

**Research Tool:  
Voice, Action, Comportment & Opportunity Checklist**

The Voice, Action, Comportment & Opportunity Checklist (VACO) is a checklist that program staff can use to observe how a girl uses her voice in different ways across six months in the program. It measures incremental (that is, small) changes in behaviors that show how girls develop into more confident young women who are leaders. It is also a tool for girls' reflection.

The items in the VACO were based on some of the things that program leadership and girls said were indications that a girl was growing into leadership. The components of VACO are:

*Voice* — Girls' ability to speak on their own behalf

*Action* — Girls' ability to use their voices to act on behalf of others

*Comportment* — Girls' ability to carry themselves with pride, respect and dignity

*Opportunity* — Girls' ability to ask for new chances and experiences

The administration of the VACO is relatively simple. Staff will select a minimum of six girls to observe during program activities for a period of two to four hours. During the observation period, the staff member will take notes on the different ways that each girl uses her voice and how she interacts with others in positive ways. After the observation period is over, staff and girls separately complete the checklist. Staff will complete a VACO by observing the same girls at regular intervals. Each time girls will also complete the VACO for the same observation time periods as staff.

VACO was originally developed for staff to use as a tool for observing. However, program staff in the Collaborative also used the measure with participants as an ongoing assessment and opportunity for feedback from staff and self-reflection for the participants. The VACO can be used in a variety of ways to document girls' leadership development:

- *Staff use:* The VACO is a tool for staff to use as a means of documenting behavioral indicators of leadership development in girls.
- *Girls' self-assessment:* The VACO can also be used as a tool to help girls measure their own development as leaders in a program through an objective and non-judgmental self-assessment process.
- *Setting leadership development goals:* Staff and girls can compare their observations so that they each can learn to identify girls' leadership development more accurately and can set goals for developing new skills.

The VACO can provide statistical documentation of girls' development as leaders within the program. For this to work, staff needs to be careful to do the following:

- The same girls need to be observed at different points in time. Ideally, girls who just enter a program would be followed over the period of a year or more.
- The same person needs to conduct the observations (or, at least, the same staff member should observe the same girls) each time to maintain consistency in perspective.
- In addition, observations need to be done in as similar a way as possible each time.
- The same or very similar program activity (such as a strategy session or team meeting) should be used as the context for the observations each time.

These points are very important! If they are not met, then the credibility of VACO findings will be limited.

### **Creative Application Strategies**

There are several ways in which the VACO can be used. The VACO can be integrated into program activity to reinforce girls' leadership development, or it can be used every six months simply as an assessment tool. The existing VACO can be used as is, or it can be adapted to reflect program-specific skills. Whatever is decided, the same version of the VACO should be used each time.

The VACO can be integrated into program activities in different ways – how this happens will guide how the VACO can then be used for documentation. No matter what way the VACO is used in the program, it should be used with girls in their first week of attending the program. Both girls and staff should complete VACOs. This will be the “baseline” against which change will be measured. There are different options for proceeding, such as:

- *Ongoing assessment tool:* Girls can keep the VACO in a special folder for assessment. After each program session, girls can be told to make tally marks on the VACO to indicate when they have shown a particular leadership behavior. Periodically (every three to six months), staff can do VACO observations of the girls formally and review what the girls have observed in themselves with how staff has seen their development.
- *Monthly or periodic administration:* Another approach might be to use the VACO each month, or at any highly regular interval, so that girls become comfortable with it as a tool for self-assessment. Staff observes girls engaging in program activity and girls assess themselves at the end of that same activity. Staff then can meet with girls to compare

observations and discuss each girl's progress.

### **Thoughts on Preliminary Statistical Analysis**

While it might be helpful to have the assistance of someone with knowledge of statistics, the VACO can be analyzed by anyone with a basic computer program for statistics. Statistical analysis of the VACO can be done as soon as data is collected so that it is possible to make comparisons over time. Statistical analysis is important because it shows whether any growth or change in the scores over time might be by accident or chance. We want the statistics to show that it is extremely *unlikely* that changes that are seen in girls' leadership skills are just coincidence or by chance. This is called a "statistically significant" result.

If the VACO is used quarterly or twice each year, then scores for each component, and for the leadership skills as a whole, can be compared over time.

- *The T-test*, a simple statistical test that is easily available, can be used to compare the average scores at two different points in time.
- *The ANOVA* can be used to detect whether differences across several different times are "statistically significant."
- *More sophisticated analyses* can be done with the VACO. If a program is using the VACO regularly, then different groups of girls can be compared. Keeping track of VACO scores across the years of program life can create important evidence to show that the program works to build girls' leadership.

### **Guidelines for Interpreting VACO Data**

VACO data is simple to analyze and interpret. Preliminary computation can be done manually, without statistical software. Staff observations and girls' observations are computed separately, as follows:

- *Developing individual component scores:* The total number of behaviors checked for each component (such as voice or action) is added up to get a component score for each of voice, action, compartment and opportunity for each girl. This is done for the staff observations and for girls' self-reports.
- *Developing an average component score for all girls:* The component scores for each girl can be added and averaged to get a score for all girls in the program. This is done both for staff's observations and girls' self-assessments.
- *Calculating leadership skills:* A "leadership skills" score can be created by adding all

four component scores for each individual girl, adding all of those scores together and then averaging by the number of girls participating. Staff and girls' scores can be compared, and similarities and differences discussed.

- *Frequencies of different behaviors:* The number of times that each particular behavior in each component (like voice) is mentioned by the girls can be tallied. Staff can then see where girls need to stretch and grow as well as determine which skills girls are beginning to master.

There are a number of questions to guide interpretation of the data. They include the following.

- Does staff observation of girls' demonstration of leadership skills increase over time? Do girls' self-reports increase over time? How do staff and girl reports differ? How are they the same?
- Do the kinds of behaviors that staff and girls observe change over time? How do they change? What does this suggest?
- Do girls' scores stop improving after using the VACO for longer than a year?

A number of precautions about the VACO might help in data interpretation. They include the following:

- *Girls new to the program:* The VACO was designed for girls new to a program. The skills that are presented for voice, action, comporment and opportunity are the fundamental components of leadership. They describe fairly basic skills.
- *Working with more senior girls:* For girls who have been in the program over a number of years, their VACO scores may plateau – hit a point and not go higher. This is not the girls' fault but may indicate that more advanced skills that more senior girls can demonstrate are not included on the VACO.
- *Adapting the VACO:* The VACO can be adapted by including different sets of skills demonstrated by girls at different levels of leadership development. For example, “took responsibility for strategic plan” or “led community action” are more advanced skills. By thinking through the skills that the program is trying to help girls develop, different versions of the VACO can be developed for use at various points in a girls' involvement in the program.

## VACO NOTES

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_ Length of time in program: \_\_\_\_\_

Observer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

What evidence do I see that this girl/young woman is developing a strong voice?

# THE VACO CHECKLIST

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## VOICE

<input type="checkbox"/> spoke out about something important	<input type="checkbox"/> took responsibility for thoughts, ideas & critique
<input type="checkbox"/> put forth ideas and suggestions	<input type="checkbox"/> stated and defended a point of view or idea
<input type="checkbox"/> expressed feelings verbally	<input type="checkbox"/> challenged person in authority
<input type="checkbox"/> expressed confidence	<input type="checkbox"/> used new vocabulary
<input type="checkbox"/> actively participated in group discussions	<input type="checkbox"/> expressed analysis of injustice, discrimination or prejudice
<input type="checkbox"/> spoke about a positive accomplishment	<input type="checkbox"/> struggled to say something hard about themselves in a group
<input type="checkbox"/> challenged another girl's opinion	<input type="checkbox"/> other: _____

## ACTION

<input type="checkbox"/> suggested changes in program or program activities	<input type="checkbox"/> encouraged and supported another girl to do something difficult
<input type="checkbox"/> stopped conflict between other girls	<input type="checkbox"/> chose a girl to work with who is usually excluded or not part of usual friends
<input type="checkbox"/> organized others to engage in activities without being told	<input type="checkbox"/> supported another girl who was struggling to speak in the group
<input type="checkbox"/> complimented or gave another girl positive feedback	<input type="checkbox"/> held peers accountable to goals; shift from personal to organizational perspective
<input type="checkbox"/> showed care for another in saying something	<input type="checkbox"/> resisted pressure from others to go along with something

## COMPORTMENT

<input type="checkbox"/> looked at others directly	<input type="checkbox"/> body image confidence; comfort with developing body
<input type="checkbox"/> paid attention to facilitator	<input type="checkbox"/> listened to peers in group
<input type="checkbox"/> stood or sat straight and attentively	<input type="checkbox"/> showed real interest in others
<input type="checkbox"/> showed respect for other girls	<input type="checkbox"/> dressed and presented self with pride
<input type="checkbox"/> looked up and ahead while walking	<input type="checkbox"/> other: _____

<input type="checkbox"/> other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> other: _____
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**OPPORTUNITY**

<input type="checkbox"/> asked to have more responsibility	<input type="checkbox"/> volunteered to do something that is new or challenging
<input type="checkbox"/> suggested ways to find more resources	<input type="checkbox"/> asked about going on a trip or being involved in a special program activity
<input type="checkbox"/> showed independence in taking on something new	<input type="checkbox"/> followed through on responsibility
<input type="checkbox"/> other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> other: _____



VACO

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