



Supporting Parents Striving for Success:

An Evaluation of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Life Impact Program

PREPARED BY
Victoria Frank, MPA

Barbara Goldberg
& Associates, LLC
CONSULTANTS



Overview

The Life Impact Program of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee aims to interrupt the intergenerational cycle of poverty by supporting low-income students who are pursuing college while they parent dependent children.

The program provides a comprehensive array of social and financial support, intended to improve student parents' academic performance and graduation rates, and to prepare them for satisfying, family-supporting careers. This evaluation was conducted during the program's twelfth year, at which point the Life Impact Program had served nearly 200 student parents.

At the Life Impact Program's core are two critical interventions: The program provides substantial financial support and personalized social support, both available over the duration of a student's time at UW-Milwaukee. Financial support is provided through performance-based scholarships distributed each semester, as well as through access to emergency funds in the event of unexpected, urgent financial hardship. Social support takes the form of "life coaching," which encompasses an array of individualized interactions to meet students' needs, and coordinated events that help students build connections to other student parents and to social support and academic resources on campus and beyond. The program targets financially disadvantaged student parents, most of whom are first generation college students pursuing a first bachelor's degree, and who are striving to graduate despite substantial social, educational and economic challenges.

Based on this evaluation's quantitative and qualitative findings, Life Impact is very successfully supporting student parents. **Over its 12 years of operation, Life Impact has enrolled the intended population of students, and has provided more than \$2 million in performance-based scholarships and nearly \$250,000 in**

emergency funds to 195 program participants.

The program's model is well-aligned with current research that suggests that student parents are uniquely vulnerable to college departure for various financial, academic and social reasons, and that scholarships, social support and coaching can improve their educational outcomes.

Of all the Life Impact Scholars who have enrolled since 2010, a striking 94% have either graduated or are continuing their studies, and the program's graduation rate

is 79%. Life Impact Scholars reported that the program was a key driving force behind their college persistence, and they provided rich, detailed descriptions of their struggles and of the ways in which the program's staff have been consistent, trusted coaches, resources, and supporters. The primary challenges drawn from the evaluation relate to the need

to expand services to meet the large demand, the need to consider adjustments to the program to ensure that the model maintains effectiveness while boosting cost-efficiency, and the need to sustain consistent, multi-year support for student parents at UW-Milwaukee.

College Student Parents: Research Evidence & Community Context

In 2012, nearly 722,000 Midwestern¹ undergraduates, or 25.9% of the region's total undergraduate population, were caring for dependent children while they worked to attain college credentials.^a The number of college students who are also parents has risen dramatically both in the Midwest and nationwide, which is not surprising given the well-established benefits of post-secondary education. Low-income student parents say that they see postsecondary education as crucial for them and for their children,^b and research supports that belief.

On average, college graduates earn far more than their less-educated peers, and they enjoy better fringe benefits, more favorable working conditions, less dependence on public benefits



¹ Refers to undergraduate parents in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin.

and better health.^c Further, research has shown that when low-income mothers obtain college educations, it improves their parenting skills and their children’s educational paths.^d

Despite the well-documented value of postsecondary education, a low share of student parents reach their educational goals in a timely fashion, if at all. **Nationally, just 33% of student parents attain a college degree or certificate within six years of enrollment, and only 27% of students who are single parents do so.^e** The student parents who do manage to complete college credentials often do so over a longer time horizon,^f which adds to the total cost of college and lessens the number of working years over which student parents can recoup their investment through earnings. As a point of reference, these national graduation rates fall well below the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee’s six-year graduation rate (41% of new freshmen graduate within six years).^g

The reasons for these low completion rates are varied and interwoven, but one important hurdle that student parents encounter is the high cost of attending college.^h Student parents face not only the standard college costs (tuition, text books, living expenses and the like) but also the large cost of child care. Further, though student parents are particularly likely to work full time, their annual earnings are low. More than half of unmarried student parents with dependent children earned less than \$20,000 in 2011, and 35% of college student single mothers had incomes under \$7,500 that year.ⁱ Emerging research demonstrates how common it is for low-income college students to experience housing instability and food insecurity,^j and many student parents likely face these challenges as well.

Of course, the barriers faced by student parents are not simply financial. Student parents are more likely to enter college with low levels of academic preparation, and are particularly likely to require remedial coursework, which lengthens the necessary time to complete a credential. They are

also balancing competing demands for their time, including working for pay, caring for children, not to mention other family responsibilities and personal challenges.^k **Perhaps because of their time constraints, their academic backgrounds, and/or their differences in background from their non-parenting peers, student parents frequently report feeling excluded or unwelcome on campus, which makes succeeding in college more difficult.^l**

Though the barriers to college success are substantial, some interventions have been effective in helping student parents reach their educational goals. Two relevant types of interventions are associated with improved college success. Financial interventions (for example financial aid, grants, and “pay for performance” style incentives) intended to lower the cost of attending college for these students have been shown to improve academic performance and graduation rates, and other interventions, intended to help provide students with personalized information and support or to endow students with a sense of belonging or “fitting in” have generated increases in college enrollment and success.^m The Life Impact program combines both financial and social support to help its participants have the best chance at college success, and does so in alignment with what research suggests can be effective for student parents across the country.

There is also evidence of the need to promote educational success for parents in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the city where most program participants reside. Many families in Milwaukee experience economic disadvantage, and that disadvantage is strongly correlated to educational attainment. Between 2011 and 2015, 29% of the city’s population and 42% of the city’s children lived beneath the federal poverty line,ⁿ and the unemployment rate hovered near 12% (19% for African Americans).^o Less than one-quarter of the city’s adults had attained at least a bachelor’s degree.^p As is true for the nation overall, economic self-sufficiency and educational attainment in the city of Milwaukee are tightly linked: while the poverty rate for city residents who had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher was 7.3% in 2015, it was more than three times as high (23.3%) for individuals with only a high school diploma.^q Incomes also varied greatly by educational attainment. The median income of city residents with bachelor’s degrees was \$42,340, while the



same for those with only a high school diploma was just \$24,858.¹ **As Life Impact helps low-income student parents to become college graduates, the program boosts Scholars' earning power and independence. In so doing, the program may also improve the educational trajectories of young children. Through both, Life Impact strengthens the city of Milwaukee's workforce, now and in the future.**

Evaluation Design

Barbara Goldberg & Associates, LLC, worked with Life Impact Program staff to develop an evaluation that would assess the Life Impact Program's work with student participants over the life course of the program. The evaluation set out to provide a rich description of the value, importance, and meaning of the program to currently participating Scholars and their families. Additionally, given the program's 12-year history, the evaluation was designed to examine the cumulative outcomes of the Life Impact Program since the program's inception. The evaluation made use of both qualitative and quantitative methods to answer specific process questions as well as to examine outcomes. Barbara Goldberg & Associates set out to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. Over the program's 12 years in operation, to what extent has Life Impact served the students it set out to serve? How strong is demand for the program and how well is the program meeting that demand?
2. What services have been provided by Life Impact in terms of scholarships and emergency funds dollars, and in terms of social and academic support? How well are students retained by the program?
3. What outcomes can be observed for program participants in terms of their rates of graduating from UW-Milwaukee and the changes in their academic performance over time?
4. How do Life Impact students feel about the experience of being a student parent? What challenges do they identify, and what motivates them to persevere?
5. What do program participants say about how the Life Impact Program has affected their college

experience? Which services and supports do students view as most essential?

6. Examining the evaluation results, what key accomplishments and key challenges can be identified?

Evaluation data were collected with approval of University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Institutional Review Board (IRB #17.166). Evaluators synthesized application data, academic records, demographic, financial aid, and other program data with the help of Life Impact Program staff. We also analyzed survey data that the program collected. We conducted interviews with a subset of randomly selected current Life Impact Scholars. This careful, multi-layered design allowed for an examination of multiple process and outcome measures, and a more thorough understanding of the mechanisms through which the Life Impact Program supports student parents.

Life Impact Program Model

Life Impact seeks to interrupt the cycle of poverty by supporting low-income parenting students so they can achieve college success. The program's primary sources of support are financial and social, and each is designed to be comprehensive, sustained, and responsive to students' individual needs. This section provides a description of the financial and social support provided by the Life Impact Program, and how those supports are theorized to operate together to help low-income parenting students succeed in college and beyond.

Financial Support

The Life Impact Program provides financial support in two forms: scholarships and emergency funds. Both seek to reduce the difficulty of affording college while raising a family. Financial support can help students in a variety of ways, for example, performance-based scholarship dollars may:

- Directly offset the high costs of tuition and related college costs,
- Encourage students to work for pay for fewer hours and thus devote more time to their coursework,
- Allow students to secure better or more consistent childcare so they can more regularly attend classes,

- Help cover the costs of basic needs like food and shelter, and
- Reduce financial stress so that students are more focused on their studies, and
- Through grade and credit requirements, encourage improved academic commitment and performance.

Emergency funds serve a different purpose in that they provide additional resources when a student finds themselves in a particularly difficult financial situation. Emergency funds are designed to keep students afloat when an unexpected cost threatens to derail their academic performance. They allow the program to be responsive and supportive when scholarships are insufficient, such as when a student's financial need suddenly increases.

Social Support

Life Impact's coaching and support is premised on the idea that dollars alone are not sufficient to help low-income parenting students become college graduates, and that students also need:

- **A sense of connection to their campus and a feeling of belonging as a student;**
- **Support and guidance regarding academic, social and financial challenges; and**
- **The knowledge that their success is taken seriously by another person in their life.**

Life Impact's staff reports taking a very individualized approach to this portion of the services offered. The team works closely to understand a student's challenges and their strengths, and to facilitate their next steps or just provide encouragement and coaching. These interactions can take whatever form is necessary: students can drop by just to say hello and feel as though they have a home base to visit on campus, they can make an appointment to review a specific academic challenge (from navigating their response to a bad test score to thinking through decisions related to their course of study), and they can get help in finding resources related to childcare, housing, legal aid, domestic violence, or any pertinent social, educational, or financial challenge they face. The Life Impact staff report taking an asset-based approach with Scholars, and they find that this approach allows Scholars to understand that they

have had success in some areas even while they face challenges, and that there are reasons to be proud, hopeful and motivated. Staff also report viewing themselves as facilitators rather than authorities or experts, so they offer incremental guidance rather than a set list of actions or prescribed steps.

Some of the support provided by Life Impact is specifically focused on academics, since Life Impact scholarships are performance-based, i.e., receiving scholarships is conditional on meeting academic requirements. Students need to maintain a 2.5 grade point average to receive scholarship support. When students fall beneath that threshold, they are placed on "program probation" and are required to form a plan to change their approach so they can improve their grade point average during the following semester. This plan is developed by the Life Impact coach and the student, where the student can determine what steps will work best and ask for the assistance they most need. If students are unable to improve despite that support, they will eventually be dismissed from the program. One required element of this plan is the "Semester at a Glance," which is a one-page graphic depiction of the student's academic deadlines over the course of the semester. Hard copies are distributed to students who are on academic probation so that students can easily see all their course-related deadlines in a single place. Students spoke about the importance of this simple, yet valuable educational tool, which exemplifies the kinds of support that Life Impact coaches provide for students.

Characteristics of Program Participants

Life Impact Program Staff successfully recruited the target population of financially disadvantaged parents striving to succeed in college. Students who were selected as Life Impact Scholars were chosen from a large pool of eligible applicants: 447 eligible students applied to the program between the years 2012 and 2017. Life Impact selects participants not simply based on demographic and financial characteristics, but through a careful review of other qualities including students' personal narratives, their demonstrated academic capacity, their established level of need for the academic and social support offered by Life Impact, and their willingness to make use of help when it is offered to them. These

preferred characteristics limit the number of students who could be considered a “perfect fit” for Life Impact programming. However, even considering these programmatic priorities, Life Impact has a large pool of “top fit” students from which to draw. For example, **from 2012 to 2017, 115 student applicants were considered top candidates for the Life Impact program, and, of these, only 45% could ultimately be offered a chance to participate, due to funding and staffing constraints. The demand for Life Impact’s support and services far exceeds the program’s current capacity to serve the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee student body, and many more student parents could likely benefit from the program’s services.**



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The students who were admitted as Life Impact Scholars all met the program’s direct requirements, i.e., they were Pell-eligible, caring for a dependent child more than 50% of the time, and planning to enroll full time (or currently enrolled full time) at UW—Milwaukee. Most had academic qualifications higher than the minimum required grade point average of 2.5, though a few were admitted to the program conditional on improving their grades after admission.

Analysis of the characteristics of the 107 Life Impact Scholars who were admitted between 2010 and 2017 shows that the typical (median) Life Impact Scholar was female, 26 years of age, unmarried, had one child, and was the first in her family to attend college. Most Scholars initially enrolled in Life Impact as sophomores or juniors (63%). **Twenty-seven percent were seniors and nine percent were freshmen when they were accepted to the program. Nearly all students admitted were deemed by the federal financial aid system as having the highest possible level of need (a \$0 Expected Family Contribution or EFC). Most Scholars were African American or Caucasian. While neither UW-Milwaukee nor the Life Impact Program itself collects data on these measures, based on interviews with Scholars and program staff, many Life**

Impact Scholars faced various forms of social disadvantage including surviving domestic violence, involvement with the court system, experiencing or witnessing neighborhood violence, caring for family members with disabilities, and managing their own mental and/or physical health problems.

Characteristics of students who participated in the Life Impact Program between 2010 and 2017 are as follows:

- 83% were female;
- 87% were single;²
- 96% had a \$0 Expected Family Contribution;
- 65% were the first in their families to attend college;
- Scholars represented diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds: 34% identified as African American, 34% Caucasian, 23% Hispanic/Latino, and 6% Asian and 4% Native American;
- 72% of Scholars had one child when they entered the program, 22% had two children, and 7% had three to five children.
- Scholars ranged in age from 18 to 53, with a median age at entry of 26.
- Most Life Impact Scholars (63%) had sophomore or junior standing when they entered the program.

Outputs: Retention, Scholarships, Emergency Funds, Social Support

This section details the scholarships and emergency funds received by all students over the program’s 12 years in operation (for 195 Scholars). Before assessing the outcomes (differences in Scholars that occurred, theoretically, because of their participation in the program), evaluators describe the program’s outputs. Outputs are the types of services and supports provided, and the size or level of these supports that students actually received. We begin with a description of the Life Impact Program’s retention rates, because it is one marker of the duration over which students received support,

² Single includes divorced, widowed, and never married.

though retention can also be viewed as an outcome to the extent that it is also a result of the program's services. In this section, we also describe the level and scope of scholarships, emergency funds, and social support received by Life Impact Scholars.

Program Retention

One overarching finding is that the Life Impact Program's retention rates are high, particularly given the challenging circumstances of Scholars' lives. The Life Impact Program was designed to support students throughout their college careers rather than to provide a short spell of financial and coaching support. The fact that Life Impact Scholars largely stay enrolled is both a marker of the ability of the program to effectively support students, the admissions process that ensures that students who become Life Impact Scholars are capable of solid academic performance, and the hard work that Scholars are willing and able to do. The Life Impact Program continues to support students who stay in good standing by meeting the program's academic and participation requirements (see discussion of the program model for details on these requirements), but if students are unable to maintain academic and participation requirements, they will be placed "on probation" and, if they are unable to improve their academic performance even with extra support, they will eventually be dismissed from the Life Impact Program.

Most Life Impact Scholars maintained eligibility and received sustained support. Overall, 83% (89 students) of the 107 students who entered the program in 2010 or later maintained their good standing with the Life Impact Program. Of these 89, as of spring 2017, 24 students were still enrolled in college,³ and 65 have graduated.

To determine whether some types of students were more likely to be retained as Life Impact Scholars than others, evaluators used statistical tests of independence, to discover whether being dismissed was statistically related to various demographic or

socioeconomic characteristics. We found that being unmarried was statistically significantly related to being dismissed from the program, but being a student of color, or an older (above age 26), being a first-generation college student, or being female, were each statistically independent of dismissal. This is not to say that being single causes dismissal, simply that single parents are statistically more likely than married students to be dismissed, which could be due to the unique challenges facing single parenting students.

Scholarships

Life Impact enrolls only students who have substantial financial need (as measured by eligibility for the federal need-based Pell grant), and most have further qualified as being unable to contribute towards their college education. Based on survey responses collected by the program, 84% of Life Impact Scholars are sufficiently financially disadvantaged to qualify for one or more state or county-level benefits including food assistance, medical assistance, and child care subsidies.⁴ In recognition of the fact that financial need greatly challenges college progress,

Life Impact provides substantial scholarships and available additional resources when students face unexpected financial hardship. Life Impact scholarships support students who are provided to students who meet program requirements, including maintaining a 2.5 grade point average. If all requirements are met, the program provides a scholarship

of \$5,000 per academic year (this amount was \$4,000 per academic year for 2017-2018). **In total, the Life Impact Program has awarded \$2,229,921 in performance-based scholarships to 195 Scholars over the course of 12 years.** Barbara Goldberg & Associates, LLC, analyzed scholarship data from all Life Impact Scholars who participated between the program's inception in 2005 and the 2016-2017 academic year.⁵



³ Including a single student who stayed in good standing with the Life Impact Program but transferred to another institution.

⁴ Based on a survey conducted with 37 Life Impact Scholars during the 2015-2016 year.

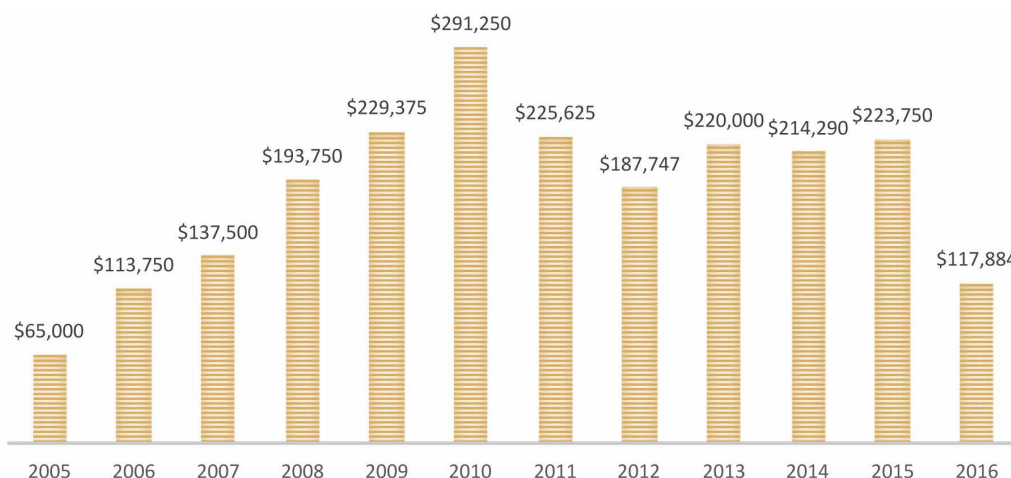
⁵ Scholarship data tallied by the UWM Office of Financial Aid is provided by "aid year" and, as such, is provided for 2006-2017, which are academic years 2005-2016.

Unlike many performance-based scholarship programs, the Life Impact Program is designed to provide multi-year financial support to students so that they can continue to make progress towards their degrees. Many students benefitted from that multi-year support. About one-fifth of students (20.5%) received scholarships during a single academic year. Nearly two-fifths (37%) were awarded scholarships during two academic years. About one-quarter (24%) received scholarships for three years, and 12% received scholarships for four years. The remaining six percent received scholarships for five or six years (only 1% received six years of support). The average total number of years of scholarships received was 2.48.

Substantial scholarships awarded over multiple years means that the total amount students receive can be substantial. The total amount of scholarships that individual students received ranged from \$2,500 to \$27,500. The median total scholarship was \$10,000, and the average total scholarship was \$11,435. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of Life Impact Scholars received less than \$10,000, and 73% received less than \$15,000. Twenty-seven percent (27%) received \$15,000 or more. About 10% of Life Impact Scholars (20 students) received more than \$20,000 in total scholarships.

Figure 1 below shows the total dollars in Life Impact scholarships awarded by academic year since the program's beginning in 2005. Total scholarship distribution grew between 2005 and 2010, as the program took on greater numbers of Scholars, and steadied between 2011 before dropping in 2016.

FIGURE 1: TOTAL SCHOLARSHIPS AWARDED BY ACADEMIC YEAR, 2005-2016



Emergency Funds

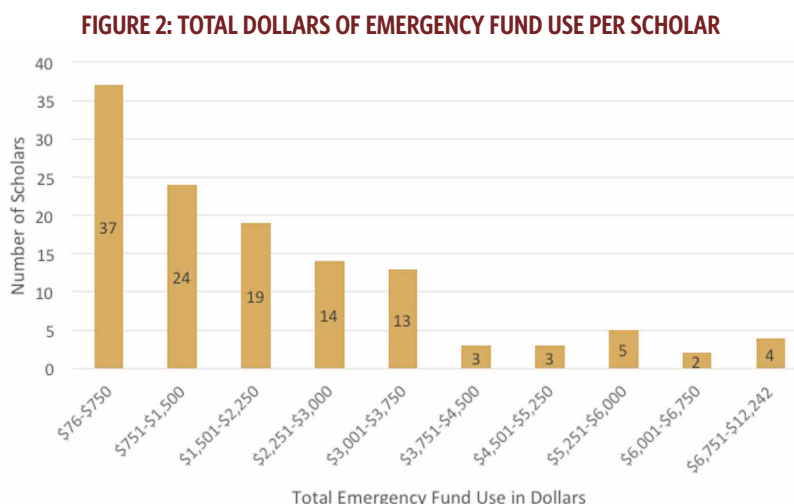
A central tenet of the Life Impact Program's model was the recognition that the educational progress of financially vulnerable students can easily be derailed by an unexpected expense. Even with the benefit of substantial scholarships, few student parents can amass enough savings to be prepared for a financial emergency, however minor. When we asked current Life Impact students how they would handle a sudden \$500 cost, not one responded that they could easily weather such an event. Small financial emergencies can snowball and become semester-stopping or even college-stopping barriers; for example, a broken-down vehicle can mean missing an exam, which in turn can mean failing a class,

losing financial aid, and even dropping out of college. Acknowledging this fragility, the Life Impact Program, since the program's beginning, has made emergency funds available to students who face unexpected costs. Evaluators analyzed complete data for all Life Impact Scholars since the beginning of the program, and here we summarize the amount of emergency funds awarded over the years.

Emergency funds were a valuable resource and last resort safety net for students: 534 requests for emergency funds were made between 2006 and 2015. Most Scholars made use of emergency funds at some point; but among those who did use them, the largest share only accessed them once. Sixty-four percent (64%) of all Scholars (124 of the 195) applied for and received emergency funds at least

once during their tenure in the program. Of the students who received any emergency funds, 31% received funds only once, 26% used emergency funds two or three times, 23% used the funds between four and six times and 21% of students who used emergency funds did so seven or more (up to 16) times.

The number of emergency fund requests per Scholar varied, as did the total amount of emergency funds students received. As illustrated by Figure 2 below, **most students did not make heavy use of emergency funds: About half (49%) of the students who used emergency funds received less than \$1,500.** More than three-quarters (76%) of Scholars who used emergency funds received less than \$3,000. Some students, though, did use high amounts of emergency funds; 11% used more than \$4,500, and a small group of students (3%) received emergency funds greater than \$6,750 and up to a total of \$12,242.



The emergency funds component of the Life Impact Program means that staff can be responsive when students experience unanticipated significant needs. Analysis of individual emergency funds requests showed that funds were most commonly used for housing (40% of requests), transportation (mainly automobile-related) (17% of requests), professional development (12% of requests) and utilities (11% of requests). Housing costs included emergency home repairs, moving expenses, rent payments, and fees related to foreclosures. Transportation costs were mainly car repairs but also car payments, car insurance, and gasoline. The remaining request categories included childcare costs, medical costs, legal costs, college-related costs, groceries, telephone/internet costs. During interviews, several students who reported that they had not accessed emergency funds expressed that they took comfort in knowing such help was available if an emergency expense arose.

Coaching & Social Support

The Life Impact Program model was developed with the understanding that student parents face challenges that are more than financial, and that they lead complicated lives where they play multiple, often difficult roles. The model also recognizes that many Scholars are the first in their families to attend college, and as such may lack sources of information and support that are critical to college success. While the Life Impact Program does not specifically quantify the scope, amount, or level of social support provided to Scholars, evaluators were able to get information about this process through interviews with program staff and through interviews conducted with a randomly selected group of current Life Impact Scholars.

Life Impact staff describes the coaching as very student-driven, in that students are asked to identify the primary areas of challenge they face, and coaches help students to focus on these areas. Coaches see themselves as facilitators, assisting students in a way that helps them build their own capacity to advocate for themselves in the future.

Scholars describe the coaching they receive as of critical importance, in fact, several of the students interviewed indicated that life coaching was as important (or even more important) to them than the financial aid they received through Life Impact. Each of the Scholars we interviewed reported that the Life Impact staff was incredibly committed to their work; Scholars frequently said that the Life Impact coaches were the people in their lives who cared the most about them reaching their educational goals.

Outcomes: Academic Performance & Graduation

Through financial support and individualized coaching, the Life Impact Program seeks to improve Scholars' academic performance and their likelihood of college graduation. To examine these outcomes among Scholars, Barbara Goldberg & Associates, LLC, compared the cumulative grade point averages of Life Impact Scholars before they began the program to their cumulative grade point averages at the latest possible point (their final or most recent semester of college). Additionally, evaluators reviewed program records to examine the college completion rates of Life Impact Scholars. These comparisons are based on all 107 students who entered Life Impact between 2010 and 2017, representing about 55% of all Scholars who have been served by the program. **Evaluation results show that students who participate in the Life Impact Program, on average, maintain good academic performance and are very likely to graduate from college.**

Academic Performance: Grade Point Average

Evaluators analyzed cumulative grade point averages collected from Scholars at the time of their application to the Life Impact Program (just prior to their beginning the program) and at the latest possible point (either when they completed their UW-Milwaukee enrollment or their latest semester of enrollment). **We find that Life Impact Scholars, despite all the myriad challenges they face, are relatively strong academic achievers, both when they begin the program, and as they proceed through their college careers.**

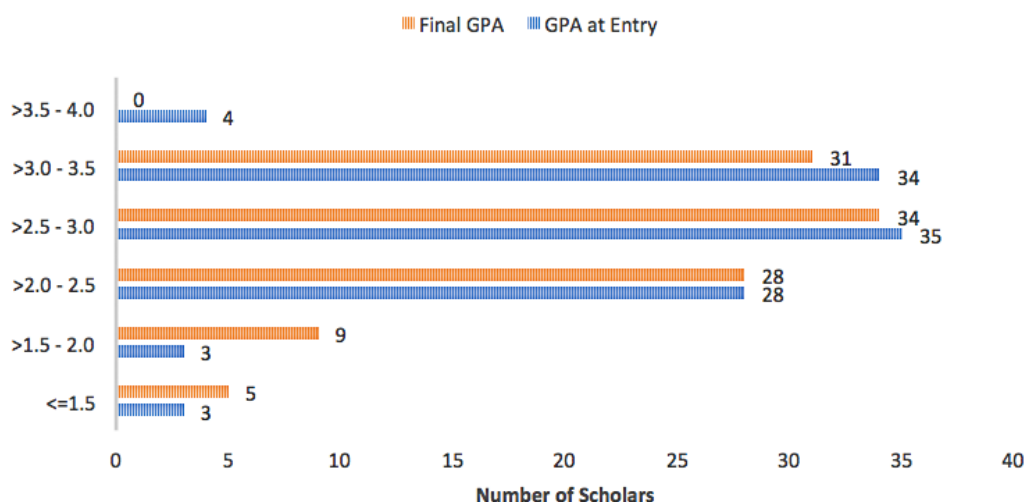
Based on grade point averages collected from the semester prior to Life Impact acceptance for 107 participants from 2010-2017, Scholars began Life Impact with an average cumulative GPA of 3.17 (median of 3.22), well above the required 2.5 GPA minimum. More than two-thirds of incoming Life Impact Scholars had GPAs above 3.0, and 36% had GPAs of 3.5 or higher. A few students (6%) were accepted with grade point averages beneath the required 2.5 cutoff.

The initial GPAs of Life Impact Scholars differed somewhat by demographic characteristics. Students who were 26 or older when they began the program had slightly higher grade point averages than those who were younger than 26, students who were married had slightly higher grade point averages than those who were unmarried, and white students had marginally higher GPAs than students of color when they began the program.⁶

At their final or latest semester, Life Impact Scholars' had steadily maintained their grade point averages. Final grade point averages were drawn for all 107 Scholars who form the analytic sample, including those who were still enrolled, those who had graduated, and those who had discontinued their enrollment. In this way, the analysis shows the overall academic performance of Life Impact Scholars over the longer term. While the mean grade point average of Scholars fell from a mean of 3.17 before they began at Life Impact to a mean of 3.10, this difference was not statistically significant, and is best interpreted as demonstrating that Scholars' grade point averages stayed consistently strong over their time at UW-Milwaukee. Figure 3 below shows the small changes in the distributions of grade point averages over Scholars' time in the program. The number of students with high grade point averages (above 3.0) decreased slightly between the pre- and post- grade point average measurements, and the number of students with grade point averages beneath 2.0 increased. At both points in time, most Scholars' grade point averages were above 2.0 and beneath 3.5.

⁶ All statistically significantly higher at the $p < .05$ level.

FIGURE 3: CUMULATIVE GRADE POINT AVERAGES OF SCHOLARS AT ENTRY AND FINAL SEMESTER



Because the Life Impact Program will eventually dismiss students who are not able to maintain academic (and other) requirements, we also examined the changes in grade point average for only the group of Scholars who were retained by the Life Impact Program. Students who remained Life Impact Scholars had a mean grade point average of 3.18 at entry and a mean of 3.21 after participation, and this change did not rise to the level of statistical significance, showing again that Life Impact Scholars are able to maintain their academic performance over time.

While it is not appropriate to directly compare Life Impact Scholars to the larger pool of student parents enrolled at UW-Milwaukee, since, as has been described, students selected for Life Impact face unique challenges to college success, and, importantly, have relatively strong academic backgrounds, for the sake of context, we examined the cumulative grade point averages of 693 UW-Milwaukee low-income undergraduate parents from a recent year. The median GPA of these students is 2.67 and average GPA is 2.42, significantly lower than the cumulative grade point averages of Life Impact Scholars.

Graduation

Given existing evidence about the likelihood of on-time college completion for students who are also low-income parents, the Life Impact Program has a striking record for graduation of its program participants. **Of all Life Impact Scholars who began the program between 2010 and 2017, 94% have graduated or are still enrolled.** We examine the graduation rates of Life Impact Scholars using three measures based

on the available data (the analysis is conducted using the 107 Life Impact Scholars who began the program in 2010 or later, 55% of the program's total lifetime enrollment).

First, we examined the share of all 107 Scholars who managed to graduate by the time data was analyzed. Sixty-three percent (63%) of the Scholars (67 students) who started in 2010 or beyond had graduated. Seven percent had discontinued their enrollment, and 30% were still enrolled. However, this measure is limited because it considers all Scholars, including, for example, those who were only freshmen or sophomores, and who could not yet expect to have graduated. To account for this, as a second measure, we examined the Scholars who could have graduated by the time the data were analyzed.⁷ **Of all Life Impact Scholars who had sufficient semesters enrolled, 79% had successfully graduated.** The remaining students are either still enrolled (13%), or had dropped out or "stopped out" (8%).⁸ Finally, we examined the total number of Life Impact Scholars who had departed UW-Milwaukee by 2017, and found that 91% of those "leavers" had graduated. The remaining nine percent had discontinued enrollment at UW-Milwaukee.⁹

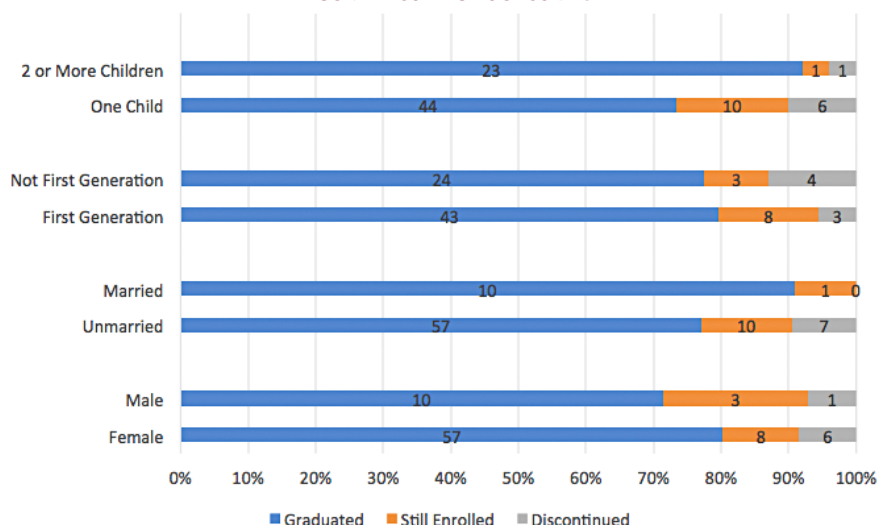
⁷ Meaning these students had had sufficient time enrolled at UW-Milwaukee, based on their academic standing at the time of Life Impact entry and the number of years they have participated in the program, n=85.

⁸ "Stopping out" refers to the phenomenon of students stopping enrollment to pursue other goals with the intention to return.

⁹ The data available for this evaluation does not include students' enrollment at other institutions. Students who discontinued enrollment at UW-Milwaukee could have enrolled at other colleges or universities.

To examine whether some subgroups of Life Impact Scholars were more or less likely to graduate, we examined the group of Scholars who had had sufficient time at UW-Milwaukee and could reasonably have graduated (as previously described, 79% of this group has graduated). Among these students, we looked to see how graduation rates varied by subgroup. The analysis showed that graduation rates varied from 71% of male students having graduated (compared with 80% of female students), to 91% of married students (compared with 77% of unmarried students). Notably, 92% of students with two or more children graduated, compared with 73% of those with a single child. These rates of graduation are greater than both the expected six-year national graduation rate for student parents, and the six-year graduation rate for UW-Milwaukee.

FIGURE 4: COLLEGE OUTCOMES



By any of the measures used, a high percentage of Life Impact Scholars are graduating from college. These results are particularly strong considering the various and significant barriers to college progress that Life Impact Scholars face. In comparing graduation rates of Life Impact Scholars to other groups of college students, it is important to note that Scholars enter the program with some unique and considerable disadvantages, but also some advantages that may render them more likely to graduate than other student parents and even other traditional students. Life Impact Scholars are selected, in part, based on grade point average and their willingness to seek out support, for example, and these are qualities that may have helped them graduate regardless of their participation in the program. Nonetheless, the Life Impact Program has a very strong track record for graduating its participants.

The 67 Life Impact Scholars who graduated between 2010 and 2017 were similar to Life Impact Scholars overall in terms of gender, marital status, expected family contribution, and race/ethnicity. Graduates received a median total scholarship amount of \$12,500, and had a median of three years of scholarship receipt, both of which were higher than those medians for

Scholars overall, and the graduates received a median of \$900 in emergency funds, less than the larger group of all Life Impact Scholars. Most Scholars who graduated had more advanced academic standing when they entered the program; 39% of graduates entered Life Impact as college seniors, 28% entered as juniors, 28% entered as sophomores, and only 4% of graduates entered as freshmen.

Voices of Life Impact Scholars

To understand the ways in which Life Impact Scholars viewed their experiences as college students, and as parents, and to gain insight into the challenges Scholars' saw as most pressing and the supports they saw as most essential, the evaluation team designed a semi-structured interview process to hear Scholars' own voices and thoughts. Barbara Goldberg & Associates, LLC randomly selected six Scholars (26% of currently enrolled Scholars) to interview. Scholars were asked to participate in 90 minute interviews at a place of their choosing and were offered a \$40 thank-you gift for their time. Despite their busy and complicated lives, all six randomly selected scholars completed interviews between May and September

of 2017. Four of the interviews were conducted in person on or near the UW-Milwaukee campus and two were conducted by phone. The group of students who were interviewed were all female, all first-generation college students, and all were unmarried as of their interview date. All six identified as racial or ethnic minorities. They were in various stages of their college careers, from near to graduation to several years away.

Reasons for Perseverance

All six Life Impact Scholars reported that their children were their most important motivation for continuing college, despite the challenges. Scholars wanted to provide financial security for themselves and their children, but perhaps even more, they were driven to show their children that they too could break through barriers to achieve a college education and a more stable life. Several referred specifically to breaking a cycle of disadvantage by earning a college diploma, and in so doing cast their motivations in terms of setting an example for their entire family. Others referred specifically to the influence their educational paths would have on their school-aged children. A sample of Scholars' comments on their reasons for attending college follows:

"I want to graduate. I want it more than anything in life. It makes me emotional because I want to set that example for my family. I have so many nieces and nephews they're young, they're beautiful and my family is smart, but we don't do enough for ourselves. You know, like we're very supportive, we're very loving, we have so much love to give, but they are teen moms so most of them don't have a high school education. None, really none of them. So they are forced to work minimum wage jobs, and all of my family has two to eight kids. All of them. You know, so it's like, I don't want this to be a generational thing. And I want to be one of those Moms because they do kind of look up to me. So, um that would be the main thing for me on graduation day, is my desire to really prove myself to them, that you can do this."

"My kids keep me going. It is them and yeah, just getting them out of this cycle that I've always been in. 'Cause none of my family...my parents didn't go to college. I have three siblings, they didn't go to college. Yeah, I just wanted better for them and to be able to live comfortably with them and show them that you know you can do it. And like obstacles come along, but keep going, you can do it, you can fight through

it. There are people to help you, there are people that want to help you, you just have to find them and work with them."

"You know what my daughter I'm really starting to see she looks up to me. She really, really watches me, and um [graduating from college] is going to mean a lot. And because I have a desire to get through school, I even have a stronger desire to do it for her."

"[My children] have been my motivation. I was a wild child, but they slowed me down. My kids made me change. I used to party a lot, I always did. [They] just changed my whole way of thinking—now I'm responsible. The streets were my focus, I was selling drugs and all types of stuff, that was what I did to survive. It was right after I had [my first child]—I noticed that my whole focus changed—it was about business about that point. Needed to be focused and stay on the right track."

"For me it's just, I'm a role model to my [child] so we're doing it together you know? [My child] always asks me, 'Did you go to school today?' so it feels like we did it together. I couldn't just stop or give up in the middle of it."

"I think the number one thing is just motivation. We all have our children behind us to motivate us because we want to get out of school and support them and give them the best possible life that we can. I think the second thing is just we actually take studying and doing our homework and getting good grades, it's serious. It's not like we're just, 'Oh you know I'm going to a party this weekend and if I study, I study.'" It's not like that. You know it's not like normal college students where they just squeeze in things when they have to. It's we have to in a sense because it's detrimental to our children if we're not doing those things and getting bad grades, you know. So I think it's like motivation and it's just our determination, like getting good grades and finishing and staying, having a clear path, you know not letting things get in the way and just keeping up with it."

Support from Family & Friends

Most of the Life Impact students reported having at least one family member who was supportive of their educational goals and who provided some assistance, whether in the form of emotional support or more tangible helpful actions. For many of these students, parents were an important form of support, both in terms of expressing enthusiasm about the

Scholar's goals, emotional support when they face stress, and in terms of providing tangible help (most often in the form of child care). As two Life Impact students stated:

"My Mom. She's amazing. We've had like a rocky past but overall she wants to see me happy and like I trust her with my kids and like I trust her with everything I do and she's just been a big support like she helps me if I need to study, she'll say, 'Oh, I'll keep the kids' or if I need just a break like she notices that I'm like crabbier than usual she's like 'go get your nails done' or something like, 'just go, I'll take them, you go relax.'"

"My family, they are really helpful and supportive so like when I have like if I like just one day like you feel like you just can't do it, you know, like I have them there and they'll talk me through it and like someone will take my kid so I can like go to the gym or go for a walk or do something like relaxing to myself before I like feel like I'm going to explode."

However, students recognized that even their closest family members could not be counted on to fully understand the demands of an undergraduate education, nor could they be expected to really provide a great deal of specific help in terms of guidance. While most students mentioned at least one family member who was a great supporter, they also noted that their family couldn't fully understand what they were going through, nor could they provide much help in some areas. One student reported that while her mother is eager to support her, she doesn't know how, "I wish I could help you but I can't, you know. Go talk to someone, she'd always tell me, talk to your instructor, ask for help, there has to be something. She's always telling me "There has to be someone that can help you." Another student reported, "I am the first college student in my family so my Mom is like 'Yeah, college is great but I can't really help you with anything' because she doesn't really know how it works."

Further, Scholars recognized that their close family members and friends were bearing their own social, financial and emotional burdens, and they were hesitant to ask for support for that reason. Some students also expressed that while support from family and friends was available, they tried hard not to take advantage of it, preferring to handle their

responsibilities independently.

"Because my other friends, they have their own agenda, and their own things that they have to take care of. Like my friends with kids their priorities are their kids you know and my priority is my kid. They help as much as they can but I would feel like I'm burdening them and weighing on like my relationship in using things that I shouldn't be using them for. Like that's not their place."

"I would love my mom to help with my kids, but her job is crazy, she doesn't get to plan her schedule, she doesn't know her schedule for weeks so she just kind of goes based off of what they give her. So it's hard to coordinate with that. And she didn't have a car for a while too, so that was really hard because if I needed someone to pick them up I didn't have someone a lot of the time."

"Yeah so ninety percent of the time it's on me. Like I try not to, unless I feel that I absolutely cannot deal with it then I'll reach out, but I try. It's my responsibility, he's my kid, and no one else should have to carry that, like my Mom had kids and you know, raised them, so like there's no reason why she needs to. She knows that I use her as the last resort, I don't abuse. Like it's not fair and it's not her responsibility."

Also, students articulated that their family and close friends, besides being supportive, were also demanding of their time and energy, in part because

they lacked a full understanding of the demands of college. As one student put it,

"They want to see me succeed but the reality of it is, sometimes when they want me to do something, maybe a ride or you know, imposing on my time or something, they don't understand what it takes to be a student. They don't understand the time. You know they call me and say you know "Can you do this?" I be working on this paper, and they say, "Girl you still working on that paper?" I'm like, yes, do you know how...do you know what type of paper I'm writing? So they don't quite understand. They see what I'm doing but they don't quite understand. So they are not too, too supportive in that regard. They don't know what it takes because again they haven't experienced it so I feel like sometimes they don't respect it."

Finally, though students reported having others in their lives who wanted to see them succeed, they



also reported not having available time for nurturing friendships. Most students said they simply did not prioritize building or maintaining social relationships with non-family members. Specifically, they did not seek out friendships or social activities on campus, even with other Life Impact students, except for the purpose of forming study groups. But in general, most students said that friendships were not possible given their current workload. As one student put it,

"Yeah, I'm friends with a few of them, when you see them in the Life Impact office, you catch up and it's nice. We always say, 'Oh we should do this or that', but honestly, just wait until I'm graduated and I'll contact you."

What challenges Life Impact students?

Undergraduate education is an immersive experience, requiring substantial time and focus between attending classes, studying, and completing assignments and projects. For many of the women interviewed for our study, being a student while also parenting a child was only one element in a constellation of social, financial, and other life challenges that students faced. These included everyday household matters like budgeting, arranging child care, finding new apartments, interacting with their children's schools, or fully participating in relationships with partners, friends and family members. They also included the time and energy needed to manage their own health crises, handling grief and trauma due to the deaths of family members, caring for children with special health care needs, and providing ongoing, daily care for parents or other family members with disabilities. They faced divorces, immigration cases, child custody battles, restraining orders against former partners, escaping intimate partner violence, involvement with the criminal justice system, and being victims of neighborhood violence themselves. While financial aid data can capture the financial need these students experience, and academic data can describe some measure of their engagement with their classes, no form could adequately convey the range and depth of challenge that these mothers outlined during their interviews.

Many Scholars described the challenge of balancing their roles as students, parents, and employees in terms of a lack of time. Frequently they mentioned their pride in their level of organization, as well as the need to sacrifice their own well-being or

time with their children in order to manage their competing roles:

"Last semester, I was working, getting my kids ready for daycare and school, come to work, work all day (which is tiring), then I'm giving assistance to my children for hours after work, helping my daughter with homework and put down my two little ones by the end of the night at eight o'clock or nine, sometimes they go to bed at nine, I am just completely exhausted and then at that time it's where my time is freed up to do my school work and so some nights I can't even get it done. Sometimes I just quit trying. As far as me studying for things, I wasn't prepared for a few of my tests, and that had a huge impact on of my final grade. I missed a few assignments 'cause I just was too tired. I couldn't pull through to get them done. It was just lack of sleep."

"Yeah, it's very crazy. I don't know how, some days I don't know how I do it. I kind of look back and I'm like, 'Whoa, like, I did that.' It takes a lot of organization. Like I have three different planners, one for like personal, one for school and one for my [kids'] doctors and dentists' appointment and things. A lot of organization and time management, a lot of like, prioritizing things and it's hard though."

"Like studying, like managing time, like finding time to study, like finding time to sleep, um especially cause like in the winter months I go through a depression too so then it's like battling that but still trying to be like an amazing mom and like school, work and all this other stuff. But it's just kind of balancing most things."

"I don't know it's just hard. You know how school is. If you're at work, work stops at five and then you go home and then you just be a parent. With school, school doesn't stop, you still have to go home, and you still have to be a mom and you have to be a student. That's the worst part about like being in school. So sometimes I get like really sad because it's really hard. He'll have missed me. Like we'll sit down and have breakfast and he'll say 'Can you just please stay here with me?' and he'll sit on my lap so I don't move and it's like really hard."



While many students accessed social welfare benefits including food, childcare subsidies and medical assistance, identifying and re-certifying for these benefits added a layer of challenge to the balancing act in which the Scholars already found themselves. One student illustrated the challenging realities of managing her family's needs while also fully participating in an academic environment. During a class focused on social policy, she participated in an activity intended to demonstrate for students the cumbersome process of qualifying for social welfare programs, and said that she was distracted because she was in the process of re-certifying for her own SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits.

"So, I could relate to that. Because during that exact class, sometimes I would be on the phone for hours,



hours because they done cut my food stamps off [saying] I needed to produce my school schedule. I already produced my school schedule but they didn't put it in the system or whatever. Then they fixed that [...]. So I share my

story and people would come up to me after class and, you know, want to become my friend like, 'Oh my God I can't believe people actually go through this.' Like they couldn't believe it."

Students articulated the difficulties of accessing these supports, and the difficulties the ways in which financial aid and scholarships interact (and cancel each other out), as well as the challenging choices they sometimes had to make related to these supports:

"So the financial aid that I get, I use that to pay off my rent, right? So I'm not using it to kick it or go out or whatever, but the food stamps that I get, they make me submit to them proof of my scholarship. What they do is take that amount and divide it by three months or however long the semester is and say that that's income. And they knock [your benefit amount] back but in reality it's not income--I'm using it to pay my rent so I really don't have nothing left. So you get penalized for getting the scholarships that are helping you get through college that actually makes it harder for you to cover your food bill. It's messed up."

"When I moved [here] I was broke. I came here with the kids, my clothes, my car and I think less than 100 dollars. I applied for government assistance. They told me first of all I had to register--you had to register your fingerprints because they want you down in their office job searching. They wanted me for forty hours a week to be down in their office job searching. So I had to check in and check out with my finger prints certifying that I was actually there. Back and forth for appointments, back and forth back and forth you know. [But then I found out] I'm being accepted to UWM right? So I went back to the office and said, look, I can't be down here forty hours a week because I was just accepted to UWM I have classes on these times and dates. They said, well look, UWM is not one of our partner schools. If you want to get the W-2 (which I think is \$650 a month) you would need to enroll in our partner school. Ok, [I said], well what's your partner school? MATC, Milwaukee Area Technical College. So they gave me an ultimatum, you know. And I said, I can't do that, I'm already accepted here. Now mind you, MATC is a technical college you can get an 18 month skill trade or a six month diploma or at most a 2 year associate's degree. But you guys are called the Women's Empowerment Center or whatever you're called? To receive a monthly benefit to meet my basic need during this transition period of me being unemployed, I have to go to a technical college versus a university? It's not, it just doesn't make sense to me. So, having to make the decision between a technical college and getting a welfare check or going to a university which in the long run gonna make me more competitive and get me going. But I had to make that decision and I'm glad that I was able to make the decision."

Scholars noted the financial challenges of being a college student parent, but most maintained an upbeat outlook despite financial hardship. Only two of the six Scholars interviewed said they were in a financial position to handle any sort of unexpected expense, and most said they worked multiple jobs, including some cash-only employment in order to make ends meet. Most were receiving scholarships beyond the one offered by Life Impact, so tuition itself was not generally identified as a burdensome cost. Most students were receiving food assistance benefits, child care subsidies (if their children were in care) and medical assistance for their children. Still, rent, utilities, and other regular bills were reportedly hard to manage, as were extras like children's field trips or Scholars' own professional development

opportunities. Despite these considerable challenges, the Scholars we interviewed maintained high levels of motivation. Two Scholars illustrated this: one by describing her return to homework shortly after the complicated birth of her child, and another by describing her drive to return immediately to school despite being hospitalized as a victim of neighborhood violence:

“Yeah, I gave birth and like it was funny ‘cause even after I gave birth I like, as soon as I was able I was like on my laptop doing homework. And so, and the only reason I took two weeks off was because I had to stay with my baby in the hospital because [my child had] like a health problem and so like for the first weeks we were in the hospital. Like, so I was doing my homework right away. The doctors were coming in like, ‘Are you doing homework?’ I’m like, yes, like my books were all laid out, my laptop was on there.”

“Right after it happened I kind of went to calling the Life Impact Program, so that they could help me rearrange the [meeting] I was supposed to have the day I got [hurt]. And I’m just ready to get back to school and finish my internship, but I just have to take it slow now.”

How does Life Impact help?

The Life Impact Program’s comprehensive model provides financial, emotional, academic, social, and procedural/informational support to Scholars, and through this support the program fosters Scholars’ confidence in their ability to navigate college-level demands and their sense of “fit” on campus. The program accomplishes these objectives in part by supporting students’ whole selves—by providing support that is not limited to topics related to school, but spans the complex, interconnected and complete experiences of student-parents’ lives. Further, Life Impact Scholars said they had built real, durable relationships with staff, and felt that they could discuss any issue or concern without fear of judgement. Each of the six interviewees spoke extensively about Life Impact’s services and the critical value of the program to their college progress. They cast the value of the program into several main categories: financial assistance, provision of information and resources (both academic and non-academic), encouragement and support, and a sense of “belonging.”

Many students articulated the importance of

both Life Impact’s scholarships and the fact that these scholarships were renewable over multiple years. They also were comforted by the availability of emergency funds if they encountered an unexpected financial challenge. They reported that the program’s participation and academic requirements were helpful; the extrinsic motivation to maintain their scholarships helped them to attend to academic matters.

“Like you get financial support from Life Impact and, like they make you like, you have to meet certain requirements so it like almost keeps you on your toes, like you have to go in for like career meetings, you have to take like education workshops you have to like go in for like mid semester and beginning of the semester meetings—there’s a lot of things that you have to do to keep the scholarship. So, it’s a lot of things on top of school that you also have to do for them, but honestly, going in there and doing those check-ups and doing those career things, it’s like, OK now I have an updated resume and now I know exactly when my exams are this semester and when all my assignments are due. They are really important meetings, they are really helpful.”

But Scholars uniformly said that the Life Impact Program was far, far more than a scholarship. They felt the scholarship was a key component, and noted that they would never have applied had it not been for the offer of financial support, but felt that the personalized support and coaching provided by the Life Impact team was really the key to the program’s value. When we asked about the most important element of the Life Impact program, students’ responses included:

“Having Natalie and Rachel as life coaches, you are receiving so much more than money. Like you’re receiving a support system and they’ve become like a part of my family.”

*“Support. Like, the financial part is really great, but their support is like **really** great. It’s like I feel like I would need to go to therapy if I didn’t have them. It’s definitely the support is number one and the financial is definitely the second most important for me. Maybe for other students it’s different. I mean if anything I could get the money from loans which is horrible—obviously the money is really great to get ‘cause I don’t have to use the loans then but money is not going to provide you support, not someone to talk to and to like walk you through.”*

"I mean I would prefer to not take out loans, but at the end of the day I need the social, mental, emotional support because I can't function if I'm not mentally OK. There's no way to get through my classes or take my tests if I can't mentally be together, so if it was just like no we can't provide you funds...but to be honest if it wasn't the fund part I wouldn't have applied do you know what I mean? That's why I signed up for Life Impact, because the first thing I needed: Funds. That's what caught my attention. Like, oh, I'm going to get money to help pay for school and thank God, because I don't want all this debt but then it was like, you know they help with all these things and all the family aspects but now actually experiencing it, if they said we no longer offer funds, I'd be like, oh I'm still coming here and I love you guys because I've already established that relationship, you know?"

"I don't know, if they would just give me a check that's not it, it's not just like writing a check. If they give me a check that's nice, but then when other things do come up that could hinder me staying in school, like where do I go then? But they're like that and more. So it's like it's an amazing balance. I feel like parents need, especially parents, but anyone who has a scholarship needs that social support and the financial support to go together to really make, to make it through college."

Another form of support that Life Impact Scholars valued was indirect academic assistance in the form of skill-building, time-management, or procedural or informational assistance. Life Impact would help students construct a "Semester at a Glance" document that would contain their entire semester's deadlines in one place, which several students found very helpful. They also remarked that they could count on the Life Impact staff to help them determine where to find out about courses to take or to get information about their major's requirements:

"They create in the beginning of the semester what's called 'Semester at a Glance' which is they take all of your syllabi and combine them into one big calendar sheet so you have your three four months of class work planned out and laid out for you and the dates and everything."

"They contact instructors for you, they help make accommodations, like help if you need tutoring or anything, they find all resources and they get on it so fast it's just, you know the actions that they do to show you that they really want you to succeed."

Most of the Scholars' comments on the importance of the program focused on having a trusting, stable relationship with Life Impact Program coaches. Scholars felt that they could safely bring issues or problems of any kind to the Life Impact staff, and that they could count on the coaches to provide good advice or resources without judgement. They also felt that Life Impact coaches were truly interested in their success. That presence and involvement of key institutional figures who believed in Scholars' capacity to succeed in college was an important source of comfort and inspiration for students. Comments from Scholars focused on the importance of their relationships with coaches included:

"You get close to them--depending on how long you in the program and how well you use the program. In as far as the emotional support they are there for anything, whether it was school related or not. There have been

times where I have been having a bad day and I walked in and there's been times where you know, when my friend died and I really didn't know what to do or if I wanted to finish school, and it was like nobody could tell me anything for getting me out of that depression but they provided that emotional support, they provided resources and counseling services to go to."

"When I got pregnant with (my child) I had like a big emotional issue dealing with abuse and they

were there for me and like saw me through the case and everything and just emotionally, just way over and beyond what they have to do or what they even get paid to do."

"Yeah, they're there. They're always there. Or you can email you can call, like any way you can get in contact with them. I know at one point I was going through a really hard time with my kid's father with domestic violence and things and I actually sat down with Natalie and made like a safe plan...it was like how to get out of my house if I....so it's way deeper than just

"I don't know if you know about the Life Impact Program? That is where I really started to kind of believe in myself. It is the program for parents, minority parents and it's a scholarship and it's also support, so you get like a five-thousand-dollar renewable scholarship, but I feel like any Scholar would say the support was the biggest thing that you know, that mattered the most."

like financial purpose like it's bonds and relationships that I built. Amazing. Like I don't think they know like how much they affect all of us especially me, especially, like, everything that I've gone through, like they've always been there. We're really close. And yeah, we're really close. And I feel like they, it's not like, 'Oh here's your check.' You know? [It's like] we're glad that you're doing so well academically, it's like I care about you as a person and I care about your life and I want you to be healthy and I want your family situation to be healthy and I want the best for you. Like that's them."

"Seeing the same faces, like always seeing like Rachel, always seeing Natalie, like I know that I don't have to explain who I am or what I'm about; they know EVERYTHING literally. So just knowing that there's nothing off limits with them. I can go in there and I know that it's a safe place and I can talk about anything."

"I hate to say it like that because you know my family, they are supportive of me, but it's been so up and down and I have never really felt that they have been as [supportive as] the people at Life Impact. The support that they give, the encouragement, you know, sending cards in the mail just out of nowhere and gift cards, you know cards to WalMart or something, to get some stuff in the mail with a card just to say 'Oh, we're just thinking of you' or 'I believe that you can do it' you know it's just, um, that really strong encouragement that they give and it's real genuine."

"It's just nice because I can talk to them literally like [I would talk to] my best friend. I know there is no judgment, they know my situation I don't have to explain who or what I am and I don't have to hide who I am, I just go in there and talk and know that I don't have to think about what I'm saying I can just say it, you know it's a judgment free zone you know. Like, just because it says that as a statement it doesn't

"Life Impact, they're just consistent, they're always there. Like if I wouldn't have that person to go to with my question about, well, my financial aid has decreased, why is this? Or you know I'm having a hard time finding child care, or, I found out that my kid's father is going to take me to court, so where can I get legal resources? You know, they're like the first aid kit. They're like everything you need in a little box."

mean that you feel comfortable enough to believe it so with Life Impact, I believe it. I know that I can go in there and they're like, 'We're here for you one hundred percent.'"

Another group of comments centered on the physical space that the Life Impact office offered to Scholars. Scholars appreciated having this space that felt safe and comfortable, a place where they belonged. Comments on this topic included:

"Because it's small, it's cozy, you know, and it feels welcoming and just like the way that it's set up. It definitely feels like home, there's like pictures, they make it like very personal and you see people's kids on the wall and that's just comforting. Like you might just go in there for coffee but then you'll end up chatting and you'll end up doing all these other things, too. It's great."

"In there, we're student parents, we all have children to support. We're all in there to support each other for the

"With Life Impact, I'm able to say [to my child], 'Look, college is important.' It's a nice way to just kind of make [my child] understand that. 'You are on this journey with me, we're doing this together you know.' And I don't know, it helps kind of solidify why I'm doing it. Like, 'Oh, baby, you can come to college and Mommy will be able to help you. Because unfortunately my Mom wasn't able to help me.'"

same thing, you know, weren't not going to go in there and not support each other and not do homework or student you know. So it's like a really uplifting place to be, the office is."

"They have an office on campus and so in the office they have for the scholars you can have free printing, free water and coffee, you can go in there and they encourage you to just stop by and chat you know and so the office space is kid friendly which is another good thing. They have a little corner of toys and everything, yeah you just drop by anytime."

"Life Impact allows me to bring my child into the college setting and not be embarrassed. I still have my moments where [I feel] uncomfortable being with my kid and everyone's staring like 'What is this girl

doing with her son?' I just assume I know what they're thinking, but I don't, I just need to be more confident in what I'm doing."

Accomplishments, Challenges & Recommendations

The Life Impact Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee has accomplished a great deal since its inception in 2005. Key accomplishments include:

- **Seventy-nine percent (79%) of Life Impact Scholars have graduated from college within four years, and 93% of Scholars have either graduated or are still enrolled.**¹⁰ While the students who are enrolled as Life Impact Scholars are selected in part based on their ability to maintain good academic performance, and as such aren't directly comparable to the rest of UW-Milwaukee students, UW-Milwaukee student parents, or student parents nationally, their performance compares favorably to UW-Milwaukee's overall six-year graduation rate of 41% for new freshmen, and the national six-year graduation rates for student parents of 33%.^r
- Life Impact Scholars maintain their strong academic performance throughout their time at UW-Milwaukee. Their strong academic performance is likely due at least in part to the academic support and motivation provided by Life Impact. Life Impact Scholars enter the program with a median grade point average of 3.20, and those who remain Life Impact Scholars have a median final (or most recent) grade point average of 3.25.
- **More than \$2.2 million in performance-based scholarships were awarded to 195 Life Impact Scholars between 2005 and 2017. The median student received \$10,000 in scholarship over two years.**
- Nearly \$260,000 in total emergency funds was distributed to 124 individual students who faced sudden financial hardship. These emergency

funds helped students weather car breakdowns, housing costs, computer problems, medical costs and costs associated with job preparation (licensing tests or professional clothing costs). Students expressed the value of knowing they had somewhere to turn in case of a financial emergency; even for those students who never made use of the funds, knowing they could request them if needed was a source of comfort.

- During interviews, students described the immense value of their relationships with the Life Impact Coaches. **In some cases, students reported that the coaches were the people in their lives who most believed in their college success, and that the Life Impact coaches were their first line of defense when something went awry. Over and over, students reported feeling that the coaches were very personally invested in their students' success.**
- There is very strong demand for the Life Impact Program's support at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Nearly 450 low-income, parenting students applied to become Life Impact Scholars between 2012 and 2017, and of those, 115 applications were selected as being a perfect fit for the program. Because of limited capacity, the Life Impact Program was only able to serve 45% of those students, leaving more than half of the best applicants without the program's services. **The demand for Life Impact's support and services far exceeds the program's current capacity to serve the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee student body, and many more student parents could likely benefit from the program's services.**
- As a well-established, experienced program that has carefully tracked student outcomes over a considerable period, Life Impact's results can serve as a national reference point in terms of serving student parents striving for four-year degrees, and the Life Impact Program model could provide groundbreaking information on the effectiveness of the combined social and financial support intervention for this group of students.

The Life Impact Program has successfully supported

¹⁰ These statistics are based on the 107 Scholars who entered the program between 2010 and 2017, who comprise 55% of the Scholars ever served by the program. Discontinued students could have enrolled at other institutions, so this figure may undercount actual enrollment.

Scholars over 12 years in operation, but is at a crossroads in terms of future capacity to serve. The evaluation identified the following challenges and recommendations:

- *Meeting demand for the program at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and the need in the community at large.* Graduation rates at UW–Milwaukee are low and particularly so for students who face various forms of social and financial disadvantage. Even though 115 students who applied to the program between 2012 and 2017 were identified as being a perfect fit, only 45% of those students could be served due to budget constraints. **The City of Milwaukee needs educated workers and an economic and educational boost for families struggling for economic self-sufficiency. Bringing Life Impact to scale could make a difference in the lives of many additional aspiring college students who are also parents.**
- *Staying effective while increasing cost efficiency.* The Life Impact Program’s sustained and considerable support offered to students helps the program to be effective, and the graduation rates of Life Impact Scholars suggests that the program does effectively support these vulnerable students in their goals of completing bachelor’s degrees. Over the years studied, Life Impact has provided a median total scholarship of \$11,875 and a median \$843 in emergency fund support per student.¹¹ Twenty-seven percent (27%) of all students who received Life Impact scholarships received \$15,000 or more, and 10% received more than \$20,000 in total scholarships. Emergency funds also added to costs, with 21% of all Scholars requesting funds seven or more times, and 11% of students using more than \$4,500 each in emergency funds. **To continue to serve students over the longer term, the program must determine what mix of funding and support is most effective and most efficient; Life Impact should carefully consider alternatives including reducing the size or duration of scholarships, maximum levels of emergency**

funds, or further honing eligibility criteria.

- *Considering the effects of the program on children of Life Impact Scholars.* While research evidence mounts that increasing maternal education is beneficial to young children, the Life Impact Program has not yet studied the effects the program may have on the children of Scholars in terms of parenting practices, childcare quality and use, and educational prospects of children. This area is fertile for additional study and represents a potential success of the Life Impact Program that has yet to be formally evaluated. As a first step, Life Impact could consider surveying current students about their child care use, costs, and satisfaction with childcare quality, and their thoughts about their children’s behavior and/or their plans for their children’s education.
- *Recognizing the great value that the Life Impact Program brings to the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee campus community in terms of supporting a vulnerable population and promoting college persistence, the University must strengthen institutional and in-kind support needed to maintain the program’s long-term capacity to meet demand.*
- *Ensuring that staffing continues to be sufficient to best support Scholars.* A key finding was the value of the strong, stable, ongoing connection that Scholars had to the Life Impact staff who provide life coaching. These relationships, rather than the relationships between Scholars, appeared to be a key driving force in Scholars’ success. **Maintaining the staffing levels within the Life Impact program office is of key importance to keeping the success of the program.**

¹¹ These statistics are calculated to capture the total cost of getting a student through Life Impact, regardless of the student’s eventual outcome. As such, we use data from the 74 Scholars who began the program in 2010 or later and are no longer enrolled in Life Impact, since continuing students may receive additional aid and thus would artificially lower the measures.

Endnotes

- a Noll, E., PhD, Reichlin, L., M.A., & Gault, B., Ph.D. (2017).
- b Adair 2001; Austin & McDermott 2003; Butler & Deprez 2002; Haleman 2004
- c Baum, Kurose & McPherson 2013; Haveman & Wolfe 1984; Wolfe & Haveman 2002.
- d Attewell 2007; Magnuson 2007
- e Noll, Reichlin & Gault 2017, p.7
- f Attewell 2007
- g <http://uwm.edu/studentrighttoknow/>
- h Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson 2010
- i US Department of Education; NPSAS 2012
- j Hungry and Homeless in College
- k Green 2013; IWPR 2011
- l Duquaine Watson 2007; Katz 2013
- m Richburg-Hayes & Patel 2013; Bettinger 2013; Scrivener et al 2008; Scrivener & Au 2007
- n US Census Bureau, American Communities Survey, retrieved 7/5/2017: https://thedataweb.rm.census.gov/TheDataWeb_HotReport2/profile/2015/5yr/np01.html?SUMLEV=160&place=53000&state=55
- o https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_15_5YR_S2301&prodType=table
- p 23%: https://thedataweb.rm.census.gov/TheDataWeb_HotReport2/profile/2015/5yr/np01.html?SUMLEV=160&place=53000&state=55
- q <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>
- r Noll, Reichlin & Gault 2017, p. 7

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Logic Model - 2017

Inputs

- A well-established, comprehensive, stable program model in place since 2005
- Long-standing partnerships with local foundations
- In-kind support from UWMilwaukee (space, administrative support, institutional research support)
- Program staff comprised of experienced, well-trained advocates with expertise in supporting student parents
- Large number of student parents attending UWM, student parents facing many financial, educational, and social barriers to college success
- Research base providing evidence of the potential of postsecondary education to transform lives, the lower likelihood of graduation among student parents, and the capacity of scholarships to improve student retention and academic performance

Activities

- Scholarships of up to \$20,000 per student awarded (dependent on student meeting academic and participation requirements)
- Emergency funds granted to help Scholars cover unexpected, urgent financial hardships
- Life coaching provided
- Referrals to resources and supports on and off campus
- Academic performance monitored, academic support provided
- Events/activities to facilitate social interaction among Scholars and their families
- Campus event collaboration (exposure of Scholars to various connections and resources on campus)
- Post-graduation support to assist Scholars in job searching, career planning, seeking further education.

Participation

Between 2005-2016:

- 192 Life Impact Scholars participated
- \$1,889,460 in scholarships awarded
- Nearly \$250,000 in emergency funds awarded
- 133 Life Impact Scholars have graduated from the program, 33 are still enrolled, giving the program an overall graduation/ retention rate of 86%
- 33 (25%) of the program's graduates have entered advanced degree programs
- 270 children have parents who were supported by the program

Outcomes: Short-Term

Scholars

- Improved engagement with courses/lower drop rates
- Improved study habits
- Improved GPAs
- Improved semester to semester retention
- Improved likelihood of graduation
- Increased awareness of and utilization of campus and community resources
- Increased sense of social support
- Increased sense of "belonging"
- Reduced work hours
- Lower reported stress levels
- Improved parenting

Children of Scholars

- Improved access to stable and high quality childcare
- Increased educational aspirations
- Improved educational trajectories

Outcomes: Long-Term

Scholars

- Higher wages/better fringe benefits
- Greater economic stability and self-sufficiency
- Lower student loan debt
- Interruption of intergenerational transmission of poverty University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee
- Increased persistence and graduation rates among student parents
- Increased tuition revenue from student parents who persist
- Increased diversity of student body

Milwaukee Community

- Improved socioeconomic conditions for working parents and their families
- Lower poverty rates, higher employment rates