Mapping the long view

Outcomes of the Unbound program for today’s alumni in Guatemala

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Introduction
The Unbound sponsorship program helps families in 20 countries build a path out of poverty by connecting them with individual sponsors. Through letters, concern and a monthly financial contribution, sponsors experience a true exchange of cultures, understanding and love. Participating families utilize financial assistance to help achieve their personal life goals through education, assistance with basic needs, and leadership and economic development programs (e.g. financial literacy, youth retreats and skill development for parents). Sponsorship requires active participation from families as they take a central role in selecting benefits for their children and building stronger communities.

The Unbound service-scholarship program exists to help dynamic, talented older students who, because of economic circumstances, are struggling to continue their education. The program is founded on the principles of perseverance, leadership and service to the community. Scholarships are used for secondary and post-secondary tuition, vocational school, transportation, school supplies and books. Recipients perform service projects as a requirement of the program. The scholarship program complements the sponsorship program and has allowed thousands of students in communities around the world to see their dreams become reality.

In 2015, Unbound's Guatemala staff contacted alumni from their programs in San Marcos and San Lorenzo with an interest in better understanding the current and long-term impact of the Unbound program on former program participants. In July of the same year, Unbound evaluation specialists Becky Spachek and Melissa Velazquez conducted an on-site evaluation using a method called ripple effect mapping. The purpose of the evaluation was to help Unbound better understand the intended and unintended results of the sponsorship and scholarship programs. This was the second evaluation of the Unbound program that engaged former program participants for data collection and analysis.

Method
Ripple effect mapping is a qualitative evaluation method that can be used to better understand the intended and unintended results of a program. Participants begin by dividing into pairs to conduct Appreciative Inquiry interviews about the results they have experienced because of the program. Participants then return to the larger group and create a mind map of the identified program results. The map is a tool to depict the continued "ripples," or long-term outcomes of the program. Connecting lines are added to indicate causal, contributing and influencing relationships between outcomes.

After the conclusion of the group mapping sessions, follow-up interviews are conducted with volunteers from each session to validate the maps and provide context for analysis.
Participants
Unbound program staff invited former participants that they still had contact information for to participate in the outcome evaluation. Participation in the evaluation was voluntary.

Thirty-two alumni participated in the evaluation, four of whom also participated in follow-up interviews. Eight participants were former members of the program in San Lorenzo, and 24 participants were from the San Marcos subproject. The time that passed since participants left the Unbound program ranged from less than two years to 13 years. However, 2009 is the average and the median year of retirement.

There was a mix of former sponsored members and scholarship students. Fourteen of the alumni noted that they had received a scholarship from Unbound. Twenty-one of the participants were women. Five of the participants have children currently enrolled in Unbound and 12 have siblings currently enrolled in Unbound.

Participants mentioned current employment in professions such as teachers, police officers, bakers and small-business owners. Twenty-four participants listed secondary education (diversificado) as their highest level of education completed; this can be compared to the national average educational attainment of their peers being less than primary education. Twelve reported holding full-time salaried employment, seven reported being housewives and four reported that they are currently students.

Limitations

Specific to Guatemala
While the findings of this evaluation demonstrate great depth and complexity to the outcomes of the Unbound program, it is also important to understand the limitations of the evaluation in understanding the general Unbound experience. One of the clearest limits of the evaluation is simply the geography. Alumni from just two subprojects in one region of the country contributed their thoughts and experiences to the evaluation, and we cannot be sure that other Unbound program participants in other projects or countries experience the same outcomes. Some analysis in relationship to previous evaluation work in the Philippines begins to broaden our understanding, but only in a limited way.

Positive bias
Ripple effect mapping, being a qualitative method, can help us better understand the stories of the program participants in the evaluation. However, since ripple effect mapping uses appreciative inquiry to discover program outcomes, these outcomes likely have a positive bias. This bias is exaggerated by the selection of participants in the evaluation. Participants were

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connected enough to the program for current staff to contact them and they voluntarily chose to come and share their experience with only minimal compensation for travel. Because of the manner of evaluation participant selection and the method of evaluation, the results of this evaluation best describe the *potential* of what the program can be and are not generalizable.

*Cultural and contextual barriers*

Language and culture are also important to note as potential limiting factors in the implementation and analysis of the evaluation, as the evaluators were North American second-language Spanish speakers and the participants were all native speakers of Guatemalan Spanish. Therefore, opportunities for misunderstanding in both language and context exist. However, several aspects of the method worked to mediate these challenges. Participants first discussed program outcomes in pairs. This way, ideas could be explored and vetted before being shared with the group in Spanish. In addition, the group mapping process allowed the group to visually make connections and ensure that the evaluators made appropriate links. Finally, group analysis and follow-up interviews allowed for additional validation.
Map descriptions

Figure 1: Map created by Unbound program alumni in San Marcos, Guatemala, on July 11, 2015

Figure 2: Map created by Unbound program alumni in San Lorenzo, Guatemala, on July 11, 2015
**Key ripples**
Many different outcome categories appeared on the ripple map of the San Marcos alumni. Education was a major hub for work and economic success. However, the alumni identified intangible character outcomes as the most significant ripples, highlighting personal reflection, gratitude and values. Similarly, the San Lorenzo map marks values as one of the most significant ripples, however, the other key outcomes identified were professional work and achieving goals.

**Personal reflection**
A reflective way of thinking and understanding oneself is heavily influenced by the Unbound program through formal and informal advice and guidance from program staff.

"They always listened to us. It gave me confidence," shared one participant.

Alumni connected this shift in worldview and personal thinking to the subsequent achievement of personal goals and expressions of gratitude.

**Gratitude**
San Marcos alumni identified gratitude as a unique, but connected, outcome of personal reflection. Gratitude is also linked to educational achievement and pride. Gratitude is directed toward the program and individual sponsors of the participants, as explored below. However, gratitude is also an attitude/worldview developed by the alumni and connected to other personal perceptions. Alumni feel pride in where they are and what they have achieved, but it is connected to an attitude of gratitude in knowing that they did not arrive at their current situation alone. They are proud of what was accomplished in collaboration.

One interview respondent shared about a moment when things got very difficult. She wanted to quit her studies so that she could go to work and help her mom. But her mother said no and encouraged her to stay in school. She is grateful for her mother's perseverance.

**Values/morals**
Values and morals were another key outcome identified by the group in San Marcos and appeared on both maps. Strong values lead to helping others and giving back. The values participants learned formed their character and taught them to value others and give back to their families and communities. It built a sense of collaboration that impacts the way participants interact in the community, work and school.

Values also in turn impact family members through their expression in relationships and are passed on to the next generation.
"I was developed and formed personally," one alumnus said. "And now I can pass that on to my children."

Unbound participants see the values and moral support offered by the program as laying a foundation for their personal lives.

Values also showed up in relationship to self-worth. Individuals talked about how valuing one's self allowed for hope and confidence to move forward. One individual interviewee articulated how the outcome of positive decision-making came from learning to value herself.

"I valued myself and I valued overcoming my challenges," she said.

She chose to pursue her education, work and future goals, rather than settling for abusive relationships or early marriage, because she knows that she is a valuable individual with hopes for a better future.

**Professional work**
Program alumni in San Lorenzo identified professional work as one of two most significant outcomes of the program through the mapping process. This outcome is felt in their daily lives as they are able to support and sustain their own families with their incomes. The participants differentiated professional work from most of the day laborer or agricultural worker jobs held by their parents and other community members. In the small mountain town of San Lorenzo, Unbound alumni serve as teachers, municipal government workers and small-business owners.

Beyond the tangible outcome of financial sustainability, participants also identified personal happiness and surprise as direct links to professional work. Several individuals described their current work as the accomplishment of long held aspirations.

"I have always held this goal of becoming a teacher," one participant said with pride.

The happiness came from feelings of capability, and the surprise flowed from a personal sense of awe at how far they had come.

It is important to note that the significant outcome of professional work did not link directly to the center circle of the Unbound program, but rather comes as a strong, but secondary, ripple linked to the outcome of educational achievement. The direct benefits of school supplies, shoes, educational savings and scholarships contributed to the success of Unbound students. Stories of siblings and community members served as a qualitative control group as alumni analyzed their own experience. One alumnus stated that, without the educational opportunities through Unbound which led to his current occupation, he would have moved to the U.S. looking for work.
"Work opens up the doors for a better future for our families and our country," he said. "You have the chance to make an impact and help other people."

**Achieving goals**

Achieving goals serves as the second-most significant outcome for former members of Unbound in San Lorenzo. In this segment of the map, participants linked "having goals" directly to the program. Having goals was a short-term requirement at the program level, but actually created a long-term outcome or behavior change for the participants. Some discussed that goals were not an explicit requirement during the time of their participation, yet the expectation to think about one's future and set long-term goals were very much ingrained. For members of the San Lorenzo group, achieving goals meant a variety of different things, from an education to job placement to educating their own children. However, it was not these individual achievements that were highlighted, but the very act of achieving goals in general.

One participant shared her goals, punctuating each one with the statement, "I achieved it!"

The significance here can be understood in the relationship to an individualized program and personal experience. In addition, the replicating nature and the mind-set, or practice, of having goals will continue to serve these alumni far into their futures. All evaluation participants affirmed that they still have new goals which they are working toward. This is a shift in thinking and way of life, from a more fatalist way of thinking, or the idea that things will just always be this way. Instead, alumni who have completed their secondary education and have been working for years as a teacher or government employee, now have new goals.

"I have a goal now to go to university and become a physical therapist," explained a participant who currently works as a teacher.

As is described visually on the ripple effect map, many of these new goals draw lines to new educational achievements.

**Other findings and notable ripples**

**Improved living situation**

Alumni in Guatemala, specifically in San Marcos, highlighted improved living situations as an outcome of the Unbound program. While this was not identified as one of the most significant outcomes for the group, its unique presence on San Marcos' map and the significance of depth for some individuals make it notable in analysis. Group members and individual interview respondents described the impact of an earthquake and other environmental factors that destroyed vulnerable homes.

"Our house collapsed in the earthquake," one participant said. "No one came to check on us. Then Unbound visited us. They told us not to worry."
The project helped her and her family rebuild their house, and they didn't have to migrate. Many community members were displaced, lost personal possessions and experienced an uprooting of family relationships and jobs. However, Unbound program participants experienced direct financial and social support from the program and were able to remain in the San Marcos community, retaining key relationships and important income sources. Many had homes repaired or rebuilt through the program.

**Faith**

A relationship with God appeared on both ripple maps, but in slightly different ways. In San Lorenzo, "encouragement in my relationship with God" stood as a separate outcome, coming directly from the program center. Many participants shared that when they started the program years ago, it was either a requirement or they were strongly encouraged by the staff to attend Mass.

One group member shared that before she was sponsored she didn't go to church, but after she was sponsored the program sent her to church. She maintains this part of her life even after leaving the program. Participants were overwhelmingly grateful for the encouragement of the program in spiritual development and they pass that part of their development on to their spouses and children.

Also emphasizing gratitude in their relationship with God, the group in San Marcos identified God as an outside influence that greatly impacted their development. God provided motivation and a root for values and relationships.

**Sponsor-sponsored relationship**

The sponsor-sponsored relationship became a strong presence in both mapping sessions in Guatemala. In San Lorenzo, the relationship with the sponsor provided the sponsored member with feelings of encouragement and happiness that led to the motivation and feelings of accountability to achieve their educational goals. The alumni in San Marcos identified the sponsor relationship as an integral part of the Unbound program. The alumni connected sponsors to providing hope, which then leads to educational and goal achievement.

One alumni in San Marcos explained how sponsorship "is a way to motivate to continue studying, it is a way to incentivize. When I entered [Unbound], my goal was to graduate. I graduated, and after [graduation] my goal was to find work and support myself and I found work already."

Alumni that reported receiving letters or visits from their sponsors reported a positive impact.

"I received mail from [my sponsors]," shared one participant. "With their words I was able to achieve this ... motivation."
However, letters from sponsors were not necessary in order to experience the positive outcomes from the sponsor-sponsored relationship.

"I did not have communication, but I felt them," said another participant.

Emotional and psychological encouragement came from knowing they had the committed support of another person.

The positive impact of the sponsor relationship continues in their present lives, even after leaving the program.

"I still have photos of my sponsors," one participant said. "It is an inspiration and reminds me of who I am."

Alumni in San Lorenzo discussed the negative impact of learning that their sponsors had ended their sponsorship. They placed feeling disheartened in the moment of losing the sponsor on the map, connected to the relationship with the sponsor. One alumnus felt "frustrated, abandoned." While the ripple effect mapping focuses on the self-identified changes and tends to be positive, this negative outcome highlights the hurt that can come from the development of a positive relationship.

**Hope and community**

The feeling of loss at the end of the sponsor-sponsored relationship was also expressed at the moment of leaving the program. The disheartened feeling was also connected to the friendship and trust built with local Unbound staff in mentoring relationships. The negative feeling at this time of loss actually reveals a strong and positive outcome. Participants described the hope that came from the program, a sense of achievement and confidence that was tied to the identity of being part of the sponsors, peers and staff. In other words, being part of the Unbound community. The "hope of the program" leads to goal achievement, which also spurs more hope in a cyclical fashion.

**Loss of values or prestige**

A surprising and notable topic arose in the San Lorenzo mapping process when the group was asked what they would call "essential" to the program or what aspect of the program they "would not want to lose." The participants collectively identified "values" and its subsequent ripples. However, in this discussion several long-time alumni shared that they saw the organization as losing these values, respect and even prestige in the community. Families used to come to the parish or the institution (the project office). They respected the space and gathered for benefit delivery, letter writing and formation classes. Everyone in the community, whether part of Unbound or not, knew where the project office was. But that is not the case now; families only come to the office when necessary, and few large gatherings exist. Instead,
people gather in homes and community groups and the social promoters have to spend more time in the community.

To the alumni, these changes appeared negative, as if the institution of Unbound was eroding. However, as these changes were described, they match, not a slow eroding of the program, but an intentional and strategic shift in the program to become more community based, focusing on small groups and mutual support.

Through their observations, the alumni emphasize the substantive nature of the changes but perhaps misunderstand their significance. At the same time, their conclusions ask us to pay attention to how values and relationships are managed under the new Unbound program model.

Comparing outcomes in Guatemala to those in the Philippines
In 2013, Unbound conducted the same evaluation method with alumni groups in the metro area of Manila, Philippines. The contexts of the Guatemalan groups and the Filipino group were dramatically different. In Guatemala, participants came from rural and small town communities with agricultural roots and minimal higher education opportunities. International migration is common, but those participants still in the community had been there for a long time. On the other hand, the Filipino group lived in highly urban areas with dense population and diverse educational and job opportunities (though not all are accessible to young people living in poverty). The Filipino group was also made up of many who had migrated to the city from their small communities and some currently work overseas.

Despite the dramatically different geographies and significant cultural differences between the two countries, the ability to compare the outcomes in these two qualitative evaluations provides an additional layer of analysis. As non-representative qualitative studies, the most value in comparison comes from one evaluation providing perspective to question the other and highlight surprises or nuances. Again, while the conclusions cannot draw any claims of causation, the presence of similarities also strengthens the argument for what might be an Unbound contribution versus a community or cultural norm.

Similarities
Gratitude and giving back
The feeling of gratitude and the action of giving back are both connected and common across the ripple maps in Guatemala and the Philippines. Participants expressed how individuals and communities in poverty might focus internally on what little they have, but through Unbound they instead began to see the strengths and assets they have. This gratitude for what they had and for what was shared through Unbound spurred a desire to help others, whether family, friends or strangers (just like their sponsor did).
**Pride**
A deep sense of pride and personal accomplishment came forward in the maps of both countries. It is a pride that comes from educational accomplishments and the ability to sustain one's family. However, it also comes from being part of, or associated with, the Unbound program itself (Philippines) or having a sponsor (Guatemala).

**Friendship**
Interpersonal relationships and friendships take a place on ripple effect maps in both Guatemala and the Philippines. The Unbound program provided the environment and a bond for children and youth to interact and share similar hopes. Meetings, celebrations, and even coming together for benefit pickup were opportunities to build social relationships.

"My best friends that I have today are from those activities," shared one alumnus from Guatemala.

Poverty is often described as isolating, and having others to share life experiences with changes things. In Guatemala, one participant even described how his best friends in the program now serve as employees and co-workers in his small business. There is trust and shared experience.

**Differences**

**View of education**
Education and academic achievement show up in all ripple effect maps created in Guatemala and the Philippines, however, their positioning and value differ between both countries. Guatemalans viewed education as a key outcome and means to their most significant outcomes. Attaining an education meant gaining access to professional employment and caring for their families. It brought about satisfaction and pride. However, in the Philippines, alumni emphasized education as an end in itself. Having an education was the outcome.

**Presence of sponsor-sponsored relationship**
One, more dramatic, difference between the ripple effect maps of Guatemala and the Philippines is the presence of the sponsor-sponsored relationship. In the analysis of the Filipino maps it was noted that the sponsor's role in the Unbound experience was considered important, but distinct from the program and was not seen as a long-term outcome. In contrast, the relationships described by Guatemalan participants were seen as more central, coming from the core of the map or as an explanation for the relationship between outcomes. While the Philippines expressed deep gratitude as well, the cultural depth of gratitude may be more dominant in Guatemala. Individuals, such as sponsors, are in many ways elevated in words and prayers in response to their kindness. This may also be an indicator of a more explicit link made by staff in the Hermano Pedro program to connect the program benefits, activities and outcomes to the individual support given by sponsors.
Absence of leadership skills

The absence of leadership as an identified outcome stood as another contrast between the Guatemalan maps and the previously conducted ripple effect mapping in the Philippines. While we do not have specific reasons for this gap, the distinct culture, context and some programmatic differences might contribute. The competitive, urban professional environment of Manila may bring to mind leadership skills as more relevant to alumni, versus a more rural experience in San Marcos and San Lorenzo, Guatemala. In addition, the perceptions of leadership in both countries may also contribute to how the term "leadership" is valued or perceived as an interpersonal skill or as an exercise of power. Finally, the sample of participants in the Philippines included many scholarship program participants, who, as part of the scholar program in the Philippines, had direct opportunity in the program to learn and practice leadership within the program and service hour participation.

Conclusions

The most significant, long-term outcomes of the Unbound program are overwhelmingly real and intangible. Housing and health, education and work are all present in the lives of Unbound alumni today, yet the core of the impact remaining for formerly sponsored members lies in the moral, character, reflective and goal-oriented worldview that they carry with them. This intangible core appears to offer a foundation for the alumni to continue to build their own tangible ripples in providing for their families and assisting community members.

As in the conclusions of the Philippines mapping, some questions remain as to how much of the character and values changes would have been felt as impacts without the tangible benefits and outcomes of the economic support. Are the tangible "basic needs" less relevant to these young people because of their distance in time and experience from the program? Would tangible and economic benefits be more prominent in mapping with parents of sponsored members? However, one benefit of the ripple effect mapping method, over separate evaluations of each outcome domain, is that we can see far more clearly that there are links between physical and the psycho-social-spiritual development. This makes an excellent case for the personalized attention, program activities and relationships that complement tangible sponsorship benefits. These components can also be called benefits.

Individual, personalized, tailored program

"The beauty is that each family can choose what is needed in each moment," said one San Marcos participant.

Sponsored members were able to leverage the resources offered in very personal ways. This conclusion is particularly interesting as we have seen the Unbound program in general evolving into a more personalized program over the past five to 10 years, with the current personalized benefit selection by families only becoming a reality in Guatemala over the past three years.
Therefore, it is surprising to see that, even for alumni who experienced the program a decade ago, in a time when benefit models were frequently bulk purchases and less individualized, the benefit (meaning outcome) to members was still highly personalized.

Each participant expressed the ways in which they were able to take advantage of the opportunities and benefits that Unbound offered and utilize them to overcome very personal obstacles. The alumni in the follow-up interviews explained using their personal experience.

One alumna mentioned how she was unable to study until she received an operation to remove thick cataracts that affected her sight. In her opinion, health outcomes should have been present on the map, even though they were not brought forth as key by the group.

Another alumna discussed how after her family's house was destroyed in a natural disaster they received support from Unbound to help rebuild. She credits this support with keeping her family from migrating.

A third alumna explained that she watched her father abuse her mother growing up. She continued, saying that through the support she received in Unbound, she learned to value herself and that she is worth more than an abusive relationship. Because of this, she has delayed starting her family at a young age like many of her peers and instead focused on starting a career.

Each individual tells a vastly different story, but all are united in their experience with Unbound. So, while these experiences do force us to recognize the significant influences of external factors in the lives of individuals, they also emphasize the remarkable malleability of the Unbound program. It has the potential to contribute to an individual's path out of poverty in ways unlike a standard aide distribution or community based development approach.