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Can't Stop the Music: Improving Youth Participation in Free Music Classes

Extracurricular arts classes can help youth connect with their communities and express themselves. But because of inaccurate perceptions—of the classes and the value of consistent attendance, and time scarcity—too many youth choose not to enroll, or drop out. After interviewing students and program staff at one such arts center, we found that thoughtful behavioral design can help community programs engage young people more deeply with their own creativity and community.

Background

Mind-Builders Creative Arts Center has been a vital part of the Northeast Bronx and greater NYC community since 1978, promoting cultural identity, self-exploration, and growth of youth, families, and the community through arts and education. The organization boasts a long list of prestigious alumni, including Alimi Ballard, Gilbert Glenn Brown, Ayodele Casel, Nelson Chimilio, Andre Dell, Victoria Gabrielle Platt, and Javon Tyler-Graham. Today, over 750 community members participate annually in Mind-Builders classes, in areas ranging from African dance to songwriting to martial arts, and over 7,000 audience members attend Mind-Builders' public events

To make the arts accessible to all, Mind-Builders provides prospective participants with financial aid and free classes. Nevertheless, some free courses—like Music Theory and those that started during the pandemic, such as Creative Music Songwriting and Digital Studio Production—regularly experience low attendance and comparatively high dropout rates. To improve student attendance and persistence, Mind-Builders partnered with ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) to identify the challenges and barriers that limit engagement and strategies to overcome them.

Identifying behavioral barriers to participation

We started by reviewing the organization's website, student handbook, outreach materials, and data from Mind-Builders' most recent annual parent and student feedback survey and an additional survey developed by the BDC, which was completed by approximately 90 families across the organization.

Highlights

- Students often disengage from extracurricular arts programs because they have incorrect perceptions of attendance and participation policies.
- Afterschool programs can engage more students by focusing on some behavioral strategies: clearly articulate the expectations, highlight the program benefits, and provide necessary support and backstops.

With this background knowledge, we conducted 10 in-depth interviews with Mind-Builders' staff and with active and inactive students to learn more about their expectations for and experiences with Mind-Builders. We focused on students in three free music classes: Creative Music Songwriting, Digital Studio Production, and Music Theory. Notably, some interview participants have taken several Mind-Builders' classes, enabling them to compare their experiences in these focus classes and others they had taken at Mind-Builders.

This research helped us understand why participants join the program, what aspects of their classes they find valuable, and what areas could be improved. To begin, our research revealed many of Mind-Builders' key strengths, such as:

- 1. *Mind-Builders is fun!*** 64% of survey respondents said classes were fun, engaging, and worthwhile. Furthermore, parents shared that their child's class participation positively contributes to their mental health, well-being, and development.
- 2. *Recitals are motivating.*** Recitals keep students engaged by motivating them to attend sessions and practice. Additionally, recitals are a great opportunity for students to showcase their talent and help the organization with recruitment and fundraising.
- 3. *Parental support matters.*** Parental support is valuable in actively engaging and encouraging Mind-Builders students to persist in the program. Some classes require parents to attend initial sessions to support their child's practice and ensure accountability.

Mind-Builders also employs several strategies that strengthen students' dedication and attendance. For example, some music classes mandate parental or guardian attendance during the class's initial weeks to enable them to assist their child's practice at home. Additionally, year-end recitals motivate many students to attend classes, participate actively, and practice at home.

Yet, our interviews and survey responses revealed several critical behavioral barriers that can lead participants to withdraw from or skip class. These barriers include:

- 1. *The consequences of violating participation policies aren't salient.*** Students shared with us that, for the most part, Mind-Builders instructors are flexible and understanding when students have to miss class. Often, students face no consequences for missing class, which contradicts the participation policies outlined in Mind-Builders' student handbook.
- 2. *Time scarcity.*** We learned that Mind-Builders students, as a whole, often balance multiple extracurricular activities. As a result, they have hectic schedules and regularly experience mental and physical fatigue. This overload, along with instructors' supportive understanding and flexibility about attendance, make it easier for students to skip Mind-Builders' activities when they're busy and return when they have more free time.
- 3. *Inaccurate mental models.*** Interviews revealed that new students in these three focus classes often had incomplete information about their course when they registered. As a result, these students held inaccurate expectations of the class content and skill level. Furthermore, we discovered many students are unaware of the organization's code of conduct and the policies outlined in the student handbook.
- 4. *Limited opportunities for students to meaningfully participate.*** We heard about instances where certain classrooms were short on equipment. For example, the Digital Studio Production class needs

more computers to accommodate every student, making it impossible for all students to participate simultaneously.

5. Unmet instruction needs. Within these three classes, some young adult learners new to the subject matter found their instructor’s teaching pace and style more suited for advanced students. These older beginners struggled to keep up and questioned whether this class was right for them.

Designing to reset expectations

Based on our research and discussions with Mind-Builders’ staff and students, we created a “Welcome Packet” for students on their first day of class.

The Welcome Packet is tailored to each course offered by Mind-Builders, and it contains a comprehensive course description, learning objectives, and a schedule. This packet is intended to give current and prospective students a complete understanding of what to expect from the class. It also highlights the skills the class develops and experiences students can look forward to throughout the year, making the short- and long-term benefits more salient as well as helping students gauge whether this class is a good fit for them. The packet also outlines key participation policies and emphasizes the importance of consistent attendance. It concludes with an “Absence Planning Prompt” activity, through which students can submit their expected absences to their instructors. Instructors can then work with the students to prepare them for how to make up the work they’ve missed.

WELCOME PACKET: OPENING SUMMARY PAGE

WELCOME PACKET: ABSENCE PLANNING PROMPT

In addition to the Welcome Packets, we composed a document of specific, behaviorally informed recommendations for Mind-Builders to improve their recruiting and outreach efforts and other essential student processes. This “Recommendations” document suggests ways to enhance student engagement by:

- ▶ **Strengthening social influence and accountability.** Behavioral science suggests that social accountability and public commitments help people to follow through on their intentions. Thus, we encouraged Mind-Builders to create more opportunities for family and friends to attend their loved ones’ classes and performances, as well as motivate them to practice independently.
- ▶ **Providing opportunities for students to actively participate in every class.** As some classes may not have enough equipment to accommodate all students at once, we encourage Mind-Builders to create special activities, or backup equipment options, that allow everyone to participate in some way, even if some students do not have access to standard equipment. By providing opportunities for all students to participate, we can ensure they feel valued, included, and motivated to continue developing their artistic skills and attending the class(es). *For example, if purchasing additional computers for the Digital Studio Production class is not feasible, we encouraged instructors to consider whether there are phone-based apps students can use when they are unable to have access to a classroom computer.*
- ▶ **Creating a sense of forward momentum.** Behavioral science research suggests that recognizing progress toward our goals strengthens our desire to achieve them. When students see that their efforts (e.g., consistent class participation, practicing at home) are helping them develop as artists, they are more likely to maintain that involvement. We recommend that Mind-Builders instructors create additional opportunities to celebrate students’ success, showcase their skills, and allow students from different disciplines to collaborate on projects or performances together.
- ▶ **Supporting students to stay engaged, even if they miss a class.** Youth have many interests and sometimes have difficulty managing their busy schedules. Providing flexibility and backstops can help mitigate obstacles that otherwise prevent youth from participating in the program. Accordingly, we encouraged Mind-Builders to create hassle-free opportunities for students to catch up and progress alongside their classmates to help them stay committed even if in-person attendance isn’t feasible. *For example, Mind-Builders instructors could record and provide video summaries of lessons for students to review after missing a session.*

What’s next and key takeaways

During the Fall 2023 term, Mind-Builders began to implement the new Welcome Packets in the three focus classes and tailor the template to enable instructors to create Packets for each class offered, across artistic disciplines. Staff also expect to implement a number of the additional strategies provided in the Recommendations document, such as revising their course descriptions for each discipline (e.g., dance, music, martial arts, theater, folk culture, and visual art).

Mind-Builders Creative Arts Center aims to make various artistic disciplines accessible, welcoming, and rewarding for students from all backgrounds and skill levels. Our work together was designed to further those goals by helping organization staff understand and address factors limiting student engagement. In sum,

to ensure that after-school programs provide maximum value to young people who are juggling multiple responsibilities and priorities, it is essential to clearly articulate the expectations, highlight the program benefits in terms of the student's own goals, and provide the necessary support and backstops to keep participants engaged. By applying these principles and drawing on the Welcome Packet and Recommendations to guide its recruitment efforts and ongoing work with students and families, Mind-Builders hopes to expand the number of community members who take advantage of its programming and enhance their participation.

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