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**BRYANT AND BEYOND: PROMOTING ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN STUDENTS OF
LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES**

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Introduction

The Emeritus Alumni Board, in conjunction with Bryant Middle School, began the Bryant and Beyond program in 2010. The Bryant and Beyond program initiative was available to 8th graders at Bryant Middle School who participated in the English Language Development Program. The scholars identified as having college potential were tracked as they continued their education at Innovations, West or East High School. The students would receive “Prospective College Scholarships” guaranteed to them upon the completion of high school, take a college preparatory curriculum, and maintain a certain GPA. Students awarded the prospective scholarships are offered mentoring and tutoring, provided by LEAP students, to help complete high school and attend college. The purpose of the research is to examine the social and environmental determinants associated with the academic success of Bryant and Beyond students to assess further the barriers they face towards the pursuit of higher education.

Methodology

The approach of the Bryant and Beyond program focused on financially supporting and promoting the academic success of low-income students. At the start of the academic year, each University of Utah Health Sciences LEAP fourth-year student is paired with a Bryant and Beyond student. During the partnership, the LEAP student mentors and advises the mentees in preparation for college coursework.

The Bryant and Beyond program financially supports the students by awarding them a Prospective College Scholarship, guaranteed to them upon the completion of high school and meeting minimum GPA of 3.0 or higher. Furthermore, the LEAP mentors were provided with funding to be utilized towards activities or supplies that would further promote the academic success of the students. This academic year, the LEAP cohort employed their funding to organize a celebratory dinner for the final Bryant and Beyond graduating class in which their accomplishments, as well as their families, were acknowledged.

The advancing of the academic success of the students was promoted through the mentorship from the LEAP students. The mentorship encompassed the guidance on general academic review of content, scholarship application assistance, and miscellaneous help that was guided toward the academic success of the students. To address the complications of scheduling tutoring sessions, a digital communication platform was utilized to improve efficiency and communication. The Discord application was utilized as a central platform for all students involved. Discord enabled students to post homework questions, ask for career/college advice, etc. Information regarding scholarships/job opportunities/financial support was posted on the platform for the students’ accessibility.

Outcome

The Discord application served as an efficient communication platform that allowed fluid conversations between mentors and mentees. Although there is no substitute for physical presence, the utilization of digital communication allowed the students to have a more accessible form to relay information.

The celebratory dinner for the final Bryant and Beyond graduating class served as an acknowledgment and encouragement to students and their family. The LEAP students had the opportunity to share their collegiate experience, as well as the continuous advising upon their completion of the program to the Bryant and Beyond students. Three of seven graduating seniors attended the dinner with the companion of their families. The dinner allowed the LEAP mentors to engage the family of the students and express the importance of their support in the success of their student reaching higher education.

Limitations discouraged the Bryant and Beyond students from academically excelling. A primary barrier included students having to work to provide for their families, consequently, leaving little time for them to apply for scholarships, study for classes, and respond consistently to LEAP mentors. Other obstacles were limited parental support, the perception of college unaffordability, and family obligations.

Conclusion

The purpose of the program was to increase college access to low-income and first-generation students. The Bryant and Beyond program strived to bridge the gap between social determinants and academic success through active mentoring and financial support.

The perception of college is unfavorable in underserved and underrepresented communities due to the perceived poor short-term benefits it offers and students not having the safety net of parents who have navigated college to rely on. A majority of the students in the Bryant and Beyond cohort are eligible for scholarships and financial aid that would finance tuition and expenses, but most often, students are unaware of these available resources. Programs like Bryant and Beyond are able to monitor the progress of students and offer mentorship from undergraduates that have similar experiences that can ultimately motivate and inspire them to advance in their higher education.

Although the Bryant and Beyond program is ending, it can be concluded that scholarship programs are beneficial to underserved communities. The scholarship program recognizes the gap between first-generation students and higher education; in addition, it addresses the developing trend of increasing tuition cost. Institutions like the University of Utah have a primary role in the affordability of education, and the new administration has been a national leader in value by providing high-quality education at an affordable cost. An innovative income share agreement program has been created to aim at filling funding gaps to allow students to complete their degrees in a timely manner.

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