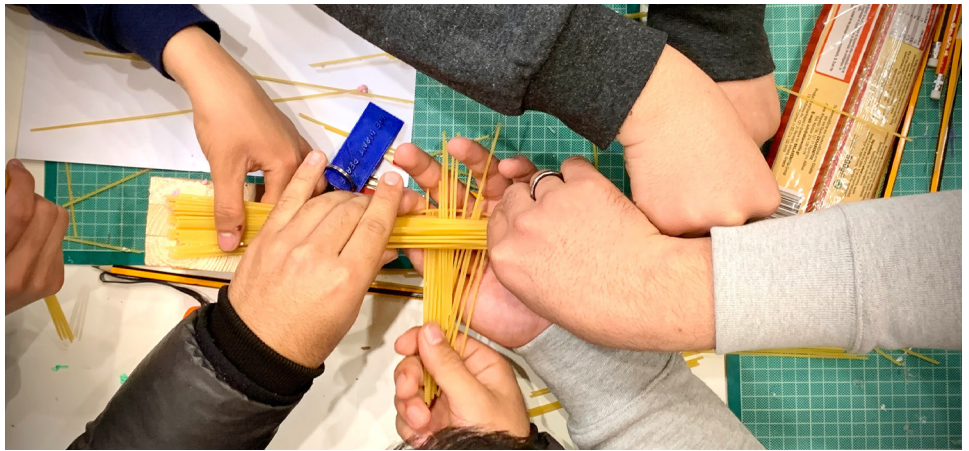


# MIT D-Lab

Monitoring, Evaluation  
& Learning D-Brief  
October 2020



## EVALUATION QUESTIONS

1. How effectively has the program operated to date? What areas need to be improved in order to make the program more effective and impactful?
2. How well has the program been adapting to changes? What factors drove adaptation and allowed adaptation to happen?
3. What has been the impact of the program on D-Lab students and Faros staff?

## Reflections on the Evolution of the Horizon Center for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

The Horizon Center in Athens, Greece--a collaboration between the MIT D-Lab Humanitarian Innovation program and Faros, a Greek NGO working with refugees in Athens--aims to teach unaccompanied refugee youth technical skills and the design process to strengthen their confidence and agency. Since its inception in June 2017, the Horizon Center program has gone through several changes to meet the diverse and ever-shifting needs of the refugee youth, primarily adolescent boys. Beginning with ad-hoc workshop-style classes, Faros established the Horizon Center in late 2018 as a safe place for refugee youth to learn the design process, gain a variety of technical skills, make new friends, and receive mentorship and services from Faros staff. As of late 2019, the program adopted a modular curriculum to allow new participants to join mid-cycle, accommodating the highly mobile nature of this population.

Throughout the life of the program, MIT D-Lab students have visited the Horizon Center to teach and facilitate classes at the center, as well as interact with and learn from the center's staff and the refugee youth themselves. After three years of developing and adapting to changes, the program's founders decided to reflect on the Horizon Center's evolution, assessing how the program has performed up to this point and learning what they can do to improve it. This reflection took shape as a formative process evaluation in the summer of 2020.

## KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

1. The program is highly flexible and adapts frequently and quickly to changes. This adaptability is both a strength and a weakness, as it allows the program to meet the boys' changing needs, but at the potential cost of staff fatigue and uncertainty around the program's mission.
2. The Faros staff highly values the integration of design training into psychosocial support for the boys. However, more frequent high-quality training is needed to strengthen instructors' confidence in teaching design.
3. While Faros and MIT D-Lab staff and students have established meaningful connections with the youth, language and cultural barriers often present challenges when it comes to teaching the material and cultivating even deeper relationships.
4. The program's mission and goals need to be more clearly defined and communicated to all stakeholders.
5. The program has made a positive impact on both MIT D-Lab students and Faros staff in terms of skills, behavioral changes, and future career trajectories.

## METHODS

The data collection methods utilized for the evaluation were an MIT D-Lab and Faros staff survey, an MIT D-Lab student survey, two staff focus groups, and a student focus group.

**Staff survey:** A 35-question survey asked D-Lab and Faros staff working on the program about their experience with the program, their perception of the current program's strengths and weaknesses, their thoughts on the program's adaptability, and the impact the program had on them personally. Ten staff (out of 15) responded to the survey, for a 67% response rate. Sample questions included:

- Which feature(s) of the Design Program do you believe is making the strongest impact on youth?
- What do you see as the most critical problems encountered while implementing the program?
- How confident are you with the program's readiness to face uncertainty, unpredictability, and risk? For example, if another major external disruption happens, does the program have the ability to adapt quickly and still create a positive impact for the youth?

**Student survey:** A 28-question survey asked D-Lab students for their thoughts on their experiences at the center and the program's impact on their learning, personal growth, and future trajectory. Eight students (out of 21) responded to the survey, for a 38% response rate. Sample questions included:

- How knowledgeable do you feel about the following topics BEFORE and AFTER the trip? (ex: participatory design approaches, youth psychosocial support, time management, etc.)
- What were some successes and challenges you faced while participating in the program?
- Did your ideas and perceptions about refugee youth change after your participation in the program? If so, how?

**Staff Focus Groups:** Four staff members (2 D-Lab staff and 2 Faros staff) who had worked very closely with the program since its establishment were invited to share their input during two focus groups. Some original staff members had left the program and some of the staff interviewed had been in the program for about 9 months. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. The focus groups gave respondents a space for reflection on changes the program had experienced, the factors that drove those changes, and factors that allowed the changes to happen. It was also an opportunity for staff to closely examine areas of the program that they believe need improvement.

**Student Focus Group:** D-Lab has brought four groups of students on two-week trips to the Horizon Center: one in 2017 and three between January 2019 and January 2020. Six students and alumni who previously participated in these trips were invited to share more of their experiences with the program, their perceptions of the program's strengths and weaknesses, and areas of improvement they believe will help the program better serve the boys.

## FINDINGS

**1. The program is highly flexible and adapts frequently and quickly to change. This adaptability is both a strength and a weakness, as it allows the program to meet the boys' changing needs, but at the potential cost of staff fatigue and uncertainty around the program's mission.**

Eighty percent of staff believe that the program has been adapting effectively and efficiently to changes. These adaptations are mostly driven by the staff's commitment to meeting the needs of the boys, the staff's willingness to adopt changes, the collaboration between D-Lab and Faros, and the flexible curriculum. The staff's positive attitude, mindset, and acknowledgement of challenges the boys face (frequent mobility, lack of basic needs, formal schooling, and trauma) have driven the program's flexibility and adaptiveness to uncover pedagogy that can best retain and support the youth. While 60% of the staff believe the program has the right amount of adaptiveness, 40% believe it is too adaptive, making it hard for the staff to keep up with the changes. Some respondents perceive the program's constant changes to be adding even more unpredictability to the boys' already unpredictable lives.

*"Because we have a 'beneficiary-first' approach, we are always willing to change the program to benefit the participants. I have great confidence that we will always be willing to do this."*

*"I think it is good, but sometimes I think we adapt too much and too fast. Working with a population that presumably carries trauma requires us to consider the abrupt changes because they are in need of structure and predictability."*

*"When I joined, the team had this attitude already. They were willing to adjust any part of the program at any time according to the need of the beneficiaries."*

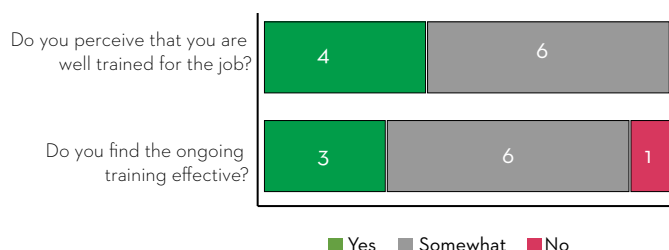
## 2. The Faros staff highly values the integration of design training into psychosocial support for the boys. However, more frequent high-quality training is needed to strengthen instructors' confidence in teaching design.

At the Horizon Center, youth not only have the opportunity to gain technical skills, but they also learn interpersonal skills, from strengthening self-confidence in designing a product for themselves, to strengthening their empathetic skills in designing a product for their friends and larger communities. In addition, they have access to individual psychological support on site. This unique combination, while beneficial to the youth, can pose a challenge when recruiting and training staff on these specific skill sets.

To that end, MIT D-Lab staff have offered a Training-for-Trainers curriculum to Faros staff, which Faros staff report has been a positive and supportive resource. However, when asked about the major areas of improvement for the program, the training curriculum was one of the top two areas mentioned. When asked, "Do you perceive you are well-trained for the job?," six out of ten staff respondents answered "Somewhat," while only four said "Yes." Similarly, when asked "Do you find the ongoing training effective?," only three out of ten respondents said "Yes," while six respondents answered "Somewhat" and one respondent answered "No."

*"The combination of the design program and the psychosocial support - that combination is the strength of the program. Both of them are good, but the better we can integrate the two, the more beneficial it will be to our participants." - Staff member*

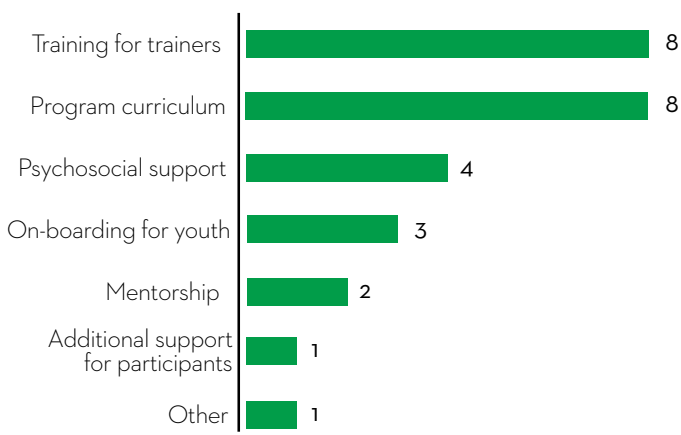
Staff felt that they need more training on the design curriculum. (Staff survey, n=10)



*"I often find myself avoiding teaching a design class, because I don't feel like I understand all the classes to their full extent. I know that each class needs some preparation before actually teaching it, but I often feel stressed out by this." - Staff member*

When asked about the programmatic areas that need more focus, the Training-for-Trainers and the program curriculum were the top two responses.

Staff felt that the two most important programmatic areas to focus on were the **training for trainers** and the **program curriculum**. (Staff Survey, n=10)



## 3. While Faros and MIT D-Lab staff and students have established meaningful connections with the youth, language and cultural barriers often present challenges when it comes to teaching the material and cultivating even deeper relationships.

Faros staff acknowledged that the language divide between staff and youth participants makes the program's implementation and delivery more difficult. While all current staff are committed to meeting the boys' needs, the lack of language skills at the center is understood to be a major area for improvement. When asked about areas for program improvement during the focus group, a managerial staff member responded, "I need to include language training to a much higher quality...Participation of the program will be improved if we also include languages."

While recalling their experiences at the center, some students mentioned that language and a lack of understanding of the boys' cultures made it difficult for them to communicate and fully support the boys.

*"Having more translators brought more kids in because they never had someone there to be able to translate for them." - MIT D-Lab student*

*“There was so much cultural complexity that we just don’t understand how to be as fair as humanly possible, and having 1 translator for 2 languages just doesn’t cut it.” - MIT D-Lab student*

#### **4. The program’s mission and goals need to be more clearly defined and communicated to all stakeholders.**

When asked to select the most critical problems encountered while implementing the program, eight out of ten staff selected “Too few staff,” four out of ten chose “Unclear mission and strategy,” and four out of ten chose “Lack of resources.” The focus groups revealed that these issues are interrelated: staff and resources are stretched thin because the program is trying to meet so many different needs.

*“We need to say to them: this is when it will finish and when it finishes, this is what you can expect.”  
-Staff member*

*“There are challenges focusing on the vision, especially when there are so many needs that the participants are facing. Being able to focus the staff correctly so that they respond to the needs that we can provide well [is important].” - Staff member*

#### **5. The program has made a positive impact on both MIT D-Lab students and Faros staff in terms of skills, behavioral changes, and future career trajectories.**

The program not only improved the Faros staff’s skills, particularly in teaching and facilitating the design process with youth, it also brought them a sense of purpose and fulfillment while working with the refugee youth population. Staff reported utilizing the design process, mindsets, and technical skills they learned from the Horizon Center in their day-to-day lives outside of work. The program also strengthened their knowledge of the humanitarian field and the refugee crisis.

When asked to rank how knowledgeable they felt about 11 topics before and after engaging in the program, staff members reported the most progress in participatory design approaches, understanding the humanitarian sector and humanitarian issues, and teaching and facilitation.

*“The program helps me to understand refugees even more and pushes me to adapt it to their needs and knowledge.” - Staff member*

*“I am not a very practical person, and the Design Program at Horizon Center has really helped me with this. I have felt that my way of thinking has become quicker and sharper than it used to be.”  
-Staff member*

The program has also had a significant impact on the majority of D-Lab students who participated, especially in terms of their skills, career path, and perspective on the refugee population. In a survey question asking what they did after visiting Athens, five out of eight students responded that they continued to engage with humanitarian issues directly, and four out of eight students applied the skills they had learned from the program to other personal projects.

When asked to rank how knowledgeable they felt about 11 topics before and after participating in the program, D-Lab students showed the most progress in understanding the humanitarian sector and humanitarian issues, youth psychosocial support, the needs and problems facing the community, and teaching and facilitation.

Notably, six of the eight students surveyed said they envisioned pursuing a career in the humanitarian innovation sector.

*“I know now how much I value interpersonal work with impacted communities in humanitarian and advocacy settings, and I’ll bring that knowledge with me to future work.” - MIT D-Lab student*

*“I don’t think I had a clear idea of what my personal contribution could look like before participating. After, it became clear that I did well in a setting like the Horizon Center and could contribute through on-the-ground work like this.” - MIT D-Lab student*

*“I have always wanted to work in the international development space, but now I think I will actively consider how I can work with traditionally marginalized populations and how I can integrate co-design into anything I do.” - MIT D-Lab student*



For some students, the experience at the Horizon Center was emotionally challenging. When asked to recall their experiences in Athens, several students shared honestly.

*“Most of the time [it] is not fun, it’s not glamorous. It is actually heart-breaking, hard, it kind of melts your heart and belief system.” - MIT D-Lab student*

*“It is a very emotional experience, especially coming from a similar background as these boys.”  
-MIT D-Lab student*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following four recommendations were developed based on the findings of this evaluation and are intended to strengthen the program’s implementation and effectiveness, with the goal of increasing its impact on the refugee youth participants.

1. As a first step, the team should clarify the program’s mission, assess its strengths, and update its theory of change. This exercise would clearly define the mission the program is hoping to achieve, the services it offers, and what participants can expect once they complete their engagement at the Horizon Center. Given the frequent changes the program makes to meet its participants’ needs, a periodic all-staff meeting to revisit the theory of change will be beneficial. This work should involve the Center’s entire staff to ensure cohesiveness.
2. When recruiting new staff, it would be helpful to consider the backgrounds and language skills that would best match the refugee youth populations the center is serving. Traits that indicate a high level of adaptability and commitment to the program’s mission should be identified during the recruitment process. If possible, it would also be desirable to recruit personnel with a background in design.
3. The Training-for-Trainers curriculum can be modified to bolster the instructors’ confidence in teaching the design process. This might take the form of more frequent training (in person if possible), a reduced number of technical classes so instructors can focus deeper on a few skills at a time, and confidence-building practice as part of the training.
4. It is important to engage MIT D-Lab students who are not only passionate about the work of the program, but who are also equipped with a deep understanding of the boys’ circumstances prior to visiting the center, so that they can better mentor and teach them. Students with the language skills needed at the center should also be encouraged to apply. In addition to a pre-departure orientation by D-Lab staff, it would be beneficial for students who have gone on past trips to help prepare new students for the nature of the work and the environment they will work in. New students should understand that the trip will be psychologically and emotionally challenging, given that they will be interacting with refugees close to them in age, but who are living in extremely different and challenging situations. It will be critical to engage in regular debriefing and reflection opportunities during and after the trip, so that the D-Lab students can process their emotions and work effectively.



## EVALUATION NEXT STEPS

The evaluation team recommends prioritizing Faros's theory of change development process in the next few months. Because the program's mission and goals are its guiding stars, it will be necessary for staff and participants to align these goals so they can coherently implement the program's components and effectively serve the youth. MIT D-Lab's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning team is also working closely with the program's staff members to introduce several evaluation tools that can measure the program's impact on the youth.

Find out more about the  
MIT D-Lab Humanitarian Innovation Program:

<https://d-lab.mit.edu/innovation-practice/humanitarian-innovation>

## ABOUT MIT D-LAB

MIT D-Lab works with people around the world to develop and advance collaborative approaches and practical solutions to global poverty challenges. The mission is pursued through our academics program of more than 20 MIT classes and student research and fieldwork opportunities; our research groups spanning a variety of sectors and approaches; and a group of participatory innovation programs we call innovation practice.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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