

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

What's Next
Closing the Feedback Loop
By Kristine Wong

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WHAT'S NEXT

NEW APPROACHES TO SOCIAL CHANGE

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MEASUREMENT & EVALUATION

Closing the Feedback Loop

BY KRISTINE WONG

On a late winter afternoon, the sun is going down quickly on a working-class neighborhood south of San Francisco. School is out, and it's getting chilly. But instead of cozying up to the TV, dozens of students are clustered around computers at a clubhouse of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula. With furrowed brows, they're fiddling with elementary code, editing video, and adjusting the sound on some R&B tracks.

It would be easy to simply assume that after-school programs such as these are beneficial—and indeed, data collected from students by the Clubs' two-person evaluation team show an overall positive impact. But that's not enough for Peter Fortenbaugh, the Clubs' executive director. "I'm a huge believer in the importance of using data to inform good decision-making," he says. "We capture a ton of data, but it's not as good as it could be."

So when Fortenbaugh heard about Listen for Good, a program that funds US nonprofits to ask the people they serve to weigh in on their programs, he jumped at the chance to participate. A project of the Fund

for Shared Insight, Listen for Good offers nonprofits \$60,000 each—\$40,000 from Shared Insight and \$20,000 from one of the nonprofit's existing funders—to administer a standardized survey to a large swath of their clients.

This spring, the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula received one of the first 19 grants, along with Habitat for Humanity Greater San Francisco, artworxLA, Neighborhood

to improve philanthropy. "We're trying to inspire nonprofits and funders to really listen more systematically, more consistently and curiously to the voices of the people that they help," she says.

It's a promising move, says Phil Buchanan, president of the Center for Effective Philanthropy. These organizations "don't have a lot of naturally occurring feedback loops, so they tend to be surrounded by people who tell them what

in Listen for Good will provide new perspective, Fortenbaugh says, because all the initiative's grantees will use the same Net Promoter survey.

This survey, which asks a series of questions about client satisfaction and loyalty via the online questionnaire site SurveyMonkey, is traditionally used by for-profit businesses to measure their relationship with customers. This spring, Listen for Good will become the first

to employ the tool on a large scale in the nonprofit world, says Valerie Threlfall, Listen for Good's project leader. Using a standardized tool will allow Shared Insight to build a dataset of responses that other nonprofits then can use as benchmarks to assess their own impact in similar areas (such as after-school programs). Each organization will also be allowed to add a few customized questions of its own.

Threlfall says the project has two goals. The first, of course, is to assess the quality of clients' experience with a nonprofit's programs. "Second, it's the potential to ask if they're starting to feel some of the things that will be predictive of longer-term success in the program," she says. "There's not a whole lot of literature across all fields that links people's nonprofit customer perceptions to their longer-term outcomes."

Buchanan is optimistic that Listen for Good can help draw



IN THE CLUBHOUSE: The director of the Boys and Girls Club of Menlo Park, Calif., mentors a high school student.

Housing Services of Chicago, the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma, and a range of others. The Fund for Shared Insight announced 13 more grantees at the end of March and plans to select about 20 more this year.

Listen for Good is "building upon interest that's latent in the field," says Fay Twersky, director of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's effective philanthropy group. Twersky co-chairs Shared Insight, a consortium of foundations that aims

they want to hear," Buchanan says. "The more thoughtful foundation leaders recognized that this was not a good thing, because it got in the way of getting the information they needed to be more effective."

Although the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula already collect feedback from their students and staff, participating

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FITTING IN: Visitors become one with a Marc Chagall painting at Amazement Square, a children's museum in Lynchburg, Va., that participates in Museums for All.

more of those connections. “It’s an interesting and exciting experiment to see if something can be done that is more standardized and comparative than the many, kind of highly specialized, one-off efforts today,” he says. ■

ARTS & CULTURE

Cultural Benefits Transfer

BY GREG BEATO

For millions of low-income Americans, electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards offer a convenient way to obtain food and other goods from retailers through federal assistance programs. Now, thanks to an initiative of the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, EBT cards are also improving access to a wide range of cultural experiences across the United States.

The idea behind Museums for All is simple. Individuals or families can show an EBT card at a participating museum’s admissions desk during normal operating hours and qualify for free or greatly reduced admission.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a federal agency, has provided \$126,445 for the program’s initial development. But unlike other programs that use EBT cards, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the actual benefits under Museums for All—namely,

free or reduced admissions—are not government subsidized. Instead, the participating institutions bear the costs and use EBT cards simply to identify qualified participants.

Still, in the same way that SNAP gives recipients autonomy in how they use their benefits, Museums for All empowers individual cardholders to decide when they want to visit a museum. Traditionally, museums have tried to broaden access through once-a-month free days. “But this approach is not really serving the demographic it’s intended to serve,” says Laura Huerta Migas, the Association of Children’s Museums’ executive director. Low-income museumgoers often lack flexible work schedules and good transportation options that would enable them to attend free days. The consequences aren’t trivial: The IMLS has found that children who miss out on museum visits lag behind their peers in reading, math, and science.

In 2013, looking to reduce these inequalities, Huerta Migas and her colleagues noted that some of ACM’s member organizations, including the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh and the Zimmer Children’s Museum in Los Angeles, were offering anytime access to EBT cardholders—who now represent 5 to 6 percent of those museums’ visitors. With support from the IMLS, ACM decided to introduce a national version of this system.

Museums for All formally launched in August 2015. As of March 2016, 65 institutions in 27 states were participating. Approximately 70 percent are children’s museums, but



science, art, and history museums, botanic gardens, and historic houses have also signed up. Admission under the program ranges from free to \$3 for up to four people on one EBT card.

Chicago Children’s Museum implemented Museums for All in November 2015, after an eight-month planning period in which it gathered feedback from EBT cardholders and local social services organizations.

“Museums for All fits in with our menu of services because it encourages routine independent family visits,” says Saleem Hue Penny, Chicago Children’s Museum’s associate vice president of community and educational partnerships. “What low-income families have told us is they don’t want to feel like, ‘Oh, I can only go Thursdays between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m.’ They want to go at times that are convenient for their families, that work with their work schedules and children’s school schedules.”

Certain museums, especially small ones, may be hesitant to join Museums for All because they worry that subsidizing admissions could cost them revenue, says Paula Gangopadhyay, IMLS’s deputy director for museum services. But as Huerta Migas notes, some early adopters of the program have found that it leads to new funding opportunities. “They’ve been able to leverage more philanthropic dollars because they have a standing commitment to serving all of their community,” she says.

The use of EBT cards also allows museums to develop partnerships with other organizations.

“It was designed as an access program, but it’s also been a great form of community engagement for us,” says Hue Penny. “We’ve been able to connect with all these different groups you might not traditionally think of collaborating with a children’s museum.” These include food banks, the US Department of Agriculture, and