

Quantum Opportunities

A Summary of:

EVALUATION OF THE QUANTUM OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM (QOP): DID THE PROGRAM WORK?

June 1994, by Andrew Hahn, with Tom Leavitt and Paul Aaron

QUANTUM OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM: A BRIEF ON THE QOP PILOT PROGRAM, September 1995

Both studies conducted by Center for Human Resources, Heller Graduate School, Brandeis University (Waltham, MA)

Overview

The Quantum Opportunities Program (hereafter QOP) was a year round, multi-year, comprehensive service program for disadvantaged youth (all from families receiving food stamps and public assistance) launched in five communities in 1989. Twenty-five disadvantaged students in each community were randomly selected to enter the program beginning in ninth grade and continuing through four years of high school. QOP was operated by community-based organizations in the five communities served (Opportunities Industrial Centers in four sites; Learning Enterprise in Milwaukee). QOP was focused around education activities (tutoring, homework assistance, computer-assisted instruction) and development

POPULATION

QOP students were selected randomly from families receiving public assistance in each of the five project cities. Eighty-six percent were ethnic minorities and only 9 percent lived with both parents.

activities (life and family skills, planning for the future including postsecondary education and jobs). Community service was also stressed. Community agencies provided service after school on their premises and, in some cases, in school settings (where the schools provided time and space). Young people were provided with caring adult mentors who stuck with them over four years, no matter what.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Brandeis researchers evaluated four QOP sites. Relative to a control group, QOP students:

- ◆ graduated from high school more often (63 vs. 42 percent)
- ◆ dropped out of school less often (23 vs. 50 percent)
- ◆ went on to postsecondary education more often (42 vs. 16 percent)
- ◆ attended a 4-year college more often (18 vs. 5 percent)
- ◆ attended a 2-year institution more often (19 vs. 9 percent)
- ◆ became teen parents less often (24 vs. 38 percent)

- ◆ more often: took part in a community project in the six months following QOP (21 vs. 12 percent); were volunteer tutors, counselors or mentors, (28 vs. 8 percent) and gave time to non-profit, charitable, school or community groups (41 vs. 11 percent, only statistically significant at the Philadelphia site)

The effects of QOP increased over time, as measured at the end of each high school year. After the first year, there were no significant differences seen between the QOP and control groups in the 11 academic and functional skill areas measured. After two years, scores of QOP participants were higher in all 11 areas, and the difference was statistically significant in five areas. By the time QOP students and control sample were leaving high school in 1993, QOP student group scores in all 11 areas were much higher than control student scores, and the differences were statistically significant in every area.

There was wide variation among the program sites. One of the five original sites, Milwaukee, was dropped from the evaluation after problems with implementation and follow-up. Of the remaining four, Philadelphia had the most significant outcomes. For example, the rate of 4-year college attendance was nearly three times higher than the rate in San Antonio, five times higher than Oklahoma City, and eight times higher than Saginaw. Researchers noted that at the Philadelphia site, staff developed and maintained strong bonds with the QOP students, and were able to forge a cohesive group identity.

The Ford Foundation forward funded QOP at \$1.3 million for four years. The evaluation's cost/benefit analysis showed that QOP cost \$10,600 per participant over the *four* year period and that \$3.68 was gained for every dollar spent if QOP college students earned a degree. Even if only one-third of QOP college students ultimately received degrees, the benefit-cost ratio was \$3.04 for every dollar spent.

Key Components

QOP also featured financial incentives for participants and staff. Students received small stipends for participating in program activities (starting at \$1 per program hour, and rising to \$1.33) and bonuses for completing activities (\$100 for every 100 program hours). They also received a matching amount in an account that could be used only for post-program activities, such as college and training.

"In contrast to most youth programs in the 'add-on' or 'second-chance' tradition, QOP was designed to encourage long-term involvement through an array of services. Meaningful relationships with adults would be encouraged without fear of having bonds abruptly severed when the programs ended."

Brandeis University

Contributing Factors

Caring Adults

Brandeis: "If young people are connected with caring adults for sustained periods of time, year-round, positive results do emerge." Program administrators and staff, as well as teachers and mentors, took an active interest in the welfare of the QOP students, encouraging them, visiting them, following up and doing everything they could to keep them in the program. "Once in QOP, always in QOP" was the unofficial motto, and most program counselors took it to heart.

"Simply put, when a quantum opportunity was offered, young people from public assistance backgrounds--African American males, females, whites, Asians, others -- took it! They joined the programs and many stayed with the programs or the staff associated with the initiatives, for long periods."

Brandeis University

Sense of Community

The project sites were small, with only 25 students in each. Students were able to bond with each other and with adults in the program, particularly at the Philadelphia site.

Multiple Services Encompassing All Aspects of Youths' Lives

The QOP program was designed to address the many challenges and obstacles that disadvantaged youth face. QOP focused on developing basic skills (academic and functional) for future success, strengthening life and social skills to make better choices and operate more effectively with families and peers, broadening horizons through cultural trips and other experiences, and taking pride in the community through active service.

Quality Staff

Results from the most effective project site--Philadelphia--show what can be accomplished with a dedicated, quality staff. Brandeis: "The differences, for example, between San Antonio and Philadelphia cannot be attributed to the neighborhood setting, the characteristics of participants, or to the program model. What distinguishes these sites is the degree of buy-in from the host organizations and the commitment of staff at all levels."

Financial Incentives As Part of a Comprehensive Program

While financial incentives were important to some students, and helped with family expenses, it appeared that they were not the decisive factor in QOP participation. When they are part of a comprehensive, well-developed program, financial

incentives can be effective in maintaining student interest in and attendance at program events. However, they do not appear to operate effectively in the absence of a strong program featuring much personal contact with staff.

Financial Resources

The Ford Foundation funded the QOP program upfront, making it possible to plan for and deliver a host of services over an extended period of time. Both staff and students knew the resources were there to carry through on their commitments.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

In 1989, program designers randomly assigned 50 disadvantaged students in each of the five sites to either a program or a control group. Researchers compared the progress of the two groups with periodic questionnaires and basic skills tests.

EVALUATION FUNDING

Evaluation of the QOP funded by the Ford Foundation.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

The pilot project took place in five communities: Philadelphia, PA; Saginaw, MI; Oklahoma City, OK; San Antonio, TX; and Milwaukee, WI.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Research Organization

Andrew Hahn
Center for Human Resources
Heller Graduate School, Brandeis University
Waltham, MA 02254-9110
(617) 736-3774, Fax (617) 736-3851
graduateschool.heller.brandeis.edu/chr/index.html

Implementing Organization

C. Benjamin Lattimore
Opportunities Industrialization Centers
of America, Inc.
1415 Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19122
(215) 236-4500, Ext. 251, Fax (215) 236-7480
oicofamerica.org