



**The Nelson A. Rockefeller Center at Dartmouth College**  
*The Center for Public Policy and the Social Sciences*

## Policy Research Shop

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# An Assessment of the Getting Ahead Program at the Upper Valley Haven

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Presented to the Upper Valley Haven, White River Junction, Vermont

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

As part of coursework for a Sociology course on poverty and public policy, Dartmouth students collaborated with the Upper Valley Haven to perform a qualitative evaluation of the Haven's Getting Ahead (GA) program. Student interviewers worked in pairs to speak with ten former participants in Getting Ahead and gathered data on the interviewee's lives before, during, and after their involvement with the program. Our report provides valuable feedback for the Haven on impressions and outcomes of Getting Ahead, but readers should be wary of extrapolating from our sample of interviewees to the entire population of GA participants. Due to invalid contact information and practical constraints around scheduling, we failed to connect with a greater number of former GA participants and therefore were only able to interview a small sample. We also face potential self-selection bias. In addition, unpracticed students conducted the interviews and may have worded questions poorly or led interviewees down unintended paths.

Comparing the demographics of the total GA population to those we interviewed, our sample was predominantly white, female, and poorly representative of the 30-40-years-old age bracket. Most subjects we interviewed grew up in generational poverty and several had family and/or personal histories checkered with drug, alcohol, and occasionally physical and sexual abuse. Homelessness of one kind or another originally brought the GA investigators to the Haven, and through the Haven's staff they eventually heard about the program. Indeed, the strength of a staff member's recommendation compelled people first, even before the money came into play, with the stipend acting as a secondary motivator. After the program, all subjects interviewed were employed and had secured stable housing for themselves and their families at some point, regardless of how long they had been out of the program. Note that finding shelter is not necessarily an achievement to attribute to GA because, counterfactually, many who dropped out of GA midway through the program did so because they had found housing and needed to move. However, GA students did practice new, unique skills learned from the program, such as code-switching, budgeting, and prioritizing.

Interview subjects approved highly of Getting Ahead's operations, from logistics and dynamics to the leaders, or "facilitators," that led their GA session. Participants viewed the classes as well-run overall, with decorum and intimacy maintained by consistent work on the part of the group leaders. Facilitators were cited as spending great lengths of time in and out of class, and generally making the experience an excellent one. The stipend was a noticeable point of contention among our subjects, with some citing it as an attractive incentive to a useful program, and others citing it as wasteful and stating that it pandered toward disengaged individuals who diminished the GA experience for others. We recommend that any stipend changes be seriously scrutinized to determine the net



cost/benefit because a few GA students relayed that they were enticed by the cash and stayed for the education. In their case, the stipend seems to be working exactly as designed.

As noted above, given the qualitative nature of our research and our limited sample size, it is difficult to assess the degree to which the Getting Ahead Program is, in and of itself, successful. We found that the program's efficacy was inextricably tied both to the ways the program was experienced specifically as a program run through The Haven as well as the personal experiences the investigators brought to the table.

Still, the former investigators we interviewed also found the information presented in the Getting Ahead workbook understandable (with the notable exception of an outlier who struggled in understanding the Hidden Rules Module). We found that the way information was presented had a large impact on how well it was understood—visual aids such as graph, charts, and tangible models were more helpful than abstract mental models. Furthermore, investigators noted that their understanding of the material was greatly enhanced by group discussion.

In particular, investigators indicated that the first few modules—with the exception of Module 2: What's it Like Now?—were dull. Many found the theoretical nature of these modules boring, but recognized their importance in the creation of a strong foundation on which to build and change. As the program progressed and modules became more practical and skill oriented, investigators' overall engagement in the program increased. Investigators almost universally cited the Hidden Rules module (Module 5) and the modules regarding the evaluation and enhancement of personal and community resources (Modules 8-10) as particularly helpful tools.

The great majority of investigators felt the Getting Ahead program was a success, as evidenced by the impact it had on their lives. These impacts manifested in a multitude of ways, including the achievement of SMART goals established at the end of the program; stronger communication skills resulting in strong social networks and a better professional presence; increased organization, stability, and future planning; increased budget and financial planning; and increased confidence and overall sense of empowerment. Investigators noticed overall mental health benefits, and expressed that they felt better about their lives and their futures because the Getting Ahead program gave them the tools to succeed.

While the value of mental health and a strong sense of self-worth should not be undervalued, tangible economic gains are notably absent from the list of ways in which the Getting Ahead program improved the lives of the investigators. Further, given the



methodological limitations discussed above, it is difficult to assess the causal connection of GA with any positive or negative outcomes of the participants.

In conclusion, we find that participants in GA generally have positive outcomes, particularly in the short-term, and that they feel good about their experience in the program. While it is unclear whether this positive experience translates into real economic gains—and if any positive outcomes can be traced to GA itself—the facilitation of a strong, constructive group dynamic by GA and Haven staff creates lasting peer networks that investigators value highly. The two most helpful parts of the program are the financial assessments and advice offered in multiple modules, and Module 5: Hidden Rules of Economic Class. On the other hand, most participants expressed distaste for the first few introductory modules, finding them boring at best.

Given these findings, the Haven may benefit from offering smaller group workshops in addition to GA. The Haven could support more group bonding sessions for those staying at the Haven to strengthen their peer networks so they have friendly support after they leave the shelter. This might even take the form of a financial planning course or a workshop on how to write SMART goals based on the self-reflective methods used in the GA workbook. This would help those staying at the Haven for shorter periods better prepare for when they leave.

It is our recommendation that the Haven also adopt the revised GA workbook, as it makes several changes that fit well with the desires and critiques of past GA investigators. The revised edition has even more information on the hidden rules and how to use language, and is generally more accessible, with a glossary handy for words that some may find confusing. In addition, the first few modules that so many participants found boring have been shortened from four modules to three, so that the hidden rules come up sooner. The financial assessments and resource discussions are still a focus of this newer book as well. These measures address the culture of poverty and the learned behaviors of individuals in the lower class that separate them from their middle-class peers. Even with the modules on how to take advantage of community resources and create personal ones, however, a very different kind of program would be necessary to address the structural and institutional sources of poverty as well.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The authors of this report have chosen to use the gender neutral pronoun “they” instead of the gendered pronouns “he” and “she” on account of the small sample group and fear that subjects might be too easily identified through the combination of their quotes and their gender. Consistent with recent debates over rhetoric style and grammar in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have chosen “they” over the grammatically proper but



## **1. METHODS/CAVEATS**

### *1.1 Section Overview*

Before we begin to explore the report's findings, we intend to outline the methodologies used and the potential faults visible in our processes and data. Evaluating the rigor of our methods and examining these faults is crucial to understanding the constraints of our study, and gives color to any assessment of the validity of the report's findings.

### *1.2 Methodology*

Our research sought to gather feedback on the Upper Valley Haven's implementation of Getting Ahead (GA), a program for the poor built around a workbook titled *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By-World: Building Your Resources for a Better Life*. Students enrolled in the Dartmouth College Sociology course, "Poverty and Public Policy in the US," interviewed former participants in the Haven's Getting Ahead program. To connect with interview subjects, the course's professor, Matissa Hollister, asked Haven staff to reach out to former GA participants regarding their willingness to speak with interviewers from our class.

After reaching out to former GA participants, also known as 'investigators' by the workbook's terminology, the Haven worked with Professor Hollister to schedule convenient interview times. Over several days in late February, the students conducted interviews at the Haven's facilities in White River Junction, VT. Interviews were done by pairs of interviewers and recorded to ensure accurate reporting and, more importantly, to improve chances that interviewers would effectively engage with the GA interview subjects. As a class and in consultation with a former GA facilitator, we agreed that scribbling notes during the interviews heightened the potential for interviewees to feel uncomfortable, closed, and less likely to provide the sort of transparent feedback needed to evaluate Getting Ahead.

Once contact was made, willingness confirmed, and time-slots agreed upon, the interviews themselves were conducted with mindfulness to four main concerns, outlined by a class and professor-created set of germane questions. At all times, interviewers attempted to use a light touch in their conversations with GA participants and allowed interviews to flow naturally according to topics raised by the respondents. Therefore, information was never demanded and consequently data varies according to the interview subject's inclination to share.

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cumbersome "him/her." While we recognize the grammar fault in this technique, we find it necessary to protect the identity of our subjects as promised.



The first section we called “Pre-Program,” which covered the backgrounds of each individual subject before they entered GA, and their eventual rationale for joining the program. Background information ranged from typical demographics to situationally-specific details about their lives before GA.

The second section, “Program Experience,” looked at the participants’ GA experiences and impressions of the program. In particular we looked for input on which modules interview subjects deemed particularly useful, difficult, or ineffective. In this section we also questioned participants on their experience with GA facilitators, i.e. group leaders, as well as the interpersonal dynamics of the participant’s group.

The third section of questions, “End of Getting Ahead,” asked interview subjects to recount their feelings at the program’s end, such as whether they remembered their outgoing S.M.A.R.T (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-framed) goals. In general this section offered an opportunity for former GA participants to share their thoughts and reflections on GA in its immediate wake.

The fourth and final section, “Post-Program Experiences,” discussed the program from the subjects’ postgraduate perspective in light of their current situations. Interviewers asked about interviewee goals at GA’s completion and whether they had progressed toward or accomplished them. Interviewers also asked about the interview subjects’ thoughts on GA after having time to reflect and process. We looked at whether and how former GA participants had practiced skills and knowledge learned in GA in their personal and professional lives, seeking to identify which GA teachings had proven most and least meaningful in real-world situations.

### *1.3 Caveats*

Retrospectively we have picked out a few key caveats, and have identified information gaps that recommend topics for future research in this vein. These caveats are important in understanding the strengths and flaws of our research, as well as in helping to interpret the data’s ability to accurately portray the program.

The first issue arose during the process of contacting former participants. The Haven possessed records of individuals who had gone through the program, but the contact information on file was not always up-to-date or valid. Haven staff were occasionally unable to obtain any usable phone number, email address, or postal address for each individual. We hypothesize that some individuals likely changed numbers, while others may have moved from the area or may currently be without steady housing. This study therefore shows a strong selection bias toward individuals who could be reached, unavoidably excluding individuals who could not be reached. We are unsure whether this



selection bias affected the data, i.e., whether unavailable individuals would have provided a different perspective on GA. One example of such a complication would be that a person without phone, internet access, or current home address would likely not have met and stayed with his or her GA goals, biasing the results against less successful cases. However, it is impossible to know whether feedback on GA differs significantly between the available and the unavailable. We must acknowledge that a substantial portion of the population was not incorporated into the sample because of the practical difficulties of making initial contact, and the Haven is working on projects to help mitigate this problem of maintaining contact in the future.

In addition, there is self-selection inherent in the GA program itself, wherein people who are internally motivated to succeed may be more likely to start the Getting Ahead program, so their future success cannot be attributed solely to the program. While the stipend attempts to correct this issue, there is no guarantee of how successful it is at doing so.

The most potentially problematic caveat to this research springs from the small sample size. In total, we spoke with ten interview subjects: eight women and two men. From a statistical standpoint, such a small sample size raises serious flags warning against extrapolation of our results to the entire population of Haven GA participants. Furthermore, within the ten subjects we interviewed there exists a possibility of volunteer bias. In any voluntary study, those who have a vested interest in, or extreme opinions on, the matter in question will respond in greater numbers, i.e., individuals self-select for participation in the study. Thus, typically with a small sample size/selection bias, we will see very polarized reactions, either very positive or very negative reactions. Ambivalence, even if that attitude predominates among GA graduates, is much less likely to appear in our data. We found very positive reactions to the program nearly across the board, which leads us to believe that volunteer bias, dramatically amplified by small sample size, may be an issue at play. This caveat is not intended to discredit the GA program or indicate that interview subjects are misrepresenting their true feelings. However, the small sample size does imply that our results are not easily generalizable. Before making broad statements about the sentiments of the entire GA participant population, we would hope to cast a wider net and gather data from more subjects.

An additional caveat is interviewer bias. Interviewer bias occurs when the researcher expresses a partiality toward a subject's response, whether by means of body language, question phrasing, conversation tone, or the pretext of the conversation, among other possibilities. In case of interviewer bias, individuals being interviewed do not feel as free to offer an untainted opinion and may feed preferred answers back to the interviewer. Again, because our interviewees experienced highly positive feedback on GA, we should





not rule out implicit pressure created by our attitudes as student interviewers or by the very reason for the interview, namely to test the success or failure of a program run by the Upper Valley Haven. The Haven provided shelter, food, and emotional support for many GA participants at one point or another. Interview subjects may have been predisposed to kind words out of an aura effect or a desire not to impinge the Haven's good name. At least one interviewee casually mentioned off-the-record information that did not align with the interview that had ended only minutes beforehand.

#### *1.4 Conclusion and Recommendations*

We offer these caveats to suggest ways in which future fieldwork could be more exacting and precise. Our report is a valuable resource for assessing the Getting Ahead program's impact and participant experience, even after accounting for its relative lack of statistically-testable rigor. To that end, one of our main recommendations is to conduct further interviews by trained students with a wide array of GA graduates representative of the program's constituency. This should go a long way toward mitigating skewed results from a small sample size and lessening the effect of volunteer bias. Additionally, we recommend conducting different interview techniques to see which most effectively neutralizes biases on the part of interviewer and interviewee, cutting to the core of GA's evaluation as an impactful program.

## **2. BACKGROUND OF INVESTIGATORS AND REASONS FOR JOINING GA**

### *2.1 Section Overview*

To have a better understanding of the GA experience and to understand the people who took the course, we will briefly examine interview subjects' demographic and personal background. This section will outline our sample's demographics, personal histories, lives during GA, lives after GA, and interview subjects' reasons for GA participation.

### *2.2 Demographics*

In order to analyze whether our sample of GA graduates is representative of the greater GA graduate population, we constructed visual representations comparing our sample of interviewees to the Haven's records of all GA entrants. As seen in Figure 1, approximately twice as many women as men completed the program in the total GA population. However, women outweighed men by a ratio of 4:1 in our sample.

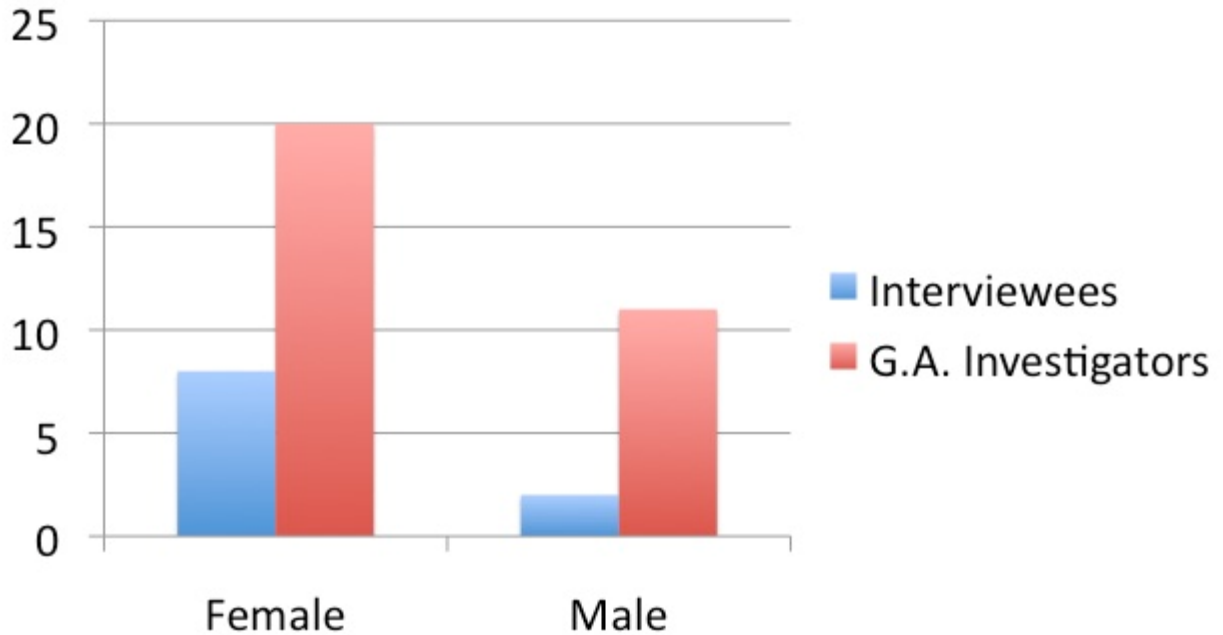
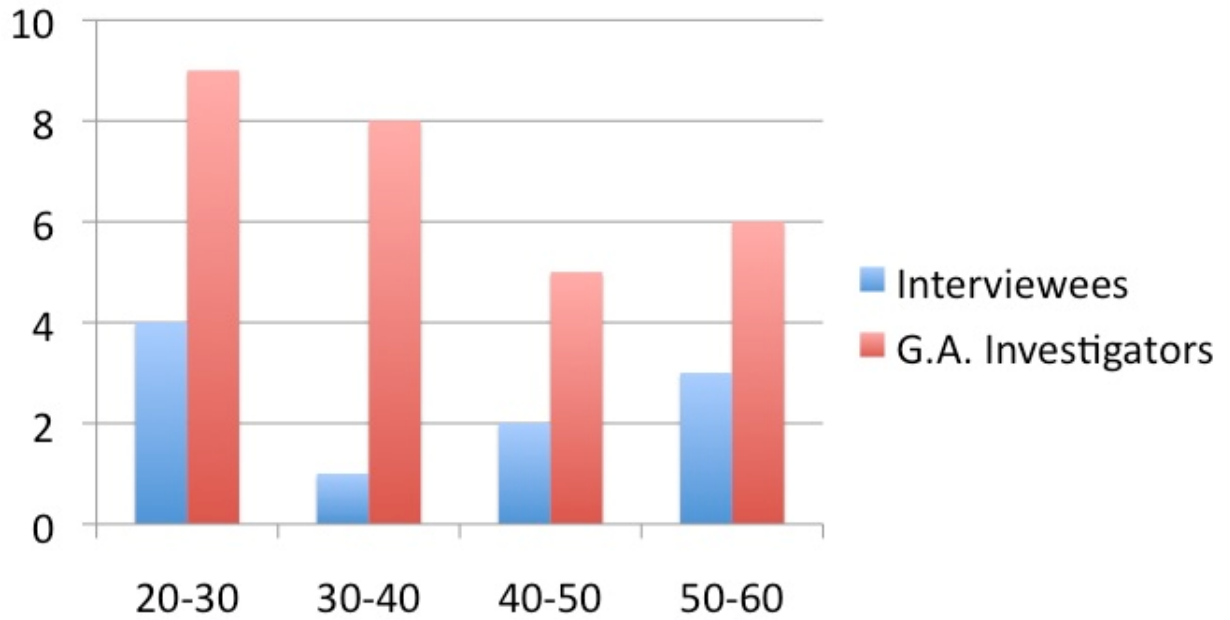
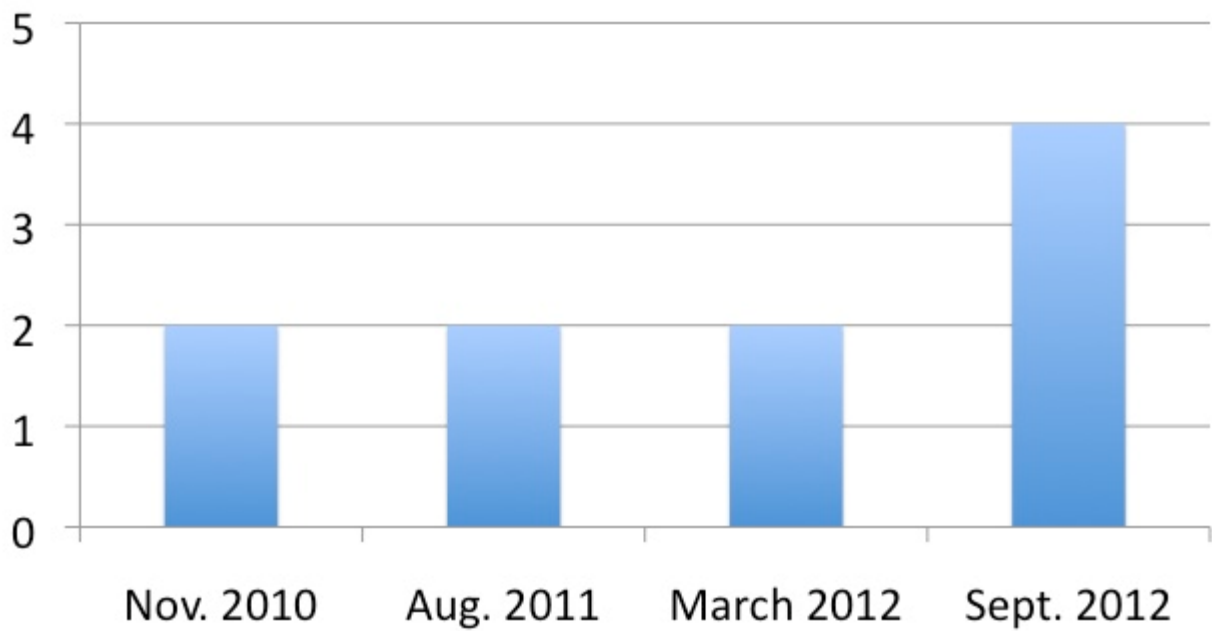


Figure 1. Gender of GA Investigators and Interviewees

Population age demographics, displayed in Figure 2, compare to our sample more favorably. All GA investigators fell between 20-years-old and 60-years-old, and our sample included participants in each decade. Noticeably, though, our sample lacked participants in the total population's second largest age category of the 30 to 40-year-olds. Racially, all of the sample's subjects were white. Though the Haven did not provide us with racial demographics, it seems consistent with New Hampshire and Upper Valley demographics to assume that most Haven GA participants were white as well. Still, we do not have factual information on the self-identified or perceived races of the GA participants that we did not interview. Finally, of the four iterations of GA the Haven has run, our sample represented at least two subjects from each session, as seen in Figure 3. The latest cohort is over-represented, which is consistent with the knowledge that it is easier for the Haven to get in touch with people who have had less time in which to move or change their contact information. This biases our study slightly toward those who have not been out of GA very long and may be unable to evaluate its long-term benefits. In conclusion, because of our sample composition, the report is especially non-representative of investigators who are 30 to 40-years-old, male, non-white, or any combination out of the three.



**Figure 2. Age of GA Investigators and Interviewees**



**Figure 3. GA Sessions of Interviewees**



### *2.3 Family and Personal History*

Getting Ahead participants at the Haven come from diverse backgrounds. We will highlight significant trends that emerged from the interviews and then delve into a few illustrative examples of family and personal history.

The majority of the group comes from generational poverty. Although two people identified their current poverty as purely situational, the majority of our ten-person sample grew up in poverty. Infrequently we heard mentions of time spent participating in middle class life. As expressed by one participant, “I’ve had a lot of things given to me ... Nice house, nice family, nice neighborhood.” In many cases, interviewers did not explicitly ask about education and job history, but everyone who did share their educational background had completed high school. One GA graduate briefly attended college. Previous occupations of our interview subjects include low-skill minimum-wage manual laborer, nurse’s assistant, registered nurse, fast-food manager, and store clerk.

Geographically, most grew up in New England or New York, although one subject hailed from the Midwest.

Mental health and various addictions were frequently referenced in interviews. One interviewee’s social anxiety presents an ongoing challenge. Around half of the sample indicated that they or their family suffered from drug and alcohol problems either presently or previously. Collectively, subjects who indicated drug and alcohol histories described those issue’s symptoms - troubled childhoods, incarceration, hospitalization, and over-medication, to name a few – as significantly weighty chains that hindered their efforts to rise above poverty. For a few, drug and alcohol addiction in their families defined their formative years. One subject described their family as large and fragmented with many members abusing alcohol and drugs: “[i]t wasn’t fantastic, but it wasn’t horrible either.... There were abusive times, but... it wasn’t a regular childhood, I’ll just put it at that.” Several interview subjects conveyed that they had moved to the Upper Valley to escape destructive family environments. Among some of those subjects, personal experiences with sexual abuse were pinpointed as causing ongoing psychological trauma.

About half of the interviewed participants have children. One interviewee cares for three children, described as “products of a bad marriage.” Two others recalled moving with the express purpose of changing their environment and insulating their children from destructive influences. Interviewers did not often collect data on present or past romantic relationships for the interview subjects, so it is unknown whether the interviewed GA participants became parents in or out of wedlock.



#### *2.4 Why Investigators Joined Getting Ahead*

The most-often cited reason for joining GA was a recommendation from the Haven staff. One interviewee recalled the simple story: “[Getting Ahead] was being offered, and it was highly suggested that you take it, so I did.” The entire Haven staff is acquainted with GA and are trained to work with GA investigators to catch up after missed classes. Haven staff members have a great deal of individual contact with residents. As personal friends to many, and representative of a beneficial organization to all, the staff holds large amounts of soft power that can sway Haven residents’ decisions. In this sense, the staff members at the Haven are ideally positioned to refer residents to Getting Ahead since they are both knowledgeable and influential.

Outside of staff suggestion, some subjects also stated that they wanted to learn. Like others, they had heard of the program through involvement with the Haven, but GA’s attraction lay primarily in its intrinsic educational benefits.

Regarding the stipend to join and complete the GA program, opinions on its effectiveness ran the gamut among interviewees. Three explicitly said they joined partly for money. Others, however, thought that the monetary reward was counterproductive. One subject pointed to people in their GA group who were interested only in the stipend followed the course through to its end, and polluted GA with negativity along the way. Another reiterated the objection to stipends, asserting that the people who were there only for the money were consistently the least interested. One participant even suggested not mentioning the money until the very end of the program, believing that if people really wanted to benefit from the program, they would join regardless of the money. However, this brings up the issue of the self-selection bias described earlier. Withholding knowledge of any stipend until the end of the program would ensure that all participants had alternative motives for joining. One could argue that those people who aren’t already motivated to join a program like Getting Ahead are the ones who need this experience even more than the internally motivated participants. Therefore, we believe the stipends provide the benefit of expanding the diversity of people in the program. Still, one interviewee commented that there seemed to be an unfortunate misallocation of funds in that not all of those who completed the class needed additional money, and at times the neediest among them were unable to take part.

To improve available data, we suggest asking participants their motives for joining the program at the beginning of the session—emphasizing that there is no correct answer—as this information might reveal trends in the participants who complete or drop the program. Additionally, we would recommend conducting post-completion and post-dropout interviews, which could provide immediate feedback for the program.



### *2.5 Life During Getting Ahead*

Our interview subjects came from a variety of backgrounds and were in disparate situations upon enrollment in Getting Ahead. One cross-cutting factor common to their experiences was the homelessness that initially prompted them to approach the Haven. Reasons for homelessness varied wildly; some had fled toxic home environments and others were forced into their situation by, for example, crushing medical bills. Our interview sample was consistent with research that shows poverty and homelessness arising from the interaction of any number of variables.

Subject's personal and social lives also varied greatly. Some lived as part of a large family or just with their children. Others specifically tried to isolate themselves from their family and friends. We found that in several instances, couples entered GA together, and at least one couple formed due to mutual involvement with GA. Moreover, because of the nature of the Haven's sheltering policies, which accommodate both singles and families, the Haven's GA program shows an array of participants with divergent social and community relations.

### *2.6 Life After Getting Ahead*

Because most of the GA investigators were homeless at the beginning of the program, interviewees heard often that a subject's primary goal was to locate, secure, and maintain independent housing. Through our interviews, we were pleased to learn that they had, in fact, found stable housing. However, this is true of those who finished GA and those who dropped out. Indeed, many of those who dropped out of the program did so because they were moving to a place of their own. At the time of our interviews, most of the investigators had successfully moved out of the Haven and were living independently, typically with select family members such as a child or spouse.

After Getting Ahead, interviewees mentioned altering their behavior in positive ways, such as utilizing budgeting skills or code-switching in order to interact with people of different socioeconomic backgrounds. One interviewee in particular mentioned changing their language toward their children and using the hidden rules to help them communicate in their current job.

When we spoke to them, around half of our interview subjects had procured employment or were currently pursuing education in fields like computer repair certification. Unfortunately, we do not have full employment information on all subjects because of the unstructured nature of the interviews.



## *2.7 Conclusion*

Now that we have a better understanding of the backgrounds and demographics of the GA investigators, we can understand the dynamics of the GA program and situate the experiences of this particular group of investigators.

## **3. GETTING AHEAD PROGRAM AT THE HAVEN**

### *3.1 Section Overview*

This section will discuss the characteristics of the Getting Ahead program unique to its implementation at the Haven. The analysis is divided into three sections. “Logistics” analyzes the technical aspects of the way the Haven conducts Getting Ahead, including times, dates, monetary compensation, and the availability of homework assistance. “Group Dynamics” discusses the overall feelings of participants towards the group atmosphere, opinions towards other group members, effects of group size, post-program contact with group members, and considerations of leaving the program. “Facilitators” examines participants’ feelings towards their program leaders and the significance of the role they played. This section’s analysis continues to build on the foundations of the previous sections in order to hone our understanding of Getting Ahead’s strengths and weaknesses.

### *3.2 Logistics*

The logistical aspect of the Getting Ahead program at the Haven most frequently mentioned in interviews was the timing of classes. All class sessions were held two nights a week for two hours. Two interviewees felt that the nighttime classes were difficult for families, particularly for parents of small children who had to feed their families just before the class and then hurry back to put children to bed after class. One went as far as suggesting that the Haven hold two sessions of Getting Ahead to accommodate work and family schedules, one during the day and one at night.

As far as the work commitment required by the program, no one interviewed said that they felt overwhelmed or found it unmanageable. Every subject was able to balance most of the homework and classes alongside professional and personal obligations. One interviewee attributed the ease of balance to the nature of the program at the Haven. Living at the shelter, there are fewer obstacles to plan around so participants could more easily fit Getting Ahead into their schedules. One interview subject wished that the classes could have been longer to allow for more discussion, especially since classes often ran late to allow discussions to continue.



As mentioned above, the stipend was also a common subject brought up by participants. Offering a stipend for GA is a practice that is by no means unique to the Haven, but rather is a fundamental part of the GA program in some form or another. The Haven's choice to implement the incentive as a cash lump sum at the end of GA, however, is more unique. The stipend also decreased over time as the Haven found it could attract as many people to the program while offering a smaller stipend. Four interview subjects expressed negative feelings about the effects of the stipend, asserting that people who only enrolled for the check were often negative and missed the point of the program. One interviewee advocated that the stipend not be advertised so as only to recruit people who would take the class regardless of the monetary component. However, two former GA graduates admitted that they initially signed up for the program because of the stipend and both were extremely positive about the program's goals and their outcomes. One participant who was initially attracted by the stipend reiterated the program's innate value, and asserted that the program is so useful that it should be mandatory for everyone at the Haven.

Other logistical topics covered in interviews were childcare and the availability of homework help. Childcare was mentioned in two interviews and was simply acknowledged as a helpful service offered by the Haven. Three interviewees mentioned working on homework with people at the Haven, two of whom said they found the nighttime Haven staff especially helpful for Getting Ahead homework. A third interviewee who discussed homework reported that their group met to do homework and discuss topics outside of class, giving them opportunities to get to know each other better.

### *3.3 Group Dynamics*

Group dynamics were cited as an integral part of the Getting Ahead program at the Haven. Of those interviewed that mentioned the impact of the group environment, all nine said the presence of the fellow investigators increased the impact of the program and was integral to their understanding of the material. Three people explicitly referred to the group dynamic as "fun," with two of those attributing that atmosphere to the facilitators alone and the third attributing it to a combination of the facilitators and the investigators. Six interview subjects noted that the group setting facilitated meaningful discussion.

The interviewees' feelings towards other program participants were comparatively more mixed than their generally positive response to the overall group dynamic. The subjects we spoke with seemed to develop a more favorable view of fellow participants over time as the group shrank. Three interviewees explicitly mentioned a change in group dynamic over time. The first, whose group retained all its members, said the dynamics became noticeably better after the third or fourth meeting; the second said the dynamic changed from one meeting to the next but did not improve significantly over time. The third,





whose class size was cut in half by the end of the program, said that the dynamic changed with each person that left. Four interviewees asserted that the stipend attracted people who had a negative impact on the group, and one said participants motivated solely by the cash reward would have ruined the program had it not been for the facilitators. Three other interviewees believed that all the group members' personalities meshed for the most part. In general, the facilitators received a great deal of praise for their abilities to bring together all group members, as discussed below.

The perceptions of group size on the overall dynamic were similarly mixed. Two interviewees whose groups started with fourteen members expressed their feeling that this number was too high, with one saying the program would not have been as intimate or meaningful with that many people, and another saying that they would have been uncomfortable in a group of that size. One interviewee whose group size declined by fifty percent throughout the course of the program argued that those who left had come for the stipend. Another interviewee whose group size was cut in half alluded to an improvement in group cohesion as a result. A fifth said their eventual group size of seven was quite comfortable. Of the five cases listed here, initial group size was approximately fourteen members, and the ending and optimal group size, according to several interview subjects, was roughly half a dozen members. Notably, one participant spoke adamantly in favor of a large group size, arguing their approximately seventeen member group allowed them to see more viewpoints, and implied that the more participants there were in a group, the better. In addition, one interviewee commented that while the initial large group was too unstructured and the smaller group at the end was tight knit, the intimacy of the small group was emotionally taxing because they were constantly put on the spot. This interviewee noted that the small group "made it harder to talk about some of the things we were talking about because they had more time to focus on a smaller group...A medium group is good because it's not as intimate and you get a little breathing time in between."

Most participants interviewed remained in contact with some of their fellow group members after finishing the program. Of the seven interviewees who mentioned post-program contact, six said they continue to communicate with some group members. The one who has not maintained contact with any group members has stayed in communication with both facilitators. No interviewee kept in contact with all group members. The average number of group members the participants maintained contact with was two to three, though one GA graduate still spoke with ten to twelve former classmates. Of those who elaborated on the nature of their relationship with group members, one said they continued to talk with them about the program and uses them as a source of support. The second does not talk about the program with those they have stayed in contact with but uses their knowledge as a resource. The third is retaking the



program with one of their former group members. The fourth has developed a close personal relationship with a former group member.

Of the three interview subjects who were asked whether they ever considered leaving the program, two answered that it was never a consideration. The third said they thought about leaving the program from time to time, but thinking of the potential benefits finishing the program might bring caused them to stay.

### *3.4 Facilitators*

The interviewees spoke very positively about facilitators and many attributed their successful completion of the program in part to the skill of the facilitators. All ten participants positively reviewed the Getting Ahead facilitators, calling them “insightful,” “knowledgeable,” “dynamic,” “animated,” and even “perfect.” The facilitators played a significant role in these participants’ Getting Ahead success, and three major trends emerged from the investigator interviews that explain why: the facilitators’ striking an effective balance between seriousness and humor, availability outside of the Getting Ahead classroom, and ability to work with people of diverse personalities and learning styles.

Participants frequently praised the facilitators’ ability to balance the serious aspects of the program with humor and fun. One participant said that the facilitator’s sternness and straightforwardness helped them remain focused and complete the program. Another described the facilitator as “tough” but “encouraging.” Much of the Getting Ahead program involves the participants’ personal desires, struggles, and fears, so finding facilitators who can treat the personal aspects of Getting Ahead with respect and seriousness is paramount. However, four of the ten participants interviewed also identified the facilitators’ humor as important to their success because it allowed them to feel “at ease” at meetings. One of the participants very satisfied with Getting Ahead said that “most of it was serious, but they tried to make the atmosphere comfortable and not threatening in any way.” Getting Ahead can be difficult at times for participants, and having a fun or friendly atmosphere can make the program much easier to endure. When found, this balance was very effective for all the interviewed participants.

Other common remarks about the facilitators concerned knowing them outside of the Getting Ahead classroom. Relationships with facilitators outside of meetings made participants more comfortable and engaged with the program and the homework less intimidating. One participant praised a facilitator for always “coming out of her way to meet with the group after it was done” while criticizing the other facilitator for not doing so. Another credited their finishing Getting Ahead to the facilitator’s offer to drive them on personal errands throughout the duration of the program, and two others were thankful



for homework help received at the Haven from the facilitators outside of class. Willingness to offer this kind of outside support appears to make facilitators much more effective, which makes particular sense given the program's emphasis on building support networks and developing personal relationships. However, it may not be fair to expect facilitators to always work with participants outside of the program without pay. Regardless, getting to know and receiving support from facilitators outside of class time is consistently memorable for Getting Ahead participants.

Finally, the participants praised the facilitators' abilities to accommodate a variety of personalities and learning styles. One participant especially liked "the big papers on the wall" on which the facilitator took notes for when they missed what was said, and two other participants pointed out that the facilitators did a great job dealing with overly-negative participants and disagreements in the class which, at times, almost "collapsed the group." Similar to teachers, any Getting Ahead facilitator must be able to effectively communicate with a large (and possibly argumentative) group of people, some of whom may have struggled in traditional classroom settings in their pasts. For example, one participant had difficulty understanding confusing language in certain activities. The facilitator's job is further complicated by the diversity in age and life experience among the group members. However, a good facilitator will recognize this diversity as an opportunity for productive dialogue and learning. Overall, the facilitators for all Getting Ahead classes surveyed were highly effective and consistently cited as reasons for the program's success.

### *3.5 Conclusion*

The response of our interview subjects to the logistics, group dynamic, and facilitators of the Getting Ahead program were generally positive, though the results also reveal possible areas of improvement. Participants indicated a favorable view of the program's workload and praised the childcare and homework assistance offered. Support for the group environment at classes was unanimous and participants seemed to find the end size of their group favorable. Interviewees provided an overwhelmingly favorable response to the role of the facilitator and the facilitators themselves, attributing much of the comfort and meaningfulness of the program to its leaders. However, responses indicate that a change in the current protocol involving the stipend may yield different results by discouraging the participation of individuals who have a negative impact on the group dynamic and may be, according to interview responses, more susceptible to quitting the program. Unfortunately, this would leave out those who come for the money but stay to learn and those who are originally less motivated and need a push, which could negatively impact the program by limiting diversity and leaving GA serving only those who might succeed on their own. Another participant advocated making the program



mandatory at the Haven, like Rental 101 currently is. That being said, several participants who admitted joining for the stipend finished the program and had a very favorable outlook on it. Moreover, because those joining the program for the stipend alone may have a higher attrition rate than others, we recommend that any change in stipend policy be accompanied by a reconsideration of initial class size in order to avoid having a group that exceeds the consensus comfort level of around five to seven final participants.

#### **4. ASPECTS OF THE GETTING AHEAD PROGRAM**

##### *4.1 Section Overview*

In this section we present our findings and attempt to assess the effectiveness of Getting Ahead as a program. This section will evaluate the intrinsic nature of the Getting Ahead workbook and how participants understood and evaluated the information it presents. Notably, interviewees' appreciation of different modules varied greatly—there were distinct trends that identified certain modules as significantly more or less effective than others. This evaluation of the Getting Ahead workbook will attempt to disentangle different factors that contribute to the participants' outcomes—namely individual backgrounds and the way the program was implemented—in order to determine the significance of the Getting Ahead program in determining success. Several aspects of the program are addressed individually, including the organization pyramid that gives structure to the GA workbook, the introductory modules, the Hidden Rules Module, the resources modules, the financial planning lessons, and the work that addresses goal formation. Appendix A provides a list of the GA modules in the version of the workbook used by the Haven.

##### *4.2 Pyramid*

During the introduction of the program, participants are shown a pyramid (Figure 4), which illustrates the holistic process by which the program works. In essence, the program is designed to be self-sustaining and build upon itself, and the pyramid visual was helpful in illustrating the purpose of each section of the program and how they relate to one another. Participants were asked to evaluate their current situation, learn about the historical causes of poverty and the hidden rules of social class, learn the importance of one's resources, list and analyze the resources they have at their disposal, and ultimately set goals for after the program ends. This visual model was very helpful for the participants, who generally found the visual graphics and charts to be much more effective than abstract mental models.

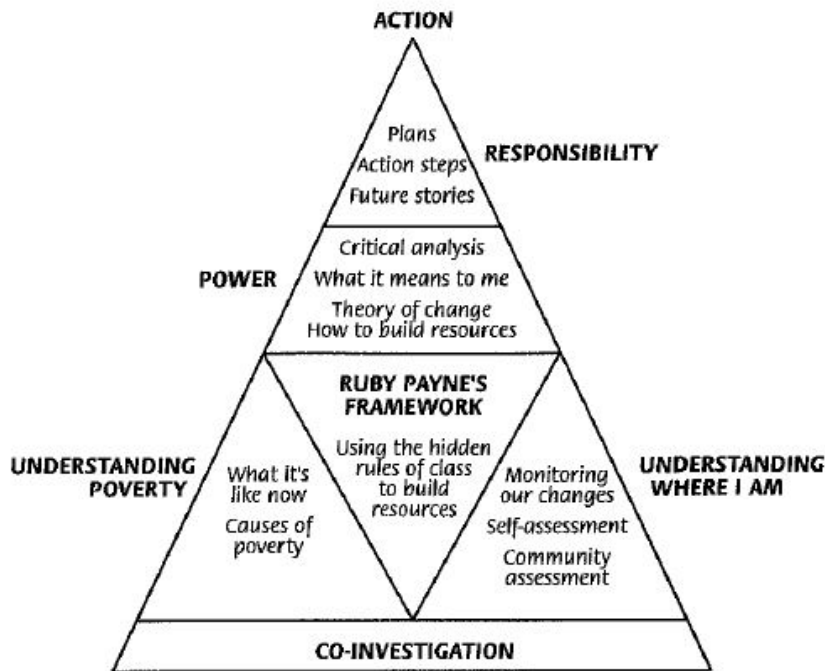


Figure 4. Pyramid diagram

#### 4.3 Introductory Modules

Multiple interviews noted that most of the first few modules of the program were dull, recalling the modules entitled “Getting Started,” “Theory of Change,” and “The Rich Poor Gap and How it Works” as being particularly dry. While only three investigators vocalized this negative feedback, it is important to note that no interviewee voiced a counter opinion.

Despite the negative feedback we received about these beginning modules, we argue that they are essential to the structure of the program. The concepts introduced in these early modules must be introduced and explored in order to create a strong understanding of poverty for the participants. Later sections of the book, which attempt to inspire change, build upon this foundation and draw upon concepts addressed in the initial modules. One GA participant also noted that the early modules served the additional (if unintentional) purpose of weeding out those individuals who joined solely for the promised stipend. They attributed the program’s high attrition rate—as many as half of the participants dropped out in one session—to the number of people who joined for the stipend and dropped the program when they found it to be more of an investment and challenge than they had anticipated. As one participant said, “If [the program] isn’t tough at parts, you won’t get anything out of it.”



#### *4.4 Hidden Rules*

Participants consistently referenced Module 5: Hidden Rules of Social Class as a particularly influential and educational aspect of the workbook. While a majority of participants found it to be the single most beneficial part of the workbook, one participant found it to be the most difficult module to comprehend. When asked their perspective on the hidden rules of class, the outlier stated that they did not understand them and could not understand them, even if “someone explained them 1,000 times.” While this participant was unique in their inability to grasp the hidden rules, we did find patterns that could predict the ease with which an individual might be expected to grasp the rules. Generally, it was difficult—though not impossible—for those who have always lived in poverty to understand the hidden rules of class.

Those participants who had lived in or had spent considerable amounts of time in the middle class generally had an easier time in both identifying the hidden rules of class as well as modifying their behavior appropriately. One participant who had been raised in the middle class noted that while the hidden rules module was helpful and interesting, it had no profound impact on the way they lived. They attributed their perspective to their background, saying “I could see where it would be really valuable for some people...there was something to learn everywhere, but a lot of the more basic stuff like that, [I learned in my career]. A lot of it was just so basic.” Although many ideas the module introduced were basic for this participant, the majority of the people with whom we spoke were not raised in a middle-class environment, and their time in poverty was reflected in their limited exposure to the social nuances of class.

To help better understand differences between social classes, participants performed an exercise in which they categorized poor, middle-class, and rich lifestyles. This was a particularly enlightening exercise for the participants, as they had perceived the upper class as having everything: a stable family, close friends, a nice community, a large home, luxury cars, and an abundance of money. Lacking from the rich lifestyle, however, were the close-knit communities and meaningful friendships that the participants cherished. This exercise suggested that social class is more than just how much money you have, more than how you speak, act, and dress; a large component of social class is also what you value. The toolkits workshop was specifically cited as a helpful program, as the ability to effectively communicate among different social classes is an invaluable tool.

Both the overwhelmingly positive reactions to the module and the points raised by dissenting voices suggest that this module is one that requires particular attention. The diversity of backgrounds and experiences could spark many different reactions to the generalizations made by the module—the rules may not be universally embraced, and



may be actively rejected, as individuals may feel that the “rules” are simply a perpetuation of negative stereotypes about poverty. Facilitators should be cognizant of this clash and be prepared to facilitate accordingly.

#### *4.5 Resources*

The Getting Ahead workbook discusses the importance of resources in five different modules (Modules 6-10). The last three modules of the program focusing on resources seem particularly influential for investigators—while no participants mentioned module 6 or 7, feedback consistently highlighted modules 8, and 10. Together, these three modules form a comprehensive assessment participants have at their disposal and how these resources might be further developed. Module 8 looks at the self-assessment of one’s own resources, Module 9 is the building of these resources, and Module 10 is the assessment of one’s community resources.

The self-reflection module was one of the most significant components of the Getting Ahead workbook. Module 8 asks investigators to grade how urgent or stable their resources were in reference to those that are essential to happiness and economic stability. Our findings suggest that for many of the investigators, rating one’s resources proved to be a very upsetting process because it forced the investigators to revisit unpleasant memories of their past. Though emotionally taxing, the process was also beneficial because it prompted investigators to assess their current situation while simultaneously considering ways to increase the resources at their disposal. In fact, one participant claimed, “I always thought that certain things were important to me, but it turns out that certain things *need* to be important.” For this investigator, the resources they once neglected became essential to their new lifestyle. Getting Ahead helped this investigator recognize their need for stability and helped them assess their priorities and consider what situations should be treated as urgent and in need of immediate attention.

For another interviewee, “the biggest thing in GA was learning in steps how to regroup my life.” The reactions we heard suggest that Getting Ahead’s goal to make investigators think more about the future (a Middle Class hidden rule) instead of the present (a Lower Class hidden rule) was successful. Ruby Payne’s discourse about the relationship between happiness and economic stability recommends a change from a poverty perspective to a middle class perspective. The overall positive reactions from the 10 interviewees on their self-evaluation modules proved to be beneficial and enlightening in that their perspectives shifted in accordance with Ruby Payne’s recommendations.

Module 10 asks investigators to complete an assessment of their community resources because “poverty [is] more than the choices of the poor...it [is] important to hold the community accountable for opportunities” (Module 10: Community Assessment). This



assessment was designed to help investigators recognize failures of their communities as well as the opportunities available to help fight poverty. The majority of the interviewees found the community resources helpful because it helped them recognize the sources of support within their community and identify how to use these resources to achieve their goals. One interviewee claims Module 10 “brings you to a point where you decide what is and isn’t important, and helps you find the tools you need to move forward.” This investigator saw their community evaluation as an important tool that helped them distinguish the resources necessary for them to achieve their goals.

On the other hand, though many found the Community Assessment Module helpful in expanding and developing their resources, others found it boring and unhelpful, often because they were already aware of many of the resources in the Upper Valley. One interviewee believes that there are not enough available resources for single men. For them, “the Haven helped and got food stamps, but that was about it.” In this case, the module pointed to gaps in community resources but led to frustration since there were few options for addressing this gap.

#### *4.6 Financial Planning*

Getting Ahead focuses on financial planning and its implications for poverty starting early in the program. Financial planning was the section with the most positive feedback. Out of the ten interviews, six of the interviewees had commented or highlighted the importance of the Financial Planning Module. As one of the more positive trends we received, we wonder if Getting Ahead should incorporate more information on financial planning. For those who never learned to deal with finances or who need a refresher course, this module is a big step toward making real changes.

The most memorable and meaningful activity of Module 2 for many participants was calculating the debt-to-income ratio, specifically the relationship between housing costs and wages. For the six interviewees who referenced this activity, the income-to-debt ratio was important because it forced the investigators to evaluate their present financial situation objectively. Moreover, the calculation helped the investigators learn “how much they needed to earn an hour to have financial stability” (Module 2: What It’s Like Now). The calculations included monthly rent or house payments, gross income, loans, car payments, credit cards, insurance, and food stamps.

Based on our interviews, the majority of the investigators approved of the section because it allowed them to understand the gravity of their finances, but also identify ways to improve their situation. This section elicited emotional responses from many investigators because they were forced to confront their lifestyle in poverty. One interviewee acknowledged how emotional it was to “confront the past but felt that the





group was a safe space to let these emotions flow out.” Unfortunately, some people felt uncomfortable and ultimately left the Getting Ahead program. If the Haven wants to attract people who might be more uncomfortable or inexperienced with these types of exercises, it may be beneficial to have a method to make them feel comfortable and encourage them to stay.

One interviewee, speaking of their success with the module, said, “It was hilarious...I knew I was broke, I just didn’t realize how broke I was.” This same investigator categorized themselves as an “impulsive buyer” and thus found the budgeting techniques very useful because they learned to “put your needs before your wants.” The function of the financial planning was to bring investigators to reality and confront their situation. Investigators such as the “impulse buyer” felt that Getting Ahead taught them to think about finances in a new way. This new way of thinking reflects the conditions Ruby Payne argues are essential to getting out of poverty. By forcing them to confront the reality of their impoverished situation, Getting Ahead helped guide the investigators away from poverty and motivate them to commit to lifestyle changes.

#### *4.7 Goals*

After the investigators complete the modules and learn skills to plan their finances and establish their resources, they are asked to make SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-specific) goals or plans that fit their situation. This section is considered crucial to graduating from Getting Ahead because investigators prioritize what is important to them and identify steps they must take as well as identify resources that might help them improve their situation.

A significant trend we found amongst the investigators was the goal to pass a certain test for employment, specifically in the nursing or technology field. For one interviewee, going back to school was a step that allowed them to take the LNA test in order to become a nurse’s assistant. Though they had vaguely planned to go back to school, Getting Ahead created a framework to work within and forced them to consider their timeframe for return. Another interviewee was unable to finish the Getting Ahead program because they had moved out of the Haven, but they ultimately kept their initial goal of becoming a technician. For this investigator, “Getting Ahead helped me focus on my own plan to get a place and pursue computer training.” Because the investigators lived in the Haven, another trend involved attaining a stable housing situation. For one investigator, their biggest goals were to find affordable housing and be assured that they wouldn’t have to worry about their health or wellbeing in the future. Another trend involved behavioral goals such as eating less salt or drinking less Mountain Dew. One investigator in particular was able to get their diabetes under control, lose weight, and improve their mental health.



While SMART goals are designed to be set at the end of the Getting Ahead program, our interviews suggest that most SMART goals were a continuation of pre-existing goals. Rather than creating new goals, investigators largely used the SMART goals section of the program to reframe and reevaluate their steps to accomplishing goals they already had in mind. Investigators noted that GA helped them prioritize their goals and develop a concrete path towards achieving them. One interviewee noted “It’s those little steps that this book really helped me realize, and without those little steps you can’t accomplish what you really need to do.” Another interviewee described how practicing with smaller goals helped in focusing on larger goals, while others emphasized how the program helped them set realistic goals. We therefore believe the goals section is a valuable tool for investigators to use to their advantage, and it ought to be used to determine steps in order to initially achieve goals as well as the steps necessary for goals to be maintained.

#### *4.8 Conclusion*

Our findings suggest that the Getting Ahead workbook, while valuable, is only partially responsible for the success of the program. We must also account for the component of discussion groups during the program, which almost all of the participants we interview noted as a significant positive aspect of their experience. The conceptual framework and the structured curriculum of the workbook provided necessary focus and addressed the personal habits that contribute to poverty. While the introductory modules were dull for some, we conclude that they are a necessary component in addressing the causes of poverty; before you can fix your personal situation, you must first understand it within the larger societal context.

We received positive feedback on the Hidden Rules Module and agree with the importance of learning these rules, especially for those who do not have much experience with different social classes. It is therefore of great significance that some of those born and raised in poverty, with no prior middle class experience, had the hardest time understanding the hidden rules, since this is the audience the module should be targeting. We found that the self-evaluation of resources helped investigators confront their past and honestly consider their financial situation and its implications. The Financial Planning Module in the GA workbook was very effective in teaching participants necessary budgeting skills that they had either forgotten or never had the opportunity to learn. Although all the investigators seemed to accomplish at least some of their goals, we question whether this can be attributed to the SMART goals or whether success was dictated more by internal motivation.

Lastly, as the Haven transitions to the new edition of Getting Ahead, we recommend evaluating the updated version of the Getting Ahead workbook, as some modules have



been altered, added, or removed, which may hamper and/or improve the effectiveness of the program examined above.

## **5. IMPACTS OF THE PROGRAM**

### *5.1 Section Overview*

Many of the participants interviewed stated that the Getting Ahead program had a great influence on their lives. For some, the program's information was entirely new; for others, it was to some degree a reiteration of previous knowledge. Almost all participants, regardless of prior exposure to the hidden rules, were able to take some particular point they learned and it apply to their lives. These changes took the form of changing behaviors, creating and accomplishing goals for themselves, and staying on track in order to make these goals a reality.

### *5.2 Hidden Rules*

Most of the interviewees commented on the strong influence the Hidden Rules Module had on them during their participation in the program. These individuals placed a high value on acquiring the social toolkits that could usher them into the middle class. One participant said knowledge of the hidden rules of class “gave [them] initiative, drive and encouragement because when you know what you are up against, the better you will find loopholes to get in.” These “loopholes” are best understood as a working knowledge of the subtle cues and habits associated with different economic classes and the ability to use this knowledge to one's advantage (GA 68).

Several interviewees claimed that the knowledge of hidden rules greatly improved their communication skills. One participant found that the hidden rules enabled them to “code switch” and communicate with people from different backgrounds. They described this code switching as the ability to “translate from middle class to poverty language.” That code switching proves to be a necessary skill indicates the extent to which class is something that must be performed. Acceptance into middle class cannot be found simply by reaching some economic threshold—acceptance into middle class culture must be constantly upheld by strict adherence to the cultural norms of the middle class.

For some, the Hidden Rules Module highlighted their own poverty. One participant asserted that it was difficult emotionally for them to look at the hidden rules and recognize that their values, behavior, and speech all denote their poverty. While this interviewee found the module painfully accurate, the Hidden Rules were not universally enlightening; another participant stated that they did not and would not understand the Hidden Rules regardless of how many times they were taught.



### *5.2.1 Passing Down Knowledge to Avoid Intergenerational Poverty*

For most women (especially those who were mothers), instilling the knowledge they gained about the hidden rules in their children was very important. Many felt the personal skills learned in GA could be used to combat the culture of poverty and hoped to help their children to develop the GA framework from a young age. Interviewees envisioned the transmission of knowledge ideally happening in two ways: their personal application of the skills learned in GA as well as the implementation of GA into schools.

Many referred to their own constant implementation of the skills they learned in GA as a chance for their children to learn by example. They viewed their changes as a means by which their children's lives might be improved. Interviewees reported significant changes in their lives based on their new understanding of class. Participants learned that these hidden rules are mostly learned during childhood, and subsequently many changed the ways in which they raised their children. Changes participants reported include using a wider vocabulary, emphasizing proactive thinking and clear planning, and changing methods of discipline so that they explained to their children why their behavior was inappropriate rather than simply yelling.

Other interviewees, recognizing that their own learning was enhanced by the group dynamics of going an actual *program*, stressed that the GA program should be taught at a high school level. One participant saw GA as a way to “ease the transition between high school world and real world,” while another desperately wanted their son to take the GA program so that they could learn to save and value money while they are young. Participants generally recognized that partaking in this program at an early age would benefit young people and equip them with life skills that might help them break the cycle of poverty or avoid it altogether.

### *5.2.2 Hidden Rules in the workplace*

The tools taught in this module also helped some participants get a job and helped others maximize their networking and increase the number of resources at their disposal. The new understanding of nuanced communication skills helped one participant effectively sell themselves and get hired for a competitive job, despite having no experience in the field. Another participant, a nurse's assistant, found that these same newfound communication skills allowed them to better understand and connect with their middle-class coworkers. The importance of networking skills in career advancement was echoed by another participant, who specifically noted that their own transition from the lower to middle class was a direct result of their ability to make strong connections with their boss and boss' friends.



### *5.3 Impact of Group Dynamics*

Many interviewees noted that their group dynamics continued to influence their lives after completion of the program. Several stated that the diversity of their co-investigators helped them be more comfortable in many different social interactions following the program. One interviewee, for example, professes to be less judgmental of those around them, citing the fact that they are more apt to talk to people of different backgrounds as evidence of this change in their mindset.

Some relationships have continued to grow and deepen following the completion of the programs, as shown by the significant number of interviewees who stated that they remain in some form of contact with one or more of their co-investigators. Notably, more interviewees report keeping in contact with their co-investigators than those who remain in contact with facilitators—a sign that the program successfully connected peers to one another. The natures of these relationships range from casual friendships to more intimate relationships. One interviewee describes a sustained social network of former co-investigators who exchange helpful information about topics such as insurance. Other interviewees describe friendships that have moved beyond job-related conversations into deeper interpersonal bonds. In summary, the dynamics of the Getting Ahead program were positive and long-lasting.

### *5.4 The Setting and Achieving of Goals*

One of the best measures of success when considering the overall impact and success of the Getting Ahead program is investigators' ability to reach individual goals. We attempt to evaluate this by looking at the SMART goals investigators set at the end of the program and measuring the extent to which their experience with Getting Ahead helped them achieve these goals. Through the examination of this relationship, we can better understand what people seek to learn when they enter GA and determine how to revise and tailor the Haven's implementation of the program to best serve the needs and expectations of individual participants. As a former Haven resident and Getting Ahead participant said, "If you don't have any goals whatsoever in life, where are you going to go?"

#### *5.4.1 Types of Goals*

The overarching theme of the participants' SMART goals was the pursuit of financial stability. Between the ten participants interviewed, when asked about important goals, the overwhelming majority listed:

- Finding affordable housing,



- Finding a job, and / or
- Leading a healthier lifestyle.
- Other notable goals included:
  - Getting a car,
  - Obtaining a degree,
  - Finding more time for oneself, and
  - Helping out family members.
- Development of Goals

Nearly all investigators had already set some kind of large-scale goal for themselves before entering the Getting Ahead program. Many noted that they felt that GA might help them achieve this pre-existing goal, and the view that Getting Ahead might be the means of accomplishing an end was a significant factor in their participation in the program. The majority of SMART goals developed as a part of the Getting Ahead program were small goals that checked progress or otherwise supplemented the accomplishment of this pre-existing goal. In one instance, the original goal was to buy a car, and subsequently the SMART goal developed was to obtain a drivers license—a necessity if one is to own and drive a car. In another example, an individual had set a broad goal: to lead a healthier lifestyle. Their SMART goal—to lower their sodium intake—was a small, manageable step that helped them achieve their larger goal.

#### *5.4.2 Achievement of Goals*

Those who felt that Getting Ahead played a significant role in helping them accomplish their goals attributed their success to the program's four main factors

- The Breaking Down of Large Goals into Incremental Steps:

Breaking down large goals into small, clear steps gave investigators a vision of each step to take in order to achieve their goals. Breaking the goals down made them seem less challenging and daunting.

- An Emphasis on Accomplishable Goals:

Focusing on feasible goals was beneficial as each individual accomplishment instilled a sense of optimism and empowerment in many investigators. When the investigators were faced with new and unfamiliar steps, they were able to refer back to small accomplishments and use this confidence to their advantage.



- Writing Goals Down:

By writing goals down on paper, participants were able to establish a clear roadmap to achieving goals. The physical list of goals and steps helped goals seem concrete and realistic and not simply ideas and distant dreams.

- Practicing with Small Goals:

Practicing with small goals helped investigators understand how to obtain larger ones.

#### *5.4.3 Maintaining goals*

The majority of the participants interviewed were able to achieve at least one of their SMART goals, and they attributed much of their success to the Getting Ahead program and the Haven staff. While the initial accomplishment of these goals is noteworthy, an equal measure success is the *maintenance* of these goals and lasting lifestyle changes. Many of the investigators completed the Getting Ahead program and stated that they were able to achieve goals that they had set for themselves, yet at the time we interviewed these participants, a number had lost this achievement. Two particularly poignant examples are two investigators who initially secured housing, but were, at the time of interview, in search of housing again. As one investigator mentioned, “it is easy to set goals and initially accomplish them, but the hardest part is keeping and maintaining them.”

The Getting Ahead program provided some tools for long-term maintenance of goals. In some cases, as discussed in other sections, investigators maintained relationships with the facilitators or other investigators after the program, providing an informal support structure. In addition, one interviewee felt that the GA program provided a new perspective on life’s challenges. This interviewee suffered a setback in life “but thanks to the program I know that a step backward doesn’t mean failure.”

While these aspects of the GA program were helpful in supporting investigators, one area where the GA program could be improved is building in a more structured system for helping investigators stay motivated and maintain their goals over the long term. Such structures might include connecting GA graduates through social media as well as regular GA reunions at the Haven.

#### *5.5 Conclusion*

This program forced its participants to reflect on their lives—their history, their circumstances, their resources, and their behavior. The reactions to this varied—some



found it emotionally taxing to the point that it was extremely difficult to manage, while others felt it was particularly liberating. Many found that the honest, objective assessment was emotionally strenuous, yet noted that an objective evaluation of themselves and their livelihood was essential if they were to experience to any personal growth. One participant mentioned that one thing they would change about the program is to alert people about the emotional toll it takes on a person, because many do not have the mental energy necessary to deal with the emotions that come with the program. Alerting participants about the emotional requirements of the program could help investigators mentally prepare for the program, though this would have to be advertised carefully so as not to exclude male participants who might initially be less comfortable with this emotion work.

Getting Ahead is designed to give participants tools to succeed; the program's focus is on helping the participants learn useful life skills and behaviors applicable to their daily life. The frequently-referenced "soft skills", or social skills, were helpful in many situations, from determining appropriate workplace behaviors and speech patterns to increasing social networks. The program also focuses on teaching the hard skills of money management, particularly budgeting. Many interviewees felt that learning these hard skills has greatly enhanced the quality of their lives. Many cited the ability to understand and manage budgets and job-search skills like interviewing and résumé building as tools

Overall, the skills participants gained from the program varied. Some mentioned that they were able to get along much better with people such as their employers. Others mentioned that Getting Ahead helped them stop judging others so quickly and instead recognize the different means of self-expression. Other changes participants made in their lives after the program included having a more goal-oriented life plan, changing their mannerisms, and becoming more socially attuned. The lifestyle changes made by these individuals had significant impacts on their self-confidence and general sense of well-being, and many interviewees reported that they feel better about themselves and more empowered as a result of this program. While such improvements should not be dismissed, self-reports of improvements, as measured in real economic terms, are notably absent.





## Appendix A. GA Modules in Original Workbook

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