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Aaron Krueger
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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AN EVALUATION OF A SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR FIRST-GENERATION
COLLEGE STUDENTS

By

Aaron Krueger

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Dr. Kay A. Keiser

Omaha, Nebraska

November 2016

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Tamara J. Williams

Dr. Jill F. Russell

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Abstract

AN EVALUATION OF A SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Aaron Krueger, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Dr. Kay A. Keiser

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a support program for first-generation college students. A qualitative study was conducted evaluating the Young Scholars Program from the perspectives of program participants. Data was collected through interviews with eight current and former program participants. The following research questions informed this study:

1. How do students perceive the program to be impacting their academic experience?
2. How do students perceive the program to be impacting their social experience?
3. How do students perceive the program to be impacting their career development experience?

Through analysis of the data, three major themes emerged: *Relationships*, *Engagement*, and *Opportunities*. Students discussed how relationships with family members have been impacted during their college experience, as well as the positive impact their involvement in the program has had on their ability to develop relationships with peers and program staff. Students also reported increased engagement with their college experience on a number of levels due to their involvement in the program. Additionally, students spoke about being grateful for the opportunity to be in the program and for the support they

receive and the positive impact this has had on their experiences, as well as the opportunities that developed as a result of their involvement in the program. This evaluation provides insight into how this program is positively impacting students' academic, social, and career development experiences while in college, as well as assisting in providing direction for the future of the program.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to a number of people who have supported me throughout this tremendously challenging and rewarding process. First, Dr. Kay Keiser, my advisor and dissertation chair, for providing direction, feedback, and encouragement throughout my graduate career. I'd also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Tamara Williams, and in particular, Dr. Jill Russell, whose Program Evaluation class provided me with the base of knowledge and confidence to begin this research project. A special thanks goes to Barb Mraz for taking the time to thoroughly review and provide edits.

I'd also like to thank all of those involved with the Young Scholars Program. The Young Family, without whose generous support this program would not be possible. Chancellor John Christensen and Lori Byrne for their support and advice regarding the operation of the program, as well as for having confidence in my abilities to coordinate program activities. Last but certainly not least, the students themselves. They are truly an amazing group of people and I am lucky to work with them on a day to day basis.

Finally, I'd like to thank my wife, Laura, and son, Anders. Words cannot express how helpful Laura's feedback has been, and I would not have done this without her support and encouragement. And Anders, thank you for always putting a smile on my face no matter what stage I was at in this process.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Successfully navigating the landscape of higher education can be a complicated process. Much pressure is placed on students even before setting foot on a college campus. Among the many often complicated steps involve preparing to take the ACT or other college entrance exams, filling out college applications, setting up campus tours, attempting to choose a college or university that is a good fit academically as well as personally, and seeking out and applying for financial aid. Upon beginning college, students face the pressure to select a major that matches up with their career interests and personal values, determine what classes to register for, adjust to the academic rigors of college classes, develop effective academic strategies and routines, find activities and organizations to get involved with on campus, and the list goes on. To exacerbate the difficulty of the process, this is all happening at a time for most students when they are experiencing a transition to a level of independence from their families that they had previously not experienced. For many students, they have the benefit of being surrounded by a network of family and friends that have experienced this transition to college life themselves, and are familiar with the processes the transition involves. For another growing group of college students, however, they often do not share the benefit of having this supportive and knowledgeable network that is familiar with the process. First-generation college students are students whose parents did not receive a degree from a 4-year college or university.

When studying this student population, a common theme among researchers is that first-generation students typically share characteristics that put them at a

disadvantage to their continuing-generation peers (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) in addition to reporting less social support from family and peers (Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Durón, 2013). As a group, they are more likely to withdraw from college (Ishitani, 2003) and share attributes that are typically associated with lower rates of college attendance and degree attainment (Engle, 2007). From an academic standpoint, these students are at a disadvantage from the beginning in that they typically have lower college entrance exam scores and are less prepared for the academic rigors of college (Darling & Smith, 2007), in addition to having lower levels of educational expectations (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Furthermore, first-generation students typically lack a family support system that has knowledge of how to navigate the often complicated landscape that is higher education, which puts them at a disadvantage compared to their peers who have parents and other family members with experience in the process (Davis, 2010). As one first-generation student noted about their college experience, “At home they don’t know. I don’t talk about it, they don’t know about anything...There’s a lot of stuff that goes on on this campus and my parents don’t know what it means. It’s like living in a totally different world” (London, 1989, p. 146).

First-generation college students represent a significant percentage of the higher education student population. According to the University of Nebraska at Omaha Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 47% of first-year incoming students entering the University during the Fall 2015 semester were classified as first-generation (The UNO Factbook, 2015-2016). Recognizing the need to provide additional support to this group of students, some colleges and universities have begun to develop support programs with specific student populations, such as first-generation students, in mind. Thayer (2000)

notes that programs designed to specifically support the needs of first-generation students will also most likely be successful in supporting the general college population.

However, the opposite may not be true. First-generation students may not benefit from programs designed for the general student population that do not take in to account the specific circumstances of this group of students. This highlights the need for colleges and universities to continue to study the first-generation student population in order to design and implement targeted support programs to enhance their opportunities for success in attending college and attaining a degree. Furthermore, it is important to evaluate these programs to ensure they are operating efficiently and that students are receiving adequate support.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to evaluate how the Young Scholars Program impacts the college experience of the students involved in the program. Specifically, the study sought to determine the student perspectives of their college experience and involvement in the program. The results of the study will be used to aid in making decisions regarding how best to support students in the program moving forward.

History of the Young Scholars Program

The Young Scholars Program is a privately funded scholarship program that began at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) during the fall semester of 2011. Leading up to that point, meetings were held involving members of the Young family, UNO administration, and representatives from the University of Nebraska Foundation. During these meetings, the Young family expressed an interest in providing a financial gift to support students at UNO. Their wish was that their financial gift be used to

directly support students in the form of scholarships. Throughout these on-going conversations, a specific group of students was targeted as being the preferred group of scholarship recipients. This group included students that are first-generation college students who had graduated from Omaha Metro area high schools. An additional goal was to identify students that demonstrated financial need; specifically, students that are not eligible to receive federal Pell Grants or other significant financial aid such as academic scholarships. Essentially, this group of students may not have options to pay for school other than student loans or paying out of pocket. As their primary goal was to support students in need of assistance, the donors granted flexibility to UNO administration to make exceptions to the criteria if a specific student has been identified as being in need of support, but does not necessarily meet the exact criteria as outlined in the scholarship agreement.

Recognizing that first-generation students typically do not persist to college graduation at the rates of the general student population, the intent was not simply to award scholarships, but to also provide a support network that would assist the students receiving the scholarships as they pursued their degrees. During the summer of 2011, a program coordinator was hired, with the job title of Academic Mentor, to direct activities and to develop a program to provide structured support to the students that were selected. Primary elements of the program that were outlined included the students scheduling regular one-on-one meetings throughout each semester with the Academic Mentor, completing weekly study hours in the program office, participating in volunteer and service activities during the school year, and participating in a UNO student organization or activity outside of the academic classroom each semester. The program's Academic

Mentor is also available to assist in making students aware of opportunities on campus related to academic, social, and career development, as well as volunteer and service opportunities, and to encourage them to attend these events whenever possible.

Additionally, students participate in social activities together both on and off campus in an effort to promote and encourage a supportive community of learners.

While there is no formal mission statement written for the program, the overall goal of the program is to support students to increase their chances of completing their undergraduate degrees. More specifically, the program seeks to enhance their chances of experiencing academic success while graduating with their Bachelor's degree, to aid in each student's social integration to the university by providing a supportive environment that promotes community within the group as well as on the UNO campus, and to support each student in the selection and pursuit of an area of study that matches their career interests and values, while ultimately achieving employment in their desired field upon graduation.

Over the course of the summer of 2011, 11 students were identified and selected as the first recipients of the program to begin with the fall 2011 semester. Since that time, additional students have been selected each school year. The total number of students that have been a part of the program since its inception is 26 (10 males, 16 females). Racial/ethnic breakdown as self-reported by program participants is as follows: Asian (1), Black or African American (4), Hispanics of any race (13), White (5), Two or more races (2), Nonresident Alien (1). The program is currently not financially endowed as a permanent program at UNO. However, funding exists for the program to continue into the foreseeable future.

Young Scholars Program Outcomes

Results of a national study suggest that first-generation students at all colleges and universities, public and private, typically graduate within 5 years at an average rate of 44.8%, which is a significantly lower rate than the 59.7% rate of continuing-generation students (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011). Preliminary analysis of the Young Scholars Program shows that of the initial 11 students that began with the program at the start of the 2011-2012 school year, eight have completed their degrees for a 5-year graduation rate of 73%. In addition to exceeding the national graduation rate of first-generation students, the Young Scholars rate exceeds the graduation rate of the general UNO student population, which includes both first-generation and continuing-generation students, with recent data showing that 36% of full-time first-time bachelor's degree-seeking undergraduate students graduated within five years of beginning at the university (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2015).

Analysis by the UNO Office of Institutional Effectiveness showed that when looking at all students that have been a part of the Young Scholars Program since its inception, over 70% have either graduated or are proceeding at a pace to graduate within 5 years. This suggests that the graduation rate of the program is not just limited to a strong first cohort of students, but the performance of currently enrolled students shows that a 5-year graduation rate of 70% or higher could be maintained in future years.

In terms of post-graduation employment, seven of the eight graduates became employed full-time after completing their degrees. The 8th graduate did not seek employment but has instead obtained a graduate assistantship and is attending graduate school full-time.

When the program was established, it was decided that a GPA of 2.5 on a 4.0 scale was necessary for each student to renew their scholarship on a yearly basis. Collectively, as of the spring 2016 semester, the 26 students that have participated in the program since its inception combine for an average individual GPA per of 3.0 on a 4.0 scale student (not weighted to factor in the number of credit hours each student has completed).

Theoretical Framework

Kuh et al. (2006) describe the journey students take throughout their educational career as a “wide path with twists, turns, detours, roundabouts, and occasional dead ends” (p. 7). They argue that this description is a more realistic portrayal of the college experience than the notion that most students typically have a direct route to graduation without any setbacks. Their framework, *What Matters to Student Success* (see Figure 1 below), outlines the path through higher education that is common to many students.

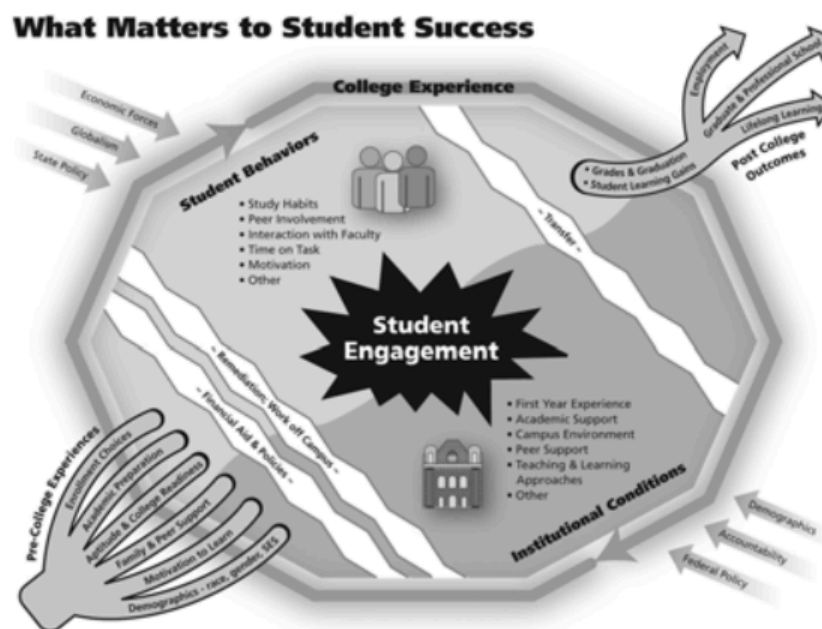


Figure 1. *What Matters to Student Success* (Kuh et al., 2006)

The first phase of the college path relates to pre-college experiences. This phase includes existing factors such as a student's demographic makeup, family background and support network, level of academic preparation, motivation, and financial situation. Factors such as these often impact a student's ability to enter college, and also influence their potential need to participate in remedial coursework that may not count toward their degree but are necessary to develop skills to be successful at the college level. This might also include additional factors such as access to financial aid, and the potential need to work significant hours during college, which can have an effect on the academic and social experience.

The next phase of the college path occurs once students enter college and includes student behaviors and institutional conditions. Student behaviors involve factors such as the time and energy students put into their studies, their interactions with faculty and staff, and their involvement on campus. Institutional factors often include things such as support services available, institutional policies and procedures, and level of peer support. Student behaviors and institutional conditions combine to form what the authors refer to as student engagement. These factors are typically within the control of the student and university, with a high level of student engagement often resulting in positive outcomes.

The final phase of the college path relates to outcomes such as graduation, receiving high grades, gaining satisfying employment, and becoming a responsible citizen that is able to live a productive life.

The Young Scholars Program seeks to support students in the pursuit of their undergraduate degrees and post-graduate employment, and in the process, become well-rounded individuals that are equipped to take on the challenges that they are faced with.

Using the framework, *What Matters to Student Success*, this study sought to evaluate the Young Scholars Program from the perspectives of the program participants. Specifically, the evaluation examined the students' perspective of support they are receiving in relation to academics, social engagement, and career development.

Research Questions

The over-arching research question this study seeks to answer is: How do students perceive the Young Scholars Program to be impacting their college experience? The following sub-questions will be addressed:

1. How do students perceive the program to be impacting their academic experience?
2. How do students perceive the program to be impacting their social experience?
3. How do students perceive the program to be impacting their career development experience?

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used during the study:

ACDC: Academic and Career Development Center at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

Academic Experience: refers to a broad range of factors including both outcomes and student behaviors. Outcomes include student grades, understanding the requirements of academic programs, and overall enjoyment of the experience of attending and participating in class. Student behaviors include motivation to attend class and study, interaction with faculty and staff outside of class, the utilization of available campus resources, ability to set goals, develop effective study plans and time management skills.

Social Experience: refers to the extent to which a student feels connected to the university. This connection happens through a variety of experiences such as becoming involved in organizations and activities outside of the classroom setting, as well as developing new relationships and strengthening existing relationships with students, faculty, and staff.

Career Development: refers to factors that influence students' preparation for and ability to enter into a job in their chosen field upon graduation. This includes the process of selecting a major that aligns with personal values and interests, gaining knowledge about particular career fields, developing practical skills through internships, volunteer experiences, or employment, developing skills necessary to conduct a job search, and participating in professional development opportunities.

First-Generation College Student: a college student whose parents did not receive a degree from a four-year college or university.

Continuing-Generation College Student: a college student whose parent(s) received a degree from a four-year college or university.

Program Evaluation: the process of determining the worth or merit of an evaluation object (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2012).

Persistence: a student who continues to enroll at the institution after matriculation (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012).

Limitations

This is an internal evaluation in that the researcher of this study is also the sole staff member working with the program on a day-to-day basis. While this provides

benefits in terms of access and understanding of the program, it is a limitation in that the internal evaluator does not bring an outside perspective of an external evaluator.

An additional limitation is that this program has currently only been in existence since the fall semester of 2011. As such, there is no long-term data to demonstrate outcomes over the course of many years.

Finally, this program involves a small number of students and a specific student population at one university. As such, this evaluation is not meant to lead to broad generalizations about any other student populations or programs.

Significance of the Study

While periodic informal evaluations and observations of the program have occurred during its existence, no formal evaluation has taken place. Preliminary program data collected regarding graduation and persistence rates for early participants in the program, post-graduation employment, as well as academic data related to student grade point averages (see Chapter 1 – Young Scholars Program Outcomes), suggests that students are performing at a high level that exceeds that of the general university population. Despite this evidence of success less is known about how the experiences of the students are impacted as a result of participating in the program. This study collected qualitative data directly from program participants in an effort to evaluate how the program is impacting their experience. The data collected in this study will be used from a formative standpoint to help shape future decisions regarding how to best serve and support the students in the program, as well as potential areas of needed support that are not currently being addressed.

Finally, this evaluation will contribute to the growing body of research regarding the first-generation student population. As this is a specific group with unique challenges, it is important to continue to study how best to support them in order to enhance their chances of academic and career success.

Outline of the Study

A review of the selected literature is presented in Chapter 2. The review of literature provides information about the common characteristics of first-generation college students including demographics, pre-college preparation and college performance, family support, theories related to student success, and support for first-generation students. In Chapter 3, the researcher will discuss the rationale for the use of qualitative program evaluation as the study design, as well as identifying the population of the study and the process of data collection and analysis. In Chapter 4, the researcher presents the research findings organized by the main themes that emerged from the data. In Chapter 5, the researcher discusses the findings as it relates to the research questions presented in the study, as well as outlining opportunities for the program and future research.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Defining First-Generation Students

There has always existed a class of individuals who were the first to represent their families in pursuing higher education. It has not been until relatively recent times, however, that this group of students has begun gaining attention in the educational world. Institutions of higher education have recognized first-generation college students as a specific category for classification purposes for approximately 25 years (Davis, 2010). The general idea behind the classification of first-generation college students is recognizing a group of students whose family members have little or no education beyond high school, and thus, typically do not have intimate or first-hand understanding of how to navigate the higher education landscape. They have not grown up around others who have gone to college and are unfamiliar with what is involved in pursuing a college degree. “Cultural capital” is a term that refers to the extent that an individual is familiar with the norms, systems, and culture of an institution (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007; Oldfield, 2007). First-generation students are typically lacking in cultural capital and do not have the familiarity with higher education that comes with being in a family with multiple generations who have attended college.

The actual term itself, “first-generation,” does not appear to have a consistent or universal definition. Higher education admissions representatives typically classify first-generation students as those students whose parents do not possess a 4-year college degree (Davis 2010). This is also the definition of choice for the federally funded TRIO programs in higher education institutions throughout the United States. This definition is

inclusive of students who may have had a parent attend a 4-year college or university for a period of time, but did not receive a degree. Another common definition limits categorizing first-generation students as those students whose parents have not attended a 4-year college for *any* amount of time (Bui, 2002, Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). The variation in definitions can make it difficult to study the population and pinpoint specific characteristics of this group of students.

Characteristics of First-Generation Students

It is important to recognize that the only true determinant of categorizing a student as first-generation is their parental level of education. Race, gender, socioeconomic status, academic background, or any other number of factors, are not qualifiers used to determine whether or not a student is first-generation. However, students who fit into the first-generation student category often do share similar demographic characteristics. Research suggests that first-generation students often come from lower-income families (Chen, 2005, Choy, 2001, Darling & Smith, 2007). Engle and Tinto (2008) estimate that approximately 24% of the overall undergraduate population is considered both low-income (household income of less than \$25,000) *and* first-generation. Students that are first-generation and low-income are more likely to be older; female; have a disability; come from minority backgrounds; be non-native English speakers or were born outside the U.S.; have dependent children or are single parents; have earned a high school equivalency diploma; be financially independent from their parents (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Engle, Bermeo, and O'Brien (2006) note that first-generation students often share characteristics that are typically associated with lower rates of college attendance and degree attainment such as being “more likely to delay

entry into postsecondary education, to begin college at two-year institutions, to commute to campus, to take classes part-time while working full-time, to stop in and out of college, and to need remedial coursework” (p. 14).

When compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students have a higher likelihood of coming from ethnic minority groups (Bui, 2002, Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005), particularly Hispanic and African-American (Chen, 2005, Darling & Smith, 2002, Engle, 2007), and their primary language growing up is more likely to have been ESL (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Additionally, they are more likely to be female than male (Bui, 2002, Choy, 2001, Engle, 2007, Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) and they tend to be older than their continuing-generation peers (Choy, 2001, Engle, 2007, Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Pre-College Preparation of First-Generation Students

First-generation students often lack a basic understanding of the structure and culture of higher education institutions, which puts them at a disadvantage relative to their peers. This disadvantage extends to specific academic characteristics that develop before college, which results in a lower level of preparedness for the academic rigors of college life. This may partially be due to typically taking less rigorous high school courses and fewer Advanced Placement (AP) courses than their continuing-generation peers (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). First-generation students also typically score lower on college entrance tests such as the ACT and SAT (Chen, 2005), and in general, have lower expectations about the level of education they will receive compared to their peers (Choy, 2001, Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, Saenz et al., 2007). Even in cases in which first-generation students have the same level of academic preparation and achievement in high

school as continuing-generation students, they are often less confident that they will be able to succeed in college (Bui, 2002).

Horn and Nunez (2000) found that first-generation students were much less likely to take advanced math courses in high school, which had a direct relation on their college enrollment. They noted that 64% of first-generation students that completed an advanced math course ended up enrolling in college, compared to 34% of students that completed math courses through Algebra 2. These college enrollment numbers were significantly less than continuing-generation students that completed the same math curriculum.

College Performance of First-Generation Students

“I’m 25 years old and I’m married, and in other realms, I’m completely self-confident, but in this realm, it is completely new to me and my entire family and what I’ve known and the jobs that I’ve had...it’s college.” - *First-generation college student* (Collier & Morgan, 2007).

Research has shown that first-generation students enroll in college the year after high school at significantly lower rates than continuing-generation students (Engle et al., 2006). Regardless of factors including income level, academic preparation, and educational expectations, the higher the parents’ educational level, the more likely a student will enroll in higher education (Horn & Nunez, 2000). Additional research suggests that when they do attend a college or university, first-generation students tend to enroll in less academically selective institutions than their continuing-generation peers (Pascarella, Pierson, & Wolniak, 2004).

First-generation students are at a disadvantage in a number of areas before even setting foot on a college campus. This trend continues for those students who do

eventually enroll in college. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Postsecondary Education Longitudinal Study (2005) provides insight into the academic behaviors of first-generation college students. Not only were first-generation students less likely to attend college within eight years of completing high school, if they did enroll, they were also twice as likely to leave college without completing a degree compared to continuing-generation students (Chen, 2005). This study provides a significant number of details regarding the higher education performance characteristics of first-generation students compared to continuing-generation students. Among the findings include:

- Majority of first-generation students took some remedial level courses during college
- First-generation students were less likely to have chosen a major during their first year
- More likely to choose a major in a vocational or technical field
- First-generation students took fewer credit hours during the first year, and generally progressed at a slower pace throughout their time in college
- Had lower first-year GPA's, and were more likely to withdraw from or repeat courses

First-generation students as a whole tend to be retained from year 1 to year 2 in college at lower rates than continuing-generation students, and specific demographic variables within the first-generation category tend to compound this issue. Within the first-generation group, Lohfink and Paulsen's 2005 study showed that Hispanic students were 35.4% less likely than White students to persist from their first to second year of

college. The same study showed a direct relationship to family income and persistence rates for first-generation students, with students persisting at higher rates as their family income increased (Lohfink and Paulsen, 2005).

These lower persistence rates could be attributed to specific behaviors, both academic and social, that the students display while enrolled in college. In regards to academics, first-generation students spend less time studying and interacting with faculty, are less likely to seek out and utilize campus resources (Engle, 2007), and are often intimidated at the thought of seeking out faculty for support (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). In many cases, first-generation students expect more thorough and detailed explanations from faculty, and are unfamiliar with concepts such as office hours and how to utilize a syllabus (Collier & Morgan, 2007). Time management can be an issue, with first-generation students often over-committing themselves and underestimating the amount of time needed to put toward schoolwork outside of class (Collier & Morgan, 2007). The fact that first-generation students often work full or part-time jobs may be attributed to the notion that many in this category come from low-income families. They often are forced to rely on grants and student loans to fund their college experience and have been shown to have higher levels of stress when it comes to finances (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). Other research has suggested that many first-generation students work in an effort to avoid taking out student loans, which can also lead to a shortage of time to focus on academics (Engle et al., 2006). First-generation students of families that are in lower income brackets have also reported feeling "increased pressure to work, anxiety about meeting financial obligations, and elevated stress that distracted from academics" as a result of what they perceive to be a

lack of understanding of their family and economic situations on the part of their institutions (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014, p. 12).

In addition to academic behaviors, first-generation students display social behaviors that may also put them at a disadvantage. Due to the fact that they are often working full or part-time jobs, first-generation students typically spend less time on campus than their peers and are more likely to live off campus (Pascarella, Pierson, & Wolniak, 2004). This leads to lesser involvement in social and academic clubs and makes it more difficult to build relationships with peers, faculty, and staff (Mehta et al., 2011, Engle, 2007, Pike & Kuh, 2005). The institutional culture at a university, specifically how faculty, staff, administration, and continuing-generation students view and interact with first-generation students has also been shown to have a negative impact on the sense of belonging of first-generation students (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014).

To date, relatively little is known about the career development processes and experiences of first-generation college students. Tate et al., (2015) argue that this absence of information may leave college support personnel lacking in the knowledge necessary to support the career development needs of the first-generation student population. The authors attempted to provide some info to fill in these blanks by conducting a qualitative study aimed at gathering data regarding first-generation students career development beliefs and experiences. Their study revealed that family played a huge influence on career development in a number of ways. The students in their study reported that their parents desired them to choose a major or career path that would allow them to have “a better life than they did” (p. 300). Many students reported that their parents’ suggestions for a career path was often motivated by the perceived level of

prestige and stability associated with particular fields. In terms of parental support, a common theme was that parents often expressed much support in their child's pursuit of a degree or particular career, but also that their parents lacked knowledge "about how to navigate the college and career development process" (p. 300). Students also reported that their career decisions were often based on their observations of their parents' struggles, either with finances due to a lack of money, or seeing their parents unhappy or unsatisfied in their line of work. An additional theme reported by students was their concern that they were lacking in a professional development network, and did not have the resources or knowledge related to developing a network that other students might have.

Other studies related to career development focus on specific sub-categories of first-generation students, such as the needs of African American males. Owens, Lacey, Rawls, and Holbert-Quince (2010) suggest that because of the deficit African-American males face in regard to the understanding of the college experience, these students may need specific support in developing and implementing a career plan. The authors encourage college support professionals to learn as much as they can about the students they support in order to provide specific and comprehensive advising related to developing goals and exploring interests. Parks-Yancey (2012) notes that African American first-generation college students are often not aware of career employment options after graduation. Many of these students are either not aware of, or do not have time to access support resources, such as a career center, to aid in career exploration, or to develop skills needed for a job search such as resume writing and interview practice. Furthermore, this group of students may not see the career value (i.e. the ability to obtain

a letter of recommendation or be introduced to other professional contacts) in developing professional relationships with faculty and other college professionals.

Family Dynamics of First-Generation Students

“For a first-generation college student, parents have absolutely no idea what it’s like.” – Cynthia, age 21, (Bryan & Simmons, 2009).

It is typical for first-generation students to feel a conflict between worlds, and a feeling of being pulled in multiple directions. First-generation students have reported receiving conflicting messages from parents. One message being to stay close to home and the family culture, the other being to explore and achieve in the outside world (London, 1989). They can experience feelings of guilt for leaving home and wanting to do better than their parents (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007), referred to as “breakaway guilt” (London, 1989). First-generation students may also feel a pull from family members who feel they are turning their back on responsibilities at home, or friends who have not had the opportunity to pursue college themselves (Engle, 2007).

It is important to recognize that families of first-generation students are looking at higher education through a different lens than families of continuing-generation students. Pursuing a college education may be a natural and traditional progression for students whose parents attended college before them. For first-generation students, however, attending college is a new path with transitions that are foreign to the family. In a sense, they may be seen as going against tradition by attending college before joining the work-force (Engle, 2007).

As is the case with all students, the support level of families of first-generation students, as well as their familial expectations toward education, varies from student to

student (Hodge & Mellin, 2010). In many cases, it is not that their family and friends do not *want* to be supportive, but they do not understand *how* to be supportive or understand what the students are going through (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). This lack of understanding about the college process can lead to feelings of frustration and annoyance for first-generation students, as well as the lack of interest in having conversations with family about their experience while in college (Hodge & Mellin, 2010).

Due to the fact that the families and social networks of first-generation students often do not have an understanding of the college experience, first-generation students may have less opportunity to share and discuss information regarding their experiences than their peers. This inability to share and process these experiences can lead to increased levels of stress and impact academic performance (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009). Providing first-generation students with the opportunity to discuss their experiences, with discussions specifically centered on what it means to be a first-generation student, can have a positive impact on achievement (Destin, Hamedani, & Stephens, 2014).

Westbrook and Scott (2012) found that first-generation students reported low levels of parental help and involvement during the college experience, and suggested that a lack of parental monitoring isn't limited to just the college experience, but is something they grew up with. They go on to suggest that the parents of first-generation students probably have little communication with their children in regards to "studying, reading, writing, and seeking academic assistance when needed" (p. 6). Westbrook and Scott recommend that colleges and universities should offer programming to first-generation students to compensate for the lack of parental support. In addition to supporting the

students directly, institutions should work with willing parents to help increase their sense of participation in their child's education (2012).

Westbrook and Scott's study is consistent with previous research by Horn and Nunez (2000) that suggests parents' educational level has a direct correlation with their involvement in encouraging their children to take advanced level courses in 8th grade and beyond, as well as their involvement in their child's academic planning in. Horn and Nunez's research showed that parental education level related directly to the likelihood of parents "obtaining information about educational opportunities, specific colleges, and financial aid opportunities" on behalf of their children (2000, p. 41). Parents of first-generation students were also less likely to report visiting a college with their children compared to parents who held a college degree (2000).

Bryan and Simmons (2009) found first-generation students to have very strong ties with their families and home communities, as well as strong interest in their decision-making processes. "Such tight-knit families and communities caused many participants to have conflicted feelings over enjoying experiences that are unique to school and which friends and family at home cannot understand" (p. 397). Students expressed feelings of sadness and anxiety due to feelings that they were losing connections with their family because of their families' lack of knowledge and understanding of the college process and what they were going through as college students. Furthermore, some students suggested that they maintained separated identities for their home life and school life (2009).

Theories of Student Retention and Success

Research suggests that first-generation students attend college and achieve their degrees at a rate lesser than continuing generation students (Choy, 2001, Engle, 2007, Engle & Tinto, 2008). It is important to attempt to understand the factors that affect why some students persist and others do not in the pursuit of their college degrees. The concept of retention is a complex issue, and there are obviously a range of factors that are unique from student to student that affect whether or not they persist to graduation. The study of these factors has led to multiple theories that attempt to explain the concept of retention in higher education.

Vincent Tinto's (1975) model of student integration is considered a landmark publication regarding student retention in higher education, and provided a closer look into why students leave college prior to completing their degree. Tinto's model has provided the foundation from which many current theories have been developed (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011), and helped to establish the importance of distinguishing the difference between being forced to leave for academic reasons versus withdrawing voluntarily. This lack of distinction between dropping out due to academic failure versus voluntarily withdrawing made it difficult for colleges and universities to adequately develop policies and procedures to support populations in need of assistance. Tinto noted that prior studies "have been limited to descriptive statements of how various individual and/or institutional characteristics relate to dropout" (p.90). However, most of these studies failed to acknowledge a longitudinal approach that links various characteristics of the individual to the institution that may lead to the process of withdrawal. Tinto asserted that withdrawal from school most commonly occurs due to a

low level of integration into various facets of college life. Most specifically, the lack of integration into the academic or social structure of the college or university were identified as primary factors. Students who struggle with academic engagement, social engagement, or both, at a college or university are less likely to persist in their pursuit of a degree. Students that demonstrate higher levels of integration into the college systems, socially and academically, will show a greater commitment to the institution and completing a degree. Tinto notes, however, that it is important that there be a balance between academic performance and social involvement. Students that are extreme in one aspect over another may also be at a higher risk of withdrawal in that it may affect the other area.

Astin's (1999) model of student involvement describes how students develop throughout the college experience, and how this impacts their continued involvement in higher education. Astin describes involvement as "the quality and quantity of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 528). Highly involved students are those that spend a significant amount of time and energy studying and preparing for class, interacting with peers and faculty, participating in organizations and activities on campus, etc. Astin argues that "the factors that contributed to the student's remaining in college suggested involvement, whereas those that contributed to the student's dropping out implied a lack of involvement" (p. 523). Astin further notes that involvement factors that positively impact student retention include living on campus, joining sororities or fraternities or other extracurricular activities such as intercollegiate sports, ROTC, or an honors program, and having part-time employment on campus. Astin's theory provides college student support staff a

framework from which to work with students who are struggling academically. Astin encourages staff to examine the student's involvement in order to attempt to determine the cause of the academic difficulties.

Swail (2004) suggests that cognitive, social, and institutional factors intersect to account for the spectrum of factors that influence student persistence. Cognitive factors include the student's academic ability, such as time management and study skills, content knowledge and proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics, and critical thinking ability. Social factors relate to a student's ability to cope with social issues, goal setting, attitude and expectations, family and peer influences, financial considerations, and social lifestyle, among others. Institutional factors identified include a university's academic and student services, financial aid options, faculty teaching ability, and culture of the university. Swail suggests that the cognitive, social, and institutional factors must form some type of balance, or equilibrium, which may vary from student to student, in order to develop a strong foundation on which to persist in college.

Bean and Eaton (2000) proposed a psychological model of student retention that suggests students begin college with a set of existing "entry characteristics" that include their personality, individual self-efficacy, past behavior, and beliefs about how a particular institution will work. All of these previous characteristics are then affected as they interact with the bureaucracy of the institution and react to their new academic and social environment. Within this new environment, students go through psychological processes of self-assessments related to self-efficacy, coping process adjustments, and locus of control. "These self-assessments help students connect particular experiences they have had at the institution with their general feelings about college" (Bean & Eaton,

2002, p. 75). How the students react to these self-assessments motivate them to develop strategies to adapt, with the goal being to feel integrated into this new environment. Students that are successful in navigating this process ideally result in “positive self-efficacy, reduced stress, increased efficacy, and internal locus of control” (Bean and Eaton, 2002, p. 58), which increases student motivation and intent to persist. Furthermore, when students “develop positive attitudes toward their institution, feel they fit in, achieve good grades, and want to graduate from the school, they are more likely to succeed and graduate” (Bean and Eaton, 2002, p. 85).

Habley et al. (2012) note that Spady’s work reviewing the dropout process in higher education is another prominent theory regarding student persistence. This sociological model for college student dropout identified five variables that affect an individual’s social integration to their school: academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support. Spady linked these five variables with student satisfaction and commitment to determine their effect on retention. Spady published a follow-up study in 1971 that indicated academic performance as the highest indicator of attrition (as cited in Habley et al., 2012).

An additional factor that influences an individual’s ability to persist in school relates to the economics of attending school. Becker’s human capital theory (as cited in Habley et al., 2012) focuses on economics as a primary factor influencing a student’s decision to continue or withdraw from school, and one in which students essentially weigh the cost of staying in school versus what they perceive to be the benefits of completing their degree. If a student perceives the cost of continued attendance as outweighing the benefits they receive, they may choose to leave school (Braxton, 2003).

While early retention and persistence theories such as those of Tinto (1975) and Astin (1993) did not factor in finances as a determinant of persistence, St. John, Cabrera, Nora, and Asker (2000) note that financing education is a complicated issue and can intersect with factors such as academics and social transitions to influence the college-going experience in many ways.

Support for First-Generation Students

As first-generation college students have been known to enroll and graduate from higher education at lower rates than continuing-generation students (Engle, 2007), institutions have begun to recognize the need to provide additional support for this population. Among the largest support for first-generation students comes through the federally funded Student Support Services (SSS) program, which is administered by the U.S. Department of Education as a branch of their TRIO programs. TRIO came to be as a result of President Lyndon Johnson signing the Economic Opportunity Act as part of his administration's "War on Poverty" in 1964 (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). In 1968, Student Support Services (SSS), or Special Services for Disadvantaged Students, as it was known at the time, was authorized by the Higher Education Amendments as a program funded under TRIO (US Department of Education, 2011). SSS is designed to support students that fit into one or more of the following criteria: first-generation, low-income, or students with disabilities (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Goodwin, 1998). Through SSS, grants are awarded to colleges and universities on a competitive basis to support students from the previously listed groups in order to increase their enrollment and graduation rates. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Student Services Support website, the funds are provided to allow institutions of higher education to

“provide opportunities for academic development, assist students with basic college requirements, and to motivate students toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education” (US Department of Education, 2015).

SSS has been shown to have a positive effect on student success, persistence, and retention, with participants being more likely to remain enrolled in school, complete more college credits, and earn higher grade point averages (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Rak, 1997). One such SSS program that exists is the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s program, Project Achieve. During the 2013-2014 school year, of the 177 students involved, 162 were first-generation. One hundred thirty-nine of the first-generation students were also considered low-income. One hundred forty-three (80.8%) of the total student population were from underrepresented populations. Among the support Project Achieve provides to its students includes counseling, tutoring, financial aid and career counseling, and community service opportunities. As of the 2013-2014 school year, Project Achieve had succeeded in exceeding the university 6-year graduation rate for the general student population by graduating 64.83% of its students (University of Nebraska at Omaha, n.d.).

Another method of support for first-generation college students has come through the utilization of living-learning communities. Shapiro and Levine (1999) identify living-learning communities, or residence-based communities, as integrating students’ living and academic environments. The authors note that, “a significant amount of what students learn during college comes from their experiences of daily living, and there is natural overlap between students’ academic and social learning activities” (p. 36). A living-learning community will often include intentionally chosen cohorts of students that

live in a dedicated residence hall while taking specific courses together, some of which may be taught in the residence hall. This scenario often also includes additional academic support programming, such as tutoring or advising, as well as co-curricular opportunities such as service projects and social activities (Shapiro and Levine, 1999). Inkelas et al. (2007) found participation in living-learning communities to be beneficial for first-generation students in a number of areas. Their study found that first-generation students that were a part of a living-learning community experienced easier academic and social transitions to higher education than first-generation students that were not a part of one of these communities. Previous research suggests that peer interactions are an important aspect to a successful transition to college (Astin, 1999). Inkelas et al. (2007) suggest that first-generation students may rely on more structured peer interactions that have been planned by university faculty and staff, rather than interactions that happen informally and naturally. Participation in living-learning communities helps provide this structured interaction through peer counseling, studying in groups in the residence halls, and social events that take place in the residence halls.

Chapter 3

Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how the Young Scholars Program impacts the college experience of the students involved in the program. Specifically, the study seeks to determine the student perspectives of their college experience and involvement with the program. The results of the study will be used to gain a better understanding of how the program impacts students' experiences, and will aid in making decisions regarding how best to support students in the program moving forward.

Design

This study is a qualitative program evaluation. Scriven (1996) suggests that the purpose of evaluation is to judge the merit or worth of something. Fitzpatrick et al. (2012) further define evaluation's purpose as "to provide useful information to those who hold a stake in whatever is being evaluated (stakeholders), often helping them to make a judgment or decision" (p. 9).

Elements of Michael Patton's Utilization Focused Evaluation (UFE) were used to inform the planning of this evaluation. UFE is based on the assumptions that not only is the primary purpose of evaluation to inform decisions, but the results of an evaluation are more likely to be utilized in decision making if stakeholders who are actually in a position to use the results are involved in the evaluation process (Fitzpatrick et al., 2012). Having an individual or individuals involved in the evaluation that personally care about the process and results has been referred to as the "personal factor", and has been shown to have the most significant effect on how evaluation results are actually used (Patton,

1997). Furthermore, UFE allows the researcher flexibility in designing an evaluation that best meets the needs and structure of the program being evaluated. As Patton (2011) notes, “Utilization-focused evaluation does not advocate any particular evaluation content, model, method, theory, or even use. Rather, it is a process for helping primary intended users select the most appropriate content, model, methods, theory, and uses for their particular situation” (p. 14).

The UFE framework is appropriate in this evaluation in that the researcher is the staff member most directly involved with the day-to-day operations of the program, and as such, is involved with both long-term and short-term decisions regarding the direction of the program. This puts the researcher in a position to be able to utilize the results to help inform the decision-making process with the ultimate goal of improving the program.

This study referred to the UFE framework to design a qualitative evaluation that attempted to assess the student perceptions of their college experience and the support they are receiving as a result of their involvement in the program. Qualitative data was collected directly from the students through personal interviews. The goal of this evaluation was not to make summative decisions about the overall effectiveness of the program. Rather, it was to learn more about the experiences the students have had in order to collect information that will aid in making decisions from a formative standpoint about how to better improve the program support offered to students. Stufflebeam (2001) notes that formative evaluations are important to “examine a program’s development and assist in improving its structure and implementation” (p.40). The formative nature of the evaluation is especially pertinent in that the Young Scholars Program is in the relatively

early stages, having only existed since 2011. “As staff try out new approaches and adapt to client needs, a formative evaluation can provide feedback about program processes and effects on program participants” (Patton, 1987, p.29).

As noted, this evaluation is qualitative in nature. Creswell (2005) defines qualitative research as “educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants, asks broad, general questions, collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants, describes and analyzes these words for themes, and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner” (p. 39). Patton (1980) notes that qualitative data is valuable in a formative evaluation in that it provides “descriptive information about programs where the purpose of the evaluation is to improve the program operations and procedures” (p.71). In this evaluation, qualitative data collection was appropriate primarily due to the fact that the Young Scholars Program is comprised of students from a variety of backgrounds and academic abilities. As such, each student has a personal story to share and experiences in college that are unique to that individual. Goals and outcomes vary from student to student, as does the way in which they interact with the program and institution. Patton (1987) refers to this process of how programs work to match services to the varying needs of its students as individualization, while suggesting that qualitative evaluation is valuable “for documentation of the unique outcomes of the individual clients rather than for measures of outcomes standardized across all clients” (p. 25). As Patton (1980) notes, qualitative data provides an approach that allows people to express themselves in their own words, with the open-ended data providing the opportunity “to find out what people’s lives, experiences, and interactions mean in their own terms and in their natural settings” (p.22). Creswell (2014) agrees by stating that a

goal of qualitative research is “to listen to participants and build an understanding based on what is heard” (p. 29).

Research Questions

The over-arching research question this study sought to answer is: How do students perceive the Young Scholars Program to be impacting their college experience? To answer this over-arching question, the following sub-questions are addressed:

1. How do students perceive the program to be impacting their academic experience?
2. How do students perceive the program to be impacting their social experience?
3. How do students perceive the program to be impacting their career development experience?

Research Setting

The setting for this research was the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), a metropolitan university accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and recognized by the Carnegie Foundation as a Doctoral/Research University, as well as receiving Community Engagement Classification. Recent data showed a total current undergraduate enrollment number of 12,488, with the university reporting that approximately 47% of the new first-year students that entered UNO in the 2015-2016 academic year are first-generation college students (The UNO Fact Book, 2015-2016).

Subjects

The population for this study included current and former students that have been involved with the Young Scholars Program at the University of Nebraska Omaha. In order to gather feedback that covers a range of perspectives, purposeful selection was

utilized to select interview participants from the pool of current and former students. Purposeful selection is a strategy in which specific individuals are selected based on their ability to provide information that is relevant to the questions and goals of the research (Maxwell, 2013). In this evaluation, the goal of purposeful selection was to select students that reflect the diversity of experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives of program participants. Patton (1987) identifies this as a type of purposeful sampling called “maximum variation sampling”. Selecting individuals that represent a diverse range of views is of benefit in that, “Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program” (Patton, 1987, p. 53).

From the group of current and past Young Scholars, eight interview subjects were selected. The interview subjects included a mix of current students in their first year at the university, current students who have been at the university and involved with the program for more than a year while experiencing varying levels of academic success, and graduates from the program. The interview subjects included students that have lived off campus during their college experience, as well as students that have been living on campus. Additionally, one student that was once a part of the program but did not graduate and is no longer enrolled was contacted and invited to participate. The student did not respond to the request to participate.

The 8 interview subjects ranged in age from 19-24. ACT scores ranged from 16 - 25 with the average score being 19.375. Current cumulative GPA's ranged from 2.4 - 3.77. Two participants had just completed their first year at the university, two participants were classified as having junior status (58-90 credits completed), and four

students were graduates that had recently completed their undergraduate degree. Other demographic data is as follows: Male=3, Female=5; Hispanic/Latino=5, White/Caucasian=1, Two or more races=2.

Data Collection

Prior to identifying and contacting interview participants for the study, the interview process was piloted in order to familiarize the researcher with the interview protocol (Gillham, 2000). A participant from a similarly represented program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha was asked to participate in the piloting process.

After identifying participants of the study, the researcher contacted them via email to gauge their interest in participating in the evaluation. The researcher informed them of the purpose of the evaluation, as well as informing them that their participation in the evaluation would involve a one-on-one interview with the researcher. If they agreed, a date, time, and location that was convenient to the participant was scheduled to complete an interview.

Interviews were conducted individually, and lasted approximately 30-60 minutes each. An interview protocol (see Appendix A) was utilized to guide the interview process. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, which allowed the researcher the opportunity to ask follow-up questions as appropriate in response to participant answers (Savin-Badin & Howell Major, 2013). Prior to the beginning of the interview, the participants were provided a consent form (see Appendix B) and informed that their answers would be confidential and anonymous, and assured that their answers would not in any way affect their standing in the program. They were given the option to opt out at any point during the process. Additionally, each interviewee was given a pseudonym in

order to maintain participant confidentiality throughout the process. The interviews were audio recorded using the app, Simple Recorder, on the researcher's laptop computer, as well as with a hand-held recording device as a back-up. The researcher took notes free hand during the interview process. Immediately upon completion of each interview, the researcher completed a Reflection Sheet to record and summarize any immediate reactions to the interview. Audio files and interview notes were kept in the locked office of the researcher to ensure security of materials.

Data Analysis

Data analysis procedures were based on Creswell's (2015) qualitative process of data analysis (see Figure 2). Creswell notes that these steps are not always followed in sequence, with qualitative analysis often involving cycling back and forth between data collection and analysis.

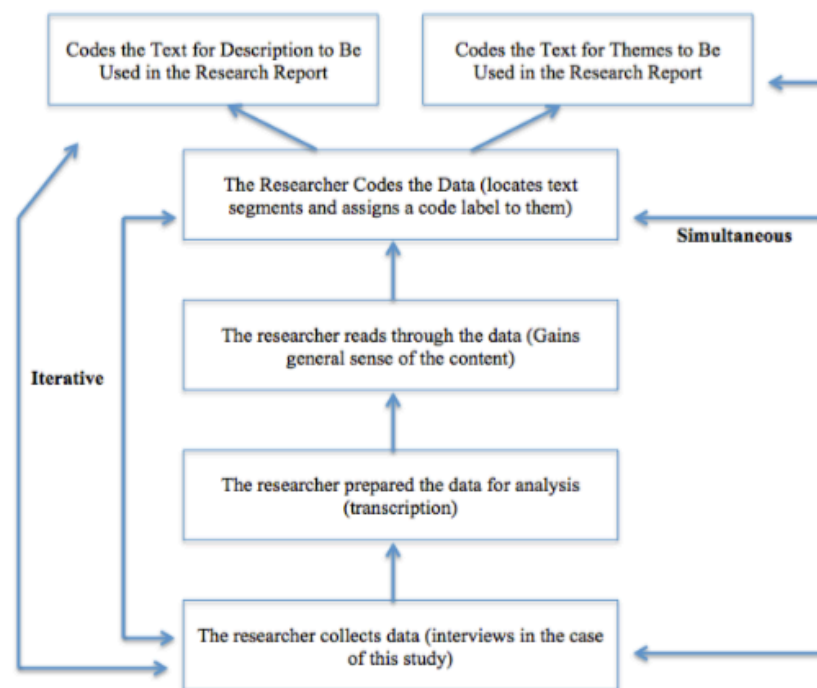


Figure 2. The Qualitative Process of Data Analysis (Creswell, 2015).

As interviews were completed, the data analysis process began as the researcher transcribed the interviews. Each interview was transcribed within 24 hours of the completion of the interview, with the transcription process aiding in familiarizing the researcher with the data (Maxwell, 2013). A member check was completed to ensure accuracy of the data. Thematic analysis, described as “a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79), was used as the primary method of data analysis. Thematic analysis offers a flexible approach that allows the researcher to become familiar with the data while searching for patterns and themes (Savin-Badin & Howell Major, 2013).

To inform this process, coding procedures were utilized (see Figure 3 below) based on recommended steps outlined by Creswell and Tesch (as cited in Creswell, 2015).

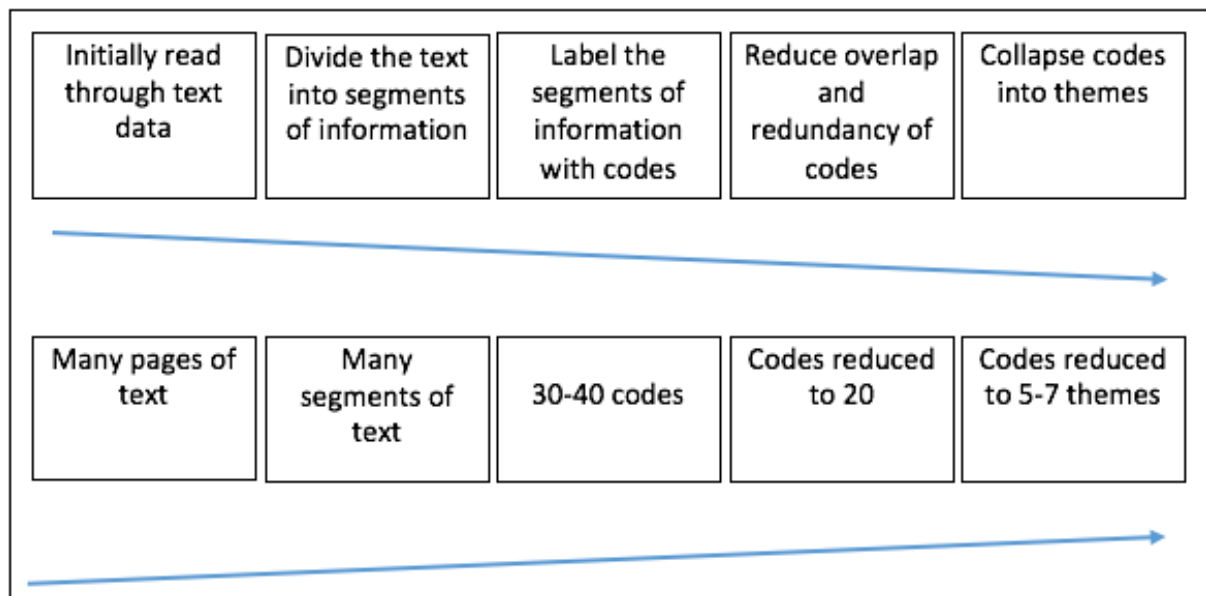


Figure 3. A Visual Model of the Coding Process (Creswell, 2015).

An initial read-through of each interview transcript was conducted to gain a sense of the overall tone and general ideas discussed in the interview. Following this, a second

read-through occurred during which notes were made on the document related to general ideas and possible codes. After this process was completed for several interviews, an initial code list was created based on regularly occurring ideas and topics mentioned during the interviews. Codes were then applied to segments of text within each interview. Throughout this process, the code list (see Appendix C) was refined to account for additional codes as needed, as well as to reduce overlap of similar codes. After initially coding each document by hand, interview transcripts were uploaded to a qualitative data analysis software, Dedoose, to aid in the analysis process. The codes were applied to the transcripts in the data analysis software, allowing the researcher to organize, sort, and search through the data in an efficient manner. Using this process, the researcher was able to formulate major themes.

Role of the Researcher

Creswell (2014) notes that the concept of reflexivity is a “core characteristic” and an important aspect of increasing validity in qualitative research. Reflexivity involves the researcher self-reflecting on their role in the research process, and helps to “clarify the bias the researcher brings to the study” (p. 202). Because of my role in developing this program and in supporting the students involved, I have a great deal of interest in the process and results of the current evaluation. I hope to learn more about the student experiences with the program, and use their feedback to shape decisions that are made about the structure of the program and how best to provide support to the students moving forward.

With the title of Academic Mentor, I have been the sole staff member working with the Young Scholars Program since its inception at the beginning of the 2011-2012

school year. Part of my role involves administrative duties such as program budgeting, overseeing the recruitment and selection of new students, and organizing all programmatic activities. As such, I have detailed knowledge of the program's history and day-to-day operations. The primary focus of my involvement is working directly with the students, and I meet with each student individually throughout the semester on a regular basis. Among the aims of these individual meetings is to identify goals and academic success strategies, discuss progress in classes and involvement in organizations and activities on campus, and to discuss strategies related to major selection and career preparation. Through these meetings, I have attempted to learn as much as possible about each student in order to support them as best as I possibly can.

During my time with this program, I have learned that in order to be an effective mentor and advisor, a trusting relationship must be present. The students need to know that I have their best interests in mind, that I am a person that they can trust, and that I am someone that they can count on to turn to if they ever need assistance while in the pursuit of their education and career. Building a trusting relationship is something that takes time and effort, and I have made an effort to be consistent and available for the students as much as possible. I have also opened my personal life to them by inviting them to my home for social gatherings where they have had the opportunity to meet my family on a number of occasions. I have done this not only because I enjoy getting to know the students, but it has also been an effort to show them that I care and that I am a person who is there to support them.

During the process of planning this evaluation, I debated the merits of enlisting an outside individual with no prior involvement with the program to conduct interviews and

interact with program participants. Ultimately, I decided to conduct the interviews myself. Patton (2015) notes a number of positive outcomes involved with having an internal researcher involved with the data collection process. Outcomes include increased data validity due to staff rapport with participants, a greater commitment to the evaluation by the researcher, the opportunity for the researcher to reflect on their own involvement with the program, enhanced understanding of the data collection process, and cost savings of not hiring outside assistance (Patton, 2015). Fitzpatrick et al. (2012) also note that involving stakeholders can result in increased validity due to the knowledge and perspectives they bring related to the program and its context that external evaluators do not have. I came to the conclusion that, because of the relationships that I have built with program participants, as well as my knowledge and understanding of the program, I felt I was in a good position to gather strong and informative data. The trusting relationships that have been built with program participants allowed me to feel confident that the students would be comfortable in providing their honest insights into their experiences. I felt that my knowledge of the program would also be beneficial in contributing to my ability to ask follow-up questions as necessary during the interview process.

Furthermore, as I am the sole staff member working with the program on a regular basis and in a position to be able to utilize the results of this evaluation, my involvement in the data collection process served to strengthen my understanding of program participants and ultimately, aid in future decisions made about the program in order to strengthen the support the students receive.

Chapter 4

Research Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the Young Scholars Program from the perspectives of its students. During the course of this evaluation, eight program participants were interviewed. The interviews allowed each participant the opportunity to share their opinions, thoughts, and feelings related to their experiences in the program and with the university in general.

Three central themes emerged from the interview data: *Relationships*, *Engagement*, and *Opportunities*. This chapter reports these themes as separate and distinct, however, they are inter-related in many ways. For example, some students spoke of getting connected to campus events or resources because of conversations they had with program staff. This could be reported in *Relationships*, due to the fact that they became involved in these opportunities because of their relationship with program staff; It could also be reported in *Engagement*, as these activities were a factor in them becoming more engaged with the university. With this in mind, despite the overlap, the data is reported as themes in separate sections where it seemed to fit most logically based on the interpretation of the researcher.

Students spoke at length about how *Relationships* have impacted their experiences. Their discussions of relationships referred to a variety of people. Students commonly talked about the varying level of understanding that their families displayed in regards to their college experiences, and how this impacted their experience. Students

also consistently referred to the relationships that they had established with other students in the program, as well as with program staff.

Engagement emerged as another central theme. Students discussed how their involvement in the program impacted their connection with the university, as well as with the community in general. Students also reported that their involvement impacted their sense of responsibility and accountability, as well as their motivation and ability to persist toward graduation.

The final theme that emerged is *Opportunities*. Students spoke about being grateful for the opportunity to be in the program and for the support they receive, as well as the opportunities that developed as a result of their involvement in the program.

Theme 1 – Relationships

Students talked at length about the relationships that they have developed in their lives, and how the dynamics of these relationships impact their college experience. This pertains to those that have existed in their lives for many years, as well as relationships that have developed more recently during their college years. The discussion of relationships centered around family, peers, and Young Scholars Program staff.

Family Relationships

Of particular note is their relationships with family members, and the varying levels of support and understanding their families demonstrate as it relates to their college experience. The dynamic of being a first-generation college student and how this dynamic fits with family relationships was a prevalent point of conversation during the interview process.

A consistent message students relayed was that their families lacked a basic understanding of what it means to be a college student. As one student commented:

With my immediate family, especially with my parents, and my siblings that didn't really, you know, went through it, they really didn't know, like what I was doing. [LAUGHS] Like even now, like explaining my degree...and they wouldn't understand what that was. And even understanding the fact that I had to take online classes sometime. It's like, what is that? You know, like having to explain that.

Because of this lack of understanding about the process, interview participants reported that despite their parents being supportive of them being in college, they typically are not able to go to them for feedback or advice. One student commented:

I think that they don't really understand the difficulty, because they're just like, just go to school and do this and that. They think it's a lot easier than what it actually is. So, on that part, it's a little bit more difficult because, you know, they don't fully understand what it takes to be a college student, I think. Um, and I mean, but again, they do support me 100%, but it's just difficult and gratifying at the same time.

Another student spoke about her experience of applying for college and various scholarships, and how she had to rely on others for assistance because no one in her family was in a position to be able to help with that process:

I went through scholarships and I wrote essays and I did my testing for, like high school, but it was never because my mom reminded me that I had to do that. It was always because school, you know how they send the letters and stuff, and I

just had to do it. Not on my own, because my counselor (name), she helped me out a lot.

Other students spoke about how their relationships have changed with family members, and that they are now considered role models for siblings and others in their families. One student discussed how he now feels more pressure from his family to be a leader:

...it always felt like, there's like some kind of expectation as far as like, the people that graduated are very knowledgeable and trustworthy and stuff like that. So, lately, now that I'm a graduate I feel that extra pressure from my family as far as the expectations from my family when it comes to, this is someone that in a tough situation, can take leadership and help us out in the family. They trust my opinion, they trust my, you know, what I can propose to the family. So, I believe that being a college grad has impacted that a lot.

Other students commented that family members now consider them role models and also aspire to attend college, particularly their younger siblings. An interview participant commented that, "my younger brother's really smart, and then my other brother wants to go to the same high school as I did and do the same things I did just so he can follow my footsteps." This comes as a point of pride, with another student stating:

I guess being a first-generation college student kind of sets the precedent for my brothers that they know you've got to go to college and do something with their life after high school. So I guess that's the big thing for me is I wanna say that it feels good to set a precedent for other people who don't think they have the opportunity to go to school.

For some students, their families lack of understanding about what they are going through as a college student is a point of frustration, negatively impacting their experience. This was a particularly emotional topic to discuss for one student, who expressed that her family isn't able to relate to her experience:

It's difficult because your family can't relate to you. And I feel like as human beings our family is the people that we go to to feel understood. And, like knowing that your family can't understand where you're coming from...I don't know, it's hard.

This particular student has a very close bond with her immediate family. Their lack of understanding and ability to support what she's going through in college has been a difficult transition to navigate. She expressed that her family has always been close, and have always understood her due to their shared background and experiences. This has not been the case for her, however, during her time as a college student:

I think that's the biggest thing. People just don't understand you...or not people, but your family. Like you expect people to not ever understand your situation, but I feel like your family should always...or you always think that your family will understand you because...like for example my brother and my mom. We've been together all of our lives. And, um, we always go to each other for help. And if I tell them something that's going on with my situation they can't help and they can't even understand where I'm coming from. They tell you that they understand, but they don't understand.

She went on to discuss how their lack of experience in higher education effects their interest in communicating with her about it. As she described it, "they never ask me

about college. Like they never like bring it up or anything. But it's because they don't...like they never went through it, so I don't think they even think about asking how I'm doing." This lack of communication has given her the impression at times that they do not care or support what she's doing, which she says negatively impacts her desire to continue. The student emotionally stated:

Yeah or they don't care if I'm...like I'm sure they care that I'm, they hope I'm doing good, but they never sit and talk to me about it. Like I feel like they don't care. But I know they do but they just don't know how to ask or show me that they care...I like know we do things for ourselves, but I feel like I've always hoped that my family would ask me how I'm doing and would be proud of me.

So when they don't ask or they don't seem to care, I know they do, but they don't seem to care, um, like you stop being good for yourself too.

Contrary to the previous student's experience with her family, other students expressed that, while their family may not have had similar experiences to relate to, they were actively involved and expressed much support throughout the process. One student laughed as she talked about how involved her parents were. "They would always ask, how's it going? What did I learn? What's new in the scholarship? What's going on? They always wanted to join in with anything they could like the dinners and stuff like that." Another student simply stated, "They were supportive even though they didn't know what it was, really, what was going on and all that." The student discussed how his parents encouraged him to attend school and study, but were not necessarily hands-on in their support and trusted that he had the resources he needed to be successful:

And it's like, yeah, and I'm being more independent now and I think they trusted me towards, you know...I feel like they did feel like I...I wasn't doing a bad thing obviously, so they did trust me and what I was doing and I had the support, too, to be able to do that.

One student commented about the difficulty of balancing her relationship with her family and being a college student. She felt that her family didn't really understand the amount of time and hard work involved with being a successful student, and felt pulled in different directions. As she described it:

It's difficult to adapt because, for my family, I feel like Hispanic families overall, we're very close and we're very family oriented, and we always try to help each other. So for example right now, my brother with (his daughter). I feel like he's always expecting me to help him, and it's fine, I do it because I love her, but there's always so much that you have to help out with. And if you don't help out you feel bad, but if you don't do good in college then you feel bad, and I think it's just hard to adapt to just giving it your time.

Because of the lack of knowledge that their family members had regarding the process of attending college, several students spoke about the impact the Young Scholars Program had on filling that void. One student commented that because his parents were not able to offer advice and feedback, he relied on the program:

And, like, you know like I said if I wouldn't have been in this program, my parents wouldn't really know what to do to help me out, you know, and I don't know if I would have been able to just seek out, you know, what I wanted to do without the support and stuff like that, and, so that was huge.

Because of her family's lack of understanding of the process, another student described how she felt like she was doing it alone without them, and without the support of the program, she wouldn't know where to turn:

It makes it more difficult. Like without the scholarship, I wouldn't know where to turn. Like what do I do in this situation, or like if there's a class or just in general, any college questions that I may have they don't really have the answers to, so it does make it a little more difficult for me, because there's nobody in our family to lean off of, you're kind of just doing it by yourself, blindly a little bit, because there's nobody really to show you the way. Um, it's like teaching yourself how to drive, really, without anybody showing you. [LAUGHS]

Several students reported that being in college was a significant point of pride for their family, and that their desire to make their family proud was a significant motivator for them. One student emotionally spoke about the work ethic she saw in her mother, and how that has been an inspiration for her to pursue her college degree:

My mom, um, she came here I think...like 12 years ago...I remember she had two jobs and like I think a year ago is when she went back to having just one job. But, she used to have two jobs and would leave at 4 in the morning, come back at 3, eat, and then leave at 5, and come back at 1 in the morning, or 12, or whatever. I don't know, if she did that for us, the least we could do is do that for her. Yeah, I don't know, like her being a single mother, you just have that to look up to. And, I do it for her.

Another student echoed the sentiment that seeing his parents work hard and struggle has been a motivating factor for him. He commented that, "seeing their struggle, and like,

that just makes me want to succeed I guess. Not only for them but for myself as well.” A recent graduate of the program was very proud to talk about how his parents’ stories and upbringing motivated him, and how his family hopes his younger brothers are able to follow in his footsteps and attend college:

I mean I think it’s a big accomplishment in general. Um, I ask my parents, like, who in our family has graduated, even extended family and apparently the closest person that has graduated was my mom’s uncle, that graduated college, and that’s it. So I think it's a big step because it's going from my parents who...and I also found out that they worked at like a, like a farm, picking berries or something. From going from that, to having kids that are actually graduating college, I think that was a big...I think I made them proud and at the same time I’m still doing a lot of it for them. And they're hoping that since I graduated college that my little brothers are able to also follow in the same footsteps.

Relationships with Peers

During the interview process, participants often spoke about the impact of the interactions and relationships that they developed with their peers as a result of their participation in Young Scholars. Some students noted that their involvement in the program helped ease the transition to a new educational environment during their first year of college because of the fact that they were starting out with a group of students with shared backgrounds and experiences. One student discussed how the smaller size of the program, as well as their common background of being first-generation students, helps ease the transition. He described it in the following way:

Smaller, then when we first come in, we come in together. I think it might be first generation students, too. Like, we all kind of lean on each other a little bit to help us get through that since we're the first person to go through it. And we all know we're in the same boat so we have something in common right away.

The student continued to discuss how, despite their differences in personality, peer relationships have been an important aspect of his involvement in the program because he and other students are going through an experience together:

I would say, getting to know, like, everybody in the program and especially the people that you came in with. Um, like you share an unspoken of bond I think with the people you come in with. For example...like me and (another student) are completely different, I feel like. He's kind of quiet, I mean I can be quiet, but not really, and I still feel as like me and (student), me and (student), me and (student), me and (student), we each have like a good bond between one another. It's just unspoken of, but we know there's something there that we all have in common and we can all talk to each other.

A recent graduate of the program described his experience with peers in program as being very supportive. "I think, you know, having my peers in the program, and growing those relationships with my friends was huge support. Being able to see them around campus and to relate with them, and you know, understand we were going through the same thing and all that." Another recent graduate added that because she met other Young Scholars before actually beginning her first semester, she already had a network of friends:

...it was a good doorway to meeting new people. Like it wasn't like I was going into school not knowing anyone. I kind of was put into a program where they had

people there and I met friends and kind of formed relationships throughout the years of being a Young Scholar so that was neat.

Some students spoke about how the positive atmosphere and culture of the program helped contribute to their ability to develop relationships with other students. One student described it as like a “family thing” and an environment that is “very comfortable” for her. For another student, the program’s efforts to include all students, and ability to do so because of its relatively small number of students have helped to contribute to the positive atmosphere:

I think it’s like, I don’t know how to put it like in one word, but it’s like really homely, like it’s really comfortable...I think it is because it’s like a smaller program and it’s like, you know, we know everybody kind of, even the new people coming in. Like we’ll do stuff with them so everybody feels included... I feel like with the program, it’s like, it really makes a strong effort to kind of make everybody feel, like, together kind of, so I really like that. I think that’s a strength. That’s why I like it in here too because it’s really comfortable. Like, because we’ve all, like, we know each other.

She went on to state, “I mean, more people wouldn’t hurt, but I like that it’s just you and 15 other people, and it’s like really close knit, kind of. I think that’s really a strength because, like you have people, too, that you can go to that you know and, um, just like in the program. Yeah, I really like it.”

For another student, the positive program culture is in part due to his feelings that the students in the program are all grateful for the opportunity and do not want to take it for granted, which has created an environment in which they want to support each other.

As he described it, “I think everyone in the Young Scholars Program is grateful for the opportunity, so they don’t scoff at others, they don’t judge others...” He went on to talk about friends involved in other programs or activities which seem to have more of a culture in which students are competitive with each other that can create a negative atmosphere. He continued, “But here, I’ve never experienced that once, I’ve never heard anything bad about the Young Scholars Program. Everybody’s just like supporting each other, like willing to help, so that’s awesome.”

Several students spoke about some of the program requirements as being key elements in helping them to develop relationships. One such requirement is that each student must complete at least 90 minutes of required weekly study time at their convenience in the program office. This time is theirs to work on any homework or studying that needs to be completed, and is also a time to touch base with program staff if there is something that they are in need of assistance with. Students noted that this time was beneficial not only from the standpoint of having the opportunity to interact with one another socially, but also to support each other academically. One student commented that, “we also had to put time into studying and knew that other people, you know, in my group were also studying too and I knew that we were going to be studying together and that was something that was helpful.” He added that “it was beneficial to have, you know, my peers, and talk about our classes and stuff like that.” For another student, the varying strengths of students in the program created an opportunity to go to peers for assistance with certain classes. “They would be good with math or science, or any subject that we knew they were good at, they would be able to help us. It was nice to have an on-campus place to go where you could study and its designated for studying...” This sentiment was

echoed by another student who said, “We’re all different. We all have different interests and different ways of, you know, studying or stuff like that, so if we have a question then there’s always someone in the program that probably is, can relate to it better than we can because we’re all different...”

Another aspect that participants expressed as a strength in helping to build relationships with peers is that there are non-academic program events that are held outside of the campus setting throughout the course of each school year. When asked about aspects of the program that they find beneficial, one student said:

I think those events that we had during holidays and school, where you’d gather the Young Scholars and we’d just hang out and talk to each other. I think those were beneficial...just so you know like who is in this program with you, and if you need help with anything they could also help you out. So I think that’s one of the aspects that I liked a lot.

Another student simply stated, “I enjoyed the get-togethers. That was nice to do as a whole so we could get to know each other more. Especially with new students.”

Some students spoke about specific program events that were memorable experiences for them during their college experience. One such event that multiple students spoke about was participating in the “high ropes course” at a local camp just outside of Omaha. This activity involved climbing a cargo net and crossing a series of obstacles as a team while up in the air. The goal of this activity is to promote team-building and trust within a group. For one student who was afraid of heights, completing this activity with peers helped him get through it. As he described it, “I’m terrified of heights, [LAUGHS], but I don’t know, I was doing it with people I was comfortable with

so it made it a lot easier to go through that.” For another first-year student, this was also discussed as a memorable experience, and one that brought students closer together:

Honestly, I really didn’t want to do it...[LAUGHS]...it was in the middle of the semester towards the beginning, but it was still like I didn’t really know too many people, and I was kind of reserved too, so I wouldn’t be like, hey I’m (student name), or whatever. But yeah, that was probably the most memorable because it was like, um, like we had to work together and stuff. And it was like, fun. Yeah, like we got to know more people that day and got a little bit closer and stuff...and I challenged myself too so that was good...we did have to trust each other and stuff like that and I think that’s why I felt closer to people I hadn’t talked to...I remember it like it was yesterday...

For that student, activities such as these have been key to her comfort level in the program. She acknowledged that it is not realistic to enter any type of program and expect to become close friends with everyone, but it is important to have a certain level of comfort with everyone:

Yeah like with the social events...just because, like I said, the high ropes course, it kind of made you get close with one another. And you got to know them too, so it wasn’t like, it’s not like awkward or anything...I think that’s really important, too, like I mean not saying when you get into a program you’re going to feel like, you know, everybody is your friend, and you know, stuff like that. But, I think it’s really important when you all do feel, like, comfortable with each other...Because you are more likely to reach out and talk to them...that’s why I think that’s really important.

Other activities students spoke about on a frequent basis were the volunteer projects that the group does each semester. These volunteer activities were not only an opportunity to serve the community, but they became opportunities for students to bond and get to know each other outside of the academic setting. When talking about these volunteer opportunities, one student mentioned that it was an opportunity “to get out, meet new people, and kind of, um, do something for other people instead of just myself.” Another student mentioned that “it didn’t really feel like community service I’d say just because you’re around people that you like and you’re kind of all doing it together.”

One student spoke about the other students in the program, particularly the students that she had seen graduate, as well as the program staff, serve as a motivator for her to do well:

I think knowing the people that we know. For example, the students who have already graduated. I feel like being a part of this program, you expect yourself to do the same. Knowing the people that you know in this program, you expect to be like them too. I don’t know if that makes sense. Like for example you, like how you’re successful, I feel like we look up to that in a certain way. Um, and we hope to be successful like you and like the students who’ve graduated, we hope to be a part of that.

An aspect of Young Scholars that appears to have had a significant impact on the peer relationships developed by some students is the financial support the scholarship provides to live on campus. Several students in the program elected to be roommates with each other in campus housing. This allowed them to develop friendships and

support each other in ways that other students may not have experienced. About the experience of moving in with a fellow Young Scholar, one participant said:

(Student name), she was very...we became close after we moved, well I moved in with her. She was very helpful too, her being close to graduating and stuff like that. She's so, so positive all the time. And there's been a couple more students who I, maybe not relate to a lot, but somehow we end up just, um, forming relationships.

Living with other students in Young Scholars served to build the confidence of one particular student. Getting to know his peers as roommates helped him gain the confidence to be more social outside of the program as well.

Like, I remember coming in and I was kind of...I don't know if I was shy at first...but the more I opened up to people, or the more I talked to people, and hung out with people, (student) and (student), for example, they lived with me for 3 or 4 years and (student) lived with me for 3 years. Like, the more confident I became with them the more confident I would be outside. Like, oh, they're actually laughing at my jokes or something. [LAUGHS]

Later in the interview, the student again brought up the fact that he had the opportunity to live with fellow Young Scholars as being a significant factor in developing a friendship with them:

And then also living with three people in Young Scholars and just getting to know them better and then like, hey do we have something going on for Young Scholars, and let's drive together, let's carpool, let's hang out. It was a lot better knowing that you had someone there for you when you needed them.

An added benefit for Young Scholars living together was simply the convenience factor for one student. As she described it, “We could go to the study hours together, or the events together and just carpool to events and stuff like that.”

Relationships with Program Staff

During the interview process, it became apparent that the nature of the program has allowed students the opportunity to develop a relationship with program staff. This has impacted students in a number of ways. Students spoke about how developing a relationship with academic advisors takes time and is not always easy to do. The fact that Young Scholars has a program advisor working with a relatively small number of students is a key aspect noted by students. One student stated:

...it was just a huge help having an advisor that's more in contact with you rather than just, um, your advisor with your program that you're, or your major. So my major, my advisor was in charge of 300 or so students where as you're in charge of like a set group and so I felt more comfortable going to you and asking you for advice or how to do stuff than my major advisor. I think was a huge help of being a Young Scholar.

This student commented further saying that her academic advisor for her academic program was friendly and helpful, but simply had too many students to work with, making meetings feel less personal. She went on to state:

I mean I liked talking to her but she just had so many other students to deal with... You could tell it was like, here's your meeting at this timeframe, ask as much as you want, as much as I want, and then, you know, you're kind of on your own. So, yeah, I think that not having you as a mentor, not having the resources

that the Young Scholars provided, it was, it would have been a lot harder to get through four years of college. Definitely.

For this student, having the Young Scholars staff that was more available to consistently meet with was a key element of her experience in the program, and one that she feels has a positive academic impact on students in the program. As she described it:

...keeping up with each student throughout the semester is a huge strength as well because if you only met with us once a semester, I feel like some people would just fall more, decrease in their studies and GPA...That was a huge strength, just to keep everybody on top of things, so I like that.

Students expressed that the consistent meetings are especially important for new students transitioning from high school to college. When asked about the most beneficial aspects of being in this program, a student discussed that aspect of the program:

I think having that benefited me a lot just so we could go over what I've been doing this semester or what I need to work on or just things coming up, or, you know it was just a good way to keep on top of things. And I think every student needs, at least first-year students, need that type of structural meetings just so they can be organized and keep on track of things. Coming from high school where they, like, I don't know, aren't that independent so...I think that it is most beneficial for me.

Another student discussed how having one consistent person that they meet with helped to make students feel comfortable, and allowed the program staff to get to know each student on a personal level. She stated, "...it's just one mentor, too, like you...so I think that's really comfortable too. It's not like five people we can go to. It's you. Like

you know our background and all this stuff, so I think that really is a strength, too.” A second student echoed these thoughts of the program staff getting to know each student, and felt that they are “very understanding of people’s situations.”

Despite this, one student discussed how it took time to build a rapport and trust, and that she initially worried about meeting individually with the program staff due to concerns that she was not performing well academically. Over time as trust was developed, the student realized the supportive nature of meeting with the program staff, and began to look at the meetings as an opportunity for growth and improvement:

Before I wouldn’t look forward to these meetings. I was like, oh my gosh, he’s going to yell at me! I used to be so nervous. But, now I take it as an opportunity to find things that I’m not doing, or that I could be doing better at. To just learn about things that I...like right now, just a couple minutes ago, these are opportunities that you might not know about but they are available. It’s kind of, it’s more like a re-grouping thing throughout the school year. I don’t usually stop and think, or evaluate how I’m doing, um, with all aspects: social life, work life, and school life, all together. And I feel like I do that in these meetings. So it helps me gather and proceed stronger, I think, than if I didn’t do that meeting. Just to kind of see where I’m at. Because sometimes I come in here and I walk out thinking way differently than I had before coming in, because sometimes I’ll come in and I’m like, I’m just a hot mess and I don’t know what I’m doing! And you kind of like, bring everything together and you’re like, ok, this is good, or we need to work on improving these areas, and I feel a lot stronger coming out than I did coming in. Every time.

Some students expressed that they wouldn't know where to go for support and advice if they weren't involved with a program such as this, particularly since they didn't feel they were able to go to family for feedback related to college. According to one student:

I mean without my parents or anything having any input on, you know, or advice, really, that's where the scholarship comes in tremendously. Like it is...they give, they have the right answers, they're supportive, they motivate you in the right way because I think the scholarship understands the aspect of school. I could walk in here and say, hey Aaron, I don't know what to do about this, and you're like, oh here's a million options let's figure it out.

Another student expressed similar feelings of not knowing where else to turn for support. She said that, "if I didn't really have this I don't know where...I probably like, honestly, I don't know who I would reach out to, like teacher-wise, or like a mentor." She went on to compare the process of meeting with an academic advisor with meeting with Young Scholars staff, and expressed that it was more convenient to be able to come to Young Scholars for assistance because she is already in the program office on a regular basis. She stated, "with you I can come in here and just say, you know, Aaron, I'm in trouble with this or whatever and I probably wouldn't make an appointment with my advisor every other week..."

Several students talked about how meeting with the program staff on a consistent basis throughout their college careers impacted their career path and career preparation. One student shared a story about how during his first year at UNO, he had general areas

of interest, but a meeting with the program staff helped to steer him in a particular direction toward a major and career that he had been previously unaware of:

And, another thing that I can remember being really impactful was actually meeting with you. I think it was my first year here too, kind of trying to find out what my path was. And I think, you know, one thing that I told you when we met back when you were in the office by the Chancellor, yeah I told you like, you know, I really like helping people...and I was like, I don't know what I want to do...I knew I wanted to help people and, you know, working with youth was always one of the things I was interested in, to help out people around that age. And, yeah, I think one thing that you told me was, have you ever heard of social work? And I hadn't, so it was just a very impactful thing to have someone that could just briefly tell me about that and point me in the right direction. You know, oh, have you tried, like, looking into it a little bit? And you helped me get connected with, I think it was (academic advisor name) in the social work department. Um, and, so yeah. Having that strong connection that, you know with the fact that I liked to help, and finding a career that was, that exactly, to help people, it was very impactful for the fact that someone from this Young Scholars was able to help me find that.

Another student also spoke about discussing career options with program staff and his appreciation for the support and encouragement offered, while not feeling pressured to rush into a decision. He said, "...you never once, like, discouraged me from changing my major. You never made me feel bad about myself for changing my major...You're

just letting me find myself and letting me figure out what I want to do so far. So that's nice."

Continuing on the idea of career preparation, students spoke about how having the opportunity to meet consistently with program staff has helped them to feel more prepared for the job search process. One student described it as "career readiness" and said, "You've really driven home to practice interviewing, practice a cover letter and everything, getting everything set straight, so even though I haven't received a job yet or gotten a job yet, I'm fully prepared to. I know I need interview skills, to research the job I'm looking for, get to know what they're about..." Another student echoed this idea of career readiness, and shared a story of stopping in the program office with a question:

Like one time I came in here asking you a simple question about resumes and you went out of your way to look for a resume template you had made up when you worked in that department...but I never asked for that. Uh, you just did that on your own willingness, so that was awesome. And then, uh, like referring me down to other people at ACDC for certain help.

When reflecting on the support he received during the job search process, one recent graduate commented:

...when you saw my resume multiple times, I mean that helped...Um, just knowing the fact that someone was here if you needed them for anything. Like if you had trouble at work, or choosing one job between another, um, I think it helped because it kind of opened your mind what the pros and cons of each job were.

Throughout the interview process, several students expressed that having individual meetings with program staff throughout the semester, as well as simply having program staff available if they needed assistance with something, served as a motivator for them to continue working hard. This was a key element in keeping one student motivated, who said, “Going to you for help, um, because you provide, like I said, a lot of encouragement, so it just makes everyone in the program want to do better...” Another student discussed how she had always wanted to go to college, but never really knew much about what to expect once she started. Meeting with program staff has helped to keep her on track:

...when I was little I would always tell my mom that I was going to go to college and that nothing was going to get in the way of that. And now I’m here and it’s like, ok, now what do I do? And, this program helps a lot. Like meeting with you every semester, it just keeps me...it reminds me that I have to do good.

She went on to describe how the program motivates her to not only be a good student, but a good person. “And we hope to make you proud. Not even, not only in like an education kind of way, like classes and stuff, but like as people in the community.”

Developing a relationship with program staff extended beyond feeling support academically. As one student described it, he didn’t feel the need to rely on the program staff as much in an academic sense due to his strong grades, but having a trusting relationship with program staff allowed him the opportunity to talk about and feel supported in other areas of his life:

...it was always beneficial because having someone that could listen to me, and knowing that I wasn’t being judged for what I was doing. Someone that I could,

you know, trust to talk about not only what was going on with my school work, but things that I was involved in, and like my goals and aspirations and stuff like that. Even stuff with like my friends and stuff like that, I was able to talk to you about that so it was very beneficial to have someone, even to keep building my support system, that was huge. That was something that I didn't have that much, I feel like, in high school, then in college I really had a chance to build that a lot.

As an alumnus, this student also discussed how he's benefited from having a continued relationship with program staff:

I know that I can still talk to you and even reach out, like when I started stuff with my job now. So knowing that I can talk to you about that kind of stuff is really beneficial and I think that's the natural thing that kind of happens through this program is that you build that rapport with the coordinator, so I think that's very beneficial.

Theme 2 – Engagement

Engagement emerged a second theme during the analysis process. Students spoke of their involvement in the program and how it impacted their connection to campus and the community in a number of ways, such as through student organizations and activities, getting connected to campus resources, volunteer and service projects, and the opportunity to live in campus housing. Students also discussed feeling more motivated to persist in their academic studies due to their involvement in the program, as well as feeling engaged with the process of planning for and beginning their careers.

Campus Involvement

Throughout the interview process, students discussed how Young Scholars helped connect them with various resources and organizations on campus. Several students spoke about the program requirement that students must participate in an approved activity or student organization outside of campus as having a significant impact on their educational experience. One student discussed how he was never involved in activities outside of class in high school, and even though he knew that it is good to get involved, he probably wouldn't have done so at UNO if not encouraged by the program.

I feel like if I wasn't a part of this program I probably wouldn't have pushed myself enough to do that. I wouldn't have joined ALAS (Association for Latino American Students), or even started with MavPro or whatever. I wouldn't feel encouraged to do that unless it was a requirement, which after being involved, it didn't even feel like a requirement. It was more like, oh, this is a good thing and I enjoy doing this so it's like, that was something that was...yeah, I don't think I would have done that to the extent that I did.

At another point in the interview, this student again talked about the impact of the encouragement he received to get involved in a UNO organization outside of class, and how it impacted his leadership skills. He shared a particular story about the impact of one specific organization that he joined based on the recommendation of another student in Young Scholars:

...thinking about some of the things that were the requirements, you know, we were required to be part of a school organization. In the beginning I didn't really know what kind of things I wanted to be in and stuff like that, just because I never

was that involved in high school. Looking back on it now it's like, why did I not get involved in high school? But yeah, definitely that push for us to be involved in organizations. In the beginning, like I said, I didn't know what to do...then I got into ALAS, the organization of Latino American Studies, because one of my other friends here from the program he was in that too and I saw it as something that could be beneficial. So I got into that and eventually I was able to get a leadership position in that, and being able to use that time, I was there for a year and a half, at ALAS and gained so many skills that I can say that I can apply to anything that I'm doing right now. So it's, that was a huge push. The huge help to have the Young Scholars Program to kind of help direct me that way...was beneficial.

Another student discussed that the organization/activity involvement requirement is important for students not only from a social standpoint, but for building confidence and helping to develop well-rounded individuals:

I think being involved in activities helps with a few things. From my personal experience I have gotten to know people who I now consider good friends. I've met students who know and understand the struggles and perks of being a college student. I believe it helps build confidence. I've met the people who build the UNO community and are always eager to help. Surrounding yourself with people who are involved with school makes you want to participate more. Feeling like part of a community makes you want to fit into its success. Participating in school activities and organizations makes for great students in my opinion.

For another student, at first, he didn't like the idea of having to join a student organization outside of class. Over time, he learned the benefits of doing so and was glad for the opportunity. As he described this program requirement:

...it did help me get involved [LAUGHS] so those organizations that I didn't think I would join, um, I mean at first kind of seemed like, really, we have to get more involved? [LAUGHS] I'm already going to school full-time and working! But in the end it did help me because, for example, I wouldn't have joined Beta Alpha Psi and gotten connections through like the accounting field...

He went on to discuss how this initial involvement helped him gain the confidence to join other groups and eventually, pursue leadership positions in them:

...running for different positions in different organizations, I probably would never have done that either, but I did VP of community development for Beta Alpha Psi. Um, and...I mean doing the CFA Research Investment Challenge...when I started I would never, like, actively join a club that would make me speak in front of people, and I still don't like doing that, but I figured I might as well try different things and that helped out too.

Other students echoed that the support the program provides in getting involved in campus organizations and activities has led them to become more involved and more connected with the campus. One student discussed how for her, her initial involvement in Young Scholars led to other opportunities that she would not have been aware of otherwise:

I think you guys do a good job in suggesting that we participate in activities and that, little by little, that makes a big part of you being involved in school and

wanting to do good in school that you're a part of. A lot of students, I feel like they don't feel like they're a part of the school and it's because they don't participate in activities outside of the classroom. Um, but, yeah, like UNO is always doing free classes, they're like free events, like all of that stuff that UNO does that I feel like I wouldn't have known about it. Not, fully because of the program only but just because getting involved a little bit makes you get involved in something else and then something else and then it just builds up, and if you don't start then you're never going to have that.

A recent graduate spoke about how the program encouraged him to get involved in organizations, and now that he is working full-time, he sees a connection between that involvement and his current work due to the connections he was able to build with other students and community members:

Off the top of my head thinking about some of the requirements, one of the most beneficial ones was the requirement of being involved in a student organization. I don't know if you guys still do that or not but for me that was very beneficial...being (in organizations) helped me grow, not only as a student because I was involved in the, you know, the UNO community and stuff like that...but also as a professional because I was able to build those relationships with the professionals in the community. Even to now, I can talk to a lot of those people that I met...that are working in the community that I can connect to with my job right now. So, that requirement helped me out so much to my career development.

Despite the consistency in students discussing their positive feelings and outcomes of being required to be involved in an organization or activity outside of class, one student did not express the positive views shared by other students. This student discussed how she didn't view involvement outside of class as something that is a key element to her success, and that participating in activities outside of class is not something that she prioritizes. She discussed how she has attempted to participate in organizations as required by the program, but to this point, has not found anything that she enjoys and wants to continue doing. She stated:

I just think that the shoe doesn't fit everyone and I'm sure maybe it's just because I haven't...dived into something that I really like. Maybe that's why, but I don't think, for me personally, it would make it or break a decision whether, or that would contribute to the success of my, like graduation, or degree or anything like that.

Connection to Campus Resources

In addition to support and encouragement related to getting involved with organizations and activities outside of class, students consistently discussed how being in the program helped them get connected with support resources on campus that were beneficial to their success, both in and out of the classroom. One student commented, "It's really good knowing I have someone that'll help me through it, and have someone that helps me with resources...helps me find all available resources so I can do better in everything." Other students discussed that they wouldn't have known about these support resources available on campus or sought them out on their own:

I feel like, without the program, I would like, just be trying to manage like I would but not nearly as well...like I really wouldn't know which person I would reach out to...and I know there are other resources on campus, but yeah, I probably wouldn't know, like, where to go to find that kind of, or like be comfortable enough to go there, I guess.

Another student echoed how he wouldn't have known about the variety of resources and opportunities on campus, and elaborated by saying:

...if I wouldn't have been in this program, my parents wouldn't really know what to do to help me out, you know, and I don't know if I would have been able to just seek out, you know, what I wanted to do without the support and stuff like that, and, so that was huge. Even, I feel like I wouldn't have known about, like, stuff around campus, like the fact that ACDC is such an important thing that can help us, and like service projects and stuff like that. You know, so definitely, this is, I wouldn't have been as involved and I wouldn't have gotten as much as what I did out of my college time, my undergrad time. I wouldn't have utilized the UNO resources as much, definitely.

When discussing Young Scholars helping to get him connected to campus resources, a student described it benefiting him in multiple ways, and his appreciation for that support being consistent during his time at UNO:

...having the resources and being connected to those resources, whether it's the financial resources or like the connection to the community and being able to connect that, and connecting us to the services here at UNO and stuff like

that...Knowing that you guys have those resources and I didn't feel like those resources were going to go away any time soon.

Several students spoke about how getting connected to campus resources impacted their career planning and preparation. Specifically, UNO's ACDC (Academic and Career Development Center) office became a key support service that students utilized. For one recent graduate, having Young Scholars staff contact her about career related opportunities sponsored by ACDC proved beneficial, and that she may have otherwise not put a priority on taking advantage of that support:

...having you tell me like, hey, there's like a career event going on, or you can go to the ACDC (office) and they'll help you out with your resume or tell you good tips on your cover letters and stuff. So, had you not emailed me or told me those things then I probably would just, you know, just over-ride it and not really pay attention.

Another recent graduate elaborated how having Young Scholars staff available to connect students to UNO's career-related support services was a key aspect of his career development:

Yeah, thinking about, you know, all the help and support that you guys provided, you specifically, you know whether it was looking through my resume and making sure it looked polished and all that, and providing the resources like having ACDC come and talk to us about how to build, you know, those cover letters, whatever it was. It was very important to me because I was able to utilize that and specifically, you know, that was one great way that I learned was by seeing and then by doing. So I was able to see what was the good practice of

doing that, so that was very helpful. Um, I think knowing that having the resources that were there, like I said ACDC was huge help. And pointing us in the right direction, you know you always encouraged us to do those mock interviews and encouraging us to get our services met there at the ACDC offices was very beneficial.

This student went on to discuss how his involvement in Young Scholars helped him become more engaged with his social work major. It was beneficial for him to be a part of Young Scholars because he was able to connect what he was learning in his coursework regarding support services to people in need, with what he was seeing in-person with Young Scholars. This served as a motivator for his career preparation:

I think also kind of connecting it with Young Scholars, you know human service, the Young Scholars program does provide a human service and I was able to connect things like what we do here and it even inspires to what I do now it's like, it really motivated me to know that I can make an impact...having that framework of seeing the Young Scholars, I knew that my social work degree could lead to something like that, too, was kind of a neat thing to have that connection. And it made me more interested in my school work as far as like, I could do something like this too...

Volunteering and Community Service

Young Scholars have completed a number of volunteer and service learning projects as a group. These projects appear to have impacted the students in a number of ways. Over the course of the interviews, students discussed how these projects helped them feel more connected to the campus and local community, in addition to feeling

more connected with the other students in the program. Students also spoke about the connection between these service projects and their career preparation.

For some students, the service projects completed in Young Scholars inspired them to be more involved in service outside of the program. One student mentioned, “I volunteered a lot last semester. And I think it's because of this program.” She went on to discuss more about how she benefited from these experiences:

I did volunteering in high school, and that was because it was required to graduate. And then coming here it was required for the program too, and it's just, like helping others just kind of, it opened my eyes to know that I don't need to commit myself into long hours or every day to help people. But, it can just be a couple hours once a week and I just hope to be a productive member of society.

Several students discussed that they felt more connected to the community, and were able to see and experience first-hand other aspects of the community that they had previously not been exposed to. As one student said, “And I enjoyed that because I could see the other side of Omaha...” When talking about the service projects she participated in with the group, another student commented, “...it definitely just helps you connect more with the community, whether that's like around UNO's campus or just out in Omaha.” When asked about impactful experiences during their time at UNO, another student discussed the service projects with Young Scholars stating, “I think things like volunteer activities...things like that, I don't think I would do normally during my spare time. But I think that it just gets me out there and gets me exposed more to things that I wouldn't normally do.”

One student discussed how the service projects helped to not only become more connected with the community, but also to reinforce the idea that individual people can have a positive impact on their communities in many different ways. One particular experience proved to be especially impactful for him. As he described it, "...it was neat because I was able to take some leadership in that. At the same time, it was, it kind of reinforced my passion for service in the community." He went on to say, "And so having that to reinforce that there's good people out there that are making big differences and, you know, no matter what and no matter where you're from, you can still make a difference."

Students also spoke about the service projects having an impact with their connection to other students in the program because they were experiencing them together as a group. One student referred to them as "team-building experiences" and said it was "good to get experience with that, quality time with other students." Another student discussed how participating in the projects as a group was a good idea from a social standpoint. She mentioned, "...just like knowing it's going to be fun with the people I was with, that definitely benefited me." Because of the group dynamic, she didn't feel like it was something she was "forced" to do. She said "it didn't really feel like community service I'd say just because you're around people that you like and you're kind of all doing it together..."

One service project that seemed to stand out was a service learning project completed in partnership with a 4th grade classroom at a local elementary school. The project involved Young Scholars visiting the elementary school to talk to the elementary students about college and answer their questions about college experience, with the

elementary students later visiting campus and going on campus tours with the Young Scholars. This project allowed students the opportunity to reflect on why they wanted to come to college. One student mentioned that working with the 4th grade students was impactful because it reminded her of what she thought about college when she was that age, and also because of the potential impact the project could have on the future of the 4th graders. On the importance of the project, she said, “Um, how they look up to you, and how memories kind of flush back about how, well I wanted to go to college. I knew that coming to the United States, I was 10 years old.” She discussed the project further by stating:

I think it just reminded me of that, that I wanted to come here and it was just nice seeing the little kids because you know that they’re going to come here too, hopefully. And then, going into my field of education, it was just nice, um, having to meet with them and, I don’t know, just having that connection.

Another student discussed how this project impacted him:

I think that was huge, just uh, seeing those kids faces light up when they saw college students come into their elementary school and talk to them about college. I know for a lot of those kids they weren’t even thinking about college... So I think seeing us made them realize there is opportunities for them to further their education. There is opportunity for them to like, to keep going to school, so like that’s just always good to like have...motivate people. Or inspire I guess for those little kids.

Some of the interview participants discussed how they felt participating in the group service projects is of benefit to their career development experience. When discussing how his involvement in Young Scholars was impactful, a recent graduate said:

Another way that I can think of is, like I said, that strong sense of service to the community. Whether we did like the 7 Days of Service and stuff like that, it did help me build my resume more too. Not even my resume, but more my own specific examples of how I've been able to help in the community when I interview. I can use examples of how I helped with Conservation Fusion, or we helped with different projects in the community through 7 Days of Service at UNO and different stuff like that. Um, knowing that was something that I did and was a benefit to the community is something that really connects my career path and being able to interview and being able to get that job that I have now.

While the students recognized the importance and benefits of volunteering and serving their community, many students commented about how they probably would not have volunteered to the extent that they did had they not been in Young Scholars. As one student said, "I definitely wouldn't have done any of the service 7 Days of Service, or Open Door Mission. I wouldn't have done that." When asked about key experiences in the program, another student replied, "I would have not volunteered as much, that's for sure." For one student, volunteering was something she had always been interested in and recognized the benefits of, but hadn't had the opportunity to do much in the past. Being involved in the program opened doors for her and made it much more convenient to participate in these activities:

It's good for me, not only like on my resume and all that other stuff, but it's good for me in general to get out, meet new people, and kind of, um, do something for other people instead of just myself. So like when we went to the homeless shelter and we did the serving stuff, I've always loved to do stuff like that but I think I'm just so worried about everything else, that just having a time set aside to say this is what we're going to do and we have this event set up, it really motivated me more to get out there and do these things. I mean it just, it makes you feel better as a person I think.

Campus Housing

The financial support Young Scholars provides students to live on campus appeared to have a significant effect on the experience of students. Students that had the opportunity to live on campus discussed feeling more connected with the university, both in terms of their academic experience and social experience.

Students commented that being on campus helped them stay on track academically, largely because it was easier to focus and study while on campus versus their parent's house. A recent graduate commented on the convenience of living on campus as it relates to his academics by saying:

I didn't have to go that far to find a quiet study hall because it's next to campus... And I know that while I did live on campus, every time I did go home to try to study, I would not get anything done. I just couldn't study at home. So it was nice knowing that I could be on campus and in the dorms and not get as distracted as, um, being at home.

Another student echoed this, and discussed how she lived at home her first year before moving into the dorms. She referenced the idea that as a first-generation student, her family didn't understand her experience enough to support her academically while she was living at home:

...before I moved into the dorms I was living with my family, and like, taking my own time to study was just difficult. Um, like they think I just go to school, and school is school, and then you go to work and work is work, and then you go home and that's it but there's more to it than that.

Living on campus also helped one student feel more supported academically and become better connected to campus resources. He said, "The fact that you guys were able to financially support us to live on campus, too, like that helped me build my connection to the resources here on campus. And, so yeah, that extra support there."

For another student, living on campus made it much easier for him to access campus resources such as the workout facilities in HPER. For him, living on campus "also helped me being active because if I had to drive 15 minutes just to go to the gym I probably would not have done it and I probably would have been a lot unhealthier."

Some students discussed how living on campus allowed them to become more involved in activities on campus that they probably wouldn't have participated in had they been living at home or elsewhere off campus.

I lived in the dorm all four years too, so that, um, if it wasn't for Young Scholars I would have moved back home after my first year. And it would be harder commuting, it would be harder just to be connected more with campus and the

community. And I just feel like I would go to class and go to practice and go home.

This was apparent for another student who spoke about being much more involved as a result of living on campus, and how her experience would have been much different if she had lived at home:

Um, I wouldn't have met as many people. I would probably be a commuter and just go to class and go home and work. Um, I just didn't have that overall, I don't know...I wouldn't see myself...I definitely wouldn't have lived here, so I wouldn't have been as involved. So yes, knowing me, I enjoyed it a lot.

Students that lived on campus were in agreement that a benefit was simply the convenience that being close provided. As one student said, "I enjoyed it because I'm on campus so I'm not going to be late to class. I don't have to worry about parking. You just have to walk to class. Its super close." Another student had a very similar description and said, "...it helped me a lot because I didn't have to drive 15-20 minutes, um, just to get from my house here. It helped because I could just walk to school." He added a bit of humor and laughed while discussing the social benefit of "being able to talk to people who are your age instead of just being with your parents and talking about parent stuff."

A first-year student discussed how living on campus has helped him meet new people and build relationships. He commented that, "I got really close with a lot of people on my floor when I moved in...I just feel as if relationships, again, got stronger." He went on to discuss how it aided with the transition of moving away from home for the first time. "I think it's another thing it provided me with knowing how it feels to be away

from my parents so like when I am at that point in my life, it won't like hurt me to leave home that much."

The benefits of living on campus were summed up well by one student who compared her experience to that of some of her friends that didn't have the chance to live on campus. She had the opportunity to live with other Young Scholars, and had this to say about her experience:

Meeting other scholars and making friendships, life-long friendships, um...and I just felt like I was more, like, connected with UNO. I'm just like already here. Which I've heard from other people that don't live here, they're just commuting, and they go to class and leave. Like there's no activities, no nothing, um, so that really impacted me. I enjoyed being close to campus.

Students who lived off campus commented on the difficulty of getting involved while being a commuter student. One particular student experienced both living at home and in on campus housing with other Young Scholars, and was able to compare the experiences. He described his experience as follows:

Another thing that would have been different is that I definitely wouldn't have had the chance to live on campus, which to me, I was able to live two years on campus. Yeah, and you know, build relationships with not only my roommates, which to now there still some of my really close friends, and to be able to connect with the campus more. My first year at UNO I did not live on campus and I felt like that disconnect, that I wasn't as involved and I didn't know the things that were going on on campus compared to those two years that I was on campus I was involved in a lot of things and was able to participate in events and stuff like

that, so I would definitely not have been able to do that if I didn't have the Young Scholars Program. And that definitely would have cut me off from my experience here.

While most students that lived in campus housing reported feeling more connected to the university, one student experienced living in the dorms her first semester, but preferred living off campus. She commented that while being on campus was convenient from a time management standpoint and having access to more experiences, she never felt comfortable from a personal standpoint while living in the dorms with people she wasn't familiar with. On her experience living in the dorms, she commented:

I was there for a little while. I would go back and forth. I mean I was just there for a little while, and it was a little intense and it was a little different. It just showed me that I didn't like living with other people. [LAUGHS] Just in general I think a home for me has to be somewhere where I'm 100% comfortable because that's where I unwind and mentally, I think I need that.

Motivation and Persistence

Students consistently spoke about how being involved in the program helped to keep them motivated and accountable for their academic performance. For some students, it was a result of simply being a part of a program such as this. One student stated, "When you get into like this kind of program, it's kind of like, you know, you want to try harder." Another student elaborated by saying:

...if I wasn't in the scholarship, I might be ok with just meeting the minimum...but being in the scholarship I think it's holding me a little more

accountable for my success because it's not just me. It's a whole, I mean, there's a bigger picture there instead of just myself. So I think it inspires me to do better academically.

A specific program element that contributes to students' sense of motivation and accountability was the required study hours in the program office. When asked about program elements that benefited him, one student commented, "I'd say the mandatory study hours in here...sometimes I like, don't have anything for the week so I don't really feel like coming in but I'll come in anyway because, one, I need to, and two, I know it'll be good for me." Having a physical space dedicated to Young Scholars also contributed to some students' ability to stay focused and motivated during their study time. On studying in locations outside the program office, the student said:

I can't anywhere else. Like at home, I'll try, but I just can't. And I come in here and it's like, I just know I'm gonna get stuff done when I come in here. Like I'll drive from my house, and I'll be starting my astronomy paper or something like that and I just, at my house, I just can't do it. So I'll come in here and finish in about 30 minutes and it would take me like 3 hours at home just because I'm so focused.

He went on to elaborate about how he is able to focus much better in the Young Scholars office than other locations, including his parents' house:

Feels nice whenever I'm worried about a class or something, studying here without like feeling, how should I say this, but like not interrupted, but I know that I can study in here perfectly fine, like, if I'm at home I won't accomplish

anything, but if I come in here I already have that mindset that I'll get everything done that I need to.

Other students acknowledged the benefits of the required study hours, but reported that they didn't benefit as much from this particular requirement. One student discussed how it's great to be able to remain in contact with program staff "because we get to see you and talk to you even outside of official meetings." In spite of that, from the standpoint of efficient study time, she commented, "...sometimes it's hard to get here, like it's not hard to get in an hour of studying, it's hard to come here and get your things out and prepare and study for 30 minutes and then get your things out and go." Another student discussed how as time went on and he got more involved with his specific academic program, he preferred to study in another building as that was where all of his classes were. On the required study hours, he said:

At first it was a little easier since I was on north campus a lot more...and you know, I could make the time since I was already here. But as I started being more specialized in my major I would start being at Mammel (Hall) a lot more time and since I lived on that campus, it'd be kind of a pain to drive here for an hour and then just go back.

Another program requirement that appeared to impact students' motivation and sense of accountability was the fact that they consistently met with program staff over the course of the semester. In particular, students commented about meeting with staff mid-semester, and having to complete a mid-term grade check. At these meetings, students are required to compile and report their current grades at that point of the semester. This

served as a motivator for students, with one student sharing a story of having a mid-term meeting during the spring semester:

Like spring comes around, like nice weather comes around and everyone starts losing motivation and that's about that time you have mid-semester grade check. And I know at that time, I didn't have the best grades...Uh, so just looking at that was just what made me like, damn, I need to keep trying a lot more.

Another student echoed this and talked about how meeting with staff at the middle of the semester and discussing class grades helps to “keep you on track” and “since you meet with you, it's like you see, like, where you are and where you should be so you don't fall behind and stuff like that.”

The mid-semester grade checks serve as a motivator for students even when they are already performing at a high level, and helped to keep them informed of their standing in each class during the semester. As one student discussed:

Um, I think the mid-semester grade checks, just semester grades in general just for the fact that, I mean I knew I was doing good but, I know during some of the years I always thought like, oh, this is going to be a really hard class and I don't think I'm going to do good in it. And then during mid-year, and end of the year, I found out, oh, I am actually passing it with an A. So I think that was really good because I knew where I was standing at all times...

Another student that had consistently high grades talked about how meeting with the program staff and doing mid-term grade checks served to keep him accountable for how he was performing:

I'm thinking about the mid-semester grade checks and the individual meetings were kind of intertwined in some sense with me specifically I thought. Just because, especially toward the end, my grades were doing really well so we didn't have to put that much emphasis on that, but you know, it was beneficial to know that someone was also holding me accountable. To know that you can't just mess up and no one's going to talk to you about it. So, being held accountable was a nice push.

A program requirement that was motivating for some was the fact that students need to maintain a 2.5 in order to be eligible. Some students saw this as a reminder that they need to stay on task, and without that, they speculated that they wouldn't have pushed themselves as hard.

I think the requirements are, like the GPA requirement, and the grade requirement, stuff like that, I think that is beneficial because without that I wouldn't do it on my own. I know sometimes I try to get by with, especially with difficult classes, I don't think I'm as motivated to go and get extra help and do all these other things that are probably in the best interest for myself. But I don't think I would probably, without that push, not only would I not think about it, I probably wouldn't enforce those things. Like meeting with a professor every once in a while, stuff like that.

Another student reinforced this opinion about the GPA requirement by stating, "...it helps me stay on track too because having to maintain like a 2.5, like I have a goal actually rather than just kind of floating and being like, oh I hope I get this. But having a 2.5 or higher GPA set kind of pushes you to do your best."

For one student in particular, the structure and support of the program after her grades dropped below the 2.5 minimum requirement proved to be a significant turning point in her college career:

When I was on academic probation, that was a tough one. But I think I learned a lot about myself that semester because without those guidelines, I didn't see how far I could push myself academically. But I think that was so memorable because I was so scared. I was like, I'm going to lose my scholarship, I don't know what to do, it was a little bit of a scary situation. So I came in here, and you were like, ok you're going to be on academic probation...and I think that was probably memorable because I was not only grateful that I didn't lose my scholarship at the time, but there was options to like make it better and that helped so much.

She went on to discuss how this was relevant for her because there was an option to continue, and that reinforced to her that Young Scholars was a program there for her support:

...usually in my life, there's not really...it's always like I cut it kind of close and it's usually, oh, turn back around and find a new option. But this was, "let's make it better" kind of situation I think. Usually if you're not doing well in class, you fail. There's not a whole lot of options. So with that, it just felt comforting, and it felt like I had a lot of support. Instead of just having a negative view of me, it was like, ok how can we make this better?

While the GPA was a motivator for some students, others felt it was too low and not something they paid much attention to. One recent graduate talked about the GPA and that he "didn't really think about it that much." He discussed how he struggled a bit

early in his college career, but as he improved as a student, he adjusted his expectations for himself and didn't need to pay much attention to worrying about maintaining a 2.5.

On the GPA requirement, he commented:

So I feel like that requirement didn't push me to do more. Which I feel like it could have been more of a benefit if it was higher or something like that. It was just, compared to other things, how they pushed me to do more, that one didn't really. I guess that when I focused on my grades it wasn't that I knew I needed to get higher than a 2.5, it was because I knew it was beneficial for my own growth...

Several students also spoke about the program having a significant impact on their ability to persist and continue on with school for a variety of reasons. When asked about how her college experience might have been different had she not been involved with Young Scholars, a student who recently graduated commented:

I probably wouldn't have made it through freshman year to be honest. Um, I know a lot of people who did have scholarships and they didn't try and failed out of college. Um, but I would have been working too much and my grades would probably fall because I worked too much just so I could pay off college.

Another student was very blunt in her assessment of what her experience would be like without the support of a program like Young Scholars:

I don't think I would have finished. I think, point blank, period. I don't think I would have finished. Because there were so many obstacles that, without the support of the scholarship, I would have just said, ok, well that's it. I guess I'm not going to finish anymore.

Theme 3 – Opportunities

The third theme that emerged from the data was *Opportunities*. Students spoke about being grateful for the opportunity to be in the program and pursue their education, as well as other opportunities such as financial support, various forms of program support, and the unique opportunity to make professional connections. Students also discussed opportunities that developed as a result of their involvement to the program that they might not have otherwise been able to experience.

Opportunity to Attend College

A common point students made was in reference to the fact that as first-generation college students, they are the first in their immediate family to have the opportunity to pursue a degree. Several students shared stories about their parents' limited educational opportunities, and how grateful they were to have this opportunity to receive a scholarship to attend college. As one student described it:

My dad actually went to college for 1 year and then he dropped out, so I think for him to just, you know, have kids that...had the opportunity to go to a 4-year university, it made him happy as well as my mom, too. They were just extremely, I don't know, yeah I guess happy that we all got to make it there...It's neat to see them like, be excited for our accomplishments and stuff because they never got to go through that type of experience before.

Another student discussed how as a first-generation student, there can be a lot of pressure, but it is an opportunity that has a lot of value and something her family is very excited for:

It's something I guess, that, I mean it has a lot of value to it. There's a lot of pressure, but there is a lot of value to it. My parents are very, they're just very excited that somebody in our family, or our family in general, we're making better and striving to be more successful.

A recent graduate was asked to share a memorable experience and shared the story of when he learned that he had been offered a scholarship for Young Scholars. He and his father attended a meeting with program staff in which the scholarship offer was made. He discussed how at the time, his father did not recognize the significance of the event due to English not being his first language:

...once I came in and I got offered the scholarship my dad didn't have a clue what was going on. [LAUGHS] So we got in the car and I looked at him and said, do you know what just happened? He was like, no, what just happened? And I told him, they just offered to pay my schooling for free, and, I think that was like a moment of joy for him.

Other students talked in more general terms about how grateful they felt for receiving such a unique opportunity to receive a scholarship and be involved in a support program of this nature. One student discussed the small scale of the program in terms of the number of students involved, and his appreciation that he was one of the students that had the opportunity to receive the scholarship. He said, "I guess they should just know how grateful I perceive an opportunity like this. Like five kids received it last year. Four kids receive it this year. That's not just something you get, it's something you should be grateful for."

Another student spoke about her life situation prior to beginning at UNO, and the impact that having this opportunity has had on her life and future. She said, “I know that it's a huge opportunity and when things are not going good, I always think back about how much help this is to me...” She began to get emotional as she went on to explain that due to her family situation, she may have had to return to her home country of Mexico had she not been selected to participate in the program. She added, “I think how without this program I wouldn't be here. And I don't mean here like just college, but here, like with my family...so I think that's like the number one thing that I always go back to.”

Financial Support

The opportunity to receive a financial scholarship was something that students consistently discussed as having a significant impact on not only their experience, but ability to attend school. One student discussed how he had missed out on other scholarships he had applied for, and was resigned to the fact that he would live at home and commute to UNO to take classes. This was disappointing for him given the fact that he was seeing all of his friends busy making plans to move into campus housing at various schools. Receiving the scholarship allowed him the opportunity to live on campus. He said, “I don't know, it made me feel, just good. Because I had kind of prepared myself to not get that, so it made me feel really happy. And astonished that I got it.”

Another student discussed the impact of the financial scholarship, and how prior to receiving it, he was busy making plans to work a full-time job, which would have hindered his ability to persist in school.

...before I even started school when I think about it I remember having a full-time job, like, 40 hours, and 18 credit hours of school...because my parents didn't save up any money. So I was going to try paying it off while I went to school. And looking back I probably wouldn't have finished because of those 18 credit hours and working 40 hours.

Receiving a financial scholarship seemed to reduce stress and anxiety for students as they pursue their degrees. A student summed it up by stating, "Also, the support, you know, the financial support was huge. Like knowing that I didn't have to worry about how much I needed to spend for my books and stuff like that. You know, it was like, it was that nice stability to have that." Several students commented about the reduced stress of not having to work as much during college with one student stating, "Maybe if I wasn't in the scholarship I would have worked more and went to school less, which would have taken longer to graduate, or I just wouldn't be as involved."

Other students admitted that, without the financial support, they simply would not have attempted college. One student discussed how most of her family is still in her native country of Mexico, and she most likely would have ended up there. She stated, "There would be no way for me to pay for college and I'd be in Mexico doing who knows what. So I always think about that." Another student discussed how she wouldn't have attempted UNO without the financial support, "I probably wouldn't even have attempted UNO if I didn't have the financial support to do so, because it's so expensive. And, I mean, I probably would have finished an Associate's Degree at Metro...I don't know, but I just know financially it wasn't an option."

A recent graduate offered a unique perspective on the aspect of financial support for college. He discussed how he is now attending graduate school and is paying out of pocket without the assistance of a scholarship. In hindsight, thinking about his undergraduate experience, he has a new appreciation for the financial support he received:

I mean, think about where I am now with my master's degree, too, you know.

Like one of the biggest things is the financial support. Like now, having to pay all my classes and knowing the stresses of that, it's very difficult for anybody obviously. It's very...it's one of those things you have to be able to balance and manage financially. That would have been very, I feel like I would have not been able to graduate because I don't feel like I would have been able to afford it.

Opportunity to Access Program Support

Students spoke about how their involvement in Young Scholars offered opportunities to access support resources that they either would not have known about, or would not have been able to access otherwise.

Several students spoke about basic access to program resources such as the Young Scholars office space that was available to them at all hours. A student described the convenience of this by saying, "I think, because it's on campus, you can come early, stay as long as you want. And, my classes were always next to it so I could come early, finish everything, study a little bit beforehand, um...have internet access to online classes and online quizzes and the extra resources that are available." Other students added that access to office technology was a benefit that aided their academic experience. One student said, "Well I know I don't have a printer at home or at the dorm or anything so I

can come up here at night to print something off, that's awesome..." In addition to printing, another student added, "Computers also mine wasn't the best in college so I definitely would come here if I had to work on like big PowerPoints or excel projects. Um, that was really nice." A student helped put these things into perspective when talking about computer and printer access stating, "...just the resources here as well is something you don't want to take for granted...I think that's like something small but it's like major at the same time, you know, just like resources like that."

An additional aspect of program support students mentioned was the support to pursue professional development opportunities. Students spoke of being encouraged to attend various events on campus and in the community, as well as receiving financial support to do so. A graduate spoke about several events that Young Scholars supported him to attend and how he benefited from those experiences:

I think the professional development...like I know I took advantage of going to different things and learning about them. I think that was really useful because there's so many ideas out there that you can learn from. And I think I went to the (Omaha) Young Professionals Summit, and I also went to the Midwest Entrepreneurial Conference, and I feel like I learned a lot from just doing those and just seeing what people are doing out there that maybe you can develop into your own life. So I think that was one important thing because I still try to do it. If there's any events that I can go to I'll still do it.

Another recent graduate spoke about opportunities for professional development that she learned of through her involvement in Young Scholars that proved to be of benefit for improving her leadership skills. "I remember that you recommended

Emerging Leaders to me as being in Young Scholars...it was fun and it was just a good experience to learn leadership skills and to be professional in certain settings.” She also spoke about program staff helping to get her connected with a local non-profit organization that helped her gain some valuable experience in her career area of interest.

And Healthy Families, I wouldn’t have done that. And that was, um, that was kind of eye opening just because it was my first actual volunteer experience that I had with the field I was interested in...But, yeah, I think that it just helped me realize why I’m pretty passionate about working with people, and like their health, and their lifestyle change and what not.

The same student went on to discuss the process of deciding what to do post-college and the opportunity to attend graduate school. Discussing her senior year, when thinking about her future plans she said, “I struggled this past year to try to figure out what I wanted to do.” She ultimately decided to apply for graduate school, but did not feel prepared for the application process. “I didn’t know how to write a good cover letter. I didn’t know how to write, you know, a purpose statement, I guess you could say, for grad applications. I needed some structural discipline on that because I had no idea.” She went on to discuss how the program staff helped her navigate that process by providing support in completing the graduate school application process. She was accepted to graduate school, expressed that without that support, she may not have had the opportunity to attend. In reflecting on the process, she said, “...I think that Young Scholars helped me out greatly with preparing for that. And I probably wouldn’t be going to grad school if I wasn’t a part of this program, so...probably would have called it quits after undergrad!”

Professional Connections

Several students commented on the opportunity to interact with and develop connections with people involved with Young Scholars as having a powerful impact on their experience. One student summarized the impact for him, stating:

Knowing also that Young Scholars was connected with, like, you know, the Chancellor, knowing that we're connected with the Young family and other things that we did with other organizations too. Knowing that I was building those connections with different people, that was nice support knowing that this program is helping me in that way to build that.

For another student, being invited to a reception with Young Scholars that was attended by the Young family, as well as administrators for UNO and the University of Nebraska system, was a great experience. When asked about memorable experiences, he said:

I'd say, experience with Young Scholars...meeting with the Chancellor was super-cool...And even with (NU President) Hank Bounds. That was awesome, that opportunity. That's just like, that's just unreal. I don't think many students have that opportunity to talk to the Chancellor. Like I talked to him for like 20 minutes that day. And that was a pretty cool experience. And even Hank Bounds was there too, so that was pretty neat.

In particular, students appreciated the opportunity to interact with the Young family, who is responsible for financially supporting their education. One student discussed meeting members of the Young family at a reception for all of the students in the program and said:

...just having some time with them and putting like a face to the person who's helping you...it's very nice, um, motivating. Because just meeting the person that you know is helping you a lot in more ways than she could imagine, you want to thank her by succeeding, or thank them as a family.

Another student discussed meeting the Young family and agreed that this was significant for students in the program. She hoped that students will have even more opportunities to connect with them in social settings in the future, stating, "With Shirley, we met with her maybe once a semester as like a dinner thing. I wouldn't mind having her around more often...I think that would be something good for the program..."

A graduate of the program recalled the experience of meeting the Young family during his freshman year at UNO. This proved to be a significant event during his college experience that has stayed with him as he has entered into his career:

One of the early ones that I remember a lot was when we first met with the Young family and Jim was actually there...our first lunch with everybody and the Chancellor and all that. One thing he [Jim] said that I really took to heart, was that, he said that, you know, the importance of work experience. Like any kind of experience, that was, you know it doesn't matter what it was, like, being able to build your resume through work experience, you get a lot of skills. Because I think about it a lot now with my job. Specifically, how I'm supporting high school students and even younger students, not only helping them find experience, like job experiences or even opportunities to build on their skills and stuff like that. And even to myself, I always took every opportunity as something

that I could always learn, so that was a very memorable thing to hear that from him.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the impact of the Young Scholars Program from the perspectives of the students. Specifically, how does the program impact the students' academic, social, and career development experiences during their time in college. A qualitative evaluation was conducted, with data collection taking place in the form of personal interviews with current and former students of the program. This chapter reviews and discusses the results of the evaluation in terms of the research questions that were presented at the beginning of the study. Additionally, opportunities to enhance the program moving forward, as well as a possible annual evaluation model for the program, are discussed. Finally, opportunities for future research related to the program are presented.

Research Question # 1 - How do students perceive the program to be impacting their academic experience?

Students' levels of academic engagement play a key role in their ability to persist in higher education (Tinto, 1975). A primary goal of the Young Scholars Program is to support students academically in their pursuit of their education. Several program components appear to play a significant role in supporting students' academic engagement.

As reported in Chapter 4, a key component that students feel impacts their academic experience is having consistent contact with program staff. These regular meetings help to motivate students, which is of particular importance considering the

effect motivation and effort have in determining student success (Kuh et al., 2006). The meetings also help to instill a sense of accountability for students, knowing that there is someone that is looking out for them and interested in their success. A student summarized their feelings after individual meetings with program staff by stating, “I feel a lot stronger coming out than I did coming in.” The fact that there is one program staff member that oversees the relatively small number of students allows the ability for the staff to get to know each student on a personal level. As mentioned in Chapter 4, a student commented that this allows the staff to be “very understanding of people’s situations.” This is a key factor in program staff being able to support each student in a manner that is most beneficial to them.

These meetings are also a time for self-assessment through the process of conducting mid-semester grade checks. During mid-semester grade checks, students are required to compile all of their current grades in order to calculate their current semester GPA. The mid-semester grade checks remind students of the importance of being aware of their personal academic performance, and provide the opportunity to re-evaluate study strategies in the cases where students are not performing as desired.

In addition to regular meetings with program staff, the structure of the program, which allows program staff to be available to students outside of regular meeting times is also beneficial academically. Students reported receiving direct assistance from program staff related to academics, as well as becoming more aware of and accessing other academic support services on campus as a result of communicating with program staff. All of these outcomes are consistent with previous research suggesting that first-

generation college students are more likely to experience academic success when they report positive interactions with college personnel (Kuh et al., 2006).

As discussed in Chapter 4, students reported that their connections to campus resources increased through their involvement in the program. This is of particular note as campus support services can play a key role in the success of students (Kuh et al., 2006), with first-generation students being typically less likely to utilize these services (Engle, 2007).

Further, students being required to complete study hours in the program office serves as an academic support tool on several levels. First, it provides students with some structure in their schedules. Several students discussed time management as being a key challenge for them during college. From this standpoint, structured study hours may be particularly relevant to students during their first year in college as they are also dealing with making the transition from high school to college. Second, it helps to keep students motivated and accountable knowing that they need to be in the office studying on a weekly basis. Not only this, but it provides an added sense of accountability and motivation from peers in the program who are going through the same process, as well as the opportunity to receive academic support from each other during their study time. Finally, it allows for more consistent contact with program staff outside of regular meeting times encouraging further relationship development, while also allowing the opportunity to receive support in specific classes during study hours. This required study time is of particular importance as previous research has shown that typically, “first-generation students spend less time studying and less time interacting with faculty (i.e. in

advising sessions) and other students (i.e. in study groups) about academics both in and out of the classroom” (Engle, 2007, p. 34).

Furthermore, having a physical office location with access to resources such as study spaces, computers, and a printer was something students noted as being of academic benefit, not only due to the ability to access the available resources, but in increasing their ability to focus on academics when in the office.

In addition to specific programming elements outlined above, students appear to benefit academically simply by virtue of being in the program. The most obvious benefit is in the form of receiving a financial scholarship. While a scholarship alone is not enough to ensure academic success, students reported the financial assistance as being an important aspect of not only their opportunity to attend college, but their ability to persist. Despite the fact that some students still choose to work while in school, the financial scholarship relieves the burden many students feel of having to work significant hours to be able to afford college, allowing more time to focus on academics. This is a key factor in that previous research suggests that working more hours while in school may lead to lower levels of persistence (Choy, 1999), and that first-generation students tend to work more hours while in college, decreasing their academic engagement on a number of levels (Engle et al., 2006, DeRosa & Dolby, 2014).

Furthermore, the financial assistance creates the opportunity to live in on-campus housing for many students. The ability to live on campus eliminates some academic obstacles students face including having the opportunity to live in an environment surrounded by others that are understanding of the process involved in achieving their educational goals, which may not be the case for students living at home. The

convenience of living on campus also makes it easier for students to attend classes, engage with campus resources, and participate in events. An interview participant summarized this in simple terms stating, “That’s another benefit of being here, you know, there wasn’t really an excuse for why I couldn’t come since I live close.” This is of particular importance as living on campus is consistently linked with higher levels of educational persistence (Kuh et al., 2006).

Consistent with previous research regarding first-generation college students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009, Hodge & Mellin, 2010), most interview participants reported that outside of basic encouragement, they do not receive much, if any, direct assistance from their parents and family members regarding their college experience. Young Scholars appears to be a program that helps to fill the void some students feel regarding their lack of parental involvement. This is often a source of comfort for students, with one student summarizing this by stating, “I think it helps you, I think mentally maybe just to know that you’re part of something, and that if something happens you can go to this program and that they’ll help you and if you have any questions that you’ll help, and that like for anything I can come to you.”

Additionally, several students suggested that without the support of the program, they would not have been successful in their academic pursuits, or simply would not have attempted college altogether. These feelings were consistent with previous research suggesting first-generation college students are not only less likely to pursue higher education, but are less likely to persist and graduate (Chen, 2005, Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Research Question # 2 - How do students perceive the program to be impacting their social experience?

In addition to academics, social engagement is a key factor in the ability of students to persist toward completing a college degree (Tinto, 1975). The structure of the Young Scholars Program aids in supporting its students' social engagement in several ways.

Being involved in a supportive program surrounded by other first-generation students, Young Scholars have a built-in network of students that they get to know on various levels. While it is unreasonable to expect that every student will develop close friendships with each other, at the very least, a respectful and supportive relationship built on shared goals is present between students. This was described by one student as an “unspoken of bond” due to the fact that students are the first in their families to be pursuing this venture. Having this built-in network of peers is an important aspect of the program as first-generation students are less likely to develop friendships and socialize outside of class (Engle, 2007).

Peer relationships are further developed through specific Young Scholars programming. As reported in Chapter 4, one such area of programming occurs in the form of program events designed to bring people together. The group has participated in purely social group events such as dinners, bowling, and other similar activities, as well as events meant to promote team-building and leadership skills such as completing the High Ropes Course at a local camp. Events of this nature serve to strengthen the peer to peer relationships during students' time in the program. Other program events students spoke of at length were various volunteer and service activities. In addition to increasing

the students' sense of civic duty and engagement with their community, students discussed these activities as an opportunity to further develop peer relationships.

As discussed with Research Question #1, required study hours primarily serve to promote academic engagement. In addition, participating in required study hours may also help in the development of peer relationships. While they are a time largely spent studying, interview participants noted that study hours are also a time for students to interact and discuss their educational experiences on a social level.

As students reported, Young Scholars also promotes social engagement outside of the program setting, as students are required to participate in a student organization or activity of their choice. This involvement has come in many different forms, including fraternities and sororities, intramural sports, academically affiliated student organizations, as well as social student organizations. As Astin (1999) noted, involvement in these types of organizations helps to strengthen students' connections and commitment to the university, which is especially key for first-generation students in that they are typically less likely to be involved in activities of this nature (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Also noted by Astin (1999) was the role living on campus plays in impacting students' campus engagement. Young Scholars reported that the opportunity to live on campus positively impacts their social experience. Living on campus allows the students the opportunity to interact with other students on a more consistent basis, as well as allowing students to be involved with the social activities that take place in campus housing. As noted by Kuh et al. (2006), "Residence halls help students develop social connections with peers who are dealing with similar challenges and difficulties" (p. 63). Of particular note in relation to campus housing were the instances of Young Scholars

having the opportunity to live with other Young Scholars. While this isn't a requirement or typical situation in the program, those students reported developing particularly strong relationships with their roommates who were also in Young Scholars. This is consistent with existing research suggesting first-generation students benefit from living-learning communities (Inkelas et al., 2007).

A final area in which students benefit in their social experience is due to the opportunities to make professional connections with various individuals involved with the Young Scholars Program. As reported in Chapter 4, students spoke about the unique opportunity to interact with a number of individuals, such as the university Chancellor, President of the NU system, as well as members of the Young family, and the impact that these interactions had on their experience at the university. Not only did these interactions keep students motivated and engaged, they expressed appreciation at being able to establish this personal connection with the scholarship donors and express their gratitude in person.

Research Questions # 3 - How do students perceive the program to be impacting their career development experience?

In their framework, *What Matters to Student Success*, Kuh et al. (2006) note that post-graduation employment or graduate/professional school are among the desired outcomes at the end of a successful college experience. To that end, this evaluation sought to determine students' perspectives of the impact of their involvement in Young Scholars on their career development experience. During the interview process, participants spoke about their personal career development process as it relates to Young Scholars in a variety of ways.

Several students discussed how they started college with a pre-conceived idea of what they wanted to major in and followed through with that plan, while others entered without a particular major in mind. The students with undecided majors in particular noted discussing major and career options with program staff during individual meetings. This seemed to be helpful for these students, with some reporting that they chose a specific major as a result of these discussions. Students also have the ability to receive direct support from program staff in individual meetings to review resumes, practice interview questions, draft cover letters, and other skills required in the job application process. As a result of these meetings, a student summed up her preparation by stating, "...where I'm at now, I feel ready...I know I have to be professional and get my stuff ready. My cover letter. My resume. My references. And know the company. And just going in smiling and everything!"

As noted previously when discussing Research Question # 2, involvement in organizations and activities has a positive impact on students' social engagement. Additionally, students discussed the benefit of this involvement on their career development. Specifically, students noted that being involved in student organizations expanded their professional network, both on campus and in the community. This may be of particular importance for Young Scholars, as some research has suggested that particular sub-groups of first-generation students often struggle to develop a professional network, or do not understand the importance of this process (Parks-Yancey, 2012).

In addition to involvement, interview participants discussed becoming better connected to campus resources and support services that can aid in their career planning and development. As one student commented, "Having someone that could direct me the

right way was very beneficial.” In particular, students discussed the Academic and Career Development Center (ACDC) as being of key importance in this process.

Involvement in Young Scholars also opens doors to participate in professional development opportunities in the community. The program’s operating budget can be used to support students’ attendance at various professional development conferences, with students specifically mentioning the Omaha Young Professionals Summit and Midwest Entrepreneurship Conference. These are opportunities students may have otherwise not been aware of or would not have had the resources to attend. In addition to encouraging students to attend events such as these, program staff are available to help students seek out volunteer opportunities and internships related to their field of study. Students expressed appreciation for this assistance, with one student who was an Exercise Science major mentioning, “...you also contacted me if there was an opportunity out in the community about health and fitness.” On a particular instance of getting connected with a local non-profit specializing in her area of interest, she commented, “I wouldn’t have known anything about that...so that was huge.”

The program’s planning of volunteer and service activities appears to be a related aspect of career development as well. One student noted that these projects help to instill a “strong sense of service to the community.” Participating in these projects can be valuable in providing students with experiences related to their areas of interest while also serving to build their resumes, as well as providing the opportunity to make personal and professional connections within the community.

Opportunities for Program Enhancement

Several students cited the small size and flexibility of program offerings as being positive attributes of the program. Because of the nature of the program structure and program funding, flexibility does exist moving forward to tailor program elements and requirements to best meet the needs of the program participants.

One such element that students spoke positively of, and also had recommendations for, was the requirement that students must complete study hours in the program office. While all students recognized the benefit of this, some students expressed the desire for increased flexibility in completing these hours, particularly after their first two years when they have hopefully established more solid routines and study habits. Moving forward, it could be beneficial to explore ways to offer expanded options for completing these study hours, while still maintaining this as a program requirement. One such option would be to continue to maintain the regular office hours in which students could complete study hours, but also offer specific study times at various locations around campus, such as the library, where students could gather with program staff to complete study hours if desired. This would not only offer some additional flexibility, but also encourage students to explore other locations around campus that could prove to be useful study locations. Furthermore, new technology is constantly being developed that allows students to “check in” with their mobile devices at any number of locations. It may be beneficial to explore allowing junior/senior level students that have proven the ability to maintain a specific GPA the option to complete study hours in this manner, particularly because these students are becoming more involved in their area of study through internships and other activities, which limits their availability

to complete study hours in the program office. It will be important to keep in mind, however, that this may limit the reported social and academic benefits that occur when students study together in the same location.

Another area of the program that could continue to be enhanced relates to developing peer to peer relationships. Students consistently spoke of this as being a positive outcome of their involvement in the program, however, room for growth exists. In a previous year, a pilot program was developed to attempt to provide peer mentoring for new students beginning in the program. This mentoring program was conducted on a trial basis, with no follow-up with specific students being conducted. Because of the positive comments regarding peer relationships, it would be beneficial to revisit the peer mentoring aspect for new students beginning in the program. This could open more possibilities of increasing new students' opportunities of experiencing a successful transition to the university, as well as providing existing students with the opportunity to develop their leadership skills.

An additional area of potential improvement is in relation to family outreach. At the current time, no specific outreach to family members of students in the program is conducted. While students are informed that they can invite their parents to attend initial meetings with them in order to go through program requirements prior to signing the scholarship agreement, they do not always attend with the student and it is unclear how much information they receive regarding the expectations involved with signing the scholarship agreement. As parents and family members can potentially play a key role in supporting their children in their pursuit of higher education, it is important that they be included in the process. For Young Scholars, this could mean holding informational

meetings for all parents and family members together prior to their children beginning school. This would allow the opportunity to not only ask questions regarding the program and school in general, but would also allow program staff the opportunity to inform them of expectations of their children, as well as offering suggestions on how they can be involved and supportive throughout the process. In addition to informational meetings, periodic newsletters, in print or through electronic means, could be made available to parents informing them of current happenings within the program and on campus, as well as encouraging them to continue to stay supportive and involved in their son or daughter's education.

Another area that offers opportunities to be enhanced relates to career development. Most students who discussed this area in interviews spoke about being assisted by program staff in individual meetings. While students reported being assisted with resume development, the job search process, discussing possible majors and career paths, etc., at this time, no formal career development plan that all students complete exists within the program. While it has been previously mentioned that a strength of the program is its ability to offer flexibility to meet the needs of a diverse group of students, the program could stand to benefit from the development of a consistent career development model. This could involve things such as all first-year students completing a resume workshop, students participating in regular mock interviews at a certain stage in their educational careers to gain experience in the interview process, and potentially culminating in each student creating a personal on-line portfolio in which they display various artifacts that show their personal growth and development during their college experiences, and could also be used as a marketing tool for potential employers.

Regardless of the specifics, creating a formal model or plan could create some consistency in ensuring all students are prepared for the job search process, while also retaining the flexible nature in which program staff works with each student on an individual basis depending on their goals and needs. The UNO Academic and Career Development Center has staff that could be available to assist in developing a plan that would be suitable for Young Scholars.

An additional area that could benefit from adjusted programming relates to student engagement. As noted in Chapter 4, students living off campus discussed having more difficulty finding opportunities for involvement and making connections on campus. Because of the nature of the students being selected for Young Scholars and the fact that it is not a requirement for students to live on campus, some students will continue to live off campus, either with parents or other locations of their choosing. Therefore, it is important to continue to explore ways to engage those students that are living off campus while involved in the program.

Finally, with the expanding base of graduates, continuing to explore opportunities for alumni involvement will be an important aspect of the program's future. Alumni that were interviewed spoke of this on several occasions with varying suggestions for how they could stay involved. Some students spoke about how the service projects they participated in with Young Scholars were memorable, and something that as alumni, they would be interested in continuing to be a part of. An alumnus discussed the importance of community service and commented, "...if we can continue making sure that we're (alumni) continuing making service in the community, I think that would be a nice addition to continue just being involved in that." This would allow them the opportunity

to continue being involved in service to the community, while also maintaining a relationship with current students.

Other alumni spoke of the opportunity to stay involved in some capacity through the mentoring of current or new students. As alumni, they have been a part of the program and shared similar experiences to current students, and now also bring the perspective of “young professional” in the community that they could share. Alumni have an understanding of what current students are experiencing, with one alumnus commenting, “Knowing that they were in the same position that you were would be a good way to connect with them”. Developing relationships between current students and alumni through mentoring or other capacities could be of great benefit to everyone involved.

A final suggestion made by a former student was to begin a supplemental scholarship fund that is supported by alumni. He felt this would be a great way for alumni to show their appreciation and give something back to the program. The funds collected could be contributed to the general program scholarship fund used to pay tuition, fees, etc., put toward the yearly operating budget that supports student activities, or any number of other program-related services and activities. In addition, this could be a valuable way to promote and encourage alumni to continue to stay connected and feel “ownership” toward the program they were a part of.

Discussion of Possible Annual Evaluation Model

Periodic evaluation is important for the sustained success of any program or organization. Because Young Scholars is a relatively small program in terms of participants, the opportunity exists to develop a sustained evaluation model that could be

conducted on a yearly basis by program staff and included in an annual report to program donors and university officials. The following recommendations should be considered:

- **Student feedback:** This could be gathered through a yearly focus group with 4-5 students during the summer months between academic years. A focus group setting would allow the opportunity for continued student feedback related to specific Young Scholars programming from a variety of student perspectives.
- **4, 5, and 6-year graduation rates:** As the program has been in existence for only 5 years, the 6-year graduation rate is not yet available. However, as the program moves forward, these figures will be available to track on an on-going basis by program staff.
- **4, 5, and 6-year current student progress rates:** More specifically, what percentage of current students are on track to graduate within 4, 5, or 6 years? This can be done through the on-going process of monitoring credit completion rates of students in the program. Due to the relatively small number of students involved on a yearly basis, compiling this data can be done directly by program staff utilizing PeopleSoft (UNO's student information system), or with the assistance of UNO's Office of Institutional Effectiveness.
- **Retention rate:** This will involve tracking the percentage of students that return to school on a year to year basis. In addition to a yearly retention rate, the overall retention rate can be tracked by compiling the year to year retention rates since the program's inception.
- **Academic performance data:** This can be done by analyzing the GPA of students based on the courses completed over each academic year. In addition to

yearly GPA data, continuing to compile cumulative GPA data will be beneficial to demonstrate academic performance over a longer period of time.

Opportunities for Future Research

While students who were involved in the program but did not persist in school were contacted in an attempt to be part of the interview process, none of those students responded to be involved in this evaluation. It would be beneficial to continue to reach out to those students to get their perspective on how their involvement was impacted, and in what ways the program could have been improved from their perspectives in order to enhance the opportunities of success for future students.

Students consistently spoke during the interview process about their perceptions of their family's understanding of and involvement in their educational experience. As reported in Chapter 4, these discussions typically centered around the lack of understanding that their family members displayed regarding their college experience. Based on this feedback, research from the perspectives of parents regarding the experiences of their children in college would be beneficial to gather. Learning more about parental views regarding their children's educational experience may prove valuable in supporting the students themselves.

Another area of possible research is to analyze Young Scholars student performance in specific required classes at the university. This could include required core classes such as MATH 1310 (Intermediate Algebra), English Composition 1 & 2, and CIST 1110 (Speech). As these are courses required of all students, it would be beneficial to analyze the performance of students that have completed these courses in

order to determine if specific support or programming is needed to help students perform at a higher level in these areas.

Additionally, as the Young Scholars program has been in existence for a relatively short time period, no longer term data regarding the program exists. With students now graduating and joining the work-force, the opportunity exists in future years to conduct follow-up research with students that had been involved in the program. Following up with students several years after they graduated may provide new insight into their experiences, with the on-going goal of improving program outcomes.

Conclusion

The first-generation student population has traditionally demonstrated the need for support in higher education settings. Young Scholars is one such program that exists for this purpose. Young Scholars benefits students' academic engagement, social experience, and career development in a number of ways, with some of these benefits coming simply as a result of being in the program (e.g. scholarship assistance, housing support, being a part of a supportive community, etc.) with other benefits resulting from specific programming (e.g. meeting with program staff, volunteer/service projects, program social events, etc.). Regardless of the specific nature of support, it is important to continue to offer programs specifically targeting first-generation students as to increase their access to higher education, as well as to provide the best encouragement and support for their academic, personal, and professional growth.

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Appendix A – Interview Protocol

Project: Young Scholars Program Evaluation

Time of Interview: _____ Date: _____

Pseudonym: _____ Location: _____

Introduction

1. Introduction
2. Purpose of the study
3. Informed consent
4. Overview of the interview
5. Check for participant questions
6. Completion of demographic information form
7. Test audio equipment
8. Make the participant feel comfortable

Interview Questions (Note – the verb tense in the questions will be adjusted depending on the status of interview participants)

As a first-generation college student, you would be the first person in your family to receive a college degree. What is it like to be a first-generation college student?

What is the biggest challenge of being a college student?

How does the Young Scholars Program support you?

Tell me about an impactful/memorable experience you had with the Young Scholars Program?

How does Young Scholars contribute to your academic success?

How does Young Scholars contribute to your success outside of the classroom?

Tell me about the process you are going through to select a major.

In what ways do you feel Young Scholars is helping prepare you to get a job upon graduation?

What specific elements of the Young Scholars Program do you find most and least beneficial?

I'd like to get your perspective about some of the program features. In looking at the following list, which of these elements of the program have been most impactful? Which have you found least impactful?

- a. Individual meetings with the program advisor throughout the semester
- b. Mid-semester grade checks
- c. Participating in service projects (7 Days of Service, Open Door Mission, Washington Elementary student tours, etc.)
- d. Required weekly study hours in program office
- e. Required involvement in an approved student organization or activity outside of class
- f. Social events (dinners, bowling, high ropes course, etc.)
- g. Support to participate in or attend professional development activities (Omaha Young Professionals Summit, guest speakers, etc.)
- h. Access to office space and resources (computers, printers, study areas, etc.)
- i. Peer Mentoring – either as a mentor or mentee
- j. Receiving emails from program staff regarding various opportunities on campus

How do you think your college experience would be different if you were not in the Young Scholars Program?

If you could change or add specific things to the Young Scholars Program to make it better, what would you do?

If I were a new member of Young Scholars just starting out at UNO, what advice would you give me about how to best take advantage of what the program offers?

What else would you like to add or share about your experience in the Young Scholars Program?

Closing

Thank you for participating in this interview. Let me again assure you that your information will be kept confidential. I may contact you again in the future for the purposes of follow-up questions. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at any time.

Appendix B – Informed Consent Form



YOUNG SCHOLARS PROGRAM

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

IRB # 449-16-EX

Young Scholars Program Evaluation

This research project will aim to investigate the experiences of the participants in the Young Scholars Program. You are invited to participate in the study because you are a student that has participated in this program.

You will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher. The interview will last approximately one hour and will take place at a location of your choosing. Prior to the interview, you will be asked to complete a demographic information sheet and a pseudonym will be created in order to maintain your confidentiality. The interview will be audio recorded. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions that are designed to allow you to share your experiences at UNO and in the Young Scholars Program.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

Participation in this study may help you reflect upon your experiences as a student in this program. This study may contribute to the growing body of research regarding the first-generation student population. Furthermore, this study may provide information that is valuable in aiding in the decision making process regarding how best to support students in this program moving forward.

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. Prior to the interview a pseudonym will be created to ensure that your identity will remain confidential. Audio files will only be used to transcribe the interview, will not be shared with any other parties, and will be stored in a locked office. All audio files and transcripts will only be seen by the researcher during the study and will be kept in a locked office for up to 5 years after the completion of the study.

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact Aaron Krueger at (605) 351-4247 or awkrueger@unomaha.edu at any time. Please contact the University of Nebraska Medical Center Institutional Review Board at (402) 559-6463 to

voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the researcher, the Young Scholars Program, or the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Aaron Krueger, Principal Researcher
(605) 351-4247
awkrueger@unomaha.edu

Date

Kay Keiser, Ed.D.
Faculty Advisor
(402) 554-3443
kkeiser@unomaha.edu

Appendix C – Code List

Access to Program Resources
Accountability / Responsibility
Alumni Opportunities
Campus Housing
Campus Involvement
Campus Resources
Career Decisions
Career Preparation
Challenge of Being College Student
Consistent Contact
Family
Feeling of Accomplishment
Finances
First-Generation College Student
Motivation
Opportunity
Physical Space
Positive Atmosphere / Culture
Program Events
Program Flexibility
Program Requirement - Negative
Program Requirement - Positive
Program Requirement - Suggestion
Relationships with Peers
Relationships with Staff
Retention & Persistence
Volunteering & Community Service