

PER SCHOLAS

NAVIGATING COVID WITH PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

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Per Scholas is a national organization that has been advancing economic mobility for twenty-five years. Through rigorous training, professional development, and robust employer connections, we prepare individuals traditionally underrepresented in the technology workforce to enter and succeed in high-quality careers. I have been privileged to lead Per Scholas as its president and CEO since 2004, including our extensive national growth, over the past nine years.

For two decades prior to COVID-19, one hallmark of our technology career training approach was that it was rooted in immersive, classroom-based instruction. We believed we achieved our impressive outcomes—85 percent of Per Scholas learners graduate, and 80 percent of the graduates attain jobs within one year—largely because we required actual *presence* from learners.

Our classroom-based model is designed to mimic the workplace, requiring on-time attendance and professional attire, as well as facilitating group projects and encouraging communication, presentation, and collaboration skills. Learners practice on business-class hardware and software, and engage with working IT professionals who volunteer to help learners develop start-up social capital and job-search skills. Finally, in a typical Per Scholas

classroom, learners form tight-knit bonds that provide added support for them to succeed. Graduates have routinely described this aspect of their training as transformative.

Twenty-eight-year-old Taiheem Wentt is just one of thousands who have benefited from this model. Taiheem overcame exceptional challenges growing up and started out on a college career. But the birth of his daughter cut short these ambitions, so he turned to Per Scholas instead. An outstanding learner, Taiheem graduated from our Network Support training and found a job paying four times as much as the security guard salary he had earned before. Today, Taiheem and his family are thriving, and Taiheem was extensively featured in 2021 on the PBS career exploration series *Roadtrip Nation*.

Moreover, from 2004 to 2007 and then again from 2011 to 2018, Per Scholas underwent long-term, random assignment evaluations, first by Public/Private Ventures (Sectoral Employment Impact Study) and then by MDRC (WorkAdvance). Both studies concluded that Per Scholas learners, all of whom attended physical classrooms, were more likely to secure jobs in tech and earned significantly more than equally qualified and motivated control group members, including those who went on to pursue other career training options.¹

Early in 2020, though, we had just begun our first pilot of a partially remote learning model—a tech-enabled “Connected Classroom” that made it possible for an instructor teaching in New York to simultaneously teach a class of in-person learners in Dallas. We planned on testing additional hybrid and remote learning models throughout the year. Little did we know how quickly we would shift to the largest organizational experiment we had undertaken to date!

In March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic overtook the nation, Per Scholas reluctantly shut down all our classrooms nationally, and migrated 538 then-enrolled learners to remote instruction. We had no idea how learners might fare in a 100 percent remote framework, only that we had no other options. But we also knew we had been presented with an unusual opportunity to explore the capabilities and limits of remote learning and, perhaps, to begin to understand whether our long-standing valorization of in-person training was fact-based.

Per Scholas is fortunate to have many amazing partners. One of them, the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**, helped fund our shift to remote learning, along with a **participant- and provider-centered evaluation we wanted to embed in its implementation**. Per Scholas subsequently

engaged **Barrow Street Consulting (BSC)**, a Washington, DC–based independent consulting firm, to provide expertise and support for this critical evaluation.

PARTICIPANT AND PROVIDER CENTERED EVALUATION

Even prior to BSC’s engagement, Per Scholas began collecting remote participant feedback on its own, from both learners and faculty members. BSC worked initially to help us organize and build on these internal feedback-gathering activities to yield better insights and to center them in a more standard evaluation design.

To these ends, BSC expanded our in-house learner satisfaction surveys, developed new instruments to assess feedback by instructors and career coaches,² and supplemented both survey types with focus groups. It also incorporated a learner **Net Promoter Analysis** into the overall research design. The latter is a strategy commonly deployed in the for-profit sector to formulate insights into *customer loyalty*, and has been found to correlate with outcomes such as revenue growth.

The largest challenge we confronted was the pandemic itself, since at the time we started, nearly all Per Scholas learners and faculty members were coping with COVID-19’s initial economic shocks, and many also experienced health impacts—all while trying to complete an intensive, boot camp-style course. Within this context, we feared our surveys would be perceived as a nuisance, or even that we might find it difficult to recruit a truly representative group of learners for the planned focus groups.

We overcame this challenge by providing opportunities for learners and faculty members to complete the surveys during class time, and by following up persistently with non-respondents. Ultimately, 74 percent of learners (n = 259) who were enrolled when the study began completed a mid-course edition of the surveys, along with 78 percent of career coaches and 58 percent of instructional personnel (n = 46). We also successfully recruited ten diverse learners and ten instructional personnel from across Per Scholas locations to participate in the focus groups.

Another challenge was that we continued to modify many aspects of our remote program design even after the research began—often in direct response to the raw survey and focus group data as it came in. By September, for example, we had reconceived and virtualized a much larger set of in-classroom demonstrations and even some hands-on computer lab activities.

These changes meant the program model we asked respondents to rate in their end-course surveys was already becoming very different from the one midstream, an inconsistency that might be fatal to the aims of more traditional evaluation research. But, here, we precisely illustrate the distinction between traditional evaluation, which tends to measure outcomes attributable to a stable, well-defined set of activities, and a true participant- and provider-centered inquiry whose more urgent focus is to help improve program experiences and processes in real time.

RESULTS

The early participant feedback we gathered ourselves immediately helped us identify many beneficial changes to our remote learning implementation, including migration to a different video communications platform, reimagining the organization of each remote learning day, providing assistance for learners who lacked adequate technology for remote access, and supporting faculty members struggling to develop remote proficiency themselves.

BSC's analysis over the summer of 2020 helped us understand whether these earlier changes were effectively addressing learner and faculty barriers. Encouragingly, BSC's findings were quite positive. Among both learners and faculty members, our implementation of remote learning was widely perceived as a "success." Moreover, the learner Net Promoter Score for Per Scholas as a whole was strikingly high at 67 (the range is -100 to 100, but a typical score in the for-profit sector ranges between 30 and 40).

However, BSC's analysis also helped us identify several areas for improvement. For example:

- Learners and practitioners alike reported that they needed more time to deliver/complete coursework than was typical for in-person sessions. In addition, "homework" lost much of its value as a pedagogical strategy when learners already spent their entire day working at home.
- Learners and practitioners also reported that we needed to build better and more creative strategies to support hands-on skills acquisition.
- Learners felt they still lacked sufficient opportunities to develop one-to-one connections with their classmates, that aspect of Per

Scholas training so many of our in-person learners had previously told us was invaluable.

- Instructors struggled to create the same energy as they have in the classroom. One instructor noted that her remote classroom was “unnaturally quiet as everyone is on mute.” This was especially difficult for career coaches.
- The initial integration of virtual IT professional volunteer engagement into remote classes had mixed success, in part because it was more difficult to manage and also because the volunteers sometimes struggled to adapt to remote interactions themselves.
- Finally, even though learner Net Promoter Scores for Per Scholas as a whole were exceptionally high, those for our remote courses were closer to the norms for this type of analysis.

We viewed these and related findings as strong confirmation that our work to develop an effective remote learning model remained unfinished. However, considered as a whole, the results persuaded us that it would be possible to provide a remote learning experience just as engaging and effective as our in-person model. **In other words, our previous bias in favor of 100 percent classroom-based training was not entirely justified.** Indeed, in one of the most revealing findings, a substantial majority of remote learners said that, in the best of worlds, they could access a *hybrid* model: one in which they attended remote sessions to learn new knowledge and physical computer labs to practice putting it to use.

IMPACT

As a result of the research findings, Per Scholas implemented improvements to our remote learning model:

- We organized a national remote training team to centralize all remote learning administration and program development across our sites.
- We provided substantially more time in each training day for learners to complete coursework and for instructors to provide individualized attention to learners.

- We developed and began distributing new “Tech Learner Kits,” customized by course, so all learners can practice hands-on skills at home.
- We created virtual IT professional volunteer engagement opportunities and centralized it nationally.

The evaluation findings helped convince us to **continue offering remote learning opportunities even after we can safely return to classrooms**—and moreover, that remote learning should become one of the primary engines propelling our future national growth. This represents a momentous change vis-à-vis our pre-COVID-19 thinking, and one that can set Per Scholas on a far more ambitious growth trajectory than we had previously conceived.

REFLECTIONS

Our research methods for understanding the efficacy of remote learning were not especially innovative or unusual. But, frankly, that was its main virtue. Although we benefited very much from BSC’s expertise, ours was the kind of project that nearly any practitioner might implement at a more basic level. More important was our willingness to listen, understand, and act on the information we received.

For funders and policymakers, we cannot underline enough the importance of supporting comparable efforts that may require funders reluctant to help pay for “research” or “overhead” costs to revisit their conceptions of what these terms really mean. Per Scholas was very fortunate to have funding that specifically supported its remote learning evaluation.

For researchers—especially those focused on mounting gold standard evaluations like the ones Per Scholas has hosted twice before—we would suggest that our project shows that evidence building can come in many forms. In this case, a rapidly constructed and fielded implementation analysis focused on participant and practitioner voices fostered a profound new shift in direction for Per Scholas with momentous implications for our future.

Finally, the experience I have described has reaffirmed for Per Scholas that this kind of participatory evaluation should never really end. We recently decided to extend BSC’s engagement with Per Scholas so it could repeat its earlier research with a new cohort of learners to see if they view

Per Scholas and their remote training differently now that we have acted on a number of the previous findings. Evaluation is most helpful when it is coupled with improvement. Isn't that what Taiheem and so many other Per Scholas learners deserve?

NOTES

1. The MDRC researchers additionally found that the earnings difference between Per Scholas and control group participants grew larger over time, and that Per Scholas participants reported greater life satisfaction. Kelsey Schaburg and David H. Greenberg, "Long-Term Effects of a Sectoral Advancement Strategy: Costs, Benefits, and Impacts from the WorkAdvance Demonstration," March 2020, www.mdrc.org/publication/long-term-effects-sectoral-advancement-strategy.

2. The Per Scholas career training model is two-pronged. *Instructors* help learners build new technical skills. *Career coaches* teach more general job search and professional skills. They also work with learners to develop individualized career plans and serve as a primary liaison for them with job placement personnel.