Program Evaluation of the Avenue Scholars Foundation

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Context: Relationships between Poverty and Education for Children

The lives and futures of children are significantly influenced by education as well as by their families and communities. As we might expect, the more education parents have, the less likely their children will grow up in poverty. Indeed, only 10% of children in Nebraska who had a parent with some college education are growing up poor, and 30% of children who had a parent with a high school degree (see Figure 1). In contrast, nearly half (48%) of children who had a parent who did not earn a high school degree are growing up poor. This means that 48% of the 19,313 children in Nebraska who have a parent with less than a high school degree live below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level. (For 2012, the federal poverty threshold was $23,283 for a family of four.) Overall, 18% of children in Nebraska live in poverty, which is less than the national average of 22%.1

One zip code in North Omaha, 68111, has a very high child poverty level—this zip code also has the highest proportion of youth served by Avenue Scholars. In this 5.2 square mile area with over 23,000 people (in 2010)2, 59% of children are living below the poverty line, compared to 19% of children in Douglas County, 17% of children in Nebraska, and 21% in the U.S. Fewer adults aged 25 or older living in this zip code have a high school education—79% compared to 90% in both Douglas County and Nebraska as a whole, and 86% in the U.S. The median household income in 68111 is especially striking: $24,000, when compared to median household incomes from $51,000 to $53,000 in Douglas County, Nebraska, and the U.S. (see Figure 2).3

High school graduation rates in the seven high schools served by Avenue Scholars Foundation ranged from 64% at Omaha Northwest Magnet High School to 90% at Millard South High School, compared to 88% statewide. Percent of Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) students (families at 130% of the Federal Poverty Level qualify for free lunch, and at 185% for reduced lunch) at these same seven schools ranged from 28% at Millard South and 87% at Omaha South High Magnet School.4

1 2013 American Community Survey; 2010-2012, National Center for Children in Poverty, Nebraska (2014).
3 2008-2012 American Community Survey.
Figure 1. Relationship between Parents’ Education and Children in Poor Families, 2010-2012

18% of Nebraska's children live in poor families.

The less education parents have the more likely their children will be poor.

Figure 2. Education and Poverty in Zip Code 68111 (in North Omaha), 2008-2012

One zip code in north Omaha, 68111, has the highest proportion of youth served by Avenue Scholars, and has a very high poverty level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>68111</th>
<th>Douglas County</th>
<th>Nebraska</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults aged 25 or older with a high school education or higher</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$24,306</td>
<td>$53,295</td>
<td>$51,381</td>
<td>$53,046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children living below the poverty line</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While the overall high school graduation rates vary considerably (26 percentage point difference between schools), the graduation rates for FRL youth are more consistent and are typically lower; they range from 69% at Omaha Northwest, to 77% at Millard South (only an eight percentage point difference between schools).  

Youth who grow up in poverty face many challenges in pursuing post-secondary education. Only 57% of low-income high school graduates in Nebraska attended an institution of higher education in the U.S. within 12 months of high school graduation, as compared to 77% of non-low-income graduates.  

**Context: Avenue Scholars Foundation**

In 2008, a group of philanthropists and educators came together to assist low-income youth in Omaha in escaping generational poverty and formed the Avenue Scholars Foundation. Avenue Scholars’ mission is “to ensure careers for students of hope and need through education and supportive relationships.” The complex context from which Avenue Scholars arises requires a complex response. To facilitate success for more than 600 students, Avenue Scholars partners with private and public institutions, including three public school districts (Omaha, Millard, Ralston), seven high schools, a public community college (Metropolitan Community College), a four-year university (University of Nebraska at Omaha), and private businesses.

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5 Nebraska Department of Education, 2012.
7 Avenue Scholars Foundation, 2014.
Avenue Scholars was created to meet the educational needs of youth who were low income and low achieving in high school (2.50 GPA or lower). Program leadership realized that financial support alone would not be enough to move youth through high school and college to a career. Therefore, Avenue Scholars provides supportive relationships and positive role models to help youth succeed and persist. The key component of the Avenue Scholars program is the supportive mentoring relationship between the youth and the Talent Advisor. Talent Advisors practice an “intrusive” or “appreciative” model of mentoring. Through relationships, Talent Advisors help youth get a hopeful glimpse of something beyond their community contexts and set realistic, attainable educational and career goals.

Much of the supportive mentoring is initially classroom-based as Talent Advisors teach high school students a curriculum focused on developing individual strengths, career readiness, and independent living skills. Selected during their sophomore year in high school and beginning receipt of services as high school juniors, youth move through the program in cohorts, receiving high school, college, and career services. The long-range goal of Talent Advisors is to help youth stay on the pathway to high school graduation, postsecondary study, if applicable, and career success.

Program Evaluation of Avenue Scholars: Quantitative Findings, To-Date

Program evaluations “describe and assess what was intended (goals and objectives), what happened that was unintended, what was actually implemented, and what outcomes and results were achieved.” Program evaluation results are used to help programs meet their mission, to inform program stakeholders, and to gain support for the program.

Avenue Scholars invited Support and Training for the Evaluation of Programs (STEPs), a UNO organization led by Dr. Jeanette Harder, to evaluate Avenue Scholars in August of 2012, and has a signed agreement with Avenue Scholars through August 2016. This long-term relationship allows STEP to have an in-depth understanding of the Avenue Scholars program.

The foundation for the evaluation of Avenue Scholars was laid through a professional literature review—we looked for information on similar programs in order to learn about their program models and their evaluation methodologies (research designs, measurement tools, sampling). We discovered that the combination of serving low-income and low-performing students was unique as was the goal of moving students from high school to college to career. We used what we learned to determine a methodology for evaluating the Avenue Scholars program.

STEPs has conducted quantitative analyses on Avenue Scholars’ youth, including school district data such as grades, grade point averages (GPA), and attendance data. Quantitative data has also been analyzed using program data on persistence in the program as well as results of valid and reliable measurement tools: the Adult Dispositional Hope Scale, the Emotional Quotient Inventory, and the School Success Profile. STEP has also analyzed data from several in-house employment, satisfaction, and college transition surveys.

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8 Quinn Patton, 2012, p. 3.
Figure 4 shows an overview of quantitative analyses on the cohort of Avenue Scholars youth who were expected to graduate from high school in May 2013. As shown, 162 sophomores were accepted into the Avenue Scholars program in Spring 2011. Of these youth, 137 remained active in the program through high school (20 youth went “favorably inactive,” as they did not start the program and/or transferred to another school; 5 youth went “unfavorably inactive” as they were either expelled from school, dismissed because of poor behaviors, or dropped out of school). Of those youth who remained active, **100% graduated high school in May 2013** (or within one year of May 2013). **This 100% graduation rate can be compared to the 78% graduation rate of low-income students in Nebraska**—this rate is conservatively compared as Avenue Scholars selects youth who are not only low income, but also low performing academically. The 137 youth who were in the Avenue Scholars program and graduated from high school had the following gender and racial/ethnic characteristics: 78 (57%) female and 59 (43%) males; 49 (36%) Black or African American, 37 (27%) Latino or Hispanic, 33 (24%) White, and 18 (13%) Asian.

**Figure 4. Persistence of Avenue Scholars’ Youth in the 2013 Cohort**

Of the 137 youth, 100 (73%) stayed in the Avenue Scholars program and began classes at Metropolitan Community College (Metro). In addition, 29 (21%) went “favorably inactive” in the program and enrolled at a two- or four-year college or joined the military. Combining these two percentages shows **94% of youth began college as compared to the average college-going rate of 60%** for the seven high schools participating in the Avenue Scholars program.11

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9 2013 Nebraska Department of Education.
10 “Latino or Hispanic” may be any race; Black or African American, White, and Asian categories are non-Hispanic (data gathered by school districts).
Of the youth who stayed in the Avenue Scholars program and started at Metro, 73 (73%) persisted through their first year of college. Additionally, 7 youth participated in Avenue Scholars’ career services.

Other cohorts of Avenue Scholars youth have shown similar educational persistence rates. High school graduation rates have ranged from 96% to 100%, beginning college rates have ranged from 73% to 80%, and completing the first year at Metro has ranged from 73% to 87% (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Graduation and College-Going Rates for Avenue Scholars Youth**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Avenue Scholars Foundation</strong></th>
<th><strong>2011 Cohort</strong></th>
<th><strong>2012 Cohort</strong></th>
<th><strong>2013 Cohort</strong></th>
<th><strong>2014 Cohort</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>completed 1st year at Metro</strong>*</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>TBD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>began classes at Metro (started at other post-secondary)</strong></td>
<td>80% (18%)</td>
<td>78% (20%)</td>
<td>73% (21%)</td>
<td>TBD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>graduated high school</strong></td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* % of youth who were active at time of high school graduation
** % of youth who graduated high school
*** % of youth who started at Metro

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**Program Evaluation of Avenue Scholars: Qualitative Findings, To-Date**

STEPs has also utilized qualitative methods as a way of hearing the voices of youth and their families, and their perceptions of Avenue Scholars. In Spring 2013, 14 focus groups were held, with juniors and seniors in the seven participating high schools.

Overall, youth reported that Avenue Scholars was having a positive impact on their lives, and that relationships were the key: relationships with Avenue Scholars Talent Advisors, other Avenue Scholars youth, and with the program as a whole. These relationships instilled hope for the future, created a pathway to college and career, and confirmed a belief that they could accomplish their goals.

"They just really keep me motivated because I could be feeling so down one day and they will just say something to me that just makes me like pick your head up, you can do this, you’re gonna make it. They just keep me motivated somehow to succeed, to get through college, to keep doing my high school work...."
“Avenue Scholars gave me hope. It gave me thousands of possibilities for my future.”

“It’s just like overwhelming joy that they can have that kind of heart. Because you don’t find that many people with those hearts these days. The hearts that actually care, the people that actually do care is what makes a child’s life better....”

“Who knew that a family could be made in a classroom?....”

STEPs also interviewed parents and caregivers of high school- and college-aged youth in the Avenue Scholars program. Through these 79 interviews, it was clear that parents saw the benefits of education for their children and that they appreciated the work of Avenue Scholars. Parents spoke of their involvement in their children’s education, both at home and at school, and expressed barriers of transportation, language, and homework assistance, and the barrier of finances for their children enrolling in college. Parents spoke of their high appreciation for how Avenue Scholars is helping their children with education and careers.

“Well, like I tell... told both of my grandkids, you know, ’cause I’m their guardian. Nowadays, you need a high school diploma to even get a job. And, um, you’re going to get a better job if you go to college. And, you don’t want to work for Walmart like I do.”

“I see her have that great sense of pride when she puts on that Avenue Scholars shirt... She sees it as a very positive thing and um, it’s one of the few times that I don’t really have to get her up in the morning and she can um, it’s making her more self-sufficient, which is great. Um, you know, every child is so individual but her specifically, it just, it seems to um, motivate her to do well.”

Cost-Benefit Analysis

STEPs also conducted an initial cost-benefit analysis for Avenue Scholars’ 2012 cohort. The program costs for the 149 students were calculated over the two years students were enrolled in the high school program. Out of the 149 students enrolled, 6 students did not graduate, resulting in 143 students who were in the program and graduated from high school. Of the 149 students who were in the program, the expected number to graduate was 110 students. This results in 33 additional students who graduated and may not have without Avenue Scholars. Program benefits were calculated for these 33 students. Calculated short-term benefits include increase in income, increase in sales and income taxes paid, decrease in use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and decrease in use of public assistance. Long-term benefits also included decrease in crime and incarceration costs. All benefits were calculated using a 3% discount rate to show their opportunity value.

Table 1 provides an overview of the program costs and benefits. The overall net benefits were positive in both the short term (10 years) and long term (40 years). The short-term cost benefit ratio is 2.13, meaning that for every $1 in program costs, there is expected to be $2.13 in benefits in the short-term. The long-term cost benefit ratio is 5.89, meaning that for every $1 in program costs, there are $5.89 in benefits over the long-term.

12 Based on percentages published by the Nebraska Department of Education.
Table 1. Overview of Costs and Benefits for 33 Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SHORT-TERM</th>
<th></th>
<th>LONG-TERM</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Societal</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Societal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased income</td>
<td>$1,643,058</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$4,434,983</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased use of public assistance</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$9,792</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$4,610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased use of SNAP</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$77,185</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$108,737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in income taxes paid</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$38,409</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$95,885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in sales tax paid</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$28,754</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$78,675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease in crime costs</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$22,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease in incarceration costs</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$221,799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>$1,643,058</td>
<td>$154,140</td>
<td>$4,434,983</td>
<td>$525,827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Benefits</td>
<td>$1,797,198</td>
<td></td>
<td>$4,960,810</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Costs</td>
<td>$842,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>$842,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL NET BENEFITS</td>
<td>$955,198</td>
<td></td>
<td>$4,118,810</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BENEFIT-COST RATIO</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6 shows the cumulative benefits exceed costs by Year 5, and over the long-term, the cumulative net benefits continue to increase throughout an individual’s lifetime.

Figure 6. Long-Term Cumulative Net Benefits

Avenue Scholars’ Program Evaluation: Next Steps

STEPs and Avenue Scholars have worked together to identify many “next steps” for continued quantitative and qualitative evaluation. We have requested data from the Nebraska Department of Education on students who are similar to those served by Avenue Scholars in order to more accurately
compare educational outcomes for youth who have and have not participated in Avenue Scholars. We will continue to extend the longitudinal analyses of youth who participate in Avenue Scholars to look at both educational and career outcomes. We also plan to look at processes and outcomes for specific groups of youth; i.e. African-American males and youth who become parents.

**Replicability of Avenue Scholars across Nebraska**

Avenue Scholars hopes to replicate their program across the State of Nebraska. Key program components include:

1. High school presence: an Avenue Scholars class in the high school(s);
2. Community college involvement: the ability for youth to move through community college in cohorts;
3. Funding; and
4. Program evaluation: ensure program fidelity and outcomes in each unique context.

**Conclusion: Program Evaluation Plays a Critical Role**

Program evaluation is critically important for program delivery and outcomes. Program evaluation that is participatory and utilization-focused provides accountability and learning for the program and provides results that are authentic and useful. Both the process of doing program evaluation and the results raise questions and provide growth pathways. Program evaluation helps organizations to be more effective as they better serve clients, and more efficient as funds can be utilized in ways that produce positive results.

**References**


U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2001-2010.