

- Contact (session moderator): Rebecca Maynard email: rmaynard@gse.upenn.edu
- Title: Learning Together: Building Evidence to Close the Opportunity Divide for Low-Income Youth
- First and second choice of conference section
 - Research to Practice in Local Education Agencies
 - Education and Life Cycle Transitions

- [Panel justification](#)

Over the last two decades, there have been major advances in the infrastructure to support routine use of improvement science in education settings, as well as the efficient and effective conduct of randomized controlled trials of education-related programs. However, the field has not yet created a culture of integrating randomized controlled trials into improvement science efforts or the converse. The proposed panel will share lessons from a long-term, evolving partnership between a large, data-driven national non-profit workforce development program for at-risk youth—Year Up—and evaluators with long careers conducting conventional program evaluations of education and workforce development programs in both research firm and university settings.

Several federally-funded projects anchor this work, including a large random assignment study of Year Up’s stand-alone core program (part of HHS’s Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education/PACE evaluation) and two studies of Year Up’s Professional Training Corps—an adaptation of the core model for college settings to enhance scalability (Institute for Education Sciences and Social Innovation Fund). Interest in evidence-building across generations of the Year Up model is justified by new findings from PACE showing substantial positive impacts of the core program.

Year Up’s core program serves about 2,000 young adults (aged 18-24) each year through offices in nine major urban areas. It provides six months of customized training in high-demand fields (e.g., IT, business operations), followed by a six-month internship in a high-level professional setting. The program provides a comprehensive array of supports and insists on high expectations. Employer payments for interns finance over half of the \$26,000 average cost per student.

The program is one of nine sites in PACE—a major national randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluation of approaches to developing career pathways for low-income youth and adults. The PACE evaluation is using “career pathways” as a framework for situating and guiding measurement and analysis across varying program models.

The lessons from PACE also informed the design of Year Up’s next-generation Professional Training Corps (PTC) model leverages college facilities and instructional capacity to reduce Year Up’s marginal costs, expand recruitment avenues, and access training in a wider array of fields. A financial goal is to reach or exceed the break-even point at which employer payments cover Year Up’s costs in operating the program. The program’s rapid spread to 15 colleges in the past five years attests to its strong dissemination potential.

Our research on this next-generation PTC model is blending improvement science with impact evaluation. Continuity in research teams from the original to adapted versions of the Year Up program has helped to ground this work in a thorough understanding of the model and issues involved in scaling. Three examples of the conditions required for the breadth, depth, and

durability of a productive partnership are: (1) a shared mission among participants in the partnership, from line staff to the most technical member of the evaluation team, in focusing research on issues that will improve Year Up's ability to achieve its mission of closing the economic divide; (2) commitment to "chunking work" in ways that distribute burden and maximize the knowledge gain; and (3) flexibility to make mid-course adjustment in plans, but correcting in ways that preserve and protect the learning agenda. Lessons from this successful experience with collaboration should interest policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and funders more broadly. This research has reached an important stage, with the first report on core program impacts scheduled for release early in the fall 2017 and a continual release of findings from mini-studies, which will include possible causes and fixes to operational challenges, as well as suggest "road-tests" of improvement strategies.

- Abstract for each element of a panel, **combined into one [PDF document](#)**

#1: Short-Term Impacts of the Year Up Core Program: Findings from a Randomized Controlled Trial

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This presentation presents findings on the implementation and early impacts of the Year Up core program in a new Pathways to Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) Evaluation report. Impact analyses are based on a randomized controlled trial, with a sample of 2,544 young adults recruited in 2013-14. This is a fairly traditional program evaluation but, with a partner that was unusually engaged with the study and demonstrated an eagerness to incorporate the rigor of this summative evaluation into ongoing improvement efforts by the internal leadership and evaluation teams at Year Up.

The main data sources for the PACE study are an 18-month follow-up survey and two administrative data systems: wage data in the National Directory of New Hires and college enrollment records in the National Student Clearinghouse covering up to 2 ½ years post random assignment. Findings address confirmatory and secondary hypotheses for impacts on employment and earnings, as well exploratory hypotheses for impacts on financial circumstances, college enrollment and completion, and subgroup differences. The research also included extensive implementation research that, in the case of Year Up, was influential in informing its internal program improvement agenda.

#2: Building Rigorous Evidence on Multiple Generations of a Promising Program: Studying Year up's Professional Training Corps

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This presentation lays out the vision and process by which the evaluators partnered with the Year Up program to create a “living” evaluation agenda and workplan that accelerated and strengthened the program improvement agenda of Year Up, while also adding to the general evidence base on how to improve workforce outcomes for disadvantaged young adults. The focus of this paper is on the processes used to create a true learning partnership among three entities: 1) national Year Up staff, 2) leadership and line staff in local Year Up programs, and 3) evaluation staff at Year Up, Abt Associates, and the University of Pennsylvania. This strategy fuses improvement science with a rigorous impact evaluation at four local offices.

In addition, this presentation will provide examples of the findings to date from studies of Year Up’s Professional Training Corps (PTC)—a next generation initiative adapting the Year Up model for college settings to enhance scalability. Three mini-studies use different research methods to examine potential responses to implementation challenges identified by program staff and college partners.

One mini-study uses a random assignment design to test improved responses to student academic difficulties at several sites, exemplifying how experiments can be used to both develop improvements and assess overall efficacy at different sites in the same program. Strategic sharing of real-time feedback and observations from site visits, the evaluation team worked closely with both the evaluation staff at Year Up and local program staff to hone in on a promising academically-focused intervention. In turn, this promoted buy-in and support from program staff, thereby fostering greater fidelity of intervention implementation and follow through with data collection.

The second mini-study capitalizes on rich program data, supplemented with focus groups and interviews conducted with students, YU staff, college partners, and employer partners. This qualitative research explored patterns of employment and college enrollment in early years following graduation from the program, as well as examined factors associated with different patterns of employment and college continuation. The findings are being used to guide YU’s performance goals vis a vis employment and college persistence, as well as to improve their strategies for supporting those goals.

The third mini-study blends traditional implementation science—the foundation for future embedded experimentation—and variations of improvement strategies. The focus is an in-depth examination of the various approaches to setting up internships across programs and the associated successes and challenges encountered. One goal is to identify and share “best practices;” a second is to explore whether there are practices developing strong, enduring

internship opportunities that warrant more formal testing for their applicability to other sites or settings.

#3: Practitioner's Perspective on Improving and Proving a Rapidly-Growing Program through an Evaluation Partnership

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This presentation provides a practitioner's perspective on evaluation findings and the research partnership. It describes Year Up's motivation for undertaking this extensive research collaboration and lessons from experience to date for practitioners, researchers, and research funders. It begins by summarizing how Year Up has reacted to the early impact findings from the Pathways for Advancing Career (PACE) evaluation—highlighting results of particular interest and ways the organization has begun to apply them in furthering its mission. It continues by identifying some of the higher-priority questions that remain and prospects for answering using improvement science. The presentation concludes by juxtaposing Year Up's robust research program led by its internal evaluation team with the rigorous approach achieved in partnership with external evaluation partners at Abt Associates and the University of Pennsylvania. Particular attention is paid to challenges and strategies for implementing research designs and generating actionable findings in an atypically rapid-paced nonprofit setting, where the speed of program tends to exceed the speed of research.

- [Blinded version](#) of the above PDF document
- **Names of all panelists in their intended order**
 - David Fein, Phomdaen Souvana, and Azim Shivji (Abt. Associates)
 - Rebecca N. Baelen & Rebecca Maynard (University of Pennsylvania)
 - Garrett A. R. Yursza Warfield & Jessica Britt (Year Up)
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