

“We Get a Chance to Show Impact”

Program Staff Reflect on Participating in a Rigorous, Multi-site Evaluation

Jill Hamadyk and Karen Gardiner, Abt Associates
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Overview

Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) is the first rigorous, multi-site evaluation of “career pathways” programs. In this brief, leadership and staff from eight of the nine programs in the study reflect on their participation. They describe their experiences implementing the evaluation procedures, the benefits of participating in a randomized controlled trial (RCT) study, how they overcame challenges, and lessons they learned. These reflections offer insights for programs considering participation in a similar evaluation: What factors weighed in the decision to participate? How can a program proactively identify and address potential challenges? Interviewees also highlight important considerations for evaluation teams, particularly when recruiting programs to participate: What benefits do programs find most valuable? How can evaluators best provide support?

Key findings include:

- Program leadership and staff found value in participating in a RCT as a way to build evidence of program effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. Increasingly, funders look for evidence of effectiveness from a rigorous study when awarding funding, an added incentive for participating in evaluation research.
- Internal and external program stakeholders initially had concerns about the random assignment methodology. Respondents shared a number of strategies for addressing these, such as facilitating multiple stakeholder meetings and being flexible about which partner organization conducted randomization. Some utilized the evaluation team’s expertise to frame stakeholder discussions.
- Program leaders invested time meeting with frontline staff to ensure they understood the purpose of the study, describe their key roles in it, and address any concerns. They hired or assigned staff open to the study’s purpose and procedures to perform recruitment, study intake, and random assignment.
- Recruitment was more difficult than anticipated. Staff in all programs noted they needed to increase the number of program applicants to build a study control group, and many had to scale up their program. This required dedicated outreach and recruitment staff, tracking the effectiveness of various recruitment strategies, and clearly and continually communicating with referral partners about the study and its importance.
- Peer-to-peer learning was an important support for program staff. PACE included in-person partners meetings and other peer-to-peer events, building community and capacity among program partners.
- A number of staff reported their experience in the study produced unanticipated positive changes within their organization, such as enhanced research and evaluation capacity and more efficient procedures.

Introduction

This brief summarizes the experiences of leaders and staff from eight career pathways programs that participated in the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) Evaluation. Based on firsthand accounts, the brief describes how staff perceived the benefits of participating in the randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluation, the challenges they experienced—in particular recruiting study participants and implementing its random assignment procedures—and how they overcame challenges. The brief then describes lessons staff learned from participating in PACE. The insights presented below will be helpful for future evaluation teams as they approach potential study sites, as well as for programs considering participating in a rigorous evaluation.

Program staff addressed a number of topics:

- What factors do programs weigh in deciding whether to participate?
- How can programs proactively identify and address potential challenges?
- How can evaluation teams identify and communicate the most valuable benefits of joining such studies to prospective programs?
- How can evaluation teams best provide support to programs that do join?

Methodology for this Brief

The evaluation team collected information for this brief through telephone discussions with program staff at eight of the nine PACE programs.¹ These discussions occurred in late 2017, three to four years after the end of random assignment. Interviewees' roles varied by program, but typically included current or former program directors and staff involved in implementing the PACE evaluation. (See the **About the PACE Evaluation** box.)

¹ The former director of the ninth PACE program, which is no longer in operation, moved to another state and did not respond to requests for a telephone discussion.

Programs in PACE

- Bridge to Employment in the Health Care Industry – San Diego Workforce Partnership, San Diego, CA
- Carreras en Salud – Instituto del Progreso Latino, Chicago, IL
- Health Careers for All – Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County, Seattle, WA
- Pathways to Healthcare – Pima Community College, Tucson, AZ
- Patient Care Pathway Program – Madison College, Madison, WI
- Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA) – Lower Rio Grande Valley, TX
- Washington Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) – at three Washington State colleges (Bellingham Technical College, Everett Community College, and Whatcom Community College)
- Workforce Training Academy Connect – Des Moines Area Community College, Des Moines, IA
- Year Up (Atlanta, Bay Area, Boston, Chicago, National Capital Region, New York City, Providence, Seattle)

Selecting PACE Program Sites

When the PACE evaluation team identified and recruited programs for the study, it looked for occupational education and training programs that incorporated multiple components of the **career pathways framework**, often in collaboration with local partners (see the **About the Career Pathways Framework** box). Six of the programs volunteered to join the evaluation; three programs were recipients of federal Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG), which required them to be part of an evaluation if requested.² Each program agreed to implement a random assignment design in which some eligible applicants would be assigned to a control group

About the PACE Evaluation

Initiated in 2007, the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) Evaluation studied nine education and occupational training programs that included key features of a career pathways framework. It was the first large-scale, multi-site experimental evaluation of career pathways programs. The evaluation was funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The evaluation included program-specific impact and implementation studies.

The impact study used a random assignment design to measure differences in educational

and employment outcomes between study participants randomly assigned either to a “treatment group” that could receive the program services; or to a “control group” that could not, but could seek other (sometimes similar) services in the community. This design meant that observed differences between treatment group outcomes versus control group outcomes could be attributed to the program. The implementation and early impact reports for each of the nine programs are available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/pathways-for-advancing-careers-and-education> and www.career-pathways.org. Additional reports will present intermediate and long-term outcomes.

and not receive program services. In recognition of the increased administrative burden associated with participating in an evaluation, programs received financial support through the PACE contract to defray evaluation-related costs. The Open Society Foundations and other foundations provided funding for programmatic scale-up and enhancements.

How Programs Perceived the Benefits and Challenges of Participating in PACE

Program staff reflected on their organization’s initial decision to participate in PACE. In each site, program leadership decided to participate after multiple discussions with internal and external program partners and stakeholders. In some instances, they also discussed research ethics with Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) or similar entities. In these interviews, program staff

articulated how they decided that benefits of joining the study outweighed the challenges.

Benefits of Joining a Random Assignment Study

Several interviewees believed the key benefit of the PACE evaluation was an opportunity to build evidence of their program’s effectiveness. Staff noted that understanding whether their program was working as planned was critical both to informing program modifications and to demonstrating the value of continued funding for the program. One program representative said:

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

² For more on HPOG: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/evaluation-portfolio-for-the-health-profession-opportunity-grants-hpog>

About the Career Pathways Framework

In the career pathways framework, postsecondary education and training is organized as a series of manageable steps leading to successively higher credentials and employment opportunities in growing occupations. Each step is designed to prepare participants for the next level of employment and education and also provide a credential with labor market value. Participants can enter and exit the pathway at different places according to their initial levels of education and work experience.

To effectively engage and retain participants, and to facilitate learning and employment, career pathways programs integrate certain core features. The PACE evaluation focused on four primary elements, based on a career pathways framework designed at the outset of the study:

- Comprehensive academic and non-academic assessments,

- Innovative basic skills and occupational training instruction,
- Academic and non-academic supports, and
- Strategies for connecting participants with employment (during or after the program).

The career pathways principle of providing comprehensive and varied services implies a need for a collaborative partnership across organizations with differing missions and strengths.

For more information, see: Fein, D. J. 2012. Career Pathways as a Framework for Program Design and Evaluation. OPRE Report #2012-30. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/career-pathways-as-a-framework-for-program-design-and-evaluation-a-working>

One program saw PACE as the opportunity to build on promising evidence from an earlier program evaluation. The prior study had used a random assignment design and had found positive results, but the number of participants was small and the “embargo” period short, meaning that control group members could enroll in the program after a relatively short window. With the short embargo period, control group members may have enrolled in the program and received the same services as the treatment group while outcomes data was still being collected. Said a representative from the program:

We knew we had to increase the size, scope, and rigor of our evaluation work, and get compelling evidence under our belt. To demonstrate that there were real impacts.

The opportunity to demonstrate impacts often went hand-in-hand with the goal of securing funding for ongoing program operations or enhancements. Interviewees described an increasingly competitive funding environment and funders’ emphasis on evidence-based programs. One program said:

The federal agencies and foundations started asking about evidence-based research, which meant random assignment. ... So I wanted to become part of the evidence-based model. It would help take [the program] to a different level, and help put together proposals in the future. Anytime we write proposals, we are now able to write that we are part of the national research, and people will be more receptive to giving funding, and larger funding.

Addressing the Ethics of Random Assignment

Internal program staff and external partners often expressed misgivings about the ethics of random assignment. Responses to concerned staff and partners included:

- **Through PACE, the programs ultimately would have the opportunity to serve more participants.** Programs had to scale up to meet study enrollment targets—not just to create a control group, but to be positioned to serve 500 treatment group members, the minimum number evaluators deemed necessary to detect impacts. Programs received foundation funding to scale up. As a result, they had more program slots available than prior to the study. As well, with the available foundation funds, some programs were able to serve participants in geographic areas formerly closed to them (i.e., that were not supported by local economic development agencies).

- **Random assignment is a fairer way to distribute program slots**—all eligible applicants have the same chance of being selected. Absent random assignment, programs generally operated on a “first come, first served” basis. Random assignment does not penalize potential program participants who learn about the program later than others.
- **The control group is not barred from receiving services.** PACE did not implement a “no services” control group. Program staff gave study participants assigned to the control group a list of alternate services in the community. PACE follow-up survey data found that many control members did in fact receive education and occupational training.

Another noted the need to “compete in the dwindling funding streams.” Describing the value of PACE:

It was an opportunity for us to demonstrate our story and have someone else tell our story for us. We wanted to show that our model works, and move the needle.

The programs alluded to the limitations of internal programmatic data and anecdotal evidence and the importance of having a third party document effectiveness.

PACE Study and Design Challenges: How Programs Addressed Them

Understanding the potential benefits of study participation was an important first step in a program’s decision to become part of PACE. The next, critical task was getting key stakeholders to buy in. All programs had to address concerns about random assignment. Some reported stakeholders internal to their organization—board members, leadership, or IRBs—voiced concerns. Others reported concerns from outside, such as referral or service delivery partners or stakeholders in the community involved in the program.

The most common concern about participating in a random assignment evaluation related to the idea of a control group. Programs raised concerns that random assignment was ethically wrong because it would deny services to otherwise eligible applicants, would conflict with the organization’s mission, or would damage the organization’s reputation in the community. Program staff reported having to explain to

stakeholders “why [we were] rejecting people who qualify” and “the impact on students that ended up in the control group.” (See **Addressing the Ethics of Random Assignment** box.)

Programs also addressed these concerns in other ways.

Having a “Champion.” Several programs reported that the evaluation was able to move forward after vocal support from a key leader. These leaders often played the role of defending the evaluation and convincing necessary stakeholders of the value of participation.

- One program’s central leadership team dedicated effort to develop supportive leaders to oversee random assignment in local sites. The program realized that these

directors had to be vocal supporters ... we did that work with directors. It was sharing ‘why’—this was a call to action, instead of just informing them that this was happening.

The same program cited the impact a champion had:

It was so valuable having the voice of a respected leader saying, ‘We are doing this, and I believe this is important, and we can do this.’

- A member of the leadership team at another program said:

We pushed [the CEO] to do it, because there were more advantages than disadvantages. [The CEO] had concerns initially, but we had a good relationship, and I persuaded him to take the chance.

Getting Buy-In from Internal Staff. The programs reported that getting buy-in from frontline staff was crucial for implementing the study successfully. Intake staff and case managers were typically the ones enrolling participants in the study and conducting random assignment. These staff often had concerns about random assignment, and about having to deliver the message to control group members that they would be denied access to the program. At many programs, staff were encountering random assignment for the first time.

Program Snapshot

How one program addressed three concerns about random assignment from a partner agency:

- **“It’s wrong to select who gets the services and who doesn’t.”**
 - » Program staff noted the agency already selects who receives services based on the timing of applications: “We had to show them that they already do that. They already do a type of RA, first come first served; we are just changing that model. Once they understood that, that was one piece.”
- **“Community members and public officials won’t accept it.”**
 - » The program noted, “That didn’t happen. We talked to the mayor and everyone and they were happy we got that money into the county. [The grant that funded the program], for them it was a win.”
- **“The evaluation might show that the program isn’t working.”**
 - » The program noted, “We all have a lot of assumptions of how things work and best practices, and there was an anxiety that research would show what you are doing isn’t what you should be doing. We had to convince them we wanted to know if that was the case so we don’t waste resources and could help community.”

“The board had a lot of concern with random assignment. I remember that it took a lot of convincing. [The program director] believed in the study, and took this by the horns to educate everyone; she was very persuasive. If the results weren’t what we wanted, we would have to look at our program and make changes, but overall we believed in the study and knew this was good.”

- One program explained that the study champion made an effort to introduce staff to the evaluation because

many colleagues had never been involved in the research setting.

- Another program emphasized the importance of creating a staff role responsible for having conversations with frontline staff and providing support:

It was important that we were proactive in approaching this. A lot of [staff] responded as ‘it is what it is.’ That’s not the attitude we wanted people to have. This was going to be a big lift. We wanted people to own the hard work.

- One program shared how it brought in outside support for staff conducting random assignment. (Although this program provided support after the study launched, programs can provide it prior to implementation.) The program director explained:

It’s very satisfactory to be on happy cases, but it is really hard when placing people in the control group, to the point where I decided to train people in how to deal with this. I contracted with a [local] school of psychology to come in and coach staff on how to cope.

- When hiring new staff, one program assessed applicants for comfort with random assignment:

When I hired other individuals, because we had research coming in, we were intentionally hiring people and asking them questions about research studies. We asked them questions about how they’d react doing this type of thing. That way we could select people who already had that in mind and were comfortable with the idea.

Facilitating Stakeholder Meetings. The programs reported that it was crucial to hold dedicated meetings with stakeholders to hear all their concerns and address them. They found that this was particularly important if the stakeholder was internal to the organization or was a key service delivery partner. Without their buy-in, the evaluation could not move forward.

- One program faced pushback from its board members. The program devoted time to holding discussions with the board to address the members’ confusion and misconceptions about random assignment, explain the benefits of the study, and acknowledge the emotional challenges associated with random assignment.
- Another program described the process of rolling out the evaluation from its central office to local service delivery sites:

We went to each of the sites and met with the entire local teams. We had a presentation on why we were doing this, the long-term benefits, and creating opportunity to demonstrate powerful impacts. We framed the long-term gain versus short-term pain, and long-term funding. We tried to anticipate questions we would receive, but we also created a space for people to voice their concerns. It was a lot of listening, validating, and acknowledging.

Proactive Discussions with Referral Partners.

Program staff emphasized the importance of reaching out early to community partners to inform them of the evaluation and explain the random assignment design. Though these community partners were not necessarily at the table when programs made the decision to participate in PACE, their buy-in was important to ensure continued referrals and explain the study to potential program applicants.

- One program recalled:

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

- Two programs that partnered closely with their local Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs described the dedicated work they did to keep the partnership strong. One program worked closely with the TANF provider to agree on a process the provider would use for making referrals and informing potential applicants about the evaluation. The program said:

That process took longer than was expected, but it was worth it. If we didn't take that time, we would have lost momentum with referrals. We were able to maintain a strong and high rate—even an increased rate.

Utilizing the Evaluation Team's Expertise. The evaluation team offered support to help address any study-related challenges. As programs met with stakeholders and partners, several found it helpful to consult with or directly involve the evaluation team.

- One program worked with the evaluation team to craft a message about the study that would resonate with a non-researcher audience—its leadership and board:

We met early to talk about what the study would look like with [the evaluation site lead]. So we would have something to show [the key program partner that was resistant to the study]. It couldn't just be the concept; we had to have a road map. We spent a lot of time looking at language and saying how they would understand certain things, language to appeal to a broad population. Then when we were in the room with [the evaluation team and the partner], there was never a defensiveness or arrogance, or anything that would be off-putting to non-researchers. Instead, it was, 'I understand your pain, we've been through that ourselves.' There was great empathy in talking with them and working with our county partners. That shared experience is important, and the process is really powerful and matters to them.

- Another program included a representative from the evaluation team in a series of regional meetings it held with leaders in the community.
- And another program worked closely with the evaluation team to receive approval for the evaluation from the college's IRB, which required a formal review of all research studies. The program said the IRB process

was well-organized from [the evaluation team's] side, so we had answers for [the IRB's] questions. It was new for us.

Designing Study Procedures to Ease Partner Concerns. The basic design of the study was the same across programs. Once applicants were deemed eligible for the program, they were invited to enter the study. Those that accepted signed an informed consent form before filling out two baseline surveys that collected background information. Random assignment to a treatment or control group was the final intake step. The evaluation team tailored the procedures to each program to address its stakeholders' concerns.

- One program partnered with an American Job Center (AJC). Prior to the study, all program intake activities occurred at the AJC. To ease concerns of AJC staff who objected to random assignment, center staff assessed program eligibility and then referred interested applicants to a dedicated staff person at the program for study intake. This staff person administered the consent form and the baseline surveys, and conducted random assignment.
- Similarly, a program brought all intake activities in-house, rather than splitting intake duties with its partners. The evaluation could proceed without exposing partners to aspects of the study they were uncomfortable implementing.

Learning from Prior Experience with a Random Assignment Study. Most PACE programs did not have prior experience with random assignment. One program that did described the value of repeated participation in such studies:

I think [the previous study] had a big impact. There were a lot of convenings to discuss the impact of the study. That process of people hearing about this type of study, putting their grievances out, that laid the foundation, so that when [PACE] came in, all agencies that were serving people [weren't surprised]. ... Having that [prior] discussion helped pave the way for a rigorous study in the community. It also helped us in having some experience explaining a random assignment study, and our staff had been through it.

"Prior to the study, word of mouth was the main recruitment for our program. We had never advertised; we never had the funding to do it. Part of the money from PACE was allocated for advertising—radio, print, etc. Our outreach was significantly augmented."

Program Experiences with Implementing PACE

Once programs entered the study, program staff had to implement and monitor evaluation procedures, including recruitment of many more applicants than normal. Program staff shared their experiences and lessons learned implementing study procedures, including recruiting applicants and using evaluation supports, such as help training frontline staff. Programs also received support through regular cross-program partners meetings and other peer-to-peer activities.

Scaling Recruitment and Intake

Participation in PACE required programs to recruit many more eligible applicants than they had previously, given that 50 percent of study participants would be assigned to the control group. In addition to intensifying recruitment efforts, several programs needed to increase the size of their programs overall, so they would serve at least 500 treatment group members, the minimum number the evaluators deemed necessary to detect impacts. Programs reported that their participation in the study required a dedicated outreach effort to scale up sufficiently to meet the evaluation's enrollment targets. Foundation funds supported program scale up efforts; programs also received support through the PACE contract to defray evaluation-related costs, including marketing and recruitment costs. A number of the programs struggled, but they learned from their experiences in tackling that challenge and offered several lessons for future programs.

Recruitment Required Testing New Methods.

During site selection visits, the evaluation team learned that word of mouth was a primary recruitment tool for most programs. To increase the number of applicants, programs tried new approaches.

- One program described how it pushed its marketing department outside of its comfort zone. This program tracked different recruitment methods—such as ads on billboards, bus stops, and the radio—by asking orientation attendees how they heard about the program:

We had to think outside the box from traditional ways, outside what the college normally did with recruiting. ... We also used funding from [the evaluation], which was really helpful. It allowed us to be able to try different things—saying, ‘We really don’t have the experience to know how effective a billboard is going to be,’ but we had funds to try that out.

- Another program considered what approach would provide the most direct route to its largely Hispanic target population. Program staff knew from interacting with community members that its target population watched a lot of news on television. To market the program to these viewers, the program director worked with a local news station to make an appearance on the evening news to talk about the program. In the following week, more than 200 people attended an orientation to learn more about the program.
- The recruitment targets also led to expanding the target population. One program that had relied solely on internal recruiting launched a “big recruitment push” in the community. A staff person noted:

That was different, because we were recruiting populations who had never considered [occupations in] trades before.

Ongoing Communication with Referral Partners Was Critical. As noted above, programs proactively met with referral partners to explain the study and answer questions. Programs also found they needed to have ongoing conversations to maintain relationships over the course of the study.

- One program described instances in which a TANF case manager referred several clients who ultimately were assigned to the control group; unhappy with the result, the case manager stopped making referrals. Program staff circled back regularly to the TANF provider to address concerns and explain the importance of ongoing referrals.
- Another program described a similar approach, adding that frequent turnover of case managers at the local TANF offices necessitated regular meetings with this partner to ensure they understood the study and continued to refer potential applicants:

We went out and did orientations with [TANF] case managers. We talked to them directly to get their management’s support. ... I also held a monthly [program] meeting that included the [program staff] and managers from [TANF] and included other stakeholders like housing. So that was another method to communicate and resolve any problems we were having.

- Staff noted that the program and its key partner had to work out new processes for the study, and this required “a lot of maintenance work”:

They had been willing to work on [adjustments], but they weren’t the happiest of partners to be doing it. ... [It involved] reminding and going back to the same messages about why we’re doing it, and why we needed to do it, and ‘you can’t do things how you want to because now we have a process in place.’

Lack of Coordination Created Challenges.

A number of programs had recruiters at multiple sites rather than at a central location. Some identified recruitment challenges that stemmed from the need to coordinate across organizational structures.

- One program delivered its services through several contracted “navigator” agencies. The program found that each navigator tended to focus on recruiting for its own program slots from its geographic area, rather than recruiting on behalf of the entire program. Recruitment was a competition rather than a shared goal. To create a team dynamic, the program manager brought the navigators together to share their experiences and challenges and discuss how to work collaboratively.
- Another program found recruitment across the college’s many departments a constant challenge. The program aimed to have advising and registration staff across the large campus refer potential candidates to the PACE program, but found it difficult to coordinate with so many staff whose roles were unrelated to the program. Program staff continually met with other campus departments to encourage referrals, but they also made sure to diversify their efforts and make presentations directly to groups of students, so as not to rely too heavily on staff referrals.

Programs Shifted Toward More Efficient

Strategies. With specific study enrollment goals to meet, programs experimented with new recruitment strategies and intake procedures, and stuck with the ones that provided the greatest return. Some programs assessed the return from various strategies by collecting information on how each applicant learned about the program.

- One program recounted:

We tried a large variety of venues to advertise in, tracked it, found what worked, and stuck with what worked.

- Another program described how it made the shift away from a more labor intensive approach it had used prior to PACE:

Under the old approach, we would go to churches in the evening to speak to groups there, but showings weren’t always great. From an operational standpoint, it wasn’t the most effective. When we saw that we were able to disseminate a lot of information about the program through print and radio, we did this more. We included information about the program’s eligibility requirements. We provided all information on our website too, including what documents to bring, and then later, even the application was online. We kept tweaking it.

- One program completely changed its intake process for the study, and retained the new procedures after the study after determining they were much more efficient. Increasing program enrollment for the study offered an opportunity for the program to look at intake and assess ways to improve it. When the program entered the study, the first step in its application process was attendance at a required three-day placement session spread over one or two weeks. Staff knew that the requirement was burdensome for some program applicants, and that many dropped out during the process. In integrating random assignment into the process, program staff streamlined activities such that the placement session lasted one day; before leaving, each applicant knew whether he or she was assigned to the treatment or control group.

Use of Evaluation Supports

As part of participation in PACE, programs could access evaluation team supports. This included in-person training on study procedures and ongoing troubleshooting as needed. Staff training proved to be a key support.

- One program described how the training benefited its staff:

The evaluation team did a lot of training with our random assignment people, in depth—working through case scenarios, role play, getting prepped for things they would run into. They were there with experiences and took positive moments and emphasized them, and figured out how to tweak others. That time and care really helped the staff who were anxious about talking to students.

- Staff from another program emphasized the value of continued training:

I thought the initial training was good, but the ongoing training was even better. The evaluation team came and worked one-on-one with our navigators in a few instances.

- Managers and leadership at the programs also found it helpful to coach their own staff, building on the initial training delivered by the evaluation team. Said one program manager:

The staff had to understand that the way you convey information will affect how [applicants] will respond. So I did some coaching on how they communicated and the spirit of how they communicated, the framing of the message. Saying, 'you didn't get [PACE program] services, but we do have these other services for you.'

Another key support was peer-to-peer interaction. The PACE evaluation team and ACF designed the study to emphasize engagement among PACE program partners, creating an internal learning community and increasing collaboration. PACE committed to sharing knowledge across programs in regular partners meetings, webinars, and newsletters. Over the course of PACE, the evaluation team hosted five in-person partners meetings and three webinars. The meetings included presentations by the PACE team on the status of the evaluation and promising practices. Meetings also provided an opportunity for programs to share and learn from one another. Despite differences in context, populations served, and services offered, programs found peer-to-peer activities and other cross-program learning to be valuable in a number of ways.

Expanding Their Perspective. Programs reported value in hearing about programs with designs and local contexts different from their own.

- One program said:

I liked [the partners meetings] even though I did not expect to, because the sites were so different. They gave me an opportunity to see what was working better. It was interesting to hear what other people are doing in general. It was better than hearing a press release. It was like getting under the hood a little bit.

- Another program said:

The conversations and seeing how these other, different services were helping, and talking with others—this was something that helped me grow as a leader. These conversations allowed me to be out of the setting where I work, and see what works in other communities.

Sharing Concerns and Adopting Promising Strategies from Other Programs. Several programs reported that sharing recruitment experiences was particularly valuable, because recruitment was a challenge for many programs.

- One program decided not to use marketing funds to implement a social media marketing strategy after hearing about another program's experience—that program had tested it, and found that despite the young and social media-savvy target population, the marketing strategy was not very effective.
- One director of a program struggling with recruitment described how he sought out the advice of another PACE program that was doing well with recruitment.
- The programs also shared what they learned on other topics, such as eligibility and intake processes and service delivery. One program said:

[The interaction] helped us reflect on our service delivery, the possibilities for partnering in different ways. I thought it was really helpful.

Staff at this program also noted:

[We] did lean on our peers in [similar program] to figure out how to manage things.

- The partners meetings were also helpful for programs to share concerns about implementing the study. One program noted:

It was nice to know that others were having the same concerns and questions about the study in the beginning, from their staff and board members. It was nice to know that they had concerns about how the results (positive or negative) were going to impact their programs. It helped us organize ourselves a little bit more, but we came out with strategies on how to go about the study and make sure we were doing what we needed to do.

Providing Information from and Interaction with the Evaluation Team. The evaluation team used partners meetings as an opportunity to update PACE programs on key aspects of the study design, analysis, and reporting. Programs reported that it was helpful to take a step back and reconnect with the overall evaluation approach.

- One program said:

Now I see that [partners meetings] were helpful in terms of building my understanding and perspective of the study more broadly. In the beginning you are so focused on you. The partners meetings helped with understanding how we fit more broadly into the study. We were part of this bigger analysis.

- One program that later participated in another random assignment evaluation missed the peer-to-peer element of PACE. A program manager explained:

We are doing another random assignment-style study, and we haven't had any partnership-level meetings. I miss that element. It is cool to have that gathering, to learn and network and share. I found that very valuable. Having that experience, you come back refreshed with new ideas and solutions.

- Looking toward future studies, several programs suggested that it would be valuable to facilitate learning by having a mix of programs new to random assignment and programs experienced with it. One program suggested a mentor-style pairing in which an inexperienced program could be advised by a similar but experienced program (e.g., a community college program working with another community college program).

Unexpected Benefits, and Looking Ahead

Reflecting on the broader implications of participation in the study, several programs commented that they found their PACE experience produced unanticipated positive changes within their organization.

- One program described how the experience with PACE positioned the college for a broader state initiative:

The work we are doing now on [state initiative], it is not by accident. A lot of it was based on this [PACE] research, and it allowed our colleges to set up the systems we have now in a short time span because we had the resources to try it. We built the capacity to take it into the next phase. ... The experience in PACE gave us a leg up.

- Another program reported that PACE provided the ammunition to effect an important change:

We had one really big win. One of our biggest challenges during PACE was that we could not identify candidates for the PACE program using the data in our college system. ... We [are] the reason that it's in place now. We could demonstrate how many students we lost through the cracks. ... The college did a ton of work to [work out the] kinks. I think that is a direct outcome of PACE.

Other programs commented that participation in PACE had improved their institution's research and evaluation capacity, and had additional benefits.

- One program said:

The study also had an impact on the college's internal research office and how we vet new research. That is all formal now, and there's a process with rubrics, which helped the research office a lot.

- Another program said:

When we think about how [our program's] engagement in evaluation and government-funded evaluation has evolved, prior to PACE a lot of the resources were coming from foundations, and we did evaluations to get funding. This has been a shift: we are doing evaluation now because we believe it's valuable, not because of funding. ... The support [the evaluation team] provided as an evaluation shop with a lot of experience working on federal evaluation was valuable.

- A program said that the benefits to participation in a random assignment study go beyond the study findings:

[The study]...changed the program, relationship with the county. The process of it was beneficial regardless of anything else, and there is value in just that. There is excitement in research and finding out what works and what doesn't. [It provides] validation [of a] hypothesis ... which you never get if not doing research. People really want to have that justification, and [a random assignment study] is key to that.

When asked what advice they would give to another program considering participation in a random assignment study, program staff touched on several common themes:

- Participating in a random assignment study is hard but worthwhile work:

It is as much work as you think it would be, but it is good work, not pointless work.

- There is value in the process, regardless of the outcomes:

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

- Transparency and communication are key. Take the time early on to explain the study to internal and external stakeholders; communicate early and often:

[Do] not underestimate the importance of planning and strategizing as an ongoing process...It's a heavy lift but will be time well spent.

- Use available resources—the evaluation team's expertise, funding, and partners:

Use knowledge of programs that have gone through it before.

- There is opportunity for program improvement and learning, beyond what is required for the study:

Just the process of having to go through an analysis changed things that had nothing to do with the analysis.

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Nicole Constance

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Project Director:

Karen Gardiner

Abt Associates Inc.
6130 Executive Blvd.
Rockville, MD 20852

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