

Campus Support Program Service Use by Students Who Experienced Foster Care, Relative Care, or Homelessness

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Abstract

Campus support programs (CSPs) in higher education institutions seek to address the barriers encountered by students who experienced foster care or homelessness (SEFC/H). This mixed methods study of a CSP at Florida State University examined the SEFC/H's service use and students' perceptions of the CSP to better understand student experiences. Study participants included 54 CSP students who graduated between 2015 and 2020. They completed surveys at graduation and six months and one year post-graduation. Students reported service use and perceptions of the services' helpfulness. They described what they valued in the CSP and what the CSP could have done to better prepare them for life after graduation. Findings show a high level of service use and perceptions of helpfulness. Students reported valuing the support; resources; physical space; sense of belonging, community, family, and home; growth and motivation; and success because of their CSP involvement. Areas where students believed the CSP could better prepare them for life after graduation included finances, graduate school, career planning, life skills, and connections. Implications for CSP include assisting SEFC/H with (a) planning and life skills, (b) financial literacy and money, and (c) mentors and connections.

Keywords: foster care alumni, homeless students, foster youth, campus support programs, postsecondary education

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Experiencing foster care or homelessness is associated with a greater likelihood of not completing a college degree (U.S. Government Accountability Office [U.S. GAO], 2016). To address the unique needs of students who experienced foster care or homelessness (SEFC/H), some higher education institutions have launched campus support programs (CSPs) designed explicitly for SEFC/H to mitigate barriers impeding this population's overall well-being and academic progress. However, little is known about how CSPs can best support SEFC/H.

Compared to low-income dependent students, SEFC/H are less likely to enroll in college and complete a bachelor's degree (U.S. GAO, 2016). Despite 70%–80% of youth in foster care aspiring to attend college (Courtney et al., 2011; McMillen et al., 2003), considerably fewer enroll in courses (Pecora et al., 2006), and fewer earn a bachelor's degree (Courtney et al., 2010; Day et al., 2011; Pecora, 2012). Similarly, high school seniors experiencing homelessness are less likely to graduate high school as compared to their homed peers (Atwell, 2021). Inadequate campus support in postsecondary settings is a factor in degree completion disparity. As such, higher education institutions can potentially improve access, retention, and graduation by strengthening campus support services for SEFC/H.

The number of CSPs in higher education serving SEFC/H is increasing; however, limited empirical research about CSPs exists (Schelbe et al., 2019). Moreover, information about which CSP services and supports students with foster care experience find most helpful is scarce (Geiger et al., 2018); thus, more research on CSPs is needed to better understand the utility and mechanisms of support students find beneficial (Johnson, 2019). This study assesses the significance of CSP service offerings to these historically underserved college students to better understand the value of these services from the perspective of students involved in CSP.

Literature Review

To fully understand SEFC/H, it is essential to acknowledge nuances between the two groups: students with a history of foster care and students experiencing homelessness. This literature review provides information about the barriers to postsecondary education faced by students with a history of foster care. Then, information is presented about the barriers faced by students experiencing homelessness. It should be noted that the barriers that both groups of students face may also be experienced by other students. Nevertheless, as described below, there is a uniqueness in their experiences due to the context in which they occur.

Barriers to Postsecondary Education for Students With a History of Foster Care

The U.S. foster care system served approximately 600,000 children and youth up to 20 years old during fiscal year 2021 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2022). Many youth with foster care experience hope to earn a college degree to achieve stability and prosperity during adulthood; however, many are less prepared academically for college than their non-foster care peers (Unrau et al., 2017). A variety of barriers exist for youth with foster care experience to complete high school. Many experience frequent foster care placement changes that can result in repeated school changes, educational disruptions (Okpych et al., 2020; Wolanin, 2005), and the loss of established social support (Pecora et al., 2006).

Research findings show that youth with a foster care background experience high rates of childhood maltreatment (Okpych et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2018), trauma exposure and associated learning disabilities (Morton, 2018), substance use disorders (Courtney et al., 2010), mental health issues (Geenen et al., 2015; Salazar et al., 2012), behavioral problems (McMillen et al., 2003), and chronic physical health issues (Woods et al., 2013); all factors that can negatively impact academic performance. Many foster youth repeat grades (Pecora et al., 2003), are more likely to obtain a GED than a high school diploma (Pecora et al., 2006), and are more likely not to earn a high school diploma (Pecora, 2012). Those with foster care experience who complete high school or equivalency are more likely to enroll in college if they receive college preparation (Barnow et al., 2015). However, a lack of educational expectations by case workers (Jackson & Cameron, 2012), less encouragement to attend college (Davis, 2006), and a lower likelihood of taking college preparatory courses (Wolanin, 2005) are obstacles to educational attainment for youth with a history of foster care.

Without family privilege, defined as “the strengths and supports gained through primary caring relationships” (Seita, 2014, p. 8), youth with foster care experience often lack the emotional and financial support afforded to their peers without foster care experience during traditional college-going years. For example, between the ages of 18 and 34, parents supply approximately \$38,000 in material assistance to their offspring (Schoeni & Ross, 2004). Almost four out of five (79%) parents provide financial resources to their adult children and often contribute between \$127,000 to \$255,000 to their child’s college education (Merrill a Bank of America Company, 2020). Additionally, adult children frequently return home, with over 30% moving back home to live with a parent between the ages of 18 and 34 (Merrill a Bank of America Company, 2020). Without family privilege, youth with foster care experience may not go to college or may struggle financially when they do.

Many students with foster care experience work while in college (Courtney et al., 2010), likely because they exit foster care without familial financial support to assist with basic living expenses or to serve as a safety net. However, working can be counterproductive to degree completion. Evidence suggests that working while pursuing postsecondary

education is associated with poorer academic performance (Logan et al., 2016; Wenz & Yu, 2010), a higher drop-out rate, and an extended time to complete a degree (Astin, 2005). To cover academic and living expenses associated with college, one study found that nearly 75% of the students surveyed with foster care experience had taken loans and still expressed concern about having enough money to complete their degree (Kinarsky, 2017). Additionally, students with foster care experience have the added stress associated with the risk of taking on student loan debt with limited financial stability should they exit higher education without a credential (Davis, 2006).

Additionally, youth with foster care backgrounds often experience gaps in independent living skills that become a barrier to attending college (Day et al., 2012; Salazar et al., 2016b). Upon reaching the age of emancipation, 18 years old, youth “age out” of foster care and transition into adulthood with reduced state-provided support. In 2021, more than 19,000 youth aged out of foster care in the United States (DHHS, 2022). However, only two years after receiving skills training while in foster care, youth with foster care backgrounds lacked tangible skills to seek employment and secure housing, and fewer than 20% received postsecondary education services (Okpych, 2015). The burden of preparing youth to leave foster care without family support resides with the child welfare system, but it often underprepares them for a successful transition to college. During this transition, there is often a reduction in formal support among youth with foster care experience, and many rely heavily on informal and peer support as they navigate new postsecondary experiences (Katz & Geiger, 2020).

In line with a strong desire to attend college, youth with foster care experience perceive college readiness at a rate higher than peers without foster care experience (Unrau et al., 2012). Yet, evidence suggests students with foster care experience underperform compared to non-foster care peers in first semester GPA and completed credit hours (Unrau et al., 2012). Compared to the 38% of people aged 25 and older in the United States who have at least a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), only 3%–10% of youth with a history of foster care complete college (Courtney et al., 2011).

Barriers to Postsecondary Education for Students Experiencing Homelessness

During the 2020–21 school year, nearly 1.1 million homeless children and youth attended public schools between pre-K and 12th grade in the United States (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2023). Experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness has adverse effects on academic performance that can last after housing is secured (Hallett & Crutchfield, 2017). The risk for mental health, substance use, and behavioral issues increases with experiencing homelessness, which can impede academic success, as evidenced by poor grades, dropping out, absenteeism, and disciplinary matters (Toro et al., 2010). The 2018–19 school year noted a significant disparity in high school completion, with 67.7% of homeless students graduating compared to a national 85.8% graduation rate (Atwell, 2021). Undeterred, approximately 90% of

youth experiencing homelessness hoped to have a career, many of which require a college degree (Au & Hyatt, 2017), yet only 16% believed they would enroll or complete college within five years (Au & Hyatt, 2017; Bernstein & Foster, 2008).

Many high school seniors begin their transition to college experiencing homelessness. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) uses the following definition of homelessness:

Homeless means lacking fixed, regular, and adequate housing. You may be homeless if you're living in shelters, parks, motels, hotels, public spaces, camping grounds, cars, and abandoned buildings, or if you're temporarily living with other people because you have nowhere else to go. If you're living in any of these situations and fleeing an abusive parent, we may consider you homeless even if your parent would otherwise provide you a place to live. (Federal Student Aid, n.d.).

Based on 2020–21 FAFSA applicant data, over 37,000 students were determined to be unaccompanied homeless youth, and an additional 38,604 requested homeless consideration (NCHE, 2022a). This is an underreport, as some FAFSA applicants choose not to disclose homelessness. Public school systems utilize federal funds provided under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to facilitate the identification, enrollment, attendance, and success of preschool to 12th-grade students (NCHE, 2022b). No equivalent funding is provided to postsecondary institutions to support the recruitment, enrollment, attendance, and success of college students. A recent study suggests that conservatively between 9%–12% of college students experienced homelessness within a year of the survey (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Homeless students in postsecondary education face barriers that make degree completion less likely, including insufficient financial stability, academic preparation, family support, and a lack of guidance in navigating financial aid and the college application process (U.S. GAO, 2016).

Costs Associated With Academic Underperformance

Earning a college degree is associated with various benefits, including increased earnings over a lifetime (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022), longer life expectancy and better health (Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020), reduced emotional and physical distress (Ross & Van Willigen, 1997), and lower unemployment (NCES, 2019). Between 2010 and 2020, the median income for those with a master's degree or more advanced degree was nearly \$70,000 higher than that of those with a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2022). During the same period, bachelor's degree holders earned approximately 63% more than those with only a high school diploma (NCES, 2022).

Substantial societal costs are associated with youth being undersupported in educational pursuits and underprepared for independent life while in foster care. Costs associated with social service provisions, engagement with the justice system, and lost wages cost the nation billions of dollars (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013). Similar societal expenditures were highlighted in a study about youth experiencing

homelessness in southeastern Nevada that demonstrated a significant income gap compared to more educated peers, which cost the region nearly \$36 million in unrealized economic contributions and tax revenue (Lim et al., 2018).

College Campus Support Programs

The number of campus-based support programs has grown over the last two decades and is considered a viable strategy to improve college-going experiences and outcomes of students with foster care experience (Geiger & Beltran, 2017; Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019; Piel et al., 2020). Due to limited empirical data on which to design a CSP model (Geiger et al., 2018; Salazar et al., 2016b; Schelbe et al., 2019), significant variation exists between programs. This variation is due to the fact that programs are each uniquely designed within the context of the specific campus, resource limitations, scope of the program, and degree of collaboration with other campus programs to support participants. Despite their differences, many CSPs provide services to mitigate barriers reported by students as they transition to and through college, including the need for mentoring, financial assistance, housing assistance, peer connections, access to medical care, and counseling to improve student retention (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Geiger et al., 2018; Salazar & Schelbe, 2021; Watt et al., 2013).

Conceptual Framework

Astin's (1993a; Astin & Antonio, 2012) inputs, environment, and outcomes (I-E-O) model provided the conceptual framework for the current study. The I-E-O model posits that student outcomes (e.g., academic performance, retention) are the product of students' existing inputs or characteristics (e.g., demographics) experiencing an institutional environment (e.g., courses, peers, culture, institutional support). Thus, the environment, which the institution controls, can be tailored to specific student inputs to enhance student outcomes.

In the current study, the student input of interest is experience with foster care, homelessness, relative care, and/or ward of the state status. Experiencing foster care or homelessness is associated with postsecondary education underperformance compared to peers without similar lived experiences (Courtney et al., 2010; Olfert et al., 2023). Students with this characteristic input experience distinctive challenges while pursuing a college education, and CSPs are employed to improve retention and degree completion rates. A CSP is the environment of interest, since it functions as a conduit for service provision to enhance student well-being, academic performance, and preparation for life after degree completion.

Regardless of the differences in CSP design and services, CSPs seek to improve postsecondary achievement for SEFC/H. However, as CSPs for SEFC/H expand nationally, more information is needed to improve effectiveness. While researchers begin to explore the value of CSP services to foster care alumni (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Salazar et al., 2016a; Unrau et al., 2017), more knowledge about which services CSP participants use, value, and best prepare them for life after degree completion is needed.

Study Context

This study examines the Unconquered Scholars Program, a CSP established in 2012 at Florida State University (FSU), a four-year public university. Before examining the CSP, it is vital to understand the state context. In 2013, Florida statute 409.1452 required public postsecondary education institutions to designate a campus coach to support students with foster care experience; however, no funding was provided to institutions to comply with this statute (Florida Social Welfare, 2023). An amendment in 2022 expanded support to homeless college students (Florida Social Welfare, 2023). To ease the expense of a college education, additional Florida legislative efforts granted qualified SEFC/H tuition and fee waivers at in-state public postsecondary institutions (Florida K-20 Education Code, 2023). Additionally, eligible youth in foster care attending postsecondary education receive a Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) stipend to cover living expenses, totaling \$1,720 monthly as of July 2022 (previously \$1,256 per month; Florida Social Welfare, 2023). SEFC/H are frequently Pell-grant eligible, but it is rare that SEFC/H would be eligible for the tuition and fee waiver, PESS, and a Pell grant. Even if they did receive all three forms of support, they may still struggle to cover basic expenses, as some colleges' cost of attendance estimates are up to 20% lower than actual living expenses for the region (Kelchen et al., 2017).

Since Florida introduced the tuition and fee waiver, there has been a consistent increase in SEFC/H using it, except for the academic year 2020–21, which was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Florida College System, 2023). The growth in the number of SEFC/H who received the waiver and graduated from college has steadily increased, with a total of almost 1,300 students graduating since 2013 (Florida College System, 2023). There has also been a continued increase in SEFC/H using waivers who receive services by a CSP (Florida College System, 2023).

The Unconquered Scholars Program serves undergraduate students with a history of foster care, homelessness, relative care, and/or ward of the state status. Its mission is to provide qualified students with holistic support and services to improve their overall well-being and academic success and prepare them for independent life after graduation. The Unconquered Scholars Program is a voluntary program provided at no cost to qualified students. Students learn about the program during orientation and the admissions process, and those interested in participating meet with the program director, who confirms eligibility and orients students to the program. Students in the program are referred to as “Scholars.” As of March 31, 2023, the Unconquered Scholars Program served 323 students and had a six-year graduation rate of 84%, which is similar to the university's six-year graduation rate.

To identify Scholars' needs and ensure the Unconquered Scholars Program's services address barriers to well-being and academic performance, the program uses a student advisory board of Scholars to guide administrative decisions about program activities. This approach is consistent with literature that argues that to operate effectively, CSP input from students with foster care experience must be incorporated (Unrau et al., 2017).

Scholars have access to a range of CSP services, including one-on-one advising, college life coaching, financial aid assistance and advocacy, a computer lab and study suite only for Scholars, referrals to mental health counseling services, academic and skills workshops, volunteer opportunities, bi-weekly group meetings, and other cohesion-building activities. Most Scholars also access services for first-generation students, including academic advising and tutoring services. Scholars also typically participated in a summer bridge program where they arrived on campus during the summer to take classes and received extra support in their transition to college. There were also assemblies that brought together the students for learning and social opportunities designed to build community, promote well-being, and provide information and skills to help them succeed in college. Scholars may also access services available to all university students. The university-provided services may be similar to those provided through the CSP (e.g., one-on-one advising, financial aid assistance, referrals to mental health counseling services); however, those provided through the CSP use knowledge about foster care, homelessness, and trauma in the service delivery. The Unconquered Scholars Program is funded through a combination of institutional, grant, and development sources.

Study Purpose

The number of CSPs to improve college retention and graduation rates of students with a history of foster care is growing (Geiger et al., 2018). However, empirical support for their effectiveness in improving educational outcomes is limited (Schelbe et al., 2019). More rigorous evaluation is necessary to evaluate CSPs (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Okpych et al., 2020). Quantifying Unconquered Scholar Program participant service usage and exploring Scholars' views about the service value is vital to understanding student experiences and outcomes. This study aims to document Unconquered Scholars Program service use and value reported by the Scholars. The research questions guiding this mixed methods study are:

1. Which CSP services do Scholars use?
2. Which CSP services do Scholars value?
3. What suggestions do Scholars have to improve CSP services to better prepare future Scholars for life after graduation?

Methods

Participants

The 97 Scholars who graduated between spring 2015 and fall 2020 were invited to participate in the study. Over half ($n = 54$; 57.7%) of those eligible completed the survey at graduation. Scholars' average age at graduation was 21.9 ($SD = .70$). Two thirds of participants were female, and over half identified as Black/African American. See Table 1 for the demographic characteristics of participants.

Table 1. Demographics of Study Participants

	n	%
Gender		
Female	36	66.7
Male	14	25.9
Not reported	4	7.4
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	29	53.7
White/Caucasion, Non-Hispanic	11	20.4
Hispanic	6	11.1
Multiracial	2	3.7
Not reported	6	11.1
Qualified to be a Scholar ^a		
Relative care	32	59.3
Homelessness	22	40.7
Ward of the state	10	18.5
Foster care	3	5.6
Not reported	0	0

^a Students can report more than one reason to be qualified as a Scholar, so the percentages add up to more than 100%.

Data Collection

Unconquered Scholars Program staff recruited Scholars in the last semester of college. Each Scholar received a link to an electronic survey and an email to encourage them to complete the survey. Staff explained participation was voluntary and responses would be confidential. The FSU Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol. Participants provided informed consent.

Data collection occurred from May 2016 through December 2021. Each survey included questions on the Scholar's engagement with the Unconquered Scholars Program. Scholars were asked to what extent they participated in the different programs and services. For each program and service, Scholars could answer N/A = didn't use; 1 = not at all; 2 = a little; 3 = somewhat; 4 = fairly; 5 = completely. Scholars were then asked how helpful each program or service was. There were several open-ended questions, including "What was your favorite thing about being an Unconquered Scholar?" "How did the Unconquered Scholars Program help you during college?" and "What more could the Unconquered Scholars Program have done to help prepare you for life after graduation?"

Analytic Strategy

Descriptive statistics were calculated for quantitative data, including demographic information and Scholars' service use and perceptions of its helpfulness. The quantitative data were analyzed first to contextualize the qualitative data.

To analyze the qualitative data, the first and second authors conducted a thematic analysis of Scholars' responses to open-ended questions following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). They separately read through the open-ended responses and identified codes in the data. The open-ended responses were printed and organized in a binder by question type, so the coding was done by question rather than participant. No qualitative data analysis software was used. The first and second authors annotated a hard copy of the open-ended responses with their initial codes. Then, the first two authors met several times to discuss and create definitions for each code. As appropriate, they combined and renamed codes; ultimately, there was a final list of agreed-upon codes. Then, they organized codes into themes. After themes were defined and named, the second author selected exemplar quotes to integrate into the presentation of each theme. The first author provided feedback. Scholars' words are presented verbatim, including punctuation and emphasis (e.g., written in all capital letters).

Findings

Scholars reported to what extent they participated in the different programs and services of the Unconquered Scholars Program (see Table 2) and how helpful the programs and services were (see Table 3). Scholars actively participated in the Unconquered Scholars Program's services and activities, with most Scholars reporting that they participated in the various services many times, frequently, or regularly. Most Scholars identified all of the Unconquered Scholars Program's services and activities as very, fairly, or somewhat helpful.

These quantitative findings, coupled with the qualitative findings below, present a holistic view of Scholars' experiences in the Unconquered Scholars Program. After the presentation of the qualitative findings, a section integrates the qualitative and quantitative findings.

Valuing CSP

In their responses to open-ended questions, Scholars described what they valued about the CSP. They valued many CSP elements. They fell into the categories of support; resources; physical space; sense of belonging, community, family, and home; growth and motivation; and success.

Support

Support was the most common theme among Scholars, with the word "support" frequently used. Support was described as having others assist them, listen to them, and

provide information. Scholars often discussed support in two main ways: support from staff and support from peers. A typical response broadly talking about support was, “The support system, no matter what someone was there for you.” One Scholar emphasized, “The support played a huge part in my success.” Scholars reported staff offered emotional and academic support. One Scholar explained, “They help me mostly with providing a support system of adults who cares about your grades and where you were going and didn’t really leave you alone to work it out for yourself.” Another Scholar shared, “The Unconquered Scholars program helped me by being a support system. Talking with [staff] every so often throughout the semester was where I could vent,

Table 2. Scholars’ Participation in Services and Activities

Service or Activity	Never		Once		A couple times		Regularly		Frequently		Many times	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Summer Bridge Program	9	16.7	12	22.2	2	3.7	6	11	5	9.3	20	37
Assemblies	7	13	3	5.6	15	27.8	11	20	6	11.1	12	22.2
One-on-One Advising	0	0	0	0	12	22.2	18	33	10	18.5	14	25.9
College Life Coaching	2	3.7	5	9.3	12	22.2	11	20	5	9.3	19	35.2
Academic Advising	5	9.3	1	1.9	16	29.6	15	28	5	9.3	12	22.2
Financial Aid Assistance and Advocacy	6	11.1	8	14.8	17	31.5	6	11	7	13	10	18.5
Tutoring Services	12	22.2	4	7.4	20	37	6	11	5	9.3	7	13
Computer Lab and Study Suites	2	3.7	0	0	14	25.9	8	15	6	11.1	24	44.4
Mental Health Counseling Services	18	33.3	5	9.3	10	18.5	7	13	6	11.1	8	14.8
Academic and Skills Workshops	5	9.3	7	13	26	48.1	8	15	4	7.4	4	7.4
Volunteer Opportunities	7	13	8	14.8	17	31.5	7	13	7	13	8	14.8
Unconquered Bi-Weekly Group Meetings	5	9.3	5	9.3	16	29.6	13	24	4	7.4	11	20.4
Unconquered Activities	5	9.3	8	14.8	20	37	6	11	4	7.4	11	20.4

Table 3. Scholars' Perceptions of Helpfulness of Services and Activities

Service or Activity	Not at all		A little		Somewhat		Fairly		Very	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Summer Bridge Program	0	0.0	1	2.1	2	4.3	7	14.9	37	78.7
Assemblies	3	6.5	6	13.0	15	32.6	11	23.9	11	23.9
One-on-One Advising	0	0.0	2	3.7	5	9.3	10	18.5	37	68.5
Financial Aid Assistance and Advocacy	0	0.0	6	12.2	6	12.2	6	12.2	31	63.3
Tutoring Services	1	2.6	5	12.8	8	20.5	7	17.9	18	46.2
Computer Lab and Study Suites	0	0.0	2	4.1	4	8.2	8	16.3	35	71.4
Mental Health Counseling Services	2	5.6	0	0.0	6	16.7	4	11.1	24	66.7
Academic and Skills Workshops	1	2.2	3	6.5	8	17.4	14	30.4	20	43.5
Volunteer Opportunities	0	0.0	4	9.3	8	18.6	11	25.6	20	46.5
Unconquered Bi-Weekly Group Meetings	0	0.0	6	12.8	8	17.0	9	19.1	24	51.1
Unconquered Activities	0	0.0	3	6.3	6	12.5	8	16.7	31	64.6

cry and figure out a plan when things were going wrong.” Several Scholars highlighted specific crises when staff support helped them.

Scholars repeatedly mentioned peer support within the Unconquered Scholars Program. One Scholar shared, “Unconquered helped me build relationships with my peers who come from a similar background and it also helped me to worry less about any issue I was having.” One Scholar shared, “There were other people with different experiences, but everyone could sympathize with my experiences. We were each others support systems with the guidance of adult professionals.”

Resources

Scholars described how access to resources through the Unconquered Scholars Program helped. Resources were conceptualized as the material things (e.g., books, food, clothing) or money provided to Scholars. Sometimes, resources facilitated their meeting basic needs. Scholars gave examples such as getting a meal plan and securing housing.

One Scholar shared, “This program has helped keep me fed and provided necessities when I could not afford them on my own.” A Scholar explained the value of resources: “The resources have been very helpful in making college easier for me. I was able to focus more on getting an education than figuring out how to pay for bills and food.” This echoes another Scholar’s response, “It offered my resources to mAKE my college experience smoother.”

Several Scholars focused on the resources only available to those involved in the Unconquered Scholars Program. For example, “The various socials/workshops, the food pantry, and the clothing closet are all resources that I have used frequently during my time at FSU.” However, other Scholars emphasized that the Unconquered Scholars Program helped to connect them to other resources on campus. For example, one Scholar explained, “Unconquered Scholars Program helped me take advantage of the many resources FSU.” Another Scholar explained, “The program definitely did a great job in connecting me with on campus resources.” Scholars mentioned the assurance of the availability of resources if problems arose was helpful. One explained, “Being able to know that if I needed assistance that I could go to Unconquered [*sic*] and they would try to find a way to help me.”

Physical Space

Several Scholars mentioned the physical space reserved for Scholars known as “the suite.” Decorated like a family room, it contains couches, comfortable chairs, pillows, blankets, a dining room table set, and a television. The suite had artwork, much of it from Scholars. There was a decal of a tree on one wall that said “family,” where Scholars posted pictures of themselves on the branches; collages of various trips the Scholars took together; and stoles from different graduation years. The suite also had a refrigerator, microwave, coffee maker, and a closet containing snacks and food. There was a “clothing closet” where Scholars could access donated clothing. Along one wall were several computer workspaces and a printer. A Scholar shared that having their own computer lab was one of their favorite things. One Scholar described the suite as providing a “homebase” and said they spent more time in the suite than in the libraries at FSU. Multiple Scholars described it as a “safe space” on campus or a “relaxing room.”

Sense of Belonging, Community, Family, and Home

Being part of the Unconquered Scholars Program provided a sense of belonging and community, with many Scholars describing feeling the Unconquered Scholars Program provided a family and home. The theme of the sense of belonging, community, family, and home can be understood as the Scholars feeling connected and grounded within the Unconquered Scholars Program. Scholars repeatedly used the word “community” and described close relationships with each other. The words “family” and “home” frequently appeared. The phrase “family away from home” was used by several Scholars. One Scholar explained, “For three years, this program has served as a function of family, especially [staff].” Another Scholar described the Unconquered Scholars Program, “During college they helped me feel as if I had a place to call home and several others

who I could relate to.” Similarly, another Scholar shared, “While being so far away from home, Unconquered helped me feel like I belonged somewhere and that I had a family.”

Scholars frequently emphasized that the sense of belonging came from being around other students with similar backgrounds. One person articulated this, “I really loved being surrounded by people who shared similar backgrounds or struggles. Feeling like I belonged somewhere was important to me. I like being able to talk to people who GET it.” Scholars stressed the value of knowing that they were understood by people who shared similar histories.

Growth and Motivation

Growth and motivation were conceptualized as Scholars developing as a person and Scholars finding encouragement or inspiration within the campus support program. Scholars mentioned how they grew due to involvement with the Unconquered Scholars Program. Scholars shared how the Unconquered Scholars Program staff helped them develop skills needed to be successful in school and life. One mentioned, “[Staff] guided me through every step while I learned how to balance school and a job.” Some personal growth was related to self-awareness and overcoming previous hardships. A Scholar shared, “The Unconquered Scholars program helped me to process and break down the present issues in my life. The program helped me pushed through my own growing pains.” One Scholar explained, “The program helped me learn so much about myself.” A Scholar wrote, “It provides me with confidence to overcome all obstacles.”

Scholars sometimes credited their growth to the Unconquered Scholars Program workshops, social events, and trips. The opportunities and exposure to new things were helpful to growing. One Scholar explained: “. . . the ability to get involved and get to know my school and self better. The trips we went on, I was able to experience new things, get away from campus, and grow and learn with the other Scholars.” Another Scholar shared, “. . . Having [staff] step in and allow us to experience new things and grow with us was amazing.”

Scholars articulated that the Unconquered Scholars Program motivated them. One Scholar explained, “It inspired me to continue to push myself academically, socially, and personally.” Scholars explained the Unconquered Scholars Program was motivating in part because of the relationships and knowing that others were supportive and understanding. One Scholar shared, “It kept me here. It helped me stay motivated and I always had something to look forward to. Everyone had a close relationship and celebrated your success stories with you.” Another Scholar’s response echoed this, “It inspired me to continue to push myself academically, socially, and personally.”

Success

Scholars professed the CSP contributed to their success, often in many ways. Success was described as accomplishments and achievements. One Scholar shared several ways the Unconquered Scholars Program helped them that included most of the themes in other Scholars’ responses:

The question really is how it didn't help me. Unconquered made me feel proud of who I am, I am surrounded by such an amazing group of individuals that are strong and resilient that MAKES YOU want to strive for the better. I felt a sense of community and conclusion something that everyone wants to find when coming to their college experience.

Scholars attribute their graduation to participation in the Unconquered Scholars Program. One Scholar explained, "The program helped me not drop out of college by having people to talk to in the office as well as pushing me to do better." Another Scholar emphasized how the Unconquered Scholars Program helped them transition to college. One Scholar who credited the Unconquered Scholars Program for staying in school explained, "I do not think I would have made it to graduation without the Unconquered Scholars Program." Similarly, another Scholar explained, "It offered me people I could lean on in time of need. I was provided with success coaches mentors and life savers I couldn't have done it without Unconquered."

Improvements

At graduation, Scholars identified how the Unconquered Scholars Program could have better prepared them for life after graduation. The most frequent response was related to finances. Scholars shared that the program could have helped them learn about finances. Scholars shared that assistance with preparing for graduate school or careers would have been helpful. Another recommendation was about improving life skills and making plans postgraduation. Scholars also recommended that staff at the Unconquered Scholars Program help them make more connections and assist with networking before graduation. Another recommendation was broadly about life skill development and preparing Scholars for adulthood. A few Scholars stressed that the program could have made more requirements and mandated participation in some workshops and activities that provided information and skills they would need postgraduation. Another theme in Scholars' responses was that there were no improvements needed, as the Unconquered Scholars Program had done a great job with everything it intended to do.

Finances

Scholars shared that it would have been useful if the Unconquered Scholars Program helped them increase their financial literacy, master money management skills, find scholarships, and reduce student loans. Specifically, Scholars mentioned wanting to learn more about budgeting and saving money. One Scholar explained,

I think there should be several financial workshops for only Unconquered students to teach us how to save and use our money wisely. For many of us, our refund checks are the very first time in our lives where we have had a significant amount of money. It is easy to get caught up and spend it on useless things. I would have liked more information on ways to save, how to do taxes, stocks, etc. to help prepare me for when I will no longer be receiving money each semester.

A few Scholars mentioned wanting assistance with reducing student loans through finding scholarships, including those for graduate school. One Scholar explained, “assist with finding scholarships so that I do not have a ton of loans, besides that Unconquered did everything imaginable.”

Graduate School

Scholars frequently mentioned that it would have been helpful for the Unconquered Scholars Program to help prepare them for graduate school. One Scholar explained, “. . . the transition to grad school I really was in the dark about how to apply and what I should do as a music major about GRE. Along with how me being a ward of the State would benefit with financial aid in grad school.” The transition to graduate school was a concern for several Scholars who thought the program could help prepare them. One Scholar suggested the Unconquered Scholars Program could “offer programs for how to deal with loans [practice] interviews for graduate school and application process or classes to prepare us on how to transition from everything we know and resources we trust to nothing familiar at all.”

A few Scholars mentioned wanting guidance about the GRE and applying to and interviewing for graduate programs. One Scholar explained,

I feel that the Unconquered Scholars Program can help Junior students think about graduate schools or professional school and help them with the process of filling out applications. Having a timeline or list of activities in regard to obtaining letters of recommendation, completing test, resumes and etc. for upperclassmen students to prepare them for after graduation would be beneficial.

Several Scholars mentioned workshops about graduate school would be helpful. One Scholar shared, “I think having a graduate school workshop would be beneficial. one where they [have] different grad students to come out and talk about the ins and out about grad school.” Scholars also indicated various graduate school tours would have been beneficial.

Career

Scholars shared that it would be helpful for the Unconquered Scholars Program to assist with their job search and career planning. One Scholar responded, “Career planning would have been helpful.” Other Scholars made more specific recommendations about assistance for help. One Scholar suggested assistance with placement with employers, “It would be cool if the Unconquered Scholars Program was able to find high profile employers and recommend us if we were qualified for positions within these companies. Like companies who specifically sought our students because of our hardships.” Another suggested organized visits to local industries to understand the job opportunities.

Life Skills and Planning

Scholars stressed it would have been helpful for the Unconquered Scholars Program to assist with more preparation for life after graduation. One Scholar shared,

I think that maybe their could be a workshop on transitioning from college into the “real world.” Maybe some of the former scholars, since we are the first graduating class, can come back and speak to others about our transition and what we could have done differently.

Another Scholar suggested having “a seminar on how to adjust to life after college.” One Scholar elaborated: “Maybe having a workshop for graduating seniors. The workshop would be someone to help arrange assist on looking for jobs, graduate programs, and how to mentally prepare yourself to leave college.”

Scholars mentioned that helping with planning for life after graduation would be beneficial. One Scholar shared, “The program could implement an aspect that assist students with post-graduation plans.” Another Scholar suggested coaching, “Provide at least one mandatory life coaching session before graduation to talk about life after college.” The planning did not have to wait until senior year as one Scholar explained, “Start a vision board as a freshman and each semester make the students update that board so by the time graduation come, there is no question about what’s coming next.”

Connections

Scholars discussed that the Unconquered Scholars Program could help with networking to prepare for life postgraduation and make more connections within the program. Those suggesting making connections mainly emphasized wanting connections to help after graduation. One Scholar shared,

The Unconquered Scholars Program could help in connecting with more [program for first generation student] graduates in the same field of study or connections in the professional world in general. I feel like it would help ease our fear of post-graduate life once this program and its benefits are not as easily accessible . . .

Another Scholar shared, “Set up networking opportunities or exclusive internships or volunteering in the field we are interested in working in.” Another Scholar recommended, “There could’ve been mixers with agencies and organizations fit for the majors of scholars to provide more opportunities after graduation.”

Some Scholars stressed that more connections in the Unconquered Scholars Program would be helpful. One Scholar shared, “I think the could have continue the group sessions because it was real helpful as far as finding a friend, reconnecting them, or just having that open support of your peers,” Another Scholar shared having more “social activities” and “enforcing the small group meeting with our class” would have created more connections.

Requirements

A few Scholars discussed how it would have been helpful to have been required to attend workshops and have more services and activities be mandatory. One Scholar recommended, “Required me to go to more workshops.” Another shared, “To prepare me for life after college, The Unconquered Scholars program could have stressed the importance of going to Job fairs, making it mandatory for students to build relationships with professors, and having mandatory classes on how to budget money.” One Scholar reflected on thoughts about requiring participation changed during their time in college:

I used to think Unconquered Scholars could have been more aggressive at forcing me to participate at the beginning of my college career because I see the difference in students who have been active participants since their freshman year. But I have grown to understand that everyone works at their own speed in their own time and I am grateful that I was not forced to participate as others do. I can’t think of a time the Unconquered Scholars Program was not a helpful and available resource to me. The program exceeded my expectations.

No Improvements Needed

A few Scholars indicated that there were no improvements needed; there was nothing more the Unconquered Scholars Program could have done. One Scholar responded to the prompt asking about ideas for improvement with:

I feel that the program did all that it could within its power to help me prepare for what life is going to throw at me. All the workshops, all the classes, everything culminated to preparing me for what it would be like to step out in the real world with no safety net to catch me if I fell.

Another Scholar shared, “Unconquered did everything it was intended to do.” Yet another Scholar shared, “Unconquered Scholars did an awesome job preparing me for life after college.” A few Scholars simply wrote, “N/A.”

A Holistic View of Scholars’ Experiences

In examining the qualitative and quantitative findings together, a consistent picture emerges that Scholars used and valued the full array of services available due to their involvement in the Unconquered Scholars Program. There is strong alignment between the qualitative and quantitative findings. Support and resources that Scholars described in their open-ended responses was also evident in the survey response. The vast majority of Scholars who used the services reported the Summer Bridge Program (93.6%), one-on-one advising (87%), mental health counseling services (77.8%), and financial aid assistance and advocacy (75.5%) were fairly or very helpful; and over two thirds of the Scholars engaged in each of the services and activities. Scholars mentioned valuing physical space, and in the survey, almost 90% of the Scholars said the computer lab

and study suite was fairly or very helpful. Seventy percent of the Scholars reported having used the computer lab and study suite regularly, frequently, or many times. The sense of belonging, community, family, and home is echoed in Scholars' reports that the activities that brought Scholars together, including Unconquered activities (81.3%) and Unconquered bi-weekly group meetings (70.2%), were fairly or very helpful. In the survey results, it is clear that Scholars were participating in the wide range of services and activities that had potential to offer growth experiences and motivation. Few Scholars reported never participating in a service or activity with the exception of mental health counseling services (33.3%) or tutoring services (22.2%). Together the qualitative and quantitative findings present the picture that the Scholars are engaged with the services and activities and find them central to their success and well-being.

Discussion

Astin's I-E-O (1993a; Astin & Antonio, 2012) model was used to examine how students who experienced foster care, homelessness, relative care, and/or ward of the state status (the input), utilized CSP services (the environment), to improve persistence to degree completion, (the desired outcome). Since SEFC/H are less likely than their peers to attend and graduate from postsecondary education (e.g., Courtney et al., 2011), developing an understanding of how Scholars who completed a bachelor's degree benefit from engaging with the staff, services, and other Scholars in a CSP is important.

Scholars reported using all of the activities, with the majority participating in the various services many times, frequently, or regularly. The computer lab and study suite were noted to be used many times by the greatest number of Scholars, with all but two Scholars reported as being used regularly, frequently, or many times. In the open-ended responses, Scholars also frequently identified the importance of physical space and discussed the value of having the suite and access to computers. The use of one-on-one advising was also noteworthy in that all Scholars said they used it at least a couple times, and no Scholars reported they never used it. The study findings are consistent with previous evaluations of CPS that have found students value the services and support and attribute their successes to CPS (Cheatham et al., 2021; Opsal & Eman, 2018).

Campus mental health and counseling services was the service most frequently indicated as not being used, with one third of Scholars (33.3%) stating they never used it. This was somewhat surprising given many SEFC/Hs' experiences with trauma and adversity in childhood (Morton, 2018) and the greater likelihood of experiencing mental health symptoms (e.g., Barnett et al., 2016; Salazar, 2012). However, it is also possible that Scholars received mental health services off-campus or were unaware of services on campus. Further, as with mental health services overall, there is a stigma to seek out and engage with mental health services, particularly among young adults (Villagrana et al., 2018). This finding points to an opportunity for the Unconquered Scholars

Program to strengthen their relationship with campus mental health and counseling services and develop ways for the program to increase access and support for mental health and well-being for Scholars. A model of doing so exists in the ASPIRE program at Arizona State University (Lietz & Cheung, 2023). The qualitative data suggests that Scholars felt supported by the Unconquered Scholars Program staff and appreciated being able to talk to them about their lives and current concerns. They also described feeling seen and understood in the Unconquered Scholars Program. Considering this, providing mental health or counseling services within the campus support program may be effective and appreciated by Scholars.

It is worth commenting on Scholars' responses to their participation in the summer bridge program, as the responses may be confusing initially. The summer bridge program spans several weeks, and most Scholars attended. Some scholars may have returned in subsequent years as one of the peer leaders for the summer bridge program. Scholars may have different interpretations of how to answer the question. Those who responded once or a couple of times may have thought of the summer bridge program as a single service they attended once or a couple of times. Other Scholars may have thought about the various components of the summer bridge program, such as tutoring sessions, meetings, outings, social events, and workshops, and responded regularly, frequently, or many times to report the extent to which they participated in the specific components. While there may have been some differences in how Scholars responded to the question, the main takeaway is that almost 85% of the Scholars participated in the summer bridge program.

Scholars emphasized that the Unconquered Scholars Program was helpful and contributed to their successes. This was both in the qualitative findings and the quantitative findings. In the open-ended responses, Scholars spontaneously credited the program for their success. Most Scholars identified all of the Unconquered Scholars Program services and activities as very, fairly, or somewhat helpful. Over three quarters of Scholars identified the Summer Bridge Program (78.7%) as very helpful. Outreach efforts, such as bridge programs, can promote college going of foster youth (Salazar & Schelbe, 2021) by orienting students to the campus, programs, and services that are offered as well as creating and fostering community among Scholars early (Geiger et al., 2018). Approximately two thirds of the Scholars identified the computer lab and study suite (71.4%), one-on-one advising (68.5%), the Unconquered Scholars Program activities (64.6%), and financial aid assistance and advocacy (63.3%) as very helpful. All but one of the services and activities were identified by at least one third of Scholars as very helpful. For Scholars, utilizing the Unconquered Scholars Program services and engaging with program staff and peers—the environment of interest—likely enhanced their sense of belonging, provided additional stability with the program-supplied financial assistance, and mitigated additional barriers to retention and degree completion. Open-ended responses provide evidence that the Unconquered Scholars Program services, staff, and peers were important factors in retention and graduation. These findings echo previous studies that highlight the perceived benefits of CSP (Cheatham et al., 2021; Opsal & Eman, 2018).

The I-E-O model can also serve as a tool to evaluate student growth as it relates to specific institutional initiatives by comparing change influenced by the environment (Astin, 1993b). Education evaluation is functional when data collected are used to enhance environmental factors that improve student outcomes (Astin & Antonio, 2012). When environmental factors enhance the likelihood of the desired student development and outcome, they can be replicated across higher education to support specific populations.

As higher education administrators better understand which services best support SEFC/H, they can refine CSP design to improve effectiveness, increase graduation, and better prepare these students for life after college. Within the responses to open-ended questions about what the Unconquered Scholars Program could have done to better prepare Scholars for life after graduation, several themes should be highlighted. First, the need for financial literacy was one of the most frequently named themes and especially appeared in the survey's earlier years. This is not surprising given that the Unconquered Scholars Program implemented financial therapy workshops in 2018 after staff repeatedly observed and heard that Scholars were experiencing difficulties with money. Even after the Unconquered Scholars Program provided a curriculum to teach Scholars financial literacy and address the stress and emotions associated with money, there were still Scholars who said it would have been helpful to have been taught financial literacy. Scholars who mentioned this could have been unaware of the financial therapy workshops, not participated in the workshops, or the workshops may not have met their needs. Since Scholars sometimes became less involved during their time in college, it is possible that even if the workshops were available, Scholars did not participate in them in their final years at college.

Scholars discussed requiring participation in services or activities. However, the Unconquered Scholars Program was designed using a youth-centered approach whereby Scholars played a critical role in designing services and activities; self-determination about which services Scholars utilize is respected. The Unconquered Scholars Program student advisory board, consisting of Scholars selected by peers and program staff, works closely with staff to plan events and make decisions about programming. Requiring Scholars to participate would be inconsistent with the program's mission and undermine Scholars' ability to make decisions about their time, needs, and interests. However, students could be provided alternate incentives to encourage participation, such as offering a stipend or a meal, but still allow for flexibility in decision-making regarding participation.

If the Unconquered Scholars Program required Scholars to participate in services and activities designed to help with the issues that Scholars highlighted as wishing they had learned or done earlier (e.g., planning, saving, connecting), it would diminish the opportunities to build Scholars' self-efficacy and sense of personal responsibility. Requiring participation is problematic, especially for the Scholars with foster care experience, as they may have had less autonomy in their lives as the foster care system dictated much of their lives. Mandating participation could dissuade students from

involvement in the program if it felt reminiscent of being in foster care. Scholars have access to and are frequently connected with campus resource providers by the Unconquered Scholars Program staff to promote Scholars' skills and well-being. Some lack of involvement in services and activities is likely connected to Scholars' pasts. They may be resistant to participating or asking for help due to previous experiences and a desire not to depend on others in an effort to remain self-reliant (Samuels & Pryce, 2008); not being involved is a way for them to have control in their lives. They may also wish to distance themselves from any stigma associated with foster care (Cheatham et al., 2021). It may also be protective for Scholars in that they avoid demonstrating vulnerability if they do not ask for or accept offers of assistance.

Scholars may not understand what their living expenses will be after graduation, which makes realistic budgeting and money management difficult. As many Scholars grew up in poverty, they may believe that their income after college is going to be a lot of money. In many regards, it may be. It may be more than they or people close to them have earned. However, living on their own may be more than they can afford, with the expenses of food, housing, cell phones, student loans, insurance, and car payments. Some Scholars also may have an unrealistic expectation of how much money they will earn immediately after graduation and are shocked to learn that the jobs they are qualified for do not pay the salaries they envisioned.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. One limitation is that the response rate was 57.7%. Also, as data were not collected from graduates who were not involved in the Unconquered Scholars Program, it is impossible to conclude how Scholars are faring as compared to their peers who were not in the Unconquered Scholars Program and/or had not experienced foster care, homelessness, relative care, or ward of the state status. Nor can there be any comparison with SEFC/H in the CPS who did not graduate, as data were only collected from graduates. Also, due to the sample size, it was impossible to make comparisons among groups of Scholars in the Unconquered Scholars Program (e.g., different genders, races, eligibility for involvement).

Study findings must be considered in context. They are specific to the Unconquered Scholars Program and not generalizable to all CSP. It must be stressed that the Unconquered Scholars Program services changed over the course of data collection. For example, after the study began, the program started providing financial therapy to Scholars. Additionally, in spring 2020, there were changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All university and the Unconquered Scholars Program functioning became virtual at that time. The sample contained students who graduated in spring 2020, summer 2020, and fall 2020; thus, some Scholars had their last one to three semesters only having virtual options.

Implications

Scholars were attending college as they were transitioning to adulthood, and, as such, opportunities exist for universities and CSPs to make the transitions to adulthood smoother and to change SEFC/Hs' life trajectories by better preparing them for life after graduation. With the safety net of resources and support of the university, it is an ideal time for SEFC/H to plan for their future and develop skills needed throughout adulthood. It should be stressed that simply offering information will likely be inadequate; to assist SEFC/H, universities and CSPs must consider the students' backgrounds when determining how to provide support and resources. Additionally, universities and CSPs should carefully examine if unintentional barriers prevent SEFC/H from accessing support and resources. Considering the study findings, recommendations are in the following areas: (a) planning and life skills, (b) financial literacy and money, and (c) mentors and connections. Additionally, findings point to the need for more research on SEFC/H and CSPs. While considering the recommendations, it is essential to acknowledge that the numbers of children experiencing foster care and/or homelessness remain fairly consistent; thus, this issue will continue for the foreseeable future.

Planning and Life Skills

There is a need to assist Scholars with planning for their lives after graduation. As Scholars are all first-generation students and many do not have family and parents able to support them financially, they can especially benefit from having additional scaffolding as they transition from college. Scholars may benefit from advising and coaching, which is already provided through the Unconquered Scholars Program and the university. More efforts should be made to ensure that Scholars engage with these services in ways that are helpful to them, while assisting them with planning for their future beyond college by focusing on the processes, timelines, skills, and resources.

Assistance with Scholars' career planning should start early in Scholars' time at college. Multiple Scholars expressed they had been confused about career paths. They indicated that they chose a major that did not help them with their desired career. Some of the Scholars explained they needed to go to graduate school to get another degree so that they could pursue a specific career. There were Scholars who wanted to be lawyers or doctors who needed to take additional classes before applying to law school or medical school. This indicates that there may have been something in their time at the university that did not prepare them to meet the programs' requirements or that they had not been successful in degrees that traditionally prepare Scholars for law school or medical school.

Scholars could benefit from help with planning around employment, specifically finding, securing, and maintaining a job. While a university career center existed, it is unclear whether it met Scholars' needs, and as a result, Scholars did not use their services. This may be similar to Scholars not using the university's mental health and counseling services. More efforts must be made to connect Scholars with the available university resources and for university services to be sensitive to Scholar's needs.

The Unconquered Scholars Program could offer topic-specific meetings, trainings, or informational webinars where Scholars could hear directly from various program representatives; they could visit these programs as a group or other forms of information could be shared with Scholars about these programs and opportunities (i.e., events, contacts, etc.) in creative ways (e.g., text, emails, flyers, etc.). Scholars also expressed wanting more information and guidance about graduate school, specifically related to selecting advanced degree programs and developing a plan to pay for graduate school. The Unconquered Scholars Program could provide some guidance and support in this area (e.g., timelines, requirements, and expectations) but could also create connections with other campus units with more expertise in this area and/or contract with an outside organization that supported students in their pursuit of graduate studies.

Scholars could benefit from developing planning skills, such as setting realistic goals, outlining a timeline, creating a strategy to achieve the goals, breaking the strategy into manageable tasks, determining possible contingency plans, identifying resources and supports, and evaluating their progress on attaining their goals. Planning skills are generalizable; they can help Scholars in both their professional and personal lives. As Scholars' needs are multifaceted, a holistic approach can best help Scholars prepare for life after graduation. Using a framework such as "It's My Life" that addresses different interconnected domains could be helpful in working with Scholars (Casey Family Programs, 2006).

Financial Literacy and Money

Money management and having enough money were primary concerns of Scholars. Recognizing Scholars' need for improved financial literacy, the Unconquered Scholars Program staff began offering a financial therapy curriculum in 2018. The sessions focused on providing information and teaching skills and included elements to address financial stress and change the way Scholars feel and think about money. The Unconquered Scholars Program also specifically addressed the concern that Scholars frequently had about handling family members and friends asking for or needing money.

Many Scholars were concerned about financial hardships after graduation and specifically raised concerns about student loan debt. Scholars must have enough money to live after graduation. There should be efforts to reduce the amount of student loans that Scholars have by reducing their need for loans and ensuring they understand the realities of repaying loans. The FAFSA Simplification Act requires postsecondary institutions to implement changes by July 1, 2024, including the notification of students requesting an adjustment due to unusual circumstances—including unaccompanied homeless youth, at-risk homeless youth, or being a foster youth—of the institution's determination process, to make determinations within 60 days, and presume students approved as an independent student receiving an adjustment due to an unusual circumstance maintain that status for each following award year at the same institution unless otherwise notified by the student or conflicting information is provided (Weisman, 2022). CSP staff must work closely to ensure the FAFSA determination process

follows the law. Adequately securing independent student status may provide access to additional grant funding for qualified students. Scholars need more scholarships and grants to fund their undergraduate education and likely need more education about student loan repayment and loan forgiveness programs. They also need to know how to access services to assist them with resources.

It would be helpful for Scholars to have a savings account established when they graduate. This could help with some of the expenses that inevitably arise in their post-graduation transitions. Moving expenses, security deposits for apartments, professional wardrobes, and required materials for graduate school can be costly. Having a savings account could help a Scholar have more options when facing challenges. If Scholars have a savings account during college, they can learn how to practice their money management skills. Then, upon graduation, when they earn more, they will be experienced and better prepared.

Mentors and Connections

Scholars mentioned needing mentors and connections. Mentors have the potential not just to help with career aspects but also to provide social support by offering guidance and support to Scholars as they navigate life after graduation. CSP supports often end as students graduate (Katz & Geiger, 2020), yet having a mentor who continues after graduation will help with the continuity of support. As many Scholars planned to attend graduate school, it would be helpful for faculty and/or other professionals to mentor Scholars. Faculty members can especially help Scholars prepare for graduate school by offering guidance about program selection and making connections. When faculty members mentor Scholars, the faculty members can write stronger letters of recommendation, which can assist with admission to and funding for graduate school as well as getting a job. Mentors can offer guidance about transitioning to the workforce and navigating the workplace.

Scholars described the community and sense of family they developed through the Unconquered Scholars Program as meaningful and contributing to their successes. Prior to graduation, efforts should be made to ensure that Scholars can connect with others after graduation. Creating a network of Scholars who have graduated may be beneficial. It may also be possible to leverage existing networks, such as alumni organizations. Developing a plan and Scholars' skills to build and continue relationships will help ensure Scholars have adequate social support.

Future Research

Additional research is needed about CSP students who experienced foster care or homelessness. There should be an examination of the experiences of students eligible to be involved in the Unconquered Scholars Program who did not become involved. Florida State University and the Unconquered Scholars Program should examine if there are unmet needs and what obstacles exist to accessing services and activities. Future research should examine SEFC/H who do not graduate to better understand factors that impact retention and graduation rates.

Caution must be taken in all research with this population to ensure it is from a strength perspective. While needs should be considered, resilience and social context must be prioritized over focusing on student deficits. This is beneficial not only to students but also a helpful perspective when considering how higher education institutions engage and serve students.

Conclusion

CSPs offer a range of services to SEFC/H. Many Scholars attribute their successes and well-being to the Unconquered Scholars Program services and activities and the community of peers they created within the program. Florida State University and the Unconquered Scholars Program have a window of opportunity to help Scholars prepare for life after graduation. Doing so has the potential to assist students who have traditionally been disadvantaged.

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