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Evaluation of the Odyssey Project: 2004 - 2016
Executive Summary

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Learning • Evaluation • Adaptation • Dissemination

Executive Summary

The Odyssey Project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison provides humanities classes for adult students who face economic barriers to attending college. Since 2004, 30 students participate annually in this challenging, college-level humanities class with award-winning faculty. Students receive free tuition, textbooks, childcare, and a weekly dinner to enable their attendance. These services are provided through the support of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, grants, and private donations. The goal of the Odyssey Project is “to help people overcome adversity and achieve their dreams through higher education” as a means to stop the intergenerational cycle of poverty. The program provides services to adults of all ages, encourages the pursuit of higher education, and shares the importance of education with immediate family, friends, and others.

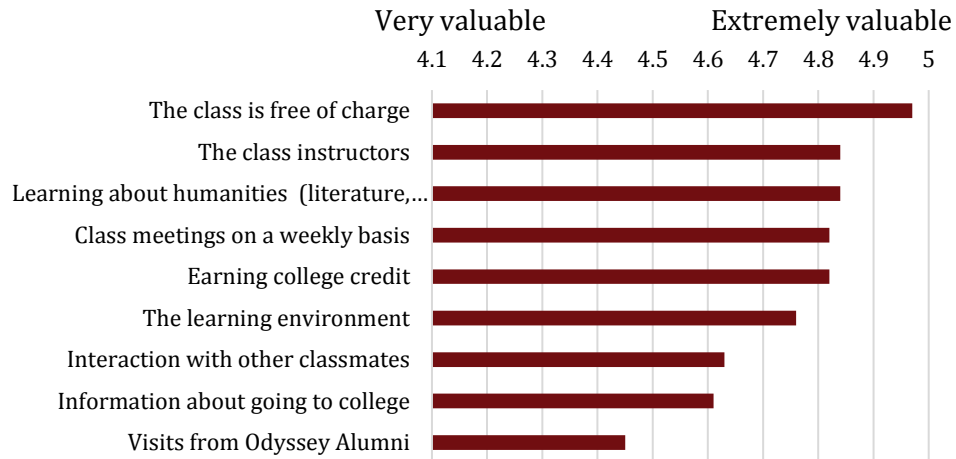
In 2016, the LEAD Center was contracted to conduct an evaluation of The Odyssey Project (Odyssey). LEAD Center staff worked collaboratively with Odyssey staff to develop an evaluation plan and methods to understand *if* and *how well* the Odyssey Project’s goals are being met.

Evaluation Plan and Methods

A logic model was developed that mapped out the program’s activities, goals and outcomes. After meetings and reviewing research about similar programs, a survey was designed to evaluate the program. Using culturally responsive methods, it was co-created with Odyssey staff and program participants who completed pilot versions of the survey and provided extensive feedback about the content and wording of items, length of the instrument, and mode of deployment. The final version was sent to 354 previous participants who were provided with multiple modes of completing the survey (i.e., Qualtrics, mail, and phone). As of March 11, 2017, 55% of the participants responded to the survey ($n=193$). The survey respondents reflect the overall program population, which is primarily African American and women. Survey items included quantitative scaled questions, qualitative open-ended questions, and retrospective questions that asked participants to compare their attitudes, skills, and behaviors before and after participating in Odyssey. The survey explored the value of the participants’ experiences and how the program affected continuing formal education; family and generational exposure to higher education; personal enrichment in terms of attitudes, skills, confidence, and civic engagement; economic impact; and the influence of the humanities curriculum on them.

Key Findings

Overall, the respondents found all **components of the program** to be either *Very* or *Extremely Valuable*. They rated the class being “free of charge” as the most valuable component (4.97/5.00 scale). The next most valuable were “class instructors” and “learning about humanities” (4.84/5.00 scale).



The participants also indicated that writing assistance, the graduation ceremony, and emotional support were valuable outside of the classroom. Respondents said the diversity of ages, personal histories, and countries of origin of their classmates enriched their experience and inspired them. They formed lasting bonds with classmates and program staff, which created a sense of belonging in the community. A participant from 2004 noted:

I learned a lot from the stories of other students. I will take their stories with me forever and ever. Their stories have made me a better human being.

The majority of Odyssey participants **pursued formal education** after the program; 75% have completed additional college coursework since completing Odyssey.¹ At the time of the survey, 81% had an educational attainment level that included either some college credits beyond Odyssey, a technical or professional certificate, or a college degree. Of these, 16% have earned 2-year, 4-year, or graduate degrees. (Table 19). Among the 19% of students who did not take any additional college courses after Odyssey, many indicated they were close to retirement age and therefore, not pursuing a degree. For the others, achieving a college degree is a common long-term goal.

Currently, seventeen respondents are full-time students and 28 are part-time students. Many participants explained that their long-term goals involve obtaining a higher education degree, but lack of financial aid and family obligations were cited as common barriers to continuing college education.

Although not all Odyssey participants are able to continue their own education, they encourage their children or grandchildren to attend college. Sixty-eight percent of respondents who are parents said their Odyssey experience has affected their

¹ This statistic was determined based on a supplementary survey question distributed to program alumni conducted by Odyssey program staff. See Table 22. College Credits After Odyssey on page 54 for more.

children's thoughts about college and 86% said Odyssey had a major impact on their ability to support their child(ren) in school (Table 12).

Participation in Odyssey instilled the message that it is never too late to continue education, and that no one is ever too old to stop learning: A participant from 2009 noted:

Overall the Odyssey Project is definitely inspirational... without it I don't know if I was thinking of going back to school to obtain a bachelor's degree or even wanting to be interested in art, philosophy and reading books from the great Henry Thoreau, Gandhi and Langston Hughes.

Personal enrichment takes many forms, but most frequently, the participants identified improved communication and writing as areas in which their skills increased. Respondents also reported an increase in their confidence and their ability to set long-term goals, and they felt more hopeful about their potential for achievement due to the encouragement from faculty and program staff. They increased their level of civic engagement by volunteering and reported voting in elections more often. Some respondents learned about and pursued different career opportunities, such as being self-employed or starting their own businesses. Odyssey participant income rose approximately \$20,000 from when they started the program to when they took the survey. Exposure to a curriculum that included literature, poetry, philosophy, history, and art changed the participants' outlook on the world and their place in it. Respondents indicated that they shared their new interest and knowledge of humanities topics with their families and friends.

Conclusions

Survey respondents enjoyed their experience in the program and continue to have supportive relationships with program staff and other Odyssey participants. Support and encouragement from program staff helped participants persist to complete the program and believe in themselves. The course curriculum centered on the humanities opens minds and inspired new perspectives, as a participant from 2011 noted:

I never felt embarrassed to share my thoughts because I was finding my place in this life like a seed was being planted. What I loved the most was the Allegory of the Cave. That was when the light bulb turned on in my life. I have never been the same.

They learned the skills and importance of setting long-term goals and the confidence to achieve them. Some participants have achieved advanced degrees or are currently enrolled as students. Others note that they are "life-long learners," but in other ways. Many report a long-term goal of continuing their formal education, and remain hopeful for their future. That said, they continue to face significant barriers financially and otherwise. Change in awareness of career opportunities, such as starting a business, has impacted the economic situations of some participants.

Description of the Odyssey Project

The UW-Odyssey Project offers a University of Wisconsin-Madison humanities class for adult students facing economic barriers to college. Odyssey provides 30 students each year with a challenging college humanities class with award-winning faculty. Students receive free tuition, textbooks, childcare, and a weekly dinner through support from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, grants, and private donations.

Adult students read, write about, and engage in lively discussions of Emily Dickinson, Martin Luther King, Walt Whitman, Shakespeare, Gandhi and more. Through exposure to these great works of literature, philosophy, history, and art, Odyssey students gain six credits in English from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, skills in critical thinking, a sense of empowerment, and a voice.

Odyssey has been the catalyst that enables many adults to transform their lives and find a career direction. After the course, the Odyssey Project continues support and advising for those who continue their college educations.

Odyssey students report transformative outcomes from their participation in the program. They also report that they read more to their children, feel that they are better parents, have more hope about their own future, are more likely to vote and become involved in their communities, and have made plans to continue their educations and/or seek job training.

Most students who participate in the UW-Odyssey Project are from racial and ethnic minority groups. Many are overcoming the obstacles of single parenthood, homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, incarceration, depression, and domestic abuse.²

² <http://odyssey.wisc.edu/about>