

Full Length Research Paper

Collaborative evaluation as a catalyst for psychological well-being: A qualitative study of students' stress, belonging, and empowerment

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First-generation, low-income students often experience a unique array of psychological, academic, and emotional challenges that impact both academic retention and well-being. While federally funded programs provide crucial academic and structural support, their evaluations have historically prioritized quantifiable academic outcomes, often overlooking students' psychosocial development. This qualitative study addresses this gap by embedding the Model for Collaborative Evaluations (MCE) into an evaluation of a pre-college support initiative for first-generation and low-income students. It also examines the extent to which the evaluation process contributed to students' psychological well-being. This study explored whether the collaborative evaluation process supported stress regulation, sense of belonging, and empowerment. Data were drawn from a year-long engagement with high school students and three program staff members using in-depth interviews, participant journals, and focus group transcripts. The findings, analyzed using Braun and Clarke thematic analysis approach, revealed that the evaluation process was perceived by participants as beneficial. Students described the evaluation sessions as safe spaces for self-expression and emotional reflection, allowing them to reconceptualize their stress as communal rather than isolating. This paper contributes to the evaluation and psychology literature by reframing evaluation as a psychosocial process that promotes resilience and self-efficacy in underserved youth.

Key words: Collaborative evaluation, psychological well-being, first-generation students, empowerment, belonging, stress reappraisal, qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, federally funded college access programs such as ABC¹, have played a critical role for higher education students who are the first in their families to attend college and come from low-income households. While these programs have traditionally

been evaluated through academic performance indicators (e.g., college enrollment, grade point average, graduation rates), they tend to minimize the emotional and psychological challenges faced by participants. Such challenges encompass social marginalization, self-doubt, heightened academic stress, and a lack of perceived belonging in educational environments shaped by dominant cultural norms. Recognizing that these psychosocial factors can influence students' educational outcomes, it is essential to examine how evaluation

¹For confidentiality purposes, all data have been fully anonymized, any reported numbers have been modified, and this evaluation is presented purely as an illustrative example of applying the Model for Collaborative Evaluations rather than as a generalizable empirical study.

processes can potentially serve as a site of psychological support.

Research in psychology and evaluation increasingly recognizes the act of evaluation not simply as a mechanism of oversight or performance tracking but as an opportunity to facilitate dialogue, reflection, and growth. The Model for Collaborative Evaluations (Rodríguez-Campos, 2015; Rodríguez-Campos and Rincones-Gómez, 2013; Rodríguez-Campos et al., 2022) offers a structured framework for stakeholder² engagement that aligns with principles of psychological empowerment and constructivist learning. It is guided by six components: identify the situation, clarify the expectations, establish a collective commitment, ensure open communication, encourage effective practices, and follow specific guidelines. Unlike traditional models that center the evaluator's authority, the Model for Collaborative Evaluations (MCE) foregrounds shared decision-making, the negotiation of expectations, and the cultivation of mutual trust between evaluators and collaboration members (CMs). This reconceptualization of evaluation has important implications for how youth experience their own agency and value within educational systems.

Within the context of the ABC program examined in this study, the MCE framework was implemented to investigate how collaborative evaluation processes might support the psychological well-being of student participants. The theoretical foundation draws from the fields of organizational psychology, developmental psychology, and clinical mental health, integrating insights from self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), social belonging research (Walton and Cohen, 2011), and narrative identity development (Smith, 2022; Lee, 2023). This study argues that collaborative evaluation, when implemented with intentionality and fidelity, activates key psychological resources that support youth resilience, particularly for students navigating structural disadvantage.

Research objectives

This study examines how the six components of the MCE support psychological well-being by (1) reducing stress through reflection, (2) fostering belonging via structural involvement, and (3) promoting empowerment through leadership. This article examines how the six interactive

components of the MCE were operationalized within an ABC evaluation. It explores how these components shaped participants' emotional states, perceptions of agency, and sense of involvement. Rather than approaching evaluation as an ancillary activity, this study treats it as a core intervention mechanism with psychosocial consequences worthy of empirical and theoretical attention. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to a growing discourse that positions evaluation not only as a technical tool, but as a relational and developmental process embedded in the lives of those it purports to assess.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The psychological literature conceptualizes well-being as a multidimensional construct comprising autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) asserts that individuals are more likely to thrive when these three basic psychological needs are met. For first-generation, low-income students, institutional and interpersonal experiences that threaten any one of these dimensions (e.g., exclusion from decision-making, invisibility in academic settings, constant high-stakes assessment) can compromise mental health and academic success. Accordingly, practices that foster autonomy and connection are essential. Collaborative evaluation presents a promising structure through which such psychosocial nourishment can occur.

The significance of belonging as a psychological construct has been demonstrated across multiple domains in education. Walton and Cohen (2011) demonstrated that even brief, targeted interventions designed to enhance belongingness among marginalized students yielded long-term academic and psychological gains. Their work suggests that social perceptions of being valued within a community can shape students' identity development and stress response patterns. In parallel, Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy identifies mastery experiences and social modeling as key contributors to an individual's perceived competence and resilience (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Yin, 2018). These theories collectively underpin the rationale for involving students as CMs in program evaluations, allowing them to articulate their experiences and co-construct solutions.

Within evaluation theory, stakeholder-centered approaches have steadily gained traction. Pioneered in the fields of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman et al., 2018, 2025; Fetterman et al., 2018), responsive evaluation (Stake, 2003), and utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008), these models have challenged traditional hierarchies that position evaluators as neutral, external experts. The MCE (Rodríguez-Campos and Rincones-Gómez, 2013) builds upon this work while providing a formalized and replicable structure for stakeholder engagement. By operationalizing six

²The traditional term "stakeholder" refers to individuals, groups, or entities directly or indirectly affected by an evaluation, including those unaware of it. It gained prominence through recognizing those involved in or affected by a course of action (Merriam-Webster). While alternatives like "interest holders" and "affected parties" have been proposed, efforts continue to establish a well-founded, long-term replacement with a strong rationale. In the meantime, we use this term interchangeably with these newer terms to promote genuine involvement, valuing multifaceted perspectives and influences in decision-making (Fetterman et al., 2018).

interactive components, the MCE establishes a rigorous, holistic, and adaptive model for evaluating complex systems.

The MCE has been applied in business, nonprofit, and educational settings with consistent benefits. Rodríguez-Campos and Rincones-Gómez (2013) documented increased organizational trust, communication, and stakeholder satisfaction across multiple projects utilizing the model. Although most applications of MCE have focused on systems-level improvements, the present study represents a novel contribution in its examination of the psychological implications for individual student participants. This integration of evaluation methodology with constructs from developmental psychology, counseling, and organizational theory helps reframe evaluation as both a technical and humanistic endeavor (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Stringer, 2014).

Scholars from leading institutions have highlighted the transformative power of engagement in shaping motivation and well-being. Hill (2022) emphasized how culturally responsive environments promote belonging and academic achievement among historically underserved students, while Santos (2020) demonstrated the importance of emotional literacy and gratitude in promoting adolescent mental health. From an organizational perspective, Gino (2016) argues that empowering individuals to participate in decision-making improves engagement and reduces burnout, insights highly applicable to youth development programs.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives support examining how collaborative evaluation may serve to optimize program effectiveness and enhance the well-being and agency of youth participants. The present study bridges these strands of theory by applying the MCE in a high school-based college access setting and analyzing its effect on student mental health constructs, including stress reappraisal, belonging, and empowerment.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was embedded within a larger mixed-methods project focused on evaluating the outcomes of an ABC program at a public university in the southeastern United States (Cabrera, 2024). The qualitative component was specifically designed to explore how the MCE functioned both as an evaluation framework and as a psychosocial intervention that supported students' well-being. Its components framed the year-long engagement with student participants and guided all activities, from question formulation to data interpretation (Torraco, 2016; Tuckman and Jensen, 1977). This study adopted a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing the co-construction of meaning and the importance of participants' subjective experiences in shaping both process and outcomes.

Participants included twelve high school students (six juniors and six seniors) who met the eligibility criteria for the federal ABC program: first-generation college status and low-income background. The sample also consisted of three program staff members who worked closely with the students throughout the academic year. Students were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a variety of backgrounds and perspectives, including variations in academic standing, and leadership participation. All participants and their guardians provided informed consent in accordance with institutional review board protocols.

Data collection occurred throughout the academic year and consisted of three primary sources: transcripts from four evaluation-focused group sessions, nine semi-structured interviews conducted at mid- and endpoints in the academic year, and student journal reflections completed monthly. Group sessions were facilitated by the evaluation team and included structured opportunities for students to provide feedback on program design, discuss personal stressors and coping strategies, and reflect on their role in shaping the program. Interview protocols emphasized emotional responses to program activities, perceptions of influence, and experiences of belonging. Journals invited students to document their evolving self-perceptions, sources of stress and support, and contributions to the program.

All protocols were pilot tested with two students to ensure clarity. Participants were recruited through direct outreach by program staff and evaluators, and informed consent was obtained from all students and guardians. Two independent coders analyzed data using NVivo, resolving discrepancies collaboratively. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged from the final focus groups, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative analytic process.

Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. An initial codebook was developed inductively, and then refined to reflect key constructs from the MCE and self-determination theory. Data triangulation was achieved through the integration of the three data sources and through member-checking exercises in which preliminary findings were shared with participants for validation. This reflexive process was consistent with the study's constructivist stance and helped ensure the credibility and authenticity of the final themes.

RESULTS

Three key themes emerged from the qualitative data, each reflecting distinct yet interconnected psychological outcomes associated with the collaborative evaluation process. These themes were: (1) Stress reappraisal through shared reflection, (2) Belonging through structural involvement, and (3) Empowerment through influence and decision-making.

Each theme was present across focus groups, interviews, and journals, emphasizing its significance in participants' lived experiences throughout the program year. The six MCE components were found to interact with and facilitate these outcomes at various stages of the evaluation. Each emergent theme corresponds to

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Table 1. Participant demographics (N = 24).

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	14	58
Male	10	42
Race/Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	15	62.5
Black/African American	5	20.8
White (non-Hispanic)	3	12.5
Asian	1	4.2
Age (years)		
14–15	6	25
16–17	12	50
18+	6	25
First-generation College Student	21	87.5

Table 2. Qualitative data collection sources and timeline.

Data source	Description	Frequency	Duration (min)	Timeframe
Focus groups	3 student groups, 1 staff group	4 totals	60–75	Weeks 2, 6, 12
Individual interviews	Students (n = 12), Staff (n = 4)	16 totals	30–45	Weeks 4–8
Reflective journals	Weekly submissions by students (n= 24)	288 entries	10–20	Weeks 1–12

distinct but overlapping components of the MCE and illustrates how the evaluation process itself became a source of psychosocial support and identity development (Tables 1 and 2).

The first theme, Stress reappraisal through shared reflection, captured how students came to view their emotional and academic stress as a shared experience rather than an individual failing. Focus group sessions facilitated using as baseline the “identify the situation” and “ensure open communication” components of the MCE allowed students to verbalize their internal stressors, often for the first time. One junior reflected, “Hearing everyone say they were overwhelmed made me feel like I was not weak; it’s just hard.” These conversations normalized emotional distress and shifted the attribution of stress from personal deficiency to systemic challenge. Over time, students began using evaluation meetings as emotional check-ins, integrating expressive coping into the program’s structure.

The second theme, belonging through structural involvement, highlighted the emotional importance of being actively involved in program decision-making. Regarding the “clarify expectations” and “establish a collective commitment” components of the MCE, students collaboratively defined what support should look like within the ABC context. Several participants reported that

their ideas being solicited and acted upon marked a turning point in how they viewed themselves within the academic system. One senior noted, “They asked what we needed and actually changed stuff. I never had that in school.” The students’ perception of belonging was not abstract but embodied in visible changes to tutoring formats, enrichment activities, and communication practices. This theme underscores that structural involvement, where students’ feedback directly informs programmatic adjustments, can serve as a powerful mechanism for cultivating belonging.

The third theme, empowerment through influence and decision-making, emerged most strongly in the final quarter of the academic year, consistent with the “encourage effective practices” and “follow specific guidelines” components. By that time, students had not only shaped the program’s direction but had also begun to articulate future-oriented identities grounded in agency. Several journal entries documented students’ recognition of their evolving roles, such as, “I have always been the one helped. Now I am someone who helps fix things.” These reflections signaled a shift in how students perceived their own competence and responsibility, both within and beyond the program.

Together, these themes reveal that collaborative evaluation, rooted in the MCE, fosters more than

programmatic responsiveness. It creates a psychosocial ecosystem where vulnerability is honored, involvement is operationalized, and personal efficacy is nurtured. The following discussion examines the broader implications of these findings for educational evaluation, youth development, and mental health promotion.

Stress reappraisal through shared reflection

In the beginning stages, students expressed anxiety about academic performance, future uncertainty, and family expectations. These feelings, voiced within the MCE component of identifying the situation, set the stage for open emotional sharing. As students engaged in group discussions, their experiences became collectively validated. Many disclosed a shift in perception, including viewing stress as a shared, manageable response rather than a personal failing. One student explained, "I did not know that others were going through the same pressure until we talked about it.

That made it easier to deal with." This theme was especially prevalent within the open communication component, where CMs created space for emotional honesty. The act of witnessing peer vulnerability and offering mutual support initiated a reframing of stress as a collective experience that could be navigated together.

Belonging through structural involvement

As students transitioned into the clarify expectations and establish collective commitment components of the MCE, they were involved in reconfiguring the structure of the program. Through direct input, students helped redesign tutoring schedules, incorporate mental health resources, and lead peer workshops. The shift from passive recipients to active architects of the program signaled a powerful form of involvement. In interviews, students repeatedly mentioned "being heard" and "being taken seriously." One participant stated, "This is the first time in school I feel like I belong; not because I am good at something, but because my ideas matter." Journals and focus groups corroborated these sentiments, emphasizing that institutional responsiveness to student voice cultivated a culture of belonging. This theme extended beyond symbolic involvement to tangible procedural influence.

Empowerment through influence and leadership

During the "Encourage Effective Practices" and "Follow Specific Guidelines" components of the MCE, students were invited to take on leadership roles in the evaluation process, including co-facilitating group activities, presenting interim findings, and mentoring younger peers. Students reflected on how these opportunities

shifted their self-image, specifically from needing support to becoming a source of support. One senior wrote in their journal, "I used to think this program was about getting help, but now I know it is about helping each other grow." The development of leadership identity was particularly evident among students who initially remained quiet during the evaluation but later emerged as vocal contributors. The findings suggest that empowerment was not only the result of being included in decision-making but also of being equipped with the skills and confidence to lead others.

Integrated summary of MCE components and psychological outcomes

The data reveal that each MCE component activated specific psychological pathways. Table 3 illustrates the alignment between components and outcomes. Collaboration fostered shifts in emotional, social, and identity-related domains. These representations highlight how the MCE operates as both an evaluation model and an intervention that promotes resilience and psychological well-being.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that collaborative evaluation transcends its methodological purpose to serve as a powerful psychosocial intervention for historically marginalized youth. By implementing the MCE framework, we created spaces where students transformed from evaluation subjects into active agents of change. Use of the MCE empowered students to become active participants in their development, fostering psychological well-being through shared reflection, structural involvement, and emergent leadership. These findings challenge conventional evaluation paradigms by showing how participatory approaches can generate programmatic insights while fostering resilience, belonging, and empowerment among vulnerable student populations (Rodríguez-Campos and Rincones-Gómez, 2018; Patton, 2015).

The first emergent theme, Stress Reappraisal, underscores the transformative potential of collaborative reflection. Students initially approached the evaluation process with anxiety and self-doubt, but through structured dialogue facilitated by the MCE's "identify the situation" and "ensure open communication" components, these internalized stressors were recontextualized as collective challenges. This finding is consistent with existing literature on the power of dialogic spaces in reducing academic stress (Conley and Domene, 2020). Notably, the safe and supportive environment cultivated by the CMs allowed for vulnerability and validation; conditions necessary for reframing psychological distress as a manageable, shared human experience.

Table 3. Alignment of the MCE components and emergent psychological themes.

MCE component	Stress Reappraisal	Belonging	Empowerment
Identify the situation	Emotional expression	-	-
Clarify the expectations	-	Co-created program goals	-
Establish a collective commitment	-	Mutual respect	Shared responsibility
Ensure open communication	Dialogic safety	Engaged discourse	Collaborative feedback
Encourage effective practices	-	-	Student-led activities
Follow specific guidelines	-	-	Leadership development

The second theme, Belonging, points to the importance of structural responsiveness in creating engaging educational contexts. The MCE's "clarify the expectations" and "establish a collective commitment" components positioned students as co-constructors of programmatic goals and success measures. This finding resonates with prior research on participatory school governance and its effect on students' sense of mattering (Freeman et al., 2007). The procedural shifts enacted in response to student feedback (e.g., the involvement of mental health resources and flexible tutoring formats) provided tangible evidence of student influence. These actions validated students' presence and perspectives, reinforcing a relational model of belonging grounded in mutual accountability and trust.

The third theme, Empowerment, illustrates the psychological shift from passive engagement to active leadership. As students progressed into the "encourage effective practices" and "follow specific guidelines" stages of the MCE, they assumed roles typically reserved for adults or professionals, including session facilitation and peer mentoring. These experiences generated a new sense of agency, reflected in students' language and behavior. This aligns with Zimmerman's (2000) theory of psychological empowerment, which emphasizes the role of participation in decision-making and skill acquisition in shaping self-efficacy. Moreover, empowerment emerged not only as a product of participation but also as a process of identity reconstruction, where students began to perceive themselves as capable contributors to their learning environments.

The interdependence of these three themes underscores the value of collaborative evaluation as an integrative developmental framework. Stress, belonging, and empowerment are not isolated outcomes but interconnected experiences that coalesce in a supportive evaluative space. The MCE's six components guided the process in a way that honored student voice, promoted collaboration in decision-making, and generated meaningful psychological benefits. By embedding students within all stages of the evaluation, the process became a living model of democratic engagement and relational learning.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature that recognizes the role of evaluation not merely as a

technical exercise but as a relational, developmental process with the potential to enhance psychological well-being. In the context of ABC and similar programs serving minoritized populations, collaborative evaluation offers a replicable, evidence-based strategy for fostering resilience, engagement, and leadership. These findings support the argument that when evaluation is done with (not to) students, it can serve as a profound tool for both program improvement and human development.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations warrant consideration. The study's sample was limited to students from a single ABC program at one southeastern university, and its small size, though appropriate for qualitative inquiry, reduces transferability and constrains analysis of demographic variation. The dual role of evaluators and researchers may have shaped responses despite reflexive practices, and the one-year timeframe captured only short-term effects without addressing the durability of psychological benefits. The absence of standardized psychological measures restricted the ability to quantify changes in well-being (Bazeley, 2013). Future studies should address these issues through multi-site research across varied institutional contexts, longitudinal designs following participants through college completion, and mixed-methods approaches integrating validated scales for stress, belonging, and empowerment with qualitative data. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs comparing MCE-based and traditional evaluations could clarify causal links to well-being, while cross-cultural studies would further strengthen generalizability. Figure 1 shows the mapping of MCE components to psychological outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study provides compelling evidence that collaborative evaluation, guided by the MCE, functions as both a tool for data-informed decision-making and a psychologically enriching process for student participants. By involving students as CMs throughout the evaluation, the

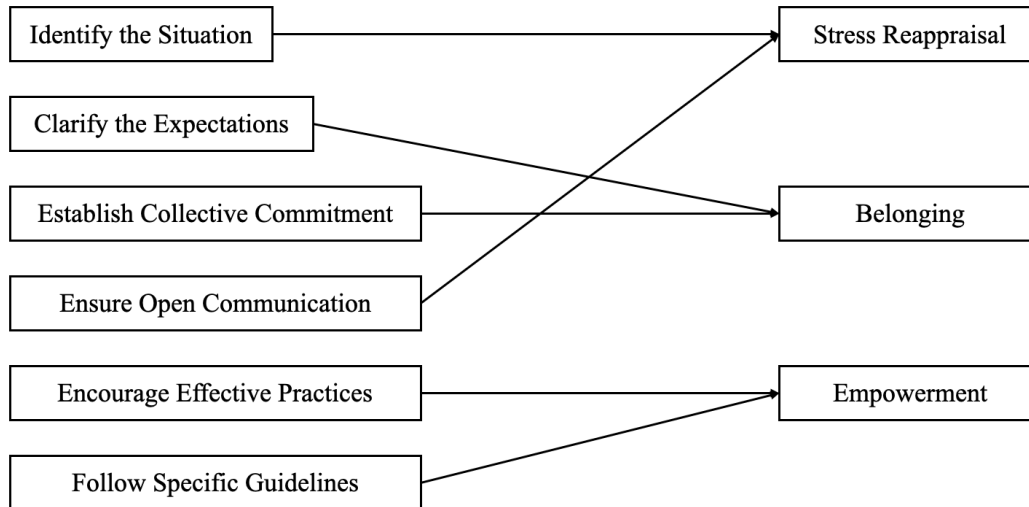


Figure 1. Mapping of MCE components to psychological outcomes.

development of stress reappraisal, sense of belonging, and empowerment was observed. These psychological outcomes are particularly critical for youth from historically marginalized backgrounds, for whom traditional educational structures often lack engagement and responsiveness (Walton and Cohen, 2011).

The integration of the MCE's six components—identify the situation, clarify expectations, establish collective commitment, ensure open communication, encourage effective practices, and follow specific guidelines—enabled students to become co-creators of their learning environments. Rather than viewing evaluation as a one-time measurement tool, students experienced it as a continuous, supportive process of learning, negotiation, and growth. This transformation exemplifies the model's capacity to facilitate meaningful engagement and cultivate psychosocial well-being.

This study advances the scholarly conversation on evaluation by demonstrating that emotional safety, social involvement, and leadership development can be embedded within methodological design. The psychosocial benefits reported by students underscore the importance of designing evaluations that value human relationships and prioritize stakeholder voice. Evaluation, when implemented collaboratively, becomes a formative experience that supports personal development and engagement.

Programs serving adolescents, especially those navigating structural barriers to academic success, should consider collaborative evaluation as an essential component of program design. Evaluators and educators alike must recognize the role of relationship-building, shared decision-making, and structural responsiveness in fostering student development.

Collaborative evaluation, as implemented through the MCE, has the power to shift institutional practices, elevate student voices, and promote emotional resilience,

a sense of belonging, and leadership capacity. By embedding collaborative evaluation into the culture of educational programs, we create opportunities for students to become empowered agents of change in all facets of life.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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