



Scientific Method in the Real World: Experience Corps and the Johns Hopkins Study Epilogue

Dr. Linda Fried and her research team at Johns Hopkins' Center on Aging and Health (COAH) decided not to pursue strict randomization of schools. In their grant application to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 2005, they proposed another solution that gave Baltimore officials a modest role in selecting treatment-group schools, and used careful analysis of school characteristics to ensure that those in the treatment group "matched" those in the control, even if the schools weren't randomly placed. The NIH accepted the grant proposal and awarded COAH approximately \$5 million over five years to fund the study.

Fried credits her research team with making the compromise possible. The methodology was far from simple. "Luckily we had this amazing biostatistician," she says. "[He] figured out a way to handle it methodologically, so that we could actually match like schools, and infer the same kind of learnings as we could have gotten from a randomization."¹ The process worked like this:

RFP. The researchers sent a request for proposal (RFP) to every public elementary school in Baltimore. Principals who submitted a proposal understood their school might be placed in either the treatment group or the control group (or neither).

Review. Those schools that responded to the RFP were reviewed for eligibility (e.g.,

¹ Author's interview with Linda Friedman in New York City, on February 14, 2014.

willingness to provide volunteers with specific training and supports).

First round. The city government selected five schools for the treatment group from the pool of eligible schools. The researchers then selected five control group schools with similar characteristics (e.g., demographics, test scores).

Second round. The researchers created 19 additional “matched pairs” of similar schools, and assigned one in each pair to the treatment group and the other to the control. In total, there were 48 schools in the study; 24 in each group.

Recruitment of volunteers was no simple task, either. There were worrisome delays in meeting targets. Securing funding for program operations was a constant concern. But COAH and its community-based partner, Greater Homewood Community Corporation (GHCC), managed to recruit 702 volunteers to Experience Corps who were also willing to take part in the study for a minimum of two years. Half of the volunteers were randomly selected to be in the treatment group, which placed them in K-3rd grade classrooms, and the other half were put in the control group.

Data were collected over four academic years, from fall 2006 through spring 2011. Grant funding from NIH ran out, but researchers at COAH continued to analyze the results. Without adequate funding, however, the pace of analysis slowed, and by early 2014, the final results of the study had not yet been published.

Tensions over the randomized control trial, leading up to the NIH grant application in 2005, strained relations between COAH and GHCC. Fried and her counterpart at GHCC, Sylvia McGill, had previously resolved issues as they came up; personal affinity between the co-leaders went a long way toward making the academic-community partnership work. But in more structured meetings between COAH researchers and GHCC representatives, resolutions tended to

be settled by vote, with each person getting one vote. As the study drew closer, COAH researchers increasingly outnumbered GHCC representatives.² Often, McGill was on her own.

Both organizations were eager to find a more efficient and equitable way to make decisions and resolve disputes. To this end, they brought in an independent facilitator who guided the two parties in drafting a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in 2007. The MoU formalized the roles of the organizations: COAH had responsibility for decisions regarding the scientific study, and GHCC for decisions related to delivery of the Experience Corps program. When a decision touched upon both the study and the operations, and the two organizations were in disagreement, the Experience Corps Steering Committee would step in. But now the committee would include a contingent of GHCC board members to counterbalance COAH leaders. The formalized agreement helped maintain the partnership as Experience Corps entered a new phase of evaluation and expansion.

Baltimore Experience Corps underwent several major organizational changes over the following years, first becoming independent of GHCC in 2009, and then, the same year, becoming an affiliate of a new national Experience Corps organization that was based in Washington, DC. In 2011, AARP acquired the national organization, with the objective of greatly expanding its reach to senior volunteers and needy schools. Baltimore Experience Corps became a branch within AARP Experience Corps. The research conducted by Fried and her colleagues at Johns Hopkins between 1999 and 2011 had helped convince AARP executives of the value of the program.

As of 2013, AARP Experience Corps served 25 schools in Baltimore and had 296 volunteers.

² Erwin J. Tan *et al.*, “The Evolution of an academic-community partnership in the design, implementation, and evaluation of Experience Corps Baltimore City: a courtship model,” *The Gerontologist* 54 (April 2014): 314-321.