Youth Perceptions of a School-Based Mentoring Program

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**Abstract:**

Academic mentoring programs promote high school completion for at-risk youth. The purpose of this study was to hear the voice of youth in order to inform program services and develop best practices for meeting their academic needs. Using a grounded theory approach, we conducted 14 focus groups to examine high school students' perceptions and experiences in the Avenue Scholars Foundation program. This study supported previous findings: students' comments reflected on the importance of the relationships built in the program, the knowledge they gained, and their experiences regarding higher education and careers. The students shared that these experiences were increasingly meaningful because of the relationship built with their Talent Advisor and classmates. These relationships instilled hope for the future, created a pathway to college and career, and confirmed a belief that the students could accomplish their goals.
Abstract

Youth Perceptions of an Academic Mentoring Program

Academic mentoring programs promote high school completion for at-risk youth. The purpose of this study was to hear the voice of youth in order to inform program services and develop best practices for meeting their academic needs. Using a grounded theory approach, we conducted 14 focus groups to examine high school students’ perceptions and experiences in the Avenue Scholars Foundation program. This study supported previous findings: students’ comments reflected on the importance of the relationships built in the program, the knowledge they gained, and their experiences regarding higher education and careers. The students shared that these experiences were increasingly meaningful because of the relationship built with their Talent Advisor and classmates. These relationships instilled hope for the future, created a pathway to college and career, and confirmed a belief that the students could accomplish their goals.

Key words: schools, students, urban education, teachers
Youth Perceptions of an Academic Mentoring Program

Youth development and educational attainment have long been areas of interest for researchers, and in recent years, this inquiry has centered primarily on the impact of school and community environments. Studies estimate that 1.2 million students drop out of school every year in the United States (Porowoski & Passa, 2011; Radcliffe & Bos, 2011). This staggering dropout rate comes at a time when higher education and college degrees are critically important for future employment and career (Samel & Knaggs, 2013; Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013; Sondergeld, Fischer). Unemployment rates are increasing at a greater rate for individuals who did not attend college. In 2010, individuals with college degrees reported annual earnings two times those of individuals who did not complete high school. Individuals who attended some college earned an average of 17% more annually than individuals without any college (Sondergeld et al., 2013). Despite the increased importance placed on college education, college is not equally accessible to all students (Radcliffe & Bos, 2011; Sondergeld et al., 2013).

In addition to higher unemployment, lower wages, and reduced lifetime earnings (Hurd, Sánchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012; Radcliffe & Bos, 2011), students who do not graduate from high school or attend college are at increased risk of experiencing health problems and premature death (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Schoeneberger, 2012). Low educational attainment can be detrimental to society. Total lifetime loss of revenue for males between the ages of 25 and 34 who drop out of high school is estimated at $944 billion dollars (Martin & Halpern, 2006; Schoeneberger, 2012).

Students at greatest risk of dropping out include those who have parents with low educational attainment, low socioeconomic status, low parent and/or student educational aspirations (Berzin, 2013), low levels of school engagement (Suh & Suh, 2006), and low peer or teacher support (Archambault et al., 2012; Chang, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2010;
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Fruith & Wray-Lake, 2013; Kenny, Gauldron, Scanlon, Sparks, Blustein, & Jernigan; 2007; Porowski & Passa, 2011). Low school attendance and engative school climate are also predictors of a higher student dropout rate (Schoeneberger, 2012; Suh & Suh, 2006), and a negative school climate (Berzin, 2010). Parents who did not graduate from high school or attend college are generally less knowledgeable about navigating the public school system and applying to college. These parents are also at a disadvantage when helping their children with homework and preparing for and navigating through college (Diemer & Li, 2011).

Mentoring is one increasingly popular method of mediating high school dropout prevalence, risk factors, and consequences (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, & Farruggia, 2010; Fruith & Wray-Lake, 2013; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Shelmerdine & Louw, 2008). Mentoring programs match a caring adult who spends time with a youth, sharing knowledge and offering guidance and encouragement (Hurd et al., 2012). Positive youth-adult relationships have been found to have beneficial effects on youth mental health (Fruith & Wray-Lake, 2012), attitudes, social skills, school attendance, and general achievement of youth (Chang et al., 2010; Shelmerdine & Louw, 2008). Successful youth-adult mentoring relationships exhibit qualities of emotional closeness, support, mutual respect (Shelmerdine & Louw, 2008), transfer of knowledge, and shared experiences (Fruith & Wray-Lake, 2012).

Mentoring relationships increase youth social capital. Chang et al. (2010) stated that relationships become social capital when they are used as a means to achieve success in education and employment. The term “social capital” refers to the resources that accompany human relationships and can contribute to positive outcomes for individuals in these relationships (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). These resources can include the benefits of having a
relationship with someone wielding more power or influence, access to new information and connections, and emotional and social support (Ahn, 2012). Students with higher levels of social capital experience better educational and life outcomes than students with lower levels. Youth social capital is developed through relationships with peers, school staff and teachers, family, and community members. Through mentoring, students who do not have the opportunity to build constructive relationships with other adults in their lives are offered a chance to build social capital (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Chang et al., 2010).

To help apply the many benefits of mentoring to education, schools and community organizations partner to provide school-based mentoring (SBM). Typical students spend about a third of their waking hours in a school, developing relationships, skills, and behaviors that impact their future. SBM programs are the fastest growing type of mentoring in the United States (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2011). SBM occurs primarily in school or educational settings and the youth-adult relationships are built over the school year. These mentoring relationships focus on building students’ academic skills, increasing their familiarity with higher education, and providing educational support and guidance (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2011; Herrera et al., 2011; Sondergeld et al., 2013). School-based mentors also provide social capital to students in the form of job or academic references, college planning and navigation, and social connections (Ahn, 2012).

Students with school-based mentors demonstrate increased school engagement and attendance, better high school graduation rates, and increased participation in postsecondary education when compared to similar students without mentors (Chang et al., 2010; Fruith & Wray-Lake, 2013; Hurd et al., 2012). Mentored students also have improved GPAs, higher educational aspirations (Chang et al., 2010; Fruith & Wray-Lake, 2013), and more positive
perceptions of school meaningfulness (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). Although Caucasian/non-Hispanic students are more likely to have a school-based mentor than students of other races, the benefits of mentoring relationships were consistent across all races (Fruith & Wray-Lake, 2013; Hurd et al., 2012).

**Avenue Scholars Foundation**

A nonprofit organization based in Omaha, Nebraska, the Avenue Scholars Foundation (ASF) built its high school program on ideas and practices similar to school-based mentoring. ASF’s mission is “to ensure careers for students of hope and need through education and supportive relationships” (Avenue Scholars Foundation, 2016). To facilitate success for more than 600 students, ASF partners with private and public institutions, including three public school districts, seven high schools, a public community college, a four-year university, and private businesses.

Two significant features distinguish the ASF model from other similar programs: long-term support and commitment to serving low-income students who experience academic challenges. Annually, ASF selects approximately 150 high school sophomores to participate in the program, based on their financial need, grade point average lower than 2.50, and a community recommendation. One of the stated goals of ASF programming is to foster hope, create excitement, and generate momentum toward a rewarding future for participants.

The key component of the ASF program is the supportive, mentoring relationship between the Avenue Scholar (student) and the Talent Advisor. Talent Advisors work with Avenue Scholars at each of the Avenue Scholars’ schools and provide mentoring, academic support, and college and/or career readiness education. Talent Advisors practice an “intrusive” or “appreciative” model of mentoring (Earl, 1988). Through this relationship, Talent Advisors help...
youth develop a hopeful glimpse beyond their community contexts and set realistic, attainable educational and career goals.

The ASF supportive mentoring is initially classroom-based; Talent Advisors teach high school students a curriculum focused on developing individual strengths, career readiness, and independent living skills. The students are selected during their sophomore year in high school. They begin participating in services as high school juniors and move through the high school program in cohorts. Avenue Scholars continue to receive career and support services during college. The collective goal of ASF Talent Advisors is to help Avenue Scholars stay on the pathway to high school graduation, through postsecondary study and/or career success.

As high school juniors and seniors, Avenue Scholars meet every day in a regularly scheduled, credit-bearing class taught by their Talent Advisor in a public high school. While earning high school elective credit, Avenue Scholars discover individual talents and career interests, strengthen literacy and math skills, learn to navigate local community college systems, build a sense of community among the other Avenue Scholars, and make future-oriented decisions. Curriculum modules also include independent living preparation, decision-making, and financial planning. A career exploration component of the curriculum extends beyond the school walls and day. Avenue Scholars engage with professional business and community partners in authentic work settings. Based on individual interests, Avenue Scholars complete at least two real-world career experiences leading to a sharper vision of their professional futures. In addition to teaching, mentoring, and serving as role models, Talent Advisors provide problem-solving and social-emotional support to Avenue Scholars for their educational and non-educational concerns.
In preparation for future college and workplace success, Avenue Scholars set goals to improve attendance habits. High school Talent Advisors encourage attendance accountability by confirming that Avenue Scholars are attending classes.

Beyond the immediate concerns of high school achievement, Talent Advisors instill belief that college is possible for at-risk students and that Avenue Scholars have a legitimate place in the college community. Talent Advisors begin demystifying college and guiding Avenue Scholars through the process of seeing themselves as capable of success in an arena that is little known to their family and community. Talent Advisors support students as they complete financial aid and scholarship forms and shepherd students through the college application, registration, and orientation process, bridging high school to college. ASF also provides each student entering college with an electronic tablet to assist their learning and ability to complete assignments. Senior students in Avenue Scholars participate in a Senior Academy program. Seniors spend their afternoons at the local community college and become familiar with the college lifestyle, college classes, and college financing.

Career Talent Advisors collaborate with high school Talent Advisors to provide Avenue Scholars with career experiences that prepare them for the school-to-work transition. Through the students’ high school and college years, Career Talent Advisors introduce Avenue Scholars to career opportunities and help them improve their workplace skills and attitudes.

**Methodology**

This study was part of a contracted program evaluation project. The purpose was to improve program services and develop best practices for meeting the academic needs of high school students in poverty. Using a grounded theory approach, we conducted focus groups to examine Avenue Scholars’ experiences in the high school program. We chose grounded theory
because, in this approach, collected data is used to construct theories rather than theories being chosen and applied to data. The data collected establishes and grounds the theory. In grounded theory research, data is collected through a variety of means, but regardless of data collection, data is analyzed by breaking it down and grouping it together by conceptual heading. Through continued analysis, the researchers continue to group these concepts together into larger categories or themes (Corbin, 2015). Grounded methodology allows the data to guide and inform new concepts—an important factor for this study.

The sample included junior and senior high school students who attended one of seven Omaha-area public schools and were currently enrolled in the ASF program. Fourteen focus groups were conducted at the junior and senior levels at seven high schools. One focus group was held for each junior and senior class at the seven participating sites in the Omaha metro area. Each of the seven schools has a unique context, and students have unique demographic characteristics.

In total, 72 youth participated in one of the 12 focus groups, consisting of 75% (n=54) female and 25% (n=18) male youth. Half of youth were high school juniors (37, 51%) and half were seniors (35, 49%). We conducted 12 focus groups in the spring of 2013; they varied in size from two to nine students. Due to low participation at one school, we conducted two individual interviews in lieu of focus groups. The study was approved by the University of Nebraska Medical Center Institutional Review Board. Two to four weeks prior to the focus group, participants were given information about the study and consent forms. Many of the participants were under nineteen years and required parental consent.
During the focus groups, one member of the research team facilitated the discussion while a second member of the research team took electronic notes. There were seven focus group questions:

1. What does being a part of Avenue Scholars mean to you?
2. What has been different for you since becoming an Avenue Scholar?
3. What is your relationship with your Talent Advisor?
4. Since becoming in Avenue Scholars, has your view of college changed? If so, how has it changed?
5. What do your family and friends say to you about being in Avenue Scholars?
6. Since being in Avenue Scholars, has your idea of having a career changed? If so, how?
7. Is there anything you would want to change about Avenue Scholars?

Focus group sessions were held in a classroom or private meeting space with a door, away from throughway traffic. The focus groups were also digitally audio recorded.

We transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. In the first stage of data analysis, two members of the research team used an open coding process to develop an initial set of concepts or themes. A third member of the research team provided oversight and evaluation to both sets of concepts. From these two sets of themes, a second codebook was developed and used in the second stage, the axial stage of coding. Two members of the research team independently coded; then they met to clarify coding discrepancies with the assistance of a third coder.

(The ASF program description represents the program at the time of the focus groups. Based on evaluation findings and experience, the Avenue Scholars program has evolved, and current programming is different than described in this report.)

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine youth’s perceptions of a school-based mentoring program. Nine themes emerged from the data analysis (see Table 1). Three primary themes were identified: 1) relationships between students and program staff; 2) experiences and
knowledge related to college; and 3) experiences and knowledge related to career development.

Overall, students described how the program staff provided them the knowledge and experiences to feel prepared for college and ultimately a career. Using grounded theory methodology, “relationships” emerged as the primary theme of the study; in other words, relationships emerged as the vehicle that assisted in the transmission of knowledge.

**Relationships within ASF**

The primary theme that emerged through analysis was the students’ descriptions of the relationships they experienced in the program. They spoke at length about their relationships with their Talent Advisors, classmates, other staff in the program, and the program as a whole.

The theme of relationships was also interwoven in the eight other themes. This theme includes both positive and negative reflections from students about relationships.

**Relationships with Talent Advisors.** Students discussed their relationships with their high school Talent Advisors in great depth, especially the role the Talent Advisors played in helping motivate Avenue Scholars to do better in school and believe in their dreams. Overall, students indicated the relationship with their Talent Advisors made them more hopeful for their future.

They just really keep me motivated because I could be feeling so down one day, and they will just say something to me that just makes me like pick your head up, you can do this, you’re gonna make it. They just keep me motivated somehow to succeed, to get through college, to keep doing my high school work.

Students used many analogies to describe their Talent Advisors. Students’ descriptions of their Talent Advisors ranged from a “best friend” or “parent” to “being a typical teacher.” Some
students described this relationship as “annoying” or being characterized by “always having someone on your case about doing better in school.”

Many students discussed the ways their Talent Advisors were available to them in areas of life other than school. Students said their Talent Advisors were supportive after the death of a family member, friend, and even a classmate. Students also expressed the trust they felt for their Talent Advisor and said they could talk to their Talent Advisor about anything. While the level of trust varied widely among students, our overall finding was that students viewed their Talent Advisors as a trusted person in whom they could confide.

**Relationships with friends/classmates within the program.** We found substantial disparities in the data on the relationships among Avenue Scholars in the classroom. The majority of students indicated their closest friends were in the program. Some talked about their class “being like a family.” Students in these classes indicated that before becoming Avenue Scholars, they may not have talked to each other; once they were in the program, they developed a real closeness. This was evident not only in what students said but how they interacted with each other. Groups that described their relationship with each other as a family finished one another’s sentences, engaged in conversation, and many times talked over each other. Through their actions, it was evident that they supported and cared for one another.

I guarantee like half of the people in this class I would have never spoken to. Yea, but it’s just like when we get in that class, it’s just like everybody is cool with everybody. Honestly though we come from so many different groups and so many different cliques and like to come together the way that we do is just so awesome.

However, some groups said they were not close and did not know each other well. Some groups talked about divisions within their class, saying that certain people stuck to their own
cliques and did not talk to anyone else. Students in these groups also expressed a desire to do more fun things within their school and program in order to build relationships with each other.

Not everyone talks to each other. Only that side talks, and the other doesn’t. They talk to each other, and we talk to each other, but not everyone talks to each other. We’re not comfortable around each other.

**Relationships with staff/entire program.** Students described their relationships with other staff in the program as well as how they viewed their relationships with the program as a whole. Students articulated a feeling of being cared for by program staff and knowing that the program wanted them to succeed. Students also gave examples of times when staff worked one-on-one with them to help secure a job or be part of a presentation. Students saw their relationship with the program as positive and encouraging.

It’s just like overwhelming joy that they can have that kind of heart. Because you don’t find that many people with those hearts these days. The hearts that actually care, the people that actually do care is what makes a child’s life better.

**Careers**

When asked about how the program impacted their career aspirations, students highlighted how the hands-on experiences in their career cohorts allowed them to decide if they might enjoy working in particular career fields. For some students, the cohorts affirmed their career interests. For other students, the experiences helped them discover that particular career fields were not a good fit for them.

Well before, I was all about like being a chef; like I wanted to have my own show, my own restaurant ... but like with the career cohorts, with the hospitality one, I really liked
like the environment of the hotel, so I changed my mind. I still like to cook, but I think I’d work better in banquet planning or like the manager of the kitchen.

In the discussion on careers, students expressed a clear understanding of the difference between a job and a career. Avenue Scholars viewed a job “as something you do to make money, get by, and overall something you do not enjoy.” A career, on the other hand, is “something you enjoy doing and is something one strives to achieve.” Students clearly communicated their wishes for careers, not just jobs.

**College**

Students discussed their beliefs about college—before and since being invited to the program. Students’ responses coalesced into one of three themes: financial assistance, logistics, and experiences in Senior Academy.

Students reported that the program helped them finance part of their college education. Program participants indicated that college was previously out of reach because of the expense, but now it is affordable. Some students mentioned they had applied for other scholarships but felt secure knowing that even without receiving those awards, the program would support their future education. Students also appreciated their Talent Advisors, whom they credited with teaching them about financial aid availability, applications for student loans, and the costs associated with attending college.

When asked about college, students also said that prior to joining the program, they did not know how to get to college; they did not have a plan. Avenue Scholars reported that they learned what college classes to take and the length of their course of study—depending on career interest and major. Many students knew where they were going to college; most planned to
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attend a local community college or university. Of these students, many also expressed interest in living in the dorms during their college experience.

In class, when we do the different things like look up your classes, how many credits you need, how to get there, it just like okay. Now I have a game plan; like I know exactly what to do.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine youth’s perceptions of a school-based mentoring program. The findings confirm previous research regarding the use of academic mentoring with at-risk, low achieving high school students and add to those findings by highlighting the importance of accountability within relationships and peer relationships in mentoring programs.

Extant research confirms that students who are disengaged from their school and education and who lack supportive relationships with school staff and classmates are less likely to finish high school and attend higher education institutions than other students (Radcliffe & Bos, 2011). The literature also suggests that mentoring programs may help mediate these factors (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, & Farruggia, 2010; Fruiht & Wray-Lake, 2013; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Shelmerdine & Louw, 2008).

ASF programming is similar to school-based mentoring programs as it looks to develop students’ academic skills and their familiarity with higher education. The ASF program built on the typical school-based mentoring model by first focusing on creating strong and supportive relationships with students and then encouraging students to build relationships with the peers in their cohort.
The students reflected at length about the importance of relationships with their mentors and how these relationships helped Talent Advisors effectively hold the Avenue Scholars accountable. Students also talked about the importance of the relationships they developed with other students in the ASF program. The importance of these relationships is meaningful because the majority of literature on mentoring focuses on the importance of the relationship between the mentor and mentee. The Avenue Scholars cohort model allows students to benefit from relationships with both a mentor figure and with their peers.

For Avenue Scholars, the relationship with their Talent Advisors provided not only a supportive and encouraging mentor but also a source of meaningful accountability. Talent Advisors also gave students the opportunity to foster relationships and gain knowledge and experiences that a typical high school education may not provide.

The findings suggest the relationship between the Talent Advisor and the student served as a conduit for meaningful educational experiences and increased accountability. This was possible because the program and Talent Advisors had a presence in the school and were able to operate as part of the school and school day but without the typical demands of teachers and other school personnel. This close partnership between the schools and the Talent Advisors allowed for a more meaningful mentoring experience for students.

The findings support the importance of a relationship between the mentor and mentee in school-based mentoring. In addition to having ASF students in their classes, Talent Advisors are expected to build close relationships with students and dedicate time during the school day to check in with students about their attendance, education, and general wellbeing. This added support, especially in the school setting, proved to be an integral component in students’ perceptions of academic success and experiences, as assessed by our study.
A second important factor in this study is the significance of peer relationships. In previous mentoring studies, researchers focused primarily on the effects of mentor/mentee relationships, not on the impact of peer relationships. The cohort model of the ASF program allows students to build relationships with both their mentor and the other students in their cohort. These relationships served as additional sources of support and accountability for students. Peers were available to support and encourage fellow students when mentors could not, and peers generally spend more time with fellow students. The findings in this study indicate that typical one-on-one or mentoring programs may be overlooking significant opportunities to build peer relationships, support, and accountability.

Students in this study emphasized the importance of the relationships they built with their Talent Advisors and their classmates and discussed how these relationships helped make their class time more meaningful. The relationships helped make the programming, educational guidance, and support from adults and school staff more meaningful and likely more lasting for the students. These relationships also instilled hope for the future, created a pathway to college and career, and confirmed a belief that program participants can accomplish their goals.

Limitations

This evaluation study has several limitations. Bias may occur in qualitative research when the research team brings personal values or preconceived ideas to the project; this is especially relevant when using grounded theory methodology. Themes should emerge from the data, and biases can influence how researchers analyze the data and allow the themes to emerge. We attempted to limit bias in this study through the use of researcher consultation, audio recording of focus groups and verbatim transcriptions, use of memos to acknowledge potential bias before and during analysis, and use of multiple coders and verifiers. However, some bias
may still exist by some members of the research team due to prolonged engagement with ASF.

Student participant selection bias is another limitation. Students who were pleased with the program may have self-selected to participate in the focus groups. Selection bias also existed in the consent process as only students who returned a signed consent form were permitted to participate.

The level of Talent Advisor commitment to the focus group portion of the project also created some significant limitations. The level of commitment influenced student participation, length of time for the focus groups, and completion of pre-work across the focus group sites, and this limited the data collection. The level of commitment to the focus group portion of the project varied among Talent Advisors, which created significant limitations. The differing levels of commitment influenced student participation, the length of focus group sessions, and completion of pre-focus group work. These variations influenced collection of data across the focus group sites.
References


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### Table 1 Focus Group Themes and Descriptions

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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Relationships within ASF</td>
<td>Students’ ideas and beliefs about their relationship with their high school Talent Advisor, friends/classmates within the program, and other staff in the ASF program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Perspectives</td>
<td>Family members’ values, beliefs about ASF, college and career</td>
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<tr>
<td>Careers</td>
<td>Students’ experiences in career cohorts, future career plans/interests, and beliefs about jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision and Beliefs for the Future</td>
<td>Students’ views of the future before and after being in the ASF program, their view of success, and their motivation for the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>Students’ statements about college: financial aspects, logistics, and experiences in the Senior Academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Improvement of the ASF Program</td>
<td>Recommendations for program improvement in the following areas: fun activities for students to participate in, career cohorts, lunches at the Senior Academy, and program structure/organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reputation of the ASF Program</td>
<td>Perceptions and awareness of others at school (teachers, students etc.) and comparisons to other programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of the ASF Program on High School Experience</td>
<td>Students’ beliefs about their high school academics, behaviors related to school, attendance, and motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affirmations about the ASF Program</td>
<td>Students’ overall satisfaction, thankfulness, and general impressions of the program</td>
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