

Impact Justice

Evaluating FosterClub: Lessons Learned About How Researchers Can Partner with their Clients

Aisha Canfield, M.P.P.
Andrea Gentile, M.P.P.
Angela Irvine, Ph.D.

Citation: Canfield, Aisha, Andrea Gentile, and Angela Irvine. 2016. *Evaluating FosterClub: Lessons Learned About How Researchers Can Partner with their Clients*. Impact Justice, Oakland, CA. November, 2016.

INTRODUCTION

Impact Justice partnered with FosterClub to evaluate FosterClub’s All-Star internship program in Seaside, Oregon – an intensive, seven week onsite internship program that strengthens the leadership and advocacy skills of young community leaders with child welfare experiences from across the US. The goal was to determine how the All-Star internship program impacted participants, understand the value that the program provides above and beyond other leadership programs for foster youth, and highlight replicable model program practices that would drive the expansion of the All-Star internship to engage foster youth and juvenile justice involved youth in multiple sites.

In addition to producing a traditional final report outlining the methods and findings at the end of the evaluation, Impact Justice and FosterClub decided to draft this short narrative describing the evaluation process as a guide for organizations considering an evaluation. This is the story of FosterClub’s evaluation in four parts: Identity Formation, Sharing Interim Findings and Building Trust, Flexibility, and Bringing it Home.

CHAPTER 1: IDENTITY FORMATION

“FosterClub exists for foster youth in care and [those] who have aged out of care, so if they’re needing things, or something’s not working, then we have to be willing to adapt and change.”

At the outset, Impact Justice staff and FosterClub staff sought to build transparent relationships, and work together to shape the evaluation process. Though the two organizations are based in different parts of the country, staff spent time together in person and by phone to develop a joint roadmap for the evaluation. Collaboration was integral to the success and completion of the All-Star evaluation. Impact Justice and FosterClub staff worked as partners throughout the duration of the evaluation – particularly during the development of the evaluation tools.

Impact Justice began the evaluation by working with FosterClub staff to develop a logic model for the All-Star internship. This process served to: 1) drive the structure and content of the data collection instruments, such as surveys and

interview questions, and 2) help clarify an organizational identity and identify All-Star's uniqueness.

LOGIC MODEL

Logic models map out how an organization's resources (inputs) are deposited into a program, what the program's primary activities are, and most importantly, what the organization believes the short term and long term outcomes of the program are for participants.

The process of considering and defining an organization's position in the field in this way is challenging; organizations often reconcile lofty goals with measurable outcomes that feel too narrowly defined, impersonal, or insignificant to the work. This can be particularly difficult when developing a logic model that will be used to define and evaluate an organization or program. It is not uncommon for staff of the program undergoing the evaluation to feel tempted to include every outcome that they believe their program participants experience in the logic model. Contrary to the notion that measuring every outcome may result in finding the organization to be a model or promising, measuring too many outcomes does not capture the organization's expertise and may lead to findings that the organization is ineffective or harmful across some of those outcomes. However, undergoing the process of considering each potential outcome allows organizations to be creative in the way they define success and discover strengths previously not considered.

To capture both the outcomes expected in the field of child welfare and the uniqueness of the All-Star internship, Impact Justice and FosterClub spent several months examining, reflecting, and honing in on the impact of the program on participants. Initially, the evaluators encouraged FosterClub staff to make note of each outcome they suspected their All-Star participants achieve as a result of their time in the program. Responses were abundant and ranged from having health insurance coverage, to permanency (achieving a long-term or permanent living situation), to positive self-identification as foster youth. After plugging in each possible program outcome into a table, the evaluators and FosterClub staff held several meetings to determine which most accurately described the All-Stars' successes, directly correlated to the internship activities, and were the most measurable. Impact Justice and FosterClub then determined which outcomes were achievable in the short term (within a year) or in the long term (in the time period following the internship through the next

three years). From the initial brainstorming, FosterClub staff and the evaluators were able to collaboratively narrow down the primary outcomes to include in the logic model and evaluation.

SURVEY

Once FosterClub staff approved the logic model, the evaluators began constructing pre and post surveys to measure whether participants exhibited changes in the identified short and long term outcomes. This process ended up shaping organizational identity. As it turned out, it was easier to list out the overarching outcomes that staff want to achieve on the logic model. It was more difficult to turn outcomes like increased soft skills, improved relationships with peers, or improved understanding of national child welfare policy, into specific survey questions. The very detailed discussions about how to write the survey questions allowed staff to further hone their ideas about what outcomes they are trying to achieve.

Once Impact Justice had findings from the first year of survey findings, they worked with FosterClub to revise the survey further. Impact Justice highlighted some questions that did not show significant changes because participants were too skilled at the beginning to show improvements. Conversations about whether or not to keep or drop particular survey questions also required FosterClub to shift their understanding of what they are trying to achieve.

Once drafted, FosterClub staff and Impact Justice administered pre and post surveys with the interns and a control group. FosterClub staff collected surveys at the beginning and end of each internship. For the control group, evaluators administered pre surveys at one point in time and then post surveys after a seven week period to control for the same length of time as the internship.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

FosterClub and Impact Justice developed interview questions to ask All-Stars details about their internship that the survey could not capture. The protocol included questions directly informed by the logic model and survey, but also included questions about their lived experiences and how that might influence their involvement in the internship.

The inclusion of demographic questions and lived experiences was important for the evaluators to determine if there was variation in program satisfaction and outcomes across various groups. Demographic questions included race, sex at birth, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Lived experience questions captured the intern's education experiences, years spent in care and types of placements, if the interns had children, and any juvenile justice involvement.

FosterClub staff were particularly interested in what added value the internship provided to its participants and how FosterClub could replicate that value in other sites. To understand this, the evaluators decided that it was important to first know who was applying for the internship and whom FosterClub was selecting to be an All-Star. If there was selection bias, the evaluators needed to know where that bias existed and what characteristics FosterClub favored. Before the internship could expand, staff would need to consider if they wanted to continue to serve the same demographic or expand the opportunity to others.

With qualitative data, FosterClub staff could better understand where they fit in the field of services for foster youth – college preparation, transitional services, leadership development, advocacy, etc. Evaluators also completed an extensive literature search to assess what other programs were available to youth and if studies about their effectiveness had been done. When FosterClub decides to replicate the All-Star program in other sites, it will have more information about how the program fits into that community.

CHAPTER 2: SHARING INTERIM FINDINGS AND BUILDING TRUST

“I think it is very important to go into the evaluation expecting a partnership aspect instead of an audit.”

When evaluators are transparent and build trust throughout the evaluation process, potentially difficult conversations about research findings become collaborative and iterative as opposed to judgmental and final.

Impact Justice met onsite in Seaside for two days with FosterClub to discuss interim, first year findings. Day one opened with a check in, an overview of the agenda, and then a trust building exercise that all FosterClub staff were invited

to participate in. The purpose of the exercise was twofold: first to highlight the importance of considering each participant's intersectional identities and privilege and oppression when engaging with the All-Stars, many of whom are youth of color and/or lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, gender nonconforming or transgender (LGBQ/GNCT). This was largely driven by the year-one research findings and program observations. The second purpose was to create a common discourse for staff and evaluators to discuss the findings that included recommendations on improving the experiences of All-Stars who identify as of color or LGBQ/GNCT. The exercise created a safe space and shared language for staff to talk about their multiple identities, their complex relationships with privilege, and their growing edges with regards to undoing oppression at an interpersonal and organizational level.

Day two was dedicated to collaboratively planning the next year of the evaluation. FosterClub staff provided feedback to Impact Justice about what the evaluation had been like for them over the course of the year, what their concerns were, and what they were excited about moving forward. In return, the evaluators shared their vision of year two and what changes FosterClub could make to the All-Star program prior to the second evaluation year to bolster the All-Star internship. This would allow FosterClub to strengthen the program and for Impact Justice to document any improvements based on those changes in the final report.

CHAPTER 3: ONGOING FLEXIBILITY

“Being open to suggestions make for a better experience and ultimately, improved programming.”

As evaluations are iterative, hypotheses, processes and methodologies may change as the evaluators become more familiar with the details of the program. It is important that the evaluators and the organization being evaluated both remain flexible.

In fact the tools and data collection methods did change throughout the evaluation process. As the logic model went through a number of drafts so did the survey. An attempt to collect post surveys from a control group chosen from general online FosterClub members did not generate enough data from which to

draw conclusions. So FosterClub and Impact Justice had to remain flexible, collaborate and recreate outreach methods to garner this key data.

In the end, flexibility cultivated data from a number of groups that provided a glimpse into what replicating the All-Star program could look like. By changing the tools and the outreach, the evaluators could provide FosterClub staff with better insight as to how the All-Stars compared to non All-Star foster youth across demographics, foster care experience, leadership opportunities and location.

CHAPTER 4: BRINGING IT HOME

“Having the partners to help us organize our thinking about our programs and help document served to be a great benefit.”

At the end of the evaluation, FosterClub and Impact Justice held another onsite meeting to discuss the final findings and the final report. Because the evaluators maintained communication throughout the second year, the final findings were not a surprise to the FosterClub staff. This left more time for brainstorming in the meeting about how FosterClub staff might want to use the evaluation and final report. Typically, final reports leverage funding, but FosterClub was also interested in replicating the All-Star program, documenting areas for growth, and centering youth voices in the evaluation. For the evaluators, it was most important that the report be strength-based and that it highlight learning edges as opportunities for even greater future success.

FosterClub and Impact Justice opted to create three final deliverables to culminate the evaluation and meet the needs of both groups. The first was a traditional final report that FosterClub could present to funders. It included a literature review, methodology, analysis, findings and recommendations. The second deliverable was this short narrative detailing the evaluation process itself and acting as a guide for other organizations considering an evaluation. The final deliverable was a guide for surviving the All-Star internship directly aimed at preparing the incoming interns for their seven weeks in Seaside. Impact Justice hired two former All-Stars to write the guide. The guide covered topics that came up as recurring themes in interviews with All-Stars during the evaluation. These included the experience of living in Seaside, Oregon itself; living in a house with a dozen other All-Stars; time management; navigating relationships with staff and other All-Stars; community and opportunities.

LESSONS LEARNED

Impact Justice staff and FosterClub staff grew together over the course of the evaluation. Organizations undergoing evaluations can and should be part of the process throughout, advocate for their needs, and work with evaluators to maximize the evaluations' usefulness in their social change work. Evaluations are most effective when evaluators and organizations build trust and work together transparently.

The following are key lessons from the FosterClub evaluation that other organizations may consider when starting an evaluation process:

1) *Evaluation is an opportunity, not a judgment.*

Evaluation can be a powerful and collaborative process for taking a program to the next level, understanding and replicating its successes, and identifying its growing edges. It is a structured way for a program to reflect; to gain new insights; and to develop measures and new language to document, assess, and communicate its impact. Through Impact Justice and FosterClub's partnership, FosterClub was able to learn more about the All-Stars program's strengths, and explore areas of growth and opportunity – with new information to support its decisions.

2) *The evaluation process can and should be iterative.*

Research methods can and should be responsive to the evolving needs and realities of the program being evaluated. Evaluations are most informative and relevant when evaluators co-develop methods with those who know the program best – program staff and participants. Impact Justice's team worked closely with FosterClub staff over the course of the evaluation to co-create quantitative and qualitative measures, capture the heart of FosterClub's work, and answer the most pressing questions about the All-Stars program's impact. Impact Justice's team and FosterClub staff also shared regular communication and report-back sessions at each stage of the evaluation, which allowed Impact Justice to revise and add evaluation components on an ongoing basis in response to FosterClub's insights, changing needs, and practices. Through the collaborative process Impact Justice's team developed a deeper understanding

of FosterClub's work, enabling a richer and more relevant evaluation. Collaboration also built trust and transparency, leaving FosterClub staff better equipped to apply the evaluation's insights to its work moving forward.

3) *Be flexible and open to change throughout the evaluation process, not just at the end with final recommendations.*

Programs don't have to wait until the evaluation is over and a report is out to start charting new paths forward. When program staff and evaluation staff collaborate and check-in regularly, program staff can respond immediately to early insights from the evaluation, rather than waiting to make changes. For example, during the evaluation process FosterClub revised how they recruited former All-Stars as "Level 2" mentors. Level 2's are former All-Stars who return as staff for the summer to lead the All-Stars program and support participants. FosterClub took feedback from Impact Justice that staff were not representative of All-Stars particularly in terms of race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE). This feedback was based on interviews with All-Star participants who expressed a desire to have staff who reflected their layered identities, especially as the program is located in a predominantly white, straight, and gender-normative town. Adding more Level 2's of color as well as L2's who come from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, gender nonconforming and transgender communities was a significant change that FosterClub implemented midway through the evaluation process to begin to address these issues.

4) *Evaluations can lead to lasting relationships.*

Evaluators can build lasting relationships with programs, and share tools that programs can continue to use and adapt after the evaluation is over. Program staff can also look to evaluators for ongoing support and assistance as programs move forward and make changes based on an evaluation's findings, and as programs communicate those findings within and outside of their organizations. Evaluators can and should build relationships and commitment to a program's ongoing success, and can be long-term friends and sounding boards for programs as they evolve. Evaluation is also not a one-time process, and evaluators can help program staff develop the skills and tools to continue to self-evaluate moving forward. Impact Justice and FosterClub worked together to build a logic model and program evaluation tools that FosterClub can continue to use and revise. Impact Justice staff and FosterClub staff also built

lasting relationships, and Impact Justice will continue to be available as a resource to FosterClub staff into the future.

- 5) *Ask for what you want from your evaluators. Evaluations should be driven by organizational needs; not evaluators' desire to publish.*

Evaluations are tools that should support programs to accomplish their goals, and amplify findings that are useful to broader social change communities. When programs advocate for their needs, evaluators do a better job gathering and reporting on the information that is most useful. Evaluations should *not* be driven by a researcher's agenda or desire to publish. Rather, programs can ask for what they are hoping to gain from the process, and come out of it with the tools and materials most useful to further the program's success. For example, FosterClub and Impact Justice brainstormed innovative report styles that FosterClub could use to communicate evaluation findings to different audiences. Programs can also advocate to co-write or co-publish findings for different audiences. In addition to a more traditional research report and this piece, Impact Justice hired former All-Stars to co-author a booklet for incoming All-Stars, based on some of the key findings from the evaluation.