



ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY PROJECT

LESSONS FROM THE ACHIEVEMENT ACADEMY

THE PROGRAM

The Achievement Academy is a suite of workforce development programs offered by the San Diego Housing Commission. Housing voucher recipients in San Diego can choose to participate in programs as they wish.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS?

The lessons from the Achievement Academy experience can be helpful for

- Public housing authorities seeking to maximize the positive impacts of their self-sufficiency efforts; and
- Non-profits and others offering services that complement and support self-sufficiency efforts.

THE RESEARCH

The research sought to understand how participant circumstances shape experiences and success. To obtain a sense of the program's scope and participant engagement, the research team reviewed program data made available by the Commission for 175 randomly selected participants. These quantitative data were supplemented with a qualitative longitudinal study of a number of Achievement Academy families. Thirty-one individuals (81.5% of information session attendees) participated in time one interviews in January 2017, 80.6% of those (25 individuals) participated in time two interviews in August-September 2017, and 88% of those (22 individuals) participated in time three interviews in April 2018.



LESSONS LEARNED & PRACTITIONER TAKEAWAYS

LESSON 1. CHOICE IS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

The Achievement Academy actively embraced the notion of providing a wide array of services, assistance and referrals. The research clearly indicated that participants valued this. However, this flexibility did not come without cost. Only seven participants (fewer than 25 percent) reported participating in the Family Self-Sufficiency program despite evidence indicating broad-based participant interest. A key observation in this regard is that all offerings were not equally used. Participants most often came for assistance with job searches, and beyond this chose assistance targeted to their specific needs (child care assistance for single parents, for example).

Recommendation for practice.

Programs should consider distinguishing between services that have general appeal and those that have population-specific appeal, and then structure participant orientations so that all are informed of the general series and that the population-specific services are targeted to participants in the specific population.

LESSON 2. POSITIVE CASEWORKER INTERACTIONS AND CULTURE ARE KEY

The Achievement Academy design required staff to have frequent positive interactions with participants. The analysis revealed this to have been successful, and these positive interactions were found to keep participants engaged in programs. Interviews with staff members made clear that this success was driven importantly by the Achievement Academy director, who instilled a clear culture of service. This leadership helped build a team of highly committed employees, who have strong public service motivations.

Recommendation for practice.

Program administrators should consider emphasizing service at least as much as compliance, to set a tone that program participants see themselves as partners rather than subjects. Administrators should hire selectively to ensure a strong cultural fit with the unit. Further, a high touch approach requires attention to staffing levels and scheduling to ensure that staff do not get burned out quickly.

LESSON 3. DIVIDING CASE WORKER FUNCTIONS ENHANCES IMPROVES ENGAGEMENT

Researchers found that program participants did not view staff and case workers who had compliance roles as full advocates for them on their self-sufficiency journey. They much preferred having a case worker who was exclusively focused on self-sufficiency and maximizing the benefits of available services. Participants viewed such counselors as trusted advisors with whom they could be open and transparent.

Recommendation for practice.

Wherever possible, program administrators should partition case worker functions so that a single person does not have both compliance and service support responsibilities. These two functions require very different – and often conflicting – relationships with program participants, and combining them complicates the relationship between case worker and program participant in ways that can trigger less engagement.

LESSON 4. WHILE ALSO BENEFICIAL, LOCATION CAN BE A CHALLENGE FOR SCATTERED-SITE PROGRAMS.

The research found that Achievement Academy participants liked the effort to distinguish the Academy from other housing authority units. By placing it on a separate floor and giving it a different floor plan, program administrators created an inviting environment that appealed to participants and sparked more vigorous and sustained engagement. However, the Academy's central location created other challenges for voucher holders living in sites scattered across the city, including high transportation costs, significant travel times, limited parking, and conflicts with

Recommendation for practice.

Housing authorities operating scattered-site voucher programs should work to make the physical environment of their self-sufficiency services program as welcoming and affirming as possible. They should also try to mitigate some of the potential costs, such as reserving parking spots or offering supplemental childcare services.





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