

CO-GENERATING EVIDENCE FOR IMPACT AT SCALE: POVERTY LAB'S APPROACH TO PARTNERSHIP

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The University of Chicago Poverty Lab was launched in 2015 to generate rigorous research that results in greater economic opportunity for communities harmed by disinvestment and segregation. We bring the best science and "big data" analysis possible to identify and highlight barriers to social mobility and racial equity; partner with policymakers, community-based organizations and others to generate rigorous evidence about how to remove these barriers; and work closely with policymakers and impacted communities to address these barriers through meaningful policy change. Our work cuts across traditional policy domains, focusing on housing, household finance, college access and success, and workforce development.

THE ROLE OF PARTNERSHIP IN OUR MODEL

Partnership with government agency and non-profit provider partners play a central role in the Poverty Lab's ability to enact our mission. Our agency partners are vital, not just because they hold much of the data necessary for project success, but because their buy in is often critical if we want what we are learning to lead to impact at scale. We believe that for our research to spur the kind of change we hope to see, agency partners need to be at the table as we craft our research questions, gather data, and interpret and disseminate results. For this reason, we have focused on building deep and lasting relationships with agencies in Chicago that are critical in efforts to increase opportunities for social mobility for individuals from communities harmed by disinvestment and segregation, including City Colleges of Chicago, the Chicago Department of Family and Support Service, All Chicago (the city's continuum of care coordinator for homeless services), Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES), and the Cook County Workforce Partnership.

Our non-profit partners are also critical to the work that we do. Our non-profit partners are on the front lines of the challenges facing individuals from low-income backgrounds and at the forefront of identifying and generating innovative approaches to meeting their needs. Fundamental to our theory of change is the understanding that the U.S.'s failure to make more sustained progress in decreasing poverty and increasing social mobility is not a result of the lack of innovative ideas, but rather the lack of rigorous evidence about

which innovative approaches are working. Non-profit partners like OneGoal, Catholic Charities, and Lawndale Christian Legal Center help us identify promising approaches and generate rigorous evidence of effectiveness.

LESSONS LEARNED

Since our founding, the Poverty Lab has learned from and adapted our partnership model over time. Some of our key learnings are highlighted below.

- **One size does not fit all.** Our partners and their learning objectives are diverse and our approach to generating evidence must be as well. While randomized controlled trials (RCTs) remain the gold standard for causal inference, not all programs are ready for an RCT and not all research question require this kind of causal evidence. To ensure that we are meeting our partners' needs and generating evidence that will be relevant, we start every project with a conversation designed to understand what our partners are hoping to learn from our partnership. The methodological approach is then selected to fit the questions generated, not the other way around. This means that our work, even when it is focused in the same policy domain, make take a variety of forms.

For example, the Poverty Lab is building a portfolio projects focused on improving the postsecondary education access and success for young people who grew up in poverty. This portfolio include several RCTs of programs, like OneGoal, that are designed to improve students' postsecondary success. OneGoal is a comprehensive college access and support program that serves over 13,000 students nationally and is being implemented at substantial scale in Chicago. The program model is well established and has suggestive evidence that it leads to improved outcomes for the young people being served. As such, OneGoal came to the Poverty Lab wanting to generate rigorous evidence on effectiveness and we worked closely with them to develop an RCT design that would provide this kind of evidence.

Another project partner, National Louis University's (NLU) Pathways program is more nascent. NLU seeks to reduce the achievement gap in postsecondary education outcomes through their Pathways program, which is made up of several interlocking components that

offer a college experience that is characterized by little-to-no tuition, flexible scheduling, a structured curriculum, and regular, personalized coaching. Pathways has scaled rapidly: moving from serving its first 85 students in 2015-16 to serving 812 students in 2017-2018. NLU is optimistic that the program is improving outcomes for students, but to date has not had a good way to compare the outcomes of students they serve to similar students who do not enroll. Because the program is not currently oversubscribed, a quasi-experimental approach is best suited to developing this initial evidence of effectiveness. To that end, the Poverty Lab is partnering with NLU, CPS, and IDES to conduct a propensity score matching study to provide suggestive evidence on the impact of Pathways on college retention, college graduation, and labor market outcomes.

Still other projects are more descriptive and exploratory in nature. Our ongoing work with City Colleges focused on developmental education provides a good example. For an open-access institution like CCC, which enrolls incoming students with varying levels of college preparedness, developmental education courses can be an effective tool in leveling the playing field before students enroll in credit-bearing courses. However, when unnecessary, these courses can delay graduation and present an additional financial barrier to attaining a degree. Whether developmental education courses positively influence student outcomes largely hinges on identifying the right students for enrollment. To that end, the Poverty Lab is partnering with CCC to analyze trends in students' developmental education placement and their subsequent success in credit-bearing courses. The long-term objective of this partnership is to develop, test, and refine a predictive model that can more accurately and efficiently place students into developmental or college-level courses, but at present the needs of the partnership dictate that the work is primarily descriptive.

• **Partnerships should engage individuals across various levels of an organization.** Poverty Lab's most successful and sustainable partnerships are not simply between a few individuals, but reach across multiple levels of an organization. For the developmental education project, described above, we work not only with the CCC Provost and the district's Decision Supports Team (CCC's institutional research office), but also faculty who teach and students who enroll in Developmental Education classes. This engagement has helped to ensure that we have a full picture of the dynamics surrounding developmental education in the district and that what we find will inform practice. Further, engagement at multiple levels of an organization helps guard against staff turnover setting a project back, ensuring that the partnership is bigger than any one individual.

Engagement across an organization is critical with our non-profit provider partners as well, especially when the research project we are partnering on will require staff to do something differently. Buy in from organizational leadership is necessary, but not sufficient. Making sure that frontline staff understand the value of the research and feel invested in the partnership can be critical to project success. We were

reminded of the importance of building buy-in in a project the Poverty Labs was partnering on with the Lawndale Christian Legal Center (LCLC). LCLC wanted to examine the effectiveness of a holistic, community based approach to indigent defense in decreasing recidivism and improving life outcomes for juveniles and emerging adults facing felony charges. Early on in the project we were working closely with the leadership of the organization to design and implement an RCT to answer this question. However, the staff and community members had not been actively engaged in the process. This led to apprehension about the study overall and randomization in particular. At the request of the organization, we paused our efforts to move the study forward and deeply engaged with the LCLC team, creating a study advisory committee of LCLC staff members, many of whom come from the North Lawndale community. Ultimately, this effort has made the study stronger and more responsive to community concerns. We co-developed an approach to consenting young people for the study and some of the most vocal critics of the study have become champions.

• **Close partnership should not obfuscate the independence of the research.** Poverty Lab's reputation as an unbiased source of information about the effectiveness of programs and policies is critical to our ability to inform stakeholder decision making. Transparency about the work we are doing and what we are learning is important to maintaining this reputation. As such, we share what we are learning from our research, even if the findings suggest areas of improvement for our partners. This helps to ensure that all of our projects contribute to the broader understanding of how to best reduce poverty and increase social mobility.

This policy means that working with the Poverty Lab on a research project brings both potential benefits and risks for our partners. We work closely with our partners at the onset of a new project to make sure they understand the implications of various potential study results for their work. To ensure that our partners are not caught off guard, we have a "no surprises" policy in which no study results are ever shared publicly before they are shared with partners. This allows our partners formulate their own organizational response to study findings before having to field external questions about them.

ONE MILLION DEGREES: A CASE STUDY IN PARTNERING FOR IMPACT AT SCALE

Community colleges have the potential to be powerful vehicles for social mobility in the U.S. They enroll nearly half of all post-secondary students in the U.S., a significant number of whom are first-generation or low-income, and the benefits incurred by their graduates are well-documented (Carnevale et al., 2014; The White House, 2015). However, roughly two-thirds of these students do not graduate within three years (Kraemer, 2013). A better understanding of how to close the completion gap is needed to inform policy.

One Million Degrees (OMD), a Chicago nonprofit that supports

low-income community college students, may provide key insights into a workable solution. OMD implements the only Chicago-area program that uses a comprehensive approach to serve community college students. Operating in all seven campuses of CCC and Harper Community College, its program supports students financially, academically, personally, and professionally through last-dollar scholarships, skill-building workshops, advising, and coaching. OMD students meet monthly with program coordinators, who work with scholars to encourage academic and personal progress. Students also attend monthly workshops that include meeting with a volunteer coach and activities designed to build professional skills. Program coordinators are embedded on the college campus, allowing students to meet with them on campus and enhancing program coordinators' ability to connect students to additional resources and services through the college.

In 2015, OMD approached the Poverty Lab and expressed a desire to rigorously understand the impact of their program. The program model was well developed and promising, its wraparound model similar to those tested in the limited studies of successful interventions (Scrivener et al., 2015; Sommo, Cullinan, Manno, Blake, & Alonzo, 2018; Evans, Kearney, Perry, & Sullivan, 2017). Further, the program was routinely receiving more applications from eligible students than there were spots in the program. These factors made the program a promising candidate for conducting an RCT. In the spring of 2016, we randomly assigned 1,452 community college-intending students to either receive an offer of a spot in the OMD program or to the control group. The following spring an additional 2,822 students were randomized. In partnership with OMD, CCC, and Harper, we have been able to track college enrollment and persistence for the entire sample using data from the National Student Clearinghouse and their experiences at CCC and Harper drawing on administrative data collected by both systems.

Year 1 results from the first two cohorts of our study find that the offer of a spot in the OMD program leads to a 7 to 9 percent increase in college enrollment, a 13 percent increase in full time enrollment, an 11 percent increase in persistence to spring term, and a 16 percent increase in full-time persistence. For individuals that took up the offer of the program, effects were substantially larger – a 23 to 27 percent increase in enrollment, a 35 percent increase in full-time enrollment, a 35 percent increase in persistence, and a 47 percent increase in full-time persistence. These treatment on the treated effects were driven by students who applied to the program when still in high school.

While still early – degree attainment remains our primary outcome of interest – these preliminary results have generated significant interest in how to expand the reach of these promising program. In addition to publishing the results in a working paper, we presented these results to district leaders at CCC, Harper, and CPS. In addition,

we met individually with presidents of six of the seven CCC campuses. These presentations led to discussions about how to target an offer of the program to more CPS seniors who are unlikely to enroll in college and how CCC could adapt key elements of the OMD model to support more students. While these conversations our only just beginning, they demonstrate the promise deep partnership holds for increasing the impact of applied policy research.