

Providing the Knowledge and Empowerment for Post-Secondary Advancement Among Teen Mothers

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Abstract

A mixed-method study is used to measure the effectiveness of specialized classroom guidance lessons designed for teen mothers to increase knowledge of higher education while also encouraging the empowerment of teen mothers to pursue higher education. Empowerment here is defined as the process of gaining control of one's circumstances in life. Classroom guidance lessons were designed to provide information not offered in the past to assist students in making decisions regarding higher education. Pre and post-assessments will showcase whether or not students increased their knowledge of higher education. Themes that arose from the interviews will provide a better understanding of the relationship between empowerment and the pursuit of higher education. Data collected by the study will indicate possible effective interventions to offer programs for teenage mothers interested in pursuing higher education.

Keywords: teen mothers, teen mom/s, knowledge, higher education, classroom guidance lessons, empowerment

Introduction

Teenage mothers face difficult challenges in completing high school and even more so when pursuing higher education. This study aims to enhance the educational potential and empower teenage mothers working to obtain their high school diplomas and pursue higher education. Through a series of five classroom guidance lessons, we assess whether students gained knowledge on how to navigate the higher education system and felt empowered to do so. In this study, a teen mother is defined as a young adult who has given birth at the age of 19 or younger. Empowerment is defined as "the process by which those that feel powerless, gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both controls over resources and over ideology". (Kishor & Subaiva, 2008). The classroom guidance lessons designed for this population will identify numerous resources beneficial for teen mothers to complete high school and enroll in college. The goal of this study is to implement strategies that encourage and empower teen mother to pursue higher education.

The guidance lessons were held at an alternative school under the Juvenile Court and Community School system. As of August 2018, about 80% of students at this site were pregnant or parenting mothers. Each student was working to obtain a high school diploma. Of the participants, there were 27 Seniors, 10 Juniors, 6 Sophomores, and 1 Freshman. At the start of the school year, and with the request of the San Diego County Office of Education, each student submitted a Personal Learning Plan (PLP). The results of the PLPs revealed that 66% of the students were interested in attending college tours and obtaining college information. The PLPs also indicated that 80% of these students wanted assistance on college applications and financial aid resources. Of those interested in pursuing higher education, 75% were interested in earning an associate's degree and 25% desired a bachelor's degree.

Review of the data collected from the PLPs initiated the option to offer knowledge of the higher education system and help empower students to pursue higher education. The classroom guidance lessons were conducted during the school's "Parenting and Life Skills"; an elective course held during 5th

period. Findings will highlight how classroom guidance lessons can increase knowledge of higher education and empower teenage mothers pursuing their high school diploma.

Research Question:

Will conducting classroom guidance lessons regarding life after high school and coordinating empowering activities tailored to teen mothers help prepare them to pursue higher education?

School Demographics

San Diego Unified is the second largest district in California and serves over 121,000 students from pre-school through grade 12. San Diego Unified has 117 traditional elementary schools, 9 K-8 schools, 24 traditional middle schools, 22 traditional high schools, 49 charter schools, 13 atypical or alternative schools, and 5 additional program sites. 46.5% of San Diego Unified students identify as Hispanic, 59.4% are eligible for free or reduce meals and 1.5% are Foster youth (Demographic Data, 2019).

The San Diego County Office of Education's (SDCOE) Juvenile Court and Community Schools (JCCS) provides a variety of services for students who are formerly incarcerated, are pregnant or parenting, in foster care, expelled, chronically truant, in drug treatment centers or group homes, and experiencing homelessness. Each year, an estimated 5,000 students are assisted through JCCS across 24 sites in San Diego County (SDCOE, 2019).

The site of the study is one of the San Diego County Office of Education's JCCS campuses. San Diego Unified also has the San Diego Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting Program (SANDAPP). Currently, seven schools are participating with SANDAPP, including the site of the study. SANDAPP is committed to enhancing the health, educational potential, and relationships for pregnant and parenting adolescents. JCCS's goal is to increase student academic success, close the achievement gap through the implementation of high expectations/standards and social justice measures that improve equity for this demographic of students.

The study was held at a female alternative high school. About 80% of the students are pregnant or parenting and 20% fall under one or more of the other JCCS categorizations. The student age ranges from 14 to 26 years old. Each student was working to obtain their high school diploma. As of August 2018, there were 27 Seniors, 10 Juniors, 6 Sophomores, and 1 Freshman.

At the JCCS staff orientation held in August 2018, the SDCOE informed school counselors to encourage all students to fill out and submit a Personal Learning Plan (PLP). The PLPs were divided into four sections: Academic, Personal/Social, Transitional and Career/College. Most JCCS sites follow an alternative high school graduation pattern that does not include lab science or physical education. Students who graduate from the site of the study do not meet A-G requirements for CSU/UC. However, following an alternative high school graduation pattern, students at this site are able to complete two English or two math courses within the same semester to prepare them for entry-level English and math tests at the community college level. The PLPs revealed that about 66% of students at the study site wanted to attend college tours and obtain college information. 80% of these students wanted assistance with the college application process and information on financial aid resources. Of those who indicated they would like to pursue higher education, 75% wanted an associate's degree and 25% desired a bachelor's degree. school has an open enrollment policy. However, PLPs were not collected from new students who entered this school in later in the year. This information lead to the creation of a curriculum building higher education understanding.

Literature Review

Population in Need

In the United States, about 190,000 girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years old gave birth in 2019 (CDC, 2019). Within San Diego County there was an estimate of 23 births per 1,000 teenagers in 2013 with Latinas reporting to have the highest teenage birth rate of all racial/ethnic groups in 2011 (Schroeder, 2016; Hamilton, B.; Martin, J. & Ventura, S., 2012). In collaboration with the San Diego Unified School District under the San Diego Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting Program (SANDAPP), this study aims to enhance the educational potential of the young mothers working to obtain their high school diploma. About 50 teen mothers attended school at this site. As of fall 2018, more than half expressed an interest in post-secondary education.

Struggle for Educational Achievement

Pregnancy among adolescent women can lead to delays in pursuing higher education due to the demands and responsibilities of parenting (Barber, J. & East, P., 2014). Many teen mothers may feel obligated to choose between parenting their child and abandoning their goals to graduate high school and/or attend college (Barber, J. & East, P., 2014). In 2002, it was estimated that 67% of teen mothers did not graduate high school and only 10% graduated on time (Texas Comprehensive Center, 2012). Teenage parents often drop out of high school due to the challenges they face including the stigma of early parenting, peer isolation and lack of support (Texas Comprehensive Center, 2012). These students would benefit from empowerment activities and services that offer a clearer more informed narrative of their options to complete high school and pursue higher education.

Past studies have found that only 2% of young teen mothers (17 years old or younger) and 3% of older teen mothers (18 to 19 years old) earn a four-year college degree by the time they are 30 years old (Costello, 2014). Teenage mothers are often unaware of the resources available to them. Many teen mothers have little to no exposure to higher education, which is why programs designed especially for this population are important (Costello, 2014). As such, completing the first steps of pursuing post-secondary advancement is often challenging for teenage mothers. Many delay their pursuit of higher education. Convoluted financial aid forms (such as the FAFSA) can intimidate and discourage low-income students from applying to college (Costello, 2014). Some teen mothers have expressed that they were unsure of what steps to take while pursuing higher education and struggles to further their education, "...I didn't know what the next step was for me. I didn't know how my college experience was going to be" (Stroble, 2013). To address the unique needs of teen mothers, it is important to offer a safe space connected to academia, instruction, and empowerment strategies that can assist, inspire and motivate these young adults in the pursuit of higher education.

Empowerment is Key

Empowering teen parents to pursue a postsecondary degree or credential can enhance the likelihood of their own financial security, in addition to the future achievements of their children (Costello, 2014). High school curriculums that address the specific positive outcomes of higher education can encourage the pursuit of higher education and degree completion among teen mothers. Higher education can be a tool utilized to empower women (Kishor & Subaiya, 2008). A high school diploma is not enough to create or sustain upward economic and social mobility in this changing global economy. Teen mothers see education as a stepping stone to greater things, "I feel great about attending college because I know that it's going to open doors for us in the future," (Stroble, 2013). Empowering teen moms to pursue higher education means to encourage them to obtain greater living conditions (i.e. higher wages, better housing).

Offering teen mothers insight and options can work to empower them to pursue post-secondary

advancement. Many cultures and families believe that education can empower women (Khurshid, 2017). Personal agency and self-determination can go a long way to encourage degree attainment and improve rates of persistence. A strong sense of self efficacy can enable individuals to plan a goal and develop resources to control their outlook (Bandura, 1994). Having knowledge of the higher education and the possibility to advance forward are great building blocks for empowerment (Kishor & Subaiva, 2008). Past studies have revealed that hearing “strong and consistent messages about the importance of higher education” is a key component in empowering teen mothers to pursue their own post-secondary advancement (Costello, 2014).

Information from past research articles have highlighted the importance of empowerment and education for the teen mom population. To strengthen one’s understanding of higher education can improve their life outcome as demonstrated in past studies. By creating a curriculum designed for a educational disadvantage group such as teen mothers, the education opportunity gap may decrease.

Research Methods

A mixed methods research approach used in this study included both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys in pre/post-assessments. Classroom guidance lessons were used as a form of intervention. Interview questions are an adaption of the Self-Empowerment Index (Wilson, S.M.; 1993). Adaptations from the I Can, I Am and I Have Scale were used for both assessments (De las Olas Palma-Garcia, M & Hombrados-Mendieta, I; 2014).

Quantitative surveys were conducted with pre and post-assessments of the participant’s knowledge of higher education. Participants ranked their own understanding of each statement given on the assessment regarding their current knowledge of higher education. Each assessment had 5-items and were measured utilizing a 5-point Likert-type scale, with five equaling “very sure”, to one being “not sure”.

An intake form was added to the pre-assessment. Basic information was gathered for data purposes only and student identification was hidden by using a number system. Each participant was given a number that is only known by the researcher to maintain privacy/anonymity. Intake forms and pre-assessments were completed during the first classroom guidance lesson.

During the last classroom guidance lesson, students were asked to complete a post-assessment. The post-assessment was composed of a Likert-type scale and explanation section. Participants were asked to explain each statement to further review their understanding of the material. The collected data of responses from pre and post-assessments were compared to determine if there was an increase of knowledge in higher education.

Qualitative interviews were conducted to address empowerment gains in the pursuit of higher education. Students consented to participate in a solo interview during their lunchtime. There were three questions asked during each interview:

1. Close your eyes, imagine you’re done with school. What are you going to do?
2. Knowing what you know now, what would you say to you from a year ago?
3. What’s your plan? Who can support you with meeting your goal?

Interviews were voice recorded and transcribed to find common sub-themes and important highlights. Internal autonomy items and externally expressed autonomy items were used to assist with coding for sub-themes surrounding empowerment (Wilson, S.M.; 1993). The responses of participants were compared to find any similarities/differences. Once all sub-themes were collected and reviewed, the main themes were uncovered and provided clear insight into the empowerment gains of teen mothers pursuing higher education. Peer-review of coding took place to reveal any possible biases, viewpoints or assumptions on the part of the researcher (Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. 1985).

Participants Demographics

There were a total of six participants in this study. Each participant self-identified as a teen mother. The mean age of childbirth was 16 years old. The eldest age a participant gave birth was 18 years old, classified as an older teen mom in Pathways to Postsecondary Education for Pregnant and Parenting Teens (Costello, 2014). Five of the six participants were classified as young teen moms ranging from age 15-17 years old at the time they birthed their child. The mean age of the participants is 17.5 years old. One participant disclosed on the intake form that she had two children. Both children were born during her adolescence. Each participant self-identified as a Hispanic/Latina via their intake form. Half of the participants are currently in 12th grade (grade does not correlate with age for students at this site). The other three participants were in the 11th, 10th and 9th grades respectively.

Knowledge of Higher Education Curriculum

A meeting was held between teachers and counselors to address the ideal time to conduct the classroom guidance lessons. Students participated in a “Life Skills” elective course during 5th period. The researcher presented classroom guidance lessons during 5th period for two weeks. Each classroom guidance lesson was forty minutes and included empowerment activities and dialog sessions. All students were welcome to participate in the classroom guidance lessons; however, data collected belonged exclusively to six teen mothers. The six teen mothers attended all classroom guidance lessons. A series of four classroom guidance lessons addressed the following topics:

April 8, 2019: Life After High School

April 9, 2019: College Info 101

April 15, 2019: Guide to Community College

April 16, 2019: Understanding the Higher Education System.

Students were able to identify and compare the different options they have for the “Life After High School” guidance lesson. From the information they received, students were able to explore opportunities of interest and analyze possibilities. Information was given regarding vocational schools, Job Corps, community college, and four-year universities. Students watched a for-profit school commercial to spot differences between the vocational programs offered at private schools versus community colleges. The costs of some vocational schools in comparison to community colleges were highlighted. Students were given time to consider and research possible pathways. During the first session, students were prompted to write a reflection of their plans after high school. Students were encouraged to use the following structure, “I am thinking about _____ because I am/know _____”. Empowering dialog used in this session included, “I know this is a lot of information, but we are here to help. We believe you can do this. This is just meant to help prepare you.”

In the second classroom guidance lesson, students demonstrated the ability to define and memorize common higher education terminology. Examples of higher education terminology include: major, minor, cumulative final, discussion, full-time and different types of degrees. Students viewed examples of syllabi, schedules and transfer education plans via Assist.org. Students practiced how to match possible majors with career pathways. Students also participated in building their own schedule to include class, homework, family and “me” time. The researcher provided a sample of a class schedule from their own undergraduate education. Empowering dialog used in this session included, “Yes, it might seem like you have no time but by scheduling out your week it will help. It is possible to go to school and raise your baby. It will take work but it’s worth it. Once you have your degree, it’s yours! No one take away your education.”

The “Guide to Community College” lesson highlighted and introduced numerous student

support programs that are available within the California Community College system. Students were informed of the specific resources to reach out to when in need of assistance. The relationship between self-advocacy was stressed as critical to their ongoing success. In session three, students selected programs to apply to which they felt could benefit them in their pursuit of higher education. Some of the programs introduced were EOPS-CARE, CalWORKS, and NextUp. Paper applications for these programs were offered to all students. Each student also had the option to meet with a counselor one-on-one to fill out any application for student services program/resources (FAFSA included). Empowering dialog included, "These programs are designed to help you, but you need to go to the office and apply for them. Advocate for yourself! It's possible for you to graduate college."

Students took notes during all classroom guidance lessons and were encouraged to keep their notes to help guide them on their journey to enter and navigate the higher education system. In the fourth session, students were prompted to reflect on the following question: "Do you know what you want to do after high school?". Empowering dialog included, "All of you are capable of great things. Your goals seem great. Remember to follow through with your plans."

The final classroom guidance lesson served as a review of all previous lessons. Students were asked questions to test their knowledge. They also participated in peer to peer outreach/networking and requested help from their peers when in need of assistance.

After the final classroom guidance lesson was conducted, students were asked to complete the post-assessment and elaborate on their responses. Once scores were collected for both pre and post-assessments, the mean for both was calculated to identify whether there was an increase in knowledge of higher education among the participants.

Findings

Classroom guidance lessons can increase the knowledge of higher education for teenage mothers. When comparing the mean and median scores of pre/post assessments, both increase at a whole point or more (see Figures 1-5 in Appendix). Interviews found that after classroom guidance lessons teen mothers felt empowered. Other coded themes discovered from interviews were support systems and obstacles (see Figure 6). Within the theme of empowerment, participants expressed the importance of independence, employment, and educational attainment. The theme of support systems revealed that participants never mentioned their fathers, the father of their baby or educational support programs. Each participant did mention their mother when asked who could support them in achieving their goal/s. Common subthemes in obstacles were overcoming a lack of maturity and regret. An overarching theme found in most participant interviews was the desire to provide a better life for their child. Many participants mentioned either finding a job or continuing to work while they pursue higher education in order to provide for themselves and their children. The desire for a space of their own was a very common response when asked about their future plans.

Quotes indicating empowerment theme:

"I am going to college, and I would get my kids into daycare, as well. Like, I see myself walking in college and attending classes." (0:17)

"I want to get like, start making my own income and like saving up for the future. And...because you never know if you're gonna end up with a struggle or not. So I want to be prepared." (1:26)

Quote indicating support system theme:

"Well, for now umm my mom. Right now my mom and my sister taking care of my daughter. Until I finish go to school, so I can be able to like pay full attention to school and stuff" (0:49)

Quotes indicating obstacles theme:

“.....giving her the best life that I couldn’t as a teen” (0:44)

“Without, with some support not all, lot of support.....I did it.” (0:30)

Discussion

From the findings of the study, the intervention can be interpreted as a success. The theme of empowerment was coded among all participant interviews and knowledge of higher education increased. The interviews showcased that participants envisioned themselves on college campuses and attending classes. Quotes pulled from interviews also implied a sense of empowerment by thinking about the future and feeling prepared for it. New knowledge generated by this research project includes the importance of a reliable positive female support system for teen mothers. Each participant mentioned their mother’s role in taking care of their child while they work to obtain a high school diploma. While all participants mentioned their mothers, none mentioned a positive male within their support system. Participants also did not mention educational programs, resources or individuals working at the school/within the district as additional support systems. As mentioned before, most participants specifically state that they want to provide a better life for their child. However, they express this sentiment differently. Some participants want to get a job or continue working in order to get a place of their own with their child. Other participants realize certain constraints to parenting as a teenager, such as access to a steady income and stable housing. Overall, the individual interviews provided greater insight into the participants thoughts on their current support systems and next times for pursuing higher education.

Some limitations of the study include student accountability to attend school on time, daycare, attendance, personal dilemmas, and personal biases. Not all students will arrive at school at the start of the day. Currently, the site of the study begins the school day at 9:30 am and it ends at 12:30 pm when lunch is served. This semester, teachers decided to include the 5th period to begin after lunchtime. There were instances where students had trouble attending class due nonreliable transportation or familial situations arising. Some teen mothers wished to engage and participate in the campus community while also testing boundaries of authority and student expectations. leave class and hang out in the front desk area without permission from their teacher. It is very common for students to leave campus after lunchtime and not attend the 5th period. Keeping in mind classroom guidance lessons for this study were held during 5th period.

Access to reliable and affordable childcare remains a challenge. Daycare services were temporarily granted to the site however this service is not available all day. There is a very limited number of daycare providers at the site. And, when a child is considered too fussy staff will pull their parent out of class. When a student is pulled out of class to attend to their child, they will miss the rest of the class or bring the child into the classroom. Children brought into the classroom can act as a distraction for other students.

Attendance issues vary from missing a few days to missing a few months of class. There are various reasons why a student would be absent. Sometimes students at this site would lose transportation methods or have family issues that affected class attendance. When available, the school offered free tram passes for all students. Many of the students at this site have experienced abuse, homelessness and have found attending school to be a challenge. This study initially had eleven participants. Due to a flu outbreak in the daycare center, many participants stayed home with their children for a few days and missed school.

There is a possibility of personal bias when interpreting coding themes among interviews due to the researcher’s family history. The researcher was raised by a teenage mother. In an attempt to limit personal bias, the coding themes were evaluated by peers who were not raised by a teenage parent, nor

had personal relationships with a teenage parent.

Implications

The findings of this study can be used to advocate for greater resources for teenage parents. Additional resources and detailed information for teen mothers are very important to help them appreciate that higher education is a possibility for them. Future research of educational programs designed to help this population may use this data to support the need for higher education readiness curriculums. This research supports the need for accessible and consistent childcare for teen mothers to complete high school and pursue higher education. Counselors who work with teen mom populations can use the information from this study to create tailored tier 3 or tier 2 interventions (ASCA, 2019).

Findings may be used for teenage mothers in high school at a post-secondary institution. Addressing the role of increased empowerment and how it correlates to the pursuit of student goals can be included in the writing of grants/proposals for programs such as EOPS-CARE or CalWORKs. Both EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs are designed to assist single parents attending a California Community College. Many teen mothers participate in these programs as they pursue higher education.

This study and the findings can provide information not previously available. Currently, it is very difficult to find positive data addressing the teen mom population. There is presently very little data available that addresses the role of empowerment of teen mothers in an educational setting. The findings of this study may be the first of its kind and can offer new insight as it relates to teen mothers pursuing higher education. This research can serve as a stepping stone and catalyst for future research on teenage mothers, assessing/addressing their needs to enhance methods to assist them in meeting their goals to pursue higher education.

Conclusion

The study reveals an increase in knowledge of higher education within the six teen mom participants immersing from classroom guidance lessons, empowerment sessions, and reflections from the posts interviews. By the end of the intervention, students expressed feelings of empowerment and an ability to reason their interest in pursuing higher education within the themes of independence, educational attainment and career readiness goals. An additional theme immersed as a support system, and, specifically, the importance of a familial – female (their mother) ally within their support team.

The findings of this study can be used to design and implement a higher education curriculum for teenage mothers in school programs across the nation. The data collected from this study advocates for interventions to be implemented to encourage and assist teen mothers to pursue higher education. The interventions conducted in this study suggest an increase in both the knowledge of higher education and the feeling of empowerment among teen mothers. Post-secondary institutions/programs can use this study to gain greater insight into the lives and circumstances of teen mothers and encourage grant writing to support/tap into the potential of this demographic of students. Curriculums designed for teenage mothers that include knowledge of higher education in conjunction with empowerment dialog and activities can increase aspirational and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) and encourage agency in their pursuit of higher education.

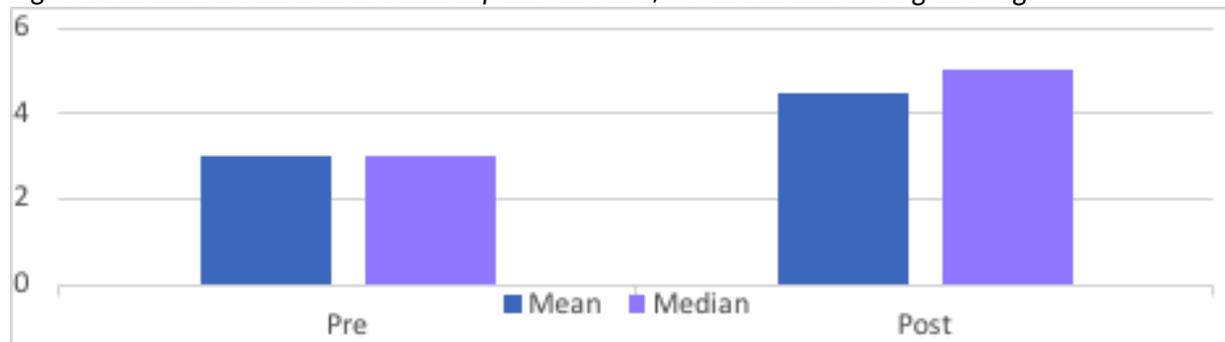
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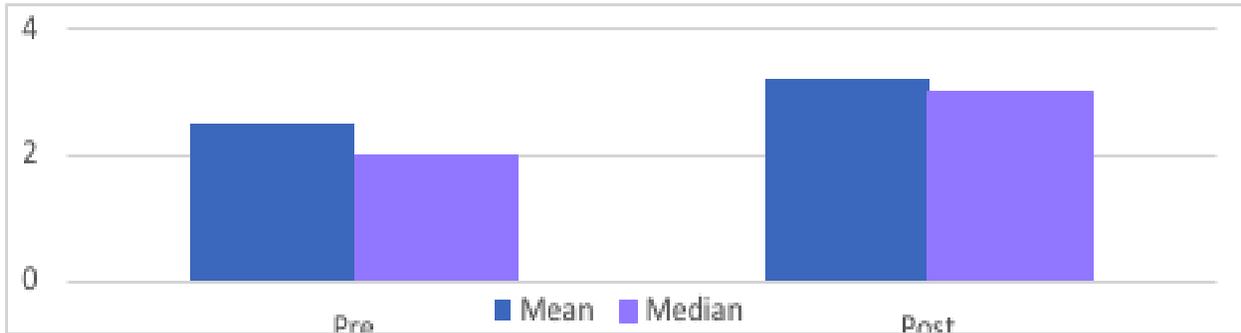
Appendix

Figure 1: *I know the difference between part-time and full time within a college setting.*



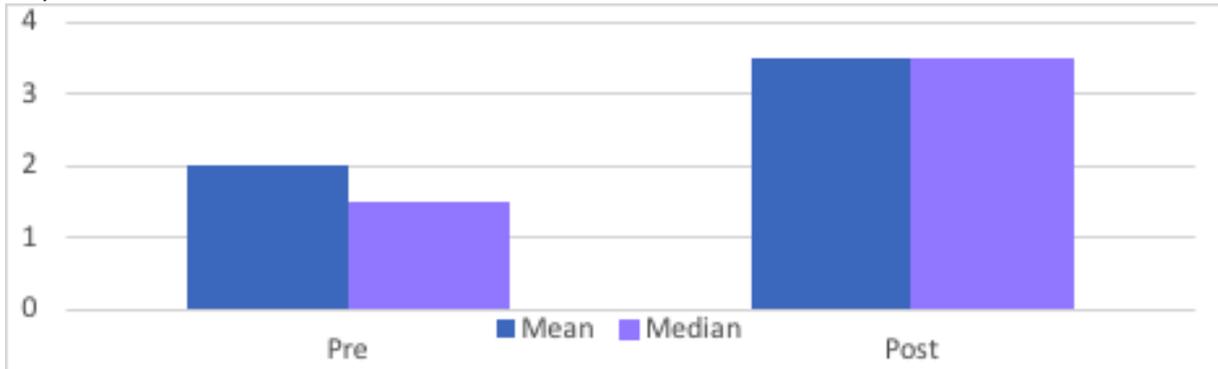
Pre-Assessment: Mean = 3.0 Median = 3.0
Post-Assessment: Mean = 4.5 Median = 5.0

Figure 2: I know what financial resources are available for me if I decided to pursue post-secondary advancement.



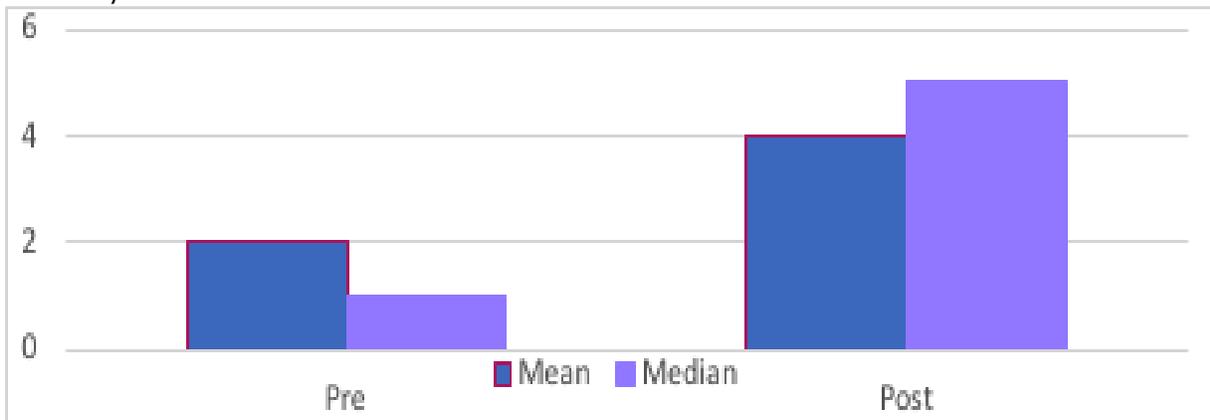
Pre-Assessment: Mean = 2.5 Median = 2.0
 Post-Assessment: Mean = 3.2 Median = 3.0

Figure 3: I can list at least three programs/departments within a college campus that are designed to help me.



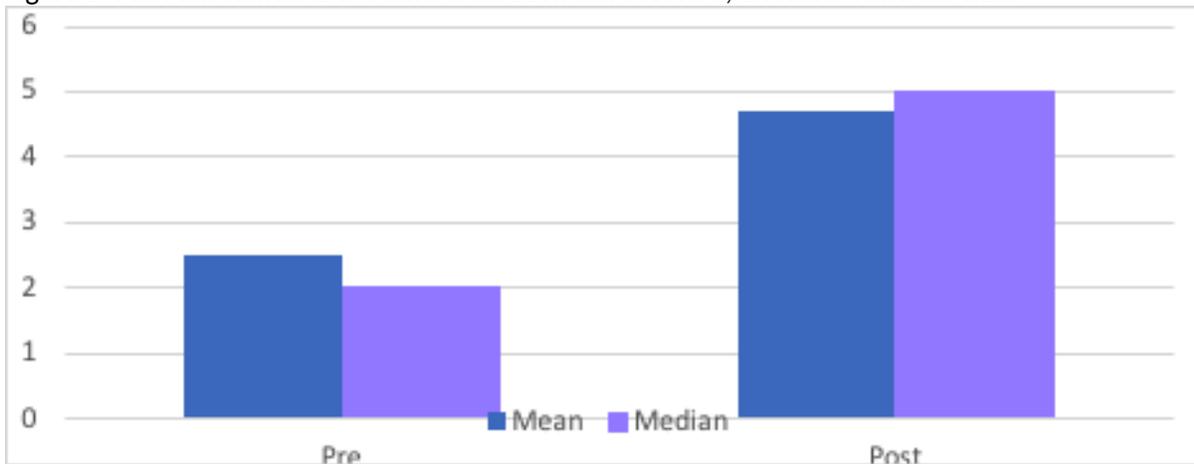
Pre-Assessment: Mean = 2.0 Median = 1.5
 Post-Assessment: Mean = 3.5 Median = 3.5

Figure 4: I am able to explain to someone else the difference between a non-profit and for-profit university.



Pre-Assessment: Mean = 2.0 Median = 1.0
 Post-Assessment: Mean = 4.0 Median = 5.0

Figure 5: I can tell someone the difference between a lecture, discussion and lab class.



Pre-Assessment: Mean = 2.5 Median = 2.0
Post-Assessment: Mean = 4.7 Median = 5.0

Figure 6: Coding Themes

