



The CUNY Fatherhood Academy: A Qualitative Evaluation

Executive Summary

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Many young black and Latino men in New York City struggle to gain a foothold in the city's mainstream economy. Poverty rates are 50 percent higher and unemployment is 60 percent higher for the city's young black and Latino men than for young white men (NYC Young Men's Initiative 2013). The challenges are especially steep for the estimated 109,269 men ages 18 to 24 with only a high school degree.¹ They are even worse for the estimated 75,561 men who have dropped out and do not have a high school equivalency (HSE) diploma. Given the economic challenges young fathers without postsecondary education face in providing for their families, New York City's Young Men's Initiative launched a fatherhood program housed in LaGuardia Community College in spring 2012. The CUNY Fatherhood Academy (CFA or the Academy) aims to connect young fathers to academic and employment opportunities while supporting them as fathers through parenting classes and workshops.

Between September 2013 and April 2014, Urban Institute researchers conducted an independent qualitative evaluation of the CFA program under a contract with the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity. The study focused on CFA's design, implementation, and participant outcomes in the first four cohorts served between March 2012 and December 2013. We interviewed administrators, staff, and advisory group members from the Academy, as well as administrators from CUNY's central administrative office, LaGuardia Community College, New York City's Young Men's Initiative, and the Open Society Foundations' Campaign for Black Male Achievement. We also held four focus groups with 33 CFA participants from cohorts 1 to 4. Including focus group participants, we interviewed 55 individuals in total. To supplement the interviews we analyzed CFA program enrollment and participation data, which included information on attendance, reading literacy, and employment. We also reviewed responses to a fatherhood survey that CFA staff administered to participants at the beginning and end of the program.

To read the Center for Economic Opportunity's comment letter on these findings, please go to <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/Response-to-CFA-Evaluation.pdf>.

The study aimed to address the following questions:

- What do participants gain from the program?
- Have the Young Men's Initiative objectives to improve young men's education, employment opportunities, and parenting been achieved?
- How important is the program's location on a college campus?
- What program modifications might improve outcomes?
- Can and should this program be replicated or expanded?

CFA Program Model

The Academy began in spring 2012. The model emphasizes education, employment, and parenting for students preparing to take the HSE exam or preparing for college. The HSE classes are free for students and are offered three days a week. In addition to academic coursework, the curriculum includes parenting and health workshops, employment preparation, and a men's support group. College-Ready participants come two days a week to attend workshops on preparing for college, participate in fatherhood and parenting classes, and receive personal and career counseling. They also participate in internships in different departments of the college. In total, CFA has enrolled 118 HSE participants and 29 College-Ready participants over the past two years.

Findings

Fathers credit CFA with changing their lives. Despite commitment to their children, CFA participants are at serious risk educationally and financially, which also puts their children at risk—a risk that the fathers recognize. Many saw CFA as a second chance to get right what they had gotten wrong by not completing school (or pursuing college) or by associating with friends and peers who were not focused on school. Several fathers discussed shifting their focus and having new motivation (thanks to their children) to think seriously about the future and make decisions that will benefit their sons or daughters. As committed fathers, they were drawn to advertisements about the program or else alerted to the opportunity by people close to them who recognized their readiness to move ahead.

CFA targets young low-income fathers, a large and underserved population in New York City. The program works to address participants' core needs by linking education, employment, parenting, and counseling services. The program helps fathers earn an HSE diploma at rates at or above the state average among all HSE test takers. Several fathers credit the program with helping them get better jobs,

though work remains very unstable for these men. Roughly 9 percent of fathers have enrolled in college. It is too soon to tell if the program has had real and lasting effects on education and employment. According to participants, the program has improved their parenting, but it is too soon to tell if it increases longer-term child engagement. The fathers varied on what, if any, program changes might make it easier for more men to complete the program. Some suggested holding classes on consecutive days and not on Fridays. Some fathers expressed a desire for additional program locations in each borough, but there was no consensus on this point.

An important feature of the Academy program is its location on a college campus. Connecting men to college is central to the program's design and mission. Locating the program in a community college appears to make a difference beyond just better access to the campus. For some participants, the location increased their motivation and self-confidence. "This program is different from other GED programs," said one focus group participant. "It's on a college campus; you get that energy back being on campus." Being around college students changed the young men's self-identity as they saw new opportunities for themselves. "It feels good, like you're part of something," said one young man. "A lot of programs are in community centers, right next to some projects, and it makes you feel bad," explained another. "Here, you're with your peers and you're in this college and you realize that you can come here."

Program planners and other stakeholders have asked whether LaGuardia Community College is the best and only setting for the Academy. Our study did not examine other potential locations, such as other CUNY campuses, but by probing stakeholders, program planners, and participants on what the Academy needs for success, we conclude it could likely succeed on other CUNY college campuses. Ingredients for success appear to include dedicated staff and administrative leadership, strong instructors, sufficient classroom and administrative space, direct links to educational and employment resources, oversight and data support from the CUNY central office, and active participant outreach. For several reasons, however, LaGuardia was an ideal candidate to launch and implement the program, and lessons learned from the four cohorts could be transferred to additional campuses. LaGuardia had interested leadership, capacity to dedicate staff and space, and past experience implementing and designing pilot programs that were later expanded to other CUNY campuses.

Recommendations

We identified two areas the program could enhance that would help program planners understand the Academy's effects and render it better suited for expanding or replicating. We recommend increased support for postprogram links and strengthening the instruction and curriculum.

Supporting postprogram links to employment, education, parenting resources, and alumni: The end of the program's 16 weeks is still only the beginning of the men's entrance into adulthood and growth as fathers. The program considers sustaining and supporting the men's progression an important mission, and we see this as critical to ensure that any program gains are sustained. Beginning with cohort 5, the Academy added a part-time alumni and retention specialist. This important addition could strengthen

fathers' links to educational and employment opportunities, parenting resources, and each other after the program ends. In addition to helping the alumni, keeping better track of fathers will help the program understand its long-term impacts.

Strengthening the instructional model and curriculum: Academy students pass the HSE at rates above the state average despite staff and participant concerns about classroom size and insufficient numbers of instructors. Now that the HSE exam has changed from the General Educational Development test (GED) to the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC),² the program should assess its instruction and consider ways to strengthen it. Staff expect that the TASC will be more difficult than the GED, so the program should focus on students' proficiencies at intake and adapt the instruction to focus on their weakest subject areas. As fathers told us, "We needed more work, more writing, more homework."

CFA is committed to helping its participants achieve college readiness, and we believe that component could be strengthened either with more academic instruction or more structured workshops and supports. Such changes would need to be carefully planned before implementing an expanded model at LaGuardia or replicating the model on other campuses.

The program is now relatively small, aiming to serve about 80 young men a year. Its size may contribute to its success. It has talented and passionate staff, a committed administration and agency partners, and relatively flexible funding that has accommodated changes as needed. In addition, the LaGuardia administration has been willing to donate in-kind resources. To replicate or expand the program and have similar success, these features would need replication as well. The program would also require more outreach to attract more than the current 40 fathers per cohort. To replicate the program on other CUNY campuses, program planners would need to make additional considerations. For one, planners would need to clearly articulate and probably document their model, including their curriculum, approach, and process, to ensure model fidelity as best as possible.

Building Capacity to Evaluate

We recommend expansion that also builds the capacity to evaluate the program rigorously with a comparison group and by using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Expanding the program's small size and evaluation capacity would allow an evaluation of some of the desired long-term outcomes. Strengthening the evidence on effectiveness requires several steps. First, evaluators would need to account for possible selection bias in who enters the program. Second, the program data need to be gathered over a longer period to determine the longer-term education and employment impacts of the program on participants. Finally, the program would need much more robust data on the parenting component to evaluate its effects.

Notes

1. 2012 estimates from US Census Bureau Fact Finder data.

2. On January 1, 2014, the HSE test used in New York State was changed from the GED to the TASC. This new test is designed to cost less and meet New York's P-12 Common Core Standards. It was developed by the New York State Education Department and CTB/McGraw-Hill.

Reference

NYC Young Men's Initiative. 2013. *Annual Report 2013*. New York: NYC Young Men's Initiative, http://www.nyc.gov/html/yimi/downloads/pdf/YMI_Annual%20Report_100713a.pdf.

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