

Power of YOU program evaluation results and implications

The Power of YOU program aims to increase college enrollment and success of underrepresented students (e.g., low-income, racial/ethnic minorities) by providing Minneapolis and St. Paul public high school graduates free tuition to select postsecondary educational institutions, as well as specialized curriculum and student support services. Power of YOU operated at Minneapolis Community and Technical College and Saint Paul College the first year (2006-07), and Metropolitan State University was added in the second year (2007-08). The evaluation focused on the program's outcomes for the first two years of operation, using a variety of data sources.

Results and implications

Successes

Increased college enrollment of targeted and underrepresented groups. Total enrollment of new Minneapolis and St. Paul public high school graduates more than doubled at the three colleges offering the Power of YOU program – from about 300 students in fall 2004 to over 700 students in fall 2007. About three-fifths (792) of the Minneapolis and St. Paul public high school graduates who enrolled in one of the three select colleges also participated in the Power of YOU program over the first two years.

The substantial net gain among the targeted population across the MnSCU (Minnesota State Colleges & Universities) system suggests that the Power of YOU program did not simply draw students away from other colleges, but increased the overall number of Minneapolis and St. Paul high school graduates attending college. There were also large increases in the numbers of students from underrepresented groups entering colleges with the Power of YOU program, especially low-income and Black or African American students, suggesting that the Power of YOU program boosted college enrollment among students from groups underrepresented in postsecondary education.

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, although the difference was small by spring semester of the second year. College personnel attributed this result primarily to proactive (intrusive) advising and individual attention to students. 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.

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 GPAs after one year.

Challenges

Inadequate preparation for college. Most Power of YOU students are not well prepared for college. Three-quarters of Power of YOU students needed to take developmental courses during their first year of college. While Minneapolis and St. Paul high schools aim to prepare all students for college, only a little over half of the high school personnel surveyed said that their curriculum was aligned with the entrance requirements of local colleges. Students also reported feeling unprepared.

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 on time. After two years, students had earned on average just over half (34 of 64) of the credits needed for a two-year associate's degree. This was partially due to the fact most were unprepared and needed to take developmental courses which don't count toward graduation.

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Power of YOU students struggled to perform well academically with just three in five participants still enrolled in good academic standing at the end of their first year of college. By the end of their second year, a small proportion (8%) of Power of YOU students earned a two-year degree, certificate or diploma. However, it is worth noting that Power of YOU students' progress towards graduation is similar to prior cohorts' in both graduation rates and academic performance. The prior cohorts of students also had low graduation rates (7%).

Non-academic obstacles to college success. Students frequently mentioned personal, family, and employment issues as obstacles to success in college. However, students were more likely to receive help in overcoming difficulties with coursework than with personal issues. Although many students were drawn to the program by its free tuition offer, meeting living expenses was cited as an obstacle to college success as well.

Program recommendations

Help improve student's preparation for college.

This could include such efforts as: 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, 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, 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. Better data on student transfers to other postsecondary 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.

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 have evolved over the first two years of program operation. In addition, the program model has evolved somewhat differently at each college. While it may be necessary for colleges to have some autonomy, greater consistency in the program model is ultimately desirable, and will be helpful in further testing of the model.

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 and state grant. Other stakeholders 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. Therefore, it seems important to be as clear as possible with students about the variety of financial aid options available to them.

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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.

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