

Starfinder Foundation Evaluation Report



June 1st and 2nd, 2015

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“Starfinder has made me a better person.”

~Starfinder Participant

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to present the findings of three facilitated group interviews conducted on June 1st and 2nd, 2015 at the Starfinder Foundation. A total of 45 students (approximately 53% of all participants) took part in facilitated dialogue sessions to assess the efficacy of the organization's programming. The purpose of the sessions was to collect qualitative data from participants regarding the following questions:

1. What do participants get out of Starfinder? What value does it bring to their lives, and/or their futures?
2. Does the above align with Starfinder's established goals as an organization? I.E. Is Starfinder achieving meaningful change in each of its three pillars: Health and Fitness, Academic Support, and Leadership Development?
3. Strengths and growth opportunities of the organization: What do participants value most about Starfinder, and what would they change or improve?

Based on the data that was collected, it is clear that Starfinder succeeds in meeting their goal of providing positive growth in the areas of Health and Fitness, Academic Support, and Leadership Development. With minimal guidance from the facilitators, the students highlighted and skillfully explained the program elements, and the short term and long-term impacts it has on their life. Beyond validating program efficacy, data shows Starfinder has gone above and beyond their goals, and by using soccer as a vehicle, they have fostered “Safe Space,” and engender personal transformation in those who take part in the program.

This report is organized into three sections: First, Three Pillars; second, Personal Transformation; and third, Feedback and Growth Opportunities.

I. Three Pillars

Health and Fitness

On the Field. The foundation of Starfinder's program is soccer, and participants identify as athletes, indicating that health and fitness is of high importance to the group. For some, this sense of identity has occurred since joining Starfinder; students described that before joining the program they would spend their after school time sitting at home, playing video games, and/ or engaging in unhealthy activities "getting in trouble." But since joining Starfinder, they are excited to explain the ways in which their soccer skills have dramatically improved (and so too their physical health). One student went so far as to say that, "I have improved my game more in my 2 years at Starfinder, than in my 8 years of playing soccer on my own." Students also discussed the positive impact of Focus Fuel; even if not everyone sees the activity as "fun," students generally find it valuable for improving their health and their game.

Off the Field. When asked if they felt that their participation at Starfinder has improved their health outside of the program, the answer was a unanimous yes. Students described being more aware of their nutritional habits, especially from nutritional programs that had occurred in previous years. Many also said that they felt that Focus Fuel can be applied beyond the soccer field, and has taught them new ways to strengthen and improve their fitness that they might not otherwise have learned. In addition, for some, Starfinder's impact on their physical health went beyond being physically "fit"; there was scattered discussion of how participation in Starfinder has been useful to steer them away from using alcohol and cigarettes, because they know that doing so would hurt the quality of their game.

Beyond Physical Health. Interestingly, when discussing Starfinder's impact on one's health and fitness, students spent the majority of time talking about emotional rather than physical health. Several students mentioned that Starfinder cultivates a positive environment, and for a few, it is the most (or the only) positive environment they have in their lives. One student remarked, "Everything in my life is really negative, except here. It feels good here, it's positive."

A number of elements contribute to Starfinder's positive environment, but perhaps the most important is the quality of community fostered through the program. The camaraderie and trust felt amongst students in all groups was palpable—they not only enjoy being together, but find a "safe space" in each other and at Starfinder at large. Research and practitioner experience demonstrate the importance of creating a safe space in order for individual or group growth to occur¹. In fact, it may be argued that in order for Starfinder to truly have an impact in its three pillars, a safe space is critical. The safe space or positive environment fostered in the program is evident in that students highly value and respect each other, are willing to speak openly about sensitive topics

¹ Holley, Lynn C., and Sue Steiner. "SAFE SPACE: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT." *Journal Of Social Work Education* 41.1 (2005): n. pag. Print.

with each other, and see the coaches as trusted peers and mentors to whom they can turn if ever in need. In addition to fostering strong relationships between students and with coaches, Starfinder has developed certain structural elements which help ensure a safe space: for example, the no cursing rule, and strict rules around speaking respectfully to others, both of which many students voiced appreciating.

Academic Support²

In terms of academic resources offered by Starfinder, students discussed built-in time to do homework during Starfinder hours, tutoring, and college support.

Overall the students found the tutoring to be very helpful, but felt that some of the structure of the academic support was problematic. (See Section III, Feedback and Growth Opportunities, for further details). They discussed the benefits of having a quiet, directed space for completing schoolwork and several mentioned seeing a positive correlation between the tutoring and higher school performance. A few students mentioned not having access to computers outside of Starfinder, and several said that their coaches provided mentoring that helped motivate them academically.

In terms of college, most students seemed to have planned to go to college before Starfinder. However, students appreciated the opportunity to visit college campus' through Starfinder, and saw a lot of benefit in informal conversations with coaches about the college process and college life, e.g. how to navigate the admissions process, make housing decisions, and "things that I wouldn't necessarily have thought about otherwise." One student said, "I mean...I already knew I wanted to go to college before I came here, but they talked to me about housing, and other stuff I should think about. There's only one college counselor at my entire high school, so I wouldn't get this anywhere else."

Leadership Development

When asked to describe the Starfinder program, leadership was consistently one of the first things mentioned. Starfinder offers a number of opportunities for students to foster leadership skills, for example, managing drills, coaching summer camp, and other community service activities. However, these individual leadership opportunities are only a small piece of how Starfinder is creating effective leaders for our future. According to the Harvard Business Review³, Emotional Intelligence is a critical to effective leadership. Emotional Intelligence is comprised of five key elements: Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Motivation, Empathy, and Social Skills. (See chart next page for details).

² A full assessment of academic outcomes will require a review of student grades, beyond the scope of this report.

³ Goldman, Daniel. "What Makes a Leader?" *Harvard Business Review*. Harvard Business Review, 01 Jan. 2004. Web. 21 June 2015.

The Five Components of Emotional Intelligence at Work

	Definition	Hallmarks
Self-Awareness	the ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others	self-confidence realistic self-assessment self-deprecating sense of humor
Self-Regulation	the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods the propensity to suspend judgment – to think before acting	trustworthiness and integrity comfort with ambiguity openness to change
Motivation	a passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status a propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence	strong drive to achieve optimism, even in the face of failure organizational commitment
Empathy	the ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions	expertise in building and retaining talent cross-cultural sensitivity service to clients and customers
Social Skill	proficiency in managing relationships and building networks an ability to find common ground and build rapport	effectiveness in leading change persuasiveness expertise in building and leading teams

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Students discussed and exhibited behaviors demonstrating that Starfinder has impact in each of the above areas:

Self-Awareness: Different students told their own stories demonstrating an increase in self-awareness. For example, one student described how she likes to talk a lot, but never realized that doing so prevented her from listening to others, and could also be found abrasive. She said that her goal this year is, “to shut up and listen, and to get more input from other people around me.” Another participant shared that after coming to Starfinder, “I realized I was a bully, and had been messing with kids I went to school with. I learned that it wasn’t cool to pick on people, and that there were other ways to make friends and to do things.” In addition, a large number of students wove a narrative of improved self-esteem or self-confidence after building a sense of community at Starfinder.

Self-Regulation: Self-awareness has led to increased emotional self-regulation for some students: “Before, I would always get angry. But here, they help me calm down, teach me how not to get mad. Now I trust my teammates.”

Motivation: “Being here gave me a new drive.” “Mentally, I’m lazy. But [since coming to Starfinder], I’m 110% now.” “I used to play video games all the time. But now when I’m home I’m looking up videos about soccer, and reading about it, anything so that I can improve my game.” Increased motivation was perhaps one of the single strongest findings in this evaluation. In fact, student motivation to attend the program is so strong that students bus one to two hours each way, three times a week, to get to Starfinder. Starfinder gives students a sense of purpose and goals to achieve. Additionally,

coaches help students define individual goals, and constantly push them to achieve to the fullest extent of their capabilities: “The coaches, they’ll push you, you know, to do things that you don’t even think it’s possible you can do them. They help us be more determined and motivated. They push us beyond [what we think are] our limits, then we look back and see, ‘oh man, look what we did.’” This particular student then went on to describe how the coaches push her to keep redefining what it means to be ‘good’ at soccer—so that she is always striving to be better. This approach teaches youth about setting goals, achieving them, and creating higher benchmarks for themselves—lessons which can be applied both on and off the soccer field.

Empathy and Social Skills: Both empathy and social skills are evident in the diversity and quality of relationships students have developed at Starfinder. Specifically, students spoke often about the benefits of being exposed to their peers of different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, and how it has changed their understanding of cultures, improved their ability to relate to people who are different from them, and judge others less. With regards to diversity, one student commented, “It has made me a better person, it made me open up, and talk to people. To not be biased against them. It made me a leader.” Through Starfinder’s tight-knit community, students develop relationship-building skills. A number of students described themselves as “shy,” “awkward,” or “scared” before Starfinder. But now they say: “I know I’ve made friendships here that are going to last my whole life.”

In addition, specific activities help cultivate empathy and social skills. Sponsored trips to international locations, community service opportunities, and gender role exploration discussions were also viewed as invaluable by many of the students, helping expand their world view and understanding of different people and cultures.

II. Personal Transformation

Thus far, this report has described how Starfinder is successfully seeing impact in each of its three pillars: Health and Fitness, Academic Support, and Leadership Development. Conventional wisdom and research tells us that soccer programming is good for athletics and health, quality tutoring can improve academic performance, and leadership development improves later life outcomes. But something else, slightly intangible, is occurring within the walls of the Starfinder Foundation: A space has been created for youth to explore the core of who they are, and the opportunity to undergo positive personal transformation, becoming better versions of themselves. Shy students have found a voice, those struggling with anger have learned to control it, and a number of comments can be summed up in the quote: "Starfinder has made me a better person."

According to Dr. Abraham Maslow, people need four things in order to reach their peak potential:

1. All physiological needs must be met
2. A sense of safety and security
3. A sense of love and belonging
4. Personal self-esteem

As an after-school program, Starfinder is limited in the extent to which it can fully meet student physiological and security needs (i.e. Even if students have food and safety at Starfinder, they may not have physical needs met at home). However, Starfinder does have an opportunity to give students a sense of love and belonging, and to improve their self-esteem. Feedback from students suggests that Starfinder does both of these very well:

Love and Belonging: Starfinder has cultivated a strong internal community. As previously mentioned, students find a "safe space" at Starfinder where they can develop positive relationships with teammates and coaches, and grow as athletes and individuals. Some students travel as much as four hours a day, after a full day of school, just to be at Starfinder. While the students do love soccer, that is not the root of their dedication—it's the community, and the sense of having a healthy, positive place where they are accepted and belong.

Self-esteem: A number of students described becoming more confident since attending Starfinder. Students feel more prepared to tackle college admissions, navigate high school life, and maneuver peer pressure around drugs and alcohol. They feel more confident in their soccer skills, to speak in groups when they were previously took shy, or even in the case of one student, to consider running for public office.

While Starfinder certainly has an impact in each of its three pillar areas, programming targeted at the pillars is a means to a greater end—enabling students to personally transform, and in turn, transform their lives.

III. Feedback and Growth Opportunities

Primary Student Suggestions

Students offered a number of suggestions on how to improve the Starfinder programming. There were only two suggestions that seemed to be held by a majority of students:

1. First, to offer more flex days. Students spoke authentically about how responsibilities in their home required more flexibility in the program. Some students care for younger siblings, take care of sick family members, or deal with other extenuating circumstances, and feel that five flex days is not enough: “If you skip days, you get kicked out. [You don’t want that to happen, so] sometimes you push yourself, like, too much. They think you’re playing around, but sometimes you’ve got stuff going on at home you’re dealing with.” The sense was that sometimes coaches fail to see that the youth are struggling emotionally or dealing with issues at home. In addition to changing the flex days policy, coaches may benefit from training to build staff awareness for understanding trauma, grief, and behavioral challenges.

It should be noted that most students were not against the concept of a flex days policy altogether—many acknowledged that the community they have developed is largely because participants are at Starfinder consistently. However, students did advocate for more understanding and flexibility in general with regards to taking days off.

2. The second suggestion was to increase the amount of activities available outside of the regularly scheduled Starfinder hours. Students were especially excited at opportunities to play with other teams, so as to improve their skills (several students mentioned feeling that their skills stagnated by playing only each other), and meet more people outside of Starfinder. Students suggested that doing so would also help “spread the word” about how great Starfinder is. In addition, a number of students were interested in non-soccer opportunities to be with each other outside the program, e.g. field trips, international travel, and community service.

Further Student Suggestions

Many of the students struggled to find things about the program that they felt should change. Below is a list of suggestions from some students—none of which were agreed upon by a majority. As such, if Starfinder intends to make programmatic changes in the future, it is recommended that they follow-up with participants, e.g. through a survey. Suggestions included:

- Provide food after fitness; many students said they get hungry.
- Bring back the nutrition programming from previous years.
- Bring this program to more schools and promote it!

- Provide more playing time: "I came for soccer. We don't play as much as we used to." (This was in reference to the changes the program made over the past year. Please note that this perspective represented only a few students; the majority of students appreciated the program's new direction and, while they have the most fun playing soccer, a majority sees the value in other activities related to leadership, academics, etc.)
- "Focus more on school performance. Some of the students are failing and they continue to play. Don't let people play who are failing."
- Increase programming on weekends.
- Make the building bigger. (Please note that most students felt that the building size was adequate).
- A center city location. (Many students felt that the location was hard to get to, and travel one to two hours by bus each way to participate).
- More cross-gendered opportunities to play soccer and interact.
- Change the logo.

Additional Suggestions

Based on observations of student behavior and student feedback, Starfinder might consider the following growth opportunities in order to continue growing its program in the future:

- **Get parents more involved in Starfinder.**
In its current setup, Starfinder only has the opportunity to impact the youth while they are physically at the Starfinder; the program is limited by the fact that it is an after-school program. If Starfinder were able to engage parents so that the intervention would continue beyond the walls of Starfinder, then the program could broaden its reach and strengthen its overall impact.
- **Open a center city location.** *Most participants do not live near Starfinder, and many travel over 40 minutes to get there. Even if this was a location for youth to take part in mentoring, hang out, or do minor exercises, it could increase the efficacy of the program, for youth who don't make it due to distance or lack of convenience on certain days.*
- **Bring back the nutritional instruction program and increase the food available.**
Students discussed being hungry during or after the program. This could also improve the outcomes of the program. Starfinder could find corporate food sponsors in the region to donate food.
- **Conduct further research and evaluation.**

A qualitative evaluation is made strongest when combined with quantitative data, surveys, and other measurements of program efficacy. In order to fully determine Starfinder's impact and continue to improve the program, it is recommended Starfinder invest in further program evaluation to complement the work in this report.

Appendix A: Evaluation Questions

1. Tell us about what you do at Starfinder
2. Why do you come to Starfinder? What do you get out of it?
3. [Focus on specific pillars, as necessary. E.G.]:
 - a. *Health and Fitness*: Once your time at Starfinder ends, what are your plans for staying fit? Are you involved in any physical activity outside of Starfinder? Have your eating habits changed at all since coming to Starfinder? Etc.
 - b. *Academics*: In addition to soccer, you participate in academic activities (e.g. tutoring, SAT prep, etc.). Do you find these activities useful? Do they help you in school?
 - c. *Leadership*: There are other activities, e.g. peer tutoring opportunities, Leadership Circles, and some of you are involved in Youth Council. What skills do you learn from those activities? Are these activities useful? Do you feel that you have learned the skills to be an effective leader at Starfinder?
4. By a show of hands, how many people think they have changed since coming to Starfinder? Does anyone want to share how they think they have changed, or any changes they have seen in their peers?
5. What do you value most about coming to Starfinder?
6. What, if anything, would you change or improve about Starfinder?
7. Is there anything we haven't asked, or that you want to add, that you think would be helpful?

Appendix B: Additional Student Quotes

"Because of the camaraderie...we want to be here. It's like an addiction."

"They push us beyond our limits, then we look back and say, 'look what we did!'"

"I was quiet and scared and introverted, and then I came here. It changed me, I am open, and able to communicate."

"I used to get in fights. This program helped me to be more calm, avoid altercations, and laugh it off."

"When I came here, I broke out of my shell."

"School and home are both negative environments for me. This is the one place I can go where it's positive."

"A lot of people think SF is just a place to play soccer. it is so much more. It changes you."

"Starfinder is a gift. It is a privilege to be here."

"They give us free tokens just to be here! Who does that? Just Starfinder. If you need cleats, you can borrow them. They really care about us."

"This is like my second family."