

Power of YOU program evaluation Year 2 report, summary and implications

Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC), Saint Paul College, and Metropolitan State University (Metro State), all members of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU), contracted with Wilder Research to conduct an independent evaluation of the Power of YOU program. This program provides Minneapolis and Saint Paul public high school graduates with free tuition to postsecondary educational institutions, as well as specialized curriculum and student support services, with the goal of increasing the college enrollment and success of underrepresented students (e.g., low-income, racial/ethnic minorities). Power of You operated at MCTC and Saint Paul College the first year (2006-07), and Metro State was added as a third institution that offered the program in the second year (2007-08).

The purpose of the evaluation study, which covers the first two years of program operation, is to determine: the extent to which the Power of YOU program achieves its intended outcomes, the degree to which program components contribute to intended outcomes, and the extent to which other factors influence outcomes for students in the program. The evaluation addresses these issues using enrollment, demographic, and academic performance data from college records and primary data collected through surveys of stakeholder groups and key informants (senior program leadership, students, parents, high school and college personnel, and community partners).

Key evaluation questions include the following:

- What is the impact of the Power of YOU program on increasing the college enrollment of underrepresented Minneapolis and Saint Paul high school students?
- How did Power of YOU students perform academically in college?

- What factors, including Power of YOU services, are related to students' academic progress and performance?
- What are the perspectives of key stakeholders (students, parents, community partners, high school and college personnel) on the program?
- How might the Power of YOU program be strengthened or improved?

This report provides evaluation results after the first two years of program operation. It focuses on the impact of the Power of YOU program on enrollment, how Power of YOU students perform academically in college, what influence program services and other factors may have on students' progress and success, and how key stakeholder groups (students, parents, high school personnel, college personnel, and community partners) view the program. To better gauge the effects and implications of the Power of YOU program, we compare the fall 2006 and 2007 cohorts at Power of YOU schools with the previous two cohorts who entered the schools in the fall of 2004 and 2005, prior to program implementation. Each cohort includes only Minneapolis and Saint Paul public high school graduates who enrolled in college the fall immediately following their graduation. We also compare Power of YOU students with their non-Power of YOU classmates or peers in the 2006 and 2007 cohorts.

Results

Enrollment

Overall impact

Enrollment of new Minneapolis and Saint Paul public high school graduates more than doubled at schools offering the Power of YOU program, with a larger increase the second year of the program than the first. A total of 357 students entered the Power of YOU program in the fall of 2006 and 435 entered in the fall

of 2007, representing about three-fifths of the target-population students enrolling in these schools in the fall of each year. Analysis of enrollment of the target population across the MnSCU system in fall 2006 and 2007 indicated a substantial net gain. This finding suggests that the Power of YOU program did not simply draw students away from other colleges but increased the overall number of students attending college.

Student characteristics

Due to the increases in college enrollment of the target population, there were large increases in the numbers in students from underrepresented groups entering Power of YOU schools, especially low-income and Black or African American students. These increases were evident in MnSCU total enrollment numbers for the target population. Again, this finding suggests that the Power of YOU program boosted college enrollment among students from groups underrepresented in post-secondary education.

Perspectives on recruitment and enrollment based on stakeholder surveys

Nine in 10 high school personnel and 6 in 10 community partners felt that Power of YOU recruitment efforts were sufficient. The Power of YOU program appeared to be more likely to have strong partnerships with high schools than community partners. High school personnel and community partners suggested that recruitment efforts could be strengthened by doing more to reach the families of potential students, building more community partnerships and outlets, reaching students earlier, and reaching students at school.

About one-third of Power of YOU students reported that the Power of YOU program made it possible for them to attend college, while about half said the program made it easier for them to attend. One-third of Power of YOU students also reported that they made the decision to enroll in college their senior year in high school, leaving little time to prepare for college if they hadn't done so earlier. The program

offer of free tuition seemed to be the primary motivator in getting students to apply for college. Despite the free tuition, it appeared that many Power of YOU students still struggled with meeting living expenses.

Level of preparation for college

Most stakeholders surveyed did not think Power of YOU students were well prepared for college, and most of the students themselves agreed. While Minneapolis and Saint Paul high schools aim to prepare all students for college, just over half of those surveyed said that their curriculum was aligned with the entrance requirements of local colleges.

Academic progress and performance over two years

The academic progress of Power of YOU students in college was tracked using a number of indicators (retention, grade point average or GPA, credits earned, academic standing, and graduation rates). Their performance on these indicators was compared to prior cohorts and peers in the same cohorts, as indicated above. Both the prior cohorts and the peers were quite similar to Power of YOU students in demographic characteristics and preparation for college. In general, then, if Power of YOU students outperform these comparison students on an academic indicator this would suggest a positive program impact. If Power of YOU students perform at a level similar to these comparison students, this might at least be considered a limited program success since many of the Power of YOU students would likely not be attending college without the program.

Retention

Power of YOU students tended to have higher retention rates than their peers within the same cohort as well as prior cohorts. The difference compared to prior cohorts, however, was small by the spring semester of the second year. Power of YOU students' retention (i.e., enrollment rate) was 85 percent for spring semester of their first year, 64 percent for fall semester of their second year, and 50 percent for spring semester of their second year.

Grade point average

At the end of their first year, the average cumulative GPA of Power of YOU students was 2.3. At the end of their second year it was 2.7. Overall, these average cumulative GPAs for Power of YOU students did not differ markedly from their peers in the same cohort or from prior cohorts.

Total credits earned

Power of YOU students earned an average of about 20 credits by the end of their first year. This represented 72 percent of the credits they had attempted. Those who continued through the second year earned an average of 46 credits by the end of their second year, representing 83 percent of the credits they had attempted. These results include both developmental credits and credits toward graduation.

Credits earned toward graduation

Including only those credits that count toward graduation, Power of YOU students earned an average of about 14 credits in their first year, with the 2007 cohort earning more credits the first year than the 2006 cohort. By the end of their second year, Power of YOU students still enrolled had earned an average of 34 credits toward graduation. This is far below the 64 credits needed to graduate with an associate's degree, which many Power of YOU students are pursuing, but quite similar to prior cohorts. Cumulative credits earned toward graduation by Power of YOU students differed by institution.

Academic standing

At the end of their first year, 60 percent of Power of YOU students still enrolled were in good academic standing, 16 percent were on academic probation, and 24 percent were suspended. Results were slightly better for Power of YOU students who entered in fall 2007 compared to fall 2006. Results differed by institution.

By the end of their second year, 77 percent of Power of YOU students still enrolled were in good academic standing, 11 percent were on probation, and 12 percent were suspended. The percentage of Power of YOU

students in good standing was slightly below prior cohorts and peers within the same cohort.

Two-year graduation rates

A small proportion (8%) of Power of YOU students earned a two-year degree, certificate or diploma by the end of their second year in college. The cohorts of students prior to Power of YOU also had low graduation rates (7%). These results are consistent with cumulative credits earned information which showed that on average after two years students are far below the credits needed for an associate's degree. Just over half of Power of YOU students had graduated or were still enrolled after two years, not including transfers to other post-secondary institutions. Reliable data on student transfers were unavailable.

Differences by institution

Academic results (GPA, credits earned, academic standing, and graduation rates) for Power of YOU students showed somewhat different patterns across the three institutions. At MCTC, Power of YOU students tended to perform about the same, and sometimes better, than prior cohorts of students or peers in the same cohorts as themselves during their first year. In contrast, Power of YOU students at Saint Paul College tended to perform somewhat lower than prior cohorts during their first year. This may be related to the higher income levels of students in prior cohorts at this college. Differences between Power of YOU students and their peers within the same cohort were inconsistent at Saint Paul College. As expected, given the more stringent admission requirements, Power of YOU students at Metro State tended to perform better on the academic indicators than Power of YOU students at the other two institutions.

Obstacles to college success

The most common obstacle to college success for Power of YOU students, reported by both students and college personnel, was personal issues. However, students were more likely to receive help in overcoming difficulties with coursework than with personal issues. The most frequent suggestions offered by college personnel for how Power of YOU

could better help students overcome obstacles to college success were to provide: 1) earlier outreach and preparation for students, and 2) support for expenses besides tuition (e.g., books, housing, transportation, or emergencies).

Educational plans and aspirations

The majority of community college Power of YOU students surveyed reported that they planned to transfer to a four-year college, many after first earning a degree or certificate from the community college. About three-quarters of the Power of YOU students surveyed hoped to earn a bachelor's degree or higher. Power of YOU students who completed the survey tended to be doing better academically than those who didn't.

Perspectives on Power of YOU program components and student academic outcomes

The importance of Power of YOU program components in student success was examined through surveys and statistical analyses yielding the findings summarized below.

Support services generally

Both students and their families reported that supports services, both those provided by program staff and other college staff, were helpful. These included assistance with course selection, career planning, financial issues, and extra help with their coursework.

College orientation courses

Most students and college personnel saw value in the orientation classes, although some felt these classes could be improved.

Retention in college

Most of the college personnel surveyed felt the Power of YOU program had a positive impact on keeping students enrolled in college. They most commonly attributed this impact to intrusive advising and individual attention to students.

Mentoring effects

Results of analyses testing the link between some Power of YOU program components and academic outcomes suggested that students who received mentoring were more likely to be in good academic standing after one year compared to students who did not receive mentoring.

Service learning

Almost two-thirds of the Power of YOU students surveyed reported that they participated in community service learning. Results of analyses testing the impact of service learning on academic outcomes suggest that participation may have had a positive impact on students' cumulative GPA and academic standing after one year. College personnel suggested that the service learning program component could benefit from greater structure and management.

Program events

Most Power of YOU students surveyed said that they participated in program-sponsored events and that these events helped them feel more connected to the campus community.

General stakeholder perspectives

College personnel

Two-thirds of the college personnel surveyed reported that Power of YOU has met their expectations very well or exceeded their expectations. They cited several impacts on the college of the enrollment of Power of YOU students including a younger student population, the need to offer more lower-level or developmental courses, increased enrollment, and increased advising or supports.

Benefits

The parents/guardians surveyed reported that the Power of YOU impacted their children and families by providing access to higher education; reducing the financial burden of college; providing additional support, direction, and guidance; and increasing their children's motivation and self-esteem. Similarly, high school personnel, college personnel, and community partners cited such Power of YOU benefits as financial

assistance, access and opportunity, additional support, and increased retention.

Concerns

The most common concern that community partners, high school personnel, college personnel, and parents had about Power of YOU was the continued funding and sustainability of the program.

Implications

Successes

Increased college enrollment of underrepresented groups. The Power of YOU program has been successful during its first two years in substantially boosting the enrollment of students who have traditionally been underrepresented in postsecondary education, especially low-income students and Black or African American students.

Retention in college. Power of YOU students were more likely to stay enrolled in college during their first year to year and a half compared to their peers or prior cohorts. College personnel attributed this result primarily to intrusive advising and individual attention to students.

Service learning and mentoring. Power of YOU students who participated in community service learning and in mentoring were more likely to be in good academic standing after one year. Additionally, participants in service learning tended to have higher cumulative GPA's after one year.

Challenges

Inadequate preparation for college. Most Power of YOU students are not well prepared for college according to their own reports as well as those of college faculty and staff. Three-quarters of them needed to take developmental courses during their first year of college.

Achieving adequate academic progress and performance. Even though the program requires students to be enrolled full-time, Power of YOU

students were making slow progress in earning enough credits to graduate. This, of course, was related to their under preparation for college and their consequent need to take developmental courses which don't count toward graduation. To illustrate, after two years, students had earned on average just over half of the credits needed for an associate's degree. Power of YOU students also struggled to perform well academically. Slightly over half were in good academic standing at the end of their first year of college.

Non-academic obstacles to college success. Besides difficulties with coursework, students frequently mentioned personal, family and employment issues as obstacles to success in college. It appeared that many of the students citing these issues did not receive help with them from the program. Meeting living expenses was also cited by students and college personnel as an obstacle to college success.

Program recommendations

Help improve preparation of students for college. This could include such efforts as the following: 1) reach students and their families earlier in students' academic careers to get them thinking about college while they still have time to prepare; 2) work with high schools to help them better prepare students for college, including aligning their curriculum with college entrance requirements; 3) offer college preparatory programs or classes to students while they are still in high school or in the summer before they enter college.

Increase understanding of why students exit early from college. Although retention rates were higher for Power of YOU students than their peers during the first year, by the spring semester of the second year, only half were still enrolled. A study of the reasons and conditions under which students withdraw early from college might be useful. It could include reviewing student record data and doing a follow-up of students who have withdrawn. Better data on student transfers to other post-secondary institutions is also needed. Information from such a

study could be helpful in further developing strategies to prevent early exits.

Consider strengthening support for students' success while in college. There may be additional things that could be done to help students succeed academically. For example, mentoring and service learning may be promising approaches to foster better outcomes for students. In the survey, 65 percent of Power of YOU students reported participating in service learning, while only 36 percent reported having a mentor. The program might consider increasing the number of Power of YOU students who have mentors. In addition, college personnel recommended making service learning a more well-established program component, with more structure and management.

Further refine the program model and establish greater consistency across the colleges. When the Power of YOU program began, some of the program components were at an early stage of development, and understandably they have evolved over the first two years of program operation. In addition, the program model has evolved somewhat differently at each college, both with regard to which components are offered and in the interpretation of program components. For example, Saint Paul College has a formal mentoring component, while MCTC and Metro State do not. Saint Paul College and MCTC both have a service learning expectation, but Metro State does not. There also appeared to be some inconsistency across the colleges in enforcing program requirements and determining who is in the program. While it may be necessary for colleges to have some autonomy in deciding how to best provide the program at their institutions, greater consistency in the program model is ultimately desirable, and will be helpful in further testing of the model. In this demonstration phase, it is important to determine, to

the extent possible, which program components are critical to program success. The current evaluation results provide some guidance in this regard. Future evaluation efforts should seek to further identify which program components are essential for success. Such identification is useful in determining which components should be considered standard features of the program model and which ones can be optional when it comes to program replication.

Improve explanation of financial aid to students. Results from the student survey show that the offer of free tuition was the primary motivator in getting students to enroll. However, several students reported feeling frustrated when they found out later that they could have received free tuition anyway through the federal Pell grant. Other stakeholders, including some of the community partners, high school personnel, college personnel, and parents/guardians, also saw a need for greater clarity in explaining financial aid to students. This is of concern because Power of YOU may not be the best fit for all students given the program expectations. For example, some students may not enroll because they cannot meet the expectation of attending full-time. Others could decide to enroll anyway and end up not being able to give their studies the attention needed. Therefore, it seems important to be as clear as possible with students about the variety of financial aid options available to them, including Power of YOU.

**Wilder
Research**

www.wilderresearch.org

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700; FAX 651-280-3700



For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Power of YOU program evaluation*. For more information about this report, contact Dan Mueller at Wilder Research, 651-280-2711.

Authors: Jennifer Lee Schultz, Dan Mueller
SEPTEMBER 2008