CHAPTER 7
PROJECT OBJECTIVES, OUTCOMES, AND DATA

T he main focus of this chapter is the ways in which Talent Search may affect program participants. Before describing specific outcomes, however, we consider projects' formal goals and informal expectations concerning the ways that participants are intended to benefit from the program. After presenting both quantitative and qualitative information on participant outcomes, we discuss projects' data-collection and evaluation practices.

Overview and Selected Highlights

- Projects' average goals for two key participant outcomes in 1998-99 were as follows: 88 percent of high school seniors and equivalency students would graduate or receive an equivalency certificate; 75 percent of graduates and equivalency recipients would enroll in a postsecondary program.

- Averaging across projects, 89 percent of seniors and equivalency students graduated or recived an equivalency certificate, and 71 percent of graduates and equivalency recipients reportedly enrolled in a postsecondary institution.

- Eighty-seven percent of projects met their goal for secondary school graduation rates, but only 53 percent met their goal for postsecondary admissions.

- Participants and program alumni mentioned numerous, diverse ways in which they felt they had benefited from Talent Search, including: more knowledge and information about postsecondary education, better access to and more choices of colleges, improved academic performance, being better prepared to succeed in college, and increased confidence and motivation. Anecdotal statements such as these, however, do not constitute evidence of program effectiveness.

- More than 95 percent of projects reportedly tracked or monitored data on the key participant outcomes of high school graduation, progression through high school, enrollment in college, and completion of college applications. Substantially lower percentages of projects had tried to measure or were collecting data on other outcomes, such as grades, self-esteem, SAT/ACT scores, or financial aid awareness.

- Most projects rely on internal evaluations. The information most commonly used in project evaluations was school retention or graduation rates and students' written evaluations of services. The information least commonly used was comparisons of participants' and nonparticipants' standardized test scores and course completion rates .

- Case study projects did not appear to place a high degree of emphasis on data collection and analysis, focusing mainly on data needed to complete the APR. Resource limitations (funds, time, expertise) may be one reason why projects did not do more in the way of data collection/analysis and evaluation.

TALENT SEARCH PROJECTS' OUTCOME OBJECTIVES

Talent Search projects' outcome objectives are goals for the way the program strives to affect participants. As discussed in chapter 2, the national TRIO office requires all Talent Search projects to set specific goals for the percentage of applicable participants expected to achieve various outcomes during each program year.[1] Each project's goals are supposed to be challenging, taking into account the types of participants served, the service context, and the project's track record.

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Table 7.1 displays the average goals across all Talent Search projects, as reported in 1998–99 annual performance reports (APRs), and conveys some of the variability in projects' goals. For example, while projects, on average, expected 75 percent of participating seniors to be admitted to a postsecondary institution, about a quarter of all projects set a goal of 65 percent or lower, and another quarter set a goal of 84 percent or higher. Projects clearly expected to achieve the most success with their objectives for secondary school retention and graduation. Their lower goals for secondary and postsecondary re-entry reflect staff views that high school dropouts and adults are more difficult populations to serve. Although not shown here, analysis reveals that projects' goals did not differ substantially or systematically by type of host institution.

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[1]Outcome objectives differ from process objectives, which address steps that projects take in operating a program and serving participants. Talent Search projects are also required to set goals for two process objectives: the percentage of "college-ready" participants who will receive assistance in applying for postsecondary admission and the percentage of college-ready participants who will receive assistance in applying for financial aid. Providing assistance with applications is clearly a process undertaken by project staff, not an outcome experienced by participants as a result of their involvement in the program.

Table 7.1—Goals set by Talent Search projects for major participant outcomes: 1998–99

Outcome objective	Average goal	25th percentile	75th percentile
Secondary school retention (percentage of secondary school participants who will continue in secondary school)	89%	85%	97%
Secondary school graduation (percentage of high school seniors and GED or alternative education students who will graduate or receive equivalency certificate)	88	83	95
Secondary school re-entry (percentage of secondary school dropouts who will re-enter secondary education program)	64	50	80
Postsecondary admissions (percentage of high school graduates and equivalency recipients who will enroll in postsecondary education program)	75	65	84
Postsecondary re-entry (percentage of postsecondary "stopouts" who will re-enter postsecondary education program)	65	50	80

SOURCE: Analysis of data from Talent Search Performance Reports, 1998–97.

Talent Search projects do not necessarily limit their outcome objectives to the five major ones discussed above. The project survey also asked about objectives for a handful of other outcomes of potential interest. As shown in table 7.2, about four-fifths of all projects (82 percent) had a specific performance objective for the percentage of seniors applying for financial aid, and about the same proportion had an objective for participant grade-level progression.[2] In contrast, less than one-half of all projects (48 percent) had a goal pertaining to participants' grades.

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[2]Grade-level progression differs slightly from secondary school retention; the former refers to moving ahead (not repeating a grade), whereas the latter refers to staying in school (regardless of grade level).

Table 7.2—Additional outcome objectives

| | All projects | Host institution | | | |
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	Community org.
Percentage of projects with specific performance objectives concerning the following outcomes:					
Percentage of seniors applying for financial aid	82%	86%	79%	78%	84%
Participant grade progression	81	79	87	80	85
Percentage going to college full-time in fall after graduation	58	56	64	48	72
College preparatory course selection (middle school)	51	57	51	45	52
Participant grades	48	51	59	39	50
Projects' average goal for:					
Percentage of seniors applying for financial aid	87	87	90	90	81
Percentage going to college full time in fall after graduation	72	71	73	74	68

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

Overall, with a couple of exceptions, there was relatively little variation between projects operated by different types of host institutions. As for the exceptions, projects hosted by 2-year colleges were substantially less likely than those hosted by community organizations to have established a performance goal addressing full-time college enrollment in the fall after graduation, and projects hosted by 2-year colleges were substantially less likely than those hosted by private 4-year colleges to have established a performance goal addressing participants' grades. The reasons for these differences are unclear, but, in the latter case, it may be worth noting that the two groups of projects were, respectively, the least and most likely to provide tutoring services (see chapter 6, table 6.1).

The survey also asked projects to report their goals for the following two outcomes: percentage of seniors applying for financial aid and percentage attending college full time in the fall after high school graduation. For the former outcome, the average goal was 87 percent; for the latter, 72 percent.

We conclude this section by summarizing information from the case studies on desired outcomes. We asked project and target school staff how students who had participated in Talent Search would be expected to differ from similar nonparticipants as a result of their experiences in the program. As might be expected, respondents consistently said that participants ought to demonstrate higher rates of high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment, which are the overarching objectives of Talent Search. Other outcomes mentioned by respondents included better knowledge of careers and their educational requirements; better knowledge of financial aid; improved self-esteem or self-

confidence; better sense of direction in life; and greater comfort on college campuses and more knowledge of assistance available to them there, such as Student Support Services. Some comments reflected projects' particular service emphases. For example, at projects that focused on academic support, interviewees mentioned better secondary school grades and test scores as expected outcomes. As for longer-term outcomes, many respondents felt fairly certain that Talent Search alumni would do better and stay longer in college than similar nonparticipants. But they also felt strongly that Talent Search projects should not be held accountable for such outcomes. As one project director stated, "We just show them to the door" of college. In the opinion of this director and other staff, once participants left Talent Search, many other factors influenced their lives, none of which the program could affect.

PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

We turn now to a discussion of how participants may have benefited from Talent Search. First we consider information on participant outcomes from APRs and the project survey.[3] Then we summarize anecdotal comments about outcomes from case study interviews.

PROJECT-REPORTED INFORMATION ON OUTCOMES

An aggregate analysis pooling 1998–99 APR data from all Talent Search projects showed that for three of the five major outcome objectives discussed above, the program as a whole appeared to exceed the average goal set by projects (table 7.3). About 97 percent of 6th through 11th graders stayed in school from one academic year to the next, exceeding the average goal of 89 percent for secondary school retention. About 94 percent of participating high school seniors (and GED or alternative education students) graduated from high school or received a certificate of high school equivalency, exceeding the average goal of 88 percent.[4] And about 72 percent of postsecondary education stopouts had re-entered a postsecondary education program during the program year or reportedly would do so in the following fall. The rate exceeded the average goal of 65 percent for postsecondary re-entry.

However, the program as a whole appeared to fall short of the average goal set by projects in two areas. About 51 percent of high school dropouts re-entered a secondary education program during the program year, short of the average goal of 64 percent. (APR data did not permit calculation of an overall rate, including middle school dropouts.) And about 71 percent of high school (and high school equivalency) graduates had enrolled in a postsecondary education program during the program year or were reportedly planning to do so in the following fall, short

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[3]APR and survey data both represent projects' self-reported outcome data. Neither source has been independently verified. In addition, neither source compares outcomes for participants with those of similar nonparticipants.

[4]The project survey found that the graduation rate for 12th grade participants in 1998–99 was 91 percent overall, with little variability by type of host.

of the average goal of 75 percent for postsecondary admissions. (Analysis also revealed that for the two key outcomes—high school graduation and postsecondary admissions—there was very little variation by type of host institution in either projects' average goals or their actual outcomes.)

APRs also contain data on two more outcomes, in this case for high school seniors and high school (or equivalency) graduates served, also known as "college-ready" participants. Nationally, 83 percent of these participants applied for postsecondary admission and 82 percent applied for financial aid.[5]

Rather than pooling data across all projects, an examination of results for individual Talent Search projects provides a more detailed perspective on participant outcomes. Such an analysis reveals that the large share of projects met their goals for secondary retention, secondary graduation, and postsecondary re-entry and that just over half of all projects met their goals for postsecondary admission (table 7.3). However, a majority of projects failed to meet their goals for secondary re-entry, a finding that may provide empirical evidence in support of staff statements about the difficulty of serving dropouts.

Table 7.3—Talent Search projects' success in meeting goals for major participant outcomes: 1998–99

	Aggregated, national-level data		Disaggregated, project-level data		
Outcome objective	Average goal	Percentage of participants that achieved the outcome	Percentage of projects that met or exceeded their goal	Percentage of projects that missed their goal by five percentage points or less	Percentage of projects that missed their goal by more than five percentage points
Secondary school retention	89%	97%	84%	7%	9%
Secondary school graduation	88	94	87	6	7
Secondary school re-entry	65	51	38	3	59
Postsecondary admission	75	71	53	18	29
Postsecondary re-entry	65	72	81	4	15

SOURCE: Analysis of data from Talent Search Performance Reports, 1998–99.

NOTE: The number of projects in this analysis varied by outcome, ranging from 328 for postsecondary admissions to 113 for postsecondary re-entry. Like other outcomes analyses performed on APR data (U.S. Dept. of Education May 2002), the analyses followed a two-part strategy. First, projects were included only if they reported data on their outcome goal, number of relevant participants, and number of participants achieving the outcome. Second, apparently erroneous data were corrected. Specifically, when the number of participants reported as achieving an outcome exceeded the relevant number of participants reported earlier in the APR, we capped the outcome number as equal to the participant number, resulting in a 100 percent success rate for these cases. Data problems such as these should be eliminated with the new, Internet-based APR form.

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[5]These percentages cannot be compared directly with any outcome goals. The related goals set by projects pertain to the percentage of "college-ready" participants who will receive assistance with applications. But goals for providing assistance are process objectives, not outcome objectives. Furthermore, there is a difference between receiving assistance with an application process and actually applying.

Postsecondary Outcomes

The project survey data enabled us to look more closely at projects' expected outcomes for one particular group—participants who had earned either a high school diploma or a GED by spring 1997. These participants are of special interest because they were in a position to fulfill Talent Search's ultimate objective of enrollment in a postsecondary education program. Results show that project staff expected the vast majority (75 percent) of participants to enroll in a 2- or 4-year college by fall 1999 (table 7.4). They reported that relatively few would go on to a vocational or proprietary school. About 2 percent were reportedly planning to enroll in other types of programs or institutions, with the military specified most frequently (52 of 80 respondents who provided a written answer). On average, projects reported that 10 percent of high school graduates and GED recipients would not continue their schooling and that the status of 5 percent of participants was unknown. Finally, participants at projects hosted by private 4-year colleges were reportedly more likely to attend a 4-year college, and participants at projects hosted by 2-year colleges were reportedly more likely to enroll in that type of college.

About three-fourths of high school graduates would reportedly enroll in college the next fall.

Table 7.4—Expected fall 1999 status of participants who had graduated from high school or received a GED by spring 1999

Average percent who would:	All projects	Host institution			
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	Community org.
Enroll in a 4-year college	41%	47%	54%	31%	43%
Enroll in a community college	34	25	23	46	33
Enroll in a vocational or proprietary school	7	9	7	5	7
Enroll in a tribal college[a]	1	1	0	1	1
Enroll in some other program or institution	2	2	1	2	2
Not continue their schooling	10	10	8	11	10
Education status unknown	5	6	6	4	4

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

[a]The survey noted that participants who would be entering a tribal college that was also a community college should be listed in the tribal college response category.

APR data provide similar details on the placements of high school graduates and postsecondary re-entry students *who were going on to some type of postsecondary education program.* Overall, about two-fifths were reportedly planning to attend a public 4-year college, and an almost equal proportion was reportedly planning to attend a 2-year institution (table 7.5). Many fewer were headed for a private 4-year college or a trade or vocational school. The pattern for projects hosted by community organizations was nearly identical to that of the overall pattern for all projects. But among projects hosted by postsecondary institutions, there was an increased likelihood that participants would attend an institution of the same type. For example, whereas 11 percent of the students overall were reportedly admitted

Relatively few graduates enroll in private 4-year colleges.

to a private 4-year college, 20 percent of students at projects hosted by private 4-year colleges were reportedly admitted to a private 4-year college.

Table 7.5—Types of postsecondary institutions that high school graduates and postsecondary re-entry students planned to attend: 1998–99

Percentage admitted or readmitted to	All projects	Host institution			
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	Community org.
Public 4-year institution	41%	48%	44%	31%	41%
Private 4-year institution	11	9	20	8	12
Public or private nonprofit 2-year institution	40	34	28	55	41
Proprietary school or public or private nonprofit vocational/ technical institution	6	8	9	6	5

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, *A Profile of the Talent Search Program: 1998–99*, Washington, DC: May 2002.

Outcomes for Dropouts

The project survey also collected information from directors on outcomes for dropouts. Two potential short-term outcomes for secondary school dropouts are to re-enter a secondary education program (for example, regular or alternative high school) or to prepare for and receive a GED.[6] The survey found that 63 percent of all Talent Search projects counted at least one participant preparing for the GED in 1998–99 (table 7.6). The number preparing for the GED averaged about 23 participants per project and was equivalent to about 68 percent of the total number of secondary school dropouts served by projects. The number of participants who received a GED averaged about 14 participants per project and was equivalent to about 61 percent of the total number preparing. (This figure can be interpreted only as a rough estimate of the overall GED success rate because some of those who were preparing may not have taken the GED examination during the same program year, and some who took the examination may not have prepared during the same year.) Some of the variation by type of host institution, particularly for the private 4-year category, may be more attributable to the small number of projects in this analysis rather than to real differences.[7]

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[6]The desirable long-term outcome, of course, is that they subsequently enroll in a postsecondary education program.

[7]Only 37 private 4-year projects responded to the initial GED question; as a result, the subsequent means and percentages presented in table 7.6 are based on just 13 to 15 cases.

Table 7.6—GED preparation and outcomes: 1998–99

	All projects	Host institution			
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	Community org.
Percentage of projects with participants preparing for a GED	63%	66%	46%	65%	68%
Average number of participants who were preparing	23	25	11	21	25
Number preparing as a percent of number of secondary school dropouts served	68%	72%	68%	64%	67%
Average number that received a GED	14	16	6	11	19
Number of GED recipients as a percent of the number who were preparing	61%	65%	51%	49%	71%

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

Exploring Outcome Differences

Using 1999-2000 APR data, we explored what factors might account for differences in some of the outcomes discussed above. Specifically, we used multivariate regression analysis to examine (1) what might account for variation in the key project outcomes of secondary school graduation, postsecondary admissions, and admission to 4-year postsecondary institutions, and (2) why graduates from projects hosted by postsecondary institutions were relatively more likely to enroll at the same type of college that hosted the Talent Search project they participated in. We controlled for factors such as the characteristics of host institutions (type, location), total number of participants served, percentage of new versus continuing participants, number of years in operation, participants' demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity, status on eligibility criteria, grade level), and the percentage of participants receiving each of the ten services. Unfortunately, however, the analyses provided little insight; the models explained only about 20 to 30 percent of the variation in project outcomes. Better data— especially measures of more factors that may influence outcomes, such as staff models and tenure—may be needed to provide more insight. As for differential enrollment rates at various types of colleges, it may simply be that students' familiarity with their host institutions may lead them to seek out similar types of colleges when they finish high school.

SUBJECTIVE INFORMATION ON OUTCOMES

People we interviewed during our site visits—project staff, school staff, students, program alumni, parents—all viewed Talent Search as a positive influence on participants. Current and former participants felt that they were better off than they would have been without the program. The outcomes mentioned by respondents varied considerably within specific projects and even within specific

Students and adults uniformly felt that Talent Search had a positive influence.

target schools. In other words, particular projects did not emerge as primarily affecting students in any particular way. We also did not detect any systematic differences in the opinions expressed by different types of interviewees. Below we summarize numerous statements made by various respondents, thereby illustrating the range of ways in which respondents saw Talent Search affecting participants.

First, however, a note on respondents' comments. We met only with students who were currently participating in the program and with alumni who had gone on to college—individuals whose opinions on Talent Search are likely to be more favorable than those of students who stopped participating in the program or those of alumni who did not pursue a college education. Furthermore, anecdotes do not constitute rigorous evidence that the Talent Search program has positive effects on participants. Separating outcomes "caused by" Talent Search from those more attributable to other experiences of the same students requires systematic comparisons of outcomes for participants and similar nonparticipants.[8]

The list of ways in which Talent Search was said to have helped students was both long and diverse. One commonly mentioned benefit was *more knowledge and information regarding postsecondary education*.

- Participants at one high school felt that Talent Search had helped them answer some of the major questions they had about going to college, such as what GPA is needed, how much college costs, what support services are available, how big colleges are, what classes are required for admission, and, once at college, what type of scholarships and financial aid may be available.

- Another student said that he did not even know that colleges offered tours to interested students. He had always just thought he would apply, be expected to pay tuition up front, and then just show up.

- A liaison to the program at one target high school opined that, compared with nonparticipants, Talent Search participants have the necessary information to make good decisions, such as what classes they need to take.

Some participants and alumni felt that the program had *improved their access to and broadened their choice of colleges*. Beyond just providing students with needed information, Talent Search project staff provided other services to make sure that students got into college—in some cases a college they had assumed was out of reach.

- A high school student described taking a program-sponsored trip while in middle school to visit a particular college and realizing instantly that it was the place for him. A second student said that

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[8]Phase II of the National Evaluation of Talent Search will attempt to make such comparisons by using data from a handful states. For a description of the planned research, see Maxfield et al., 2000.

because of Talent Search he now knew he could go straight to a major university. A third student said that he had decided to go directly to college after high school instead of first joining the Navy.

- An alumna claimed that without Talent Search she would have attended a community college; instead, she enrolled in a 4-year college. Furthermore, she said that if she had initially attended a community college, she doubted that she would have later transferred to a 4-year college. She said that her Talent Search advisor helped her prepare for the possibility of attending a 4-year college by making sure that she took algebra II and the SAT. She also saw the advisor as instrumental in securing a scholarship for her.

- Another alumnus said that in high school he did not think he could go to directly to a 4-year college but that his Talent Search advisor kept encouraging him to set his sights on a 4-year institution. When he reached his senior year in high school, the student still had not taken enough of the appropriate classes to attend a public 4-year college; nonetheless, his advisor said that enrollment in a 4-year institution was still possible. The advisor made some calls and succeeded in convincing a major public university to add the student's name to a special admission list; the student has since graduated from that university.

Yet another outcome mentioned by some participants was *doing things sooner to prepare for college than they would have otherwise.* Officials at one project said that Talent Search helps keep students on track for important steps such as registering for and taking college entrance examinations, applying for college admissions, and completing financial aid applications. At another project, a high school student said that if it were not for Talent Search, he probably would have "let it slide until twelfth grade." Similarly, a middle school student said that if there were no Talent Search, "I wouldn't *do* anything. I'd just worry about it until I hit high school." And at a third project, all of the alumni we interviewed concluded that the assistance that enabled them to complete their college applications and financial aid forms early was one of the best aspects of Talent Search.

Participants reportedly prepared earlier for college.

Several interviewees described how Talent Search led to *expanded horizons.* In other words, participants had developed broader perspectives and saw more opportunities for themselves. As described above, some participants saw Talent Search as expanding their horizons with regard to college. Students who at first suspected that a college education was beyond their reach came to see it as within their grasp; students who initially thought they could attend only a certain type or level of college came to see attendance at a higher-level, more expensive, or more prestigious institution as a realistic option. We also heard several comments about broader perspectives on careers.

- A project staff member who worked with middle school students saw the project's career focus as raising participants' career goals. At

the beginning of the school year, when asked about what careers they wanted to pursue, some students would name occupations such as hair stylist or mechanic. Toward the end of the year, though, those students were aiming higher for more advanced careers.

- Two teachers whose classrooms were served by that staff member independently said that Talent Search taught their students a lot more about careers and college than they themselves could have and that the project helped students make an important connection between jobs and education much earlier than they otherwise would; it gave them a reason for the things they did in school.

- At another project, a high school official felt that, compared with nonparticipants, Talent Search participants tended to grow more in their career interests. The parent of a participant in that project described how the career-interest tests taken by her daughter had opened her daughter's eyes and helped lead her to an intended college major and career field. Furthermore, her son, a Talent Search alumnus, originally had professed aspirations of following his father by working in a mechanic-related job in the mining industry, but the program helped him discover an aptitude for mathematics and computers.

One outcome mentioned at a few projects, especially those we selected for their emphasis on academic assistance, was *improved academic performance* as reflected in higher grades or test scores. At projects that featured substantial tutoring components, many interviewees were quick to cite tutoring success stories.

- *Grades.* At one project, an alumnus said that when he started in Talent Search, he was earning a D in algebra and felt unable to do any better on his own; with tutoring, however, he raised his grade to a high B. Tutors for the project told of a student who had improved his GPA from 0.8 to 3.0 over a two-year period and of a second student who had failed algebra twice but passed it after tutoring. At another project, students mentioned improving their grades in language arts as a result of the story writing they completed in Talent Search.

- *Grade-level promotion and graduation.* At one target high school, a student speaking on behalf of himself and some other juniors said that, without Talent Search tutoring, "Some of us would still be in tenth grade." Another student said that some juniors would have dropped out. Similarly, the director of another project pointed to students' grade-to-grade promotion rates and high school completion rates as major indicators of the program's success.

- *College entrance examinations.* A high school guidance counselor at one project said that students who spent a decent amount of time in

Talent Search preparing for the ACT examination often raised their composite scores on a retake by at least two points and occasionally by much more.[9] In addition, a counselor from a high school at another project that served all the juniors and seniors said that SAT scores had increased in the project school compared with nontarget schools in the same district.

- *Other tests.* Staff at one project cited pre- to post-test improvements on teacher-prepared examinations as well as improvements on the standardized achievement test used by the school district. Staff from another project said that the program was motivating students to work harder and helping more of them pass the state's high school exit examination.

- *Study habits and test-taking skills.* At one target high school, a student said that her tutor helped her to feel prepared, calm, and in control when taking mathematics tests. He also showed her different ways of approaching mathematics problems; those methods surprised her own teacher when she used them on a test. A guidance counselor from one of the same project's target high schools mentioned that students learned how to study in groups. Students from another project mentioned that they improved their study skills such that they were less likely to forget what they had learned in school. Staff from a third project described their participants as growing more confident about taking the ACT and SAT.

Several comments focused on how Talent Search participants were *better prepared to succeed in college* than were their peers. To a certain extent, interviewees saw this outcome as the cumulative effect of the various services provided by Talent Search, but sometimes they cited specific activities or experiences, especially those that made students more comfortable in a college environment and more familiar with support services.

- At one host college, officials viewed Talent Search alumni who enrolled there as demonstrating both a stronger determination to pursue college and a better understanding of the commitment needed to succeed in college than did similar students who had not been project participants. At another college, an administrator reported that when Talent Search alumni enrolled in that institution, they performed better than other students because of the academic support they had received, the general exposure to college they gained through field trips, and their ability to deal with the new freedoms offered by the college environment.

- An alumnus from one project explained that Talent Search not only opened the door to college but also introduced him to a network of support services to help him succeed. Specifically, his Talent Search

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[9]The maximum composite score on the ACT is 36.

advisor in high school told him about some important resources at the university he was going to attend, such as tutoring assistance from a program similar to Student Support Services.

- An alumnus from a different project said a "bridge" program that she participated in during the summer after high school graduation helped with networking and gave her a connection to some of the "higher-ups" on campus. Another alumnus of the same project said that the connections he made through Talent Search and the bridge program helped him secure a work-study job at the host college when he enrolled there. He also credited Talent Search for helping him feel comfortable in speaking to professors during their office hours, which he thought had helped him do better in classes.

In addition to the above outcomes, people mentioned several other perceived benefits of participating in Talent Search. Some of these additional outcomes were tangible. For example, a high school counselor pointed to the amount of scholarship money received by participants. Students at one project spoke of improving their attendance at school so that they would be eligible to have the Talent Search program pay part of the cost of a school-sponsored trip to Disney World. Participants in some projects reported benefiting from referrals to summer programs, such as an Upward Bound Math/Science program. Two students at one target high school felt that they had benefited from assistance in securing a summer job.

Other outcomes were more intangible, such as changed attitudes.

- Students at one project, for example, described *learning to control their temper* and walk away from certain situations in response to what they had learned about conflict resolution. A participant at another project said, "I have more patience."

- Sometimes staff described students as *developing a "sense of direction"* or a clearer plan for their lives. A student speaking for several others said that they now believed that they had a goal for the future. Although we stressed earlier that most students already had a desire to attend college when they joined Talent Search, a few high school students and alumni said the program had changed their aspirations. Before joining Talent Search, they said, they mostly wanted to "get out of school and just live life"; eventually, they developed a desire for a college education.

- Another perceived intangible benefit was *increased confidence.* At one project, a high school student said that the program made him feel better about himself and the future, that he became more confident. Elsewhere, a student described how her participation in Talent Search had increased her self-confidence to the point where she was able to compete in speech and debate tournaments. Similarly, at

another project, a student said, "I was shy and now I am more outspoken."

- Interviewees at a couple of projects described participants as becoming *more organized* and better at time management. Participants also cited *improved communication and teamwork* skills. An alumna said that the program taught her how to *set goals and achieve them.*

- A middle school counselor said that the program *builds self-esteem* and makes students feel special. Coincidentally, a middle school student from a different project said, "I learned how to respect myself."

- Talent Search also reportedly helped *motivate students to work harder,* according to staff from one project we visited. Elsewhere, an alumnus said that Talent Search helped build his motivation to work harder in school, helped him learn to enjoy school, and kept him focused on "doing good things" and staying away from bad influences. A current participant in that project said that he had been earning As and Bs but was not necessarily trying to do his best. With Talent Search, he made homework completion a high priority.

Did other groups besides participants experience positive outcomes? Despite little or no talk of "spillover" effects, in which benefits extend directly or indirectly to nonparticipants in target schools or the wider community, we heard the occasional comment about how Talent Search had benefited parents of participants. At one project, a noncollege-educated parent said that through her children's involvement in Talent Search she herself had "learned lots about college." A school liaison to a second Talent Search project said that she sometimes sees participants' parents become interested in pursuing postsecondary schooling. At a third project, a parent said that the program "empowered" her and helped her become more involved in her children's education; it gave her more confidence to talk to her children's teachers.

Many of the positive outcomes described above are closely interrelated. Some of them may be seen as intermediate outcomes that lead to other, subsequent outcomes. For example, attitudinal changes, such as greater self-confidence, may lead to behavioral changes, such as better academic performance; better academic performance, in turn, may lead to greater postsecondary options; and so on. But some relationships between outcomes may be more complex. In the view of one target school guidance counselor, for instance, academic success is the best way to build self-esteem and the confidence that leads to more success. A longitudinal study would be necessary to explore such issues.

PROJECT DATA, RECORD KEEPING, AND EVALUATION

The ability of Talent Search projects to demonstrate empirically how they help program participants depends on the participant information they collect and

maintain. Systematically collecting and analyzing process and outcome information is also critical to individual projects' evaluations. Both the project survey and the case studies shed light on projects' practices in collecting, maintaining, and evaluating process and outcome information.

Two questions in the survey directly addressed projects' data-collection efforts.[10] One asked about the types of items that projects had attempted to measure. The outcome that the largest share (85 percent) of projects tried to measure was completion of college financial aid forms, followed closely by completion of college applications, which 82 percent of projects had attempted to measure (table 7.7).[11] Of the eight items we asked about, a majority of projects had not measured three of the items—participant self-esteem, completion of GED preparation courses, and number of college preparation courses taken. There was little variation between projects operated by different types of host institutions. Overall, almost one-third (30 percent) of projects had tried measuring seven or eight of the items, but about 23 percent had tried measuring three or fewer; the mean number that projects had tried to measure was 5.1.

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[10]A major purpose of these questions, and one discussed below on record-keeping, was to help assess the feasibility of using project data in an impact analysis during Phase II of the National Evaluation of Talent Search. The implementation study did not set out to describe projects' data-collection efforts. For an earlier detailed look at seven projects' data-collection efforts, see Decision Information Resources, 1994.

[11]Given that all Talent Search projects are required to report in their APRs the number of participants who applied for financial aid and the number who applied for postsecondary admission, it is unclear why the results were so far below 100 percent. In a related survey item, 96 percent of respondents reported monitoring or tracking college application completion (table 7.8).

Table 7.7—Participant information that Talent Search projects have attempted to measure

	All projects	Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	Community org.
			Host institution		
Percentage of projects that have attempted to measure:					
College financial aid form completion	85%	85%	84%	84%	87%
College application completion	82	82	78	80	87
College aspirations	70	73	70	67	68
SAT/ACT test taking	68	67	64	67	73
Financial aid awareness	62	60	62	64	63
Participant self-esteem	49	48	54	50	45
GED course preparation completion	44	42	46	43	47
Number of college preparatory courses taken	43	48	35	41	47
Percentage of projects that have attempted to measure:					
All eight of the above	12	10	14	12	13
Seven of the above	18	22	14	18	15
Six of the above	22	20	25	22	22
Five of the above	14	17	14	12	10
Four of the above	12	8	14	10	22
Three of the above	8	10	3	8	8
Two or fewer of the above	15	14	17	17	10

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

A second survey question asked about the types of participant information that projects tracked or monitored and whether projects tracked or monitored the information for some or all participants. All but one of the eight items—hours of participation in the program—referred to participant outcomes. All respondents reported that they tracked or monitored high school graduation, and over 95 percent tracked or monitored progress through high school, college enrollment, and completion of college applications (table 7.8). Only one item was tracked by a majority of projects, but not typically for all participants: participants' course selection. College graduation was the only outcome that a majority of projects did not track or monitor at all. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of all projects tracked or monitored seven or all eight types of information, with the mean number of items at 6.7.

Table 7.8—Information that Talent Search projects tracked or monitored on program participants

	Yes, for all participants	Yes, for some participants	Not for any participants
Percentage of projects that tracked or monitored:			
High school graduation	94%	6%	0%
Year-to-year progression through high school	91	8	2
Enrollment in college	83	14	3
Completion of college applications	74	22	4
Contact hours or participation in program	70	13	17
Grades	65	26	10
Course selection of participants	35	42	23
Graduation from college	15	26	59
Percentage of projects that tracked or monitored:			
All eight of the above	26		
Seven of the above	37		
Six of the above	24		
Five of the above	9		
Four or fewer of the above	3		

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

A third survey question asked not just about the types of participant data that projects collected, but also about how they maintained it—on paper, in a computer database, or both. Virtually all projects (97 to 99 percent) maintained records on active participants' demographic characteristics and the services they received—information that is critical for completing the APR; the vast majority maintained both paper and computerized records (table 7.9). In contrast, less than two-thirds of projects maintained participants' scores on college entrance examinations (ACT or SAT) or other standardized tests, and a majority of those that did maintain such records kept only hard-copy records. Projects often maintained records both on paper and in a computerized format, but there were a few items (including transcripts and career survey results) that were much more likely to be maintained on paper only. Very small percentages of projects reported maintaining the various types of information we asked about in a computer database only.

Table 7.9—How Talent Search projects maintained data on active participants

	Maintained on paper only	Maintained in a computer database only	Maintained both on paper and in a computer database	Not maintained in either form
Records of services received	26%	2%	70%	1%
Individual participant contact sheets	30	2	67	2
Demographic information	10	1	86	3
Project's assessment records	46	2	38	14
High school or postsecondary transcripts	64	1	20	15
College or postsecondary school enrollment	29	5	50	16
Career-survey results	56	2	20	21
Recommendations or commendations	63	1	12	24
Follow-up data on former participants	29	3	41	27
Financial aid applications	42	3	27	28
College or postsecondary school applications	42	4	23	31
ACT scores	37	3	25	35
SAT scores	36	3	21	40
Other standardized test scores	39	3	17	40
Diagnostic test data	27	1	8	64
Attitude scale profiles	21	1	5	73

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

A task closely related to data collection and record keeping is project evaluation, and it is a task that all projects must undertake in one way or another. Evaluation plans are one of the dimensions on which Talent Search grant applications are scored. Information on participant outcomes is obviously central to evaluating project effectiveness, but information on project processes is also needed so that staff can consider whether and where they may need to make improvements. Three project survey questions addressed evaluation practices.

Most evaluations of Talent Search projects are internal evaluations. At the time of the project survey, fewer than half (45 percent) of all Talent Search projects had undergone an external evaluation (figure 7.1). Projects hosted by community organizations were somewhat more likely than those hosted by postsecondary institutions to have undergone an external evaluation. A previous review of 31 recent Talent Search grant applications found that some external evaluations were to be conducted by advisory committees composed of community members and that sometimes professionals from other Talent Search projects participated (Silva and Kim 1999).

Figure 7.1—Percentage of Talent Search projects that have had an external evaluation conducted
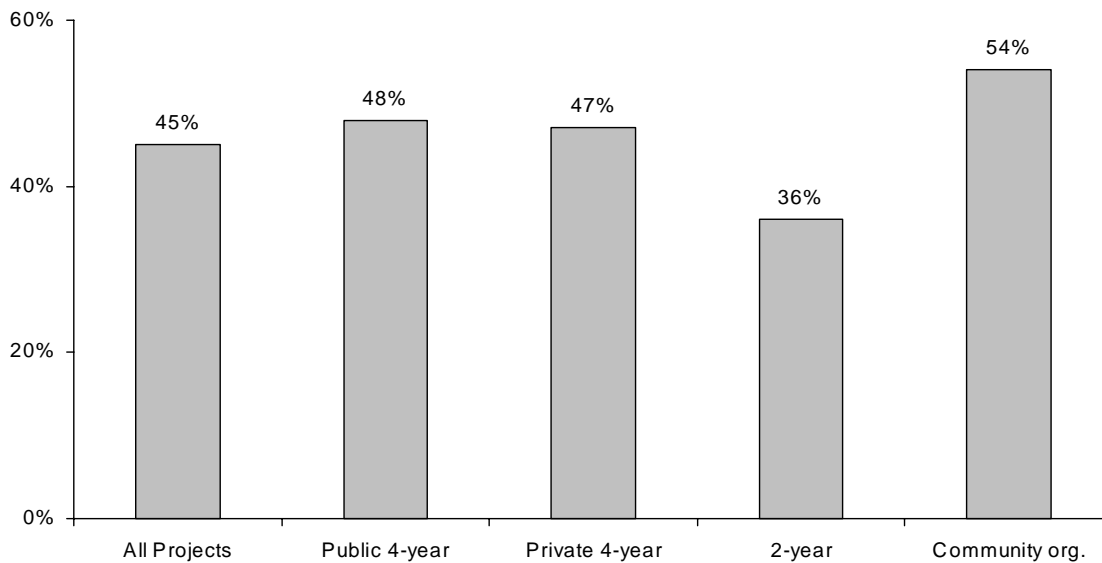
Overall, more than 90 percent of Talent Search projects reported that their evaluations involved an ongoing assessment of program operation and success—a type of assessment that is sometimes called a formative evaluation (table 7.10). Grant applications commonly described plans calling for primary staff to meet on a regular basis during the year to assess a project's progress. Case studies confirmed that project staff did in fact meet regularly to address a wide range of operational issues, from recruitment and target school relations to positive and negative aspects of particular activities. In addition, over 60 percent of all projects reported that their evaluations involved a comprehensive year-end study, sometimes called a summative evaluation. Such a study provided an opportunity to make final determinations about project success in meeting process and outcome objectives.[12] There was almost no variation in choice of evaluation by type of host institution. Response patterns revealed that about 60 percent of projects undertook both formative and summative evaluations and that about 30 percent relied on only an ongoing (formative) assessment.

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[12]In addition, about 15 percent of projects indicated that some other type of evaluation was performed for their programs, but the responses did not provide any clear insight into the nature of the evaluations. Finally, about 3 percent of projects reported no evaluations undertaken for their programs.

Table 7.10—Types of evaluations performed for Talent Search projects

	All projects	Host institution			
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	Community org.
Percentage of projects using:					
Ongoing assessment of program operation and success	92%	89%	94%	90%	97%
Comprehensive year-end study	63	63	58	65	63
Percentage of projects using:					
Ongoing assessment only	30	27	38	28	35
Year-end study only	2	1	0	3	2
Both of the above	61	61	56	61	62
Neither of the above	7	10	6	7	2

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

What types of information were used to evaluate projects' success in meeting their goals and objectives? Of the 11 types of information that our project survey asked about, the most common response was an analysis of participants' school retention or graduation rates (table 7.11). This result is not surprising in that these rates pertain to major outcome objectives. The second- and third-most common categories of information were written evaluations prepared by, respectively, students and staff. One case study project, for example, distributed feedback forms with open-ended questions after some events (such as workshops, college visits, and other field trips) and used year-end evaluation forms that asked students to rate the program on various dimensions. The least commonly used type of information was a comparison of standardized test scores for participants and nonparticipants (18 percent). Overall, about 15 percent of Talent Search projects used eight or more types of information, but about 26 percent used three or fewer, with the mean at 5.

There were a few cases of notable (but nonsystematic) variation by type of host institution. For example, projects hosted by community-based organizations were much more likely than other projects to (1) follow-up on participants who left the program but remained in school and (2) compare the retention rates of participants with those of nonparticipants. However, we have no insights to explain the differences in the information collected.

Table 7.11—Information used to evaluate Talent Search projects' success in meeting their goals and objectives

	All projects	Host institution Public 4-year	Host institution Private 4-year	Host institution 2-year	Host institution Community org.
Percentage of projects using:					
Analysis of school retention or graduation rates for those served	94%	96%	86%	95%	92%
Written student evaluations of services	82	84	83	85	76
Written staff evaluations of project procedures	65	70	73	56	65
Analysis of course completion rates for those served	48	56	46	44	45
Analysis of retention rates for those served compared to nonparticipants	40	38	30	38	52
Analysis of standardized test scores for those served	38	40	41	32	43
Follow-up of those who left the program and the school	28	28	22	25	38
External evaluations[a]	32	30	35	32	35
Follow-up of those who left the program but remained in school	31	30	24	27	43
Analysis of course completion rates for those served compared to nonparticipants	22	18	19	22	28
Analysis of standardized test scores for those served compared to nonparticipants	18	18	19	17	20
Percentage of projects using:					
10 to 11 of the above	6	6	6	5	7
Eight to nine of the above	9	9	3	8	14
Six to seven of the above	20	16	25	19	26
Four to five of the above	39	47	42	35	33
Two to three of the above	23	21	22	30	14
None or one of the above	3	1	3	3	7

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

[a]Respondents who said "yes" to this item were asked to specify the type of external evaluation. Respondents most often mentioned feedback and assessment from target school staff, followed by feedback and assessment from the host institution.

The preceding tables and narrative may give the impression that many Talent Search projects maintain a great deal of data on program participants and use it extensively to assess program effectiveness. But the situation is not that clear. For example, projects that reported that they had attempted to measure various outcomes may not have succeeded in measuring the outcomes, or may have stopped due to associated costs or difficulties. In addition, the project survey did not collect information on how projects selected nonparticipants for comparison with participants.

The case studies provided a different perspective on data collection, record keeping, and program evaluation. The overall impression that emerged was that these projects did not place much emphasis on data collection and analysis. Although most case study project staff had fairly firm beliefs about the ways in which their participants benefited from Talent Search, they did not have objective data that would support those beliefs. The projects focused their record keeping and data analysis on the elements required for the APR, such as high school graduation and other major outcome objectives. By and large, projects did not collect data on the other outcomes they claimed their participants were achieving. A project with a major emphasis on tutoring, for example, collected no objective information, such as course grades, on students' academic performance. Similarly, a project with a substantial test preparation component for high school students did not collect data on students' SAT or ACT scores.

Projects also did not use a rigorous approach to evaluation. None of the 14 case study sites systematically compared outcomes for program participants with a matched group of nonparticipants. Only one of 31 previously reviewed Talent Search grant applications mentioned a plan to conduct such an evaluation (Silva and Kim 1999).

What might account for projects' practices regarding data collection and evaluation? First, projects indicated they did not have sufficient resources—such as time, funds, or expertise—to mount a serious data-collection and analysis effort. As it was, staff in some projects already spent one day each week engaged in paperwork, such as recording which students had received which services that week. More time on administrative tasks would have meant less time in the field working with participants. Second, staff apparently operated under the assumption that participants would stop using project services if such services did not meet their needs. In other words, why track students' grades to measure the effectiveness of a tutoring component when voluntary participation rates in tutoring suggest that the service must be producing the desired outcome? Third, project staff seemed to feel that they were close enough to their participants and key target-school staff to obtain a well-informed view of how students were benefiting from the program. Fourth, in some cases, projects might not have had easy access to needed data sources such as student transcripts.

Overall, evidence suggests that data collection and record-keeping appeared to be among the greatest challenges faced by some Talent Search projects. When the survey asked directors to list problematic aspects of their projects, *collecting and maintaining student records* and *student tracking and follow-up* were among the more frequently cited problems.