



Findings in Collaboration with the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF)

The Impact of TMF Initiatives on Thriving and Well-Being



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Travis Manion Foundation Character & Leadership Course Pilot Evaluation Report

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Travis Manion Foundation Character & Leadership Course Pilot Evaluation Report

Introduction

The Institute for Veteran and Military Families (IVMF) conducted a pilot evaluation of Travis Manion Foundation's Character Does Matter (CDM) program.

Planning for this pilot began in March 2018 and was implemented in August 2018. The evaluation measured the impact of character and leadership education for youth—aged 12-18-- and identify key factors in a student's success. Also, this evaluation identified areas to improve to maximize the impact for youth.

Character Does Matter (CDM)

Travis Manion Foundation (TMF) trains and supports veterans and family members of fallen heroes to deliver a character and leadership program called Character Does Matter (CDM). Veteran Mentors aggregate stories from their personal lives and are trained to deliver a curriculum that teaches leadership and character development. CDM's goal is to give youth positive role models and inspire them to adopt the "If Not Me, Then Who..." mantra into their lives. The CDM curriculum is grounded in the evidence-based practices of Positive Psychology and twenty-four character strengths, as adapted from the VIA Classification of Strengths. CDM mentors share stories to highlight the legacy of character of veterans and fallen heroes. Also, TMF provides twenty-four lesson plans that each contain a practical activity to teach character and leadership. Finally, young adults put character-in-action through serving in honor of a fallen hero. Below are the components of CDM:

- Veterans deliver CDM Presentations to inspire young adults to live with character and adopt the "If Not Me, Then Who..." ethos into their daily lives.
- Veteran Mentors lead CDM Character & Leadership Courses (CLC) to develop young adults as values-based leaders through exercising personal character strengths and practical applications of leadership under the mentorship of veterans.
- Veterans mentor youth during CDM Service Projects to activate young adults to serve their communities in honor of fallen heroes.

Methods

Evaluation Questions

This pilot evaluation was conducted to address the following questions:

- What outcomes can be expected for youth participants?
- What outcomes can be expected for mentors?
- How do programs differ across regions and program type (one day vs. several weeks?)
- How do programs differ based on age of youth served?
- How do programs differ based on mentor to youth ratio?
- What role does the school play in program success?
- What role do the mentors play in program success?
- What role does TMF program staff play in program success?
- How can TMF improve CDM curriculum and execution?

Site Selection

School/youth group selection criteria was based on having an ongoing Character & Leadership course (CLC), an involved member of the school staff, school size, number of students participating in the CLC, length of participation in the program, regional location and diversity of student body.

Six CLC sites were selected and agreed to participate in the pilot evaluation: USS Midway Leadership Academy in California; Energy High School in Texas; St Joseph's Prep High School in Pennsylvania; New Brunswick High School in New Jersey; Wakefield Middle School in North Carolina and Windsor Hills Middle School in Maryland. Other schools were identified to participate in future studies.

Data Collection and Scales

Survey Data

Survey data collection for this pilot began in the Summer of 2018 and will continue until the end of the school year. This report includes data collected through April 2019.

The following pre/post scales were used for the pilot evaluation:

- Pro-Social Orientation: This scale assesses empathy, helping others and some aspects of leadership (being encouraging, how decisions affect others).
 - Related program components: Focus on integrity, ethical decision making and leadership
- Educational Expectations: Measures student's confidence in going to college and also graduating.
 - Related program components: Perseverance and grit
- Attitude Toward Risk: Assesses students attitude toward risk (since we aren't asking them about their own risk behavior, but rather other kids their age engaging in risk behavior, we are more likely to get honest responses.)
 - Related program components: Overall character development focus
- Thriving: Measures the key aspects of thriving

- Related program components: Overall mission/vision of TMF and measured across all TMF programs.
- Caring: Measures students' level of caring for others.
 - Related program components: Thinking of others and empathy

Improvements in these categories lead to improved high school graduation rates, decreased crime, improved grades, improved test scores and a decrease in substance abuse

Qualitative Data

In addition to the survey data we also conducted structured and informal interviews with TMF staff, veteran mentors and school personnel. Qualitative data was collected from USS Midway Leadership Academy; St Joseph's Prep High School; Energy Institute High School; New Brunswick High School; and Wakefield Middle School.

Results

We collected sixty-nine pre and post surveys from CDM youth, interviewed volunteers from four programs, six TMF staff, two students and five school liaisons.

Interview Data

Structured Interviews-School Liaisons

Five interviews with CDM school liaisons (one middle school, two high school) were conducted by phone in March and April 2019. All five liaisons were very positive about the program and felt it benefited the youth. Quotes from school liaisons:

Self-awareness

"They are learning about themselves in ways they wouldn't. They are learning skills and teaching other students that aren't in the club."

Integrity

"It gives them an independence they wouldn't have and confidence to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do."

Leadership

"The students are hearing about leadership and talking about it explicitly, and broken down as a subject, like math or English. The mentors are the teachers of leadership. And have so many examples of leadership dilemmas so they have that concrete material and know the philosophies of leadership. It really works well for students who are motivated academically and can apply what they are learning from the program."

Service to others

“What appealed to me was one giving back and giving back to the community. They don’t focus on college prep, no matter who you are and where you come from, you can give back.”

Confidence

Also one of the liaisons noted that some of the participant students aren’t usually vocal, but in the program they have a voice, which she felt was very important.

Gratitude

“When they visit the Vets home (service project), seeing their faces has been amazing. It can be intimidating at first, but then they don’t want to leave. They see the Vets are members of society that deserve more appreciation.”

Authentic relationships and trust

“The students are able to bring to the veterans (mentors) their own experiences, things they are dealing with. They aren’t grading them, they don’t have the power of grading, they feel freer to share those more complex problems with them. They are able to be a more unbiased source of ethical quandary. There is a trust there.”

Overall

All three of the liaisons have recommended the program to other schools and two reported that all of the teachers in their school know about the program. They also have been pleased with the support and responsiveness of TMF, with one liaison commenting “They are attentive to the school needs, school mission, and school identity, school context.” Additionally, two of the liaisons mentioned how the mission of the school around character building was a very good fit for the program, and a key reason they have the program in their school.

Areas of improvement

Teach the teachers: One liaison requested more information regarding the positive psychology research that underpins the program structure and content. She felt it would be beneficial to understand the program and for her own leadership growth.

Consistency: Another wished there was more consistency in the veteran mentors who participated in each session and would like to structure the program in a way that broadens the impact. Additionally, there was a request for more time, though that was due to both school and program constraints.

Standardization: As a next step in the CLC evaluation, we will determine which program elements are essential and need to be implemented across all sites, and which program elements can be adjusted based on school/community needs. This will also be a focus of the evaluation over the next two years.

TMF staff need to administer surveys: One key lesson of this pilot evaluation is TMF staff need to work very closely with school staff and be on site during survey administration. The survey administration process should not be left to school staff or TMF volunteers.

TMF Staff Informal Interviews

TMF staff were supportive and inspired by the CLC program. They felt the program partners were pleased they were involved and once they started a program, it continued. One of the barriers to schools partnering has been the misconception they were a military recruitment program. This was also mentioned in the liaison interviews. However, once the schools understood the focus was on leadership and character building, there was program buy-in. One approach that worked to overcome this misperception was conducting a one-time CDM presentation to the whole school, or a whole grade.

Staff felt one of the strengths of the CLC program is its flexibility depending on the community and school needs. However, some also felt this was also one of the challenges, the inconsistency across program sites. Additionally, a couple staff mentioned some inconsistency in veteran mentors program attendance, which was also noted by one of the school liaisons.

Veteran Mentors Informal and Structured Interviews

Veteran mentors were positive about TMF and their experience in the CLC program. Many of the veterans had participated in other TMF programs before becoming involved in the CLC program. Most commonly the Heroes Run. Their reasons for participating varied, but common themes were finding a sense of purpose, becoming more involved in their community, being with other veterans, being attracted to the notion of building character in youth, unlike other programs which focus on a particular skill. One veteran felt focusing on character helps the youth across their entire life because it was applicable to all facets of being.

They did express an interest in knowing how they were impacting the youth, and would find it valuable if this information was collected and shared with them. One veteran thought it would be good to hear about students that used what they learned in CLC and applied it to some positive action/project they implemented. For example, a student who sticks up for someone being bullied after participating in the CLC course. Or student who organizes a clean-up at a playground after seeing the difference made after participating in an operation legacy service project.

All the veterans reported personally benefiting from the program by finding a sense of purpose and greater sense of community. They also increased their social networks by connecting with other veterans. Many were very new to their community and it was a good way to not only help themselves, but also feel they were still able to give back.

Conclusion

The CLC program pilot survey data suggests the program has a positive effect on young adults' attitudes toward both positive and negative behaviors. We found that that school aged young adults who participated in a CDM program had significant increases in caring, educational expectations, and pro-social attitudes. In addition, there was a data trend indicating greater negative attitudes toward risky behaviors, such as drinking and the use of drugs.

Preliminary findings indicate that CDM school liaisons feel students are learning valuable lessons in character and leadership that they might otherwise never be exposed to. It was observed that students are given the confidence to do the right thing and share their insights with peers, which may lead improved character development for non-participating students. The school liaisons were very appreciative of the program and felt it had a positive impact on participating youth. They also had very good relationships with the TMF staff and felt supported. Veteran mentors also reported positive experiences with the program and TMF staff.

As the program matures, it will be important to establish essential program elements that are part of each CLC program. For example, clear roles and expectations for schools, veteran mentors, students and TMF staff. Also, although the operation legacy service projects were a great way for students to give back to the community, some expressed a desire to have longer term impacts – not just one day of service, but service during the full school year. For example, the high school students mentoring local elementary school youth, or visiting a senior center weekly.

Next Steps

1. Continue to collect/analyze survey data and structured interviews from pilot locations until end of school year 2021.
2. Conduct an additional site visit in May 2019 to a middle school program. Conduct structured interviews with TMF staff, school liaisons, veteran mentors and youth.
3. Non-pilot sites collect retrospective survey data¹ from CLC youth end of school year 2018/2019.
4. Administer and analyze mentor and school liaison survey data from May 2019 to June 2019 (mentor and school liaison surveys were developed based on pilot evaluation and distributed to all TMF programs in April 2019).
5. Revise youth, mentor and school liaison surveys based on qualitative and survey data findings. (Summer 2019)
6. Develop program elements questionnaire to administer to all CLC programs. (Summer 2019)

¹ The retrospective survey asks youths to take one test at the end of the program responding to each evaluation question twice. First, respondents answer each item in a traditional posttest manner, reporting current behaviors or skills. Then they respond to the same items retrospectively, before the program began. Though the pre/post test process is preferred, we developed a retrospective survey to allow programs that weren't able to collect pre-survey data to still be able to collect valuable outcome data for their program.

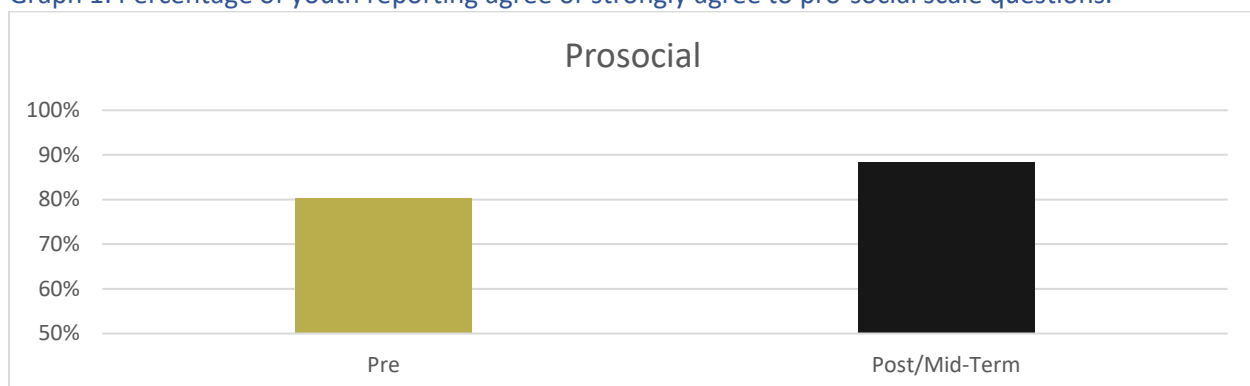
7. Develop survey administration protocol and train all TMF program staff. (Summer 2019)
8. Analyze survey results to determine which character lessons are most effective and which are least effective, revise CLC curriculum.
9. Release revised curriculum across all regions. Work closely with pilot sites to implement the revised CLC curriculum. (School year 2020/2021)
10. Administer the second program element questionnaire to all CLC sites. (late Winter 2021)
11. Revise CLC curriculum based on qualitative and quantitative data collected during implementation process. (Spring 2021)
12. Establish essential elements which will be implemented across all CLC sites. (early Summer 2021)

Supporting evidence for Pre/Post Findings

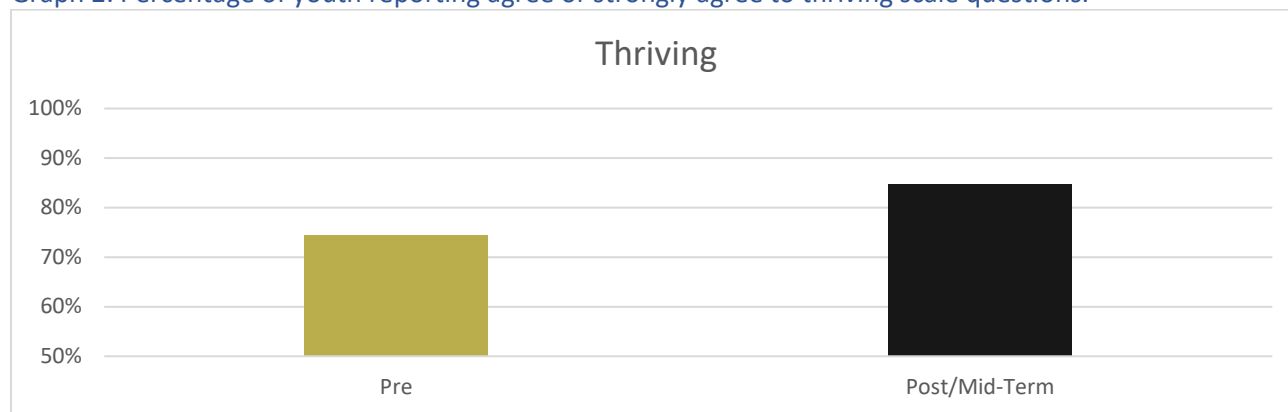
Table 1. Overall CLC Youth Evaluation Pilot Results

Scale	N	Mean		Difference Post - Pre
		Pre	Post	
Attitude Toward Risk (lower is better)	67	1.23	1.15	.08
Drink	67	1.15	1.12	.03
Take Drugs	68	1.19	1.07	.12
Hit others	69	1.41	1.29	.12
*Caring	53	4.04	4.24	.20
*Educational Expectations	67	3.68	3.78	.10
*Pro-social	62	3.23	3.35	.12
Thrive	46	4.32	4.37	.05

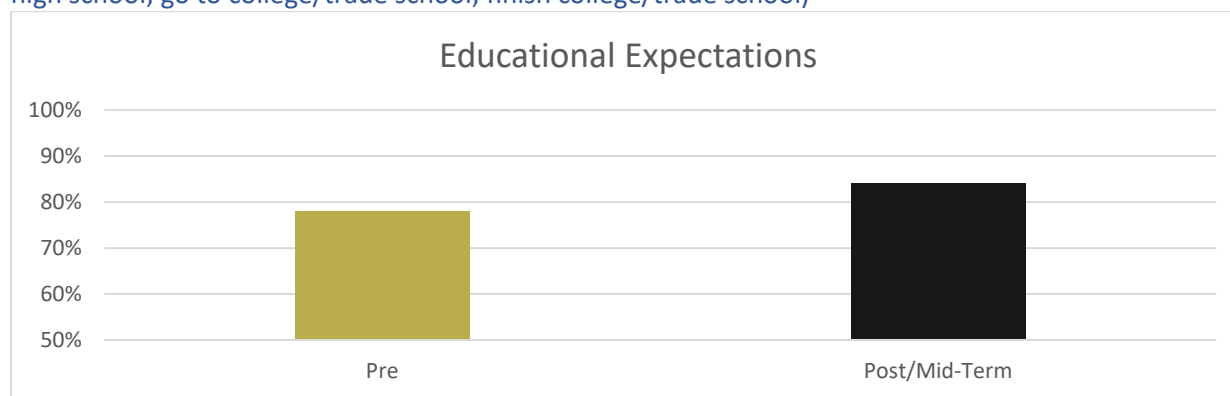
Graph 1. Percentage of youth reporting agree or strongly agree to pro-social scale questions.



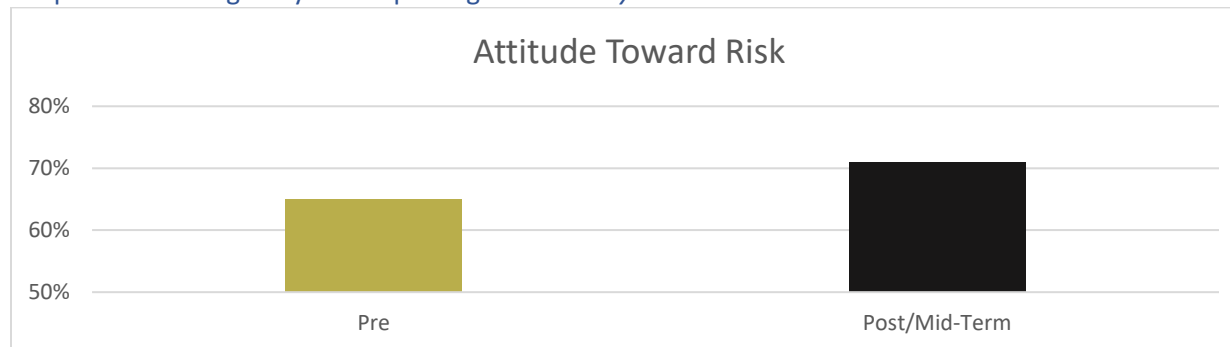
Graph 2. Percentage of youth reporting agree or strongly agree to thriving scale questions.



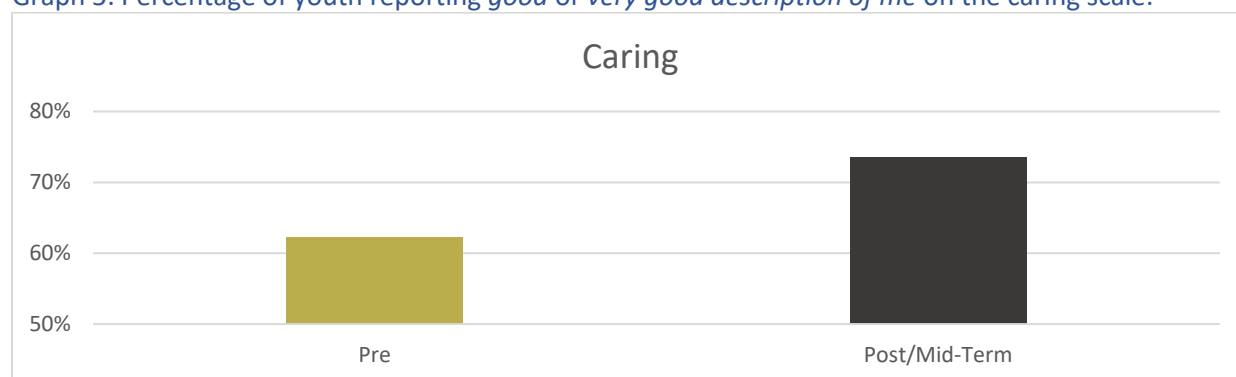
Graph 3. Percentage of youth reporting they were *very sure* on the educational expectations scale (finish high school; go to college/trade school; finish college/trade school)



Graph 4. Percentage of youth reporting *it's not okay* on the attitude toward risk scale.



Graph 5. Percentage of youth reporting *good or very good description of me* on the caring scale.



Open Response Comments

Why did you decide to apply for the TMF program?

- Heard about it from my mom.
- I heard about it from an announcement at school and thought it would be a good opportunity.
- Mental and spiritual growth
- Because I wanted to do service and get involved.
- The TMF program offered the chance for me to further myself as a leader.
- I wanted to improve my leadership skills and learn from people with military experience.
- I was recommended.
- It was recommended to me by a friend who I look up to who graduated from the program.

What were the most valuable three principles or concepts taught during the program?

- Perseverance, stepping out of your comfort zone, trust
- One should always have integrity, look out for others, and lead by example.
- Integrity, honesty, patience
- Integrity, moral-decision making, and courage
- Integrity, lead by example, how to proceed when making decisions
- Integrity, leadership, and humility
- Integrity, decision making
- Integrity, Decision Making, and Courage

Was there a mentor you felt especially connected? If yes, why do you think you felt connected?

- [Mentor] because he was relatable and chill
- Yes, the mentor was able to share life experiences and advice that I hope to achieve myself.
- I thought I connected with [Mentor] because of his seriousness when completing each activity.

During your time in the program, what did you enjoy the most?

- Improv
- A service project in a park on Veteran's Day
- Workout at CrossFit
- the improv
- The lesson on integrity when we were brought to a cross fit gym and challenged to uphold our integrity through every rep.
- I really enjoyed presenting my Leadership Philosophy at the ceremony.
- The veteran mentors dedicating time to teach us valuable lessons.

What program activity do you think most helped your character development?

- Improv
- Learning about ethical decision making and the impacts our decisions have on others impacted me.
- The day we worked on risky decisions

- the yoga
- Cross fit gym integrity lesson
- CrossFit
- decision making
- CrossFit

