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Evaluation of United Friends of the Children's Scholars Program

Kelly Murphy, Kristin Sepulveda, Michael Bradley, Samantha Anderson



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Overview

In spring 2017, [United Friends of the Children](#) (United Friends), a nonprofit dedicated to empowering current and former youth in foster care on their journey to self-sufficiency, commissioned [Child Trends](#) to conduct an independent evaluation of United Friends' Scholars and Pathways programs. The goal was to document the experiences of youth and young adults affiliated with United Friends and explore how participation in its programs affects youth outcomes. A key focus of the evaluation involved examining how United Friends' relationship model—which focuses on forging lasting, trusting ties between youth and positive adult role models—contributes to successful outcomes.

The findings in this report show:

- United Friends counselors are successful in both developing strong, supportive, trusting relationships with youth they work with and cultivating an environment in which young people feel supported by their peers and multiple other United Friends staff.
- With participants completing an average of more than three years in the Scholars program, United Friends consistently provides young people with a solid support network during a substantial portion of their transition to adulthood.
- Participation in the Scholars program can contribute to young people's educational success. This is because longer durations in the program were significantly associated with access to more educational resources and more confidence that completing college is possible.
- Ninety-nine percent of Scholars program participants from the classes of 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 had graduated by May 2019—a figure that stands in stark contrast to the national data that indicate that only 65 percent of youth in foster care graduate high school by age 21.ⁱ
- Young people who participate in the Scholars program have high academic aspirations and feel well-prepared to achieve their educational goals. However, many cited financial barriers to completing college, including not having enough money and having to work while attending school. As a result, United Friends should consider expanding its focus on connecting youth to financial aid resources.
- United Friends' relationship model appears to be a driver of the program's success. Positive participant-counselor relationships were associated with stronger ties with peers, greater social competence, and an increase in educational engagement, goal setting, and initiative taking. Feeling connected to United Friends more broadly was also associated with the extent to which young people demonstrated goal setting, increased civic engagement, and more positive perceptions of their mental health, and to which they perceived fewer barriers to employment.
- Although participants, particularly those who are older, feel well-supported by United Friends, they report a need for support outside of the organization. As such, United Friends should consider strengthening ties between young people and community resources, especially those related to housing and healthcare.
- United Friends has demonstrated mixed results in enhancing young peoples' relationships with their caregivers. Therefore, the organization should consider expanding efforts to engage young people's families in the program.

Background

Youth with experience in the foster care system are less likely to achieve key educational milestones than their counterparts without a similar background. Young people in foster care often face multiple challenges (e.g., exposure to trauma, separation from family, frequent out-of-home placement and school changes, and a lack of social support or a “safety net”). Such adversity can inhibit their ability to accomplish key milestones such as graduating from high school and entering and completing post-secondary education or training.ⁱⁱ

United Friends of the Children (United Friends) addresses this problem through its Scholars program, an 11-year education initiative that provides the support current and former foster youth need to graduate from high school and college. Based in Los Angeles, United Friends targets students beginning in the 7th grade and provides them with support through tutoring, test preparation, workshops, college tours, and career development until college graduation.ⁱⁱⁱ A key component of the Scholars program is its emphasis on a social support system that partners with students on their educational journey. The relationships United Friends counselors form with students are key because this social support provides youth with the tools needed to achieve positive educational outcomes.

Counselors work in teams and are assigned to youths based on their grade level:

- **Engaging Minds:** 7th through 10th grades
- **Achieving Results:** 11th grade through 1st year of college
- **Ultimate Impact:** 2nd year to end of college¹

Evaluation Methods

Our evaluation was designed to answer the following questions:

- **How and to what extent does the Scholars program affect participants’:**
 - Educational attainment?
 - Socio-emotional well-being?
 - Positive relationships with others in and out of the program?
 - Self-sufficiency?
- **How and to what extent does United Friends’ Scholars program affect caregivers’:**
 - Awareness of the value of college?

¹ Ideally, participants complete the program by the 5th year of college, but it can be extended.

Data Sources

This report provides United Friends with strategies for program improvement by drawing on the following data sources for evaluation:

Administrative Data

Child Trends used Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) data, which includes details on program participants’ outcomes, program dosage, and participant characteristics.

Participant Surveys

The surveys help assess staff-participant relationship quality, United Friends’ relationship model, and youth outcomes.

Staff Focus Groups

Data collected assess United Friend’s relationship model and program implementation quality.

Participant Focus Groups and Interviews

Qualitative data gathered from participants were used to more deeply examine their experiences and United Friends’ relationship model.

- Ability to support educational attainment?
- **How and to what extent does United Friends' relationship model affect participant outcomes?**

To answer these questions, we used 1) United Friends' Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) administrative data; 2) a survey of Scholars program participants; and 3) data from focus groups and interviews conducted with United Friends counselors and program participants (see Data Sources text box for more information).

We administered the Scholars program participant survey in spring 2018 and early 2019. A total of 298 young people completed a survey during at least one of the data collection periods. This represents a response rate of approximately 42 percent.² Although this response rate is somewhat higher than typical response rates for online surveys,^{iv} there is a chance that the participants who completed a survey may not represent all Scholars program participants.

To understand the extent to which the survey sample was reflective of all Scholars program participants, we used United Friends' administrative data on participant characteristics to compare the two groups. Table 1 displays the demographic and background characteristics of Scholars program participants with and without survey data. As reflected in Table 1, the sample of participants with survey data was fairly similar to the full population of Scholars program participants.³ As expected, however, survey respondents were more likely to be currently enrolled in the Scholars program than participants without survey data.⁴ In addition, participants with survey data were significantly younger at their enrollment ($M=14.60$) than participants without survey data ($M=15.03$) and had participated in the Scholars program for significantly more days ($M=1,344.50$) than participants without survey data ($M=1,164.34$).⁵ Given these differences, the results of the Scholars program participant survey should be interpreted with some caution, as they might not fully represent all program participants.

² Response rates were calculated using United Friends' administrative data on participant enrollment and exit dates. Based on these data, a total of 713 young people were enrolled in the Scholars program at any time between November 15, 2017 (start of the first survey administration) and May 1, 2019 (end of the second survey administration).

³ Results from Fisher's exact test indicate that there were no significant differences in race/ethnicity, gender, school level, and number of placements experienced in foster care between Scholars program participants with and without survey data.

⁴ $\chi(1)= 188.78, p<.001$; Current participation was defined as any youth who had not exited the program by May 13, 2019.

⁵ $t(626.135) = -3.6508, p<.001$

Scholars Program Participants

From January 2016 through May 2019, a total of 985 young people participated in the Scholars program.⁶ Two-thirds of these participants were middle and high school students (67 percent) and one third were college students (33 percent). Throughout this report we present the findings in aggregate, however, given that middle/high school students and college students are in different life stages (adolescence and early adulthood), we disaggregated participant data by school level to assess whether the patterns that emerged were consistent across both age groups. Thus, unless otherwise noted, findings presented throughout this report are consistent across both age groups of young people.

Participant demographics

Overall, just over 50 percent of young people in United Friends' Scholars program are Latinx/Hispanic, over one-third are Black/African American, and the remainder are Asian (2 percent), white (3 percent), or other (5 percent). The majority of participants identify as female (63 percent). On average, participants were 14-years-old when they entered the Scholars program and were 18-years-old when they left the program.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of program participants and survey respondents

	Participant demographic characteristics	Survey respondents (N=298)	Scholars participants without survey data (N=687)	All Scholars participants (N=985)
Race/Ethnicity	Latinx/Hispanic (Any Race)	59%	54%	56%
	Black/African American, non-Hispanic	31%	35%	34%
	Other, non-Hispanic	6%	5%	5%
	Asian, non-Hispanic	3%	2%	2%
	White, non-Hispanic	2%	3%	3%
Gender	Female	66%	62%	63%
	Male	35%	38%	37%
Education Level ^a	Middle School & High School	70%	65%	67%
	College	30%	35%	33%
Enrollment Status ^b	Current participant	84%	36%	51%
	Former participant	16%	64%	49%

Note: Table includes participants for whom data were available. Gender data were missing for about 5 percent of participants, and race/ethnicity data were missing for 7 percent. ^a Some youth participated from middle/high school through college; those who fell into both categories were included in the college group to avoid duplicate counts.

^b Current participation was defined as any youth who had not exited the program by May 2019.

There were a few differences in the demographic composition of participants across the two education levels. College-aged participants were more likely than middle and high school participants to be female.⁷ In addition, middle/high school participants were more likely to be Hispanic (any race), and participants in

⁶ Data are based on United Friends administrative data on participant demographic characteristics.

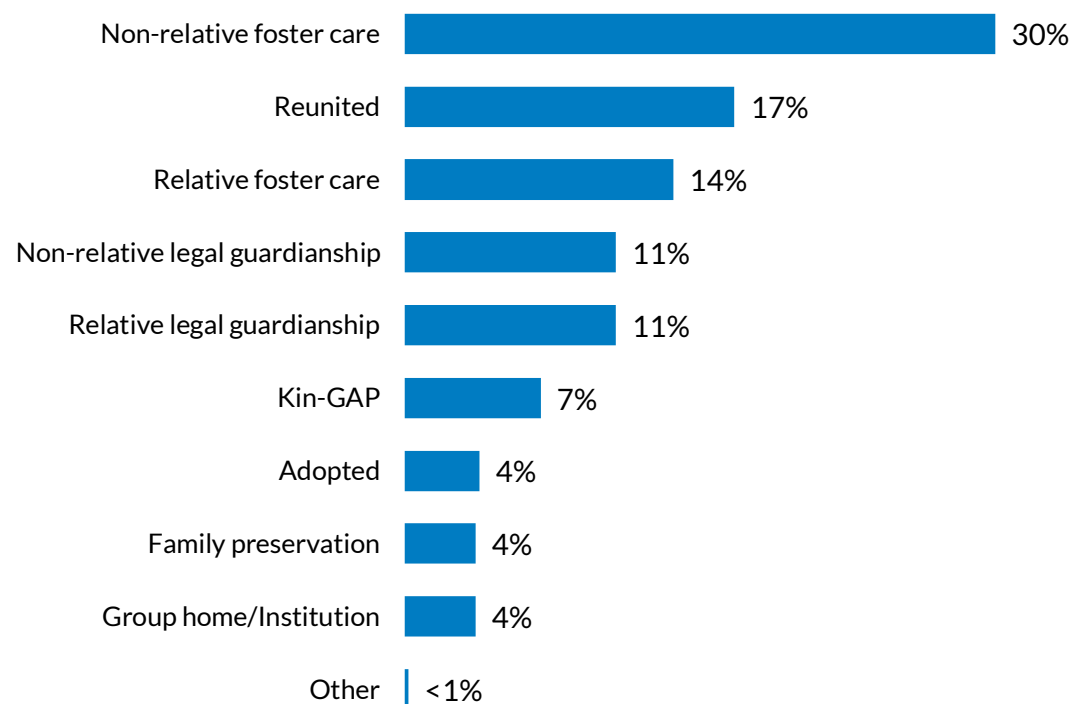
⁷ $\chi^2(1) = 32.76, p < .001$

college were more likely to be Black or some other race.⁸ As expected, participants in college were significantly older at program intake⁹ and exit¹⁰ than middle/high school participants.

Participant experiences in foster care

To be eligible to enroll in the Scholars program, middle school and high school students must have an open case (including reunification and family maintenance) with the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services or be in a kinship or legal guardianship placement.¹¹ The most common out-of-home placement for middle and high school-aged students is non-relative foster care (30 percent), followed by relative foster care (14 percent), relative legal guardianship (11 percent), non-relative legal guardianship (11 percent), and Kinship Guardian Assistance Payment Program (Kin-GAP, 7 percent). In addition, many youth were living with their families: 17 percent were placed with their families following reunification, 4 percent were living with adoptive families, and 4 percent were living with their families while a family preservation case was open.

Figure 1. Most recent placement type for middle & high school students (N=521)



Source: United Friends administrative data, January 2016 through May 2019.

Many middle and high school Scholars program participants experienced placement instability (median = 2; range 0 to 29). As can be seen in Figure 2, approximately 60 percent of participants had experienced two or

⁸ $\chi(2) = 41.21, p < .001$

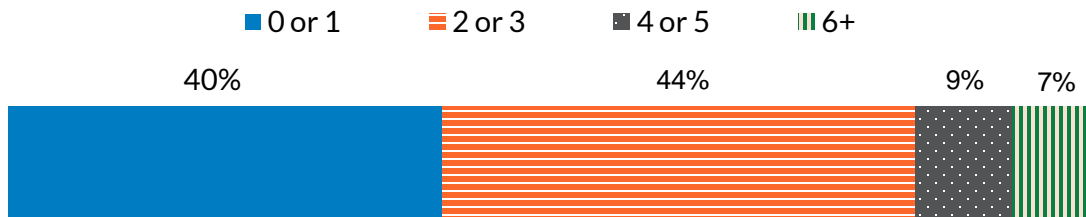
⁹ $t(472.09) = -49.44, p < .001$

¹⁰ $t(719.86) = -48.46, p < .001$

¹¹ While these are the eligibility requirements at the time of enrollment, program participants often remain enrolled in the Scholars program after their case is closed.

more out-of-home placements. Just over 40 percent had experienced 2 to 3 placements, 9 percent experienced 4 to 5 placements, and 7 percent experienced 6 or more placements.

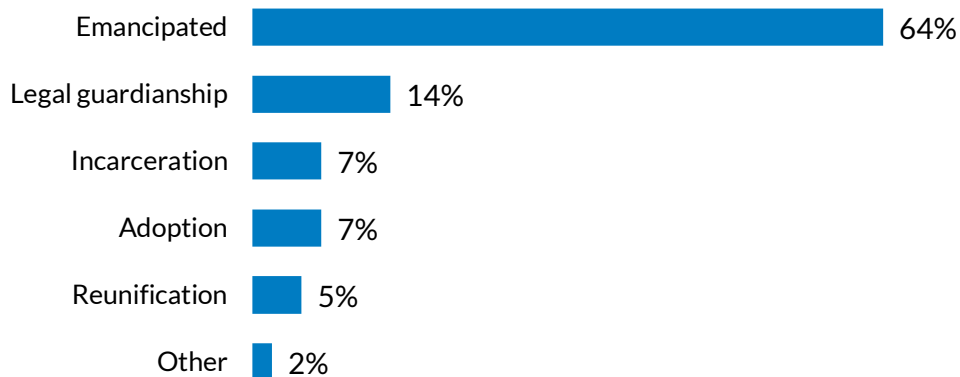
Figure 2. Number of placements for middle & high school participants (N=420)



Source: United Friends administrative data, January 2016 through May 2019.

Because many college-aged students have left foster care, the Scholars program is open to any community college student who is or was Independent Living Program (ILP) eligible.^{12, v} As such, United Friends only maintains data on the foster care experiences of younger program participants. To better understand the foster care experiences of this older group of participants, we asked respondents to report if they were currently in foster care (as youth may remain in extended foster care in California up to age 21^{vi}). Of the 80 college-aged participants who responded to the question, 70 percent indicated that they had exited care, 26 percent indicated that they were still in foster care, and 4 percent indicated that they did not know if they were still in foster care. Of the 56 participants who were no longer in care, most (64 percent) exited care by “aging out” or emancipating. The remainder exited care through legal guardianship (14 percent), incarceration (7 percent), adoption (7 percent), reunification (5 percent), or other (2 percent).

Figure 3. Exit reason for college participants no longer in foster care (N=56)



Source: Child Trends survey of United Friends Scholars program participants, 2018-2019.

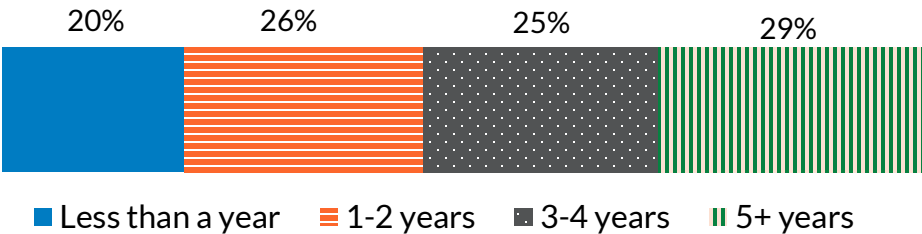
¹² In California, young people are ILP eligible between ages 16 and 21 if they meet one of the following criteria: 1) were in foster care between the ages of 16 and 19; 2) were placed in out-of-home care by a tribe or tribal organization between ages 16 and 19; 3) are a former dependent who entered kinship guardianship and received Kin-GAP payments between the ages of 16 and 18; or 4) are a former dependent who entered non-relative guardianship after age 8 and have received permanent placement services.

Program Participation and Experiences

Length of participation

For young people to achieve the maximum benefits of participation in the Scholars program, they must participate in the program for an extended period of time. Figure 4 displays the distribution of the length of time participants have been enrolled at United Friends. Given that the Scholars program is designed to support youth across school years, most participants (80 percent) were enrolled for more than a year. Notably, 29 percent of participants have been enrolled for five or more years.

Figure 4. Years enrolled in the United Friends Scholars program



Source: United Friends administrative data January 2016 through May 2019.

Table 2 displays the mean days enrolled for program participants who took part in program activities from January 2016 through May 2019. Overall, youth were a part of the program for an average of 1,218 days (just over three years). As can be seen in Table 2, on average, college-aged youth participated in the Scholars program for nearly one-year longer than middle/high school students.¹³ Given that some youth remain involved in the Scholars program from middle school through college, this finding is unsurprising.

Table 2. Mean days enrolled for participants, by education level and overall

Education Level	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range	N
Middle & High School	1,092	716.3	4 - 2,862	713
College	1,297	618.6	7 - 2,241	327
Overall	1,218	748.4	4 - 3,132	982

Source: United Friends administrative data, January 2016 through May 2019.

To further explore participant retention rates, we restricted our analysis to participants who had exited the program. Of the participants who exited the program (N=486), just 16 percent had durations of under a year. Notably, one-third of participants remained in the program for five or more years. Together, these findings indicate that the Scholars program is successful at retaining young people across multiple years, providing consistent support through a substantial portion of young people’s transition to adulthood.

¹³ $t(686.53) = - 11.76, p < .001$

United Friends relationship model

One core United Friends principle is to build meaningful, lasting relationships with young people through commitment and consistency. By building these strong relationships, United Friends counselors address participants' critical emotional needs.^{vii}

To examine the strength of these relationships, we examined participants' responses to a series of questions related to their relationships with United Friends counselors. Each item included in these scales were based on a 5-point scale (1: *None of the time*; 5: *All of the time*). On average, Scholars program participants expressed strong, positive relationships with their counselors (median = 4.9).¹⁴

To explore staff-participant relationships more deeply, Figure 5 presents participant responses for each item. As reflected in Figure 5, generally, participants are happy with the way counselors treat them most or all of the time. Almost all participants felt comfortable with their counselor and that their counselor respected them and listened to what they had to say. As can be seen in the callout box, below, the opinions of focus group participants and interviewees align well with the survey data. Together these results suggest that youth are able to develop strong, positive relationships with their counselors.

When I see my counselor here as compared to school, I feel like I want to see her. The frequent checkups and the personal relationship make me feel like she cares about my grades, my feelings, and our relationship.

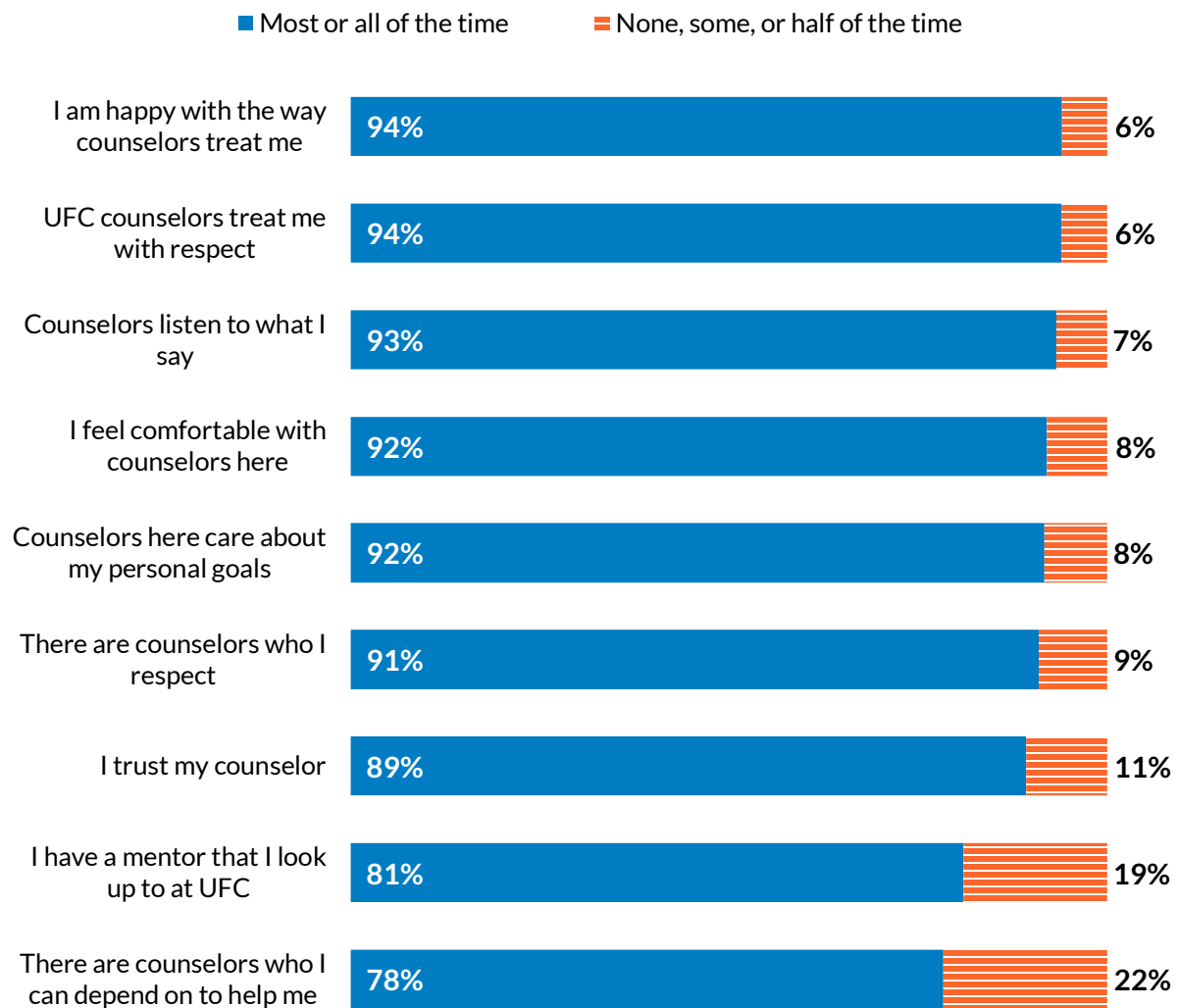
- Scholars program participant

Insights from Focus Groups and Interviews

When asked what they would and would not change about the program to make it better for future youth, participants stated that they really appreciated, and in many cases needed, the frequent check-ins with their counselors. While the way counselors checked in with the youth varied across participants—by phone, text, or in-person—each participant stated that they were happy with the frequency and format. All youth reported that they felt supported by and appreciated the relationship they had with their counselor. While one youth reported that they did not have a positive relationship with their previous counselor, the issue was resolved during program restructuring, and the youth had a supportive relationship with their new counselor. In fact, most of the participants stated that they felt comfortable reaching out to any of the counselors on staff, even if that staff member was not their counselor.

¹⁴ All scales and indices exclude participants missing more than 25 percent of the questions used to create that scale.

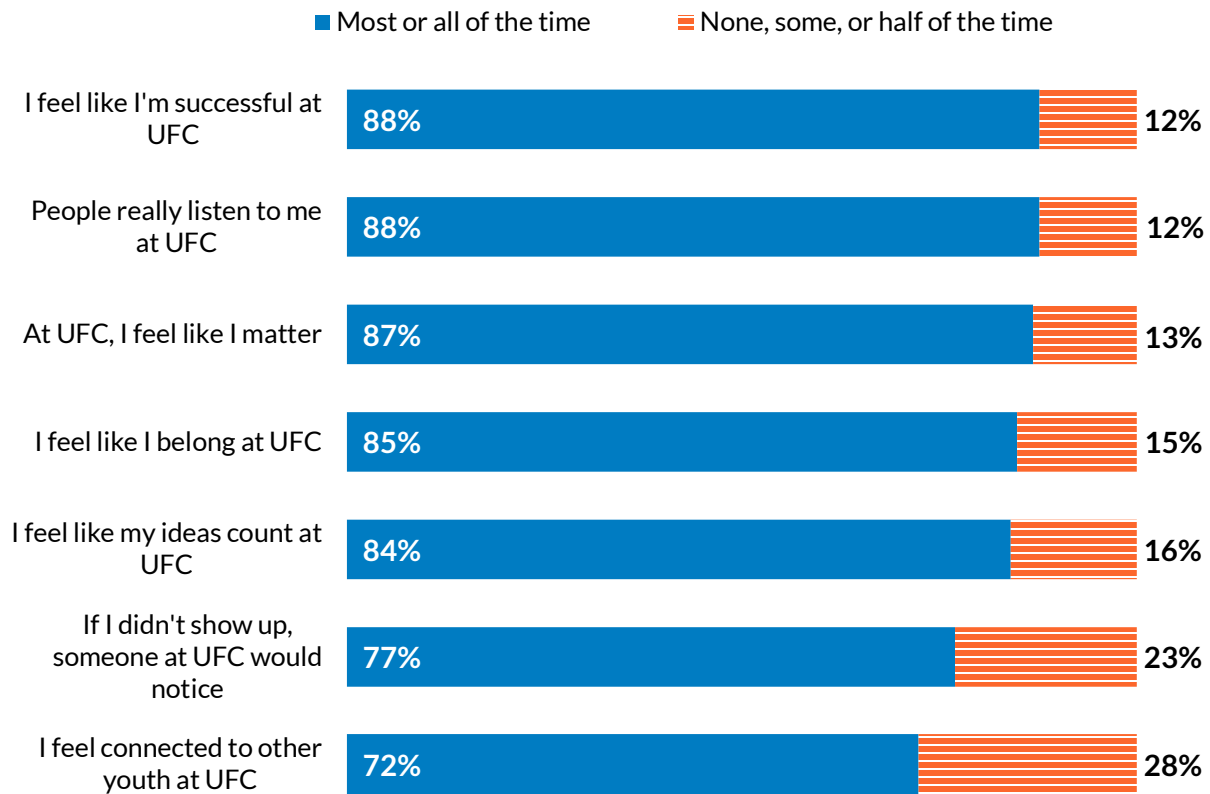
Figure 5. Participant responses to measures on relationships with United Friends counselors (N=257)



Source: Child Trends survey of United Friends Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Because young people also interact with other participants and staff at United Friends, we also asked them to report on their sense of connection and belonging at United Friends more broadly. Aligned with the findings on participant-counselor relationships, participants expressed a strong, positive sense of belonging with others at United Friends (median = 4.6). As can be seen in Figure 6, most participants felt they belonged and that they mattered at United Friends most or all of the time. Most also report feeling successful at United Friends, that their ideas mattered, and that they were listened to. Moreover, most participants reported that they felt connected to other youth at United Friends.

Figure 6. Participant responses to measures on sense of belonging at United Friends (N=257)



Source: Child Trends survey of United Friends Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Insights from Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus group and interview participants reported that their experiences with the Scholars Program strengthened their relationships with others inside and outside of United Friends. They discussed the friendships they made with others at United Friends, stating that they care about each other’s success and will often check in with each other to make sure everyone is doing well and staying on track. While many of the participants discussed the program workshops, one youth specifically shared the effect that those workshops have on their relationships with others by stating:

“I see people during workshops, and we check in about school, grades, and college. We all know that we are hard-working people, so we make sure that everyone is doing well.”
 -Scholars program participant

Staff who took part in focus groups and interviews reported only minor disagreements between program participants. They expressed that participants frequently support each other at United Friends events.

Participant Outcomes

United Friends seeks to empower youth with foster care experience on their journey to self-sufficiency through its Scholars program, Pathways Housing program,^{viii} and advocacy. Recognizing that the path to self-sufficiency is built upon a foundation of young people's social, emotional, and physical well-being,^{ix} United Friends seeks to provide resources to facilitate successful transitions to adulthood, better prepare young people to graduate high school and attend four-year colleges, and build meaningful, lasting relationships and social "safety nets."

This section describes the outcomes of the young people who participated in the United Friends Scholars program between spring 2018 and spring 2019. To assess the influence of the Scholars program on participants' outcomes we:

- Conducted descriptive analyses to describe how well participants are faring across the key developmental domains targeted by United Friends: education, socio-emotional well-being, and self-sufficiency
- Used regression models to analyze the associations between participant outcomes and program participation or "dosage," participant-counselor relationships, and participants' sense of belonging and connectedness^{15, x}
- Thematically coded and analyzed transcripts from focus groups and interviews with young people who participate in the Scholars program and United Friends staff

Analysis Approach

Analyses were conducted in Stata, 13.1. A skew or kurtosis greater than +/- 2 was used to identify variables with non-normal distributions. Medians are reported in lieu of means for variables with non-normal distributions. To assess group differences, t-tests were used for variables with normal distributions and Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was used for variables with non-normal distributions. Similarly, Pearson's correlation was used for normally distributed variables and Spearman's rank-order correlation was used for variables with non-normal distributions.

Prior to the regression analysis, data were screened for outliers that have a large effect on the regression coefficients (e.g., assessment of studentized residuals, leverage, Cook's D, DFIT, and DFBETA). This resulted in six cases being dropped from the analysis. Given that many of the models had heteroscedasticity, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression and logistic regression models were run with robust standard errors. Robust regression was used for models that had issues with outliers and high leverage data points.

¹⁵ Each regression model included the outcome of interest (dependent variable), three measures of participation (days enrolled in the Scholars program, participant-counselor relationships, and perceptions of connection and belonging at United Friends), and two covariates (gender and age at enrollment). Race/ethnicity was not used as a covariate due to unbalanced sample sizes across racial and ethnic groups. Models are based on a sample of 225 participants who have data for each outcome variable.

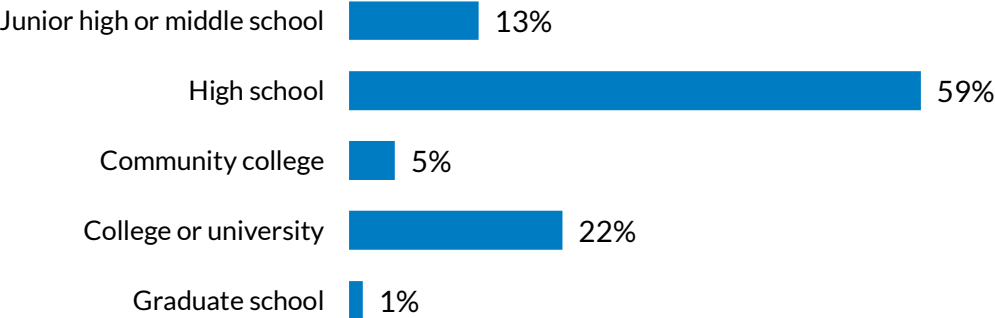
Educational outcomes

United Friends seeks to improve the educational outcomes of young people by preparing them to graduate from high school and attend four-year colleges. To assess the organization’s ability to achieve this goal, we asked participants to respond to questions about their current educational attainment, educational goals, barriers they may face while trying to achieve those goals, and how prepared they feel to achieve their goals.

School enrollment and engagement

At the time they completed their survey, 96 percent of Scholars program participants were enrolled in school. Of the participants enrolled in school, most were in either high school (59 percent) or a four-year college or university (22 percent; see Figure 7). Of the 12 youth who were not enrolled in school, all had graduated high school, and nine had already graduated college. Of the three who had not yet graduated college, two indicated they were “very sure they would complete a college degree.” Only one indicated they would “probably not complete a college degree.”

Figure 7. Type of school in which participants were enrolled (N=278)



Source: Child Trends survey of United Friends Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Research has demonstrated that students’ educational engagement (e.g., their level of participation, motivation, preparation, curiosity, and interest in educational activities) is associated with their educational attainment.^{xi} Accordingly, we also asked participants who were currently enrolled in school about their level of educational engagement in school.

As can be seen in Table 3, on average, Scholars program participants reported moderately high educational engagement (M =4.2 on a 5-point scale). College-aged participants reported significantly higher school engagement (M = 4.3) than participants in middle and high school (M=4.1).¹⁶ This finding is unsurprising, however, given that college-aged students have chosen to go to college and have likely selected a degree concentration of interest to them.

¹⁶ $t(130.62) = -3.12, p < .01$

Table 3. School engagement scale, by education level and overall

Education Level	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range	N
Middle & High School	4.1	0.5	2.8 - 5	202
College	4.3	0.5	3.2 - 5	67
Overall	4.2	0.5	2.8 - 5	269

Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018-2019.

Scholars program participation and educational engagement

Results from the regression analysis^{17, xii} indicate that participants' educational engagement¹⁸ was significantly associated with their age at enrollment in the Scholars program,¹⁹ their gender,²⁰ and participant-counselor relationships.²¹ Age was positively associated with educational engagement, whereby older youth reported higher levels of educational engagement than younger youth. This finding is unsurprising, however, given that older youth were enrolled in post-secondary education. Female participants were significantly more likely to report greater educational engagement than male participants. Finally, participant-counselor relationships were positively associated with educational engagement, suggesting that students' development of positive, supportive relationships with their United Friends counselor can positively contribute to young people's engagement in school.

Educational achievement and academic aspirations

High school graduation data were available for 138 youth who had participated in the Scholars program in high school or middle school and were expected to have graduated high school by 2018 (i.e., they were part of the classes of 2015, 2016, 2017, or 2018). Of these young people, 136 (99 percent) had graduated high school by May 2019. This finding is particularly impressive given that national data indicate that only 65 percent of youth in foster care graduate high school by age 21.^{xiii}

Participants were also asked about their goals for education. More than 80 percent said they expect to earn either a four-year college degree or a graduate degree (see Figure 8). Many participants expressed confidence in their ability to achieve their academic goals. As can be seen in Figure 9, 81 percent of middle and high school participants felt very sure they would graduate from high school.²² Just over 60 percent of participants (middle/high school and college-aged participants) felt very sure they would graduate from college. College-aged students were significantly more confident about gaining a college degree than high school-aged students.²³ In fact, just 60 percent of high school students reported that they were very sure they will graduate compared with 83 percent of college students.

¹⁷ Robust regression was used due to issues with outliers and high leverage data points.

¹⁸ Only participants enrolled in school at the time of the survey responded to items in the educational engagement scale (N=220).

¹⁹ B=0.03, SE=0.13, $p < .01$

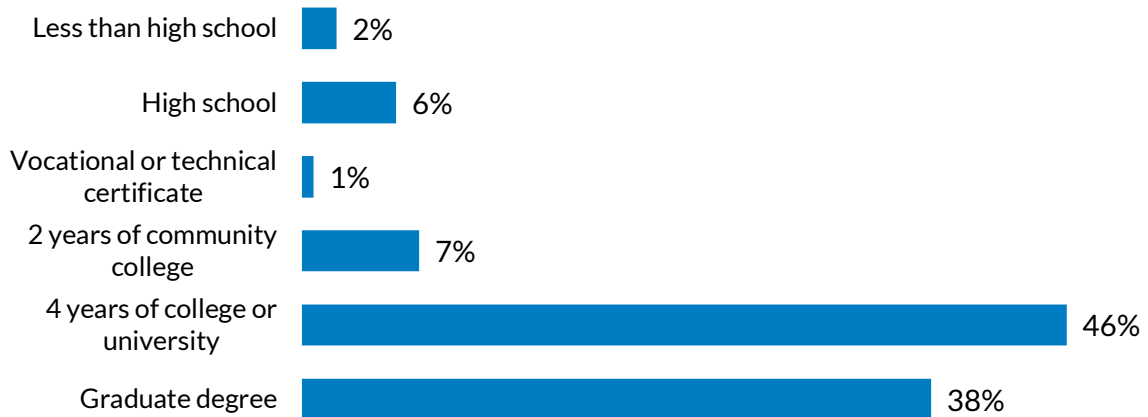
²⁰ B=-0.15, SE=0.07, $p < .05$

²¹ B=0.22, SE=0.10, $p < .05$

²² Only middle and high school students reported their level of confidence they would graduate high school as all college students had already graduated high school.

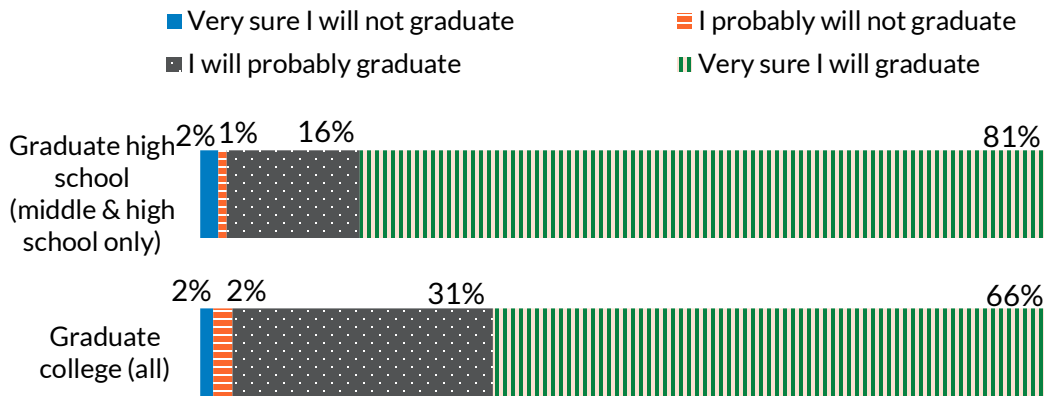
²³ $z = -3.16$, $p < .01$

Figure 8. Highest level of schooling participant expected to complete (N=281)



Source: Child Trends survey of United Friends Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Figure 9. Participant responses when asked how sure they are that they will graduate from high school and college (N=192 & N=266)



Source: Child Trends survey of United Friends Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Scholars program participation and expectations for college completion

Given the non-normal distribution of expectations for college completion, the variable was transformed into a binary variable (Very sure will graduate college: 66 percent; unsure will graduate from college: 44 percent). Results from the logistic regression analysis²⁴ indicate that age at enrollment²⁵ and days enrolled in the Scholars program²⁶ were significantly associated with the likelihood that participants would be confident they would graduate from college. Older participants and those who were enrolled for longer durations at United Friends were more confident that they would graduate from college than their peers.

Barriers to college

Participants were also asked about barriers they might face while completing a college degree. Of a total of 22 potential barriers, participants reported a median of 3 barriers they felt they were either likely or very likely to face (see Table 4). As noted in Figure 10, not having enough money was the most common barrier reported by Scholars program participants, as was having to work while going to school.

Table 4. Education barrier index, by education level and overall

Education Level	Median	Standard Deviation	Range	N
Middle & High School	3	3.7	0 - 22	194
College	5	4.4	0 - 22	75
Overall	3	4.0	0 - 22	269

Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

As can be seen in Table 4, participants in college reported more potential barriers (median=5) to college than middle and high school students (median=3), a difference that was statistically significant.^{27,28} Beyond differences in the number of potential barriers identified, as can be seen in Figure 10, middle/high school students and college students identified different types of barriers as concerning. For example, middle and high school students were more likely to express concerns with not being prepared enough for college, their teachers not supporting their plans, and that none of their friends had gone to college. In contrast, college-aged students were much more likely to express concerns about having enough money, racial/ethnic and gender discrimination, and pregnancy or having children.

²⁴ Respondents who reported they had already graduated from college were excluded from the analysis (N=10). Thus, the number of participants included in the logistic regression analysis is 215.

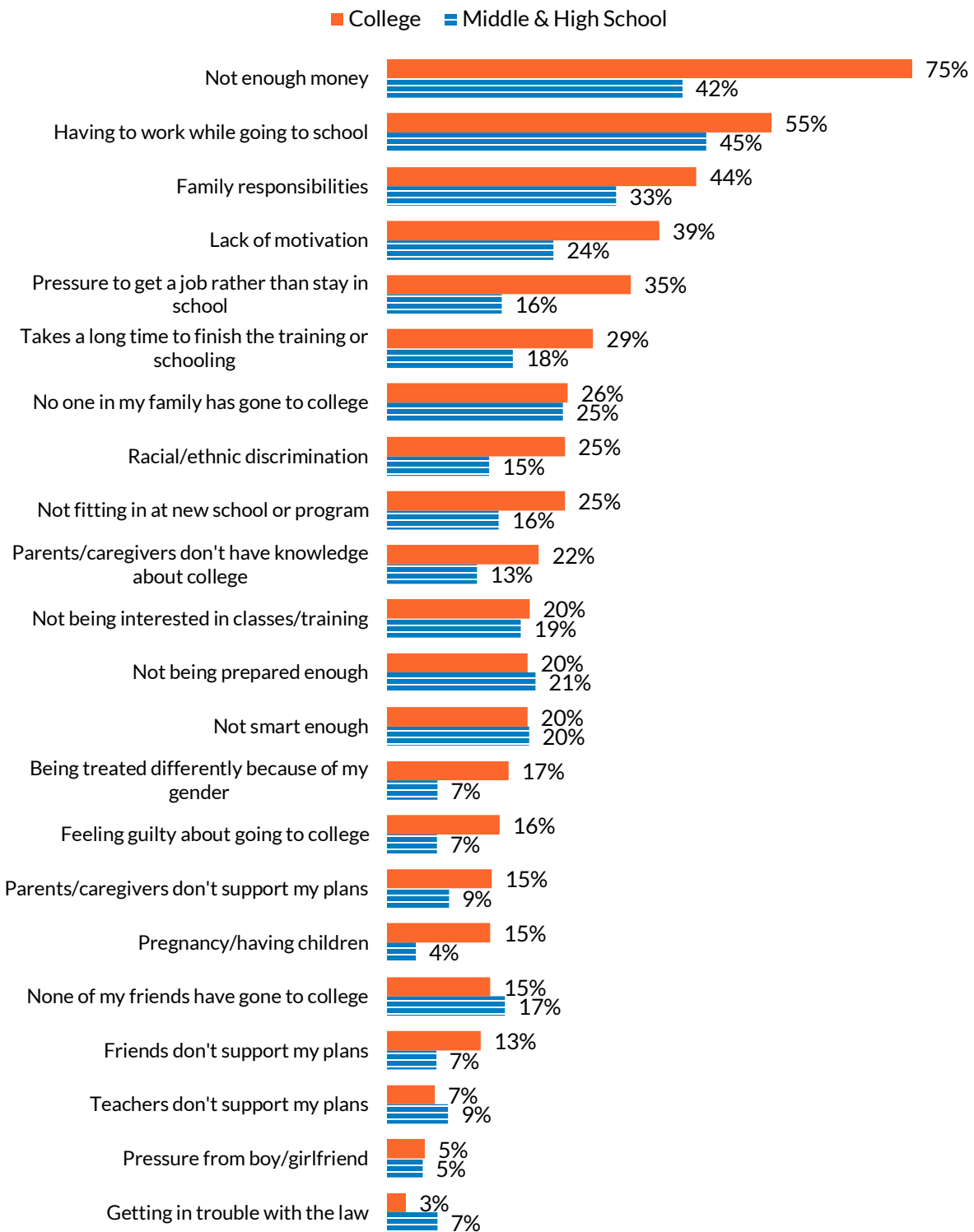
²⁵ B=0.19, SE=0.08, $p < .05$

²⁶ B=0.0006, SE=0.0002, $p < .05$

²⁷ $z = -2.83$, $p < .01$

²⁸ The Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test was used because data were not normally distributed.

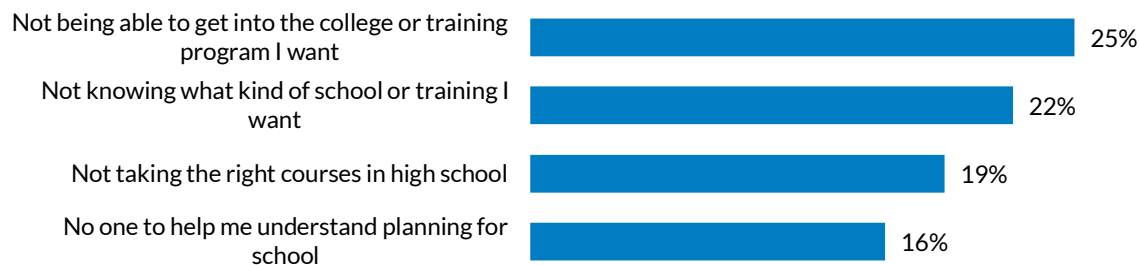
Figure 10. Percent of participants who reported they will likely or very likely face this barrier while finishing a college degree, by education level (N=275)



Source: Child Trends survey of United Friends Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Given that younger participants have yet to enroll in college, we also asked those in middle and high school to rate the likeliness they would face barriers to getting into college. The percent who responded that they felt they were likely or very likely face each of these additional barriers is presented in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Percent of participants who reported they will likely or very likely face this barrier while finishing a college degree (N=192)



Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Scholars program participation and college barriers

Results from the regression analysis indicate that the number of barriers participants reported was related to a couple of predictor variables. Older participants²⁹ and female³⁰ participants reported significantly more barriers to college completion than their peers.

I've grown as a person and I have more knowledge about college. I know that when I need help, I can just call my counselor. You go from just being alone in the world to having full support from someone.

- Scholars program participant

Insights from Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus group and interview participants reported that, with the help of their mentors and counselors, they care more about education after being involved with United Friends. Additionally, multiple participants from the focus groups and interviews expressed their desire to gain an education that would allow them to inspire and influence future generations of youth with similar backgrounds to also achieve and value education.

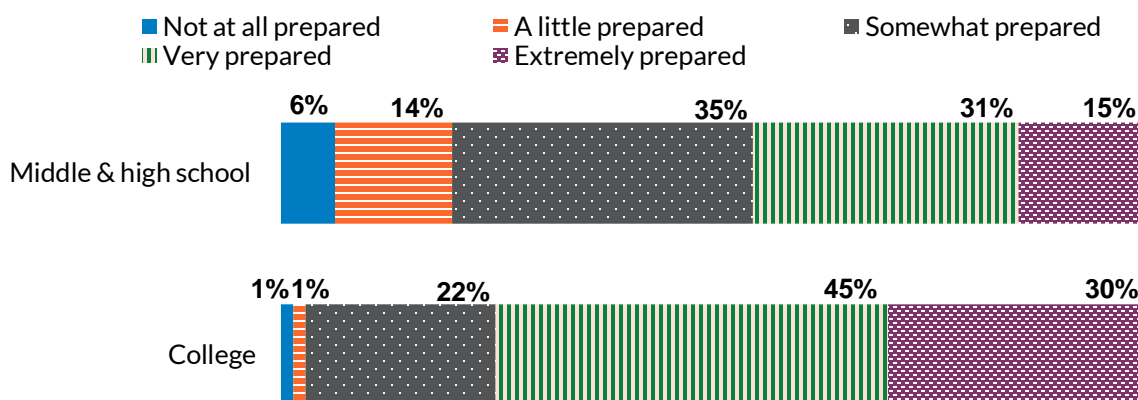
²⁹ B=0.25, SE=0.08, p<.001

³⁰ B=-1.35, SE=0.44, p<.001

Preparation and resources to meet academic goals

Participants were also asked to rate how prepared they felt to meet their educational goals. Overall, 54 percent of participants reported that they felt very or extremely prepared to meet their educational goals. Figure 12 presents participants' level of preparation disaggregated by education level. As can be seen in Figure 12, participants in college reported feeling more prepared to meet their educational goals than participants in middle and high school, which is expected given that they are further along in their academic careers.

Figure 12. Preparedness to meet educational goals, by education level (N=266)

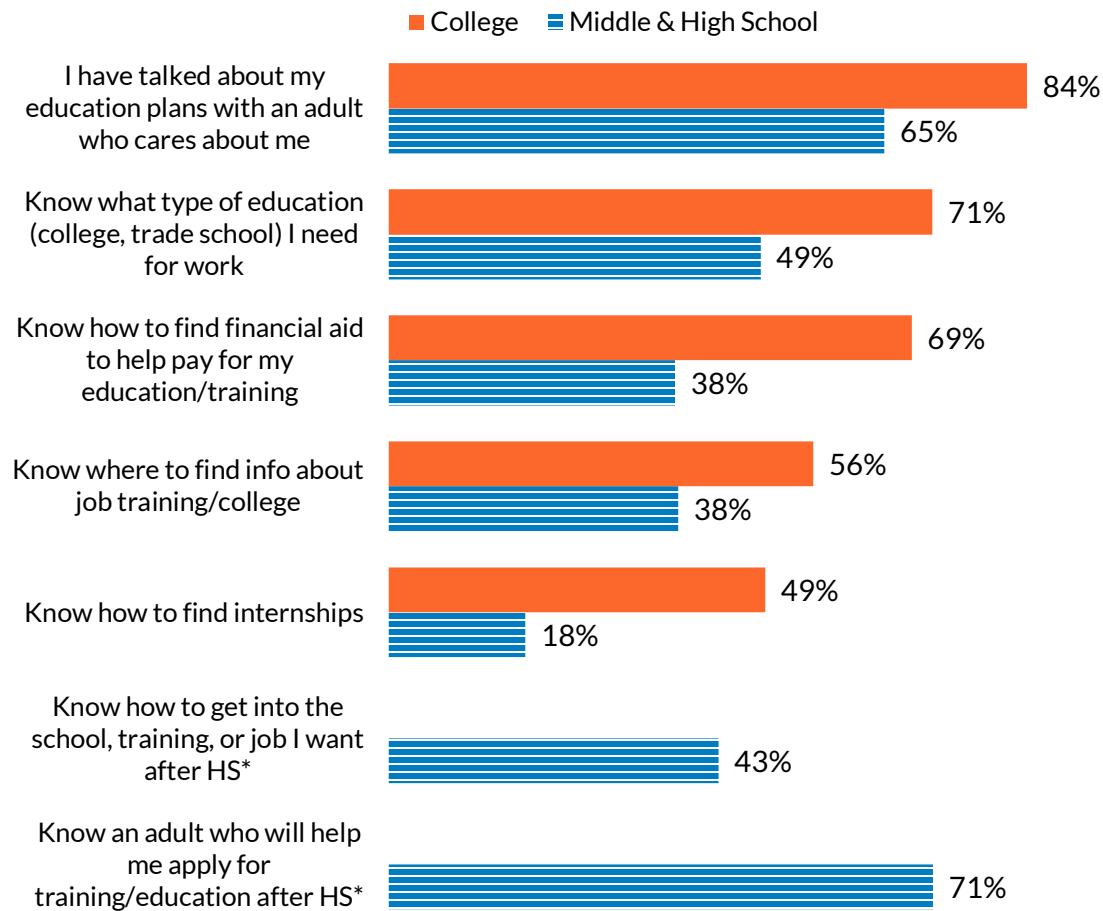


Source: Child Trends survey of United Friends Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

To explore how well-prepared Scholars program participants felt to meet their educational goals, we also asked participants to rate the extent to which statements about having knowledge of how to access information that will better prepare them for educational success was like them on a 5-point scale (1: *Not at all like me*, 5: *Exactly like me*). As can be seen in Figure 13, on average, across each item, college-aged participants were more likely to endorse that the statement was very much or exactly like them.

Across all students, Scholars program participants felt that they had talked about their education plans with an adult who cares about them and that they know an adult who will help them apply for the education or training they need after high school. The largest gaps between college-aged and middle/high school-aged participants appear for the items related to knowing how to find financial aid to help pay for education or training and knowing how to find internships. Thus, United Friends may want to provide additional support to younger participants in these areas. In particular, United Friends may want to focus on financial aid, as concerns about having enough money to go to college was the barrier most commonly identified by participants.

Figure 13. Resources and knowledge to meet educational goals, by education level (N=256)



Note: *Question was only asked to middle and high school-aged participants.
 Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018-2019.

Scholars program participation and preparation

The number of items in Figure 13 that participants endorsed as being very much or exactly like them was summed to create an index of the number resources for success that were available. To facilitate comparisons across college and middle/high school students, we only included items that were asked to both groups. Out of five potential resources, Scholars program participants identified an average of 2.4 resources.

Results from the regression analysis indicate that the number of resources participants reported was related to age and days enrolled. Older participants³¹ and participants who were enrolled for longer durations³² reported significantly more resources than their peers.

³¹ B=0.19, SE=0.03, $p < .001$

³² B=0.001, SE=0.0001, $p < .001$

Self-sufficiency

To assess United Friends' ability to prepare young people to be self-sufficient and make successful transitions to adulthood, we asked participants to respond to questions about their career and vocational expectations, their preparedness to achieve those goals, and barriers to employment they may face. Given that college participants are close to starting (or have already started) their careers, most of the questions regarding career development were only asked of college-aged participants.

Career aspirations and expectations

College-aged participants were asked to rate the likelihood that they would have a good job by the age of 30.³³ More than 60 percent of participants reported that it was very likely that they would have a good job by age 30 (see Figure 14), suggesting that most participants have positive perceptions of their future careers.

Figure 14. College participant responses when asked about the likelihood of having a good job by age 30 (N=66)



Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Knowledge of how to apply for jobs

To explore how well-prepared Scholars program participants were for applying for jobs, we also asked them to rate the extent to which statements about having knowledge about the job application process was like them on a 5-point scale (1: *Not at all like me*, 5: *Exactly like me*). As can be seen in Figure 15, most college-aged participants felt that they knew how to fill out a job application, prepare for an interview, and develop a résumé.

Figure 15. Knowledge to apply for jobs (N=66)



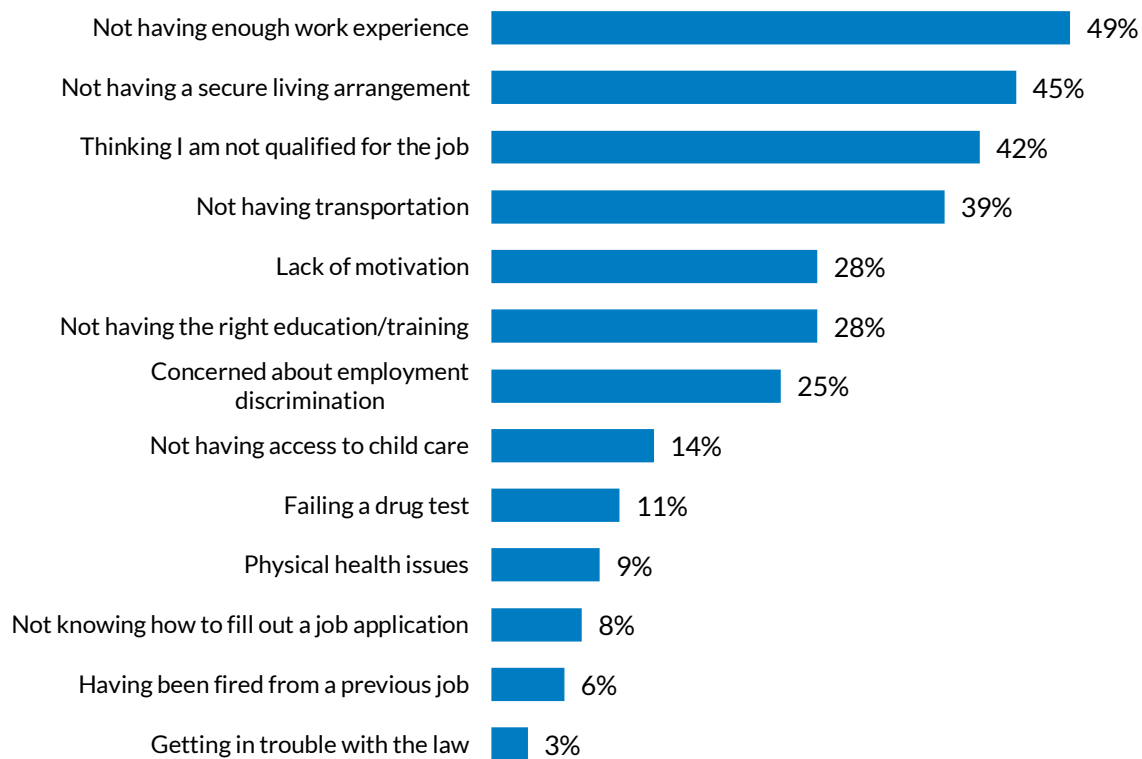
Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

³³ The survey did not define what “good job” is (e.g., high salary or highly satisfying), so participants applied their own definitions when responding to this question.

Barriers to employment

Participants in college were also asked to report on potential barriers they may face to getting a job. (see Figure 16). Of a total of 13 barriers, participants reported a median of 3 barriers they were either likely or very likely to face. The most common barriers participants anticipated were not having enough work experience and not having a secure living arrangement. As with barriers to completing college, the least common employment barrier participants anticipated was getting in trouble with the law.

Figure 16. Percent of college participants who reported they will likely or very likely face this barrier while seeking employment (N=66)



Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Scholars program participation and employment barriers

Aligned with the results for education barriers, results from the regression model indicate that gender³⁴ and belonging³⁵ were significantly associated with the number of employment barriers participants perceived. Female participants reported significantly more potential barriers to employment than males. In addition, participants who reported a strong sense of belonging and connectedness at United Friends reported significantly fewer potential barriers to employment.

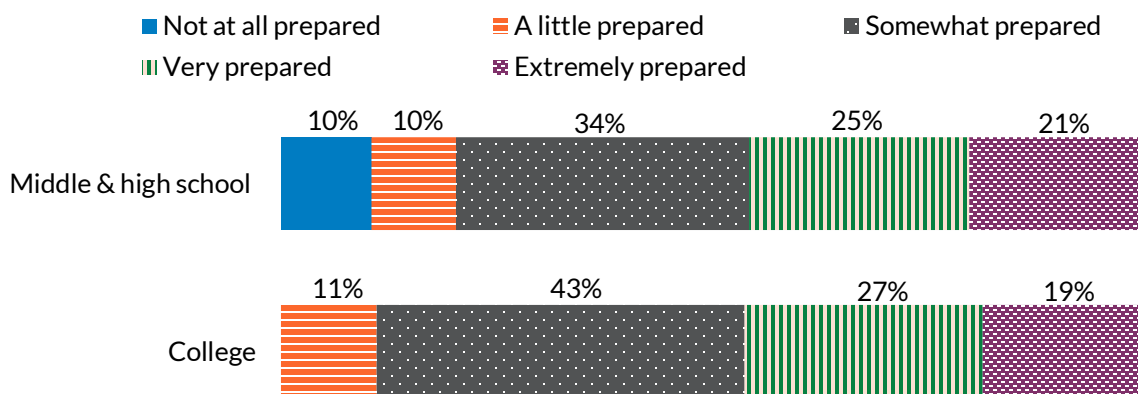
³⁴ B=-1.77, SE=0.73, $p < .05$

³⁵ B=-1.34, SE=0.62, $p < .05$

Preparation for future career

Participants were also asked to rate how prepared they felt to meet their occupational goals. Overall, nearly half of Scholars program participants felt very or extremely prepared to meet their occupational goals. Notably, however, approximately 20 percent of participants in middle and high school felt that they were either not at all prepared or only a little prepared to meet their career and vocational goals. This is likely due to younger participants feeling underprepared for their future goals, as unsurprisingly, participants in college felt more advanced in career planning than participants in middle and high school (see Figure 17).

Figure 17. Preparedness to meet career or vocational goals, by education level (N=266)

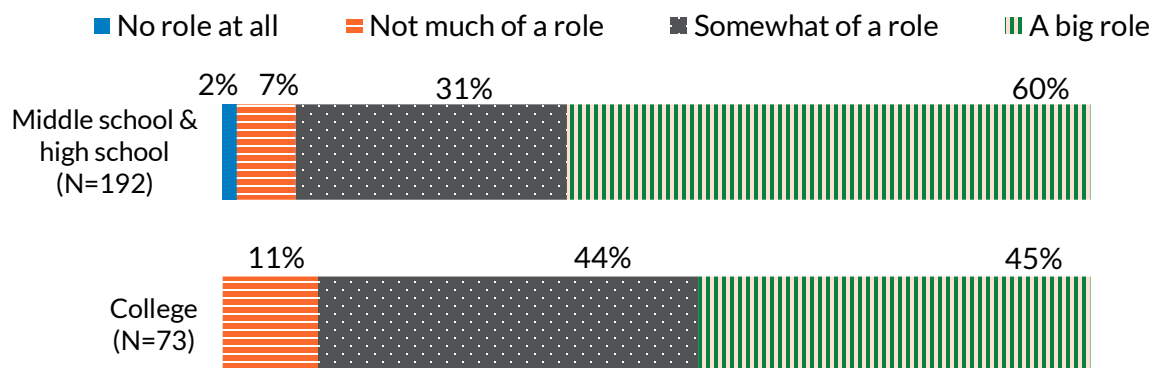


Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Scholars program participation and preparation for adulthood

Participants were asked to think about how prepared they are for adulthood and to rate how much of a role their counselor played in preparing them. As can be seen in Figure 18, 60 percent of middle/high school participants and 45 percent of college participants reported that their counselor played a big role in preparing them for adulthood. Only a minority of participants reported that their counselor did not play a role in their preparation for adulthood.

Figure 18. Counselor role in preparing participant for adulthood

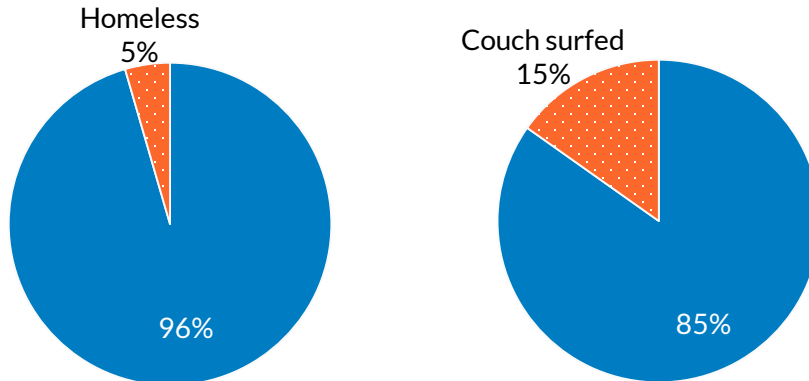


Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Housing

Participants in college also provided information on their housing status. As seen in Figure 19, 5 percent of those in college reported they had experienced homelessness in the six months before completing the survey, and 15 percent reported they had “couch surfed.” Although only a small proportion of young people experienced these challenges, housing instability can have substantial negative impacts on young people’s development. As such, United Friends should consider identifying opportunities to connect students to housing while they are in college.

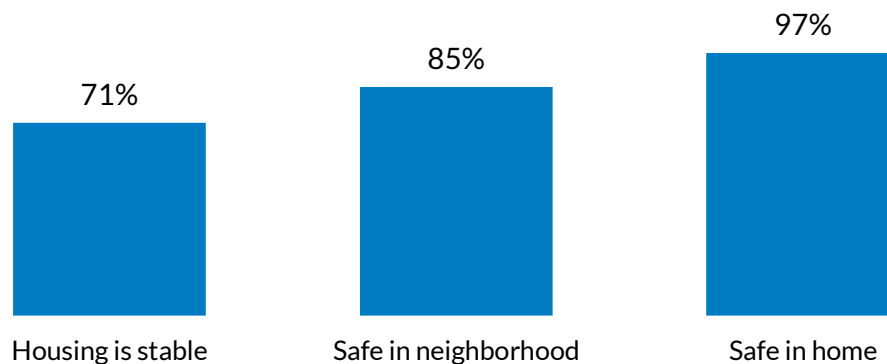
Figure 19. Homeless and couch surfing in the past six months for college participants (N=66)



Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

We also asked young people about their perceptions of their housing. As reflected in Figure 20, while almost all participants felt safe in their home, only 85 percent of students felt safe in their neighborhood. In addition to risks to youth’s physical safety, exposure to neighborhood violence has been documented as having a detrimental impact on young people’s mental health and academic achievement.^{xiv} Finally, aligned with the findings in Figure 19, about one-third of young people felt their housing was unstable.

Figure 20. Housing stability and safety for participants in college (N=66)



Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

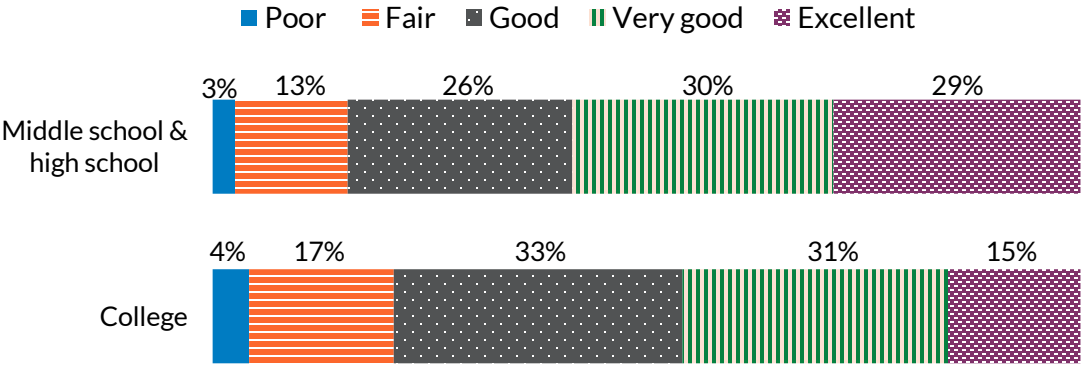
Participant well-being

Recognizing that the path to self-sufficiency is built upon a foundation of young people’s social, emotional, and physical well-being,^{xv} a key focus of United Friends is to support young people’s well-being through providing resources and building and sustaining meaningful, lasting relationships with participants. To better understand how successful United Friends was in achieving its goals of promoting positive well-being, we asked respondents to report on their physical and mental health, soft skills, such as taking initiative and goal-setting, social competence, civic engagement, and relationships with peers outside of United Friends and their caregivers.

Health

Most participants report having good, very good, or excellent physical health. Notably, as can be seen in Figure 21, college students were less likely to report excellent health than middle and high school students. More information is needed to understand why this difference emerges, as these differences could emerge due to issues such as less access to healthy and nutritious food or inability to access or navigate the healthcare system as an adult.

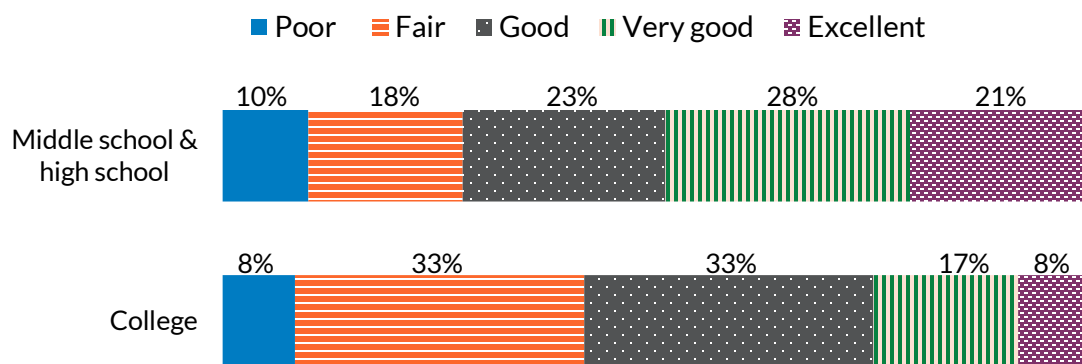
Figure 21. Participant physical health, by education level



Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

While a majority of participants report having good or better mental health, overall responses were not as positive as those related to physical health (see Figure 22). Aligned with the findings for physical health, college-aged participants rated their mental health lower than middle/high school-aged students. Notably, just over 40 percent of college-aged participants rated their mental health as poor or fair.

Figure 22. Participant mental health, by education level



Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Scholars program participation and health

Participants’ physical health was not significantly associated with any predictor variables. However, mental health was significantly associated with both gender³⁶ and participants’ sense of belonging.³⁷ Female participants were significantly more likely to report good mental health. Participants who reported a strong sense of belonging with other youth and staff at United Friends were also significantly more likely to report good mental health.

Taking initiative and goal setting

Scholars program participants also responded to measures that assess their ability to take initiative and achieve goals. The initiative scale includes participant responses to measures such as “When I work in a group, I do my fair share,” and the goal scale includes participant responses to measures about setting goals *and* working toward achieving those goals. Once again, participants in college had a higher median score on both scales when compared to middle/high school participants (see Figure 23).

Initiative and goal setting were significantly associated with participants’ age at enrollment³⁸ and their relationship with their counselors.³⁹ Participants who enrolled in the Scholars program at older ages reported taking significantly more initiative and engaging in significantly more goal setting, as did those who had a positive relationship with their counselor at United Friends. In addition, participants who felt a strong sense of belonging with other youth and staff at United Friends were significantly more likely to set goals and work toward achieving them.⁴⁰

³⁶ B=0.63, SE=0.16, $p < .001$

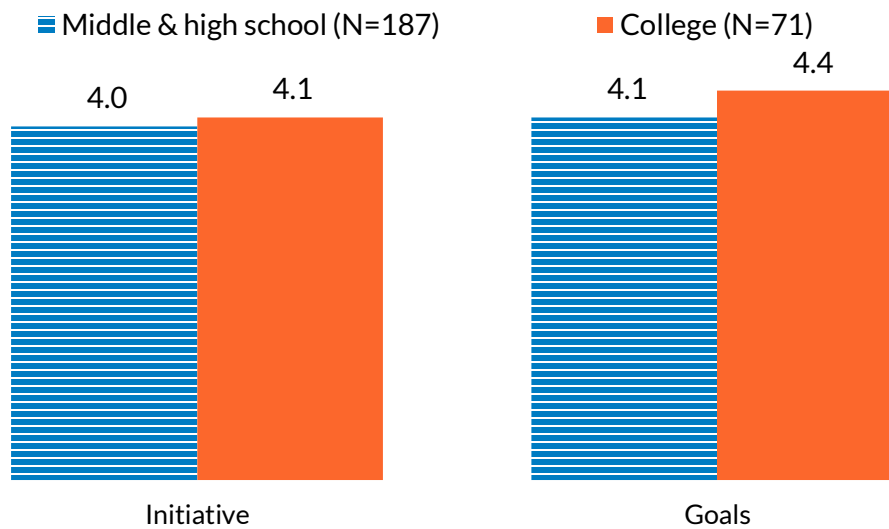
³⁷ B=0.54, SE=0.17, $p < .01$

³⁸ Initiative: B=0.04, SE=0.01, $p < .05$; Goal Setting: B=0.05, SE=0.01, $p < .01$

³⁹ B=0.30, SE=0.14, $p < .05$; Goal Setting: B=0.28, SE=0.13, $p < .05$

⁴⁰ B=0.27, SE=0.10, $p < .01$

Figure 23. Median scores for initiative-taking and being goal-oriented, by education level



Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Social competence and civic engagement

Participants responded to a series of questions that measured social competence and civic engagement. We used these items to create scales (all from 1 to 5) for both domains. The median score for each scale is presented by education level in Figure 24.

The social competence scale includes measures such as “I avoid making others look bad,” and the civic engagement scale includes questions about participants’ attachment to their communities and their dedication to making a difference within those communities. Participants in both education level groups reported high scores on both scales; however, participants in college had higher median scores than participants in middle/high school.

Participants’ social competence was significantly associated with age at enrollment⁴¹ and participant-counselor relationship.⁴² Participants who enrolled at older ages reported higher social competence. Those with strong participant-counselor relationships also reported significantly higher social competence.

Like social competence, civic engagement was significantly associated with participants’ age at enrollment.⁴³ Older participants were significantly more engaged in their communities. Civic engagement was also significantly associated with participants’ sense of belonging with other youth and staff at United Friends.⁴⁴ Participants who reported a strong sense of belonging reported significantly higher levels of civic engagement.

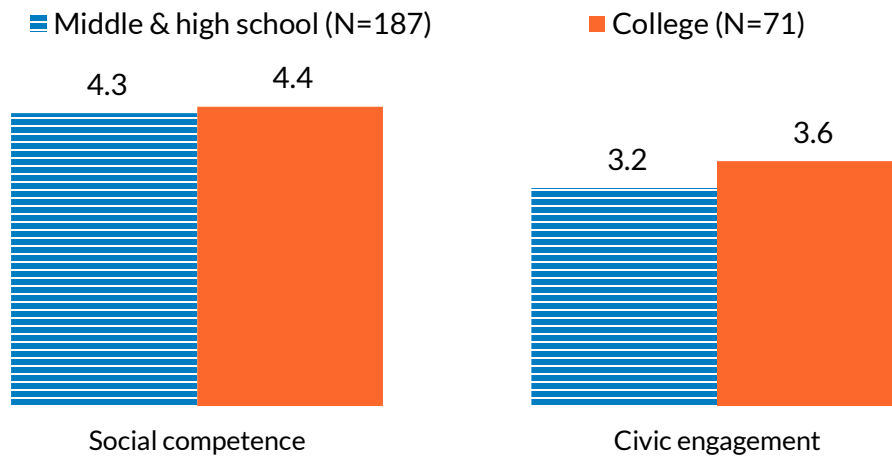
⁴¹ $B=0.04, SE=0.01, p<.01$

⁴² $B=0.56, SE=0.11, p<.001$

⁴³ $B=0.05, SE=0.03, p<.05$

⁴⁴ $B=0.57, SE=0.13, p<.001$

Figure 24. Median social competence & civic engagement, by education level



Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Relationships outside of United Friends

In addition to responding to questions about their relationships with counselors and others at United Friends, participants responded to a series of questions that asked about their relationships with their peers (not only those at United Friends). Each measure of peer relationships was based on a 5-point scale (1: *not at all like me*; 5: *exactly like me*). The medians for each scale can be found in Figure 25.

The peer support scale was created using measures that ask about the support participants provide their peers. On average, Scholars program participants reported moderately high levels of support for peers (median = 4.5). Participants' support of their peers was significantly and positively associated with age at enrollment,⁴⁵ participant-counselor relationship quality,⁴⁶ and participants' sense of belonging with their peers and others at United Friends.⁴⁷

The peer quality scale was calculated using participant responses to questions about having friends who make them feel good or who they can turn to for support. On average, Scholars program participants reported high levels of support from peers (median = 4.7). The amount of support participants reported receiving from their peers was significantly associated with the quality of their relationship with their counselor,⁴⁸ a finding that aligns well with findings from the qualitative data, which suggests that healthy relationships with counselors serve as a model for their relationships with others.

[The counselors] show us what a healthy relationship looks like and how you're supposed to act. [My counselor] helped me deal with emotions and it rippled into my other relationships.

- Scholars program participant

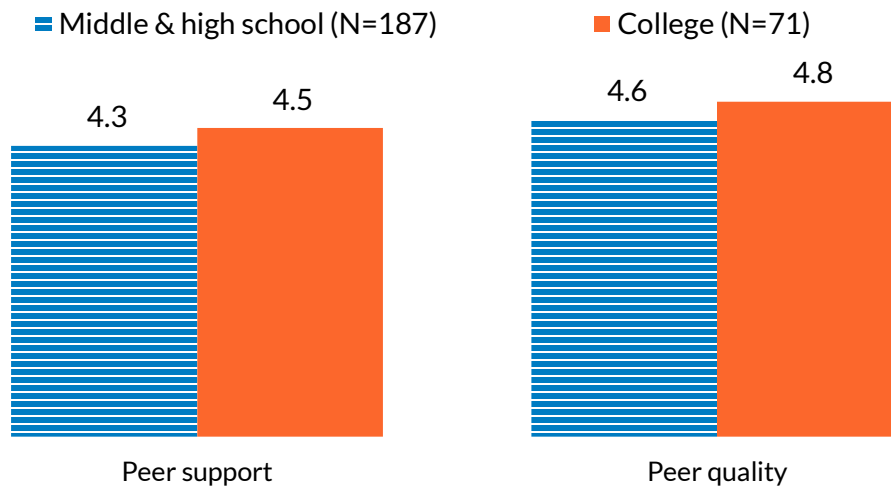
⁴⁵ $B=0.04, SE=0.01, p<.01$

⁴⁶ $B=0.39, SE=0.11, p<.01$

⁴⁷ $B=0.19, SE=0.09, p<.05$

⁴⁸ $B=0.47, SE=0.16, p<.01$

Figure 25. Median scores for peer relationships, by education level



Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018-2019.

Insights from Focus Groups and Interviews

While several of the participants who took part in the focus groups and interviews reported not being very social and preferred not to socialize with other youth at United Friends, they did report that the counselors have had positive effects on their social and emotional well-being. Although most of the participants discussed appreciation for the counseling and therapy they were receiving, some youth did talk about wanting additional mental health supports.

Caregiver relationships and support of academic achievement

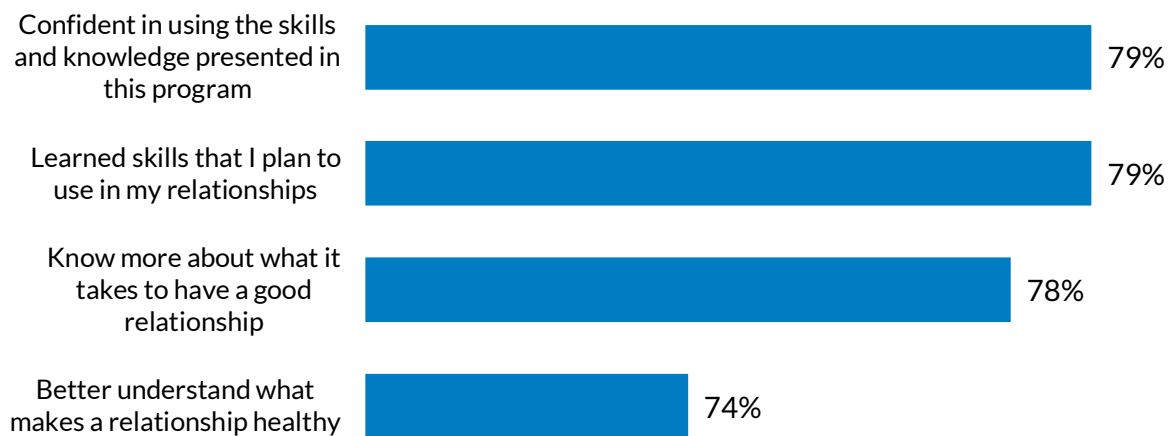
United Friends also works to improve relationships between young people and their parents/caregivers, including through enhancing the ability of parents and caregivers to support young people in their efforts to enroll in and complete college. Participants in middle/high school responded to a series of questions about their relationship with their parent or caregiver on a 5-point scale (1: *none of the time*; 5: *all of the time*). For example, they were asked to rate how often their parent or caregiver takes interest in their activities. Overall, participants reported moderately strong relationships with their parents or caregivers (median=4).

In focus groups and interviews, researchers asked participants to report about the extent to which participation in the Scholars program boosted their caregivers' support for their educational aspirations. As noted in the callout box, young people had mixed opinions about whether the program changed their caregivers' attitudes. This finding, coupled with the results from the regression analysis, which found that no variables were significantly associated with caregiver-youth relationships, suggests that more efforts should be made to engage parents and caregivers in the Scholars program.

Scholars program participation and healthy relationships

Participants responded to a series of questions about how participating in the Scholars program improved their knowledge and skills around building and maintaining healthy relationships.⁴⁹ As can be seen in Figure 26, most participants reported that their knowledge and skills around relationships increased and that they felt confident applying them to their relationships.

Figure 26. Relationship knowledge (N=110)

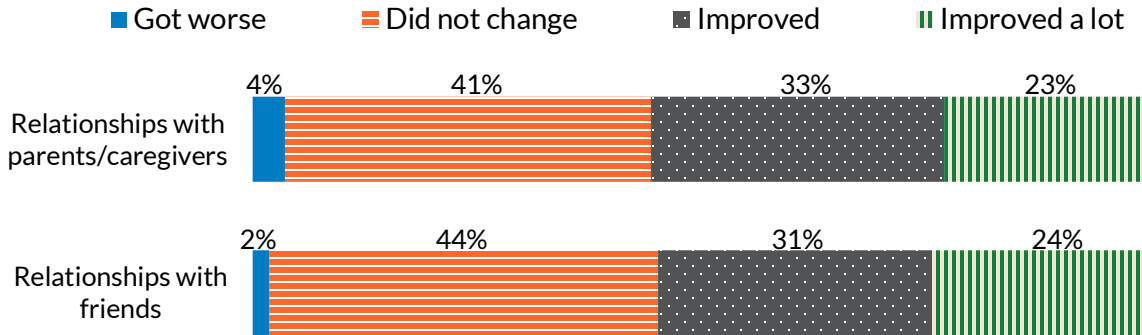


Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Participants also responded to questions about how their relationships with friends and parents or caregivers changed after they enrolled in the Scholars program. As can be seen in Figure 27, about half of participants (56 percent) reported that their relationships with parents/caregivers had improved and a similar percentage reported their relationships with friends improved (55 percent). Interestingly, this finding conflicts with the findings from the focus groups (see callout box, below) and the parent/caregiver relationship scale. More information is needed as to why this is the case.

⁴⁹ The questions about relationship knowledge and improvement were added to the survey after the 2018 administration. Only participants who reported they had been enrolled in the Scholars program for a year or longer responded to these questions. As a result, the sample size for these measures is smaller than others presented in this report.

Figure 27. Changes in participant relationships (N=110)



Source: Child Trends survey of Scholars program participants, 2018–2019.

Insights from Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus group and interview participants expressed differing opinions about whether the Scholars program changed their families' attitudes about their education goals. Several participants reported that their family was not involved with their educational pursuits, while others said that their family became more enthusiastic and supportive as a result of their involvement with the Scholars program.

Several staff members who took part in focus groups and interviews felt United Friends could do a better job of incorporating parents and caregivers into the program. They had several ideas about how to engage families and caregivers, including a holiday party and trainings on trauma-informed care. One staff member reported that previous attempts at engagement were not successful, which may explain why they no longer take place:

We did have opportunities we just didn't have people show up, so we couldn't do it financially. We had to adjust to have counselors go to homes. But we might have an opportunity to open it up again. Sometimes bandwidth gets in the way, or people who were promoting it left.

-Scholars program counselor

Discussion and Recommendations

From 2016 to 2019, United Friends served in its Scholars program nearly 1,000 youth and young adults with foster care experience. Many enrolled in the program experienced unstable placements while in the foster care system—a risk factor known to negatively affect young people’s well-being, support networks, and educational and employment outcomes. On average, participants remained in the Scholars program for more than three years, with nearly one-third remaining for five or more years.

Results from the evaluation indicate that United Friends counselors are successful in both developing strong, supportive, trusting relationships with youth they work with and cultivating an environment in which young people feel supported by their peers and other United Friends staff. Both youth and counselors report that their relationships are overwhelmingly positive; however, several counselors report feeling stretched too thin, which they fear interferes with their ability to connect with youth. Ensuring that counselors and staff feel supported and not overworked will help ensure that they are able to maintain positive, supportive relationships with participants, which are vital to the program’s success.

Data from our participant survey, as well as interviews and focus groups, suggest that young people’s relationships with their counselors strengthened their ties with others and increased the likelihood that they would succeed in school and at work. Notably, results from the regression analysis show that positive participant-counselor relationships were associated with positive relationships with students’ peers, greater social competence, and increased educational engagement, goal setting, and initiative taking.

Additionally, feeling connected to United Friends more broadly was associated with young people engaging in more goal setting behavior, being a more supportive friend to their peers, demonstrating increased civic engagement and more positive perceptions of mental health, and perceiving fewer barriers to employment.

These findings align with those from the field of positive youth development (PYD), an approach to developing the skills and competencies of young people through fostering positive relationships, providing opportunities for growth and giving back, and building upon their strengths.^{xvi} Together, the findings of this evaluation—along with findings from other evaluations that have demonstrated that integrating PYD principles when implementing youth programs can positively affect youths’ academic^{xvii} and employment^{xviii} outcomes and reduce teen pregnancy,^{xix} substance use, and violence^{xx}—suggest that United Friends’ relationship model is a key driver of the program’s success in promoting positive outcomes.

In addition to the positive findings regarding United Friends’ relationship model, our findings from the evaluation indicate that length of participation in the Scholars program can contribute to young people’s educational success. Results from the regression analysis show that longer durations in the program (as measured by days enrolled) were significantly associated with more resources for educational success, increased career planning and preparation, and increased confidence that a young person can complete college.

Results from the evaluation suggest that Scholars program participants are on the path to academic success. Almost all participants reported being enrolled and engaged in school. Moreover, the vast majority of those who were not enrolled in school had already completed a college degree. In fact, nearly all participants (99%) who were members of the classes of 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 had graduated high school by May 2019—a figure that stands in stark contrast to national data that indicate that only 65 percent of youth in foster care graduate high school by age 21.^{xxi}

Most participants aspired to complete a college or graduate degree and felt that they were sufficiently prepared to achieve their academic goals. It should be noted, however, that although participants were largely optimistic about their educational futures, they frequently cited barriers to graduating related to the financial burden of attending a four-year college or university. Increased access to financial resources, such as scholarships, may reduce the likelihood of economic barriers preventing participants from completing their education.

Additionally, given that participants generally felt less prepared to achieve their occupational goals, students should be encouraged to take advantage of work-based learning experiences, such as internships and apprenticeships, which have been known to increase the likelihood young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will secure a good job in adulthood.^{xxii} Connecting youth and young adults to these opportunities will not only help them develop their technical and soft skills, it will also strengthen their professional networks and increase their confidence in their ability to gain employment.

Participants reported positive perceptions of their physical health, but their mental health is sometimes lagging. This is particularly true for college-aged students. Research has shown that youth, particularly those with mental health needs, have difficulty navigating adult-oriented health care systems.^{xxiii}

Moreover, a sizable minority of young people said they experienced housing instability, with some reporting that they either had to “couch surf” or were homeless in the past six months. While focus group and interview participants said support from United Friends is helpful, youth expressed a need for additional resources. As such, the organization may want to do more to facilitate connections between young people and community resources—particularly those related to housing and healthcare.

The findings regarding caregiver-youth relationships and caregivers’ knowledge and involvement in participants’ education varied. Qualitative data suggest that integrating caregivers into the program has been an ongoing challenge. Nevertheless, given the importance of caregivers to young people’s well-being and academic and occupational success, additional efforts should be made to strengthen connections between young people and their caregivers and provide the latter with tools to help them more fully support their child’s educational journey.

Conclusion

The transition to adulthood is a challenging period of development for all youth and young adults, but especially for those with foster care experience. In addition to handling the ordinary challenges that many of their peers face, young people with foster care experience often must grapple with complex trauma histories and limited social support and financial resources.^{xxiv}

United Friends supports this population during the transition to adulthood by providing educational resources that make it more likely that these particular students will graduate from high school and earn a college degree. Helping young people develop and maintain meaningful, supportive relationships and social safety nets is another key component of the nonprofit organization’s Scholars program. But more could be done, particularly in regard to strengthening ties between young people and community resources, particularly those related to housing, financial aid, and healthcare.

A recent report^{xxv} estimated \$2.17 billion in economic gains⁵⁰ if youth with foster care experience graduate from high school at the same rate as their peers in the general population. Given the graduation rate of youth who participate in the Scholars program—and assuming an average annual expenditure of \$4,387 per participant in the Scholars program⁵¹—the return on investment in the Scholars program may be significant. This return may be even larger when considering the additional economic gains associated with a post-secondary education, for which the Scholars program provides additional supports.

Study Limitations

Although the results from this evaluation are promising, it should be noted that its design was correlational in nature and, as such, precludes us from making causal attributions regarding the program’s impact on

⁵⁰ Economic gains include increased taxed payments and lifetime income.

⁵¹ Represents average annual expenditure across last three fiscal years.

young people's development. Moreover, although we worked with United Friends to develop an estimate of the annual expenditure per participant, we were unable to conduct a formal cost-analysis that includes factors such as resources provided at no cost (e.g., donations, participant time, and volunteer labor).^{xxvi} Nonetheless, the results underscore the importance of United Friends' relationship model and suggest that participation in its Scholars program likely contributes to the socio-emotional well-being and academic and occupational success of young people in and transitioning from the foster care system.

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