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A Multiple Case Study of Long-Term Success for At-Risk High School Students

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A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF LONG-TERM SUCCESS
FOR AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

By

Emily DuPree Christensen

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration and Leadership

Under the Supervision of: Jeanne Surface, Ed. D

Omaha, Nebraska

May 2018

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FOR AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Emily DuPree Christensen, Ed. D

University of Nebraska, 2018

Advisor: Jeanne Surface, Ed. D

Abstract

As a qualitative, multiple case study this research reports on the factors that young adults, in their early to mid-twenties, reflect upon as contributing factors they encountered during their high school and late adolescent years that lead them to or away from success. Individual stories and experiences defined factors that lead to success while aided to gain an understanding of individual perceptions of attaining success. The researcher used emerging themes from each story to find the commonalities that lead to long-term success of at-risk youth and then made recommendations to the field of education by redrawing the notion of supporting at-risk students by hearing from them rather than taking the research and findings of adults to make future recommendations for education regarding at-risk adolescents. This research finds the most common themes that lead towards long-term success for at-risk youth to be family involvement, resilience, and mentoring.

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To Anders, you have loved me fiercely and endlessly. May we grow closer and better each day.

You sacrificed immensely to support my pathways. You are an amazing father to our children and perfectly humor the simultaneous range of whim and structure I thrust into our life.

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To Avenue Scholars & students of years past, your stories, your perseverance, and your willingness to teach me truly crafted this body of research. Without you, this dissertation does not exist. May you continue to seek a pathway of success as I marvel in what you continue to teach me.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Statement of the Problem

As I walked into the building, the security guard glanced my way and told me that “my girl,” as he called her, was waiting at my office door for me. I smiled and thanked him as I already knew the student he was referring to before I rounded the corner and saw Joselyn slide her back down the brick wall. She clutched her knees to her chest, and she began to sob quietly into herself. I calmly proceeded toward my office door and unlocked it. She glanced up, pulled herself to a stand, and, with a sigh one would have given when collapsing into a favorite recliner after a long day, she slumped into the cold, plastic student chair in my office.

Joselyn then spent the next hour in my office venting about real life stress that she couldn’t mentally escape when she was supposed to be sitting in Algebra I as a junior in high school. She explained that her mother continuously stayed locked in the upstairs bedroom with her mother’s boyfriend for hours each evening and that she then became the care provider for her younger siblings for that entire evening, daily. When she did get time to herself she was reckless with drugs and alcohol to get a moment of relief. This had begun to lead to sexual experiences and the aftermath of regret. She went on a brief tangent about her biological father who was back in the picture temporarily and then jumped to fears and worries she kept for her little sister who was repeating the mistakes Joselyn had already made. Money was tight, food was scarce, and the rent/bills had not

been paid. A knock on the door from the same security guard drew Joselyn back into reality. He calmly stated that Mrs. Salty, one of the assistant principals, had ran attendance and Joselyn must return to Algebra then or she would suspend her for two days. Joselyn and I finish up promptly and I walked her to class. I peeked my head into the classroom as Joselyn walked in and took her seat, caught the eye of the teacher and gave her a wave to say that the student was with me and excused. The teacher knowingly comprehended the nonverbal of this whole exchange and the puffy, red-eyed 15 year-old girl that entered her room, and simply returned the wave. As I walked away certainty overcame me that this mathematics lesson would not be absorbed by the teenage girl with so many other worries on her mind.

Sitting in the interview for a nonprofit aimed at college and career readiness, The Avenue Scholars Foundation, the interviewer asked me to explain why I thought I would make a great mentor for at-risk students. My response consisted of a reflection upon being a coach, being a mother, being an educator, but mostly my ability to engage in meaningful conversations with students. I openly shared that students would teach me more than I have surely ever taught them and that my learning came from constant dialogue with the individuals in the halls and classes before me. During consecutive questions, I expanded on my belief that once a student is truly heard it then gives me numerous opportunities to guide and steer the student in his or her own, individual path that they had just dictated to me. Specific examples were given to share times of developing students by going outside of the traditional teacher role: gave rides to school

or home after school, bought a notebook, called a house phone at 6:30 each morning to ensure a student was awake, talked with a student after school about how she would tell her father she was pregnant at 14 years of age and role played it until she was confident enough to actually have the conversation, gave a student my cell phone number after they had made a statement hinting at suicide while not saying enough for me to be able to report anything. They offered me the job at the conclusion of the interview and explained that if I took the job, I would work at an urban, public high school through a partnership with the school system and the non-profit with 25 juniors and 25 seniors on my caseload. My sole purpose was to teach one class to the juniors and one class to the seniors each day. The rest of my day was to be spent aiding and assisting the students to be able to graduate from high school and complete an associate's degree at the local community college. Yearly bonuses were based on my students' improved attendance, graduation rates, and participation in career exploration programming.

In the beginning of Joselyn's junior year, I had taught my Avenue Scholars a lesson about how to read a transcript. We covered how many credits they had already earned and how many credits were still needed to graduate. Each student had been given their own transcript along with a grid that had the current graduation requirements on his or her desk. Individually the students checked off each class they had taken and totaled it up. Many were thrilled to announce that they had more than half the classes necessary to get the hell out of this place. It was powerful and confusing to me all in one moment. See, I knew that they were in my program and class because they had a 2.5 GPA or lower,

qualified for the free/reduced lunch program, had mediocre to acceptable attendance, and were labeled at-risk by the school, courts, foster care system, or all of the above. How could they all be on-track or even ahead of track to graduate?

Then came the grim discussion that a diploma is not earned by simply enrolling in a class but actually passing a class with a D or higher. We then had to recalculate our credits. This time I was much more careful to clarify that a credit could only be counted if they had passed that class. Throughout the room, so much conversation was occurring all at the same time and with only one of me and 25 of them, I was overwhelmed with the notion that I needed to be all things instantaneously to answer question all at once. “Why didn’t anyone ever teach me this stuff before? How come you just now saying this?” “It’s cool, Miss, none my brothers graduated so my family is just happy I still come to school...if I actually graduate I don’t know what they might do.” “Yea, Miss is right, my tracker said these classes don’t count unless I get a D or higher but that’s easy.” “Hey Miss, I don’t even do my work and I get D’s...I just show up and shut up. “

I had given Joselyn a ride home that same day because at the last moment her friend, who is her normal lift home, skipped the second half of the day to go get high with her boyfriend. As I drove, I asked her how the rest of her day was. She replied “fine” then asked if she can ask me a question about that stuff we did in class. She asked if “those online classes you could do in like 10 hours if you just sat down and did it count as a credit?”. I gave a half grin due to the oddly accurate description of the online rigor and replied “yes, yes they do count”. In true teenager fashion, she rambled on about how she

knew teachers don't think she was very smart because she got put in all developmental (remedial) classes: developmental math, developmental science, developmental history, developmental English. These were not the classes students who were talked to about their future aspirations and careers ever got enrolled into. Guidance counselors never showed Joselyn how this math or history is relevant to her specific future pathway. Her classes, the remedial classes, were the classes where the expectations were to not be too disruptive, show up enough that the teacher recognized you, and the student would get a D as long as they turned in an assignment here or there with a name on it and an answer or two. The sad part was that she was right and could see through it all so clearly. She had observed the poster presentations and group work of other classes but never her classrooms. She was vividly aware that she was capable of more but never pushed for more. Joselyn wrapped up the car ride by reassuring me. "Don't worry Miss, I'll graduate, I promise...then I'll be bigtime because I'll have that degree in my hand". She gave a smooth smile and entered her mom and mom's boyfriend's rental.

Over the 6 years I spent as an advisor for the Avenue Scholars students, I only had 2 students not graduate from high school; some graduated in the very last second by cramming 4 or 5 online, recovery courses in but they made it. Most took remedial coursework throughout all of high school, many had the online recovery courses sprinkled throughout their tenure, some had atrocious attendance, but regardless of the pathway they all made it to that same finish line that the National Merit Scholar, 4.8 GPA student whose locker was next to theirs made it to, that point called graduation. No one

had an asterisk on their diploma to say which path was taken to earn the degree; each student that had graduated from the high school was given a full-fledged diploma stating they had met all the state and district requirements for graduation and could move onto the next steps life held for each one.

The next steps the future held for the students was where my eyes were most widened. My Avenue Scholars attended the local community college and tested into all remedial classes. Everyone had to take math, equivalent to pre-Algebra in the system they just graduated from, and then slowly worked up the non-credit bearing remedial class staircase. The same students that I worked tirelessly for to get to and from school, helped through crisis after crisis to ensure they persisted despite the odds, these were the same students who held a high school diploma but couldn't write a proper essay nor knew their times tables. The students' families beamed with pride to announce to the world that their baby graduated high school AND was going to college! The students themselves started with steadfast determination and then began to question how they got this far without knowing these things. The students own perceptions were that they had made it big time because they beat the neighborhood statistics.... yet the societal norm, societal bar was set miles upstream a river and my students were merely offered an education that taught them to tread in water, not swim.

The questions that inspired this research flew rampant. What did that diploma even mean for them? Their families had always been told that they weren't as valuable because they didn't have a high school diploma, but what is this young man's value to

society if he isn't competent as another student with the same diploma? The graduation parties I got to attend were always filled with professions of pride, love, joy that now someone would finally be different, lead a new direction. What direction would this student go if he or she can't get through the remedial English and math sequence to earn an associate's degree or the wherewithal to complete an on-the-job blue-collar training program? If they weren't given the knowledge necessary to complete the next steps, had they really even been given a chance at that new direction? Would some make it regardless of the initial struggles because they could rise to the challenges? Who would make it and who would not?

My professional development opportunities had often been from reading profound research, engaged in graduate class discussions, or sat in district implemented sessions to learn exactly what students needed from me as an educator. Yet, I could tell you honestly I had learned the most by listening to the students themselves, hearing their stories, being in their homes, getting through the systems alongside of them. That is where I had truly learned and flourished as a professional to comprehend the students themselves.

Adolescents are insightful beings when allowed to be. They could tell you the observations they've made and how they personalized, interpreted each experience in a unique manner. Rather than taking the research and findings of adults to make future recommendations for education regarding at-risk adolescents, this study was intended to hear from the students themselves. To learn what it took to achieve long-term success, what success was perceived to be, and how the student voices could lead the educational

profession to replicate these---for the greater of all. To truly know these frameworks, I had to understand from the student perspective what the pinnacle points that defined their place in life are as they were now young adults. I needed to sort through each story to find the commonalities that lead to a long-term success, or lack thereof, and then assist those surrounding me by redrawing the notion of supporting at-risk students by hearing from them rather than telling them.

Research Framework

Conceptual framework. The tenets of the Avenue Scholars program would serve as the conceptual framework for the study. Students were selected at the end of their sophomore year based on criteria of being low-income, low-grade point average, and high hope. The scale for determining those were as follows; (a) low-income was determined by being categorized as free and reduced lunch recipients; (b) low-grade point average (GPA) was based on having earned less than a 2.5 GPA at the point of selection; (c) hope was quantified by using the Gallup Hope Index scale that demonstrated one's hope and belief for his/her self and positive future.

The Avenue Scholars Foundation began in 2008 and was initially founded solely by philanthropists in the Omaha area that believed the low-income, low-GPA students in the Omaha area needed a program to better prepare them for career attainment. As the Avenue Scholars website stated, "Focused on the belief that hope, combined with talent and need will lead young people to promising careers, a group of Omaha philanthropists

founded Avenue Scholars Foundation in 2008” (2017). The program’s mission was “To ensure careers to students of hope and need through education and supportive relationships” (avescholars.org, 2017). Though the Avenue Scholars model has changed slightly over the years, the general model of selecting low-income students and preparing them for a meaningful career by giving quality relationship-based education has remained.

As of January 2015, the Avenue Scholars program was located in Omaha, Nebraska in seven metropolitan area high schools: Omaha North, Omaha Northwest, Omaha Benson, Omaha South, Omaha Bryan, Ralston, and Millard South High Schools. Students began the Avenue Scholar program their junior year of high school. Students took an elective class with their Talent Advisor (mentor/teacher from Avenue Scholars Foundation that had a teaching license) during one block or class for his/her entire junior year and senior year of high school to develop and learn college and career readiness skills. “Starting in the junior year of high school, Avenue Scholars are able to explore career possibilities, skill-set requirements, behavioral expectations and pathways to locate entry-level positions” (Avenue Scholars Foundation, 2015). During the second semester of the participants’ senior year, they enrolled at the local community college, Metropolitan Community College (MCC). Students attended their high school courses in the morning to finish any credits required for high school graduation and then were transported to MCC to attend a developmental or credit-bearing course along with an elective college course to begin their college program.

Upon high school graduation, many Avenue Scholars continued on to the community college program to pursue an associate's degree, specialist diploma, or certificate of achievement that ranged in duration from a 6-week program to 3 years to attain. Successful completion of the Avenue Scholars program was considered once a participant was placed into a meaningful career for which he or she was trained or educated. Throughout the entire program, the Talent Advisors and the Avenue Scholars Foundation were providing guidance, encouragement, counseling, course scheduling, financial aid assistance, transportation, part-time job placement assistance, and helped with accessing community resources; this was all referred to as "intrusive support."

Theoretical framework. The framework upon which the research questions were built was through the philosophical stance of phenomenology. *Qualitative Research: The essential guide to theory and practice* (Major, 2013, p 38) states that phenomenology is a study of the individual and his/her social reality that the researcher learns by uncovering that individual's specific experiences. During one-on-one, face-to-face interviews that used the research questions as the central guide the research would navigate the phenomenology of the Avenue Scholars students to understand the factors that correlated with long-term success in at-risk high school students while also understanding the student perception of success.

Contextual framework. The research phenomenon was then placed within the individual Avenue Scholar students selected to investigate their own perceptions of what lead them towards or away from long-term success. The data collection of the individual

interviews was then bounded into a research case. Each interview was audio recorded then transcribed into text. The text in totality was analyzed for emerging themes through thematic analysis to discern what factors were most influential to at-risk students' long-term success. By reporting holistic themes that emerged from multiple individual interviews (the human experience), social research could then be connected to other current scientific methods and quantitative research currently being conducted in the field of education.

Significance of the Study

This research was intended to tell the story of students who graduated from high school and completed post-secondary training to attain a career, yet it would also tell the story of those who failed to complete post-secondary training/education or achieve career attainment. The significance of the study rested within the compilation of the Avenue Scholars program not being a pull-out program, an after-school program, or a high school only program. The research defined logistical problems within these models; the Avenue Scholars Foundation was built on a different model of student support.

Some intervention programs provided for temporary increases in academic success due to initial increases of attention and direct support given to the student. These academic gains eventually plateaued due to personal circumstances that prevent ongoing or continuous increases: overwhelmed and absent parents, social-emotional disturbances, or substance abuse (DeAngelis, 2012).

Researchers Adelman and Taylor of the University of California, Los Angeles, School of Mental Health Project identified two common interventions used across multiple districts and states. Both had negative, unintended consequences. By pulling at-risk students out “to be counseled, punished, or suspended for aggressive behaviors or bullying (it) interfered with their peer relationships and academic progress” (DeAngelis, 2012). Rather when keeping students in the physical classroom where instruction and learning occurred, the researchers discovered that a supportive, engaging classroom proved to halt students from acting out as they had a greater sense of belonging and ownership in a class where they were consistently participating and interacting with peers to foster and share their talents with one and other.

The second common intervention practice found was an abundant duplication of schools’ mental health and social services. Rather than having one entity responsible for coordinating services the guidance department handled some, the school psychologist addressed other concerns, administrators dealt with one angle of a concern, while the classroom teacher attempted on his or her own another angle. This created fragmented and even replication of services which was wasteful of school resources and increased time of intervention responses (DeAngelis, 2012).

Disengagement, lack of social belonging, and lack of self-regulation (McDonald, 2002; Dweck, 2011), lead to a sense of failure. By identifying what success is when it is perceived to be achieved, and the contributing factors that lead to a positive or negative outcome, future educators and administrators can better implement intrusive supports

through informal curricula into the educational institutions looking to assist student populations.

The soft bigotry of stereotypes of children born into poverty and lowered expectations are not a prescribed destiny. “Many students, especially those who face negative stereotypes in school, may not feel that the attributes they value most in themselves- their sense of humor, their relationship with their family- make them of any value in the school setting. By thinking about and elaborating upon these qualities, students can bring these values into the school setting and thereby enhance their sense of belonging” (Dweck, 2011). Educators may diminish poverty's harmful effects and increase student sense of belonging, engagement, and success by learning and duplicating proven strategies. Capacity building methods, such as growth-oriented mindset, giving meaning to curriculum by drawing connections to a student's own life, helping students to set goals and supporting them as they attempt the goals to navigate obstacles and to coach them into perseverance beyond an obstacle, teaching self-control techniques, and creating a sense of belonging for all students (Mattern, 2014; Borman, 2002) are all fruitful endeavors that are not found in a traditional high school program of study or seen as the formal curriculum prescribed in a high school; Yet, these are the proven strategies that study after study point to as helping students labeled “at-risk” to achieve success.

The Avenue Scholars program was designed to start with the student in high school by meeting during a classroom instructional period with additional one-on-one services. After graduation, the students continued in the program onto the local

community college to earn a specialist's diploma, career certificate, or an associate's degree based upon their career interests. During high school, college, and even after post-secondary graduation, the Avenue Scholars received ongoing career exploration opportunities, lessons on resumes, transferable job skills, Gallup strength coaching, in addition to access to social support and mental health services.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that correlated with long-term success in at-risk high school students while also understanding the student perception of success. If educators could define success for students labeled at-risk and could define the factors that are correlated to that success, then educational institutions could replicate these factors and habits for students sooner and on a larger scale to have greater societal impact.

The academic merit and social impact are fairly immediate upon publishing research results. Educators and educational institutions should be able to draw from this study to replicate the recommended methods to increase long-term success for their student population within other systems.

Central Research Questions

This study investigated two central research questions as they related to the long-term success at-risk high schools students were able to achieve, the specifics aid the student attributes to his/her success, and their perception of what success is.

1. What factors do students perceive lead to the attainment, or lack thereof, of success?
2. What is the Avenue Scholar student's perception of success and did they reach that mark?

Profile of Data Collection and Analysis

Research design. This research was a qualitative, multiple case study that interviewed five students that were former Avenue Scholars students of the same high school. Individual stories and experiences would define factors that lead to success while aiding to gain an understanding of individual and cultural perceptions of attaining success.

Bracketing. Reflexivity, the ability to evaluate oneself, was crucial to identify and reflect upon biases and misconceptions before conducting research. Bracketing is the actual act of reflexivity. This was the process of setting aside the personal experiences, biases, and any preconceived notions regarding the research topic; this included any prior research or prior knowledge the researcher had about the topic. Being reflective was crucial to this body of qualitative research to fully engage and understand the views of the participant rather than manipulating the views to interpret them into fitting the researcher's views.

Bracketing was done in three phases throughout the research. First, the researcher reflected and wrote out a formal recording of prior knowledge, biases, and preconceived notions held regarding this specific research topic. These concepts would then be

formally bracketed to reference throughout the research. The referencing of biases and on-going recording when the researcher sensed a bias arising assisted in keeping such notions in check. Finally, in the formal report a section was included regarding the bracketed notions to allow the audience to be aware of the researcher's biases as they read the results and interpretations of the study.

Case Selection. Study participants were purposefully selected based on their individual participation in the Avenue Scholars program with the researcher as their high school mentor. These five individuals were a sample representation of participation and fulfilment of the high school portion of the Avenue Scholars program. After earning a high school diploma, each participant took their own unique pathway. Each participant selected had developed positive rapport with the researcher in high school. All participants willingly disclosed their experiences, perceptions, and self-reflection to offer the most complete impression possible of their own endeavors.

The participants of this research were selected based on having taken various pathways and having achieved various achievements; yet all had the similar experience of graduating from the same high school, had completed junior and senior years of high school while in the Avenue Scholars program, and all had the researcher as their advisor/mentor during that junior and senior years of high school. Participant 1 was a Latino male who started at the community college right after high school graduation and completed an associate's degree. He then transferred to the local university and completed his bachelor's degree. Participant 2 was a Latino female who started at the

community college following high school but stopped attending during the first trimester. Participant 3 was a Latino male that went to the community college and completed his associate's degree. Participant 4 is a white female who started at the community college. Shortly after starting she stopped attending. Participant 5 is a white male that completed an associate's degree at the community college.

Data collection. Qualitative data was derived from individual interviews of students with their consent and compliance. Interviews took place in-person at a location the participant is most comfortable for 60-90 minutes. The same set of semi-structured research questions was asked of each participant with an initial question of regarding pathway intended versus pathway taken and a final question of any additional information the participant feels is necessary to share regarding the line of questioning. Each interview was audio recorded using an application, SuperNote, and then transcribed through an online service, EndQuote. The transcription had some errors in the text so the researcher then replayed each interview to correct the errors made to ensure the text matched the exact language used during each interview.

Data analysis. Before analysis occurred, the researcher transcribed each interview. Through trend and narrative analysis of themes that arose from the interviews, the students' perception of what lead to their point of success and perceptions of success was documented. The transcript of each interview was sent to the interviewee to confirm accuracy of transcription.

Instrumentation. As the primary researcher, I am a 33 year old female doctoral student at the University of Nebraska Omaha. I started in education at Omaha North High Magnet School, an urban school in a neighborhood of higher crime and poverty rates when compared to the greater metropolitan area. Thankfully, I student taught in the fall at Omaha North to help ease the transition of being a mid-year hire to teach senior and freshman English at 22 years of age. My fifth year seniors proudly shared that they were 19, almost 20, and I quickly lied to share that I was 25 to simply put a few buffer years and the false impression of experience between us in their minds. In my mind, I knew, I had to hold my ground. I wasn't large, I didn't have a booming voice, didn't seem to be threatening or have an ounce of intimidation going for me. This was my first of many realizations that my strength as an educator, and even simply as a human being, was my ability to connect, hear, and relate to students.

After a few years as an English teacher, soccer coach, academic mentor, curriculum writer, homecoming parade sponsor, and any other "opportunity" so often given to the brand new teachers, I was asked to apply at a nonprofit, the Avenue Scholars Foundation. I thought I could never leave my classroom and yet the more I learned about this experience the more it called to me to investigate it further. I found that this nonprofit was aimed at helping at-risk high school students to get beyond a high school diploma and into a career that aimed to move the student out of poverty through education and mentoring. I interviewed and shared the experiences and outcomes of the relationships I was able to form with students. My naïve passion shown through bright as I told of my

beliefs in all students, that education is limited by being a “45-minute sit-and-get” system, and that students needed to be seen as a whole entity rather than just a name on the roll. Something I put out there must have stuck because they hired me.

The next six years I got to spend with the Avenue Scholars Foundation. While teaching one class a day to just my caseload of students selected to be in the Avenue Scholars program, I spent the rest of my day figuring out where Diego was, why Anthony was in the office again, talking to the security guards to get the real scoop on Mariam, or helping Nisha to get in to see a doctor. Then I’d arrange rides home, take students to visit a local business for a career exploration, or meet with colleagues to problem-solve and brainstorm next steps; the entire goal was to inspire hope, show my students that there were opportunities out there, and that with hard work, followed by guidance and taking care of themselves, that they could attain these pathways. While being funded privately and employed by the nonprofit, the black and white lines for a traditional educator employed within a school district were often more blurred for me as the Avenue Scholars advisor, teacher, and mentor.

My research was conceptualized as I began to grow with my students and learn from them. I completed my Master’s degree in Education Leadership and Supervision by often asking my students questions and relating research to them to complete different papers and assignments. The most eye-opening and rewarding times with my students were when local colleges, school districts, educational administrator groups, or business would ask for a group of Avenue Scholars students to be on a guest panel. We would

select a few students that would speak clearly, openly and take them to the different sites once or twice a year. Every single time the questions from the audience were almost identical and the responses from the wide range of students sitting on the different panels were just as similar. Whenever asked what schools could improve students would respond by talking of their advisor from Avenue Scholars never judging them, being honest with the student, and then going out of their way to help solve whatever obstacle was in their pathway. The panels were asked about goals and students would explain that no one, until their advisor, ever had talked to students like them about college or careers and that it seemed like the schools only goal was to graduate them and be done with them. And, each time at the conclusion of the student discussion panel, the student stories of hope, heartbreaks, honesty, and perceptions left the audience with tears, inspiration, and a notion that the individuals could make an impact regardless of a greater system in place. I always marveled at the surprise the adults in the audience left with. It was as if they expected to hear a cute, little feel good story from my students. Instead the students gave honest, harsh critiques, spoke truths and then also offered tangible, simple solutions that have truly benefited them and that the adults in the audience could take away, could replicate for a greater societal impact. By listening to student voices regarding the system they are in and how to improve, the educators and business leaders unanimously gave feedback of the 30-45 minutes hearing from the students being one of the most valuable experiences they've had. It is so easy for us as adults to hear students talk yet so incredibly difficult for us to truly listen.

Now as an administrator with Elkhorn Public Schools, a suburban school district in Omaha, I still get to use the gift of listening to students, parents, teachers, and community members to hear what is really being said. My passion for at-risk youth continues to grow as the names and stories of my students continue. My beliefs and perceptions of being a change agent continue to guide my personal pathway. I desire to cause a small drop, which may someday ripple out, in the field of education for student voices to be heard.

Chapter 2 Antonio's Story

As I would do my monthly check-ins with each student on my caseload, Antonio was always a welcomed meeting. Did he have part-time employment? Was he attending school? Were his grades all passing and was he remaining on track for graduation? Yes, yes, and yes. What was difficult was getting to know the more pressing obstacles for Antonio. Though he was easily obtaining the benchmarks set for each Avenue Scholar, he also was so reserved that it felt as though I wasn't helping him because I often didn't know what he needed help with. Yet as I ran in to Antonio on the community college campus, at university events, or even on Facebook, he always went out of his way to stay connected. He brought his younger brothers to my office. He was a freshmen in college and his younger brothers were underclassmen in high school and in middle school. He lectured them openly about needing to know where my office was, that they must apply for Avenue Scholars the second they hear they can as sophomores, and that they must do well their freshmen and sophomore years to be able to be an Avenue Scholar. I will never

forget how Antonio stood at my door with his younger brothers lined up behind him and the talk he gave them. It was inspiring to see and intense all at the same time. Compared to other Avenue Scholars, Antonio required very little of me outside of class yet he talked to his brothers as though it was life-changing to know me. I coyly allowed them to believe their brother but noted each of their names and ensured I sought them out from time to time to see how school was going and to keep an eye on them for their oldest brother as I promised I would.

Antonio had always pictured himself mirroring his family and their pathway by continuing to work in the field of construction. By graduating high school, he was already surpassing the educational success of his mother and father. Antonio's father completed half of high school and his mother completed all of elementary school before going to work full time to make money for their respective families. Yet Antonio reflection of his parents is that they were his first mentors in life. Antonio recited the words of wisdom his father and mother had always shared: "My dad always told me to finish high school and then start working"; "...my dad had always said that he, at least, wanted us all to finish high school"; "My dad as well, he's like 'if I had the opportunity my family had, I would have definitely gone to a university and gotten an education'"; "My mom tells me, 'If I would have had a different way, a different route, if I had lived in a different place, I would have loved to go to university. I would have loved to get an education'"; "They would tell me 'don't stop, whether you need something, you need help? Let us know. We don't want you to stop. We want you to finish and get your degree.'". With each question

asked, Antonio wove stories and reflections of his own family's struggles, values, aspirations, hopes, and wisdom in to each question asked of him.

Antonio stated that his second mentors were the researcher, during his engagement in the Avenue Scholars program, and Mr. Aaron, from the Young Scholars program. "I had no thoughts about going to any type of community college or university or anything like that. My thoughts were to just get done with high school and start making money. What changed for me was the (Avenue Scholars) program, that's what changed a lot for me because then I started having mentors and people that were guiding me to a different path than what I knew." Antonio directly attributed his path trajectory changing due to these mentorships. Antonio made the decision to move from being a high school graduate to undertaking an associate degree after learning about the opportunities available and the mentors that would continue on with him as he registered for classes, filed for financial aid, paid for textbooks, or read over papers alongside of him. He took the leap and completed his associate's degree in criminal law from the local community college. Though his schooling and books were paid for by being an Avenue Scholar, Antonio took ownership of his academic success by getting tutoring when courses were difficult or even asking his younger brother for math help. Antonio was proud to admit that his younger brother was very strong in mathematics, while Antonio felt he was not, and a unique brotherly bond grew out of his younger brother helping to tutor him through his college math courses. A different adult/mentor from Avenue Scholars began talking to Antonio about what he would be doing with his time between finishing his associate

degree and applying for the Omaha Police Department at age 21. This conversation progressed into discussing the potential to continue on to the local university and obtaining a bachelor's degree. Antonio stated he had not even consider this as an option until it was presented to him but once the option was on the table and someone was willing to help him take the necessary steps with him that he had nothing to lose. "That is when I started thinking: they're saying you can do it and they're going to help me out, what do I have to lose?"

Avenue Scholars connected Antonio with the Young Scholars program. The Young Scholars paid for his tuition, books, and fees at the university along with providing mentoring to navigate the complex systems that first generation students often get blindsided by. The Young Scholars program, and Mr. Aaron in particular, directed specific programming towards students that faced similar obstacles as Antonio. "For me, what I thought and always kept in mind and what I always had that pushed me when I had my rough days and days that I thought it wasn't going to make it through a class or do bad was definitely my mentor, Aaron from Young Scholars. He's a great man. He was always there to support me all the time. He knew how to push me when I felt bad or felt I couldn't do any better." By having a constant mentor in Mr. Aaron and this program, Antonio and the other program students gathered to ask about classes, give each other advice and support, or to talk about housing on campus and even being roommates to further a sense of belonging of students they felt were like themselves. Antonio acknowledges that "having different mentors who helped me to have different thoughts,

that's what started me focusing more on getting into education and going to college". He graduated in December 2017 with a bachelor's of science in criminology and criminal justice and with a minor in sociology.

Though the mentoring may have changed some of Antonio's thoughts regarding what he was capable, he had thoughts on his identity that stood in his path. Antonio had an overwhelming feeling while at the university that he wasn't like the other students in his classes. "There was a time I was ignoring about the family that I come from but then I admit it to myself that I don't come from a wealthy family. I don't come from a family where they all got an education, got a bachelor's degree, master's degree, where they know how to do college and where to go and how to get through it all. So I realized that I was going to have to do something that my family has never done before- that's how I realized that I'm going to have to put in a lot more work." Antonio's realization was that not coming from a family that could support him with much more than their encouraging words would require him to work twice as hard, twice as long because his starting point was twice as far behind most of his college peers. He combatted this notion of self-doubt with hard work. "What guided me to do what I did (graduate college) would be working hard, hard work. I've always seen all my family to work very hard. That is what I was taught as well. Since I was small I knew we never got anything just given to us." Whether it is a want or a need, Antonio attributes perseverance to his willingness to overcome obstacles by out working them. From having a job the day he turned 14 to being told that all wants and needs were to be worked for, it was instilled as an essential value to exist in

Antonio's family. "My family made sure and made it very clear to me that they were going to give me nothing and that I had to work for everything that I wanted in life. So that has guided me to where I'm at now and being able to realize that if I wanted this (education) I was going to have to work my butt off. I was not going to take a break or anything like that; it was going to be straight work all the way through."

Success was easily defined by Antonio as "being able to get something that they wished for but gave up so that I could actually do it that is being successful to me". To feel and know that he has achieved success is to know that he has made his parents, his family proud. Now as a young adult, Antonio can identify the sacrifices his father and mother specifically made so that he had opportunities. To achieve the things that his parents could only ever wish for and to see they are content with him is his measure of success. When held up against his own rubric, Antonio confidently states he has been successful. And his success is now trickling down to his younger siblings. While Antonio's older sister started a college program, she dropped out and has never returned to school. Antonio's three younger brothers have all graduated high school and begun or will shortly begin post-secondary education towards a career. Antonio beamed with pride as his work, determination, and willingness to be mentored has blazed a pathway for his siblings.

There are just so many things that make it all up to where I am at now. It is not just one thing but I have always had a mentor and the program. It has pushed me, guided me, to where I am now.

Chapter 3 Mari's Story

For Mari to consider herself successful at the age of 23 is a success in and of itself. There is so much to share about this pint-sized force that it is hard to even know where to begin. I met Mari on her first day of junior year in high school in the Avenue Scholars class. My first impression was that it would either be a delight to get to work with her after I won her trust or a battle to get her to buy in to her own success based on the hard shell and stone-cold expression she presented. While others were chatting and giddy to see who all they knew in the classroom, Mari kept to herself. When we began to journal and reflect on our initial goals for the 1st semester of being an Avenue Scholar, Mari did not write on the notebook but instead scribed on her arm a boy's name. Later that day I found Mari skipping school, on the very first day of school mind you, with her boyfriend. I don't know if most could have predicted it at the time based on her level of disengagement but Mari was bound and determined to be a survivor. She yearned for the emotional connection to her then boyfriend, now husband, as she had few other people in her life to fill that capacity.

Mari sat casually on the couch of her townhome with her daughters playing upstairs in their bedroom and offered me something to drink after apologizing for her bird squawking at me. From time to time the girls would come down for a snack or drink or to ask a pressing question and Mari would graciously speak with or assist them, apologize to me, and then pick up in conversation right where she ended as she sent them back upstairs to continue in play.

She began by imparting her story of how she was sent to live with her grandma and grandpa in Omaha, NE when she was of late elementary age. Mari's would not have been able to continue onto middle school or high school in her town in Mexico. Elementary was the only free, public education so Mari would have graduated elementary and gone to work as her mother was not financially able to support Mari continuing in education. "My mom sent me here to live with my grandparents to go to school and then I was supposed to go back to Mexico and live with her. I told my mom and grandparents, basically, that I would be in middle school, finish that year, and then I'll go back. Then I was like- 8th grade? Then I finished 8th grade. Year after year after year, I have been using school as an excuse to not go back to Mexico. So now I feel like I want to do (college) to make that sacrifice worthwhile for my mother. Being able to look at her and say, 'here you go, like, I got my degree'."

The counselor/social worker at Avenue Scholars intervened in Mari's life when the researcher noticed bouts of depression and borderline neglect through Mari's journaling and side comments. The counselor/social worker provided counseling for the depression and learned that Mari was another student that fought many battles before and after school daily. Mari was trying to not be a financial burden on her grandparents, she was the primary caretaker for numerous young nieces and nephews, she found her own transportation to and from school, though she was provided a roof over her head and an evening meal Mari simply desired to be loved and cared for emotionally as her mother used to. At times Mari would state she was used to caring for herself and didn't really

need that since she had been her own parent since the age of 10 and then other times she would weep to be held in her mother's arms.

Mari and the counselor/social worker began working on a path to citizenship through a legal partner. Mari qualified as an abandoned child immigrant and her grandparents legally adopted her while she was in high school. Mari and her grandparents worked closely with Avenue Scholars and the lawyers, under the DACA Act (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), to achieve this.

Regardless of being adopted, the feelings of being her own parent never ceased yet Mari recounts many lessons learned during her time living under her grandparents' roof. She fondly recalled seeing her grandpa, uncle, and every male in her family working from sunup to sundown. From odd jobs, to meat packing plants, to being subcontractors for other construction companies, to now owning their own business with many local clients, these men taught her what dedication and working hard for what you have looked like. "You can't just take stuff without working for it. A lot of their own work ethic was what mattered to me. I think culturally it is like you work hard for what you have you. Don't just mope and don't just sit around. My grandpa started, came here crossing the border and he is up every morning and goes to work to be there. He would say, 'It doesn't matter what job you're doing- you have to be the best at your job'."

While the men in her family were out working, Mari lived in a house that followed strict, traditional gender roles. Women were to be home, caring for children, cooking, and cleaning. Mari's existence in that home was a challenge to those rules; she

was in this home to get an education, to not have to become “just a housewife”, and to be an independent young woman. In her youthful wisdom, she knew she had to abide by the traditional rules to achieve her non-traditional pathway toward her dreams. Through the many chores and meals prepared, her grandmother would offer advice to Mari. “My grandma made me to respect everyone so you can get respect back.” Over the course of high school, Mari’s cold mask lifted and she began to expose a more jovial, hopeful disposition. She graduated from high school with ease and was ecstatic to be the first of anyone, any aunts, uncles, cousins, anyone, to graduate from high school, let alone be the first to go to college. She felt as though all she risked in not having a mother and in continuing on in school was finally coming to fruition as she was going to college for her human services associate degree.

Mari’s boyfriend, Giovanni, graduated high school but went immediately to work full-time to begin to create a foundation for the life they now have together. Meanwhile, life had other plans and Mari became pregnant that very first year of college. She continued with classes towards her degree but stated the physical, mental, and emotional toll she endured was too much for her to handle. Pregnancy before marriage was outside the bounds of acceptance for Mari’s grandparents and family in Omaha. “When I got pregnant my family didn’t want anything to do with me for some time. They all threw it in my face like ‘I thought you were going to college and all that.’ I needed someone to just help me, someone to ask a question of or talk with.” Once again, Mari connected with the counselor/ social worker from Avenue Scholars for prenatal care and emotional

stability. After giving birth to her first daughter and taking a year off of school, Mari reignited her pursuit of her college degree. “So it was my full-time job, the baby, and I also had a part-time job at a call center at that moment to be able to help pay for schooling. It was two jobs, the baby, and house stuff of cooking, cleaning, laundry, just way too much. It was just way too much so I ended up just dropping out.” Mari attempted an online, for-profit university as her next step but said the only thing she obtained from them was debt. As she was expecting her second daughter, school dropped on the list of priorities and creating a stable home quickly rose.

Some part time employment opportunities came and went but the call to work with and help people never left. Mari attributes her husband as being the primary support to her career goals. “(Human Services) helps more than it pays... He's been huge and understanding of this. He knows this is the career path that I wanted even though it isn't the most rewarding economically.” Mari applied and was offered a job at a transitional living home. “He told me that later on I was going to wonder ‘what if I would have taken this job’ and I told him that this job is really what I want to do”. She works full time at the transitional home and gets full benefits for her family and herself. Her role is to support those that were homeless or those that were court ordered to the home to help them find stability in their own lives. From job-seeking, to obtaining housing, to being in healthy relationships, to addressing mental health/substance abuse concerns, she is constantly aligning with the residents to offer permanence in the selected pathways.

Mari went from being the one to rely heavily on social services to get through her own turmoil to now being the one to provide the services to others. From day one it was hard to get Mari to accept any help and see that it was a hand up, not a hand out. Yet when she shared with me that one daughter wants to be a police officer, one a soccer player, and one wants to be a mommy, she laughed "I guess I must be doing something right!" Her intrinsic motivation shined as Mari reflected on the final question of success and if she felt she had obtained it. She thought for a few moments, smiled, then replied. Mari will never feel completely successful until she earns her college degree but for the time being would definitely consider herself successful. "Success is being happy with what you do, where you are at. It is looking around and being okay with where you are at in life. Seeing that you have 3 beautiful daughters, a car that is very reliable, a house of your own, all your needs met, and even having some of your wants...to me this is success."

I risked staying here and never getting to see or be with my mom so I could go to middle and high school. I was supposed to go back home and be with my mom. But the risk was worth it because I finally got the green card, being able to become a U.S. Citizen. I wouldn't have had that if I wasn't an Avenue Scholar. I have been very blessed. I cried the day that I became a citizen. We use it now to go legally back and forth. So now we try to go at least once a year, so we can go visit my mom pretty often. Like shit, I wouldn't be here if I didn't have Avenue Scholars.

Chapter 4 Leo's Story

An old soul. Leo is now a young man in his early to mid-twenties but even when I got to meet him at 15 he had an old soul and I'm thankful he still does. When I needed a volunteer, a project leader, or someone to step up to help another student, Leo would always say "I got it Miss" and with that he would. He would just get things done, without production or show, he just would bury his eyes to the desk and get it done. If everyone was told to arrive to school at 7:15 a.m. the day of the ACT to ensure they got checked in and settled on time, Leo would be there by 7am and be calling the habitually late peers to ensure they made it there too. Yet, I wouldn't know he did this until I began to fret that Marvin or Alexis or Jordan weren't here yet and begin to ask if anyone had a phone number in his/her phone to call them. Here would come Leo, calm and casual, and would report, "Miss, Marvin and Alexis are riding together and are parking now. Jordan says he forgot and isn't coming and said to tell you he was sorry." As I got to know Leo over time, it was abundantly clear that his old soul was a family trait.

Leo beamed with pride during the interview when he spoke of his mother and father. "They've always been very supportive. I mean my dad since I was very young, he would say to me: 'You want to study? That's great. If not? That's also great. There's plenty of jobs out there I'm not going to force you to do one or the other'. He said that when he was a kid, no one told him to go to school. He graduated elementary school. He left school to start working. He said whichever one you do I'm alright with that...you know you can find a good job that pays well either way you go." Leo reflected back on

to this concept of support and freedom to choose his own pathway many times during the conversation.

Leo's intended pathway after high school was to join the military or to get some sort of mechanical degree. On his own, Leo landed a part-time job as a mechanic while in high school at a liquid trucking company. (Again, his old soul shines through... not many sophomores or juniors in high school go and apply at a trucking company so that they can begin to immerse themselves in a prospective career industry.) Upon high school graduation, the liquid trucking company offered Leo an internship that would last as long as it took him to get his associate's degree in diesel technology, on the condition that he would then come and work for them for a certain time period.

Not wanting to limit his options, Leo peered down the military pathway. He recalls that his mother tried her hardest not to temper his dreams of being a marine. His dad continued to remind him that he would support him either way. As the time drew closer his mother began to open up more about her true feelings for her son going to the military. Instead of feeling like his mother was keeping him from this step, Leo maturely summarized his mother's feelings as being similar to how any mother would feel knowing their son would be enlisting. He still went and took the marines entrance exam and physical; he passed. Seeing that the diesel mechanic internship was opening up for him and that his mother would be hurt if he joined the marines, Leo made the decision to pursue college and began at the community college the fall after high school graduation.

Whereas Antonio's mentors sought him out, Leo was the one to initiate and continue to seek out mentors in various walks of his life. Leo articulates that his father was his first mentor and admires him for his calm, rational way of processing life. "He's always been very, very smart, street smart, so he is always thinking. He likes to think things through. As something happens or some goes down or we have a problem or anything...he's already thinking about it." His next mentor was his martial arts trainer. Leo first meet his trainer at the age of six but says he still goes back to the gym to train with him whenever he can. As an entrepreneur, his martial arts teacher/trainer continues to invest in Leo in a holistic sense. "He taught us not only just the training on the martial arts, but he taught us a lot of lessons life wise. And he still does every time I go back. I see the kids that he's teaching now and it brings back really good memories of when he was teaching us." Leo briefly mentioned an on-going rapport he has with the researcher and his lasting connection to his high school wrestling coach that he still talks with from time to time. Yet, the most fascinating person Leo accredited as a mentor to him was an older gentleman. Leo described him as a man that lived down the road from him that came from Cuba who said he was an engineer in Cuba. This man would tell Leo stories of being an engineer in Cuba and then contrast it to the current times of not knowing English very well and the difficulty he is facing trying to find work. "So I'd go out and eat with him. I did it because he wasn't doing very well here so I'd go out and buy him dinner. I'd listen to all his stories about how he was successful down there and now he's struggling here. I guess I've always just listen to the people that I thought were

successful.” Leo stated that he would watch, observe, talk with, imitate those that he saw as happy, successful, note the errors of others, and was intentional about replicating the good while not repeating the mistakes of others.

Five months ago, Leo just left the job with the company he has been with since high school to explore other opportunities. His uncle talked to him about applying at a baking factory, he did, and he got the job. “I work on anything from small box makers to big ovens and coolers and freezers. I just have to have a little bit of a mechanical mindset and common sense. Then I can just figure out how to fix each machine as I go. It's not too bad. I was a little scared at first. I went to school for trucks and then I come to these things and have to figure them out on my own.” Though the pay is not enough, Leo says, to fully support himself, he enjoys the ability to learn from good, older coworkers while not feeling stressed at work. Currently, Leo has two job offers: one with a fence company and the other one with a fleet maintenance company. Both positions would be working on equipment and diesel trucks but he hasn't decided which to take. The mother in me asked him about insurance and benefits and Leo answered as most early 20-somethings with a “I should look into that, huh, I hadn't considered that yet miss.” Then Leo rapidly added that he has also applied to be an Omaha firefighter, passed the physical, passed the written test, and got a first round interview. Though he didn't get a second round interview with the fire chief, Leo affirmed that he thinks his adaptability and enjoyment in solving problems would be a strength so he will apply again.

As I interviewed Leo, I was astounded with his ease of the unknown and his willingness to take things as they come, think thoroughly through a plan, and then his ability to act with confidence on a decision. Each story he told of times of transition, mentors he held, of family strife was riddled with these constant themes and it again made me realize his true old soul. So when I asked the question of defining success and his perceptions of attaining I still am not sure why it amazed me. “If you wake up, and you don't say I have to go to work, but If you wake up happy. I think happiness from doing what you do. I think that's success.” He mentioned that having enough money to pay the bills and having a little on the side to be comfortable is important. Leo sat leaned back in the coffee shop and he casually mentioned that he is willing to change jobs and careers as many times as he has to until he achieves satisfaction, achieves success. “Even the firefighting thing is just something that I think I might like so I'm willing to try it. If I find out it is something that I don't like as much as I thought then I'll switch over again and try something else.” To have Leo's comfort of self and ease of processing such complex life milestones is a gift in this anxious and fast paced time.

I'd definitely say I listened and watched a lot of people that I thought were doing well and being successful and I thought 'I want to do that, I want to be like that'. They motivated me. So I would learn what to do, what not to do...When I was going to college I would get up and watch motivational videos every morning... I pay attention to people that I thought were successful, not even in the financial way, just that I see really happy.

I'd want to know why or how and so I would go and talk to them.

Chapter 5 Joselyn's Story

From my time at Avenue Scholars, I knew more about high school Joselyn than any other student I had gotten to work with. It was as though she found someone that she could trust and she let the floodgates down. I learned that her dad was in and out of prison. Her mother had a drug addiction and a boyfriend fetish. She moved out of her house at the age of 16 because she was sick of the drugs, the fighting, being the sole caretaker for her siblings so her parents could live recklessly. She would repeat over and over as a high schooler "all I want is to not be like any of them". When asked about her parents now, Joselyn flippantly retorted that her dad went to jail and mom has been in and out of court-ordered rehab but finally admitted herself this past year and is doing better. Joselyn thinks this time it might actually be for real. It was uplifting and heartbreaking all at one time to see Joselyn's childlike hope for her family to heal is eternal.

Most of the students interviewed would state a few sources of support to aid in getting him or her to their point and place in life currently. Not Joselyn. "It was Avenue Scholars, (the counselor/social worker), and (the researcher) that helped me out a lot. It was just that you were sitting there and listening to what I had to say. You were not trying to fix everything but just listening to what I needed to get out. You would sit there and listen and then wait till I was done and then try and help me figure out what I needed to do. You and (the counselor/social worker) really got me through a lot of the stuff that I went through in high school, especially when my dad had went to prison that year of me

graduating.” The only form of motivation her family provided that Joselyn could identify was the motivation to be nothing like them. With her mother graduating from high school and her father dropping out in middle school, Joselyn knew education would be a small piece of not being one of them. Though she admits she did not put much effort into her schooling, hung out with “potheads”, and partied, Joselyn graduated from high school and was ready for her college journey to begin her own life finally.

Joselyn enrolled and began promptly after graduation at the community college to earn her associate degree in culinary. Despite numerous conversations held in high school regarding the risks of childbearing on your intended pathways, Joselyn became pregnant two months after starting college. She immediately dropped out and took a full-time job at an in-home, non-medical service for disabled or elderly people where she was still employed at the time of her interview. Additionally, Joselyn picked up a part-time job at a shipping company. After working there long enough she was able to get full insurance for her daughter and herself. Joselyn has been engaged to her daughter’s father for 3 or 4 years but they have not had a wedding yet. She did share that if they did get married then he would be covered under her insurance as well but there was no urgency for that step.

There was a notion of sadness still in her voice that I couldn’t detect in the others that were interviewed. I don’t know if it was a feeling of comfort with me in just being open, honest, and real that the others didn’t feel and therefore kept their guard up or if it was a genuine detection of sadness in Joselyn. She openly stated that she sees on social

media that kids she graduated high school with have also now graduated college, are married, and have careers and it makes her question her own self-worth. Yet when prompted about going back to school or obtaining “career-leading” employment, Joselyn admits she doesn't want that either. “I really don’t know what I want to do in life though so for right now my fulltime job and part time job are good enough. They are keeping me above water.”

Raising her daughter is the definition of success for Joselyn. She saw how her mother had her at a young age and was well aware of how that turned out. By not giving her daughter up for adoption or having an abortion, Joselyn states it helped her arrange her priorities and stay away from the drugs that lured the rest of her family. “Success is having your life together, being able to pay your bills and still have money left over to do things with your child. I know I have obtained success when I have money left over at the end of the month. When I look at my bank account and don’t have to say, ‘aw crap, what did I do wrong?’ ”

I think I am successful right now, I do, but I still kind of want to go back to school.

Chapter 6 David’s Story

There is that one that walked his own walk while talking his own talk. Meet David. The lone white boy in class of Latino, black, Sudanese, and a few white girls. The one who laughed openly and loudly at his own jokes. The one who knew he was cool and therefore others believed it too. The one who boasted about his obsession with NASCAR,

racing, 4-wheeling, and all things rural yet was still well-liked in such a diverse, urban school. It did not add up and yet I began to understand after a short time of having David in the program, with him it never would.

The first day of class his junior year, David lingered after the bell. When I told him he better get going to his next class, he laughed and said he hadn't been on-time to a class in high school thus far and wasn't about to start now. I looked at him, paused, and said "I've always been one for a good challenge, you're on!" He was taken aback, put out his hand, and said he accepted the challenge. Then I proceeded to ask him where his next class was, he told me it was just down the hall. I linked my arm in his and to his wide-eyed 15 year old amazement began singing loudly about my new "best friend", named David, and how he needed my help getting to class, and how I was so excited to help him find the value in being on-time. He stopped me after about 20 feet and admitted utter defeat. He stated he promised he would be on-time to each class as long as I never did that again. I agreed.

David was sure he would be working on race cars and own a race car company immediately following high school graduation. "But then I had my son at 15 and I knew I needed to do something to make sure I could provide for him." He started and stopped his associate degree a few times but eventually completed his applied science program for car and auto body in February of 2018. "I guess I took a risk when I didn't go get a full-time job right out of high school but I knew I needed one (a full-time job). I went to college and I still just worked nights and stuff to support my son. But I'm glad I did

because now I'm better off in life.” The reality of being a father, working nights, and being a full-time college student hit hard as David watched friends party, saw some explore drugs, and knew that a few ended up in jail. He attempted to still have a social life in the beginning of college. His initial goal was to “still hang out and to be with my son too”. As the influences of drugs and alcohol crept into David’s life, he made the choice to choose his son over his friends and clarified that he has never regretted his decision once. “I knew I had to do it to get a better job. I was working at the body shop like 70 hours a week, it was rough, and I was becoming a mess.” Honest reflection allowed David to see that his sacrifices and long hours have paid off for him. “I now have my family, a beautiful family, and I love that.”

The cost of this lifestyle was one reason David walked away from his then friends. “It is important that I get the bills paid for me and my fiancé and my son. I’ll make sure my bills are paid and make sure my son has everything he needs, and not what he wants.” Another reason was the desire to provide a certain type of upbringing for his son. “I didn’t have my needs met when I was a kid, like I didn’t have parents around, I didn’t have stability. I make sure my son has two parents, stability, food, house, clothes and that is how I know I am doing fine.” David was raised by his grandparents as his parents were in and out of his life. He knew neglect was prevalent in his early years but his memories of childhood are solely of living with his grandparents. David followed his grandfather’s advice whenever he could. “He tells me never to give up, just keep on going. Life might be hard and suck now, but it’ll get better.”

His desire to have a two parent family, that lives in a consistent home, with food in the cupboards and clothes in the closets is one of the ways David knows he is being successful as a young adult and as a father currently. “I live with my fiancé and my son in a townhome. We are hopefully getting married this year. I provide our needs but not many wants, those aren’t the things (the wants) that really matter to me in life.” Another way David defined himself as successful was through his level of contentment or satisfaction. “Success is doing something you really love and it doesn't matter about the money...You want to wake up and go to work. I think I have attained success because I wake up every morning and I like going to work...It isn’t if my family is proud of me or if I’m changing the world. If it makes me happy, then it shouldn’t matter.” After high school, he worked for three years in an auto body shop but then took a position at an automotive part recycling company. As the shipping and receiving manager, David uses his automotive knowledge and unique ability to befriend anyone that was present back in high school to sale used parts online and in-person.

David could not specifically identify one thing that lead him to be a successful young man but rather a few different people and interventions. With no one in his family ever having gone to college that was enough to seize the opportunity when it was offered to him in the Avenue Scholars program. He states having gone to college and completing a degree as one step he took towards success. David also cites the Avenue Scholars counselor/social worker as playing a critical role. “Avenue Scholars really helped me when I had my son. They were there and (the Avenue Scholars counselor/social worker)

really helped me. She talked to me a lot when I was down about having a son at 15 and (the researcher) always help me. You were there to talk me through stuff. You would tell me life will get easier and not to worry about the small stuff.” Though David admits he did not have many family or friends ever pushing him to do better as a child, he did share an interesting friendship that steered him clear at times. “One of my best friends that I’ve known since I was 12, he’s always pushed me. He’s like a mentor to me and just makes me think and talk about life with him. He is actually like 20 years older than me but I met him when I was 12. He was a friend of our family and he took me under his wings. When I was in trouble when I was a teen I met him and he’s always help me with through the hard times and stuff. We talk, we hang out, and we just work on cars.” Though most adolescents would stay clear of bonding and hanging with an adult that is of no relation or kinship, I should have known that David would seek refuge in an uncommon spot and find some of his success because of it.

To me, I’d rather have a million dollars’ worth of fun than a million dollars just sittin’ in the bank.

Chapter 7 Emerged Themes of Analysis and Literature Review

Much research states that success for at-risk youth is not done in isolation but rather in collaborative approaches and therefore identifying one particular catalyst is not possible. It takes more than engaged parents to produce high student achievement. Henderson and Mapp (2002) break it down further by stating the most commonly cited

factors of student success. “Many studies of high-performing schools identify several key characteristics associated with improvement. These include high standards and expectations for all students and curriculum, as well as instruction and assessments aligned with those standards. They also include effective leadership, frequent monitoring of teaching and learning, focused professional development, and high levels of parent and community involvement” (p. 29). For the purpose of this research, the categories of defining success, family involvement, mentoring, and resilience will be further clarified as emerged themes from the participant interviews.

Definition of Success

Part of the Avenue Scholar curriculum was to teach the difference between a job and a career. It was explained that a job is something you wake up and do just to pay the bills. While a career was a position you had a skill or specific training that brought satisfaction. This was not prominent on my mind during the interviewing process yet while conducting the theme analysis and review of emerged themes it immediately rose to the forefront of my mind.

This case study would prove that it is actually a combination of the above definitions of job and career that dictates the perception of success. All five participants cited that success was two-fold; being able to provide for oneself by paying bills and having needs met while also finding satisfaction in what they do.

Antonio, Mari, Leo, and David all easily stated they had attained success. These four all had in common that they are employed in an industry that they have special

training for. Antonio is in the criminal justice field and applying for the Omaha Police Department. Mari works in the human services sector. Leo works in auto/diesel mechanics and David works in the automotive field. While Antonio, Leo, and David completed college degrees related to employment, Mari completed on-the-job training. All four meet the definition of career attainment through being employed in a position that he or she has specific training for.

Additionally, these four also note that they define success based on a level of satisfaction. There is not a lingering feeling of being incomplete or desiring better, desiring different. They are each content with their place in life. Income was not a factor of success other than being a means to pay bills and providing basic needs. Having additional money after bills to provide for wants was mentioned by Mari and Leo as a satisfaction enhancer.

Joselyn was the only one discontent in her own lack of attaining a career but was also the only one who was working a job: employment held to simply pay the bills. Though she felt successful in the fact that her bills were paid most months she gestured that she has hope to be more successful and that will come from eventually determining a specific career pathway.

Adolescents are insightful beings when allowed to be. They can share the observations they have made and how they personalized, uniquely interpreted each experience. To learn what it takes to achieve long-term success, what success is perceived to be, and how the student voices can lead the educational profession to

replicate long term success of at-risk high school students for the greater of all, it must be understood from the student perspective what are the pinnacle points that defined their place in life as they are now young adults.

Yet, defining success is a very subjective process. Again, all five participants cited that success was two-fold; being able to provide for oneself by paying bills and having needs met while also finding satisfaction in what they do as a profession. In delving deeper into the themes emerged, there is an inferred theme of emotional regulation relating to success. Knowing these five participants, reading their interview transcripts, and reflecting on the level of resilience each currently and formerly display, the one that demonstrated the lowest level of emotional regulation in words and actions not surprisingly reported the lowest level of satisfaction and lack of success.

In the book *Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say?*, the authors state there is a direct correlation to success in academics and also in life between those that have excelled in the social-emotional learning as well as academic learning (Zins, 2004). Those that excel in social-emotional learning demonstrate it through behaviors such as emotional regulation, choosing to be ethical or responsible when given an option to not be, or in demonstrating the ability to build healthy friendships while avoiding negative influences by being able to “say no”. These behaviors are linked to long-term implications of success, again not only in school but in life. When students lack social-emotional behaviors they have a much greater risk of struggling to connect with peers at school, failing to advocate for themselves with

teachers/staff, and engage in behaviors, such as substance use, truancy, or exceptional defiance, that cause academic learning to be hindered or even halted (Zins, 2004; Mazzotti, 2016).

The Avenue Scholars program focused on many aspects but in regard to student success themes such as building emotional regulation, building academic skills, and career attainment were a hyper curricular focus. Emotional regulation was taught through lessons such as how to approach authority appropriately, disagreeing with respect, or accepting being told no. Academic lessons were vast but an example of some would be study skills, time management, why attendance matters, how to take notes that mean something, or how to calculate grade point average (Avenue Scholars, 2018).

Avenue Scholars CEO Ken Bird is quoted for stating “The personal attention and support they’ve gotten from Avenue Scholars help and college navigators’ to...solve problems, (such as) making sure students get registered, attend classes, get academic help, receive social help and emotional support, and build a relationship with an adult who cares about their success” (Truax, 2016). It cannot be directly stated that because these participants were involved in the Avenue Scholar program that it solely caused them to be successful. But it can be said that each stated that being in the program contributed to their success and aided them toward being successful.

Family Involvement

These particular case studies would denote that having a two parent home does not necessarily equate to raising a teenager into a successful adult. Rather stability would

be a better predictor of success. The stability may come from a biological mother and father, a single mother/father, or through other relatives. Mari was sent in late elementary school to live with her grandparents and David was given over to be raised by his grandparents as a child. Antonio and Leo were both brought up by a two-parent home in which both were biological parents. Jessica moved out from under her mother and father's roof as a teen to seek refuge. Whereas all but Joselyn were placed in homes determined by adults in their life as stable, Joselyn was also the only one to not discuss being taught family values other than the desire to not be like any of her family members.

The value of work ethic were discussed by Antonio, Mari, and David. Each of these three were able to recall memories of witnessing people in his or her home get up and go to work to earn money to provide for the family. Additionally, Antonio, Mari, and Leo could recollect specific quotes that were repeated by their parent or grandparent that instilled a value for hard work.

When directly asked what contributed to success, the four participants that reported attaining success answered automatically by citing their family as one of the primary factors. A parallel of lack of success to lack of positive family involvement was made by one of the five participants. The progression of family involvement at home appears to have a protective effect on children as they progress through our complex education system. In a synthesis of 51 recent research studies, Henderson and Mapp (2002) confirm that the more families support their children's learning and educational progress, the more their children tend to do well in school and continue their education.

The most effective types of parent involvement are not those geared towards behavioral supervision, but rather, those geared towards advising or guiding teens' academic decisions. This was also supported by Leo, Mari, Antonio, and David's referencing of conversations held with family member that were advising in conversation and in actions observed.

At home, parents guide their children toward postsecondary education, make sure they read and do their homework, and stress the value of education. They also steer children away from risky behavior, help them maintain positive attitudes, and support them through problems at school. Despite the relationship between achievement and family resources, Clark (2002) found that high achievers came from a wide variety of family backgrounds. "Let us recall that 51.3 percent of the mothers of high achievers possessed no more than a high school education. Almost 40 percent... lived in single parent households. Almost 43 percent of the high achievers were Hispanic and 21.8 percent were Black" (p.103).

Mentoring

A slight correlation is present that the more mentors and positive adult influences present in an at-risk teens life, the more likely they are to achieve success as a young adult. Four of the five participants could easily note 3 or more adults that actively mentored them during adolescence while one could only note the Avenue Scholars program. The four that had multiple mentors during high school, college or early career, are the same four that deem themselves as successful.

The capacity, prior knowledge, or mentoring topic were vast between the participants that were interviewed. The three that have had a child were the three that felt a part of their success was due to support provided from the Avenue Scholars' counselor/social worker. All five noted that being a part of the Avenue Scholars program was supportive in the college and career aspect of mentoring. Antonio clarified that his parents provided hope and enduring encouragement while Mr. Aaron of the Young Scholars program provided academic and educational perseverance. Leo told story after story from the Cuban gentleman to former coworkers to his friends. Each story told had the outcome of lessons observed, people he admired and then emulated, and those he vowed not to repeat their actions. Both Joselyn and Mari talked of having the researcher as simply a listener who they could be open with and get reliable advice from.

Antonio stated that he would not have consider going to college until his Avenue Scholars advisor prompted him, then he would have never considered completing a bachelor's degree had another mentor not mentioned it, and finally felt he would have never accomplished finishing his bachelor's degree without a third mentor's encouragement and guidance. But once a student arrives on campus, he or she require cultural and social capital to navigate the hidden and informal curriculums of colleges and universities. While the formal curriculum is listed in a course catalog online or in the degree requirements, knowing this part is not enough to attain a degree for any student. In the book *Mentoring At-Risk Students through the Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education*, Buffy Smith (2013) defines the hidden curriculum as "the unwritten norms,

values, and expectations that unofficially govern the interactions among students, faculty, professional staff, and administrators”. For example, knowing who to talk to and how to talk to them is not often an inherent trait taught in households that are forced to focus on meeting economic needs rather than embedding lessons of social capital. David, Leo, and Antonio all stressed that their families were able to provide encouragement and emotional support but when it came to talking to family about their college programs each family was not an option to turn towards. Yet, they each admitted that they sought out their mentors when it came to addressing a poor test grade with a professor appropriately, when it came to talking with student services about a payment plan for books, or how to handle the feeling that an academic advisor was not properly guiding them down an efficient path towards their degree. A mentor that is well-versed in both academia and guiding young adults toward his or her individual goals becomes paramount for those that cannot attain this support from family members (Dweck, et al, 2011).

Cultural capital and social capital was the primary focus for each of mentoring relationships referenced in this research case-study. Cultural capital is how a student decodes, interprets, processes, and applies the culture of the school. If the student is aware of norms and accepted practices within a particular institution and then can replicate them accurately, they have utilized cultural capital which is rewarded through the hidden curriculum of post-secondary education (Smith, 2013). Social capital is the student’s ability to use relationships, networks, and interactions to help himself or herself advance within the institution.

Mentoring can assist students in the acquisition of cultural capital and social capital, which are related to broader retention and degree completion in higher education (Smith, 2013; DiMaggio, 1982). Broussard, Mosley-Howard, and Roychoudhury (2006) examined the connections between long-term success in youth and mentoring; they found that children who exhibit resilient behaviors usually have a supportive and trusting relationship with at least one family member or community adult that has high expectations. In order to address the high rates of remediation and non-completion among at-risk youth, Kirst and Venezia (2004) suggest a more integrated K–16 system that accommodates not only the educational needs of students, but the needs of those students and their parents with respect to the knowledge necessary to pursue and successfully complete postsecondary education thus again proving that true societal advancements is made as intentional collaborative practices. Dr. Ken Bird, CEO of Avenue Scholars concludes this by connecting the academic success with the mentoring relationships as a key element to building cultural, social capacity; “Access to college through scholarship has little to do with success (in college),” he said. “Without advisers, navigators or coaches, the likelihood of success diminishes dramatically” (Truax, 2016).

Resilience

The researcher was able to discern resilience from all five participant interviews. Resilience “is the ability to react to stressful, traumatic life conditions in active and positive ways that enable individuals to bounce back and maintain a positive outlook” (Broussard, C.A. et al, 2006). Antonio had never considered college until it was

presented to him and then he took the leap to earn his associate degree. During the conclusion of that program, he was presented with the idea of continuing on to earn his bachelor's degree and he went for that as well. His willingness to follow advice and take the chance rewarded him. David was not planning to attend college until he had his son and decided he needed a degree to provide a more suitable, in his eyes, home. Sue Truax (2016) writes in an Omaha-World Herald article highlighting the Avenue Scholars Program, "the first-quarter persistence rate was way above the 50 percent rate of the general population and the 15 percent rate of those living in poverty" (Truax, 2016).

The willingness to leave people behind also emerged as a theme and has a correlation to resilience. Mari gave up a much desired relationship with her mother to attain a high school education. Joselyn, Antonio, and David all gave up friends and/or family members who were engaging in drug and alcohol abuse to reach for success.

Self-awareness was the final theme that emerged under positive attributes in connection to resilience during the interviews. David, Mari, and Joselyn did not want to neglect their children and therefore mentioned a high drive to be a provider. Joselyn was able to note a time in which she had to arrange her priorities to ensure she was on a stable path while Antonio had to be honest with himself that he was not like some of the other students he saw on campus, then accept that fact, and proceed with additional effort to overcome the differences. Leo was one to ask questions of all those around him as to learn and gain as much knowledge as he could. Each one had a strong sense of self-awareness that they could state aiding in their path to success.

Each research participant endured stressful, traumatic life conditions. The four study participants that stated they had attained success were the four that also navigated negative life conditions, such as poverty, absent parents, the presence of drugs or alcohol abuse in the home, etc, with resilience. These four were able to process such conditions, either internally or with the help of a mentor, in active and positive methods which allowed him or her to persevere and maintain a positive perspective. “Resilient children show continued, positive developmental progress despite being bent, compressed, or stretched by risky environmental factors...and share common protective factors, including adaptable personalities, supportive environments, more compensating experiences, and fewer stressors than other individuals” (Broussard, C.A. et al, 2006). In addition, resilient individuals tend to approach problems proactively, solving problems in ways that enable them to maintain a strong sense of self and to bring about positive change in environmental interactions. These traits could be observed in the emerged themes of the participants that reported success now as a young adult.

Chapter Eight Implications and Professional Recommendations

The interviews, literature and body of prior research, in conjunction with themes emerged all dictate that there are strong correlations that will lead at-risk high school students to long term success. But first a few comments on the topic of success are necessary. While little research currently exists to define such an abstract concept as success, this body of research developed its own working definition that should be

explained. Achieving success is an existence in thought, or a feeling, idea rather than a physical or concrete destination one could stand at. When these participants and their classmates were in the high school portion of the Avenue Scholars program, almost every lesson that talked about future planning, college and career outcomes, or brainstorming what their success would personally look like involved many material items, often solely material possessions. Students would cover vision boards with magazine clippings of brand new cars, giant houses, high end fashion, and even just images of people swimming in pools of money, literally. As the interviews began with students talking of their planned pathway and actual pathway, I would hear about the twist and turns that took them in directions they had not planned. Regardless of the twist, in every single interview, the participant, the young adult would beam with pride that they could pay their own bills, provide for their own needs, and some even stated they had money left over for some wants as well. Each time I began to ask the next question as to if they felt they had achieved success, a small knot of concern would build in my stomach as I was aware they were not living the life of the rich and famous that their 16-year-old-self had envisioned success to be and I worried that the question may unintendedly cause them to feel disappointment or failure. The knot would quickly ease and be replaced with refreshing perspective as my former students would dictate to me that success was more about providing a modest roof over their head, having a career they enjoy, reuniting, healing, and/or continuing relationships with family, having some form of their own transportation, good food in the home, clothes in the drawers, and sustaining this all

month after month. Many admitted this success did not come without worry, without careful budgeting, or without doing without the extras but that their pride and notion of success came from the fact that they could provide for themselves and their loved ones. Those with children added that they each were providing better stability, better parenting, better environments than what they were afforded which also added to their existence of success. How refreshing it is to be surprised that the material driven teens grew into aspiration driven young adults.

Build Hope thru Pathways to Gain Long Term Success

Jessica talked of how she kept coming back to my office to simply get help in making it one more day. Antonio admitted he had never considered even going to college let alone earning a bachelor's degree. David didn't think he was the type of kid that went to college until he learned there was a pathway just for him. Leo had plans of one pathway but when they changed sought out help to secure a local pathway to success. Maria's original plan was to move back with her mother after high school until she learned even more opportunities were available if she desired to keep reaching for more. All five participants talked about a specific lesson or moment in which they learned that there was an associate's degree that matched their interests, financial assistance to make it possible, a person willing to walk side-by-side with them to navigate college's hidden curriculum, and even conversations with mentors who pushed them to keep being resilient.

Many Avenue Scholars had introductory ideas of their future plans yet, much like their juvenile notion of success, these plans were often times unrealistic, unattainable, or even just a generic, idealized lifestyle/career due to their knowledge of options being so limited. When a junior in high school with Ds in science since 6th grade talks about their future career as a surgeon while he or she failing anatomy, the likelihood of attaining this goal is slim. Instead of proctoring another career interest survey, sit down with the student to understand what it is about that career that appeals to them specifically. Is it the salary, the medical knowledge, working under pressure? Is it the twelve to sixteen additional years of schooling? Is it what the student thinks will make his or her parent finally proud of them? Through lessons on future pathways, hope can be fostered or shattered.

Once a realistic pathway is accepted by the student, hope is kindled. The pathway to success cannot be superficial and it is essential that the student be able to articulate the time, cost, requirements, and specific steps of their own pathway. Reminding at-risk students what they have already hurdled and connecting this to the ability to mount future hurdles with build additional hope. Hope is the belief that the future will be better than the present. Hope is what instills the desire for the at-risk student to take the very first leap from where they are to where they want to go. Dr. Shane Lopez, a scientist of hope and the author of *Making Hope Happen*, offers great insights into hope. He states that “a majority of Americans believe their future will be better than today but the ones with hope are the ones that feel they have the power to do something about it” (Lopez, 2014).

Empowering students to change their circumstances should be done through hearing specifically what interests and motivates the student, aiding them in developing a specific pathway that they are motivated by the outcome, and building hope through them acknowledging they have the capacity to carry out this pathway to success.

Collective Trauma-Based Practices

Is it disengaged students or students in disengaged systems? Dr. Ken Bird once asked me what schools could do better to reengage students who had become disengaged. He stated many Avenue Scholars were disengaged as the data reflected poor school attendance, low grade point averages, and lack of post-secondary program completion. As he and I spoke more about this I posed this question to him. “Is it disengaged students or is it students in disengaged systems?” I asked. We then went in to discuss the complexity or fragmented and disengaged systems that many students progress through before becoming young adults.

Again, the criteria to be in the Avenue Scholar program is what many school districts across the nation use to label a student as at-risk. The student qualifies for the federal free or reduced-lunch program, qualifies due to lower grade markings than higher achieving peers, qualifies based on lower rate of school attendance than peers, qualifies due to higher rates of discipline incidents than peers, and often it is a combination of multiple to all of these qualifying conditions. So when an at-risk student is struggling with instability in housing, food insecurity, lack of access to health care or social services, and/or behavioral issues to mask emotional struggles a disengaged system is one

that responds with focus solely on reading, writing, arithmetic, and assessment score preparation.

An engaged system acknowledges that certain students have endured trauma and responds in a collective manner. Each participant could specifically recollect a time where school was not able to be a priority at all due to harmful side effects of poverty. When the student was working 60 hours a week in a minimum wage job to help pay the rent but then sleeping in class, the focus had to become finding a job that could pay \$12-15 an hour so that they could cut their hours in half, hence creating the ability to getting more sleep, which increased the chances of the student being more alert and ready to learn during the school day while still fulfilling family obligations. A disengaged system has a dean of students tell the student they should cut back their hours while an engaged system has someone integrated into the building that learns of a student's currently reality and works to take that very reality and improve it so that education can become a higher priority. The advisor must respond by educating the student, and the class as a whole, on financial literacy, time management, and job-preparation skills such as applying, interviewing, securing, and enduring employment.

When experiencing depression, health care concerns, teenage pregnancy, or lack of connection to social services, the student has to know that there is an adult at school that will not just refer them to an outside agency but rather is the actual bridge to the resources. This is a person that will call the student's guardian, gather the necessary documents, arrange the appointments, facilitate the transportation, and even sometimes

accompany the student/family to the meeting. When this scene begins to play out with multiple students over a course of time, the advisor may deem it appropriate to ensure students know how to access resources and the difference between them. In class, a whole group lesson on difference between the school guidance counselor and a therapist can be taught. The difference in level of care between a primary care doctor's office, an urgent care, and the emergency room can assist multiple students at the same time learn to navigate the health care systems to ensure physical and mental health is such that learning can occur. Disengaged systems assume the student and their family already have this knowledge or that it is not the school's place to teach students this content.

During the participant interviews, the fact that Avenue Scholars provided a consistent person that the student was familiar or comfortable with, was shared as monumental to the student accessing the support necessary to overcome the trauma-based circumstance he or she was faced with. The ability to face this circumstance and have guidance in overcoming it allowed the trauma-based situation to be a hurdle for the student rather than the student's endpoint. By having an adult that was both a teacher of their class and a mentor to touch base with, the Avenue Scholars advisor was able to know their grades, attendance, and academic records while talking with the student frequently about the personal place and point that was contributing and often driving these academic outcomes. The advisor could then find resources such as tutoring, or arranging work time with a teacher to assist the specific academic obstacle alongside the student or the advisor could connect with the school's academic guidance counselor,

consult with the Avenue Scholar's counselor/social worker, or even take the student to the school-based health center depending on the need of that particular student. An engaged system that operates collectively for the holistic good of each student produces engaged students.

There will never be a complex enough algorithm that can predict all the if-then scenarios that at-risk students may present. But having an engaged system that uses collective, trauma-informed approaches has proven to move more students towards long term success by aiding in removing or diminishing obstacles to return education as a priority. Additionally, having a laser-like focus on a specific caseload of students with the perspective of who the students present to be while in class and combining it to the knowledge the advisor has of each individual student from outside of class, the daily curriculum delivered during the instructional time should be bound by the needs of the students.

Create the Bridge from High School to College

Participants in this study did not directly identify this concept therefore it is not listed as an emerged theme. Yet multiple insinuated that having familiar faces and people that were associated with the Avenue Scholars program made asking for help during college easier. In reflection this should be asserted as a critical element of an institution or program truly aimed at helping at-risk youth achieve long term success. Students were familiar with the level of support and the wide-array of assistance that the high school advisors and counselors could provide to them. Therefore as they navigated the hidden

curriculum of the community college or university they were not also having to navigate an entirely new system resources, guidance, and assistance. At no time during the interview did a participant cite a college academic advisor, the student services personnel, writing or math lab, etc as a beneficial intervention to their success. These would be the traditional sources of support any college student would be expected to access. It is then assumed that due to the lack of familiarity with the traditional college supports in combination with an increased familiarity of the Avenue Scholars personnel, students did gain assistance during their post-secondary education from those that they had a prior rapport and trust with.

Almost all programs are solely focused on students during one phase of their educational career; in example: middle school, high school, college. Yet the novelty lies within the ability to continue, to bridge that support, especially with students previously deemed at-risk that are already battling concerns of having enough intellect, social savviness, financial support, or stamina to be the first in their family to complete a college degree.

Develop Opportunities for Family Onboarding & Education

Further consideration must be given to the reins a family holds as a high school student begins to draft future plans. I humbly admit that my perception of family influence was broken and proved wrong by this research. Prior to conducting the interviews, I was aware and attempted to bracket my assumptions that the guardians were so busy with working multiple jobs or providing as best as possible that there were likely

little to no conversations about future plans occurring within the home. I started a professional development seminar with a belief I hold: 99% of parents are doing the absolute, 100% best they can. I proceeded to explain that I wholly believe that no one, no student, no teacher, no parent wakes up and thinks to themselves “hmmm, I’m going to explode the day and hope it ends up horribly”. This is counterintuitive to our most basic human design. People desire for good things to happen. Students want school to go well. Parents hope and pray that they are doing the best to give their child more than what they had... yet we all are limited by what we have been taught, shown, and experienced. If a parent does not know how to access a student’s grades or attendance record, it does not mean they do not care. If a student does not study and take-notes, it does not mean they are trying to fail. And, to my own error, if a student reports that a parent is gone all the time because they are working relentlessly to get the family afloat, it does not mean they aren’t talking from time to time about the student’s future. What a powerful tool it could be to incorporate these biological influencers into the program and utilize them as hope builders for the student’s motivation capacity to only further grow.

All participants spoke of family member achievements, positive and negative actions, and specifically of memorable conversations that they felt aided in their success. This led me to then contemplate the potential impact of incorporating families into the construction of student hope by collaborating of the future pathway. Three participants spoke of the highest expectation their family holding was to graduate high school. What if these families we also educated on the opportunities that could unfold with a specialist

diploma, associate degree, or bachelor's degree? "When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement" (Henderson, et al, 2002). More could have been done and further research consideration should be given to honor the contributions that the families made towards the success of each at-risk student in his or her journey towards long term success.

Honor Student Voices

The crux of this research lies within the honoring of student voices. Educational institutions and programs that support at-risk students must have a forum to hear from individual students as to what is their specific need. There is wisdom within every story yet we will never learn if we never hear the tale told. Educational systems must be engaged enough to fully vet each student's story, have people with the ability to hear what the student is willing to say and even what they are not willing to share, and then build a plan in unison with the child. The program must have an overarching vision and mission but a sublayer must be that the program may then be tailored to drive the student's passion and not, as so many programs do, to attempt to steer the student into a preselected pathway.

The way individuals experience the world influences the way they think about it. How could any teacher, administrator, or program CEO know the lenses a student views the world through until they had asked and heard from that specific individual?

"Honoring student voice is really about empowering students, but any question about

student empowerment is really a question of how much power we, as adults, are willing to give up...The most effective voice we can hear in the various struggles in education is the students themselves. Know that they are your allies, and by recognizing and honoring their voice, you will also be empowered” (Goodman, 2015).

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Appendix A: Internal Review Board Approval



NEBRASKA'S HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER

Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

January 22, 2018

Emily Christensen
Education
UNO - VIA COURIER

IRB # 789-17-EX

TITLE OF PROPOSAL: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF LONG TERM SUCCESS FOR AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

The Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA) has reviewed your application for *Exempt Educational, Behavioral, and Social Science Research* on the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46.101b, category 2. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable HRPP Policies. It is also understood that the ORA will be immediately notified of any proposed changes for your research project.

Please be advised that this research has a maximum **approval period of 5 years** from the original date of approval and release.

If the research is completed prior to 5 years, please notify the Office of Regulatory Affairs at irbora@unmc.edu. If this study continues beyond the five year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,

Signed on: 2018-01-22 09:20:00.000

Gail Kotulak, BS, CIP
IRB Administrator III
Office of Regulatory Affairs

Appendix B: Participant Consent to Participate in Research

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves being interviewed.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the researcher's dissertation, a conference presentation, and/or published papers.

- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained electronically on a USB stored in a locked drawer in the researcher's office until December 2018.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained until December 2020.
- I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Researcher: Emily DuPree Christensen, doctoral candidate for University of Nebraska-Omaha College of Education, echristensen1@epsne.org

Academic Supervisor: Jeanne Surface, UNO College of Education Professor, jsurface@unomaha.edu

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of research participant

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Questions for Interview

Please start by telling me a brief history of what pathway you intended to take when you started the Avenue Scholars program as a junior and the actual college and/or career pathway you actually took.

1. What defines success to you? How do you know if you have attained that success or not? (Validation of success could be a factor?, Students' self-perception/family-perception of success?)
2. What cultural or personal factors do you identify as helpful or harmful to your success?
3. What intervention(s) did you have that your peers did not that you can specifically identify? Do you feel that intervention was helpful or harmful?
4. What risks were you willing to take to or not willing to take that you attribute to your point in life now? These may be social connections of peers or family, accepting or rejecting support, trusting or not trusting others etc.

Appendix D: Theme Coding Notes

	<i>Values instilled from family member/guardian</i>	<i>Mentor/ positive adult</i>	<i>Positive Self-Attributes</i>	<i>Exposure to career/college</i>	<i>Success is...</i>
<i>Antonio</i>	influence of dad and mom in school and work (pg. 24), always saw family work for what the had (27), passing on value of school to younger brothers (24 & 27)	ASF & Young Scholars (pg. 24-25), talking to him about going for bachelor's degree after associate degree (25), when he thought he couldn't he had Mr. Aaron (26)	Took the leap to college (pg. 25) , asked for help academically (25), said no to parties (25), "what do I have to lose?" (25), Realized he wasn't like other college kids and would have to outwork them (26), hard work (27)	no thoughts of college until ASF (pg. 24), "Guiding me to a different path than what I knew" (25), had never considered bachelor's until presented (25)	Getting what his parents wished for but gave up so he could get it (pg. 27), making family proud (27)
<i>Mari</i>	Mom sent her to live with grandparents (29), saw men work hard (30), work for what you get (30), grandma taught respect (31), husband encouraged her in career path (32)	ASF counselor/social worker helped with depression (29), citizenship (30), mental and prenatal help (31)	Using school as an "excuse" to stay/pushing for more school for herself when others weren't (29), first to graduate high school & 1st to go to college (31), sacrificed mother for education (31)	Thought of human services associate degree (32)	Is being happy with where you are at in life, meeting all your needs, and some of your wants (33)

	<i>Values instilled from family member/guardian</i>	<i>Mentor/ positive adult</i>	<i>Positive Self-Attributes</i>	<i>Exposure to career/college</i>	<i>Success is...</i>
Joselyn	To not be like any of them (38),	Solely reliant on ASF and counselor/ social worker (39)	Arranged priorities and knew to stay away from drugs (40)	Knew education would help but didn't put much into it (39), went for associate in culinary, dropped out and worked full time (39), sees other are graduating and she never did (40)	Raising her daughter & paying bills (40)
David	Raised by grandparents (42), grandpa encouraged his to persevere (42), family never went to college so he wanted that (43),	ASF counselor/ social worker helped when he had his son and when he was depressed (43), would tell him life would get better (43), older man who befriended him and gave advice (44),	Went to school for self and son (41), kept going after stopping (41), left friends who were getting into drugs and alcohol for son (42), didn't have his needs met as a child so is willing to work hard to ensure his son does (42),	Knew he would be working on race cars and owning his own car company (41), worked in auto body shop and now works in auto part recycling company (43),	Having 2-parent home, food, bills paid, and needs met (42), being content (43),