



**girlsBEST (girls Building Economic Success Together) Initiative  
Five-Year Summative Evaluation Report  
(2002 - 2007)**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

September 2007

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**INTRODUCTION**

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This executive report is a summary of key findings from the girlsBEST Initiative Five-Year Summative Evaluation Report, 2002-2007. Highlights include both successes and challenges of the Initiative, as well as lessons learned and plans for the future.

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**History of the girlsBEST Initiative**

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The Women's Foundation created girlsBEST (girls Building Economic Success Together) in response to community input and research. Foundation staff reviewed data about the status of women and girls in Minnesota. The Foundation organized a statewide "listening tour" that involved nearly 200 women and girls in focus group conversations. The focus groups identified that many Minnesota girls face gender-specific barriers that discourage the vision and skill-building for a secure economic future, such as poverty, low wages, lack of job opportunities and training, wage discrimination, sexism in academic counseling, lack of leadership and athletic opportunities for girls, teen pregnancy, poor self-esteem and body image, and violence against girls by men and boys. Pervasive sexism was described as a major issue, along with racism and the lack of culturally appropriate services for women and girls.

A common theme of the listening tour emerged: the need to build opportunities for girls throughout the state. From these experiences the Foundation developed girlsBEST. girlsBEST was formally launched in 2002.

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**Focus of the girlsBEST Initiative**

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Since its inception, the Initiative has focused on preparing girls for an economically secure future by supporting girl-specific programs that strengthen girls' self-esteem, leadership and activism. In one of the first programs of its kind in the nation, the Women's Foundation of Minnesota created the girlsBEST Initiative; a five-year grants program focused on preparing girls for an economically secure future. Specifically, program were designed to strengthen girls' self-esteem, build girls' aspirations for the future, provide academic enrichment and college preparation, offer business and entrepreneurial skill-building, and build leadership and encourage activism on behalf of women and girls.

The girlsBEST Initiative also sought to decrease sexist attitudes and increase commitment to the wellness and economic well-being of Minnesota girls, by supporting two adventurous programs focused specifically on changing public awareness and public attitudes.

To date, the Women's Foundation has awarded more than \$1,000,000 to girlsBEST programs. In 2006, the foundation secured a gift of \$1,000,000 dollars restricted to help create a permanent funding stream for girls. As was true of the first generation of girlsBEST programs, this permanent source of funding is, again, the first of its kind in the nation.

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### Program Description

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**Outcomes.** Each of the participating girlsBEST grantees developed their programs to address one or more of the following Initiative-wide outcomes:

1. Individual girls will increase readiness to achieve economic well-being
2. Supportive environments will lead to increased readiness of girls to achieve economic well being.
3. The public will increase recognition of the values of women and girls to society, and decrease sexist attitudes.
4. Activism will be built for girls' economic well-being in Minnesota.
5. Underserved and underrepresented Minnesota girls will benefit.

**Theory of Change.** girlsBEST was built on an assumption that girls' progress toward economic well-being is incremental and happens over time. Therefore, the program model was designed to provide repeated skill-building opportunities and leadership experiences to move girls from an early awareness of the barriers they confront to an ability to confront those barriers through agency and activism.

For the purposes of girlsBEST, the assumption has been that girls would pass through three distinct, although not necessarily linear, stages of development on the road to economic independence. These assumptions are reflected in Nina Strandberg's conceptual work for the United Nations of identifiable stages women go through in the process of poverty eradication.

The three stages have been defined for girlsBEST as:

1. **Awareness:** Gender awareness, self esteem and personal leadership.
2. **Agency:** Leadership and agency linked to economic well-being.
3. **Activism:** Activism and advocacy to bring about community and systems change.

**Program Tracks.** The girlsBEST program activities were provided in three program "tracks." These tracks serve to illustrate the wide array of program outputs and services that were intended to achieve the program's overarching outcomes.

The three program tracks include: 1) **Academic** in which girls were provided with the knowledge and skills needed to graduate from high school and enter post-secondary education or employment preparation; 2) **Entrepreneurial** activities focusing on girl-planned and girl-led

businesses and money-making ventures, and 3) **Public Education** or advocacy activities in support of women’s equality. Each is described in more detail below.

**Notable Practices.** Over the five-year life of the Initiative, evaluation confirmed that there were several program components that contributed to successful girlsBEST outcomes, which included:

- **Mentoring.** Mentoring and supporting girls to build their comfort, confidence and self-esteem.
- **Cultural Awareness.** A strong focus on cultural awareness, identity and appreciation, particularly among girls of color.
- **Leadership.** The development of leadership, primarily experiential.
- **Outreach.** Outreach to younger, underserved and underrepresented girls.

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### Successes

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There is strong evidence that the girlsBEST programs were successful in achieving both anticipated and unanticipated outcomes, and in providing important knowledge to the youth development field about programming for girls. The girlsBEST Initiative has encountered and created some significant successes, particularly in creating model programs in which girls develop self-esteem, self-confidence and high aspirations. In turn, those self-confident girls are exercising leadership in their schools and communities, making the community a better place for girls and women. The evidence confirms the following results as listed under the outcomes below:

**OUTCOME 1 – Individual girls will increase readiness to achieve economic well-being.** Results show this outcome was achieved in a variety of ways:

*Girls developed exceedingly high career and educational aspirations....*

- **A cadre of self confident girls was built.** The majority of core participants (girls who provided leadership and regularly attended meetings and activities) show a highly developed sense of self and a strong sense that they can accomplish whatever they aspire to. This is one of the stunning accomplishments of girlsBEST, and its strongest outcome. An overwhelming 93% of core group girls believe “I can accomplish whatever I set out to.” In focus groups and interviews, girls exuded self-confidence. They spoke enthusiastically about their goals, their aspirations and their firm belief in their ability to attain them. Evidence suggests that this outcome derives from the strong support of multiple mentors, including: site mentors/staff, professional women in the community, women of the same cultural heritage as participants, women business owners, and older girls and peers
- **Girls’ aspirations were successfully built, particularly for college.** The girlsBEST Initiative has been successful in building confident girls who aspire to high school completion and to post-secondary education. Nearly all (96%) of the participating (survey respondent) girls agreed or strongly agreed that they would graduate from high school. Nearly equal proportions of the girls agreed that they will go to college. When asked to specify their highest level of educational attainment, a clear majority, (64%) of the girls reported that they would have an Associate degree, a Bachelor’s degree or a graduate degree. Site mentors reported that few girls had parents with post-secondary

background. Therefore, the sites were able to provide girls with what would otherwise be an unobtainable sense of the importance of higher education.

*Girls are graduating from high school and going to college....*

- **Enhanced graduation rates and college admissions.** In addition to building girls' aspirations, the girlsBEST program has succeeded in increasing high school graduation rates, significantly so among immigrant girls and girls of color. Sites that tracked graduation and college admission reported significant increases in both graduation and college entrance. This strongly suggests that the program's emphases on college visits, orientations, and hands-on college preparation have been successful. This is also another indicator of the success of girlsBEST programming in finding various ways to convince young women that their economic futures will be significantly improved with educational preparation.

*Girls know the fundamentals of economic well-being....*

- **The Initiative provided girls with the fundamental underpinnings of economic well being.** Economic well-being is strongly founded on the ability to envision the future and set goals. In girlsBEST, girls clearly learned to set goals; 93% of the 328 core group girls responding to surveys over two years agreed or strongly agreed that they knew how to set goals. Over 85 % of the girls agreed that they knew what kind of career they wanted to have and that they knew what education or training they needed to prepare for that career.

*Girls are leaders in their schools and communities....*

- **Girls developed leadership skills.** A significant 87% of the core group of girlsBEST participants agreed or strongly agreed that they are leaders, in their schools and in their communities. Girls were given many opportunities for leadership: ranging from the simple planning of project activities to school involvement to more complex leadership activities such as launching community drug awareness presentations. As a result, girls have confidence in their leadership skills and communities are more aware of the enormous contributions girls can make.

*Girls are proud of themselves and their cultural traditions....*

- **Culturally appropriate and sensitive programming.** There is good qualitative evidence that girls of color learned more about their own cultures, and their own unique cultural assets. This learning has helped to develop a strong sense of self-confidence and pride in self. Programs emphasized culture in various ways, ranging from the American Indian Daughters of Tradition curriculum, to the Ogichidaakweg model which emphasized youth leadership and youth organizing approaches that are culturally appropriate and effective in a reservation context. Girls were also provided with numerous opportunities to meet with women of color in various leadership roles, in their communities and professions.

**OUTCOME 2 – Supportive environments will lead to increased readiness of girls to achieve economic well being.** Results show this outcome was achieved:

*Girls feel women and older girls in their communities want them to succeed....*

- **Safe, supportive and nurturing environments were created for girls.** As the data reported over the past five years confirm, the sites have clearly done an extraordinary job of establishing safe, nurturing and supportive environments for girls. An important element of this nurturing environment has been the site mentors themselves. Understanding that many of the girls came from under-resourced schools and sometimes from troubled families, they recognized how important it is for girls to receive consistent support from a caring adult. It is significant that many of the site mentors are of the girls' own culture, providing another dimension of role modeling. A variety of data, including site reports and surveys of girls, confirmed that the girls felt a strong connection to the site mentors, and believed that adults in the girlsBEST program cared about them. In addition, girls developed relationships with professional women in the community, and sometimes with former girlsBEST participants.

**OUTCOME 3 – The public will increase recognition of the values of women and girls to society and reduce sexist attitudes.** Results show this outcome yielded great results:

*Communities value women and girls more....*

- **Perceptions of the value of women and girls increased to some degree in two communities.** Two of the girlsBEST sites were focused on addressing outcome three – the Asian Media Access' What About Us? project (WAU) and the I Am and GoGirls™ project in Red Wing. Findings in this section are specific to these projects. Teens from both groups were educated on the issues of gender inequality, as they pertain to sexual violence in the Asian community, and to the impact of negative media images on girls, body image and eating disorders. In both sites, participating girls developed knowledge and skills – notably media and presentation skills - that have, in turn, helped to build their self-confidence and sense of power to change. Correspondingly, girls in both programs have taken their personal leadership into the larger community. Girls speak to adults and the larger community about the “right and wrong” of gender inequality and sexual violence in the AAPI community, and have made presentations to teens and community members about body image and eating disorders.

While some progress toward reduction of sexist attitudes has been assessed, neither site has accumulated sufficient evidence to verify that widespread attitude change has occurred.

**OUTCOME 4 – The Initiative builds activism throughout the state for girls' economic well-being.** Results show this outcome yielded great results:

*Girls are activists...*

- **Built a degree of activism among young women.** It is clear that the participants in girlsBEST have been leaders and important contributors to their schools and communities, taking activist stances on a wide range of issues. Girls campaigned for equal rights for girls and women, tackled problems of sexual violence and teen pregnancy in the Hmong community head on, attended workshops on lobbying, extensively lobbied legislators, mounted sophisticated letter writing campaigns and boycotts of stores and media products

that portray unhealthy body images of girls, led voter registration campaigns, another campaign to save a teacher's job, and conducted drug awareness and disease awareness presentations and projects. Community leaders and others have suggested that this level of activism created expanded community awareness of issues affecting girls and greater willingness to support ways to address those issues.

- **Increased commitment to work for equal opportunity.** It is of significance that nearly all (95%) of survey respondents in 2006 indicated that it is important to work for equal opportunity for girls and women. This strongly supports the girlsBEST program model, emphasizing a focus on equality for girls and women, and steady incremental progress toward advocacy.
- **Enhanced institutional and community support for girls programming.** Through persistence and accumulated successes, the girlsBEST sites have succeeded in enhancing institutional and community support for girls' programming. From guaranteed admission and scholarships at St. Cloud State University for girls graduating from the Sisters in Action program to expanded programming for the alternative high school in the Moorhead Mas Que Suenos program to increasing community support for the Stompin' Grounds coffee shop in Staples, the program has been successful in building institutional support and enhanced opportunity for girls.

**OUTCOME 5 – Under-represented girls throughout Minnesota are served by girlsBEST.**  
Results show this outcome was achieved:

*Underserved girls throughout the state have benefited from girlsBEST....*

- **Reached and benefited a significant number of low income and under-served girls.** The girlsBEST sites focused considerable effort on outreach to under-served girls; those efforts clearly proved successful. Over the course of the five year initiative, 4,924 girls were touched by girlsBEST programming around the state, and 628 girls were core participants (regularly participated in program activities). Sixty-eight percent (68%) of the core participants were girls of color and eighty-five percent (85%) were low income.

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### Challenges

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The girlsBEST programs have also encountered challenges. Many related to the girls' life circumstances of racism, poverty and low expectations. Other challenges were institutional, such as the need to insure consistent funds for programming. The most significant challenges of the Initiative were:

- **Multiple barriers of poverty.** Given the Initiative's success in enrolling under-served and low income girls, many of the girls experienced barriers. Mentors suggested that girls experience a variety of difficult family and living situations, including: poor community role models, limited expectations, and family financial and social pressures. Site mentors have had to address issues of drug abuse, mental health issues, and family dysfunction. These barriers presented significant programming challenges in the girlsBEST sites. However, the site mentors have been quite resourceful in developing partnerships and finding referral resources and maximizing services available to girls.

- **Resources for sustainability.** Toward the end of the five year Initiative, sites struggled to find sufficient monetary resources to sustain programs. The Women’s Foundation of Minnesota has made various efforts to help sites secure funding, including consultation on fundraising and limited matching grants in the final year. While all of the girlsBEST sites have found sufficient funds to sustain some level of programming, it has proved somewhat difficult to find consistent resources to continue the consistent and comprehensive programs that characterized girlsBEST. On a more hopeful note, the Bremer Foundation has asked that we advise girlsBEST grantees to apply for funding from Bremer.

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**A New Model for Girls’ Development and Programming**

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- **The Women’s Foundation’s girlsBEST Initiative confirmed the value of this model of girl-specific programming, documenting its key elements.** The Foundation has learned much about this model and approach to programming for girls. Its essential program elements of mentoring, safe and supportive environments, cultural awareness, and focus on leadership experiences and self-esteem have been validated in a variety of ways, both in the outcomes achieved and in the professional judgment of the competent and committed women who have worked with the Foundation to provide programs for girls over the past five years.
- **Consistent programming strategies and consistent participation.** In five years of hard work, the girlsBEST sites developed a consistent and comprehensive approach to girls’ programming. Sites have demonstrated that each of the three program tracks -- academic, entrepreneurial, and public education -- played an important role in building girls’ self-esteem, knowledge, communication and leadership skills, and commitment to advocacy. In addition, although it was sometimes difficult given the challenges of poverty, the sites also succeeded in building and sustaining a core of consistent participants who were able to benefit from the program model.
- **Developing a sustainable model for girls’ programming.** The outcomes of girlsBEST clearly support the validity and value of this model and approach to girls’ programs. The model, its program tracks and best practices, successfully implemented in sites across the state, have created a roadmap from which organizations, schools and communities can create programs that lead to significant attitude, skill and academic gains for girls.

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**Lessons Learned and Future Plans**

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<b>Lessons Learned</b>	<b>Future Plans</b>
<p><b>Ongoing programming for girls is needed.</b> Programming to build low income, under-represented girls’ chances of economic success is a critical, ongoing need.</p>	<p><b>Launch a second generation of girlsBEST programs in 2007</b></p> <p><b>Establish a permanent fund for girls’ programming.</b> With the launching of a \$15 million comprehensive campaign, a permanent funding source for girls’ programming is being created, the first of its kind in the nation.</p>

Lessons Learned	Future Plans
<p><b>The girlsBEST model of sustained, comprehensive services to girls is workable and effective.</b> The girlsBEST sites have provided clear evidence that a complex mix of academic, entrepreneurial and public education strategies are required to help girls acquire the skills needed to achieve economic success.</p>	<p><b>A comprehensive model of girls' programming will be continued for the next generation of girlsBEST programs.</b> grantees will be encouraged to plan and develop programs and services in each of the three primary areas or program tracks: academic, entrepreneurial and public education</p>
<p><b>Girls thrive in environments where they feel valued, competent and capable and multiple mentors encourage them to set goals and have high aspirations.</b> Stunning gains in girls' self-confidence and competence in their personal lives and the larger community have occurred in girlsBEST. The girlsBEST sites have excelled in creating a climate in which girls are nourished and supported. girlsBEST has also demonstrated that learning about and celebrating one's own culture enhances self esteem.</p>	<p><b>Multi-layered and multifaceted mentoring environments will be created in the next generation of girlsBEST programs.</b> Evaluation in the next generation will focus on documenting the various ways in which such environments are created, as well as their effects on self-esteem, educational attainment and leadership skill.</p>
<p><b>The efficacy of the Stages of Girls' Economic Development, or theory of change, supports continuous, sustained programming for girls.</b> With multiple exposures to ideas and to opportunities, a number of girls did move towards activism, as suggested by the theory of change. Episodic programming and/or irregular participation does not the lead to the kind of outcomes intended. The lesson is that change of this depth takes time and effort.</p>	<p><b>The girlsBEST model and theory of change will be implemented in the next generation of girlsBEST programs.</b> Foundation staff will continue to work with sites over a period of up to three years as they implement the model, assess and fine-tune programs, and continue to collect evidence that confirms the theory of change.</p>
<p><b>A limited number of achievable outcomes would help focus program resources and enhance accountability.</b> While all five outcomes are important, sites suggested that the number of outcomes sometimes tended to dissipate focus. Sites were asked to select one or two outcomes upon which to focus, which proved difficult in some cases, since they often felt they were working on several outcomes simultaneously. The important lesson is to focus resources and energy on the most central and important outcomes.</p>	<p><b>The next generation of girlsBEST will focus on two outcomes.</b></p> <p>The next generation of girlsBEST outcomes are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To increase the readiness of girls to achieve economic independence and well-being</li> <li>• To increase public education, activism and advocacy on behalf of girls' economic independence and well being throughout Minnesota.</li> </ul>

Lessons Learned	Future Plans
	<p>In addition, several of the outcomes from the first generation of programming have been restated as model program practices or strategies that most programs tend to utilize, e.g. building supportive environments for girls.</p>
<p><b>Baseline data and clear parameters for evaluation are important to accountability and learning.</b> The evaluation system that utilized local evaluators at girlsBEST sites was cumbersome, unworkable, and confusing to grantees. girlsBEST site mentors sometimes complained that evaluation expectations were not clear.</p>	<p><b>Evaluation will be conducted by Foundation staff.</b> Evaluation will largely be a Foundation responsibility, and all expectations of grantees will be centralized, clearly described and frequently communicated, through surveys and documentation of a common template of program indicators.</p> <p><b>GirlsBEST Advisory Committee will help monitor programs and make recommendations for funding.</b> A diverse girlsBEST advisory committee will continue to conduct site visits, program visits and review evaluation data to make grant recommendations to the board of trustees. The foundation’s leadership and programmatic staff will also continue to offer technical skills through evaluation and structured program visits that identify groups’ key capacity building needs.</p> <p><b>Dissemination.</b> The girlsBEST model and findings from the first generation of girlsBEST programs will be shared with key foundations, the Women’s Funding Network, and fields of expertise to help encourage building other girlsBEST funds across the country, through reports and presentations.</p>