

UCLA Student-Initiated Outreach 2004/2005
Evaluation Consultant Report

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1. Short description of student-initiated outreach projects

In the academic year 2004/2005, UCLA student-initiated outreach consists of a set of eight individual outreach projects. Seven projects are associated with an ethnic group; one project is a one-year temporary project aimed at college financial aid awareness. The following are the long-standing projects with ethnic group affiliation:

AIR (American Indian Recruitment)
HOPE (Higher Opportunity Program for Education)
MAPS (Mentors for Academic and Peer Support)
PIER (Pacific Islander Education and Retention)
SHAPE (Students Heightening Academic Performance through Education)
SPACE (Samahang Pilipino Advancing Community Empowerment)
Xinachtli

All projects aim at increasing academic performance and empowerment of underrepresented and disadvantaged / at-risk middle and high school students, with the ultimate goal of improving their admission rates at post-secondary education institutions. All projects work with undergraduate UCLA students who join the projects to offer *peer advising and tutoring* to middle and high school students¹, but there are a number of additional activities that vary from project to project, for example, workshops, field trips and parent meetings. The projects are mostly active at local high schools, but some work in community centers. A total of about 630 participants are served at 17 sites (see Table).

¹ Hereafter we refer to the high school students as “participants” to avoid confusion with the UCLA undergraduate students who work as tutors and peer advisors.

Table 1. Overview of SIO Projects in 2004/2005.

<i>Project name</i>	<i>Type of sites</i>	<i># project staff</i>	<i># of participants</i>
AIR	1 high school 2 community sites	About 3 paid 3 to 12 volunteers	Estimated at 71
HOPE	1 high school	About 5 paid 15 volunteers	Estimated at 60 to 70
MAPS	2 high schools	About 17 to 20	Estimated at 28
PIER	2 high schools 1 community site	About 12	Estimated at 155
SHAPE	2 high schools	About 32	Estimated at 120
SPACE	3 high schools	About 32	Estimated at 120
Xinachtli	2 high schools 1 community site	About 18	Estimated at 68

Differences among the projects include the following: (1) While most of the funding for the projects comes from general UCOP Outreach funding, distributed by the UCLA Vice Chancellor's Office of Student Affairs to the Student-Initiated Outreach Committee (SIOC), two projects (SHAPE & Xinachtli) have acquired additional funding for this academic year. (2) Currently, three of the projects are managed by actively enrolled undergraduate students, the other four have staff managers who are not active UCLA students. (3) As the table shows, the number of support staff, participants and sites varies across projects. For example, MAPS is the smallest project serving less than 30 participants, while PIER,

SHAPE and SPACE have participant numbers exceeding 100. (4) The kinds of project activities, as well as their respective implementation, also vary. For example, the topics of the skill-building workshops differ, as well as the number of tutoring and peer advising sessions per quarter, per participant. The list of intended student outcomes therefore also differs, but some outcomes are universal for all projects. Universal targets include “50% of students show an increase in GPA, from Spring of 2004 to Spring of 2005,” “100% of seniors have post-secondary plans of action” and “50% of students participate in at least one extracurricular, service or volunteer activity.” In summary, seven quite individual projects pursue similar objectives under the umbrella of student-initiated outreach.

2. Current situation of monitoring and evaluation

Currently, the monitoring and evaluation procedures for the projects vary to some extent, even though there is a common reporting structure imposed by the Student-initiated Outreach Committee. While all projects do the same basic monitoring, i.e., sign-up sheets for activities and tracking peer advisor / tutor contact hours, and most collect some form of evaluative data from the students at the end of the quarter and/or academic year (e.g., basic satisfaction questionnaire, tutor/peer advisor personnel assessment), some projects gather additional, more in-depth data. But even these more detailed surveys (for example, those developed by SHAPE and SPACE) do not usually provide *measures of change* in participant attitudes, knowledge or behavior. Is the data that is being generated in fact systematically analyzed? Are these data collection instruments designed so that they gather valid and reliable data in an efficient manner?

There is an ACCESS database that is being used by some of the projects to process their data. This database stores student background information, project attendance records, grade transcripts, course enrolment, and standardized test scores. The database also includes checklists on student outcomes. But these checklists are not based on systematic analyses of comparison data; they ask for subjective yes/no answers to items such as “developed tolerance for others through understanding stereotypes” and “improved time management skills.” As such, these checklists do not provide valid evaluative feedback for program improvement.

Thus, all projects could benefit from collecting valid and reliable empirical data on changes in student outcomes in a systematic and efficient manner. How is this possible, given the context, organization, scope and intensity of each of the projects specifically, and student-initiated outreach in general? This takes us to the notion of evaluability.

3. An evaluability assessment perspective

An evaluability assessment fulfills two purposes: (1) it assesses whether the project has well-articulated objectives (outcomes), which are linked logically and realistically to the project activities, outputs and inputs, and (2) it assesses whether the information gained from performing evaluation is wanted and worth the resources that are necessary to do it well. While the second purpose will be discussed in subsequent sections of this report, the following paragraphs share thoughts on the first point.

As described above, the SIO projects are independent projects active at different sites and working with different bodies of participants, as well as staff each year. That is,

there is little continuity of both staff and participants. The projects' levels of intensity also vary: Some projects offer about three peer advisor contact hours per participant per quarter, others only provide one hour during the same period of time. Tutoring services are also offered on a continuous basis, but are harder to track reliably for each participant since it is difficult to determine whether participants really engage in academic work and receive help from a tutor.² Finally, each project offers a varying number of additional activities (workshops, field trips etc.) each year.

One has to compare this choice and level of intensity of project activities with the identified goals and objectives of the projects. While it seems clear that the overall goal of UCLA outreach (to increase the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are admitted at institutions of higher education) cannot be expected from the individual SIO projects on a yearly basis, even the more specific goals of increasing academic achievement and empowering students to take ownership of their educational careers seem ambitious. The projects have generally succeeded in translating these goals into concrete, measurable, time-bound and realistic objectives, although the specific indicators usually imply changes only in quantitative, not qualitative, terms. These short-term outcome objectives constitute the "mini-steps" necessary along the way to achieving the longer-term, more complex outcomes. Therefore, while it would be inappropriate to expect the longer-term goals as consequences of the projects in their current form, these mini-steps can be expected and assessed.

² Statement based on site observation by author.

It must be emphasized here that outcomes are not the same as outputs or activities. *Outcomes* describe *changes* in the target group in terms of knowledge, attitudes or behaviors. *Outputs* are “number of hours of tutoring received,” “number of workshops attended,” or “number of journal entries written.” *Activities* are “workshop planning”, or “recruiting volunteers.” Outputs and activities are prerequisites to achieving outcomes. While these can be counted or observed, outcomes are more difficult to assess.

4. Which evaluation needs were identified with client and main intended users?

The Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs at UCLA identified the general need for support of SIO projects in evaluation issues, and she hired the SRM Evaluation Group for this purpose. She left it to the main intended users, the project directors, to identify more specific areas where they saw a need for improvement related to their project evaluation tasks. These needs were discussed in a meeting of the evaluation consultants with one project director and one site coordinator representing two SIO projects. However, these two had not been delegated to speak on behalf of the entire group. Thus, buy-in for the evaluation services was only ensured after the evaluation consultant had attended various project director meetings.

The primary evaluation need identified related to *measuring more substantive project outcomes* – that is, academic performance and holistic and student empowerment outcomes. This reflected the project directors’ desire to demonstrate project impacts to current and potential funding sources. Based on our subsequent analyses of existing

monitoring and evaluation processes the main users accurately diagnosed one of the projects' main evaluation needs. But the task of the evaluator was to keep these expectations realistic and to consider beforehand the possibility that future evaluations might fail to show positive changes in (some of) the expected outcomes. Negative evaluation findings often cause frustration and future resistance toward evaluation, but they are less likely if projects are planned well, with realistic objectives that logically build on inputs, activities and outputs.

5. What did we decide to do, and why?

Because we subscribe to a utilization-focused evaluation philosophy, we see the main task of the evaluator as meeting the intended evaluation users' information needs. Our work could have gone in many different directions, e.g., it could have asked whether the objectives of the projects are truly the right ones, or whether the underlying program theory is well thought out, etc. Instead, following our service orientation we concentrated on what our users requested: to improve the assessment of project outcomes.

Measuring outcomes is methodologically challenging; it requires high-quality data collection, processing, analysis and interpretation, and usually (ideally) an extended timeline (longitudinal data collection). But above all, there must be an intervention of sufficient substance and intensity, so that one can realistically expect the intended outcomes to be (at least partially) caused by the activities. As described above, we found the projects to contribute to the intermediate steps (mini-steps) on the way toward achieving longer-term outcomes. Therefore, the projects should only be held accountable

for achieving these intermediate steps, i.e., for changing some *enabling factors* for longer-term academic and empowerment outcomes. These are reflected in the concrete indicators developed by most of the projects. As part of our work we asked the projects to fill out a table that links their overall outcomes goals to their more specific indicators.

As a next step, we proposed to develop a comprehensive set of questionnaire items to cover the specifically articulated project objectives. Each project would pull from this pool of items whatever is related to their actual activities planned for each year. This makes measurement *responsive to each project*. At the same time, the projects would use the same individual items, thus making their evaluation efforts comparable among themselves. Data collection would also become more focused, as fewer forms are necessary and there is less danger of collecting data that is not processed, analyzed and used systematically. The overall quality of data collection and analysis is also more likely to be ensured, given that all projects would now use questionnaires developed by a professional evaluator. Furthermore, using questionnaires developed from the same set of items provides the opportunity to share one data entry person, and one statistical consultant for data input, processing and analysis for all the individual projects. The tutorial (attached) developed in conjunction with this report gives more details in this regard.

Two questionnaires were developed: (a) "Participant Self-assessment Questionnaire," and (b) "Peer Advisor Assessment of Core Students on their Caseload" (attached). The questionnaire items were first drafted by the evaluator, then critiqued by two project directors, and finally field-tested with participants at a high school site. It is

important to be aware of validity and reliability issues when working with data collection instruments. The tutorial explains in more detail how validity and reliability of the data can be ensured.

The two questionnaires are meant to provide data on *change* by the participants, and measurement will take place before the activities with each participant start, and at the end of the academic year (*pre-post assessment*). This proposed data collection procedure implies a particular *evaluation design* and, similar to the data collection instruments, evaluation designs also struggle with threats to their validity: How definitive an answer can our evaluation design give to the question of project effectiveness (that is, the link between the project's intervention and its effects)? There are different ways to increase the validity of such answers. For example, it would enhance the internal validity of the evaluation design if data from comparison groups were also collected, that is, if the exact same questionnaires were also delivered to students in the same schools who do *not* participate in the SIO projects. But given the limited resources of the projects this is neither feasible nor realistic.

Finally, it must be noted that the newly developed questionnaires are useful for *evaluative* purposes only, and only to measure *participant* (high school student) outcomes. The questionnaires do not provide necessary *monitoring* information related to project management and the quality of their implementation. Monitoring also serves important staff management purposes. Thus, monitoring and tracking must be continued, in addition to the collection of this evaluative data by way of the questionnaires.

6. How can this proposal be sustainable?

We are aware of the limited resources available, even for project delivery, much more for evaluation. In order for this suggested evaluation strategy to be sustainable, the following points are necessary:

1. *The projects need additional support in this effort.* While it is possible for them to decide which questions to use based on their annual project planning and budget, and to follow the tutorial on how to collect the data in a valid and reliable way, they will not be able to input, clean, analyze and interpret the data without expert support. This is especially the case because the data analysis does not only consist of counting frequencies or percentages. Pre-post comparisons of matched groups are not an easy task, if there is no statistical expertise present. Thus, we propose a consultant arrangement, someone who spends a total of 80 hours during the academic year, first supervising one SIO staff member or volunteer who enters the data³, then him/herself performing the analyses and communicating the results to the project directors. This would require an approximate yearly budget of \$1,600 (80 hours x \$ 20), plus student fees associated with this amount (approx. \$400). These consultancy services could be provided by the SRM Evaluation Group under the leadership of Prof. Marvin Alkin.

2. *A tutorial* has been developed together with this report. The tutorial addresses project directors and site coordinators, introducing them to the main issues of data collection, entry, analyses and interpretation. It outlines all necessary steps in the data

³ Data should be entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), and a license must be obtained by the SIO projects.

collection process and alerts to potential pitfalls and limitations. In order for the collected data to be valid and reliable, the instructions outlined in the tutorial must be taken seriously. If the instructions are not followed, then the results of the entire evaluation process will be flawed.

7. Other recommendations regarding the project monitoring and evaluation systems

We suggest eliminating any overlap of existing evaluation data collection instruments with the newly designed pre/post questionnaires. This will make data collection more efficient and avoid unnecessary burden for both staff and participants. At the same time, we suggest leaving in place the *tracking and monitoring of project activities and outputs*, as well as those instruments that serve staff management functions (e.g., sign-in and attendance sheets). Furthermore, some of the existing “data collection instruments” really should be considered as *working tools* for the tutors, peer advisors, and their supervisors (for example, the Journals of Tutoring, the Records of Interview/Dialogue, and the Student Bios). These should also be kept in place, because they are important for effective project implementation.

The process of building SIO projects’ capacity and providing them with the necessary resources to largely self-evaluate their participant outcomes will continue to be a challenge. However, if done well it will result in more sustainable evaluation processes that are owned by project staff, and the data that will be generated on participant outcomes will be of sufficient quality to provide useful evidence on project effectiveness.