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Youth Perceptions of a School-Based Mentoring Program

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Education and Urban Society

Youth Perceptions of a School-Based Mentoring Program

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Abstract:	<p>Academic mentoring programs promote high school completion for at-risk youth. The purpose of this study was to hear the voice of youth in order to inform program services and develop best practices for meeting their academic needs. Using a grounded theory approach, we conducted 14 focus groups to examine high school students' perceptions and experiences in the Avenue Scholars Foundation program. This study supported previous findings: students' comments reflected on the importance of the relationships built in the program, the knowledge they gained, and their experiences regarding higher education and careers. The students shared that these experiences were increasingly meaningful because of the relationship built with their Talent Advisor and classmates. These relationships instilled hope for the future, created a pathway to college and career, and confirmed a belief that the students could accomplish their goals.</p>

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Abstract

Youth Perceptions of an Academic Mentoring Program

Academic mentoring programs promote high school completion for at-risk youth. The purpose of this study was to hear the voice of youth in order to inform program services and develop best practices for meeting their academic needs. Using a grounded theory approach, we conducted 14 focus groups to examine high school students' perceptions and experiences in the Avenue Scholars Foundation program. This study supported previous findings: students' comments reflected on the importance of the relationships built in the program, the knowledge they gained, and their experiences regarding higher education and careers. The students shared that these experiences were increasingly meaningful because of the relationship built with their Talent Advisor and classmates. These relationships instilled hope for the future, created a pathway to college and career, and confirmed a belief that the students could accomplish their goals.

Key words: schools, students, urban education, teachers

Youth Perceptions of an Academic Mentoring Program

Youth development and educational attainment have long been areas of interest for researchers, and in recent years, this inquiry has centered primarily on the impact of school and community environments. Studies estimate that 1.2 million students drop out of school every year in the United States (Porowoski & Passa, 2011; Radcliffe & Bos, 2011). This staggering dropout rate comes at a time when higher education and college degrees are critically important for future employment and career (Samel & Knaggs, 2013; Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013; Sondergeld, Fischer). Unemployment rates are increasing at a greater rate for individuals who did not attend college. In 2010, individuals with college degrees reported annual earnings two times those of individuals who did not complete high school. Individuals who attended some college earned an average of 17% more annually than individuals without any college (Sondergeld et al., 2013). Despite the increased importance placed on college education, college is not equally accessible to all students (Radcliffe & Bos, 2011; Sondergeld et al., 2013).

In addition to higher unemployment, lower wages, and reduced lifetime earnings (Hurd, Sánchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012; Radcliffe & Bos, 2011), students who do not graduate from high school or attend college are at increased risk of experiencing health problems and premature death (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Schoeneberger, 2012). Low educational attainment can be detrimental to society. Total lifetime loss of revenue for males between the ages of 25 and 34 who drop out of high school is estimated at \$944 billion dollars (Martin & Halpern, 2006; Schoeneberger, 2012).

Students at greatest risk of dropping out include those who have parents with low educational attainment, low socioeconomic status, low parent and/or student educational aspirations (Berzin, 2013), low levels of school engagement (Suh & Suh, 2006), and low peer or teacher support (Archambault et al., 2012; Chang, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2010;

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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Fruht & Wray-Lake, 2013; Kenny, Gauldron, Scanlon, Sparks, Blustein, & Jernigan; 2007; Porowski & Passa, 2011). Low school attendance and negative school climate are also predictors of a higher student dropout rate (Schoeneberger, 2012; Suh & Suh, 2006), and a negative school climate (Berzin, 2010). Parents who did not graduate from high school or attend college are generally less knowledgeable about navigating the public school system and applying to college. These parents are also at a disadvantage when helping their children with homework and preparing for and navigating through college (Diemer & Li, 2011).

Mentoring is one increasingly popular method of mediating high school dropout prevalence, risk factors, and consequences (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, & Farruggia, 2010; Fruht & Wray-Lake, 2013; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Shelmerdine & Louw, 2008). Mentoring programs match a caring adult who spends time with a youth, sharing knowledge and offering guidance and encouragement (Hurd et al., 2012). Positive youth-adult relationships have been found to have beneficial effects on youth mental health (Fruht & Wray-Lake, 2012), attitudes, social skills, school attendance, and general achievement of youth (Chang et al., 2010; Shelmerdine & Louw, 2008). Successful youth-adult mentoring relationships exhibit qualities of emotional closeness, support, mutual respect (Shelmerdine & Louw, 2008), transfer of knowledge, and shared experiences (Fruht & Wray-Lake, 2012).

Mentoring relationships increase youth social capital. Chang et al. (2010) stated that relationships become social capital when they are used as a means to achieve success in education and employment. The term “social capital” refers to the resources that accompany human relationships and can contribute to positive outcomes for individuals in these relationships (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). These resources can include the benefits of having a

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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1
2
3 relationship with someone wielding more power or influence, access to new information and
4
5 connections, and emotional and social support (Ahn, 2012). Students with higher levels of social
6
7 capital experience better educational and life outcomes than students with lower levels. Youth
8
9 social capital is developed through relationships with peers, school staff and teachers, family,
10
11 and community members. Through mentoring, students who do not have the opportunity to build
12
13 constructive relationships with other adults in their lives are offered a chance to build social
14
15 capital (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Chang et al., 2010).
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20 To help apply the many benefits of mentoring to education, schools and community
21
22 organizations partner to provide school-based mentoring (SBM). Typical students spend about a
23
24 third of their waking hours in a school, developing relationships, skills, and behaviors that
25
26 impact their future. SBM programs are the fastest growing type of mentoring in the United States
27
28 (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2011). SBM occurs primarily in school or educational
29
30 settings and the youth-adult relationships are built over the school year. These mentoring
31
32 relationships focus on building students' academic skills, increasing their familiarity with higher
33
34 education, and providing educational support and guidance (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, &
35
36 Rhodes, 2011; Herrera et al., 2011; Sondergeld et al., 2013). School-based mentors also provide
37
38 social capital to students in the form of job or academic references, college planning and
39
40 navigation, and social connections (Ahn, 2012).
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46 Students with school-based mentors demonstrate increased school engagement and
47
48 attendance, better high school graduation rates, and increased participation in postsecondary
49
50 education when compared to similar students without mentors (Chang et al., 2010; Fruht &
51
52 Wray-Lake, 2013; Hurd et al., 2012). Mentored students also have improved GPAs, higher
53
54 educational aspirations (Chang et al., 2010; Fruht & Wray-Lake, 2013), and more positive
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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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1
2
3 perceptions of school meaningfulness (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). Although Caucasian/non-
4
5 Hispanic students are more likely to have a school-based mentor than students of other races, the
6
7 benefits of mentoring relationships were consistent across all races (Fruith & Wray-Lake, 2013;
8
9 Hurd et al., 2012).

Avenue Scholars Foundation

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14
15 A nonprofit organization based in Omaha, Nebraska, the Avenue Scholars Foundation
16
17 (ASF) built its high school program on ideas and practices similar to school-based mentoring.
18
19 ASF's mission is "to ensure careers for students of hope and need through education and
20
21 supportive relationships" (Avenue Scholars Foundation, 2016). To facilitate success for more
22
23 than 600 students, ASF partners with private and public institutions, including three public
24
25 school districts, seven high schools, a public community college, a four-year university, and
26
27 private businesses.
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30

31
32 Two significant features distinguish the ASF model from other similar programs: long-
33
34 term support and commitment to serving low-income students who experience academic
35
36 challenges. Annually, ASF selects approximately 150 high school sophomores to participate in
37
38 the program, based on their financial need, grade point average lower than 2.50, and a
39
40 community recommendation. One of the stated goals of ASF programing is to foster hope, create
41
42 excitement, and generate momentum toward a rewarding future for participants.
43
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46
47 The key component of the ASF program is the supportive, mentoring relationship
48
49 between the Avenue Scholar (student) and the Talent Advisor. Talent Advisors work with
50
51 Avenue Scholars at each of the Avenue Scholars' schools and provide mentoring, academic
52
53 support, and college and/or career readiness education. Talent Advisors practice an "intrusive" or
54
55 "appreciative" model of mentoring (Earl, 1988). Through this relationship, Talent Advisors help
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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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1
2
3 youth develop a hopeful glimpse beyond their community contexts and set realistic, attainable
4 educational and career goals.
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7
8 The ASF supportive mentoring is initially classroom-based; Talent Advisors teach high
9 school students a curriculum focused on developing individual strengths, career readiness, and
10 independent living skills. The students are selected during their sophomore year in high school.
11 They begin participating in services as high school juniors and move through the high school
12 program in cohorts. Avenue Scholars continue to receive career and support services during
13 college. The collective goal of ASF Talent Advisors is to help Avenue Scholars stay on the
14 pathway to high school graduation, through postsecondary study and/or career success.
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24 As high school juniors and seniors, Avenue Scholars meet every day in a regularly
25 scheduled, credit-bearing class taught by their Talent Advisor in a public high school. While
26 earning high school elective credit, Avenue Scholars discover individual talents and career
27 interests, strengthen literacy and math skills, learn to navigate local community college systems,
28 build a sense of community among the other Avenue Scholars, and make future-oriented
29 decisions. Curriculum modules also include independent living preparation, decision-making,
30 and financial planning. A career exploration component of the curriculum extends beyond the
31 school walls and day. Avenue Scholars engage with professional business and community
32 partners in authentic work settings. Based on individual interests, Avenue Scholars complete at
33 least two real-world career experiences leading to a sharper vision of their professional futures.
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48 In addition to teaching, mentoring, and serving as role models, Talent Advisors provide problem-
49 solving and social-emotional support to Avenue Scholars for their educational and non-
50 educational concerns.
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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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3 In preparation for future college and workplace success, Avenue Scholars set goals to
4 improve attendance habits. High school Talent Advisors encourage attendance accountability by
5 confirming that Avenue Scholars are attending classes.
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10 Beyond the immediate concerns of high school achievement, Talent Advisors instill
11 belief that college is possible for at-risk students and that Avenue Scholars have a legitimate
12 place in the college community. Talent Advisors begin demystifying college and guiding Avenue
13 Scholars through the process of seeing themselves as capable of success in an arena that is little
14 known to their family and community. Talent Advisors support students as they complete
15 financial aid and scholarship forms and shepherd students through the college application,
16 registration, and orientation process, bridging high school to college. ASF also provides each
17 student entering college with an electronic tablet to assist their learning and ability to complete
18 assignments. Senior students in Avenue Scholars participate in a Senior Academy program.
19 Seniors spend their afternoons at the local community college and become familiar with the
20 college lifestyle, college classes, and college financing.
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36 Career Talent Advisors collaborate with high school Talent Advisors to provide Avenue
37 Scholars with career experiences that prepare them for the school-to-work transition. Through
38 the students' high school and college years, Career Talent Advisors introduce Avenue Scholars
39 to career opportunities and help them improve their workplace skills and attitudes.
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46 Methodology

47
48 This study was part of a contracted program evaluation project. The purpose was to
49 improve program services and develop best practices for meeting the academic needs of high
50 school students in poverty. Using a grounded theory approach, we conducted focus groups to
51 examine Avenue Scholars' experiences in the high school program. We chose grounded theory
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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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3 because, in this approach, collected data is used to construct theories rather than theories being
4
5 chosen and applied to data. The data collected establishes and grounds the theory. In grounded
6
7 theory research, data is collected through a variety of means, but regardless of data collection,
8
9 data is analyzed by breaking it down and grouping it together by conceptual heading. Through
10
11 continued analysis, the researchers continue to group these concepts together into larger
12
13 categories or themes (Corbin, 2015). Grounded methodology allows the data to guide and inform
14
15 new concepts—an important factor for this study.
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19
20 The sample included junior and senior high school students who attended one of seven
21
22 Omaha-area public schools and were currently enrolled in the ASF program. Fourteen focus
23
24 groups were conducted at the junior and senior levels at seven high schools. One focus group
25
26 was held for each junior and senior class at the seven participating sites in the Omaha metro area.
27
28 Each of the seven schools has a unique context, and students have unique demographic
29
30 characteristics.
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33
34 In total, 72 youth participated in one of the 12 focus groups, consisting of 75% ($n=54$)
35
36 female and 25% ($n=18$) male youth. Half of youth were high school juniors (37, 51%) and half
37
38 were seniors (35, 49%). We conducted 12 focus groups in the spring of 2013; they varied in size
39
40 from two to nine students. Due to low participation at one school, we conducted two individual
41
42 interviews in lieu of focus groups. The study was approved by the University of Nebraska
43
44 Medical Center Institutional Review Board. Two to four weeks prior to the focus group,
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46 participants were given information about the study and consent forms. Many of the participants
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48 were under nineteen years and required parental consent.
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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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3 During the focus groups, one member of the research team facilitated the discussion
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5 while a second member of the research team took electronic notes. There were seven focus group
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7 questions:
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- 10 1. What does being a part of Avenue Scholars mean to you?
- 11 2. What has been different for you since becoming an Avenue Scholar?
- 12 3. What is your relationship with your Talent Advisor?
- 13 4. Since becoming in Avenue Scholars, has your view of college changed? If so, how has it
- 14 changed?
- 15 5. What do your family and friends say to you about being in Avenue Scholars?
- 16 6. Since being in Avenue Scholars, has your idea of having a career changed? If so, how?
- 17 7. Is there anything you would want to change about Avenue Scholars?
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22 Focus group sessions were held in a classroom or private meeting space with a door, away y
23
24 from throughway traffic. The focus groups were also digitally audio recorded.
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26

27 We transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. In the first stage of data analysis, two
28
29 members of the research team used an open coding process to develop an initial set of concepts
30
31 or themes. A third member of the research team provided oversight and evaluation to both sets of
32
33 concepts. From these two sets of themes, a second codebook was developed and used in the
34
35 second stage, the axial stage of coding. Two members of the research team independently coded;
36
37 then they met to clarify coding discrepancies with the assistance of a third coder.
38
39

40 (The ASF program description represents the program at the time of the focus groups.
41
42 Based on evaluation findings and experience, the Avenue Scholars program has evolved, and
43
44 current programming is different than described in this report.)
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47

48 Findings

49
50 The purpose of this study was to examine youth's perceptions of a school-based
51
52 mentoring program. Nine themes emerged from the data analysis (see Table 1). Three primary
53
54 themes were identified: 1) relationships between students and program staff; 2) experiences and
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3 knowledge related to college; and 3) experiences and knowledge related to career development.

4
5 Overall, students described how the program staff provided them the knowledge and experiences
6
7 to feel prepared for college and ultimately a career. Using grounded theory methodology,
8
9 “relationships” emerged as the primary theme of the study; in other words, relationships emerged
10
11 as the vehicle that assisted in the transmission of knowledge.
12
13

14 15 **Relationships within ASF**

16
17 The primary theme that emerged through analysis was the students’ descriptions of the
18
19 relationships they experienced in the program. They spoke at length about their relationships
20
21 with their Talent Advisors, classmates, other staff in the program, and the program as a whole.
22
23 The theme of relationships was also interwoven in the eight other themes. This theme includes
24
25 both positive and negative reflections from students about relationships.
26
27

28
29 **Relationships with Talent Advisors.** Students discussed their relationships with their
30
31 high school Talent Advisors in great depth, especially the role the Talent Advisors played in
32
33 helping motivate Avenue Scholars to do better in school and believe in their dreams. Overall,
34
35 students indicated the relationship with their Talent Advisors made them more hopeful for their
36
37 future.
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41 They just really keep me motivated because I could be feeling so down one day, and they
42
43 will just say something to me that just makes me like pick your head up, you can do this,
44
45 you’re gonna make it. They just keep me motivated somehow to succeed, to get through
46
47 college, to keep doing my high school work.
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49

50
51 Students used many analogies to describe their Talent Advisors. Students’ descriptions of
52
53 their Talent Advisors ranged from a “best friend” or “parent” to “being a typical teacher.” Some
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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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3 students described this relationship as “annoying” or being characterized by “always having
4
5 someone on your case about doing better in school.”
6
7

8 Many students discussed the ways their Talent Advisors were available to them in areas
9
10 of life other than school. Students said their Talent Advisors were supportive after the death of a
11
12 family member, friend, and even a classmate. Students also expressed the trust they felt for their
13
14 Talent Advisor and said they could talk to their Talent Advisor about anything. While the level
15
16 of trust varied widely among students, our overall finding was that students viewed their Talent
17
18 Advisors as a trusted person in whom they could confide.
19
20
21

22 **Relationships with friends/classmates within the program.** We found substantial
23
24 disparities in the data on the relationships among Avenue Scholars in the classroom. The
25
26 majority of students indicated their closest friends were in the program. Some talked about their
27
28 class “being like a family.” Students in these classes indicated that before becoming Avenue
29
30 Scholars, they may not have talked to each other; once they were in the program, they developed
31
32 a real closeness. This was evident not only in what students said but how they interacted with
33
34 each other. Groups that described their relationship with each other as a family finished one
35
36 another’s sentences, engaged in conversation, and many times talked over each other. Through
37
38 their actions, it was evident that they supported and cared for one other.
39
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43 I guarantee like half of the people in this class I would have never spoken to. Yea, but it’s
44
45 just like when we get in that class, it’s just like everybody is cool with everybody.
46
47

48 Honestly though we come from so many different groups and so many different cliques
49
50 and like to come together the way that we do is just so awesome.
51
52

53 ,However, some groups said they were not close and did not know each other well. Some
54
55 groups talked about divisions within their class, saying that certain people stuck to their own
56
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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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3 cliques and did not talk to anyone else. Students in these groups also expressed a desire to do
4
5 more fun things within their school and program in order to build relationships with each other.
6
7

8 Not everyone talks to each other. Only that side talks, and the other doesn't. They talk to
9
10 each other, and we talk to each other, but not everyone talks to each other. We're not
11
12 comfortable around each other.
13
14

15 **Relationships with staff/entire program.** Students described their relationships with
16
17 other staff in the program as well as how they viewed their relationships with the program as a
18
19 whole. Students articulated a feeling of being cared for by program staff and knowing that the
20
21 program wanted them to succeed. Students also gave examples of times when staff worked one-
22
23 on-one with them to help secure a job or be part of a presentation. Students saw their relationship
24
25 with the program as positive and encouraging.
26
27

28
29 It's just like overwhelming joy that they can have that kind of heart. Because you don't
30
31 find that many people with those hearts these days. The hearts that actually care, the
32
33 people that actually do care is what makes a child's life better.
34
35

36 **Careers**

37
38 When asked about how the program impacted their career aspirations, students
39
40 highlighted how the hands-on experiences in their career cohorts allowed them to decide if they
41
42 might enjoy working in particular career fields. For some students, the cohorts affirmed their
43
44 career interests. For other students, the experiences helped them discover that particular career
45
46 fields were not a good fit for them.
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48

49
50 Well before, I was all about like being a chef; like I wanted to have my own show, my
51
52 own restaurant ... but like with the career cohorts, with the hospitality one, I really liked
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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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3 like the environment of the hotel, so I changed my mind. I still like to cook, but I think I'd
4
5 work better in banquet planning or like the manager of the kitchen.
6
7

8 In the discussion on careers, students expressed a clear understanding of the difference
9
10 between a job and a career. Avenue Scholars viewed a job “as something you do to make money,
11
12 get by, and overall something you do not enjoy.” A career, on the other hand, is “something you
13
14 enjoy doing and is something one strives to achieve.” Students clearly communicated their
15
16 wishes for careers, not just jobs.
17
18

19 College

20
21 Students discussed their beliefs about college—before and since being invited to the
22
23 program. Students’ responses coalesced into one of three themes: financial assistance, logistics,
24
25 and experiences in Senior Academy.
26
27

28
29 Students reported that the program helped them finance part of their college education.
30
31 Program participants indicated that college was previously out of reach because of the expense,
32
33 but now it is affordable. Some students mentioned they had applied for other scholarships but felt
34
35 secure knowing that even without receiving those awards, the program would support their future
36
37 education. Students also appreciated their Talent Advisors, whom they credited with teaching
38
39 them about financial aid availability, applications for student loans, and the costs associated with
40
41 attending college.
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45
46 When asked about college, students also said that prior to joining the program, they did
47
48 not know how to get to college; they did not have a plan. Avenue Scholars reported that they
49
50 learned what college classes to take and the length of their course of study—depending on career
51
52 interest and major. Many students knew where they were going to college; most planned to
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1
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3 attend a local community college or university. Of these students, many also expressed interest in
4
5 living in the dorms during their college experience.
6
7

8 In class, when we do the different things like look up your classes, how many credits you
9
10 need, how to get there, it just like okay. Now I have a game plan; like I know exactly
11
12 what to do.
13
14

15 Discussion

16
17 The purpose of this study was to examine youth's perceptions of a school-based
18
19 mentoring program. The findings confirm previous research regarding the use of academic
20
21 mentoring with at-risk, low achieving high school students and add to those findings by
22
23 highlighting the importance of accountability within relationships and peer relationships in
24
25 mentoring programs.
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28
29 Extant research confirms that students who are disengaged from their school and
30
31 education and who lack supportive relationships with school staff and classmates are less likely
32
33 to finish high school and attend higher education institutions than other students (Radcliffe &
34
35 Bos, 2011). The literature also suggests that mentoring programs may help mediate these factors
36
37 (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, & Farruggia, 2010; Fruith
38
39 & Wray-Lake, 2013; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Shelmerdine & Louw,
40
41 2008).
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45
46 ASF programming is similar to school-based mentoring programs as it looks to develop
47
48 students' academic skills and their familiarity with higher education. The ASF program built on
49
50 the typical school-based mentoring model by first focusing on creating strong and supportive
51
52 relationships with students and then encouraging students to build relationships with the peers in
53
54 their cohort.
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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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3 The students reflected at length about the importance of relationships with their mentors
4 and how these relationships helped Talent Advisors effectively hold the Avenue Scholars
5 accountable. Students also talked about the importance of the relationships they developed with
6 other students in the ASF program. The importance of these relationships is meaningful because
7 the majority of literature on mentoring focuses on the importance of the relationship between the
8 mentor and mentee. The Avenue Scholars cohort model allows students to benefit from
9 relationships with both a mentor figure and with their peers.
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20 For Avenue Scholars, the relationship with their Talent Advisors provided not only a
21 supportive and encouraging mentor but also a source of meaningful accountability. Talent
22 Advisors also gave students the opportunity to foster relationships and gain knowledge and
23 experiences that a typical high school education may not provide.
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29 The findings suggest the relationship between the Talent Advisor and the student served
30 as a conduit for meaningful educational experiences and increased accountability. This was
31 possible because the program and Talent Advisors had a presence in the school and were able to
32 operate as part of the school and school day but without the typical demands of teachers and
33 other school personnel. This close partnership between the schools and the Talent Advisors
34 allowed for a more meaningful mentoring experience for students.
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44 The findings support the importance of a relationship between the mentor and mentee in
45 school-based mentoring. In addition to having ASF students in their classes, Talent Advisors are
46 expected to build close relationships with students and dedicate time during the school day to
47 check in with students about their attendance, education, and general wellbeing. This added
48 support, especially in the school setting, proved to be an integral component in students'
49 perceptions of academic success and experiences, as assessed by our study.
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A second important factor in this study is the significance of peer relationships. In previous mentoring studies, researchers focused primarily on the effects of mentor/mentee relationships, not on the impact of peer relationships. The cohort model of the ASF program allows students to build relationships with both their mentor and the other students in their cohort. These relationships served as additional sources of support and accountability for students. Peers were available to support and encourage fellow students when mentors could not, and peers generally spend more time with fellow students. The findings in this study indicate that typical one-on-one or mentoring programs may be overlooking significant opportunities to build peer relationships, support, and accountability.

Students in this study emphasized the importance of the relationships they built with their Talent Advisors and their classmates and discussed how these relationships helped make their class time more meaningful. The relationships helped make the programming, educational guidance, and support from adults and school staff more meaningful and likely more lasting for the students. These relationships also instilled hope for the future, created a pathway to college and career, and confirmed a belief that program participants can accomplish their goals.

Limitations

This evaluation study has several limitations. Bias may occur in qualitative research when the research team brings personal values or preconceived ideas to the project; this is especially relevant when using grounded theory methodology. Themes should emerge from the data, and biases can influence how researchers analyze the data and allow the themes to emerge. We attempted to limit bias in this study through the use of researcher consultation, audio recording of focus groups and verbatim transcriptions, use of memos to acknowledge potential bias before and during analysis, and use of multiple coders and verifiers. However, some bias

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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3 may still exist by some members of the research team due to prolonged engagement with ASF.
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5 Student participant selection bias is another limitation. Students who were pleased with
6 the program may have self-selected to participate in the focus groups. Selection bias also existed
7 in the consent process as only students who returned a signed consent form were permitted to
8 participate.
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14 The level of Talent Advisor commitment to the focus group portion of the project also
15 created some significant limitations. The level of commitment influenced student participation,
16 length of time for the focus groups, and completion of pre-work across the focus group sites, and
17 this limited the data collection. The level of commitment to the focus group portion of the project
18 varied among Talent Advisors, which created significant limitations. The differing levels of
19 commitment influenced student participation, the length of focus group sessions, and completion
20 of pre-focus group work. These variations influenced collection of data across the focus group
21 sites.
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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAM

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Table 1 Focus Group Themes and Descriptions

Theme	Description
Relationships within ASF (primary theme)	Students' ideas and beliefs about their relationship with their high school Talent Advisor, friends/classmates within the program, and other staff in the ASF program
Family Perspectives	Family members' values, beliefs about ASF, college and career
Careers	Students' experiences in career cohorts, future career plans/interests, and beliefs about jobs
Vision and Beliefs for the Future	Students' views of the future before and after being in the ASF program, their view of success, and their motivation for the future
College	Students' statements about college: financial aspects, logistics, and experiences in the Senior Academy
Recommendations for Improvement of the ASF Program	Recommendations for program improvement in the following areas: fun activities for students to participate in, career cohorts, lunches at the Senior Academy, and program structure/ organization
Reputation of the ASF Program	Perceptions and awareness of others at school (teachers, students etc.) and comparisons to other programs
Impact of the ASF Program on High School Experience	Students' beliefs about their high school academics, behaviors related to school, attendance, and motivation
Affirmations about the ASF Program.	Students' overall satisfaction, thankfulness, and general impressions of the program