

YEAR UP

IMPROVING ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND RETENTION OF PROFESSIONAL TRAINING CORPS PARTICIPANTS

JESSICA BRITT, DAVID FEIN, REBECCA A. MAYNARD, AND GARRETT WARFIELD

Year Up and researchers at both Abt Associates and the University of Pennsylvania collaborated to come up with evidence-informed solutions to staff concerns about academic challenges faced by participants in the Year Up's Professional Training Corps (PTC) program. The collaboration led to the launch of a "mini-study" using random assignment and extant data to explore signals of and impediments to participants' success in their college courses and to devise and rigorously test strategies for more quickly identifying and addressing those impediments.

With support from the study team, PTC staff identified the improvement strategies for testing and then implemented those strategies in three sites with a random subset of participants in two successive enrollment cohorts. Other participants received the usual coaching strategies and supports. Staff working with the improvement strategies group were encouraged to alter their strategies between cohorts 1 and 2 based on their experiences with the first cohort.

Year Up is a national nonprofit organization with a mission to close the opportunity divide by ensuring that young adults gain the skills, experiences, and support that empowers them to reach their potential through

careers and higher education. Year Up's core model serves young adults age eighteen to twenty-four with a high school degree or equivalent who are, otherwise, disconnected from higher education and quality job opportunities. Participants enroll in a year-long program. They spend the first six months in classroom training in basic and technical skills and the second six months in internships with corporate partners. The goal is for these internships to culminate in full-time jobs related to their technical training.

The PTC is a second-generation version of Year Up's core program and operates in partnership with career-focused colleges with the goal of achieving impacts comparable to the core program but at a substantially lower cost. The Year Up team for the improvement study was led by Dr. Garrett Warfield, chief research officer, and Jess Britt, senior director of research and evaluation. **Abt Associates** is a research and evaluation organization that specializes in applying systems analysis and social science techniques to social and economic problems. Their research, monitoring, and evaluation practice is known for interdisciplinary approaches. The Abt study team included Dr. David Fein, principal associate for social and economic policy; Azim Shivji, senior analyst; and Phomdaen Souvanna, research associate. The research team from the **University of Pennsylvania** included Dr. Rebecca Maynard, professor of education and social policy, and Rebecca Baelen, a PhD student.

The PTC evaluation grew out of a shared experience with the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) evaluation, a large-scale, long-term impact evaluation commissioned by the Administration for Children and Families. Abt's PACE evaluation team, led by Dr. Fein, actively solicited Year Up's participation in the PACE evaluation as one of eight fully developed, seemingly high performing career and technical programs targeting low-income adults.

A PRACTITIONER-CENTERED APPROACH

The PTC evaluation arose from concerns that poor academic performance was impeding program retention and completion. In addition to Year Up's interest in generating good outcomes for participants generally, the PTC financial model calls for over 90 percent of program revenues to come from employer-sponsored internships for participants during the second six months of their program participation. Year Up staff believed that more timely identification of and support for students struggling with their

academic courses could make a meaningful difference. Thus, Year Up was especially keen on an evaluation that could inform strategies to strengthen its participant coaching so as to ensure timely identification of academic challenges and provision of support to address them.

Although the technical methods used in the PTC evaluation were not novel, the way the evaluation partners approached the work differed from a typical evaluation. The process was practitioner-centric. The interests and needs of Year Up staff determined the research questions—namely, bolstering academic performance and boosting program retention—and all parties relied on feedback loops to provide strategic tweaking of plans and timely use of findings.

Codeveloping an Evidence Agenda with Practitioners and Students. The partners winnowed a long list of concerns to three focal issues for study. The winnowing process entailed a series of stakeholder engagements, careful review of readily accessible historical program data, and multiple brainstorming sessions with Year Up's National leadership team.

The evaluation team conducted interviews and focus groups with a diverse array of PTC stakeholders, including Year Up national and local staff and college and employer partners. These conversations had several purposes. First, they established a connection with key players. Second, they provided contextual information useful in planning, implementing, and interpreting findings from the study. Third, they elicited valuable information on key stakeholders' priorities for program improvement. Finally, they were a source of information to help interpret study findings as they emerged.

Selecting the Research Methods. The team used random assignment and extant data to test field-generated, low/no-cost strategies for improving participants' academic success. This strategy was an efficient way to generate highly credible evidence on the effectiveness of the improvement strategies program staff designed.

Four principles guided these choices. First, since a major challenge for the PTC was its high operational costs, the strategies tested needed to be inexpensive to implement. Second, program and evaluation staff needed to agree that, if effective, the strategies could be implemented successfully in all PTC locations. Third, the evaluators aspired to be able to judge the success of the program in near real-time to support continuous improvement. Fourth, it needed to be possible to test the strategy in a manner that would produce highly credible evidence of effectiveness.

Designing Improvement Strategies for Testing. The evaluators led the research design process, working closely with their Year Up partners and local site directors in planning the improvement strategies to be tested, selecting sites, enrolling and randomizing the sample, and interpreting and disseminating findings. They supported the PTC site staff on detailed planning and implementation of the improvement strategies to be tested and assumed responsibility for monitoring their implementation. They also collaborated on the design and coordination of data collected from PTC staff and participants to support the evaluation.

Based on a brief qualitative assessment, the team hypothesized that academic performance was a major contributor to high program attrition and, thus, strengthening, and monitoring support to struggling students could be an effective response. The team then selected three local PTC programs that differed in the nature and degree of challenges faced to develop and test low-cost, high-promise strategies for improving academic success and program retention during the first six months of the program (i.e., the classroom training phase).

The improvement strategies tested were designed by the PTC program staff in the three study sites with guidance from Year Up National and support from the evaluation team. In addition to working directly with program staff to design the strategies, the team applied insights gleaned from focus groups, interviews, and reviews of the literature.

Transparency and Respect in Participant, Stakeholder, and Site Staff Engagement. The study benefited from the fact that all Year Up staff serve as coaches to participants. As a result, Year Up staff working on the evaluation had first-hand knowledge of local operational practices, which enabled those using the enhanced coaching practices to more easily determine which strategies tried in cycle 1 were not helpful and which were. Their input was critical to their work with the study team to adjust the enhanced coaching strategies for testing in cycle 2 and for making meaning of the final study findings. For example, the study team worked closely with local program staff to assemble a binder of tools coaches found useful for training and supporting staff and other coaches to more effectively identify and support students who were struggling during this academic phase of the program.

A Stable Research Collaboration with Qualified and Complementary Partners. The stability and complementarity of roles within the research partnership helped it generate high-value output. Senior members of the team from each of the three organizations brought extensive program evaluation expertise.

Year Up leads guided work on identifying the focal topics for research, coordinating with Year Up national and the local PTC sites on implementation issues, and planning dissemination and follow-up on the research findings. Abt's staff led a number of technical and administrative tasks—such as coordinating various studies that were co-occurring, IRB and data management planning, and data processing and analysis, while the UPenn researchers assumed primary responsibility for the design and implementation of the improvement study as well as a cost analysis of one PTC program.

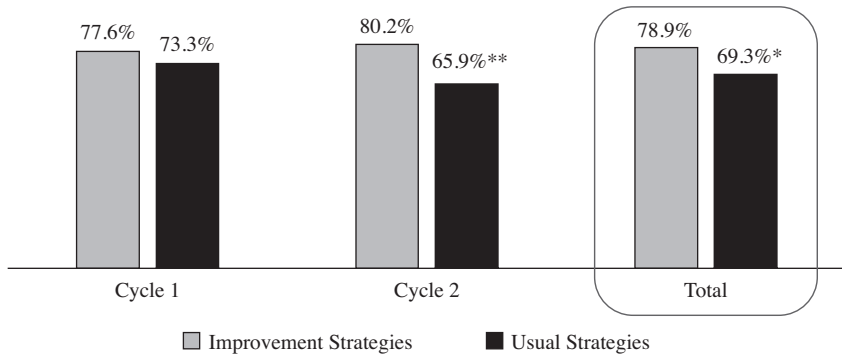
Project Cost and Efficiencies. The PTC evaluation is part of a larger evaluation initiative. Funding for a suite of evaluations conducted under two grants available to this partnership totaled a little over \$2 million. The study team estimated that the improvement study focused on academic monitoring and supports cost about \$400,000 in external funds—an amount that would have been larger had it not been for the high-functioning partnership that provided opportunities to economize by coordinating efforts across various partnership activities.

RESULTS

Participants in the improvement strategies group were substantially more likely than their counterparts in the usual strategies group to successfully complete the learning and development phase of the program and to enroll in one or more college courses during the internship phase of the program. On average, participants who received the improved coaching strategies had nearly 10 percentage points higher rates of retention through the end of the Learning and Development (L&D) phase of the program than their counterparts who received the usual coaching (see figure 10.4-1). Even more notable is the fact that retention gains were much larger for the second cycle of testing (14 percentage points) than the first (4 percentage points). Similarly, a significantly higher percentage of those in the improvement strategies group than their counterparts in the usual strategies group continued to enroll in college courses after entering internships (67 versus 54 percent overall, and 84 versus 64 percent for the second cohort).

Coaches working with participants assigned to the improvement strategies group reported substantial changes in their approach to coaching. They were nearly four times more likely than coaches working with those engaging the usual strategies group to spend most of their coaching time on academic issues (43 versus 11 percent) and more than three times more likely to refer par-

FIGURE 1.4.1 Retention of Participants in Improvement Strategies Group versus the Usual Strategies Group through the End of the Learning and Development Phase by Testing Cycle. *Source:* Fein and others (2020). Data on retention from Year Up’s management information system.



participants to tutoring (46 versus 14 percent) (Maynard and others 2018). They were only slightly less likely than coaches working with the usual strategies group to report spending their coaching time on generic Year Up topics commonly addressed during group coaching. Notably, participants assigned to the improvement strategies group rated the quality and level of support received from PTC staff higher than did their counterparts whose coaches followed the program’s usual strategies.

Year Up shared the main study findings with both its national and local site staff at critical junctures during evaluation. The primary method of sharing study findings and recommendations was timely, end-of-study online briefings of about an hour in duration. These typically were preceded by a brief pre-read summarizing the study, findings, and recommendations and a post-read document providing more detail—both formatted in PowerPoint slides to honor the strong preference of Year Up’s practitioners for PowerPoint presentations over technical white papers.

The team also shared emerging findings with Year Up staff on an as-needed basis to support strategic decisions. For example, the team briefed the national staff on the findings of field efforts aimed at prioritizing evaluation topics and broad evaluation plans, and provided high-level general feedback to national and local staff in conjunction with other phone or in-person encounters as requested.

The main evaluation report covering the full suite of studies on the PTC (Fein et al. 2020) included four recommendations to Year Up and other training providers. The central recommendation was to modify the program's approach to coaching to include a deliberate focus on academic goals, achievements, and challenges. A second recommendation was to offer formal staff training on academic coaching strategies. The emphasis would be on improving early identification of academic challenges and devising timely strategies to help participants address them. A third recommendation was for program staff to be on the alert for additional ways of identifying academic challenges that would complement asking participants directly. The final recommendation was for Year Up national staff to consider other applications of the evaluation-based improvement process used in this study.¹

Year Up's Response to the Study Findings. Year Up national staff and local staff involved in the study reported liking the approach used in this evaluation, citing its collegial and relatively low-burden nature. More importantly, Year Up national and participating PTC programs are using evidence from the evaluation to improve practice. Staff at study sites reported they still use the coaching practices developed and tested in the study, as well as the system they created for documenting and sharing participant information. Using these coaching practices has improved academic oversight, facilitated early detection of academic challenges, and increased retention in the study sites. Year Up also rolled out features of the improved coaching strategies, including a binder of tools assembled as part of the evaluation effort, to all its programs nationwide (Baelen, Britt, and others 2020), and staff have continued to iteratively adapt these shared materials to local contexts.²

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated major shifts in coaching strategies to accommodate online delivery. The study team has not been able to assess the degree to which the enhanced focus on academic issues has been embodied in the online coaching formats or to isolate potential confounding influences of the myriad operational and contextual shifts arising due to the pandemic. Thus, the applicability of the study findings to the current environment is unclear.

REFLECTIONS

This study differed from the typical program evaluation in several important ways. First, it focused squarely on issues of immediate concern to practitioners—in this case, Year Up leadership and staff. Second, the study's

success owes in large measure to a well-functioning partnership among program management, student-facing staff, and the evaluation team. Third, the evaluation team—comprised of Year Up staff and external researchers—was able to apply its experience and tools in a manner that produced highly credible evidence with minimum burden on program participants or staff. Fourth, the team provided timely feedback from the study in formats useful to frontline program staff.

This work was made possible in large part due to flexibility on the part of funders. One funder, the Social Innovation Fund, allowed the team to restructure the research agenda to delay implementation of a traditional impact evaluation of the PTC program in the Philadelphia site so they could “braid” the evaluation they funded through an IES Development and Improvement grant. The flexibility in funding and evaluation design allowed the team to include three programs in the “rapid-cycle” improvement study prior to launching the summative evaluation.

The resulting improvement study proved useful to the program and offers an example of practitioner-research partnerships that yield credible and actionable evidence. This type of evidence generation was much more valuable than if the partnership had prioritized a traditional impact evaluation of a program model still working to address known performance shortfalls. It also was more valuable than purely descriptive and anecdotal evidence.

Site staff drove decisions about the improvement strategies for academic monitoring and support that would be tested. Within broad guidelines, Year Up site staff were empowered to design strategy changes that meshed with their local contexts. They also were encouraged to modify their strategies for the second cycle of testing based on experiences in the first cycle, reinforcing the notion that they had been invited to participate in a program improvement effort. The evaluation team used light-touch monitoring of the enhanced coaching and supports during the study period but strategically timed monitoring to encourage continuous reflection by program staff while also yielding adequate contextual information to support the study.

The external evaluation team drew heavily on its Year Up partners for guidance in designing and communicating with local staff. This guidance included counseling in the program language and in protocols for meeting preparation, conduct, and follow-up (for example pre-reads; tailored protocols; timely and conventional formats for follow-up). Products of the

evaluation included not only conference calls and post-reads to present study findings but also a compendium of tools that were assembled, tailored, or otherwise created by program staff working with participants in the improvement strategies group. This compendium has since been adapted for use throughout Year Up as part of its adoption system-wide of lessons from the study.

Many factors contributed to the success of this partnership. Three were especially critical. First, all parties shared a commitment to using the available study resources to help Year Up improve its ability to close the opportunity divide for young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds. Second, all parties were willing and able to adjust their project roles and responsibilities as needed to keep the effort on track. Third, all parties had tremendous respect for and trust in one another and for the youth whose welfare was at stake.

NOTES

1. The evaluation work discussed in this paper was supported by grants from the Social Innovation Fund and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES Grant Number R305A150214). This article does not necessarily reflect the views of the funders. The primary study reports include two for the Social Innovation fund: one on early implementation of the Philadelphia Program (Fein and Maynard 2015) and one expanded on in this improvement study and including a cost analysis of the PTC (Maynard and others 2018). Two final products to the Institute of Education Sciences included a summative report (Fein and others 2020) and a compilation of tools and guidance from documents developed or adapted for use in the improvement study discussed here (Baelen and others 2020). Arnold Ventures has supported longer-term follow-up of the study sample, which will be reported on in the future.

2. Britt and others (2021) provides a fuller discussion of methods, findings, and resulting actions of the improvement study.

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