



THE POWER OF DATA

How The Power of Camp Study impacted our camp

I vividly recall speaking at a parent focus group some years ago and sharing a camper's story of new faith, new friends and what I believed to be a life-transforming experience at camp. It was a moving and compelling story that I felt sure would capture the hearts and imagination of this group of parents and key stakeholders of my ministry. As we were nearing the end of the question and answer period, I was rocked with a piercing question from a parent considering sending their child to camp. "Ed, your story tells a wonderful story of one child's experience, but how do I know it was true for others and will be for my child? Can you show me the data?" The sound of crickets filled the room, and all I had were more stories to share as I struggled to regain my footing and close the meeting. ▶



What is discovered, learned, challenged and affirmed through research must translate into life transformation at camp.

Our job as Christian camp and youth development professionals is to influence today's culture and point young people to a brighter future in Christ. If we don't have a robust process for measuring our influence and impact, how do we know if we have moved the needle toward growth? For measurement and evaluation to be effective, you need to start with what you want to measure and then create and test the measurement tool. I quickly realized that the paper surveys I designed had very little value from either a qualitative or quantitative perspective. I needed help to design and deliver a tool that would gather data that could also be put into a format that would be helpful for interpretation and discovery. My desire for a process that would challenge our assumptions and affirm others, and be a catalyst for innovation, launched my quest for a tool that would synthesize the anecdotal stories with the empirical data.

Research, in my view, is like a three-legged stool; if one leg is missing, the stool no longer functions for the purpose that it was designed. The legs of the research stool could be represented by measurement and evaluation, interpretation and discovery and implementation and impact. In *The Power of Camp Study*, I have found a tool that I believe meets these criteria.

Measurement and evaluation

The survey instrument that has been developed for *The Power of Camp Study* has been tested and refined over several years and has proven to deliver good, reliable data when administered well. The key to our success with the study has been to establish a culture of measurement and evaluation that is understood and embraced by all camp staff. This did not happen overnight. We had many years where we were not sure exactly what we wanted to measure. So, we measured everything and accomplished almost nothing besides amassing a large data set. Consequently, with nothing useful to show for the effort, it was difficult to get buy-in for the value of the research. It is not only important to know what questions to ask, but it is also equally important to share with staff why you evaluate and what you plan to do with the knowledge and information gained.

Interpretation and discovery

Dr. Jake Sorenson and his team at Sacred Playgrounds have been indispensable to me when it comes to interpretation and discovery. They take the raw data I provide and turn it into useful information, charts and graphs. They were able to offer analysis and observations from the data that stirred questions for my team to wrestle with and challenged our assumptions about where we were as a ministry. To be sure, the data pointed out much to be thankful for and to celebrate, but it also illuminated areas of concern and vulnerability that needed to be addressed if we are to keep moving forward.

One example of this was in the area of creating a safe space for campers. (See page 32 to learn how Sacred Playgrounds defines "safe space.") This is an area in which we take a great deal of pride and train very intentionally. However, the initial results of our study indicated that there were campers who were not experiencing safety at camp in the ways we hoped. Although a small percentage, it was still concerning to us. So, we got to work digging into the details of the study's findings. Discussing this issue with key staff, campers and parents, it became clear that once we accounted for homesickness and those kids who just did not want to be at camp, we discovered one area needing to be addressed was how we programmed and staffed free time. Free time looked and felt a lot like recess, and recess for some kids is a scary and vulnerable time. We retooled, reformatted and reconfigured staffing for free time based on our discovery and learning from the study. This, along with a couple of other adjustments, resulted in our ability to move the needle this year in a positive direction concerning the needs of those campers feeling vulnerable while at camp.

Implementation and impact

What is discovered, learned, challenged and affirmed through research must translate into life transformation at camp. In all of our meetings for the upcoming camp season, the results of the study provide context for our planning. We take time to celebrate what went well and to explore and identify factors that contribute to success, along with opportunities to keep them moving forward. We also address gaps or vulnerabilities that are exposed and develop a plan to implement mitigating or corrective measures. A plan that cannot or is not implemented, at best, is just a good idea. A plan that is implemented, measured and evaluated has impact potential that is off the charts.

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Research requires an investment in time and resources, and it is important to count the cost before diving in. There is no better way to engage staff in a process of continual quality improvement than for them to be active participants in the interpretation of the data and the development of a meaningful response. You can inspire donors to give to high-impact programs when you're able to tell your camp's story of influence and impact — and back it up with the data. ■



Ed Covert currently serves as executive director at Redwood Glen (Scotts Valley, California), and has been involved with the Salvation Army's camping ministry for a long time as he's also led ministry teams at three of the Army's west coast camps and has served as the Army's national camp liaison. Ed and his wife, Maryann, have two children, Taylor and Claire. He loves to surf, fly-fish, watch baseball and eat ice cream (not always in that order, but there is always ice cream!).