriCorps members, retired adults, college students or residents of the community, their presence may have a positive effect on the school environment.

To capture these additional benefits, the Project STAR teacher survey administered by Experience Corps and Leaps in Literacy also asked teachers whether, for example, the presence of the tutors had an effect on their classroom management or their ability to target instruction to specific student needs. That survey, and a survey with somewhat different questions that was administered to principals and non-teaching staff, also tried to assess whether there were benefits to the school as a whole. Since in both of these programs, the tutors, who are primarily retired adults, are a visible and ongoing presence in the school, the surveys asked, for example, whether the program had contributed to increased student respect for older adults and to positive changes in student behavior throughout the school.

Because of its particular goals, Volunteer Maryland takes a different approach to measuring its benefits for schools. See the sidebar on the next page for a discussion of its evaluation methods.

Measure the outcomes for service providers.

Yet another category of outcomes that can be important for programs to identify concerns positive changes for service providers which, in turn, can ultimately have benefits for society. For example, the primary goal of Providence Summerbridge is to prepare middle-school students to enter and succeed in college-preparatory high school programs, thus greatly increasing the likelihood that they will move on to college. Middle-school students who participate in Summerbridge attend an intensive summer school for two years, as well as participate in academic support and enrichment activities during the school year. Providence Summerbridge measures several outcomes for the middle-school students—including positive

WHAT THEY DO

VOLUNTEER MARYLAND: MEASURING LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

Volunteer Maryland (VM) places AmeriCorps members in nonprofit organizations, government agencies and schools across the state to create effective volunteer programs or strengthen existing ones. Its goal is to ensure that these volunteer programs thrive long after the AmeriCorps members' term of service has ended.

The ACMs who are placed in schools focus on developing a program where volunteers provide tutoring to children, and VM works with each of the schools to implement a strategy that measures the outcomes for the tutored students. In addition, at the schools and its other partner sites around the state that host an AmeriCorps member, VM administers a series of surveys that measures its success in building a sustainable volunteer program.

Before the ACM's placement begins, the partner site completes an initial "Volunteer Program Survey" which asks about that organization's current number of volunteers, how many hours they serve and what services they perform. The survey also asks about the organization's current satisfaction with its volunteers and its ability to manage them. A follow-up survey administered at the end of the ACM's placement asks the same questions and also explores changes in specific elements of the organization's volunteer program, such as recruitment and training, the quality of volunteers' services and the organization's ability to access resources for its volunteer program.

To track longer-term changes in both the size and quality of the volunteer program, each organization completes a similar annual survey for three additional years. To help ensure that it will be able to collect this ongoing follow-up information, VM has each organization commit to completing these surveys when they sign their original partnership agreement.

changes that take place as a result of their participation in the summer sessions, their rate of acceptance into college-preparatory high school programs and their rate of matriculation at colleges.

But Summerbridge also has an important secondary goal: to motivate people to become interested in teaching as a career. To accomplish this goal, it hires college and high school students to teach in its summer program for middle-school students, and those teachers receive intensive training and ongoing support throughout the summer. Summerbridge administers a survey to them at the beginning and end of the summer to measure the extent to which their involvement in the program did, in fact, make them more interested in pursuing teaching as a career. Programs like the San Francisco AmeriCorps Collaborative similarly administer a pre- and post-survey to their AmeriCorps members to assess, among other things, the percentage who are planning to enter a career where they will be involved in service.

While the sites that primarily recruit young adults as service providers are interested in outcomes related to career choices, the programs that engage older adults in service typically have as a goal improving the quality of life for their volunteers. Leaps in Literacy has explored progress toward this goal by surveying its senior volunteers about items that include changes in their feeling of connection to the community, their self-confidence and their belief in their own capabilities. During its pilot phase in the mid-1990s, the Philadelphia Experience Corps participated in a study that used pre- and post-service surveys to measure changes in the senior volunteers' physical health and cognitive ability.

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PROGRAM ELEMENTS

As anyone who runs a mentoring or tutoring program knows, the actual delivery of services is, in reality, the ultimate step in a long series of efforts. Programs have to recruit, train, support and retain their volunteers and other service providers. They have to form and maintain partnerships with other organizations; attend to a myriad of logistical issues, such as scheduling and transportation; and deal with the ongoing problem of funding. Anything that goes off-course along the way can negatively affect outcomes for children and youth. A program might be forced to serve fewer participants because it is unable to recruit enough volunteers or because a partnership breaks down. It might serve the children and youth less effectively because the volunteer training is inadequate, the program offers little supervision or the partner is not providing the kind of support that is necessary.

The SOS sites have developed a range of both formal and informal approaches for assessing the effectiveness of key program elements. This section describes some of their strategies.

Collect information about the strength of your partnerships.

Programs operating in schools need strong relationships with the principal and staff in order to bring about the best possible outcomes for the students who participate. Several of the SOS sites formally assess the strength of each partnership at the end of the program year. Volunteer Maryland has each organization that hosts an AmeriCorps member complete a year-end "Satisfaction Survey" that asks, for example, if VM staff members were clear up-front about partnership requirements and responsive to

requests for information and assistance throughout the partnership year.

Experience Corps and Leaps in Literacy use a section of their year-end surveys to assess teachers' and principals' attitudes toward the partnership. Teachers, for example, are asked about their satisfaction with the volunteer tutors, communication with program staff, the level of their own role in the program, and logistical issues such as when and where the tutoring took place. Principals are asked whether they are satisfied with the level of communication with program staff and whether they want the program to return to their school the following year. Importantly, they are also asked whether they would contribute funding from their school budget to help support the program—the ultimate test of satisfaction with the partnership.

It is important to note, though, that while formal year-end assessments provide valuable information that can lead to programmatic adjustments which strengthen future partnerships, the information may come too late to save a struggling relationship or undo its negative effect on the delivery of services. Thus, several of the SOS sites also conduct regular, informal check-ins with their partners. Philadelphia Experience Corps, for example, has site coordinators who serve as liaisons between the schools and the program, and between the teachers and the volunteers in each school. Because they are present in the school, the coordinators are able to quickly identify problems that are arising that could create stress in the partnership. Connect Tucson, which facilitates partnerships among schools and community agencies, holds quarterly meetings with each of its six Partnership Collaboratives to review progress toward the Collaborative's goals and to identify any problems arising in the partnership. After each session, Connect Tucson writes a follow-up report that describes decisions made during the meeting, makes recommendations for any changes and outlines a plan of action.

Identify specific program elements you want to learn more about.

Depending upon their particular structure and goals, individual SOS sites have found it useful to focus special evaluation efforts on specific program elements. (See the next page for a description of Campus Link's efforts in this area.) The San Francisco AmeriCorps Collaborative (SFAC), for example, has been attempting to increase the number of adults who volunteer in the schools where its ACMs coordinate programming. To learn more about the volunteers' perception of their experiences, SFAC administers a "Volunteer Satisfaction" survey that includes questions about the usefulness of the training they received, the helpfulness of the ACMs at the site, whether their volunteer work makes good use of their skills and strengths, and their level of interest in the projects in which they are participating. There is also an opportunity for them to comment specifically on how they feel the volunteer experience could be improved. SFAC can then use this information to strengthen its volunteer program and, ultimately, recruit and retain larger numbers of volunteers.

In Philadelphia, the Experience Corps organizes its tutors into teams of 7 to 10 members and places each team in an elementary school. The site believes that the more effectively each team functions as a cooperative group, the more effectively each member will function as a tutor and the better the outcomes will be for the children. To measure the current level of team strength and understand how the teams could be improved, the site is giving volunteers a survey called the "Group Development Questionnaire" that was designed by the Adult and Organizational Development Center at Temple University. The survey includes statements like "The goals of the group are clear" and "Members tend to go along with whatever the leader suggests." Respondents score each statement on a scale of 1 ("never true of this group") to 5 ("always true of this group"). The scores ultimately reveal how effectively

the group is functioning as a team and allow staff to examine the correlations between team effectiveness and outcomes for the students that team members are tutoring. Experience Corps director Rob Tietze thinks the survey will ultimately lead to program improvement. "The important thing," he says, "is to feed this [the survey results] back to the troops"—the volunteers themselves.

CONCLUSION: USING EVALUATION TO STRENGTHEN PROGRAMS

During an interview about one of the SOS site's evaluation strategies, the program director described the site's multi-faceted approach to assessing outcomes and key program components. "What are you planning to do with all the information?" he was asked. He laughed. "Send it to funders," he said. "Put it on the shelf." He was joking—but not entirely. Programs' data collection efforts are often a direct response to funders' reporting requirements, and thus, programs do not always think about how they could use those data for their own purposes as well. And even when they initiate their own evaluation efforts because they want to learn more about what they are actually accomplishing and how they are accomplishing it, programs sometimes do not take advantage of the information they acquire.

The SOS sites have developed a variety of systematic approaches for using their evaluation findings to strengthen the delivery of services, build support for their program and, ultimately, expand the reach of their services to greater numbers of children and youth. While the strategies vary, the principle underlying them is consistent: decide early on what data are important to collect and how you are going to use those data. Who are the audiences for the information? How are you going to get the information to the audiences? This section describes ways in which the sites have applied that principle to take advantage of their evaluation findings.

WHAT THEY DO

CAMPUS LINK: USING EVALUATION TO BUILD CONSISTENCY

Mississippi's Campus Link AmeriCorps program works to increase reading comprehension of the state's elementary school students by creating one-to-one tutoring relationships between school children and college students from 18 campuses across the state. At each campus, a team of AmeriCorps members recruits volunteer tutors and coordinates the program. The tutors include full- and part-time AmeriCorps members, Education Award Only (EAO) members, work study students and other campus volunteers. Because Campus Link operates at so many sites and utilizes a wide range of tutors, it has faced two particular challenges: (1) allowing autonomy at each campus while maintaining consistent high quality across the campuses; and (2) ensuring that the entire range of tutors is equally reliable and effective.

Established in 1996, Campus Link has developed and refined a comprehensive evaluation plan that measures outcomes for children who are tutored and examines key program components that can contribute to, or impede, those outcomes. Included in this plan are a number of strategies that allow the program to both look at the successes of campuses individually and to compare the campuses so program staff can see where, and how, to step in and offer help.

To evaluate the tutoring initiative at each college, Campus Link staff visit each site to attend a brief presentation by that campus's AmeriCorps leadership team. The presentation covers areas such as recruitment techniques, successes and challenges; lessons learned regarding local literacy needs; training initiatives; and information related to book distribution and books read by elementary school students. To collect additional data, Campus Link administers a survey to principals or lead teachers at each of that campus's partnering elementary schools. The program also uses data it is required by funders to collect for the added purpose of evaluating individual campuses' strengths and weaknesses. For example, its "Tutor Survey," which provides required data on such items as the effectiveness of tutor training, also provides insight into which campuses need to strengthen their efforts in this area. Using all of this information, Campus Link staff provide feedback to each site. They also identify campuses that are particularly effective in an area where other sites may be struggling (recruitment or training, for example) and then help those other sites adapt the effective practices.

Because Campus Link was also interested in learning whether there is any variation in the effectiveness of different categories of tutors, they recently conducted a study that correlated tutees' gains in reading comprehension with tutor type (full-time ACMs, part-time ACMs, EAOs, other volunteers) as well as with the amount of training tutors received. Not surprisingly, they found a positive correlation between the number of training sessions tutors attended and the level of improvement in tutees' reading comprehension, and they used these findings to support their call for a consistent level of training across the sites. They also found that one category of tutors (the EAOs) was significantly less effective. As a result, Campus Link is altering EAOs' role in the program so they do less direct tutoring and, instead, focus on organizing students in the college for service activities.

Use the findings to strengthen partnerships and other program elements, and to retain volunteers.

Earlier sections of this report described some of the ways the SOS sites feed evaluation findings back into their program to make ongoing adjustments. The importance of using these findings to strengthen program components cannot be overstated. In fact, the San Francisco AmeriCorps Collaborative hires an outside evaluator, who states that, "My best role is to be the cord of communication back to management about what people are saying." Whether she is collecting data through interviews with site supervisors, surveys of teachers or end-of-the-year focus groups with AmeriCorps members, she sees an important part of her job as analyzing the information and reviewing it with program management so they can make the adjustments necessary to operate more effectively.

Melissa Gartenberg, director of Leaps in Literacy, has found that surveys of teachers and principals at the program's partner schools are a particularly valuable source of information for "helping us adjust our program." The findings, she says, allow Leaps to understand what school personnel "perceive as positive in terms of program implementation" as well as what areas, such as program-school communication, need to be strengthened. Leaps also makes sure that the volunteer tutors learn about the evaluation findings, particularly the outcomes for the children who are tutored. Gartenberg notes that the volunteers "are very interested in the test scores. They want to know they are being effective, that they are making a difference."

Use the findings to recruit new partners and volunteers.

Potential volunteers and partners want to team up with a program that has solid accomplishments. Melody Schneider, former director of Connect Tucson, says, "People like to hear about numbers. It makes things

real for them." Potential business partners want to know if it is "worth their while" to become involved, and the evaluation findings allow Connect Tucson to convince them of the program's stability, growth and accomplishments. The information is also an important recruiting tool for attracting new volunteers, who want to know that they will be investing their time well.

Campus Link similarly uses its outcome findings to "sell" its program to prospective partners (colleges and elementary schools) and to recruit both paid and unpaid service providers. And Volunteer Maryland places evaluation findings at the center of its recruitment campaigns. The information it sends to potential partners emphasizes the findings from its "Volunteer Program Surveys" that detail the long-term, positive effects VM AmeriCorps members have had on organizations' volunteer initiatives. VM also features evaluation findings in the materials it uses for recruiting new AmeriCorps members. In fact, the program does follow-up surveys of past ACMs to collect information on what work they are doing now and which skills developed during their year at VM they are using in that work. That information becomes a powerful recruitment tool.

Use the findings to create visibility, provide legitimacy and generate funding.

The SOS sites have found that one important audience for their evaluation findings is the public at large. Whether through well-written press releases or by catching the attention of a reporter, sites like Experience Corps and Leaps in Literacy have been able to get the message to the public about their positive effects on children and schools. Using its evaluation data as a centerpiece, Providence Summerbridge publishes an annual report to the community that is sent to funders, donors and school partners, among others. While creating visibility for a program in these ways may not seem to have an immediate payoff, the sites have found that it can have significant long-term benefits because it raises awareness of the program—

and that can eventually lead to increased success in recruiting volunteers and forming new partnerships, as well as with fundraising.

But, certainly, the ultimate purpose of doing evaluations to measure the positive changes in program participants is to demonstrate that the program is successful—that it is making a difference and should receive support and funding. These outcome findings become especially significant for programs that are operating in schools and asking the schools to allocate some of their own scarce financial resources to provide support.

Leaps in Literacy, for example, is asking each elementary school with which it partners to pay from \$15,000 to \$18,000, about a third of the program's actual operating cost at each location. In turn, says director Melissa Gartenberg, the schools "want real data to show that the investment they have been asked to make is paying off." Particularly in the current era of "school accountability," which often primarily means raising students' scores on standardized tests, programs must be able to demonstrate that the students they are tutoring have made measurable improvements in their reading skills and comprehension.

"We've gotten this far because of test scores and the overall benefits to the schools," says the Experience Corps' Rob Tietze. In fact, because of the program's documented success in the past few years, the School District of Philadelphia included Experience Corps in a grant proposal for funding through the U.S. Department of Education's Reading Excellence Program, which provides support for tutoring activities and other literacy-focused services for children. The application was successful, and as a result, Experience Corps recently received School District funding to place teams of older adult tutors in five additional elementary schools.

EPILOGUE

Despite all of their uses and their benefits for programs, the irony of evaluation findings is that the young people themselves seem to disappear under the cascade of data. What a program is about, after all, is each child, each youth, and the ways in which each of their lives has changed to become more comfortable in the present and more promising for the future.

We can tell you what changed for three of these young people. First, here is Monroe, the seventh-grader who began the year by rarely attending school. In October, thanks to the Native American Education Program, a member of one of Connect Tucson's Partnership Collaboratives, Monroe was matched with a tutor, a student at the University of Arizona who met with him once a week. According to Thomas, the tutor, they spent their time together "talking a little about what's going on," reading the newspaper and discussing the news, and paying attention to homework. The effect on Monroe was almost miraculous. He began attending school regularly and earning all As. According to his teacher, he changed in other ways as well. At the beginning of the school year, when Monroe was not absent, he was "very quiet and unsocial," she said. But then he "came out of his shell." In fact, she said approvingly, he became "the class clown."

Sammy was also matched with a tutor, Nicole, a student at Milsaps College who volunteers in Mississippi's Campus Link AmeriCorps program. During their meetings, they read books together, used word recognition flash cards or worked in the journal that Nicole made for him, a book where he could draw pictures and make up stories to go with them. While the changes in Sammy must be measured in smaller steps than the leaps achieved by Monroe, those steps are no less meaningful to him. When Sammy and Nicole read together, he became able to pay more attention to the stories and remember details about them. His confidence as a reader also improved, and he began to choose books with more complex words and more text on each page. And when he was puzzled by how to read a word, he stopped asking for help.

Instead, Nicole explained, "He'd say 'wait, wait...don't tell me,' and then he figured it out on his own."

And in Philadelphia, Teresa was assigned a tutor from the Experience Corps. She met with Florence three times a week, and they spent their sessions reading, learning words and discussing the stories. She was soon reading aloud softly and confidently, and reading and understanding increasingly difficult books. A standardized test will almost certainly reveal that Teresa has increased at least two levels in reading comprehension. That information will be important to the school, the school district and other funders; and the gain is obviously important for Teresa as well because of its implications for her future success in school. But another change that is at least as important for her potential development and life possibilities will not be identified through the standardized test. If Teresa seemed "afraid of the words" in September, by April she had become a child who loves to read.

Endnote

¹ For a discussion of the lack of control group studies of programs that use volunteers as tutors, see *Volunteer Tutoring Programs: A Review of Research on Achievement Outcomes*, by Barbara A. Wasik. Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR), Report No. 14, June 1997. Available at www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar. For a discussion of an interesting approach to a control group study, see *Seniors for Schools Evaluation Results: 1998-99 School Year*, Project STAR, San Mateo, Calif., January 2000. That report describes a control group study conducted by the New York site of Seniors for Schools. The site administered a standardized reading test to primary-grade students at the beginning of the school year. The students were matched into pairs with similar test scores and placed in two groups. Group A received tutoring sessions during the first half of the school year, while Group B received no tutoring. Halfway through the year, tutoring stopped for Group A and began for Group B. Students in both groups were tested at this halfway point and again at the end of the school year. Thus, the site was able to create a comparison group while still providing that group with services.

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