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Elevating Cultural Relevance and Racial Equity in Research and Evaluation

Lessons from an Urban Institute-Asian American LEAD Collaboration

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Interest in evidence-based programs is increasing—not just among policymakers, but among philanthropic organizations. Simultaneously, more foundations are interested in supporting efforts that advance racial equity in research and in the field. To providers serving less well-researched communities, applying for grants amid these parallel movements can feel like a trade-off. This brief discusses the tension between implementing models based on available evidence and piloting programs that prioritize cultural relevance and responsiveness to the communities they serve. The discussion stems from Urban's partnership with a nonprofit youth development organization, Asian American Youth Leadership Empowerment and Development (AALEAD).

Policymakers and funders have demonstrated strong support for evaluations that produce evidence-based practices—mainly randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental evaluation designs. Because of funders' growing interest in supporting this research, programs seek evaluation so that they may demonstrate their value, be considered evidence-based, and receive more funding. Inevitably, funding and evidence-based programs and interventions are often tied together.

Grantmakers are interested in not only how programs impact individuals across metrics, but also whether those metrics address racial equity and elevate community voices. Large philanthropic organizations, like the W. K. Kellogg Foundation,[1] the Ford Foundation,[2] the WT Grant Foundation,[3] and the Annie E. Casey Foundation (GrantCraft 2007), provide resources and funding for efforts advancing race equity. These efforts include engaging and sharing power with community members.

Photo provided by AALEAD staff.

Despite funders' interest in evidence-based programs that elevate racial equity, the nature of many rigorous evaluations, including randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental designs, make them difficult for practitioners to fully support. These evaluations could be perceived as withholding supports for community members the program aims to serve, potentially raising conflicts with the program's organizational values. Randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental designs could also be perceived to cause unintended and undetected consequences to those in a control group. However, evaluations, especially in education and youth services, are typically designed around resource constraints and rarely deny services intentionally for the sake of a comparison group.[4] For example, researchers can rely on randomization generated through preexisting lotteries based on oversubscription of a program (Cook 2001). Quasi-experimental designs are typically developed around a natural cutoff (e.g., birth date for eligibility, timing of a program change) to develop an artificial comparison group, or they may match students after they receive an intervention to those who did not participate in the program.

Even if racial-equity-minded practitioners are willing to explore how their services can be more based in evidence, they often lack the capacity to undergo rigorous evaluation; it can be costly to provide additional training or professional development to ensure implementation fidelity, challenging to identify a comparable group of students, and difficult to collect and analyze necessary data. And, if a program's sample size is small, it will be more difficult to separate program impacts from simple chance differences between participating students and their comparisons. Similarly, if a program uses

evidence-based instruments that are neither aligned with its culturally relevant curriculum nor use language that resonates with the community served, assessing the program's impact may be more challenging.

This leads to the following questions: What other evaluation methods and techniques can programs use to ground their work in data? How can programs find or create assessments that fit and integrate evidence and cultural responsiveness? And how can researchers and practitioners collaborate to meet this common need?

AALEAD in Washington, DC, is aiming to use evidence-based practices that are also culturally relevant to their population. Their evaluation efforts are still in the exploratory phase. AALEAD has helped fill a gap in services for underserved, low-income Asian American youth. Created as a community organization by and for the Asian American community, AALEAD initially served a large Vietnamese refugee and immigrant population in Washington, DC, but expanded to underserved Asian American youth in middle and high schools in the greater DC area (Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia).

AALEAD provides after-school, mentoring, and summer programming for youth in the greater DC area. After-school programming is provided to youth in participating DC elementary, middle, and high schools; Maryland middle and high schools; and Virginia middle and high schools. Youth receive academic, social, and emotional learning opportunities to improve their academic development, decisionmaking around their educational future, leadership skills, and healthy concepts of self. Most after-school programming occurs on site in school buildings.

All AALEAD programming focuses on three outcome areas: educational empowerment, identity development, and leadership opportunities. AALEAD is the only organization in the country working to meet needs specific to low-income Asian American youth, including cultural and language barriers. Unlike similar programs for Latinx students, who often share the same language and similar home cultures, organizations that serve Asian Americans, including AALEAD, serve students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Organizations that serve Asian Americans must provide resources in languages such as Chinese, Tagalog, and Vietnamese, the most commonly spoken languages among Asian Americans.[5] This cultural and linguistic diversity within the Asian American population makes finding curricula and assessments that accurately measure the experiences of those from different backgrounds more challenging.

Because AALEAD's mission is so unique and the communities they serve so diverse, finding assessments that accurately capture student outcomes is a challenge. Program coordinators often adapt curriculum that meets the needs and plays to the strengths of their students. This flexibility makes measuring students' growth even more difficult. AALEAD uses the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale in its pre- and postassessments. Though the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is an evidence-based survey, it does not align well with the curriculum's distinctive emphasis on youth accepting and growing in their Asian American identity and community. Consequently, based on the assessments AALEAD currently uses, it is not clear if the data accurately measure AALEAD's impact in the three outcome areas of educational empowerment, identity development, and leadership opportunities.

AALEAD is interested in exploring evaluation to contribute to the research field and improve their own program model. This is important given that there is especially a lack of data on culturally relevant practices for Asian American youth, and few tools and measures can be adopted to evaluate Asian American youth programming. Many of those currently available are not inclusive of Asian American communities and their experiences, rendering them useless in measuring the impact of programming specifically for Asian Americans. Without culturally relevant tools and measures to assess impact and outcomes, AALEAD, among other programs that serve Asian American youth, cannot effectively measure youth progress, which can hinder their strength and evidence base.

Starting October 2017, Urban began working with AALEAD to draft an evaluation design for its after-school program with consistent feedback from AALEAD. During the fall of 2017, Urban and AALEAD established a data sharing agreement to transfer and format program data. AALEAD provided the program data, including program enrollment and participation; enrollee characteristics; enrollee school participation and achievement; pre- and postprogram assessments; youth and parent satisfaction surveys; and documentation about survey items and instruments, to Urban for data analysis. Urban has also been working with AALEAD to develop a blog series and data visualizations on Urban's blog, *Urban Wire*.

Strengths and Challenges of AALEAD Data Collection

Summarizing AALEAD's Program Data

AALEAD collects various data on participants as part of program administration and an effort to measure program outcomes. Running the program involves AALEAD staff recording youth demographics, enrollment characteristics, and participation. Demographic data include self-reported participant gender, race and ethnicity, household size, self-reported family income, and eligibility for and receipt of free or reduced-price meals (figure 1).

Program enrollment information includes participant program level (elementary, middle, or high school), grade in school, school attending, program site, and self-reported participation in English Language Learner programs (figure 2). Attendance information includes youth participation and the names, number, type, and program outcome alignment area of activities as well as descriptions and hours of community service.

FIGURE 1
AALEAD Participants Were Predominately Asian and Low-Income

Racial and ethnic composition and self-reported family income, 2016–17

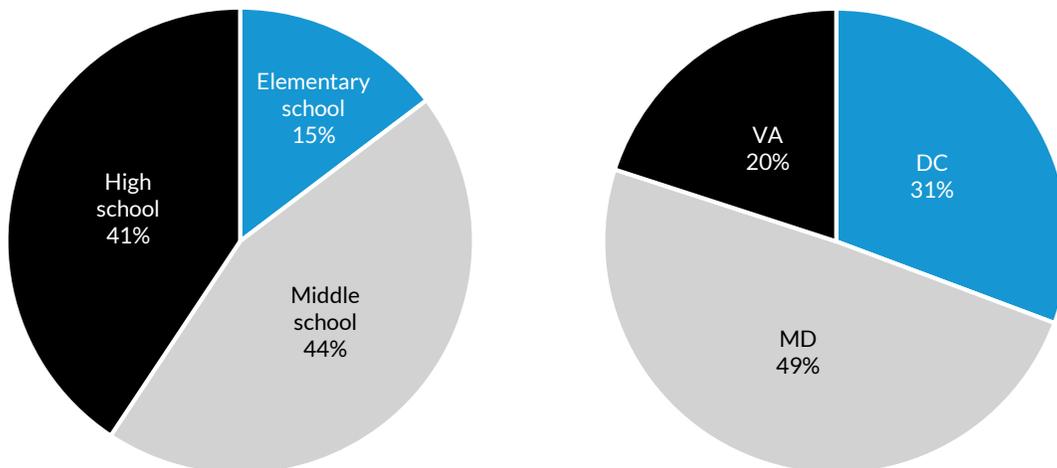
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Source: Urban Institute tabulations of AALEAD program data.

FIGURE 2

AALEAD's Middle School Programs and Maryland Enrolled the Most Participants

Participation by program level (left) and AALEAD site (right), 2016–17

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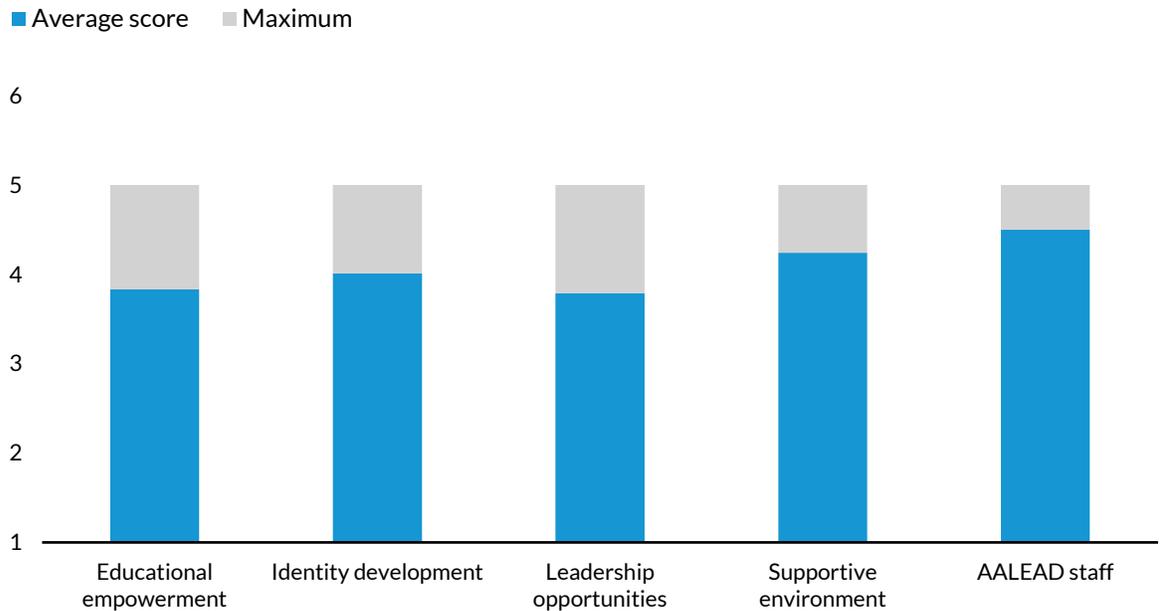**Source:** Urban Institute tabulations of AALEAD program data.

AALEAD also collects information on youth outcomes and satisfaction to facilitate program improvement and demonstrate its impact (figure 3). AALEAD staff administer a battery of pre- and postprogram surveys aligned with its three outcome areas (educational empowerment, identity

development, and leadership opportunities) and youth and parental satisfaction surveys. Quarterly report cards and self-reports also provide information on youth school participation, achievement, and transition from middle to high school and high school to postsecondary education.

AALEAD Participants' Satisfaction across Outcome Areas
Normalized scores based on responses to satisfaction survey, 2016–17

Source: Urban Institute tabulations of AALEAD satisfaction survey data.

AALEAD'S DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Currently, data entry is a three-step process where staff record data in individual Excel spreadsheets and then compile those data into monthly management reports, which are also used for internal tracking. In the final step, staff upload data into a case management and data collection tool. Staff analyze the data in the monthly management reports to assess how many outcome-related activities youth have participated in and whether they are still on track to meet program goals. They also use the data to create progress reports for their funders.

As with many smaller programs, however, AALEAD data capacity is limited by database systems and analytic resources. Changing data monitoring systems coupled with staff turnover and departures has led to diminished and less standardized and centralized data gathering as well as a significant knowledge and capabilities gap. Frontline staff who would benefit most from the information lack the right levels of access to create customized reports. And software updates from the data monitoring system affected AALEAD's access to their historical data, making it more difficult to compare data over time.

Another concern is the level of consistency in collecting data across program sites, levels, and individual staff members. The level of effort required, frequency of, and which modules and items are prioritized in administering surveys and recording program data are not immediately clear. Standardizing information collection would aid the dual goals of improving programs and demonstrating effectiveness. However, even with ideal data, limited staff time, resources, and capacity to analyze program data may blunt these efforts.

Moving forward, AALEAD staff aim to expand their data collection, management, and analysis capacity. They have discussed how they might digitize intake forms to avoid reentering data into multiple spreadsheets. Ultimately, AALEAD's goal is to use data—both real-time and longitudinal—to improve organizational decisionmaking around program design and delivery.

Next Steps for Program Evaluation

Though AALEAD's after-school programming is unique, AALEAD is similar to many small organizations working with less well-researched communities. Such organizations often prioritize what data can do for their organizational development and programming. This means finding the research and data activities that allow them to grow and improve in real time while best meeting their participants' needs. Through our partnership with AALEAD, we have seen the many strengths of their approach, programming, and data collection and have learned areas they want to improve. We have also coalesced around the importance of participatory research, especially for underserved communities.

The Urban Institute and AALEAD have collaborated on a plan for an outcome and implementation evaluation. The goals of the evaluation are to assess (1) youth participation and engagement with AALEAD; (2) AALEAD's influence on leadership, educational empowerment, and identity outcomes; (3) key elements of implementation (e.g., data use and frequency, intensity, and consistency of sessions); and (4) best practices and lessons learned from program implementation. The evaluation would span 12 to 16 months and would build off AALEAD's current systems, including their pre- and postprogram surveys used to assess outcomes. Though it is unclear whether curricula lead to intended outcomes, this can be explored more within the outcome evaluation framework. AALEAD and its staff also need better access to data to inform their practice.

The implementation evaluation will draw on several data sources (student focus groups; facilitator, AALEAD leadership, and stakeholder interviews; observations; document review). The implementation evaluation will focus on amplifying students' and staff's voices and providing continuous feedback to inform real-time improvements.

Ultimately, the evaluation should answer the following research questions.

OUTCOME EVALUATION
- Do students that participate in the AALEAD after-school program improve within and across school years on leadership, educational empowerment, and identity indicators?

> » Do these outcomes differ by student demographics, attendance, prior participation, facilitators, etc.?

- Are students engaged and satisfied with the AALEAD after-school program and its components (e.g., curriculum, facilitators)?

IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION

- How does curriculum instruction and implementation differ across schools and instructors?
  - » What factors may explain observed variation (e.g., training, experience, population served, school district)?
  - » How do curriculum and activities align with the goals of the program and positive youth development framework?

- How do program leaders support facilitators to set a vision and goals for the program and provide feedback for facilitators?

- What characteristics of the program make it engaging and fulfilling for students?

- What are the patterns of enrollment, attendance, and persistence in AALEAD? What drives these patterns?

Ultimately, the evaluation will focus on building a collaborative research project that draws on facilitators', students', and parents' rich expertise and prioritizes frequent updates and information that can facilitate continuous quality improvement.

Conclusion

Relevant and timely research should match community needs and assets. The collaboration between AALEAD and the Urban Institute shows the first steps of this relationship. AALEAD, like other similar organizations, wants to push forward on data analysis and evaluation while staying true to its mission, goals, and youth participants. The goal of the future evaluation is threefold: provide necessary feedback and data that can help AALEAD refine their approach and priorities to improve the program; provide evidence of how a research-practitioner partnership can best aid programs serving specific minority communities; and add to the current knowledge base and literature on after-school programming for Asian American youth to catalyze similar programs and initiatives nationwide.

Notes

1 "Racial equity," W.K. Kellogg Foundation, accessed October 17, 2018, https://www.wkkf.org/what-we-do/racial-equity.

2 "Challenging inequality," Ford Foundation, accessed October 17, 2018, https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/challenging-inequality/.

3   "Reducing inequality," William T. Grant Foundation, accessed October 17, 2018,
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4   Mayookha Mitra-Majumdar, "RCTs as an ethical evaluation choice in pay for success," *PFS Perspectives*, March 6,
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Acknowledgments

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