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More than Access: The Role of Support Services in the Transitional Experiences of Underrepresented Students in a Statewide Access Program

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More than Access: The Role of Support Services in the Transitional Experiences of Underrepresented Students in a Statewide College Access Program

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While a number of studies have examined outcomes associated with early intervention programs that have a financial aid component, few have examined the experiences of student beneficiaries of those programs and the administrators charged with carrying out state mandates associated with the implementation of the programs. This gap in the literature exists for students and administrators at both the K-12 and higher education institution levels. This qualitative study reports findings from interviews and focus groups with 76 administrators and 150 students from colleges and universities in a Midwestern state that implemented a middle school-to-college access program. Findings high-light the disparity between institutional supports for students across the state, differential use of services provided, lack of clarity of financial support structures, and the resulting difficulties encountered by students in the program and the staff hired to administer the program.

Keywords: Underrepresented students, college access programs, financial aid, transitional experiences

Many statewide access programs have passed through state legislatures to support students from underserved (i.e., low-income and first generation in college) backgrounds to transition from high school to college. Though diverse in nature and scope, many of these programs seek to encourage college aspirations while students are in middle or high school, provide financial aid to cover college costs, and/or offer transition support. Some research has explored the process and outcomes associated with college access programs promoting student success (e.g., Doyle, 2008 St. John, Musoba, Simmons, & Chung, 2002; Toutkoushian, Hossler, DesJardins, McCall, & Canche, 2013); however, few studies have considered the holistic experiences of program participants.

The Twenty-First Century Scholars Program (TFCSP) is an early-intervention, statewide, college access initiative that seeks to increase high school graduation rates, the diversity of the college-going population, and the state's economic productivity. The Indiana legislature passed the TFCSP in 1990 and it has been in operation there since then.

TFCSP supports college access for students from underserved backgrounds and requires that colleges and universities provide financial and programmatic assistance to promote student success. The early intervention component includes: the initial application and enrollment by income-eligible students (e.g., students who receive free/reduced lunch) into the program while in middle school; a student pledge of good citizenship throughout high school (e.g., pledging to refrain from drugs and alcohol and to obey the law);

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completion of federal financial aid forms (i.e., Free Application for Federal Student Aid or FAFSA) prior to the deadline during their senior year in high school; and successful graduation from high school with a minimum cumulative grade point average of 2.0.

Additionally, Scholars and their families can receive college preparation support through a statewide network of 14 regional support sites that provide a range of services and programs, including disbursing college information, organizing financial aid workshops, helping Scholars and their families select a college preparatory course track, and sponsoring college visits.

Once in college, Scholars who successfully complete the above requirements qualify for financial and academic support. Scholars receive *last-dollar* tuition assistance for four years of tuition at any participating public institution, or a fixed amount of support if they choose to attend any of the state's participating private colleges. The last-dollar approach provides funding to students to address unmet need left after other forms of aid have been accepted. Some institutions offer Scholars additional financial assistance, covering costs of room and board or providing book vouchers. Moreover, as the state mandates that participating colleges and universities provide support to students, many institutions offer specific services and programs targeted to meet the needs of Scholars.

This qualitative study examines the experiences of TFCSP participants with the services and programs offered for first-year Scholars to address the following overarching questions:

- In what ways do colleges and universities meet state mandates for the TFCSP to support the college transition of Scholars?
- What are Scholar experiences with these services while in college?
- To what extent do these services support Scholars' transition to college?

Informing Perspectives

This study draws on two main bodies of literature to inform its research decisions and understanding of the experiences of students within the TFCSP: (1) the role financial aid has in student access and success and (2) students' transitional experiences into the college environment. These perspectives provide the framework for this study.

Financial Aid as a Means to Provide Access

Financial aid plays a vital role in increasing access to higher education (Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda 1993; Nora, 1990; St. John, Cabrera, Nora, and Asker, 2000; Hossler, Gross, & Ziskin, 2006); however, this varies for different students. Low-income and other underrepresented students (e.g., African American, Latino, first-generation college-going students) are more likely than other students to make final college decisions based on financial aid offers and tuition costs (Holland & Richards, 1965; Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob, & Cummings, 2004; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005; Walpole, 2003; Weiler, 1994). The cost of attending college and correspondingly, the amount of financial aid received, can mean the difference in whether a low-income student applies to or attends a particular college or university (Heller, 2002; López-Turley, 2006; Tinto, 2005).

Given national trends of overall decreases in need-based aid and increases in merit-based aid (Doyle, 2008) and national increases in tuition costs across the past two decades that have exceeded those of inflation (College Board, 2010), programs that support access for marginalized student populations play increasingly vital roles in filling the gaps left by insufficient aid packages. While these programs take multiple forms,

financial aid scholars have given considerable attention to early commitment programs (Cunningham, Redmond, & Merisotis, 2003; Blanco, 2005; Doyle, 2008; Heller, 2006; Schwartz, 2008). These programs provide financial aid to students who meet certain eligibility requirements—such as family income and minimum grade point average—while they are in middle or high school. Despite the moderate support these programs have received for their efforts to expand access to low-income students (Swail & Perna, 2002; St. John, Hu, & Weber, 2001; St. John, et al., 2004), there are critiques of such programs which underscore how funds typically pay the "last dollar" after students have accepted all other forms of aid (Schwartz, 2008; St. John, Musoba, & Simmons, 2003). Under the last-dollar model, the actual amount granted to students is only slightly higher than the amount students would have been eligible for without the program.

Despite the significant body of work in this area, there are limitations, particularly in capturing students' experiences with financial aid programs (e.g. Santiago, 2007; Somers & Cofer, 1998), as much of the research focuses on quantitative analyses (e.g., Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Perna, 2000; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996). Further, research on the effects of financial aid on college student outcomes conducted over the past 20 years remains inconclusive (Hossler et al., 2009). While financial aid has been found to promote access, the connection to student success once students are in college is less conclusive, suggesting that there may be much more at play when it comes to student success beyond just financial need.

Financial aid, though vital to certain students, is not always sufficient to ameliorate the challenges associated with making the transition to college. When institutions provide access to students, they are simultaneously making an implicit commitment to create conditions that make college success a reality (Hossler et al., 2009). In the next section, we consider other aspects associated with promoting student success early on in their college careers.

Student Transition to the College Environment

Initial integration into the campus environment is imperative for student success, as attrition is most likely to happen during the students' first year for those who are not successfully integrated into the campus setting (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Light & Strayer, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997). This dynamic is more salient for underrepresented students, who often experience challenges in successfully transitioning to college (Carter, Locks, Winkle-Wagner, & Pineda, 2006; Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Murgia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991).

Cultural and social capital provide an important lens to understand the prevalence and depth of barriers presented to underrepresented students as they navigate the academic, social, and organizational differences between high school and college (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Coleman, 1988). Prospective students accumulate capital as they inquire and learn about the college-going process, including postsecondary opportunities and services, and steps for attending and succeeding in college. Students from underrepresented backgrounds come to college with rich cultural experiences associated with success, such as resiliency and the value of education (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002; Yosso, 2005). However, additional types of capital are necessary to navigate the policies that shape the process of entering and transitioning onto college campuses. Students whose parents attended college and students from middle- to upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds have a distinct advantage over other students. These students have greater access to resources (e.g., parents with knowledge of college processes, more counselors in K-12 settings and teachers to encourage college going) to access during the application process and overall transition to college (Hagedorn & Tierney, 2002; Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, & Morrel, 2002; Yonezawa, Jones, & Mehan, 2002).

Additionally, research demonstrates the role that campus environment plays in the transition of students to higher education (Kuh, 1994; Hurtado, 1997). It is well documented that students of color often perceive

a hostile racial climate on primarily White college campuses, which impact students' initial perceptions of college and their sense of belonging in the institution (Cabrera et al., 1999; Hurtado et al., 1999; Hurtado et al., 2007).

Colleges and universities can address this issue by undertaking specific programs to facilitate integration and sense of belonging. Ideally, the transition from high school to college is a shared responsibility between all educational stakeholders, including high school teachers and counselors, students and families, and staff at the higher education institution. However, there is often little coordination between the many offices and individuals that interact with students early in their academic careers (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Alexson and Kemitz (2003) argue for the need to provide students with accurate information about the differences between negotiating high school and college academic environments. The absence of a strong collaboration between high schools and colleges leaves students with misconceptions about their new college environment—an outcome exacerbated for first-generation students who do not have the benefit of parental experience with college (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Without these collaborations, students from disadvantaged backgrounds might lack an accurate understanding of what is required for college admission and how to succeed once they arrive on campus.

Social integration efforts may take shape through academic advising, faculty rewards and development, student orientation, residential life, and student affairs programming focused on topics such as coping with stress, planning, and diversity (Braxton & McClendon, 2002; Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, 2006). Additionally, numerous studies show that intrusive support services such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, first-year experience courses, peer-support instruction, and learning communities help support students' adaptation to the college environment and contribute to their success (Abelman & Molina, 2001; Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Barefoot, 2002; Bradley & Blanco, 2010; Johnson & Romanoff, 1999; Smith, 2005).

The Transitions Context for Students in the TFCSP

These combined perspectives have implications for how we understand access to and success in higher education. Though financial aid is the deciding factor for many students in whether or not they even consider attending college, it is not sufficient for student success. The successful transition of students into the college environment is an essential prerequisite and is influenced by a number of factors. Many studies focus on students' integration or financial aid factors separately, despite the existence of programs that provide support in both. Further, though programs and interventions that offer comprehensive support to students do exist, studies have failed to capture the experiences of students in these programs or the institutional experiences of those charged with implementing these initiatives.

The purpose of the current study is to understand the transition context for students enrolled in the statewide TFCSP. In this study, we were specifically interested in the support programs provided by colleges and universities and how students interact with these programs in their transition to college. In so doing, we hope to contribute to the literature surrounding state and institutional efforts to not only enhance access, but also to support low-income and underrepresented students' success along their postsecondary pathways.

Methodology

Research Design

This study focuses on the programmatic aspect of the TFCSP's efforts by employing an embedded case study design (Yin, 2003) to elicit rich descriptions of individual (i.e., Scholars) and collective (i.e., institutions)

experiences in a common setting (i.e., the state's TFCSP implementation). The TFCSP represents the overarching case, with 13 participating campuses representing embedded cases. An emergent qualitative research design permitted researchers to be responsive to different student experiences at each campus (Creswell, 2003). This research methodology allowed for research questions and processes to emerge and be modified based on the data and participant responses to the *a priori* assumptions and questions created at the onset of the study.

Research protocols varied according to participants—administrators or students—and evolved organically in response to their knowledge and context. During one-hour interviews, we asked college administrators questions centered on services and programs provided to all students, and then asked their views regarding strengths and weaknesses of how their institution served Scholars, particularly in terms of Scholars' transition to college.

For the individual and focus group interviews with Scholars, we asked two sets of questions. The first focused on their general college experience (e.g., "Talk about your decision to come to college," and "Describe your overall academic experience so far."). We then followed with another set of questions specific about the TFCSP (e.g., "What does it mean to be a Scholar?"), and their experiences with the services provided (e.g., "What resources/supports do you receive as a Scholar?").

Sample

A three-step process developed a purposeful sample. First, the research team gathered a list of institutions participating in the TFCSP, yielding thirteen campuses from different regions across the state: four community colleges, eight public universities, and one private university. Next, the interview process included the purposeful selection of 76 administrators who supported students on their respective campuses in two ways: (1) familiarity with services provided for Scholars, and/or (2) provided transition support for all students. Third, the research team collaborated with key administrators at each of these campuses to identify and recruit Scholars for the study. In total, 150 Scholars participated in individual and focus group interviews.

Scholars who participated in the interviews were first-year ($n = 113$) or second year ($n = 37$) students. The majority of Scholars were female (60%) and European-American (61%), while 26% were African American, 5% Latino, and 7% self-identified as Asian, Native American, or of multiple ethnic backgrounds.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed the conventions of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We defined and applied data component codes and categories to the text developed for each interview and focus group. We read the text multiple times and shared discussions about coding decisions. After the preliminary read of the data, we assigned two researchers to each campus and performed a within-case content analysis on the transcripts using a consensual qualitative research (CQR) method (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). Each member of the research team independently reviewed the transcripts to generate the codes and convened afterwards to discuss their respective codes. They arrived at consensus on each code before proceeding to the next. The team followed the same procedure for theme identification within cases and for the cross-case analysis, constantly comparing perceptions of students and college administrators.

Findings

Several themes emerged across all participating campuses, regardless of size, location, or mission, resulting in four primary categories: 1) services and programs for Scholars, 2) shortcomings of tuition remission, 3) uneven financial and institutional support, and 4) difficulties in outreach and communication.

Scholar-Specific Services and Programs

Participating campuses shared a commitment to support Scholars and offered a variety of services and programs specifically designed to help ease the transition of all incoming first year-students, including Scholars. Services and programs reported by nearly all schools included summer orientation, math and writing labs, tutoring, supplemental instruction, and learning communities. In addition to these academic programs, some offered voluntary workshops on topics such as time management and money management, and social functions to promote student integration with the campus.

The mentoring program emerged as a commonly cited service used by Scholars across all participating campuses. Although slight variations existed, the mentorship program functioned similarly across all campuses. Mentors tended to be upper-level Scholars, often paid to work individually or in small teams with incoming Scholars. A few campuses mandated weekly meetings between mentors and mentees while others had flexible schedules arranged by mentors.

Scholars reported that participating in mentorship programs helped them to meet multiple needs, including finding academic, emotional, social, and cultural support. Academic advisors, program service providers, student mentors, and administrators described the necessity of meeting Scholars' personal and psychological needs using multi-faceted conversations focused on the transition to college life. One student mentor described those interactions in the following way:

> We just talk. Any issues that they are having in their life…if they are having family issues. They can talk to me. I am not going to go to anybody else and tell them. If they are having issues with their roommate, I will help find them another room or something like that. Send them to the right people on campus, if they are having any kinds of problems. I am always open to my mentees.

Many mentors and mentees considered the informal conversations—just talking—as an important component of their interactions.

Administrators noted that immediate academic indicators, such as increased grade-point averages, were not always the best or appropriate measure of effective mentorship. As reported by one administrator, although academic success was important, helping first-year students make substantive changes in the way they approached their studies was more salient. Many of the upper-level Scholars who participated in the study confirmed the value of having someone *"show them the ropes"* when they were freshmen. They admitted that their academic struggles stemmed from their limited study skills and that they benefited personally and academically from the mentoring. With this understanding, the aforementioned administrator emphasized talking about working on the "little things" or the soft skills of college.

Scholars reported that they generally benefitted from services and programs provided by their campuses. Administrators reported significant development of Scholars' academic and social skills. One administrator specifically credits the mentoring and peer-support programming: "I think the [TFCSP] Scholars have a really good grasp of what college is going to be like because of their mentoring." One Scholar commented

on the intangibles of these supports, expressing the sense of community the Scholars mentorship program developed for her:

> I love it [the campus TFCSP]. ...Now with this mentor program, I was really excited about it. I always wanted it to be part of something where people can get together. Just being able to help... It's just like a little network community.

Mentees were typically appreciative of the efforts of their Scholar mentors and felt that having a mentor helped them to be successful during their first year. One student expressed this impact in the following statement:

> I think having a mentor really helped me out. My fall semester I finished with 3.0 that first semester and I was like 'oh my gosh, I can't do this.' There are kids who do much worse their first semester, but I had a 3.4 that spring semester because I had a good mentor and I was changing what I was doing.

Interestingly, Scholars who did not take advantage of TFCSP services also understood their value. Several reported regret for failing to take advantage of the support offered to them, including the opportunity to work with mentors. At the end of the interviews, many of these Scholars would advise future Scholars to avoid letting challenges, including lack of time, personal insecurities and apathy, get in the way of participating in TFCSP services. Instead, they should actively seek and engage as many available services as possible.

Further, Scholars revealed their appreciation for the TFCSP last-dollar scholarship provided to them by the state. For many, the scholarship was the deciding factor for attending college, and they expressed that without it, college would not have been an option. A Scholar underscored this scenario as follows:

> [The TFCSP] is a very important program because a lot of people in [this state] do not have any other means. People in my neighborhood, in my city, in my community, a lot of them are at the bottom end of the spectrum when it comes to resources and everything. They really need that assistance.

This student and others consistently pointed to the financial support from the TFCSP as integral to their ability to attend college. They understood that fulfilling their TFCSP obligations in middle and high school resulted in TFCSP funds to support their aspirations to attend college.

A smaller number of students described the financial support from TFCSP and other funds from their college as a "safety net," affording them time to focus on their studies instead of other possible distractions, such as work. One student stated, "I didn't have to work as much. It gave me more time to study and I could do a job at the writing center about 12 hours per week." A few others also described the financial support as making college more affordable for Scholar families. As captured by one Scholar, "[The scholarship] relieves so much stress off your families. My mom and I had less loans we had to take." Regardless of whether colleges offered additional financial support, administrators described their efforts to identify on-campus work opportunities for Scholars for those who needed it.

The Shortcomings of Tuition Remission

Despite accounts of the support provided by the financial scholarship component of the TFCSP, the last-dollar scholarship was not enough for many of the Scholars. They valued the TFCSP scholarship, but reported persistent concerns with the high cost of books, housing, and living expenses associated with being a full-time student. For some, family obligations increased the financial strain. Some students were the primary

financial supporter in their household or cared for family members. Much of student discussions centered on the additional sources of financial support they relied on and their experiences with them, mainly loans and work.

Many Scholars described having to borrow excessive amounts to pay expenses. This practice included the maximum amount from federal student loans, private loans, credit cards, and parent PLUS loans. As explained by one student, "My parents don't help me, so I am living here on loans." Some expressed concerns about long-term debt and a general resistance to relying on loans. One student said, "I have to pay back my loans that I didn't want to get in the first place, but I needed them for my school books."

A few administrators pointed to a lack of financial literacy on the part of college students in general, and particularly among Scholars. They told stories of students getting large financial aid refund checks at the beginning of the semester, not budgeting properly, and subsequently running out of funds before the end of the semester. Others expressed concerns about the amounts of loans students take out, time spent working, and the support students provide to families—all of which they felt affected students financially and academically.

Additionally, the majority of Scholars reported working on- and off-campus to supplement their income to meet basic needs. On some campuses, it was common for Scholars to have two or more jobs and to work more than 20 hours per week. Student accounts of their experiences reflected extreme challenges in balancing their school and work responsibilities. Administrators expressed worry about the impact of working while attending school full-time, however they were cognizant of their students' realities. As one administrator stated, "For the kids themselves, most of them desperately need money." Another administrator stated the following:

> Ideally, it would be great if all students could afford to not work and focus on classes. But most of our students don't have the luxury of doing those kinds of things. So [work-study] is one thing that I try to help out with…We can help support their academic progress and at the same time, work around their schedules.

Notable within this comment is how work-study is a form of support, in contrast to work off campus which may not provide similar flexibility.

Work study was not the only form of financial support for Scholars. Administrators described other opportunities on campus to help Scholars offset the costs of higher education. For instance, one campus provided additional funds towards housing and books for students who graduated from high school with a 3.0 GPA or higher. Another campus provided extra money contingent on participation in Scholar support services and programs, for example, book voucher funds if they participated in the mentorship program or funds for attendance in a two-week summer bridge program.

One college worked closely with Scholars to maximize the amount of award they received from any source of funding. An administrator talked about spending twice as long working with prospective Scholars than with non-Scholars, so that Scholars understood that a private college was an option for them. She emphasized to Scholars that the school would cover their costs:

> We try to get students to understand that we are actually being more generous with the money they receive. Say they get an outside scholarship for $500, such as Kiwanis. We will bring that in to help cover the cost of their books or their room, to stack on top of other funds. So, we are not going to reduce how much of a commitment that we are making to them for their tuition, we just put that money toward their room, board, or other costs.

This institution's approach varied from that described by others. It rejected the last-dollar efforts described by most campuses and used the TFCSP funds to supplement student aid, not replace it.

Uneven Financial and Institutional Support

The statewide program relies on the efforts of individual campus, and Scholar-specific assistance varied across campus' commitment levels and constraints. These differences ranged from some colleges offering a broad range of services and programs specifically for Scholars to others having only university-wide support for all students. Many Scholars on the latter campuses reported their frustration with the lack of support in place specifically for them and felt betrayed. They described counselors and teachers in middle school who promised support specifically tailored to their needs once in college, and assistance with their transition, if they committed to TFCSP. Instead, Scholars described seeking university-wide services and programs to help in their transition, and expressed their disappointment. These support structures lacked the personal attention they felt they needed, and even discouraged them from attending future services. For instance, two Scholars described their experience with their campus orientation program as follows:

> Scholar 1: It was useful for getting to know campus as structures. But it wasn't that useful as far as telling us what classes would be like or what eating would be like, what scheduling would be like. It was great at saying 'here is what it is' but it wasn't as good at saying 'here is what it does.'

> Scholar 2: Yeah, it was [only] good for networking.

These Scholars echo the findings of other research on first-generation and other underserved student populations about knowledge needed to navigate higher education institutions (cited previously). The Scholars' observations reflect the needs of this specific population of students, which colleges may tend to overlook when designing programs to serve their general college populations.

Financially, administrators were well aware of their limitations in providing sufficient, comprehensive support for their Scholars. All of the administrators agreed that they could do more with additional resources. Most pointed to the minimal financial and institutional support, citing lack of funding at the campus level and cuts in federal programs as the reasons for reduction in TFCSP programs. For example, when asked about a Scholar-specific mentoring program, one administrator said she was disappointed that their mentoring program had been funded and then terminated. "They revamped the program and then they reallocated the resources," she said. In this particular case, the university eliminated the Scholar-specific mentorship program, yet funded other mentorship programs on campus.

One administrator voiced a concern that others shared when she discussed the lack of support available for Scholars. "There needs to be more staffing and more monetary support to do that staffing. There are kids that are missing out," she said. Another administrator echoed, "It is an excellent program here. And I feel like with more funding and more advertisement and with more support, it can be just as big as any organization on campus."

These comments reflect a reoccurring theme across the administrator interviews. Many envisioned a more consistent program beyond the more intensive and intentional programming provided for first-year Scholars; however, as captured by a staff member on one campus, they described feeling "handcuffed" by budgetary constraints.

Additionally, staffing levels varied among the campuses where we conducted interviews. This impacted what campuses perceived to be their ability to provide transitional support specifically for Scholars. At an

extreme end, one university had an entire office with administrators devoted exclusively to Scholars, providing significant attention to each one. Although not quite at the same level, a few campuses hired administrators to specifically assist Scholars. For example, at one community college, Scholar services and programs had both a program and marketing coordinator.

Despite the lack of resources relative to the schools just mentioned, several campuses benefitted from housing the regional pre-college TFCSP outreach offices. Although meant to service middle and high schools, Scholars and administrators described relying on these regional offices for additional support, overcoming staffing issues, and supplementing services missing on their college campus. As reflected in the comments offered by one administrator, "Having the [TFCSP] Scholars' Office on our campus has also been a really big help. Many times their staff has stepped in with a Scholar and helped identify that student or provide resources to help that student." This administrator speaks to the significance of having Scholar-specific staff or a designated physical space (e.g., an office) to support Scholars, a sentiment expressed by both Scholars and administrators.

Other campuses, however, did not have any TFCSP staff solely committed to coordinating the necessary services to support incoming Scholars with their transition. Such campuses often resorted to collapsing TFCSP responsibilities into already existing administrative positions that seemed like "a natural fit" to the institution. For example, a few administrators described Scholar responsibilities being assigned to multicultural education coordinators or advising staff. Some administrators volunteered to take on TFCSP responsibilities, either out of concern that no one else was doing it or disappointment with TFCSP programming. They described the lack of adequate staff or institutional support as a disservice to Scholars and felt they could do more despite feeling overwhelmed as well. These challenges reflect what administrators described as significant institutional barriers in meeting Scholars' needs. Their comments also suggest that administrators perceive the lack of adequate support as a misalignment between policy commitments made to scholars by the program on the state level and those made by the institution.

Difficulties in Outreach and Communication

In addition to limited resources across campuses, administrators felt that challenges in reaching Scholars created a barrier to providing assistance. Scholars and administrators described communication as being difficult, varied, and repetitive. Simply compiling the list of Scholars presented the first challenge and then transforming that list into a usable email communication network presented the next. Many administrators expressed that they were not confident in the reliability of their email contact lists and were even less confident in the students' consistency in checking those emails:

> I think that the other challenge that we all face is actually contacting the Scholars. The ones that we can identify we are able to get e-mail addresses, however then you run into the problem that some students do not check their school email accounts… It is a struggle: Communication…[You] have Scholars who don't check their emails and Scholars that will come back a month later and say, 'yeah I just got this email.' We try our very best to let them know that they have to stay up with it.

Reliance on email as the primary means of communication with Scholars might indeed create a challenge in reaching these students, who may tend to come from homes with less familiarity with or access to technology.

Consistently, administrators described identifying Scholars as a challenge to recruiting students to seek services and participate in programs. Administrators reported difficulty in navigating the various information systems on their campuses and in coordinating services and programs for their students. They also

reported similar difficulty with receiving information about Scholars from the state TFCSP office, financial aid records, and enrollment management to help them identify Scholars on their campuses. Scholars who participated consistently in the services and programs proactively sought them. They clearly built positive relationships with staff and administrators and took up participation in the program as a part of their personal sense of identity on campus.

Relying on Scholars to self-identify in order to receive support for their transition was described as problematic for two main reasons. First, many Scholars stated that they had difficulties in registering as a Scholar, blaming a general lack of organization and communication between their campus offices. Capturing what many other Scholars described, one Scholar shared her experience:

> I had to go to the [financial aid office] five times. The last time she was like 'you are a [TFCSP] Scholar?' And I said 'yeah.' She said 'okay, somebody didn't put it in your file.' So whoever I met here the first few times never put it in the system.

Notably, these students represent those who persisted in spite of these institutional hurdles. It is possible that some students did not persist, in part because of these barriers and/or a lack of timely information about the availability of opportunities and requirements of the program.

A second barrier for Scholars, involving campus' ability to reach them, emerged in our study. Not all students wanted to be known as a TFCSP Scholar. Though some Scholars described a Scholar identity as one that acknowledged their hard work and academic accomplishment, others described it as carrying the stigma of a low socio-economic background and sought to avoid identification with it. Consequently, some students did not register as Scholars and thus did not receive information about any services and programs specifically designed for them.

Study participants also described miscommunication regarding program policies and processes as another challenge for Scholars. Students reported that advisors, peers, and university staff often gave them conflicting information regarding their responsibilities and the opportunities available to them. As described by one student:

> Our TA [teaching assistant] flat out said that she doesn't go to the meetings and she doesn't know what is going on or anything. So, she tells us to do stuff wrong all the time and it is really frustrating.

This student described what others had reported as well: their information sources were not well informed. Other students described reliance on informal information networks, friends in particular, and the difficulties in doing so. As described by one student, "I think that most of the misinformation that I get is from my friends. Sometimes your friends just don't know or their situation is different." Collectively, these comments point to the information channels Scholars were relying on and the opportunities that exist to enhance those channels. For students who may rely on informal networks for college information, this miscommunication may potentially impede their academic success. Frustration and the sense that these problems could be avoided came through over the course of the focus groups. Differing information and obstacles inhibiting Scholars from connecting with one another seemed to cause of much of this challenge.

Discussion

Scholars appreciated the financial support they received, but they experienced several challenges related to financial concerns and balancing multiple responsibilities associated with family, work, and college. Although the TFCSP financial support provided Scholars with some financial relief, administrators and students alike recognized the challenges and complexities associated with the TFCSP. A primary challenge on the administrators' side was a lack of consistent ways to identify and reach out to Scholars. Many campuses had unreliable or inaccessible identification and contact information regarding Scholars. Without a centralized source of information, campuses were unable to reach all Scholars even when they did have specific services and staff in place to serve them. Coupled with inadequate funding and staffing, many college campuses had difficulty providing services and programs to support Scholars.

The accounts from Scholars, administrators, and staff members highlight that the TFCSP is providing some, but not all, of the information and explanations needed to support students as they learn to navigate the college environment. Intrusive advising or student services being used at some campuses to connect Scholars to support services (e.g., mentoring programs, first-year experience courses, and other co-curricular activities that are targeted specifically for Scholars) have been found to help connect students with one or more advocates on campus and reduce mid-semester crisis in the first year (Ableman & Molina, 2002). This has often been found to be an important factor in student retention (Tinto, 1987, 2000). However, many campuses are still falling short and can do more to fulfill the state's goals for the TFCSP.

While this study revealed that participating higher education institutions provided an array of resources and services campus-wide, it also shows that they committed different types and intensities of support toward specifically assisting Scholars to transition from high school to college. These disparate levels of support across campuses reflect broader systemic inequalities in resource availability and distribution across colleges and universities. Students on flagship campuses benefitted from additional support structures and resources already available at those institutions. This is of particular concern, given stratification by race and income across different sectors of higher education (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Haycock, Lynch, & Engle, 2010), and may potentially contribute to already existing inequities in student outcomes. Institutions must work collaboratively with all educational stakeholders to ameliorate some of these disparities and fulfill the program's goals.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Supporting the success of all students—particularly those from marginalized backgrounds—requires alignment and support across the higher education context. The support services and programs of the TFCSP are an unfunded mandate from the state. As institutions strive and struggle to meet the diverse needs of all students, prioritizing additional and/or separate services for Scholars is a challenge in light of available resources. While some campuses allocated funds and resources to help Scholars to offset college costs not covered by the scholarship, others did not or could not provide such funds. Doing so requires significant resources and alignment across all levels of the institution, and requires great coordination between state agencies and campuses. These efforts should focus on developing buy-in and support at all levels of the institution. This would allow institutions to allocate sufficient resources to serve Scholars in fulfillment of state policies to reach broader program goals for access, success, and economic opportunity.

Scholars reported that TFCSP was valuable in helping them access college. However, if the program is to succeed, TFCSP must look beyond access and comprehensively support students in reaching their higher education goals. Consistent levels of funding for students, as well as appropriate services to meet their academic and social needs, are necessary throughout Scholars' undergraduate careers. Such attention and fram-

ing is imperative to advance student success goals and requires adequate framing and preparation of student services personnel, administrators, and policymakers to integrate these commitments throughout institutions.

Nexus: Connecting Research to Practice

- Policymakers and campus officials should provide greater institutional commitment by fully funding transitional support services for historically underserved students (i.e., first-generation college-going, low-income, and disabled). This student population faces specific challenges (academic, financial, and non-cognitive) different from most students and requires nuanced support to achieve their academic, professional and personal goals, which in turn will benefit society.

- Policymakers and campus officials should align specific resources (i.e., funding, staff, and services) across all participating institutions offering transitional services. These efforts should ensure that all underserved students have access to the same and equitable support services regardless of institution.

- Colleges and universities should develop policies that identify underserved students to transitional services. Such policies can systemically refer such students to transitional support programs as well as provide an option in the admissions application for students to self-identify.

- Staff and office space specific to supporting eligible students is fundamental to providing consistent, quality services and resources for underserved students. This can include a combination of full- and part-time personnel (e.g., a project director, events coordinator, advisor, and administrative assistant).

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