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The Evaluation of Effectiveness of School-based Small Group Mentoring System:

Discovery Scholars Program at UT Austin

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The evaluation of Effectiveness of School-based Small Group Mentoring System

: Discovery Scholars Program at UT Austin

by

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Report

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The evaluation of Effectiveness of School-based Small Group Mentoring System

: Discovery Scholars Program at UT Austin

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Previous studies have found that students' college experiences differ vastly depending on their socioeconomic status (SES), not only in their academic achievement (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Harackiewicz et al., 2014), but also in the wholesome process of the college experience, including college preparation and socio-cultural practices while at college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Merritt, 2008). The present study examines the effectiveness of a small-group mentoring program, Discovery Scholars Program, targeted for students identified as at-risk due to SES and lower entrance scores at the University of Texas at Austin. Through exploring the survey data collected as part of the program, the current study explored the following research questions: 1) Did the students engage in and benefit from DSP events and feel supported by the DSP groups? 2) Did the DSP program help students develop academic skills necessary for college life? 3) Did the DSP program help students feel more comfortable and confident as a part of the UT community? The results showed that, while more long-term goals of the program were difficult to measure, the program succeeded in helping students develop social support groups and academic skills that aided in their adjustment process to college.

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Chapter 1: Literature Review

College is a different experience than high school for most students. Depending on individuals, it could be an exciting adventure, or a challenging experience through which some students struggle with various factors. While it is almost universal with empirical support that college is a guarantee for investment of socioeconomic advancement (Blondal, Field, & Girouard, 2002 ; Psacharopoulos, 1994), poor college students are at risk for psychological distress followed by negative outcomes (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; McLeod & Owens, 2004). Students from lower income families, especially, are at risk of successfully graduating from college than their counterparts from more financially stable backgrounds (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado Pryor, & Tran, 2011).

Previous studies have found that students' college experiences differ vastly depending on their socioeconomic status (SES), not only in their academic achievement (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Harackiewicz et al., 2014), but also in the wholesome process of the college experience, including college preparation and socio-cultural practices while at college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Merritt, 2008). The present study examines the effectiveness of a small-group mentoring program, Discovery Scholars Program, targeted for students identified as at-risk due to SES and lower entrance scores at the University of Texas at Austin.

Psychological Distress

Students from low SES families confront material scarcity and financial struggles upon starting college life and are at risk for psychological distress (Reyes & Yujuico, 2017). According to previous studies, psychological distress of these students is not a

product of poverty itself only, but comes largely from the sense of poverty compared to their peers who are from wealthier backgrounds (de Vos & Garner, 1991; Mangahas, 1999). This subjective self-evaluation of one's SES, compared to other objective SES indicators, is highly correlated with a variety of negative outcomes including low self-esteem, and high levels of depression and anxiety (Adler, Epel, Castellazo, & Ickovics, 2000; McLeod & Owens, 2004). Further, students who are first-generation college attendees, meaning neither of their parents have college degrees, were found more likely to feel guilty about their educational achievement (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015).

Moreover, many low-SES students struggle with identity management as they navigate the college environment with many high-SES characteristics as low-SES members (Aries & Seider, 2005; Hinz, 2016). Through exploring the cultural context of the unfamiliar, higher education environment, many low-SES students feel "out of place" and often have difficulty embracing their new identity as college students (Aries & Seider, 2005; Lee & Kramer, 2013). Additionally, low-SES students find themselves as the minority group, with the majority of students from more financially stable backgrounds. As a result, these students continuously report feeling like they "do not belong" in the college context, adding to the psychological struggles they face (Harackiewicz et al., 2014; Soria & Stebleton 2013).

In addition, low-SES students suffer from negative self-perceptions as a result of comparison of their own circumstances to those of more privileged peers. Many students from lower SES report lower competencies and self-efficacy regarding their academic performance, and have lower perceptions of their intelligence compared to their high-SES peers (Hellman & Harbeck, 1997; Ivcevic & Kaufman, 2013). While these perceptions

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may not be true, they do negatively affect students' psychological wellbeing and experiences at college. As such, students from lower SES struggle with not only financial strain but also various psychological barriers that leave these students at-risk for healthy adjustment and successful academic achievement at college.

Social Support

Social support is an important aspect of what constitutes college life for many students. Low-SES students, especially those who are first-generation college students, have fewer opportunities to build social connections through engaging in on-campus activities (Pascarella et al., 2004). One of the reasons that low-SES students struggle with college social life is due to their parents' lack of familiarity with college life, which can result in a difficult transition phase to college from home. Because their parents do not understand the social aspects of what entails a college life, they often lack the "appropriate" cultural knowledge to pass on to their children (Calarco, 2014; Gibbons & Borders, 2010). On the other hand, as students attempt to adjust to college life, various burdens, including financial burdens from family members who might not understand their commitment to college life, are placed on the students (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Moreover, low-SES students often have to work full-time jobs to support themselves and live off campus, which lowers their chance of social interaction at campus (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). These factors contribute to low-SES students feeling less connected and supported at college, often hindering their healthy adjustment to college life.

Nonetheless, it is through social support and connections that students cope and find comfort the most through college. Through building relationships, the at-risk

students are encouraged to partake in on-campus activities and find themselves fitting in better as full members of the college context (Stephens et al., 2015). When students develop connections with their peers, it creates a sense of belonging through which many students feel secure and connected, not only to their friends but also to the whole educational system to which they belong. Aside from bringing better psychological adjustment through social security and connectedness, students can benefit from these social relationships by utilizing such networks in maximizing their college experience. For example, students may feel more comfortable exploring different on-campus organizations with their friends, or ask older students that they meet to share their college experiences (Riggs, 2014).

It is not just peer networks that serve as an important component of social support in college. Creating opportunities to interact with professors, teaching assistants, and administrators is another integral aspect of social support at college, which can facilitate more academic involvement and exploration (Stephens et al., 2015). Developing relationships with authority figures may be intimidating to students from more disadvantaged backgrounds due to their lack of familiarity with such individuals. However, these experiences can greatly benefit students in various ways, from providing more opportunities for more academic engagement such as research, to simply asking questions about the future and getting more concrete and tangible answers (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Developing social relationships and connections at college helps students feel supported, included, and recognized as part of the larger community. Through establishing social relationships both in and out of classrooms with peers and

authority figures, students develop skills and resources to manage and adjust to college life in healthy ways.

Present Study

Due to various factors discussed above, students from lower SES are at-risk for healthy adjustment to college, which often results in negative psychological and academic outcomes. In order to aid students who are prone to more struggles at college, there are a number of existing school-based interventions at universities (Le et al., 2016). Previous studies show that school-based programs designed to improve college experience have been effective in promoting better academic performances as well as motivation (Le et al., 2016; Castleman & Page, 2015). Rather than taking extensive measures to help students, existing programs took more feasible and low-cost approaches, such as peer mentoring (Castleman & Page, 2015; Stephens et al., 2015). Evaluations of existing interventions, in addition to the literature discussed above, suggest that creating a more inclusive culture and providing more concrete goals and approachable role models at colleges can benefit students greatly (Stephens et al., Jury et al., 2017).

The purpose of the current study is to evaluate the effectiveness of a program targeted for at-risk students who might be struggling with similar problems at the University of Texas at Austin. The Discovery Scholars Program (DSP) is a small-group mentoring system that provides a variety of programs at the University of Texas at Austin (UT), targeted for students identified as at-risk based on SES and financial need, as well as entrance scores, by the Provost office. The objective of the DSP is to provide support for college transitions for selected students and encourage responsibility for students'

individual educational experience. Through exploring the survey data collected as part of the program, the current study was aimed to conduct an evaluation of the DSP, specifically exploring the following research questions.

1. Did the students engage in and benefit from DSP events and feel supported by the DSP groups?

2. Did the DSP program help students develop academic skills necessary for college life?

3. Did the DSP program help students feel more comfortable and confident as a part of the UT community?

Chapter 2: Method

Discovery Scholars Program

Program Goals. The objective of the Discovery Scholars Program (DSP) is to provide support for college transitions for selected students and encourage responsibility for students' individual educational journeys. The mission is to help students acquire skills that will help them to succeed in both their majors and life after UT. The program is for students who have been pre-screened for being at-risk with less chance of graduating from UT. Because college is a different experience from high school years, the program is specifically designed for students who are especially at risk of struggling with the challenges of the transition process to college life. The goals are that the students selected for the program acquire necessary skills to succeed in college, develop marketable professional skills, and successfully progress as UT college students. In the long-run, the goal is that the DSP students exhibit comparable marketable students as the rest of the UT population, financially self-sufficient, and civically engaged.

Overview of the Program/Activities. When Discovery Scholars enter the program, they are assigned a DSP support team comprised of several student resources across the university to help the students transition to UT, which includes a program coach, a peer mentor, an academic advisor, a career counselor, and a learning specialist. The DSP support team helps Discovery Scholars in several areas to succeed at UT. The following provides more detailed description of the goals and program activities of the DSP.

Goal 1: Enhance student development of knowledge, skills, mindsets, and support networks necessary for academic success.

- Programming: Provide range of events to connect students with campus resources, peers, and faculty (e.g., small group seminars, evening programs, coffee with coaches, etc.).

- Small Group Learning Communities: DSP mentors encourage students to engage in activities that promote use of campus resources, ways to connect with other students, faculty, and organizations, and strategies for succeeding in college.

- DSP Support Team: Provide expert guidance to students through 1-1 support from the DSP coach, the learning specialist, academic advisor, and career counselor.

- Professional Development: Engage in staff PD and team meetings to strengthen effectiveness of DSP support team in meeting student needs.

Goal 2: Enhance student leader development of marketable professional skills.

- DSP Small Group Leaders: Peer mentors receive ongoing training to develop skills for effectively facilitating student groups.

Goal 3: Enhance student success as they progress at UT

- Programming: Continue to communicate information about upcoming events, campus resources, deadlines, DSP requirements, and graduation requirements to DSP students through email and DSP website; Reserve seats for DSP students in popular courses.

Expected Outcomes. The following are expected outcomes for the program. While these desired outcomes may not be measurable after one semester, the program is deemed effective if the students express that they have received help and report having benefitted from the program in their process to college adjustment. These outcomes were measured by conducting two online surveys, pre- and post-, once in the beginning and once towards the end of the semester.

First Order Outcomes:

- Students are generally satisfied with Discovery Scholars Program (DSP), School of Undergraduate Studies (UGS), and UT.

- Students have increased awareness of how to use campus resources (UT faculty, staff, etc.) through utilizing various means provided for them, such as attending seminars, info sessions, and meetings with their mentors and student leaders.

- Students report increased confidence in social and communication skills, career decision-making as a result of utilizing various means provided for them, such as attending seminars, info sessions, and meetings with their mentors and student leaders.

- Students internally transfer to college/major of interest within1 year, 2 years at the longest.

- Students graduate in 4 years.

- Students report increased sense of well-being and belonging to the community, as a result of being a part of the DSP program that holds regular meetings and promotes social interactions among students.

Second Order Outcomes:

- Students are involved in DSP student employment positions such as working as student mentors/leaders or in the DSP office or in the School of Undergraduate Studies office.

- Students are able to self-advocate and use own initiatives in seeking help.

- Students show increased confidence in their capabilities.

- Students exhibit traits of marketable employees and increased problem-solving skills.

- Students stay in touch with other DSP students.

Figures 2.1 through 2.3 provide more visual representations of the goals, restraints, and outcomes of the DSP program. Figure 1 represents an overview of the program and what is expected of the DSP program in a more holistic sense.

Figure 2.1. First Level Program Decomposition
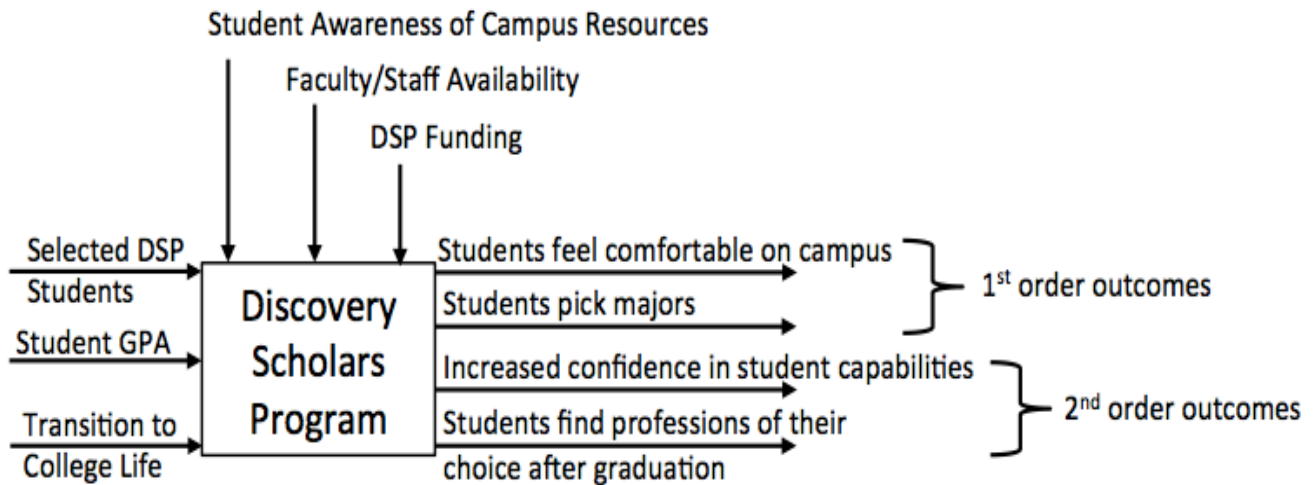
Figure 2.2 represents a more specific outline of goals (boxes), restraints placed upon the program (arrows coming from above), and desired outcomes of the program.
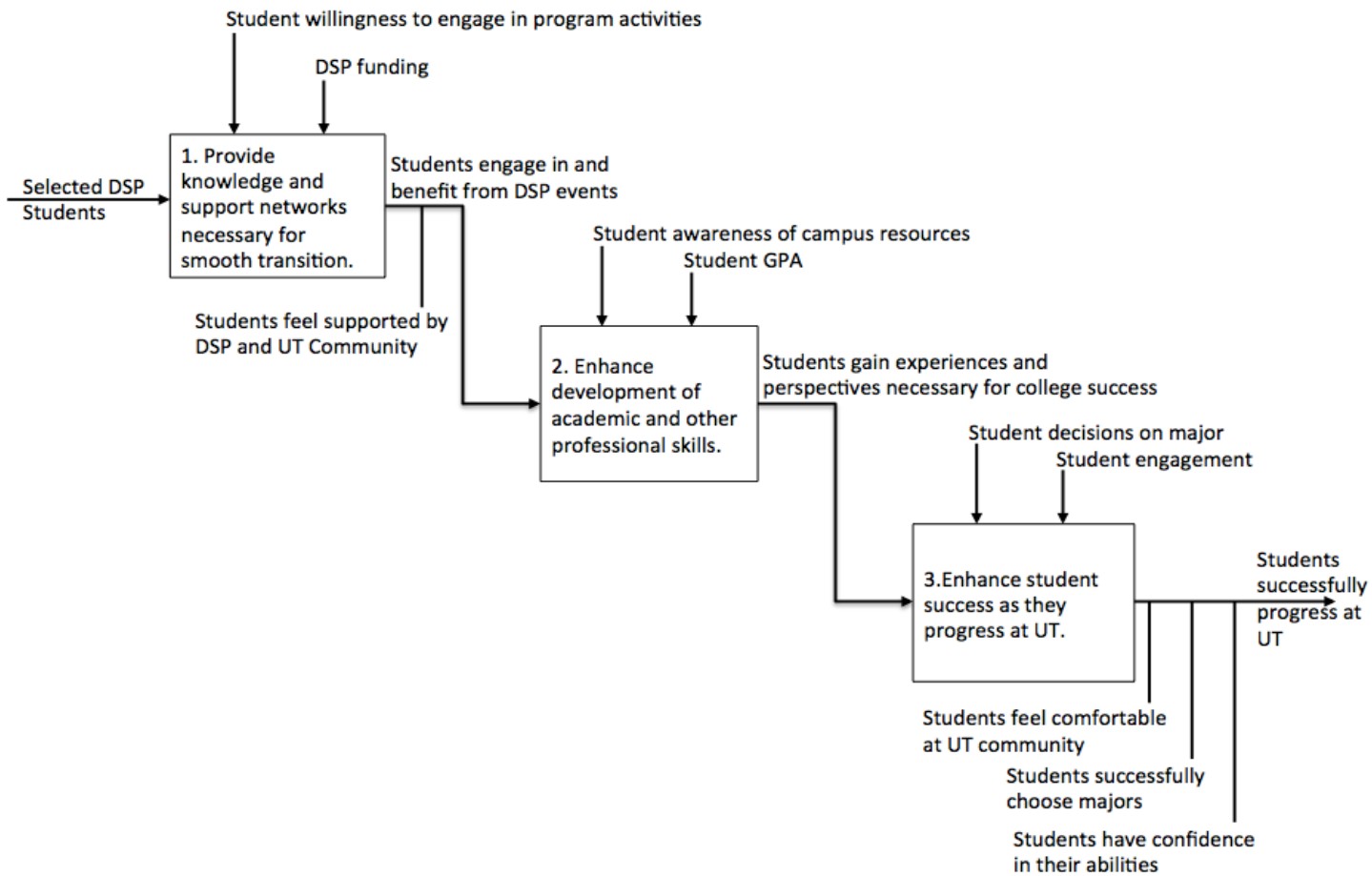

Figure 2.2. Second Level Program Decomposition

Figure 2.3 provides an example of a more detailed decomposition of activities and desired outcomes for one of the goals.
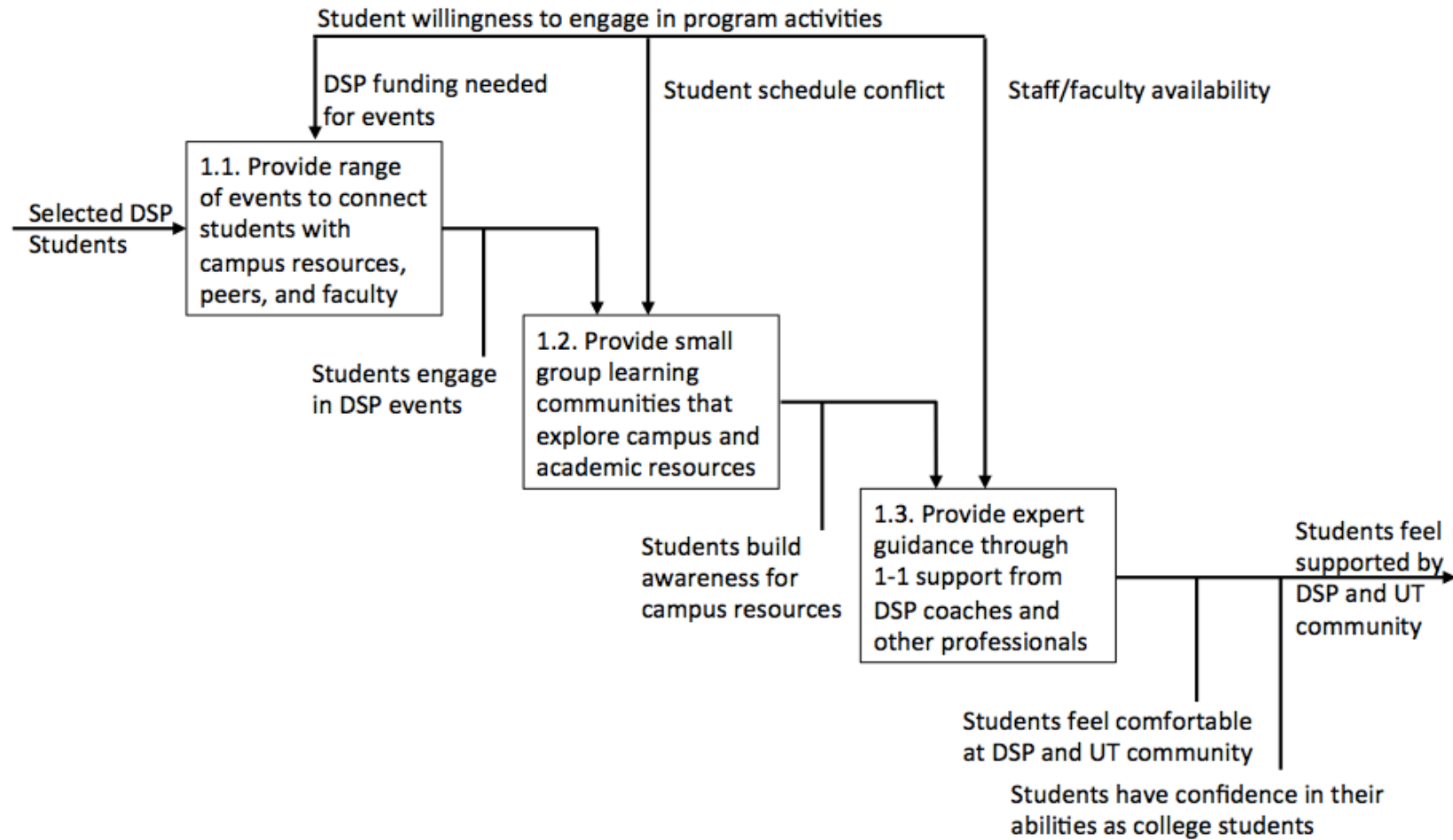

Figure 2.3. Third Level Program Decomposition

Participants

Answers of 50 DSP students who complete both the pre- and post- online surveys were included in the current study. This accounts for roughly 15% of the whole program. Students selected for the DSP programs were determined by the Provost office of being at-risk with 40% or less chance of graduating from UT. These decisions were made under certain criteria that consider multiple factors including SAT/ACT scores, high school GPA, and especially SES, and need for financial aid. Although all students at UT have met certain entrance standards, those who enter UT for being in the top 7% and 8% of their high school class have shown to struggle more with the transition process than their peers who entered with the typical entrance standards (e.g. SAT and ACT scores, extracurricular activities…etc.). These students, who often get selected to be DSP students, may get labeled as not having as high entrance scores as others, and not having worked hard enough to get into college, contributing to their struggles in transitioning to college.

Moreover, those from lower SES are at higher risks for dropping out of college with financial reasons. Taking these factors into consideration, the Provost office selected DSP students, and the selected students are to meet certain expectations to stay in the program, as the program offers many resources including scholarships and seminars…etc. All DSP students are freshmen students who have not decided on their majors yet, meaning that they could benefit more from extra guidance through college transition process. They are all part of the School of Undergraduate Studies, where several outreach programs, including the DSP, are overseen.

Procedure

The author was recently associated with the Assessment Office of Undergraduate Studies, where the DSP program is overseen, as a research assistant, through which she gained access to surveys distributed to DSP students aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Only the online survey data from an ongoing, school-based project was used in this study, and the author had no influence over the survey itself or had any additional interaction with the participants. Online pre- and port-surveys were administered during the beginning and end of the semester, over two-week timeframe. For pre-survey, 58 students (18%) out of total 324 students in the DSP responded. For post-survey, 152 students (47%) responded. While the response rates were different at the two times, survey data from only the respondents who completed both surveys were included in the analyses to accurately compare survey findings. For open-ended questions, however, all student responses were coded and analyzed.

Instrument

The online pre- and post-survey consisted of items asking questions regarding students' adjustment process to UT community, specifically responding to the three research questions. The survey included items by the following subscales regarding: students' sense of belonging (7 items), small group interest and value (3 items), academic self-efficacy (4 items), self-regulated learning (4 items), and transition to UT Austin (2 items). These items were on a 5-point, Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating healthier adjustment and more positive college experience through the program. The survey also consisted of questions asking students' awareness and utilization of various

resources provided, and how the DSP program helped the process. Examples of questions asked in the survey are included in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using paired sample *t* tests for each subscale, responding to different areas of desired outcomes. Additional descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviation, were also conducted. Data analyses were completed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 22. Qualitative responses from all students who completed the survey were coded and analyzed by three research assistants. Any disagreement on qualitative coding was settled by seeking additional coding from a fourth coder. Data were analyzed with the aim of answering the three research questions, as well as addressing the three main goals of the DSP program.

Chapter 3: Results

Overall, comparing data from the pre- and post-program surveys showed that students benefitted from their engagements in the DSP program, not only in learning about campus resources but also in developing necessary skills and relationships.

RQ 1: Did the students engage in and benefit from DSP events and feel supported by their DSP groups?

The first research question was answered by exploring survey items regarding students' interest and values about the DSP program as well as student awareness and utilization of DSP events and campus resources. Results of the paired *t*-tests assessing the change from pre- to post-program regarding student engagement in DSP events and the extent to which they feel supported by their DSP groups are presented in Table 3.1. The overall pre-post difference for student interest and values regarding DSP was significant although not all items were. As for student utilization of campus resources, difference between pre-post surveys of students' reports of having received help from the DSP program was significant. This shows that DSP program successfully attracted and helped students become aware of and utilize campus resources, as well as engage in them.

Analysis of the qualitative data showed that many students learned about resources and opportunities on campus. To an open-ended question that said, "Are there additional comments you would like to make about your DSP experience?" some students provided comments about learning about campus resources through DSP that they otherwise would not have known. Some examples of student responses include, "Learning about the various things UT offers," and "getting information that would help me throughout the semester."

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RQ 2: Did the DSP program help students develop academic skills necessary for college life?

Similarly, the second research question was also addressed through comparing appropriate survey items regarding student development of academic and professional skills through the DSP program. Results of the paired *t*-tests assessing the change from pre- to post-program student reports of developing necessary skills for academic success through DSP are presented in Table 3.2. The results show that for the subscale Academic Self-Efficacy, students showed overall increase in their reports of developing adequate skills to succeed in their college courses. These differences were generally significant. For the subscale Self-Regulated Learning, the overall pre-post difference was not significant. However, the pre-post difference for item on "putting together different class materials" was significant.

Examining the qualitative data, students reported that their DSP groups have helped them learn new academic skills. Additionally, some students expressed wanting more academic guidance and organized study groups to help through their academic life. Some examples of student comments regarding the academic skills acquired through the DSP program include, "Learning test taking techniques," "Learning how to manage my time better and study effectively," and "Focus more on class-related DSP meetings."

RQ 3: Did the DSP program help students feel more comfortable and confident as a part of the UT community?

Data were analyzed in a similar manner to explore appropriate items for research question 3. For this last research question, items related to students' extent to feeling connected and secure at college context through the DSP program were analyzed. The

results of *t*-tests are presented in Table 3.3. Students' sense of belonging was generally

high even before starting the program. Not all items under this subscale had significant

pre-post increase. However, the overall pre-post difference was significant, especially

with the items that attribute DSP for helping with their security at college being

significant. For subscale Transition to UT Austin, the two items were both significant,

suggesting that the DSP program was, in fact, beneficial for students' transition process

to college life.

As for qualitative data responding to students' extent to feeling more comfortable

and connected to UT campus, many students provided comments on how helpful their

DSP program has been, especially through providing a close group of friends with similar

backgrounds. Students showed appreciation for DSP's facilitation of making social and

academic connections. Some comments include, "The most valuable part of my DSP was

the ability to get to meet other people who had similar interests as me," "Having others I

can talk to about struggles and stress," and "Meeting and connecting with new people."

Table 3.1

Pre-post program comparisons for self-reported student engagement in DSP

Subscale	Item	Pre M(SD)	Post M(SD)	Diff. M(SD)	t(df)	p
DSP Interest and Value	Total	3.48 (.80)	3.94 (.88)	.46 (.76)	2.54 (47)	.014*
	I think what I'm learning in my DSP is relevant to my personal needs.	4.00 (.81)	4.10 (.82)	.10 (.60)	1.03 (47)	.152
	I put a lot of effort into actively participating in DSP activities.	3.50 (.92)	3.94 (.87)	.44 (.71)	2.07 (47)	.042*
	My DSP has helped me identify my academic interests.	2.93 (.71)	4.01 (.93)	1.08 (.86)	3.23 (47)	<.01**
Campus Utilization	DSP has helped me learn about campus resources.	2.43 (.69)	4.34 (.84)	1.91 (.77)	4.46 (47)	<.01**
	DSP has helped me learn about campus organizations.	2.67 (.74)	4.19 (.94)	1.51 (.86)	4.02 (47)	<.01**

Note: * <.05, ** <.01

Table 3.2

Pre-post program comparisons for self-reported student development of academic skills through DSP

Subscale	Item	Pre M(SD)	Post M(SD)	Diff. M(SD)	t(df)	p
Academic Self-Efficacy	Total	3.79 (.72)	4.17 (.80)	.38 (.82)	2.27 (47)	.029*
	I feel as competent as other students in my classes.	3.72 (.68)	4.10 (.72)	.38 (.69)	2.16 (47)	.031*
	I can bounce back from challenges or setbacks in my classes (e.g., getting a bad grade on an assignment or exam).	3.87 (.92)	4.21 (.87)	.34 (.79)	2.03 (47)	.041*
	I'm capable of meeting my own academic expectations.	3.98 (.81)	4.25 (.73)	.27 (.96)	1.32 (47)	.077
	I believe I can cope well with stress or anxiety in college.	3.61 (.74)	4.10 (.86)	.49 (.83)	2.64 (47)	.023*
Self-Regulated Learning	Total	3.72 (.78)	4.01 (.64)	.29 (.91)	1.43 (47)	.075
	I'm able to put together different information (e.g., class notes, readings) to learn the materials in my class.	3.65 (.88)	4.13 (.76)	.48 (81)	2.21 (47)	.039*
	I'm confident in my ability to prepare for assignments or exams in my classes.	3.67 (.94)	4.13 (.84)	.27 (.80)	1.21 (47)	.066
	I'm able to manage my time between personal and academic activities.	3.59 (.64)	3.85 (.75)	.25 (.70)	1.32 (47)	.070
	If I have trouble understanding class material, I ask someone for help (e.g., instructor, peer, campus resource).	3.84 (.87)	4.09 (.88)	.25 (.82)	1.28 (47)	.068

Note: * <.05, ** <.01

Table 3.3
Pre-post program comparisons for self-reported student connectedness at UT Austin

Subscale	Item	Pre M(SD)	Post M(SD)	Diff. M(SD)	t(df)	p
Sense of Belonging	Total	4.00 (.82)	4.33 (.83)	.33 (.78)	1.80 (47)	.031*
	I can really be myself at this university.	4.22 (.87)	4.25 (.69)	.03 (.98)	.86 (47)	.33
	I'm treated with as much respect as other students on campus.	4.33 (.79)	4.54 (.78)	.21 (.77)	1.53 (47)	.068
	I feel better connected to the UT community because of my DSP group.	3.46 (.91)	4.10 (.83)	.64 (.86)	2.32 (47)	.017*
	I feel like I share some similarities with other students in my DSP group.	3.74 (.84)	4.19 (.66)	.45 (.73)	2.04 (47)	.021*
	I could see myself staying connected with people in my DSP group.	3.50 (.67)	4.06 (.71)	.56 (.70)	2.11 (47)	.014*
	My DSP peer mentor is to approach when I need help.	4.33 (.81)	4.44 (.78)	.11 (.67)	1.07 (47)	.109
	My DSP coach is easy to approach when I need help.	4.43 (.76)	4.67 (.65)	.24 (.70)	1.36 (47)	.074
Transition to UT Austin	Total	3.43 (.83)	4.03 (.76)	.60 (.80)	2.11(47)	.025*
	Overall, my transition to college life at UT Austin has been smooth.	3.67 (.78)	4.10 (.86)	.43 (.81)	1.81 (47)	.035*
	My DSP group has helped me transition to college life at UT Austin.	3.20 (.84)	3.96 (.81)	.76 (.73)	2.66 (47)	.010*

Note: * <.05, ** <.01

Discussion

College transition can be a difficult process for some individuals with drastic changes, especially those from low SES families who have had limited resources to prepare them for the relatively high-SES college environment (Calarco, 2014; Gibbons & Borders, 2010). As students from low-SES families struggle with not only financial strains but also lack of knowledge on social and cultural capital of college context, many students go through financial distress (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; McLeod & Owens, 2004). This inevitably affects their college life in many ways, including low academic achievement, poor mental health, and early dropouts. With students from different backgrounds struggling especially through the initial transition phase, many universities offer outreach programs to aid students' adjustment process to college life (Riggs, 2014; Stephens et al., 2015).

The present study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a school-based, small-group mentoring system that provides a variety of programs to help first-year students transition to college life at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). The Discovery Scholars Program (DSP) is designed for pre-screened, at-risk students from more challenging backgrounds with less than 40% projected chance of graduating from UT. The main goal of the DSP program is to promote students' self-efficacy throughout college life and possibly post-graduation life by providing necessary skills during the transition phase. Through exploring data from online pre-post program surveys, the effectiveness of the program was examined.

Evaluation of the Program

The first and foremost strength of the DSP program to be discussed is its promotion of developing social relationships, which not only helps with technical aspects of college life, but also provides very secure and strong coping mechanisms for college students. While college students, whether in the DSP program or not, may find friends and develop strong friendships over time, the DSP program provides contexts in which the DSP students are give the opportunities to meet and connect with students from similar backgrounds.

The results of this study show that students reported significant increase in feeling like they share similarities with other students in their DSP groups, and that they would stay connected with those people. This suggests that the DSP students were able to build lasting relationships with other students they were able to meet through the program. The benefits of development and maintenance of healthy social relationships have been evident in research for many years (Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Stephens et al., 2015; Riggs, 2014). Through DSP groups, students were able to develop social connections, with which they felt a sense of belonging and togetherness that would be a good source of comfort and security throughout college years.

Another strength of the DSP program is its effectiveness in raising awareness and promoting actual utilization of various campus resources among first-year students. While students may be aware of some campus resources such as the counseling office, it may come across as difficult, or even intimidating to utilize these services for the first time. The results of this study show that students' increase in both knowledge and awareness of campus resources through DSP was significant. This suggests that

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continuous encouragement of the program to utilize these services may have been successful. Through engagement in DSP programs, students become more aware of resources and services available to them and actually come to utilize them, which could help not only their transition phase to college, but also throughout.

Further, the DSP program encourages utilization of not only materialistic resources, but also more academic and personal resources, including relationships with mentors, advisors, and even faculty members. The results show that students were able to build more personal relationships with peer mentors who were able to give them hands-on advice regarding campus and academic life. Moreover, the program provides various opportunities, such as seminars inviting speakers across campus, small-group sessions with academic coaches, and one-on-one meetings with counselors and advisors. Students commented that "being able to connect with DSP mentors and coaches who were always there to help out" was a big comforting factor through their initial adjustment phase. This provides students with indispensable opportunities for maximizing their college experiences, getting advices from both their peers and authority figures (Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Stephens et al., 2015).

However, the program does come with its shortcomings. While students in the DSP program may build close relationships with other students in the program, who are easier to connect with due to their membership of the program and similar backgrounds, this may also hinder them from seeking relationships outside the program. College provides a context for wide diversity of people, and the membership of the program just may present itself as a double-edged sword, by limiting students' exploration of the rest

of the campus. The program does, however, promote students' exploration and development of association with outside campus organizations.

Overall, this initial evaluation of the program suggests that the DSP program successfully fulfills its main goal of providing support for first-year, at-risk students for a smooth transition to UT campus and promoting responsibility and necessary skills as a member of the university. While more long-term goals, such as students' advancement to choosing majors and graduation in time, were not measurable with this study, the program is deemed successful at this point, as students in the program did report receiving substantial help from the DSP. Perhaps this program could benefit from conducting a follow-up study to evaluate its long-term goals, along with other aspects as well, that were missed in this evaluation.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations as does any other study. First, because there was not a control group, it is hard to draw more general conclusions about the effectiveness of the program versus not. While the students in the program reported having benefitted from the program, one does not know whether some aspects of the survey, such as feeling more connected to campus, may simply be a result of living through a semester of college, as to due to the effectiveness of the program.

Moreover, only about 15% of the students in the program responded to the survey. It is possible that those who responded did so because they had a positive experience of the program and wanted to contribute to the assessment, while those who did not care about the program simply ignored the survey. As such, it is difficult to generalize the findings of this study to the all students in the DSP program.

Conducting follow-up assessments on the program with above issues addressed would provide a more concrete and objective evaluation, and strengthen the efficacy of the program as well. Furthermore, in future trials, collecting data from the facilitators of the program, such as DSP peer mentors and coaches, in addition to the student self-reports, could provide a more holistic sense of how the program is operating.

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