

PACE CENTER FOR GIRLS

ADVANCING EQUITY THROUGH PARTICIPANT-CENTERED RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

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Pace Center for Girls, a Florida-based, multiservice nonprofit serving middle- and high school–age girls with histories of trauma, faced an ethical dilemma several years ago: The organization and the community it serves, as well as funders and policymakers, sought concrete evidence that Pace was effective in helping the girls who participate in its programs. With this goal, the nonprofit launched a randomized control trial to assess whether performance in school was better for girls in the program than for those not enrolled. But that meant withholding services from some girls (the control group) and referring them elsewhere, at odds with Pace’s mission. The longitudinal RCT also would be costly and labor-intensive—and take years—while approaches at Pace and in the field naturally evolved.

Despite the downsides, Pace pursued the RCT. Conducted from 2012 to 2018, it found that Pace girls were nearly twice as likely to be on track to graduate from high school as girls not at Pace.¹ But the findings had limited application, as they focused on standard measures such as attendance and grades. The RCT, as designed, could not establish a causal link with Pace’s signature individualized services—such as counseling, anger and stress management, and building self-efficacy—that set girls up for success in life.

Flash forward, and Pace has learned that empirical research can be done holistically and equitably. Instead of relying on an RCT for ultimate answers, Pace blends empirical findings with participatory approaches to learn how processes, policies, and social institutions help the girls it serves. Pace's approach to evidence-building has evolved from conducting one arm's-length study at a time, post facto, to sustaining an ongoing process that directly involves girls, community members, and other stakeholders in designing and answering research questions. By building a robust internal research and evaluation function, Pace has identified causal links between feedback and outcomes for girls. It now immediately incorporates participants' insights into program improvements, thereby strengthening Pace's culture and its participants' self-efficacy and self-advocacy in real time.

Founded in 1985, Pace today serves more than 3,000 girls annually in twenty-two locations in Florida and Georgia with its evidence-based model, and it is recognized as one of the nation's leading advocates for girls in need.

PARTNERING TO GROW CAPACITY

Pace's pivot to participant-centered measurement was supported by an overall pivot to developing a feedback culture as an organization. Because Pace's major funder, from the organization's inception, was Florida's Department of Juvenile Justice, Pace placed a significant focus on compliance. A decade ago, it simply was not part of Pace's culture to be highly innovative in seeking to improve its model for helping girls prepare for the future. Pace grew from a program for ten girls in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1985 to seventeen centers across Florida, serving approximately fifty girls per center by 2006, but then growth stalled.

In 2010, with support from Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF), Pace brought in new leadership, and EMCF encouraged a thorough review of program data to understand the true scope of what Pace needed to become more impact-driven and to embrace learning for continuous improvement. Financial analysis showed that many Pace centers were not cost efficient and that innovation lagged the field. To renew growth and to initiate in-house learning and evaluation, Pace needed to find more cost-effective ways to evolve its model and reach beyond its physical sites. This led to partnering with leadership and culture consultancy Human Synergistics (HS) to define high performing behaviors and evolve Pace's talent and culture to support the growth strategy. It also led to partnering with Fund

for Shared Insight, a funder collaborative building the field of feedback, to ensure that the voice of Pace girls and community members informed the evolving the model.

OUR APPROACH

A core difference between RCTs and participatory approaches is at the heart of the equity argument and our blended measures approach: RCTs follow a treatment and control group over time—and then look back, running regressions, to analyze change. They can't adapt the intervention in response to participant feedback, because the participants are seen as subjects. After all, RCTs have roots in scientific experimentation. In contrast, participatory tools—feedback, surveys, focus groups, testimonials, diaries, participant councils—derive from a social science method called “participatory action research” (PAR) that dates back to community surveys initiated by sociologist W. E. B. Dubois in the late 1800s to understand structural racism.

PAR connects immediate learning with continuous improvements to programs and policies, with participants seen as experts in their own experience.² It gave rise to participatory evaluation (PE), which gives program participants, staff, and other stakeholders ownership in designing and managing the evaluation process itself. It emerged in the late twentieth century as a subfield of program measurement, particularly outside the United States among international relief and development nonprofits. PE radically shifted how to gauge social programs' effects on participants and their sense of power, always asking, “What answers are we seeking? Why? By whom? For whom?”³

With these participatory approaches in hand, Pace set out to reshape its culture. Yet, culture is not something an organization can change overnight. To identify the behaviors Pace wanted to see as an organization, it used a tool from HS and a corporate culture framework from search firm Spencer Stuart. The HS tool allowed Pace to measure its current culture against constructive benchmarks as well as define an ideal culture to advance its strategy, asking: “What are you expected to do here to fit in?” (from a list of 120 behaviors related to constructive, aggressive/defensive, and passive/defensive work styles⁴), rating each on a scale of 1 to 5).

With culture ratings in hand, Pace could analyze gaps between current culture and its ideal, determine strengths, and focus on areas for improvement. The Spencer Stuart framework helped Pace's leadership zero in on

words to describe its ideal culture. The team landed on a desire to be caring, learning, purposeful, and results-oriented.

The HS ratings allowed Pace human resources to work with centers and individual departments to identify any subcultures at odds with the ideal culture. Where alignment was off, team members worked together to create goals and performance and development plans to grow the culture constructively. The thinking was that if at least 75 percent of staff moved to the ideal culture, it would become a norm that talent would start to opt into—or out of.

In keeping with cultural aspirations, Pace built an internal measurement team focused on listening, learning, and improving their work with girls and their communities, which meant soliciting feedback from community stakeholders and program participants. Pace implemented a salesforce.org tracking system to analyze participant feedback along with metrics such as school attendance and juvenile justice involvement. And Pace reinforced functions that facilitated communication with participants, greatly expanding IT efforts and investing in technology that improved connectivity among sites, participants, and staff members' homes.

Pace girls played an important role in this cultural realignment. The new measurement team, led by Lymari Benitez, Ph.D., Senior Director, Program Information and Impact, used girls' feedback (qualitative data), captured by Shared Insight's Listen4Good (L4G) survey system, to identify staff behaviors that aligned with Pace's cultural expectations and to develop trainings to support such behaviors. In 2016, Pace received co-funding from EMCF and the Fund for Shared Insight to embed L4G in its measurement approach, which allowed girls' input to influence the design of Pace's culture model. The L4G survey probed how often the girls felt treated with respect and how likely they would be to recommend the program to their friends. The latter likelihood, scored from 0 to 10, is called a Net Promoter Score, or NPS. Using the NPS system, Pace conducted multiple regression analyses and found that positive feedback was predicted by a higher sense of belonging and feeling safe and respected. Pace also aligned positive culture expectations with girls' outcomes. Data analyses indicates that, in Pace Centers with high social cohesion among team members, girls are more likely to improve academically and have longer length of stays (low attrition).

Ultimately, Pace shifted from being a compliance-driven partner of the juvenile justice system to a future-focused agent of change with a practical goal—of developing “socially, emotionally, and physically healthy, educated,

and stable girls”—that permeated all of its departments and its refreshed theory of change. The L4G survey now takes a twice-yearly pulse on what Pace is doing well, what it could improve, the degree to which participants feel treated with respect, and how likely participants would be to recommend Pace to their peers.

To further permeate change, Pace developed feedback processes across organizational functions. It created Girls Leadership Councils at every site—the girls help design, execute, and interpret program research and evaluation; conduct focus groups with peers; aid in interviewing new hires; and contribute to program decisions, where Pace “closes the feedback loop” and lays out areas the girls’ input has surfaced for improvement.

Any organization embarking on building an ongoing research and evaluation function needs a way to fund the high-quality talent and technology it entails. In Pace’s case, then-COO Yessica Cancel and her team found cost efficiencies in changing their approach to health insurance and in reducing turnover. For the former, Pace became self-insured. By paying claims directly versus working with an external healthcare insurance provider, and by educating staff on wellness practices, Pace saved 40 percent of a \$2 million healthcare line-item expense while simultaneously expanding coverage. Pace also reduced turnover, which by 2011 was costing \$2.3 million a year in recruiting and hiring. Pace did market analysis to ensure it offered competitive salaries and reduced absenteeism through investments in wellness and educating team members on how to become smart consumers of health care. Since embracing a feedback culture, over the past five years Pace team-member turnover has declined by nearly two-thirds, and productivity and engagement have increased more than a quarter.

Pace reinvested dollars saved into active recruiting and in retaining and developing new talent. In the process, Pace and Cancel won a Nucleus Research Award for achieving a human resource breakthrough. Pace also became a “Best Place to Work” in northeast Florida.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Pace has faced two key challenges to its participant-centered measurement systems since implementing them. The first was to figure out the right blend of participatory measures and empirical data to generate evidence of impact absent an RCT. Pace evaluation lead, Lymari Benitez, uncovered links to outcomes by conducting statistical analysis (correlations, regressions,

ANOVAS, T-tests, and structure equation models) of girls' perceptual responses in the L4G surveys, and empirical data such as school attendance, grades, and interactions with juvenile justice. To date, Pace has found the strongest link between teacher retention and girls' feeling more respected and staying in the program longer, with tenure in program statistically proven to positively influence their results.

A second challenge came with the pandemic and difficulties collecting feedback from girls who were unable to attend programs in person. Here, Pace's investments in technology paid off, and it was able to extend its technology—including internet-enabled tablets, laptops, and Microsoft® Teams accounts—during the pandemic from supporting 527 staff to supporting an additional 2,000 girls—and implemented remote services with feedback channels for the girls. As a result, Pace engaged with more than 90 percent of its girls at least once per week during school closures, and with 75 percent seven or more times per week—delivering food, computers, tele-counseling, and other goods and services they needed.

Ultimately, 91 percent of girls completed the program in 2020 (versus 81 percent in 2019); and 88 percent improved academically in the fourth quarter (versus 70 percent the prior year). Meanwhile, EdWeek⁵ found that in high-poverty communities across the United States (those with 75 percent or more kids on free or reduced lunch), one of three students had no engagement with schools at the outset of the pandemic.

RESULTS

Pace's foray into participatory measurement has transformed the organization, both in makeup and culture. Pace has new roles that keep it proximate to and learning from the communities it serves. And it has developed an instinct across all team members for responsiveness and resilience. But the greatest payoff in shifting from outsourced RCTs to participant-informed measures has been the way participatory approaches have influenced and empowered the organization to step up advocacy to change the systems—juvenile justice, foster care, and education—that can serve as barriers to young girls' success.

Today, Pace uses direct input from its girls to identify local, state, and federal policies that need reform—and the community members who must be involved. For example, to lobby for misdemeanor and civil-citation

legislation so law enforcement could censure girls for petty crimes without arresting them, Pace girls testified before legislative committees and met with individual legislators, with success. In 2011 and every year since, Florida has increased funding for prevention measures to keep girls out of the juvenile justice system. Over the last decade, the number of girls arrested annually in Florida has dropped by about 65 percent.

Pace further evolved into a community catalyst to mitigate and disrupt inequities through a data-driven, collaborative approach that would allow community stakeholders to identify and address specific issues affecting girls. They convened Girls Coordinating Councils (GCC), where these stakeholders, including girls themselves, are given the space to influence favorable conditions for girls and young women's healthy development in their communities. In 2018, a GCC in Broward County, Florida, tackled the county's rate of detaining girls for failing to appear at their court hearings. When the girls interviewed judges, probation officers, and youth, they found that, often, girls who had been arrested forgot their hearing dates or struggled to find transportation to the court. The girls' research team created a video with avatars portraying what arrested girls could expect upon entering the juvenile justice system. They also created cards teenagers could carry with their cell phones in the event of arrest, with hotline numbers for case managers, transit information, and contact information for the court in the event of a delay. The following year, arrests in Broward declined 16 percent, and instances of failing to appear after arrest dropped 27 percent.

REFLECTIONS

Nonprofits serious about building equity and inclusion must ensure constituents are true participants in evaluating program impact to develop more inclusive organizations that empower the voices of the communities they serve. This is the key, too, to building resilient nonprofits and to bringing about complex and lasting social change.

Pace's growth in listening to the girls it serves, gathering high-quality feedback from them, and applying it to advance the organization's goals has empowered girls and changed the nonprofit's culture. Today, Pace connects ongoing learning to continuous improvement of programs, policies, and practices and views its participants as experts in their own experience. As a result, Pace has:

For Girls:

- Increased engagement, measured via girls' attendance, their net promoter scores, and their active participation in feedback loops.
- Increased confidence and self-efficacy.
- Achieved better outcomes.

For the Organization:

- Built high awareness of the value girls' insights bring to program improvement.
- Enhanced the nonprofit's reputation—which increases referrals from girls and their families to Pace's voluntary program.
- Facilitated a shift from work silos to a systemic approach for process improvement that resulted in a more trusting and equitable organization.

For All:

- Developed more equitable relationships between girls and staff.
- Implemented an actionable feedback loop—Pace uses real-time data and participants' insights to inform services and ensure the program addresses girls' needs.
- Expanded the scope of organizational culture to include staff and participants. Aligning all to a common cultural ideal has been the key to process improvement and better outcomes.

It was important throughout Pace's work that cultural transformation remain anchored in Pace's mission and that Pace align investments with aspirations for change. Accordingly, Pace made strategic investments in recruiting, talent management, internal research and evaluation, IT, and learning and development.

It also was important that Pace adapted both its processes and its mindset in interacting with the girls to elicit not only their participation in creating change for themselves and their communities but also their belief in the power of their own voices.

Other practitioners seeking to advance equity through their approach to measurement should bear in mind lessons learned at Pace: that transformation begins with an engaged and competent workforce, ultimately leading

to lower attrition of program participants, their greater persistence in the program, and better outcomes.

Meanwhile, funders supporting this work need to ensure that resources are flexible enough to fund the talent and technology needed to gather participant feedback and target their true needs. And they need to ensure that their arc of funding is long enough to sustain change.

NOTES

1. See Pace Final Report, January 2019, www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/PACE_Final_Report_2019.pdf.

2. Sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois in 1898 used community surveys to understand structural racism. Sociologists Kurt Lewin, Margot Haas Wormser, and Claire Selltitz in the 1940s and 1950s used participatory community self-surveys to understand individual lived experiences.

3. IDS Policy Briefing, “Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: Learning from Change,” Issue 12, November 1998.

4. “The Human Synergistics Circumplex,” Human Synergistics International, www.humansynergistics.com/about-us/the-circumplex.

5. Stephen Sawchuck and Christine Samuels, “Where Are They? Students Go Missing in Shift to Remote Classes,” *Education Week*, April 10, 2020, www.edweek.org/leadership/where-are-they-students-go-missing-in-shift-to-remote-classes/2020/04?cmp=eml-contshr-shr.