**Camp Fun Times: Medical Specialty Camp**

Camp Fun Times is a nonprofit organization serving children with serious illnesses (e.g., cancer, sickle cell disease, hemophilia, metabolic diseases, HIV/AIDS, and rare diseases) and their families. Over 20,000 people attend Camp Fun Times’ programs every year in the Northeast U.S., including the traditional summer camp program, wilderness program for teens, family weekends, hospital outreach, and regional events. With a yearly operating budget of $13M and 93 full-time staff, Camp Fun Times committed in 2013 to a five-year strategic plan to “Create an evaluation and data-friendly culture.” This was further explained as “By 2017, develop a greater understanding of 1) the impact of Camp programs in terms of camper and parent satisfaction as well as programmatic outcomes and 2) other data that will inform Camp’s future actions, including the amount of need for our services within and beyond our target disease groups.” Further, goals and strategies were to (1) assess programmatic satisfaction and impact and (2) use data to inform decision-making. Camp Fun Times hired a full-time staff member (director of research and evaluation) in 2013 and funding for the position was not tied to a foundation, although later a foundation offered to pay about 75% of the cost of the position.

 Starting in 2013, simple post-program and post-event surveys were given or sent to participants of most programs, and results analyzed and reported on every six months or so. In 2014, the director of research and evaluation decided to evaluate the residential and recreational summer camp program for children aged 7-15. When considering which outcomes to evaluate, conversations were held with full-time camp staff to better understand the campers’ backgrounds and needs for camp. Through this process, “friendship skills” was identified as an outcome of interest because campers typically miss school and out-of-school-time activities, and are socially isolated due to their illness, such as from being hospitalized or attending doctor’s appointments, and having other delays or limitations associated with their illnesses. Missing out on important opportunities to meet friends and build friendships is one factor that led to the creation of the camp, as a way to fill in the gap for children with serious illnesses. Camp was viewed as a good place for children to engage in social skills and make friends, all while being medically supported.

 Camp Fun Times chose to use the American Camp Association’s Youth Outcomes Battery, which contained a validated and tested 14-itme scale for measuring friendship skills. In summer 2014, Camp Fun Times administered the “friendship skills” survey to around 500 campers aged 10-15. First, camp counselors were trained in how to administer the survey in each of the 15 cabins using mini iPads and a survey app. Results were analyzed at the end of the summer and a report given to the full-time camp staff team and discussed at a meeting. Results were also verbally shared with a sub-committee of the board of directors focused on programs, and an executive summary and full report provided to this group. The report was posted to Camp Fun Times; website under the “program impact” section.

 In thinking more about friendship skills at camp, staff pondered what they could do to further enhance campers’ friendship skills. In concert with the director of research and evaluation, the full-time camp staff decided to add a 45-minute session to the 2015 summer staff training on how to build campers’ friendship skills. The director of research and evaluation conducted the training and measured camper friendship skills as they did the prior year. Everyone was pleased to see camper friendship skills go up by a moderate amount. While people acknowledged that there could have been other reasons for the increase, the discussion on what those reasons could have been proved fruitful for thinking more deeply about the mechanisms of friendship skill change in the camp setting.

 Following the common assumption that “more is better,” in 2016, the full-time camp staff team decided to double the amount of staff training and add a mid-season booster session about camper friendship skills. Results from the evaluation in that summer showed no additional increase in campers’ friendship skills with the extra training or the booster session, although the campers’ scores were still higher than they were when there was no summer staff training. So, it seemed that additional training didn’t make a difference to camper friendship skills.

 Results from this 3-year natural experiment were verbally shared with full-time summer camp staff. In 2017, a 45-minute session on building camper friendship skills was again given to summer staff, and the other 45 minutes used to cover another topic. This study helped the staff make decisions on the amount of training to provide to summer staff. Results from this study were also shared with parents and caregivers of campers as a handout and a short presentation at a “parent work day.” Parents/ caregivers were happy to learn about campers’ experiences and had good ideas for Camp Fun Times to continue helping their children build friendship skills even after camp ends. Results were also shared with the board of directors and other medical specialty camps. The study was discussed at two conferences and the director of research and evaluation wrote a manuscript for a practitioner-oriented academic journal.

**Camp of the Rockies**

Camp of the Rockies is a family owned and operated not-for-profit camp that provides traditional overnight experiences and multi-day wilderness trips. Despite nearly 100 years of solid enrollment and a large and active alumni base, CoR staff decided to explore if they were achieving their mission, "To live together in the outdoors, building a sense of self, a sense of community, a sense of the earth and a sense of wonder through fun and adventure." Specifically, they wanted evaluation information to improve programming, to design more intentional staff training, and demonstrate to their stakeholders that CoR is doing what they say they are doing.

For the last six summers, CoR has administered a survey to measure outcomes that align with their mission to about 475- 500 campers near the end of each month-long session. In 2015, the team decided to focus on one aspect of their mission, “sense of self,” which they defined to include Perceived Competence, Independence, Responsibility outcomes. Each outcome was measured using a subscale taken from a set of statistically-sound youth outcomes measures developed by the American Camp Association.

When administering the surveys, CoR staff explained to campers that the survey was as part of the camp’s "culture of feedback," which gives them the opportunity to make camp better. Campers complete the anonymous survey in small-group living units with the support of senior leadership staff who they may or may not have had direct contact with during their time at camp. Following the survey, staff members solicit information about the camp experience from the campers and take copious notes as the campers respond to each question. The details of "who said what" remain anonymous. The outcomes data CoR gathers through these surveys add a depth of quantitative information to camper interviews and parent satisfaction surveys.

CoR’s 2015 results indicated that every camper, at both camps, in all sessions, experienced personal, self-reported growth in Independence, Responsibility at Perceived Competence. In her analysis, the staff person leading the project wrote, "Campers reported increases in all of these areas (raw scores on a scale from 0-5 are: Independence=4.05, Responsibility=3.82, Perceived Competence=3.77). Scores on each of these measures were above average compared to the American Camp Association’s National Norms. There appeared to be no significant differences in scores by camp (girls’ camp and boys’ camp), age (9-16 years), years attended (first year-10th year), nor session (1 or 2). This indicated CoR is delivering a positive and predictable growth experience in campers' sense of self (as measured by the survey) at each camp, at every age, in each session, whether or not this was their first year or their 10th year at camp. This also indicated that CoR is reliably and uniformly delivering on this intention for all campers, and campers' growth is ongoing summer after summer."

But, when compared to previous years, staff noticed a slight dip in the responsibility results between the 9th and 10th grade summers. This age group includes campers who are Counselors in Training, and--in theory--they take on more responsibility than any other camper in the entire program. CoR staff had a number of theories regarding the dip in responsibility results:

1. They had so much more responsibility, they actually felt they weren't doing a good job and--in turn--felt less responsible;

2. As the oldest campers in their final year at camp, they may engage in activities that make them actually feel less responsible while at camp;

3. There is a disconnect between their theoretical understanding of responsibility and what actual responsibility looks like, sounds like and feels like.

The CoR team wanted to address these possibilities in a comprehensive manner through improved programming, more intentional leadership training of both staff and Counselors in Training, and by recognizing "responsibility in action" during the summer. In preparation for the summer, CoR’s Program Director reevaluated the leadership curriculum and added a formal service learning project and a "shadow day" so campers could observe responsibility in the community. In addition, the staff members working with the Counselors in Training were trained how to be intentional and consistent with their descriptions of responsibility, their recognition of "responsibility in action" and addressing the challenge and reward of responsibility.

**Midwest Camp**

Midwest Camp’s (MWC) residential summer camp program consists of five weeklong sessions: Traditional Camp, Wellness Camp, and one weeklong session dedicated to children impacted by HIV/AIDS. Over 76% of the children who attend MWC live at or below the poverty line and many are referred from foster care homes and homeless shelters.

MWC’s summer camp programming is based on the nationally recognized Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets, which outlines the building blocks of successful youth development. These developmental assets, or positive traits and experiences, teach children to engage in learning, develop a sense of purpose, and take a positive view of their personal future. At camp, colored beads become the focal point of the week, as campers learn about Empowerment, Social Competencies, Positive Values, while they demonstrate those traits and give and receive feedback within their groups.

In 2008, MWC decided that it was imperative to understand and report camper outcomes in the best way possible. They knew that, through anecdotal and first-hand evidence, the summer camp program was resulting in phenomenal change and impact, but they needed to understand where we could improve by program quality and camper outcomes.

MWC chose to use evaluation tools developed specifically to assess program quality and camper outcomes, and chose tools that have strong evidence of validity and reliability. The larger challenge, though, was in developing routines and systems that would allow for rigor in data collection, organization, and interpretation. MWC now trains all of summer and year-round staff how to implement their outcomes measures, and they. developed systems to ensure that data collection happens under the best of camp circumstances, controlling for most variables besides the weather and the occasional bad mood. They also work to ensure that certain staff positions are responsible for implementation and collection of the data and that they fully understand the purpose and the instruments, and understand how to use data for program planning.

Figuring out how to use and communicate quantitative data has been a learning process. Initially, MWC’s full-time program staff, in collaboration with the executive director would review and interpret data. In time, MWC partnered with a regional youth-focused commission to help them understand how to assess program quality. They also sought outside support from the American Camp Association, who supported their use of camper outcomes tools.

MWC analyzed and made judgements through the data in different ways. Program staff analyze the data as it relates to selected variables, which allows MWC to look for trends or outliers in the data. Recently there was a significant decrease in Session 4 Girls’ results related to teamwork skills. MWC staff were able to consider those results together with their working knowledge of that session and brainstorm what can be done differently to appropriately support our Session 4 Girls and our Session 4 Girls’ staff.

To expand their capacity to analyze and use data, MWC now implements a Fall Retreat in which 10 – 12 staff and volunteers from a cross- section of camp responsibilities and roles come together to look at the results from a season of evaluation. Full-Time Staff, Cabin Staff, Cabin Life Coordinators, and even Health Services Staff together brainstorms, discusses, and hypothesizes via data and collective feedback, leading to a weekend rich in prioritizing and planning our program’s ‘next steps’ and areas for focus and attention. This process has resulted in significant advances to our summer camp programs.

**University-Based Camp**

U Camp is a 5-day overnight experience for middle and high school students held on the campus of a large research-intensive university in the US. The goal of the program is to encourage interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) careers. Like many universities, the campus on which U Camp is held is currently examining how and why it runs youth programs during the summer and during other breaks in the academic calendar. Concerns about youth safety, particularly in a setting where there are almost 1,000 different camps run by a wide variety of practitioners (e.g., coaches, professors, nonprofit organizations), are forcing U Camp to demonstrate its value to the University and its overall impact on youth. The University has stated that camps unable to demonstrate value and impact before the start of the 2019 camp season will no longer be allowed to use university facilities and systems.

As an academic program, U Camp decided to best demonstrate its value to the university by evaluating the extent to which youth participants gained new knowledge of STEM career options and their associated college majors. However, U Camp staff knew that they needed to show results sooner than it would take for their participants to attend college. The team looked for STEM-related scales through the Afterschool Alliance and decided to measure:

* Active participation in STEM learning opportunities
* Curiosity about STEM topics, concepts or practices
* Ability to productively engage in STEM processes of investigation
* Ability to exercise STEM-relevant life and career skills
* Understanding the value of STEM in society
* Awareness of STEM professions

The items from these scales, plus some additional demographic and satisfaction items, resulted in a 45-item survey that was administered online in a campus computer lab on the first day of the program and then again on the last day of the program. First, U Camp’s director wanted to know how the campers in this program compared to a national sample of campers taking the same outcomes measures. Results showed that the calculated mean for these scales (M = 5.30) at the end of camp was above average but not significantly different from the national norms for the scales used. Next, the U Camp director asked a volunteer knowledgeable in statistics to conduct additional analysis, and results showed that participants showed remarkable gains from pre-camp to post-camp. In the report, U Camp’s director used these results to claim that the academic program facilitated growth and positive STEM-related outcomes in areas beyond the immediate scope of the program. In the report, the director also compared U Camp to traditional school and claimed that U Camp was impactful because it complemented, through positive youth outcomes, the academic focus of traditional school.

Specifically, the director wrote, “The implications of our evaluation findings are clear. Despite data that showed that the attitudes and abilities of U Camp participants were no better than a national sample, significant gains across six salient dimensions were found. The cultivation of these STEM outcomes is believed to be a result of a residential camp structure that reflected an immersive, interactive, and investigative nature and environment. The implementation of engaging and enriching activities and events that emphasized cooperation and collaboration had far reaching ramifications beyond just the aspect of interest in STEM. Our findings demonstrated that in an especially designed learning environment, students are able to solidify a career interest while gaining valuable STEM skills and competencies that will enable them to not only clearly define their goals and aspiration but better equip and empower them to reach them.”

With this report, U Camp was able to satisfy the University and keep its status as a university-based camp; however, university administration asked U Camp to better document findings related to the camp’s mission (college and career awareness), and evaluate the camp practices that lead to the 21st century learning outcomes they are targeting.