Impact of Formal Mentoring on Freshmen Expectations, Graduation Rates, and GPAs

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Abstract

This quantitative study examines the expectations, graduation rates, and GPAs of participants (n=113) in a formal mentorship program, *Freshmen Focus*, at a small, rural Midwestern high school through the framework of organizational socialization theory (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Findings indicate freshmen students formed expectations of the program and their mentors relative to homework help, acclimation assistance, and emotional support. Students' expectations of their mentors and the program were surpassed throughout the mentorship experience. The study also demonstrates that participation in the *Freshmen Focus* mentorship program improved grade point averages and graduation rates.

Keywords: socialization, mentorship, freshmen, transition program, graduation rates

Introduction

For this study, we considered a rural Midwest high school that is experiencing declining graduation rates, which the school attributes to poor assimilation of freshmen into the high school setting. In 2007, the school implemented a mentoring program, known as Freshmen Focus, to help freshmen succeed academically and lower the possibility of dropping out (Shaw, 2009). This review is the first analysis of the program. Secondary data provided by the high school was reviewed to examine the relationship between the Freshmen Focus program and student expectations, graduation rates, and GPAs.

The school guidance counselor incorporated the strategy of peer support in which upperclassmen (mentors) mentored freshmen students (mentees) in a daily, yearlong, one-credit class known as Freshmen Focus. A system of supervision was developed for the mentors that included a formal application and interview process, two months of daily

leadership training, and ongoing weekly training throughout the school year and summer. Under the guidance of the school counselor, mentors developed the *Freshman Focus* curriculum that consists of more than 80 lessons on themes such as bullying, resiliency, teamwork, and communication. Mentors taught the lessons in the context of the formal *Freshman Focus* class under the supervision of a *Freshman Focus* teacher. All *Freshman Focus* classes met during sixth period in groups of 20 students with 4 mentors per class. Mentors teach from the *Freshman Focus* curriculum three days per week and provide direct support two days per week, assisting freshmen with homework, acclimation, and social situations. The *Freshman Focus* teacher moderated the class and provided guidance.

The mentor-mentee relationship begins at the end of the freshman student's 8th grade year in the form of mixers and scheduling assistance. It continues throughout the summer as mentors send notes of encouragement to mentees. In the week preceding the start of school, a Freshman Orientation session is held where freshmen are greeted by mentors, participate in team-building activities, tour classrooms, and experience a *Freshman Focus* class.

In addition to the established *Freshman Focus* curriculum, the supervising *Freshman Focus* teachers are also trained in college and career readiness materials to prepare freshmen on the college entry and career choice process. English teachers also play a vital role in *Freshman Focus* by integrating college essay writing, college applications, resume writing, and employment applications into the English curriculum. By incorporating mentors and teachers as part of the guidance department offerings, the school counselor has created a holistic system that increases her reach. Interestingly, the de-centralization of guidance tasks may be potentially meaningful. Barton and Coley (2011) report the national average of guidance counselor-to-student ratio as 1:467 and 39 minutes per year.

The organizational theories of socialization (Feldman, 1976; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977) and assimilation (Jablin, 2001) were applied as the theoretical perspective that enculturates students into the high school. The theory of mentorship (Kram, 1983, 1985) was explored as the practical perspective that socializes 9th grade students to the high school setting. Additionally, the components of social and emotional learning, school climate, environment, fluctuating national graduation rates, and dropout prevention strategies were reviewed to provide background to the problems of poor expectations, lowered graduation rates, and lowered GPAs experienced in our Midwestern high school.

Background

Within the educational system of the U.S., high school completion rates have fluctuated for the past forty years. The national graduation rate in 1969 of 77.1% dropped to 66.1% in 2000 (Barton, 2005), and leveled to 80% in 2012 (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). The oscillation of graduation rates throughout the intervening years caused concern not only for the self-sufficiency of the students, but for the social and economic health of the nation. The potential implications of a national dropout rate exceeding 20% led to a groundswell of research across multiple disciplines by educators, government agencies, and private foundations.

The crisis in graduation rates prompted the formation of The National Commission on Excellence in Education by the U.S. Department of Education. The task of the 1981 Commission was to identify lagging perceptions of the quality of education within the United States (Barton, 2002; U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), 1983). The Commission's landmark report, A Nation at Risk, cited a 13% functional illiteracy rate among 17-year olds and a 40% illiteracy rate among minority youth (U.S. NCEE, 1983). From 1963 to 1983, the report identified declining scores in the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT®) with losses greater than 50 points on the verbal section and decreases of 40 points in mathematics. Compared to the other 33 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries, these dimensions indicated that the U.S. had fallen behind other industrialized nations in critical reading, math, and science skills (U.S. NCEE, 1983). For students born in 1983, it was projected that only 70% would graduate with a high school diploma in their graduation year of 2000 (U.S. Department of Education (DOE), 2008). This projection was confirmed at 66%-68% (Barton, 2005; Education Week Research Center (EWRC), 2013).

The release of A Nation at Risk was a catalyst that sparked national attention to raise academic excellence within elementary and secondary education. The report also ignited further research by the public and private sectors that were primarily twofold in nature: to explore the social and economic implications of high school failure and to examine the academic and psychosocial risk factors of dropping out of high school.

Academic and Psychosocial Reasons for High School Failure

Academic reasons for dropping out of high school included the feeling of being poorly prepared for high school and fear of being able to meet graduation requirements (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006); having failing grades (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006); repeating a grade (Hammond et al., 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006); not being challenged intellectually through the curriculum (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Stanley & Plucker, 2008), student behavior problems (Stanley & Plucker, 2008); and school location (Smink & Schargel, 2004). Students with poor school attendance were also associated with non-completion (EWRC, 2014; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

Psychosocial reasons for early school withdrawal included a poor sense of connection to the school and weak relationships with peers and school adults (Bridgeland et al., 2006; EWRC, 2014; Stanley & Plucker, 2008); low social and emotional learning levels (EWRC, 2014); and family values (EWRC, 2014; Hammond et al., 2007; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). Becoming a parent, caring for a family member, or needing to find work to earn money (Bridgeland et al., 2006) were cited as personal reasons for exiting school prematurely. Collectively, these risk factors were characterized as "push effects" and "pull effects" (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET), 2004, p. 14) that either pushed a student out of school due to failing grades and poor curriculum or pulled a student away due to increased family responsibilities. Categorized into four domains, the areas of individual, family, school system, and community (Hammond et al., 2007) influence a student's risk in leaving high school without a diploma.

Risk Factors Offset through Mentoring and Legislation

In response to the research findings, legislation was enacted to mitigate the risk factors of student disengagement and to increase high school graduation rates. The national educational reform initiatives that were enacted include The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (NCLB, 2001) and The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 (ARRA, 2009).

The first intervention, NCLB, addressed six critical academic areas to avert high school failure, by encouraging schools to include: 1) curricula focused on proficiency in the subjects of math, science, and reading; 2) recruitment and preparation of highly qualified teachers; 3) language instruction for limited English-speaking students; 4) providing parents with school choices; 5) holding schools accountable and responsive to local needs, and 6) providing assistance to students with disabilities (U.S. DOE, 2004).

As the second intervention, the ARRA implemented the Race to the Top (R2T) program to prepare middle and high school students for college and career opportunities (The White House Setting the Pace Report (TWHSPR), 2014). The R2T program incentivized teachers and schools to creatively engage students through the use of comprehensive supports and tools, rigorous learning, and mentorship opportunities. In states embracing R2T, graduation rates increased to 80% and student test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have improved (TWHSPR, 2014).

A third intervention, The Common Core State Standards Initiative, was developed by state governors and state school chiefs with state-by-state adoption and implementation in 2014 (Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), 2014). The purposes of the Common Core were to standardize reading and math curricula and to address K-12 expectations and high school graduation requirements across the fifty states (CCSSI, 2014). As reported by the CCSSI (2014), implementation was achieved in 43 states, the District of Columbia, 4 U.S. territories, and the Department of Defense (DOD) Education Activity.

Of relevance to this study were the risk factors categorized in the individual and school domains. The individual domain identified that risk factors of social and emotional learning were enhanced through mentoring (EWRC, 2014, NCSET, 2004). Risk areas within the school domain revealed that enriching the school structure, school resources, and curriculum with mentorship programs were helpful in supporting students (Bridgeland et al., 2006; U.S. DOE, 2008).

Goal of Legislation — Improve Graduation Rates through Mentorship

The identifiable goals of these national and state educational initiatives were to improve high school graduation rates through academic preparedness, to make quality education more accessible across all populations, and to retain students through improved social and emotional learning programs. Interestingly, the U.S. DOE's R2T legislation identified mentorship as a means to bridge the social and emotional learning gaps of students (TWHSPR, 2014).

The enactment of educational reforms contributed to the development of better curriculum, the improvement of classroom equipment and tools, and the implementation of vocational education classes (ARRA, 2009; NCLB, 2001). The legislative acts also

promoted changes to emotional and social learning, including more student support via guidance, counseling, mentoring, and tutoring (ARRA, 2009; NCLB, 2001).

As one may expect, at a time of increased focus on the retention of high school students, the roles of school guidance counselors expanded. The important functions of monitoring students' course load, tracking graduation credits, recognizing struggling students, and mobilizing academic and social supports were increased along with the additional responsibilities of being test administrator and manager of accountability reports (Barton & Coley, 2011). With school resources deployed to the hiring of highly qualified teachers and developing innovative programs, staffing for the guidance department decreased. This caused an increase in the ratio of students per guidance counselor (Barton & Coley, 2011).

Mentorship Facilitated through Guidance Department

With the additional school guidance counselor responsibilities, the strategy of peer mentoring offered the prospect of assisting the guidance department by deploying an army of peer mentors to help students attain graduation. Mentorship is the concept of a more experienced individual assisting a less experienced person (Kram, 1983; 1985). The high school years, and more specifically, the freshman year, are pivotal stages in an adolescent's development in which having a mentor can be helpful. Navigating the waters of high school can be particularly intimidating for 14- and 15-year old students who are just beginning their sojourn toward more appreciable independence (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Freshmen high school students are still acquiring crucial self-leadership and self-organization skills (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007) and are still growing physically, cognitively, and psychosocially with full brain maturation not achieved until the mid-twenties (Simpson, 2008).

With many transitions happening simultaneously, mentors offer students assistance to traverse the course with greater ease. In addition to acclimating the mentee to the high school building and schedule, the mentor can provide information, encouragement, support, role modeling, and friendship. Mentors can also assist in teaching the tasks of problem-solving, prioritizing, thinking ahead, long-term planning, and communication techniques. Thus, mentorship (Kram, 1983, 1985) plays a key part in the socialization (Feldman, 1976; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977) and assimilation (Jablin, 2001) of a new member to an organization.

Review of the Literature

A review of relevant literature includes educational and non-educational sources to explore the relationship of mentors and mentees in different organizational settings. Sources include seminal authors from the 1960s to current literature. Reviewing educational literature reveals that social and emotional learning translates to a student's sense of engagement (EWRC, 2014) that is fostered by strong relationships with other students and adults (Bridgeland et al., 2006; EWRC, 2014; Stanley & Plucker, 2008). In a sample of 606 educators, teachers identified that students who had a sense of connection and a durable relationship with a caring teacher or administrator were more engaged in learning (EWRC, 2014). In other studies conducted by educational dropout

prevention organizations, a sense of belonging and personal relationships were also reported as helpful to student success (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hammond et al., 2007; Stanley & Plucker, 2008).

Mentorship

The concept of mentoring was identified by The National Dropout Prevention Center as one of fifteen strategies to increase high school graduation rates (Smink, 2007; Smink & Schargel, 2004). The importance of a supportive individual in a person's life has, as its basis, the theoretical framework of mentorship (Kram, 1983, 1985). Kram (1983, 1985) developed mentorship as a discrete construct that builds on the life stage theory of Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee (1978). Levinson et al. (1978) recognized the underlying patterns of a person's life at any given point. The seasons of an individual's life are marked by two key concepts, stable periods where crucial decisions are made, and transitional periods in which one stage ends and another stage begins (Levinson et al., 1978). Mentorship theory appreciates the transitional periods of one's life and the need for close support by an individual with greater experience. Mentors play a pivotal part in helping a mentee clarify, understand, and adjust into his changing roles.

The concept of a senior, more experienced person (the mentor) providing advice, support, or counsel to a junior, less experienced individual (the mentee) was noted by Kram (1985) as helpful with assimilation into an organizational environment. In psychological literature, the influence of supportive adults upon children was perceived as integral to positive childhood and lifespan development (Erikson, 1963). Encouragement of youth occurs in several settings and developmental stages, such as in the home, between parent and child (Erikson, 1963; Levinson et al., 1978); between youth and youth organizations (Levinson et al., 1978; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2007; Kram, 1985; Ragins & Kram, 2007); in academia; and in the workplace (Eby et al., 2007; Kram, 1985; Ragins & Kram, 2007).

The mentorship relationship. Smink (2007) suggests that the relationship between a mentor and mentee is built on trust. In the mentorship role, the mentor communicates affirmation, guidance, counseling, friendship, and becomes a role model for the mentee. During the beginning phases of a mentoring relationship, known as initiation, the mentee feels cared for and supported (Kram, 1983). As the mentee feels accepted, he or she can relax and learn the information that is being passed on by the mentor. After a period of two to five years, the mentorship relationship advances to the cultivation phase, a time where the mentor promotes the mentee's talent within the organization. During this season, both the mentee and mentor benefit from the experience and enjoy a sense of well-being, settledness, and satisfaction. The final stages of separation and redefinition occur as the mentee becomes more independent and pursues his unique goals. Separation is typically manifested by physical relocation, with redefinition signifying the formation of a new relationship of peer-like friendship (Kram, 1983; Scandura & Pellegrini, 2007).

Applying mentorship theory to students in the academic setting has been explored as a strategy to ease the transition into elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools. The theory of mentorship (Kram, 1983, 1985) was explored as the practical perspective

that facilitates the socialization and assimilation of 9th grade students to the high school setting. As such, we tested the expectations of 9th grade students of their mentors and the mentorship program.

Socialization

High school transition programs have at their core the honorable intent of socializing a student to his or her new environment. High schools differ from middle schools in their larger physical size, expansive range of course selection, acquisition of credit attainment to meet graduation requirements, pressure to maintain grades, college entrance testing, long-term projects, rigorous homework demands, and additional opportunities for extracurricular activities. The role of the teacher also changes from hands-on and nurturing to an instructor who promotes independence and self-responsibility within the adolescent student (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

To normalize these many physical and social changes, the theory of organizational socialization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977) was examined. Socialization theory offers a framework that is helpful for newcomers to assimilate to an organization. When an individual enters an organization, he or she brings a set of skills, perceptions, and competencies that may be complete or incomplete as applied to the new system. Each system has its unique culture and climate that requires both an awareness of, and an acceptance by, the newcomer. Becoming familiar with the culture and adapting to the organization's norms and values is known as socialization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

The Socialization Process

Feldman (1976) identified the socialization process as three phases: anticipatory, accommodation, and role management. The anticipatory stage, also known as the "pre-arrival" (DeCenzo & Robbins, 2007, p. 206) phase, is a time when organizations can communicate relevant information to the newcomer about what to expect and to convey necessary forms or papers. This phase also offers newcomers the opportunity to ask questions about the organization or to obtain feedback from existing members. The accommodation phase, or "encounter" (DeCenzo & Robbins, 2007, p. 206), takes place when the newcomer has transitioned into the organization and learns the tasks, skills, and practical methods for his role and the policies, procedures, and culture of the organization. Finally, role management, or "metamorphosis" (DeCenzo & Robbins, 2007, p. 206), occurs when the individual is effectively integrated into his role within the organization and is marked by productivity (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2013).

Possible outcomes of the socialization experiences are noteworthy. Within the anticipatory phase, the newcomer learns about the organization before actually entering into the building to perform work functions. This pre-information assists the newcomer in evaluating the landscape and making informed choices. As the newcomer participates in the accommodation phase, Feldman (1976) posited that four variables demonstrate the progress through the accommodation process; those include: initiation to the task, initiation to the group, understanding one's role, and reconciling pre-information with an actual understanding of the role and organization. In role management, the newcomer

achieves positive affective outcomes such as general satisfaction and mutual influence. Greater positive affective moods may suggest a higher job motivation and involvement. After progressing through all three stages of the socialization process and attaining a level of comfort and fit, socialization is deemed complete.

Assimilation

The nature of socialization into a new setting was expressed by Jablin (2001) as organizational assimilation. Assimilation includes the communication processes by which a newcomer integrates into the organization. Communication encompasses peer-to-peer interaction as well as the tactical information provided by the organization. The transference of information provides a fluid opportunity for individuals to adapt themselves to the work environment. The development of peer relationships may provide a level of socialization and assimilation to the organization that is not conveyed in formal training sessions. Peer relationships are typically characterized by a lateral exchange of friendliness, understanding, and openness. Points of view may be expressed in unhindered ways that deepen learning.

Thus, peer-to-peer exchanges facilitate the newcomer in shaping his or her role in the organization. Equally important is that peer relationships are reciprocal. In addition to helping the newcomer assimilate to the organization and his or her colleagues, peer relationships help existing organizational members make sense of the newcomer and integrate him or her into the workspace. Jablin (2001) noted that peer communication exchanges are crucial in setting the tone for assimilation of the newcomer into the organization. As newcomers progress through the socialization process, communication serves as a sequence in the chain of events that may lead to greater organizational identity.

Socialization Process Applied to Midwestern High School

The progression of pre-arrival to encounter to accommodation was examined with the Midwest high school's Freshmen Focus 9th grade mentorship program. In this program, 9th grade students are given pre-arrival communication in the form of an orientation, known as the Freshmen Focus Orientation Camp during the summer before school officially starts. Secondary data was provided by the high school with 9th grade student entry feedback pertaining to the Freshmen Focus Orientation Camp. This was reviewed with 9th grade student exit feedback pertaining to the encounter phase, the actual Freshmen Focus Mentorship Program.

Freshmen Transition and Mentorship Programs

Creating small learning communities that provided students with mentors, advocates, advisors, and tutors was identified as an effective assimilation strategy for 9th grade students in their first year of high school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006; Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Johnson, Simon, and Mun (2014) and Hughes, Copley, and Baker (2005) established the use of studying 9th grade participants in a mentorship program. In a qualitative study of the effectiveness of small learning communities,

Johnson et al. (2014) examined the Peer Group Connection (PGC) program, a peer-led high school transition program in a mid-Atlantic high school comprised of a 92% Hispanic student population. The PGC program consisted of three teachers who served as program instructors and 16 high school seniors who were trained as peer leaders. Student peer leaders were enrolled in a daily one-credit leadership class and met as a two-person team with their mentees once per week for 40 minutes. The results of the study indicated that students who were part of the peer group had a graduation rate of 60% compared to the 30% graduation rate of the control group (Johnson et al., 2014).

Importance of Mentorship Structure

Note that not anyone should be a mentor. In fact, mentors need to be chosen purposefully to have certain salient constructs, such as leadership and mentorship. For example, in a qualitative study of adolescent youth (n = 447), volunteer mentors of a large Cincinnati youth-based mentoring program were paired with at-risk students in the Cincinnati Public School (CPS) System (Hickman & Garvey, 2006). During the 10-year study (1988 to 1998), researchers hypothesized that mentoring would have a positive effect on grade point averages (GPAs) and proficiency tests, and a negative effect on expulsion rates (Hickman & Garvey, 2006). Mentors met socially with mentees twice monthly. Students completed an average of 26.09 months in the mentoring program (Hickman & Garvey, 2006). Data were collected from CPS for each student participant at the end of the mentorship program. The results identified lowered GPAs, decreased math proficiency scores, decreased reading proficiency, increased grade retention, and increased total expulsions occurrences (Hickman & Garvey, 2006). No consistent pattern of the impact on mentorship to graduation rates and grades were found; therefore, this Midwest high school study would be of benefit in educational literature due to its unique focus on the effects of mentorship on graduation rates and grades.

Methods

This study used a quantitative approach that delineated the expectations of mentees in the pre-arrival and encounter phases of the Freshmen Focus program and the relationship between participation in the program and GPAs and graduation rates. Three hypotheses were examined:

H1: The freshmen student mentees will enter Freshmen Focus Mentorship Program at a Midwest high school during the Freshmen Focus Orientation Camp (pre-arrival phase) with varied expectations or no expectations of their mentors. This study will evaluate the types of expectations in the pre-arrival phase.

H2: There will be a positive trend between freshmen expectations in the pre-arrival phase of the 9th grade Freshmen Focus Orientation Camp and the encounter phase of the 9th grade Freshmen Focus Mentorship Program at a Midwest high school.

H3: There will be a positive trend amongst participation in the 9th grade Freshmen Focus Mentorship Program and GPAs and high school graduation rates at a Midwest high school.

Quantitative methods included secondary data provided by the school that included program entry and exit surveys, GPAs, and graduation rates. In a longitudinal study by Sanchez, Bauer, and Paronto (2006), the effect of mentoring was examined by correlating GPAs and graduation rates for college freshmen. The current study uses similar approaches by trending the impact of mentorship with 9th grade high school students.

Sample and Data Collection

Participants were 9th grade mentees and 11th and 12th grade mentors in a small rural Midwest high school that served two neighboring villages with a combined population of 12,715 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The school was selected because of its nationally-recognized 9th grade mentorship program, Freshmen Focus. Internal Review Board approval was granted by the researchers' university. Consent and access to secondary data was confirmed through the school guidance counselor and high school principal. Additional graduation rate data was collected through the state's school district report card.

Measures

Graduation rates. Quantitative data were gathered from the school that included GPAs and graduation rates. The GPA data was dependent on quarterly information provided by the school and covered the time span of 2004-2011.

Graduation rates covered the timespan of 2002-2013. These were provided by the school and expanded by searching public domain materials as reported in the school district's state report cards (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). This expansion included five years before the introduction of Freshmen Focus in 2007 and six years after the introduction. A spreadsheet was created with the year, graduation rate, and class size. Other variables as available on the school report cards were included in the spreadsheet for a later study, such as percentage of economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, diversity, and number of highly-qualified teachers. For this examination, graduation rates were considered. The other variables are noted in the discussion.

Survey. The 10-item Freshmen Focus Entry and Exit Surveys were developed by student-mentors under the supervision of the school guidance counselor (Shaw, 2009) to gather feedback from 9th grade students on freshmen expectations and the benefits of the mentorship program. Freshmen voluntarily completed the surveys. Responses to specific questions on the surveys were reviewed for their relevance in assessing the expectations of mentees in the pre-arrival stage and fulfillment of the expectations in the encounter stage. Included in the secondary data were Freshmen Focus Entry and Exit Surveys for the 2013-2014 school year.

Expectations of pre-arrival phase. This aspect was assessed on the Freshmen Focus Entry Survey with the open-ended questions numbered 1-3 developed by the

student-mentors under the supervision of their school guidance counselor (Shaw, 2009). Questions 1-3 pertained to the expectations that 9th grade students have of his or her mentor at the beginning of the Freshmen Focus program. Categories were identified and frequencies were determined in each category by number of survey participants (n = 113) and number of responses collected (n = 335).

Expectations fulfilled in encounter phase. This dimension evaluated the efficacy of mentoring functions that assisted with newcomer socialization via four items, questions 1, 2, 3, 5 on the Freshmen Focus Exit Survey (α = .80, M = 4.12, SD = .841, n = 4) using a 6-point Likert-type scale with answers ranging from "do not agree at all" (0) to "agree the most" (5). Items on the entry survey included such statements as, "The mentors were a good help when it came to schoolwork." Results from the "agree" and "agree the most" were used from the responses of the respondents (n = 71). The three categories of emotional support (Exit question 1), homework help (questions 2-3), and acclimation (question 5) were tested and means calculated.

Results

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 evaluates the types of expectations of 9th grade mentees in the pre-arrival phase of the Freshmen Focus mentorship program. A frequencies table was utilized to test this hypothesis. Prior to this analysis, data was coded for Entry Questions 1, 2, and 3 with students (n = 113). Results identify survey participants (n = 113), responses collected (n = 335), and M=2.96 responses per student. Results identify that 62% of the freshmen identified homework help as the most prominent expectation. Other expectations revealed that 20% of freshmen expected assistance with acclimating to high school and 9% expected assistance with emotional support. The remainder of the freshmen had either no expectations or presented unique requests.

Of the 335 responses in the homework help category, 86% of respondents expected individual homework help and 34% of respondents expected help with maintaining grades. The results indicate that in the pre-arrival phase, freshmen students had varied expectations of the mentors and the Freshmen Focus mentorship program before experiencing the camp in the areas of homework help, acclimation, and emotional support. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. See Appendix A, Table 1A for the categorization of the students' responses.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 tests the expectations in the pre-arrival phase and the fulfillment of the expectations in the encounter phase of the 9th grade Freshmen Focus Mentorship Program. A frequencies table was utilized to test this hypothesis. Prior to this analysis, data was coded for Exit Questions 1, 2, 3, and 5 with students (n = 71). The results generated from the encounter phase questions indicated that of the 71 freshmen respondents, 76% stated that the "mentors were a good help when it came to schoolwork," 87% reported that "I felt that I could go to my mentors with problems or

questions," 72% indicated that "mentors cared about my well-being in school," and 61% affirmed that "the program was well-run and organized."

Themes identified. The results of the exit questions were then categorized according to the pre-arrival themes of homework help, acclimation, and emotional support. The results for the themes for the exit surveys in the encounter phase indicated that 80% of freshmen encountered homework help, 61% of freshmen encountered acclimation, and 76% of freshmen encountered emotional support. A comparison of the pre-arrival and encounter phase expectations indicates that freshmen were pleasantly surprised at how well their pre-arrival expectations were satisfied in the encounter phase. In fact, in each of the themes of homework help, acclimation, and emotional support, the freshmen reported a positive increase in how their expectations in the pre-arrival stage were met or exceeded in the encounter stage. Increases in expectations were as follows: an increase of 18% in the area of homework help, an increase of 41% in the experience of acclimation, and an increase of 56% in the matter of emotional support.

Expectations positively fulfilled. The results indicate that the freshmen students' expectations in the pre-arrival phase were positively fulfilled in the encounter phase. While the freshmen students' most prominent pre-arrival expectation was that of homework help, the encounter phase not only satisfied the homework help expectation, it assisted freshmen with acclimation and emotional support. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported, as there is a positive relationship of the expectations in the pre-arrival phase of the Freshmen Focus Orientation Camp and the encounter phase of the Freshmen Focus program. See Appendix A, Table A2.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 tests the relationship amongst participation in the 9th grade Freshmen Focus Mentorship Program and GPAs and high school graduation rates. The results generated are as follows: Graduation rates were examined from 2002-2013. The Freshmen Focus Mentorship Program was introduced in the 2007-08 school year. Graduation rates for each year were identified and then averaged. The average graduation rate from 2002-2013 was 90.8%. The average graduation pre-implementation from 2003-2007 was 87.3%. The average graduation rate post-implementation was 93.7%, an increase of 6.4%. See Appendix B, Figure B1.

Graduation rates compared. A comparison of the lowest graduation rate to the highest graduation rate was made for all available school years. The lowest graduation rate of 83.4% in 2006-07 was compared to the highest graduation rate of 97.4% in 2011-12, with the Freshmen Focus program in place. Examined in this manner, results indicated a 14% increase in the graduation rate from the lowest graduation rate without Freshmen Focus to the highest graduation rate with Freshmen Focus.

GPAs. GPAs were then reviewed for the years 2007-2014. GPA band range is noted in Appendix B, Figure B2. When Freshmen Focus was introduced in 2007, 18.4% of the students had GPAs in the two lowest GPA bands. By 2013-14, GPAs in the lowest band had decreased to 1.7%, and GPAs in the middle GPA bands had increased, creating the potential to improve graduation rates. Since the Freshmen Focus program was introduced in the 2007-08 school year, there has been a consistent increase to the middle

and middle-high GPA band and a consistent decrease in the extremely low GPA band, while the highest GPA has remained relatively stable.

GPAs per GPA band compared. The difference in GPAs per GPA band was then compared between the 2007 introduction of Freshmen Focus and the most current school year of 2013-14. GPA bands with the greatest differences were the middle-high GPA band with an increase of 8.6% and a decrease in the lowest GPA band of 7.5%. See Appendix B, Figure B2.

Graduation rates and GPAs compared. Next, the results of graduation rates and GPAs were compared for the years 2007-2013 in which data were available for both variables. The results are as follows: When the Freshmen Focus mentorship program was introduced in the 2007-08 school year, the graduation rate was 88.6% with 9.2% of the students in the lowest GPA band. As the Freshmen Focus mentorship program continued through the years, the percentage of students in the lowest GPA band decreased, while the percentage in the middle GPA bands increased as shown in Figure B3. As the GPAs increased, the graduation rate increased. Comparing the Freshmen Focus introductory year of 2007-08 to the most recent school year data of 2012-13, the graduation rate increased by 2.9%. Comparing one year prior to the introductory year of Freshmen Focus to the highest graduation post introduction, the graduation rate increased by 14%. See Appendix B, Figure B3.

Hypothesis 3 Supported. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported as follows: As students moved from the lowest GPA band to the middle GPA bands, the graduation rate increased. There is a trend between the decrease of the lowest GPA band and the increase in the middle GPA bands, and a trend between improved GPAs and the graduation rate. Thus, there was a positive relationship in GPAs and graduation rates with participation in Freshmen Focus.

Discussion

Principal Finding

The principal finding is that the Freshmen Focus mentorship program has increased the Midwest high school's graduation rate by 6.4% since its implementation in 2007. When examined from the perspective of the lowest graduation rate before the implementation date to the highest graduation rate after implementation, the graduation rate increased by 14%. With the mentoring program in place, the average graduation rate was 93.7% through 2013. These findings are in stark contrast to the literature review studies of a graduation rate of 60% (Johnson, Simon, & Mun, 2014) and a decline in GPAs that occurred in a mentoring program that lasted twice as long as *Freshman Focus* (Hickman & Garvey, 2006). Similar to *Freshman Focus*, the Johnson, Simon, and Mun (2014) study trained peer mentors. The contrast is that the peer mentors met as two-person teams with mentees on a weekly basis for 40 minutes in a small learning community, instead of daily mentor-mentee interactions in a one-credit class as in the *Freshman Focus* mentoring program. While both have in common trained mentors, the consistency of the daily interactions could be perceived as creating a benefit to the mentee which may have influenced school performance and longevity. The population of at-risk mentees, the urban setting, and a lowered frequency of interactions with volunteer mentors in Hickman and Garvey (2006) are also contrasting factors to the *Freshman Focus* program.

In reviewing graduation rates over the lifespan of the *Freshman Focus* program, other variables were examined to determine the value of mentorship evidenced in the principal *Freshman Focus* finding. Several factors were explored in the state report cards (Ohio Department of Education, 2015) and in discussions with the school. The following variables were relatively constant—percentage of students with disabilities, diversity, *Freshman Focus* teachers, and school guidance counselors. An increase of transient and economically disadvantaged students was noted in 2012-2013 when the graduation rate decreased to 91.9% (See Appendix B, Figure B3). Improvement of mentor training and mentor selection process was also considered. The content of the *Freshman Focus* curriculum, mentor training, and mentor candidate application procedure (Shaw, 2009) was thoroughly reviewed. Consistent factors with mentors included thorough and ongoing leadership training of mentors, yearlong tenure, escalation procedures, and close supervision by the same teachers and school guidance counselors. Consistent themes of mentor-mentee interactions included classroom instruction on *Freshman Focus* curriculum, acclimation assistance, emotional support, and homework help.

The evidence of enhancing performance through supportive measures is supported by Kram (1985) who suggests that the practical interaction of a mentor with his mentee heightens the learning of new responsibilities and acclimation to unfamiliar environments. As expressed in the open-ended responses to the survey results, freshmen indicated concerns regarding maintaining his or her grades without assistance by a more senior person. This expression is consistent with Van Maanen and Schein (1977), who identified the need for a framework that helps newcomers assimilate to an organization. The activities of the student-mentors included sharing life lessons, engaging in enculturation activities, providing practical advice, and offering direct homework assistance. The increase in graduation rates since the implementation of Freshmen Focus supports Hypothesis 3 that mentees experienced a positive benefit from the activities of the student-mentors.

Second Key Finding

The second key finding of the study reveals that as GPAs improved, graduation rates increased. When students moved out of the danger zone of the lowest GPA band, it alleviated the risk of failing grades and academic deficiencies that would make students ineligible to graduate. By moving into the safer zone of the middle GPA bands, the student's chance of acquiring the appropriate number of academic credits to graduate on time was maximized. This finding of improved GPAs and increased graduation rates could be attributed to the mentoring relationship between freshmen mentees and his or her student-mentor. Kram (1983) indicates that as a mentee feels welcomed and cared for, he or she is more receptive to new material that is being communicated. As the freshmen mentees came to know and understand the academic rigor of the high school curriculum through the helpful support of the student-mentors, the mentees' grades rose. This translated into higher GPAs and graduation rates. This finding also supports Hypothesis 3 that there is a trend amongst participation in the Freshmen Focus mentorship program and GPAs and graduation rates.

Third Key Finding

The third key finding is the impact to the GPA bands. Analysis indicates a positive trend that as the lowest GPA band decreased, the middle GPA bands increased, with a sizeable increase to the higher-middle GPA band. An increase of 8.6% in the higher-middle GPA band signifies that students had the potential of elevating their grades with guided assistance. The shift to a more distinguished GPA also suggests that mentees were motivated with strategies that they felt were in reach. It is also suggestive that low grades are not hopeless, and that negative experiences can be turned around with positive direction and attitude. The shift in GPAs may also imply that the student-mentors communicated practical methods to freshmen students who were able to integrate these skills into their academic work during the encounter phase (DeCenzo & Robbins, 2007). The ability of the freshmen student to sequence through the pre-arrival and encounter stages into productivity is indicative that the student moves into the role management phase (Feldman, 1976). Simply put, as the student acquires the skill, s/he is able to communicate it in her/his work products on a consistent basis, as reflected in her/his grades. The higher grades are meaningful because a student who moves into the upper-middle GPA band is college eligible. The higher GPA enables the student to be eligible for more selective colleges. This finding is again supportive of Hypothesis 3 that involvement in the Freshmen Focus program improves GPAs.

Fourth Key Finding

The fourth key finding of the study is that the students arrived to Freshmen Focus with expectations of homework help, acclimation assistance, and emotional support, and that these expectations were surpassed throughout the course of the program through the efforts of the student-mentors. The data support research that show expectations are either confirmed or not confirmed during the encounter phase (Feldman, 1976). Research also demonstrates that effective communication and peer-to-peer interaction are crucial elements in the surpassing of expectations (Jablin, 2001). Therefore, the suggestion of this fourth key finding indicates that freshmen felt capable of achieving his or her academic goals with the support of student-mentors. This finding supports Hypothesis 1 and 2 that freshmen formed expectations of the Freshmen Focus program and their mentors in the pre-arrival phase and that the expectations changed positively or remained the same in the encounter phase.

Limitations

The limitations of the study involve the use of secondary data that was provided by the school, surveys that were designed by 11th and 12th grade student-mentors at the school, and social desirability of 9th grade students in responding to survey questions. Further, student survey data responses could not be matched to individual student GPAs and graduation rates. Lastly, the study took place in a well-funded, small rural school; therefore, this may limit generalizability to urban, suburban, or under-funded schools.

Theoretical Implications

The primary contribution of our study is the application of socialization theory in a high school educational setting. We also analyzed elements that were not tested in research before, namely, 9th grade students' expectations, GPAs, and graduation rates in a yearlong mentorship program. Our results support the idea that mentoring helps in the socialization and assimilation of high school freshmen students. As freshmen entered the Freshmen Focus program, they came with certain reasoned decisions based on logic, intuition, and personal expectations. The students' individual experiences varied in intensity. As the student was supported by a caring student-mentor, the student felt more welcomed and included. The student's emotional response and sensory overload to the unfamiliar setting and routine were normalized. In fact, it was not only normalized, but the results indicated an upward trend in adaptation as shown in satisfaction of expectations, grades, and graduation rates.

Attributed to Mentoring and Socialization Theories

The positive increase in a student's acclimation to the high school setting may be attributed to mentoring (Kram, 1983) and socialization theories (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977) in which a mentor assists a newcomer in learning the culture and adapting to an organization through an intentional mentor-mentee program. Interestingly, the more structured the process, the more likely the individual was to stay with the organization and assimilate into the environment. Similarly, with the Freshmen Focus program, as the freshmen had more encounter opportunities with his or her mentor, the more socialized and integrated the student became into high school life. The freshmen student's integration offset the dumbfounding that may sometimes occur when a student's experience does not match his expectations. Instead of foundering in a haze of confusion, the Midwest high school's freshmen students were systematically shown the way through the haze, and given a context for learning.

Importance of Lateral Communication

Also of significance is the peer-to-peer nature of the student-mentors with the Freshmen Focus mentees. The student-mentors of Freshmen Focus are just two years older than the 9th grade freshmen. This small difference in age makes for a meaningful exchange of information as the peer relationship is more conversational, relaxed, and unfettered by formal language. This is supported by Jablin (2001) who posits that peer-to-peer communication is more fluid and effortless between lateral organizational members.

Socialization Process Theory

The Freshmen Focus program contributes to the socialization process theory of pre-arrival, encounter, and role management (Feldman, 1976; DeCenzo & Robbins, 2007). The Freshmen Focus students arrived with opinions about the program and high school that were constantly getting confirmed or changed throughout their daily interactions at school. As the freshmen were assisted through the complex issues and challenges they

faced each day in high school, the freshmen acquired skills needed to move into managing their roles.

Thus, the theories of mentorship, socialization, and assimilation, are useful frameworks in understanding both the process and intent of the Freshmen Focus program. The application of these theories has been tested with the Freshmen Focus mentorship program that serves as a tool to assist freshmen students in their acclimation to high school.

Practical Implications

The bonding that is fostered between freshmen and student-mentors through the Freshmen Focus program in the student's 9th grade year is significant. The impact of this bond to graduation rates and GPA results are encouraging, particularly the implications to students in the upper-middle GPA band. As noted earlier in the study, students with higher GPAs have expanded opportunities for college and career choice.

Freshman Focus Curriculum and Aligning Mentors with Students

As such, a suggestion is to continue with the *Freshman Focus* curriculum and leadership training of mentors in order to prepare students of all GPA bands for high school, college and career success.

Practical Advice

The important element of emotional support was recounted by the freshmen survey results as a pleasant and unanticipated positive outcome of the Freshmen Focus. Freshmen wrote comments about their preferences, which included practical advice on how to deal productively and appropriately with teachers, peers, and upperclassmen; how to get better grades; how to get organized and stay on track; and how to say "no" to overcommitment. Day-to-day functional items were also expressed by freshmen as they would like to be asked if they need help and asked, "What types of grades are you getting?" Implementing separate lessons on some of these topics into the Freshmen Focus mentor curriculum may be a way to standardize that these matters are taught consistently by all mentors.

Study Hall Involvement

Other low-cost measures to increase grades include placing student-mentors in study halls for homework, organization, and task assistance and opening up the assistance to students in all grades, including 8th grade students. This would introduce rising freshmen to the similar assistance given in the Freshmen Focus classroom, may reduce anticipatory anxiety, and give 8th grade students an opportunity to establish friendships with upperclassmen.

Mentorship for At-Risk Students

At-risk students in all grades may also benefit from a Freshmen Focus-type mentorship program. Teaching of life lessons, organizational and homework skills, and access to a direct mentor has proven to be a beneficial format for at-risk students. In our research setting, the practicality and costs of expanding a mentorship program to at-risk students would need to be weighed with the school schedule, staff capacity, classroom space, and enrollment numbers.

Recommendations

Future studies could incorporate urban, suburban, and rural high school settings that have a similar freshmen mentorship program, thereby increasing the generalizability of the findings. Using standardized entry and exit surveys and the ability to match entry and exit survey responses would be beneficial in evaluating the program. Conducting focus groups of freshmen students with mentorship and a control group of freshmen students without mentorship may reveal areas of support that are needed or not needed. Finally, longitudinal studies that follow freshmen who were engaged in mentorship could assess the long-term impact of such program.

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Appendix A

Tables
Table A1
Frequencies of Pre-Arrival Phase Expectations

Expectation	EQ1[a]	EQ2[a]	EQ3[a]	Total[a]	Total %[a]
Category %[b]					
Homework help					
.62					
Help me with homework	23	51	24	98	.86
Help me keep my grades up	32	2	4	38	.34
Help me with homework and keep me on track	—	20	11	31	.27
Be helpful and repeat things if necessary	—	—	12	12	.11
Give advice on how to get better grades	—	10	—	10	.09
Get and stay organized and share study methods	—	—	9	9	.08
Help study for tests	—	5	—	5	.04
Schedule help	—	—	4	4	.03
Acclimation					
.20					
Get acclimated to high school	19	—	—	19	.17
Make Freshmen Focus fun	9	—	6	15	.13
To be with friends	9	—	—	9	.08
To learn life lessons	8	—	—	8	.07
Team building	5	—	—	5	.04
Tell me the rules of high school	—	—	3	3	.03
Discuss their freshmen and teacher experiences	—	—	2	2	.02
Seat me away from talkative people	—	—	2	2	.02
Tell me if I am doing something wrong	—	—	1	1	.01
Introduce me to other high school students	—	—	1	1	.01
Offer a before school study hall	—	—	1	1	.01
Emotional support					
.09					
Homework help and emotional support	—	10	9	19	.17
Emotional support	2	5	4	11	.10
Be a friend	—	—	2	2	.02
No expectations					
.05					
No expectations	2	1	6	9	.08
Don't know	4	—	3	7	.06
Other					
.04					

To be boring, good, or in the afternoon	5	—	—	5	.04
To be a study hall	4	—	—	4	.03
Give me candy	—	—	3	3	.03
Help in any way	—	1	—	1	.01
Leave me alone	—	—	1	1	.01

Note. EQ1, EQ2, and EQ3 = Entry Questions 1-3 on the Freshmen Focus Entry Survey by Shaw, 2009. Bolded text represents category heading totals.
[a]$n = 113$. [b]$n = 335$ responses.

Table A2
Comparison of Pre-Arrival and Encounter Phase Expectations

Expectation	Pre-arrival	Encounter	Difference
	($n = 113$)	($n = 71$)	
	%	%	%
Homework help	.62	.80	.18
Acclimation	.20	.61	.41
Emotional support	.09	.76	.67

Note. Comparison of freshmen students' expectations pertaining to homework help in the pre-arrival and encounter phase. Freshmen students' expectations were positively fulfilled in the encounter phase with a positive difference of 18%, 41%, and 67% in homework help, acclimation assistance, and emotional support, respectively.

Figures

Figure B1. Graduation Rates Midwest High School with *Freshmen Focus*. This figure depicts the graduation rates for the years 2002 – 2013. The *Freshmen Focus* program was introduced in the 2007-08 school year.
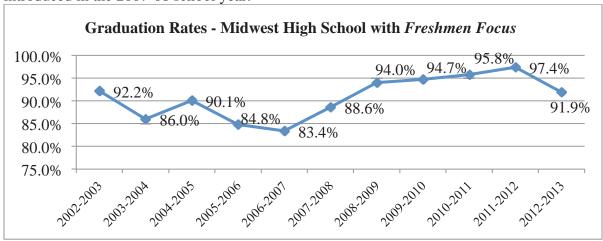

Graduation Rates - Midwest High School with *Freshmen Focus*

Figure B2. Comparison of GPAs from Introductory Year to Present. This figure compares the percentages in each GPA band in the 2007-08 school year (introduction of *Freshmen Focus*) to the 2013-14 school year for a Midwest high school. The 3.5-2.6 GPA band experienced an increase of 8.6%; the .5-0 GPA band experienced a decrease of 7.5%.
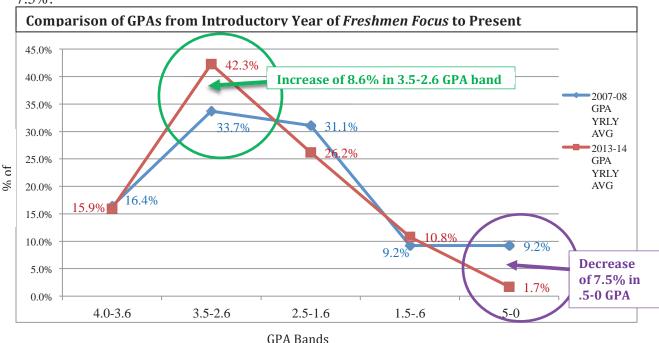

Comparison of GPAs from Introductory Year of *Freshmen Focus* to Present

Figure B3. GPA and Graduation Rates Comparison for a Midwest High School with *Freshmen Focus*. This figure compares the percentages in each GPA band per year with the yearly graduation rates since the introduction of *Freshmen Focus* in the 2007-08 school year. The graduation rate increases as the 3.5-2.6 GPA band increases and the .5-0 GPA band decreases. State report cards (Ohio Department of Education, 2015) and discussions with the high school suggest that the decreased graduation rate of 91.9% in 2012-13 was due to an increase in transient and economically disadvantaged students in which students left school to help provide family support.