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# ACE Scholars Services

Program Evaluation Study Report  
April 2012



**“ACE Scholars not only gave me a sense of belonging to my college, but they helped with all my financial aid problems ... ACE Scholars was there to help me and guide me to graduation.”**

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National Latino Research Center



## I. ABOUT THE NATIONAL LATINO RESEARCH CENTER

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ACE Scholars Services contracted the National Latino Research Center (NLRC) to conduct a baseline external evaluation of the ACE Scholars Services program at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM). The purpose of the evaluation is to capture students' perceptions of program services, increase understanding of the impacts and value of the program, facilitate reflection and ongoing learning about how to strengthen and refine the program going forward. Students' comments and recommendations will contribute to shaping the future of ACE Scholars Services at CSUSM.

The National Latino Research Center is a university-based research institute conducting community-based collaborative and participatory translational research; providing culturally and linguistically appropriate training and capacity building workshops to diverse organizations and coalitions; building community and academic partnerships to advance research and education activities; seeking solutions to address contemporary challenges in diverse communities; disseminating and exchanging research and data related to education, health, youth empowerment, disaster preparedness, technology, and civic engagement.

NLRC is committed to contributing to the knowledge and understanding of rapidly growing U.S. Latino populations and other underserved communities through applied research, teaching, research-based services, and information exchange. For more information about the NLRC, please visit the center's website: <http://www.csusm.edu/nlrc/index.html>.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The National Latino Research Center is appreciative of ACE Scholars Services participants whose courage to share deeply personal and empowering stories will help to enhance, sustain and expand ACE Scholars Services at CSUSM.

Numerous individuals provided invaluable expertise and input during the design of the evaluation tools, implementation of data collection, and completion of data analysis. In particular, we would like to thank and acknowledge the students who volunteered their time and were willing to share their personal experiences, and the extremely supportive staff who made this project possible and whose work and dedication is positively impacting lives of underserved students on a daily basis.

We thank the ACE Scholars Services staff for entrusting this project to NLRC and for inviting us to be part of this important first evaluation project.

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### III. OVERVIEW OF ACE SCHOLARS SERVICES



CSUSM has historically offered support for former foster youth as an “at risk” population who experience academic and social challenges in higher education. In 2002 the University’s

Division of Student Affairs launched a task force to explore ways to especially address the needs of former foster youth. Based on research findings, CSUSM developed a proactive plan to recruit, support and retain former foster students. In 2007, Mr. Jim Mickelson volunteered to build an all-embracing program to serve former foster youth.

ACE Scholars Services at CSUSM is a comprehensive program that supports former foster youth in their efforts to obtain an undergraduate degree. In 2008, ACE Scholars Services was formalized as a student support service program in the area of Student Academic Support Services within the Division of Student Affairs at CSUSM. The primary objective of the program has been to improve rates of matriculation and graduation from CSUSM of former foster youth by addressing the unique needs of former foster students.

ACE Scholars Services serves as the hub for former foster students who have aged out of the foster care system and who face significant obstacles as they acclimate to university life, succeed academically, earn a degree, advance to graduate or professional school and/or to find employment after graduation. A professional team of masters-level social workers identify, recruit, and advocate for students providing direct services and/or referrals to specialized services as needed.

#### ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

**Be a former foster youth:** ACE Scholars Services defines a former foster youth as an individual who was placed in the foster care system on or after their 13 birthday and remain in the system for more than two years or was emancipated and under the age of 26.

**Be a high school graduate and meet minimum freshman eligibility criteria.**

**Meet minimum transfer eligibility criteria.**

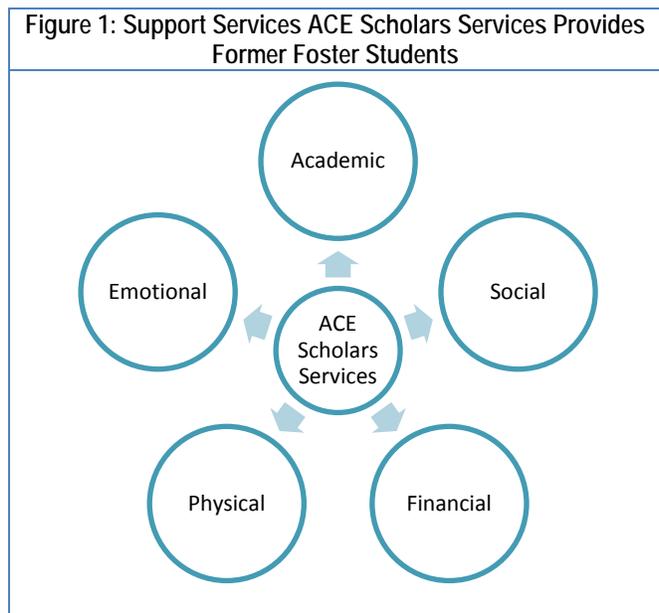
ACE Scholars Services has a long history of meaningful partnerships with high school districts and other educational agencies reaching out to former foster youth. CSUSM has established the following formal agreements with school districts, academies, agencies, and sovereign governments guaranteeing admission to students who meet all minimum CSU eligibility requirements:

- ◆ Escondido Union High School District
- ◆ Lipay Nation of Santa Ysabel
- ◆ Oceanside Unified School District
- ◆ Riverside County Department of Public Social Services Agency (DPSS)
- ◆ San Diego County Health & Human Services Agency (Children Services)
- ◆ San Marcos Unified School District
- ◆ **San Pasqual Academy**
- ◆ Temecula Valley Unified School District
- ◆ Valley Center-Pauma Unified School District

Cal State San Marcos works closely with San Pasqual Academy, a residential high school for foster youth and the Children's Division of the San Diego Department of Health and Human Services. The University has signed MOUs with San Pasqual academy and the counties of San Diego and Riverside that guarantee foster youth admission if they prepare and meet the minimum California State University standards. Over 14% (n=8) of former foster students at CSUSM came from San Pasqual Academy, a first-in-the-nation residential education campus designed specifically for foster teens. Opened in October 2001, the Academy is located in Escondido, California and provides foster teens with a stable, caring home, a quality, individualized education, and the skills needed for independent living. Teens live and learn at the Academy as they prepare for college and/or a career path. ACE Scholars Services works with students at San Pasqual Academy strengthening a college-going pipeline for former foster students. For more information about San Pasqual Academy, visit the school website: <http://www.sanpasqualacademy.org/>.

ACE Scholars Services reaches out to former foster youth who may not have considered college as an option thereby opening a pathway to access educational opportunities for this underserved population. The program design embraces a comprehensive support system approach customized for former foster students and uses evidence-based social work practices tailored to the longstanding and emerging needs of students in the CSUSM service areas of San Diego, Riverside, and Orange Counties. Support services include:

- ◆ Advising and counseling (academic, career and/or personal)
- ◆ Assistance dealing with other departments on campus (advocacy)
- ◆ On-campus jobs (working scholarships)
- ◆ Campus housing
- ◆ Career development and internship opportunities
- ◆ Emergency financial assistance
- ◆ Social activities
- ◆ Crisis management support
- ◆ Freshman seminar
- ◆ Personal development training
- ◆ Career assistance after graduation
- ◆ Connection to other support services on-campus



In addition to the personalized services ACE Scholars Services provides, program staff encourages former foster students to utilize a myriad of additional services and resources the university offers on campus to actively engage in the life of the university, reach personal and professional objectives, conduct university business, stay safe and healthy, and prepare to graduate and pursue a career. For a list of campus-wide services and resources available for students, visit the following website: <http://www.csusm.edu/students/resources.html>.

Overall, ACE Scholars Services ensures that students have the resources and support they need to reach graduation. The program uses a wraparound approach to deliver a specific set of services for former foster students. For more information about the program, please visit: [www.csusm.edu/ace](http://www.csusm.edu/ace).

## IV. RESEARCH OVERVIEW OF FOSTER YOUTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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National foster care trends indicate a substantial decline in the number of youth in foster care from over 800,000 in FY2002 to 662,000 in FY2010; however, many foster youth will be dependents of the state until they age out of the system at 18 (AFCARS, 2011). California has the largest number of children in foster care (60,198 children in FY2009), primarily because it has the largest child population in the nation.

Below is a demographic overview of foster youth population in the nation, California, San Diego County, Orange County, and Riverside County.



### Demographics of Foster Youth

According to federal statistics, in FY 2010, 662,000 children were in the public foster care system in the United States. Males comprise over half (52%) of the population in foster care. White children comprise the largest group in foster care accounting for 41% of the population. This is followed by Black children (29%), and Latino children (21%). Approximately 12.4% (82,372) of children in foster care are youth ages 16-20. In 2010, 61,011 youth ages 16-20 exited the foster system. Eleven percent (27,854) of the youth who exited the system became emancipated (AFCARS, 2011).

California's foster youth population has declined during the last decade from 109,396 in 1999 to 54,055 in 2011. Youth ages 16-17 make up 15% of the foster population in California. However, California is experiencing a trend similar to the nation's in which the number of youth aging out of foster care has continued to grow (California College Pathways). Latinos comprise the majority (47%) of children and youth in foster care followed by Whites (25%) and Blacks (24%). Racial and ethnic disparities are evident in California as they are nationally. Black children in foster care are overrepresented and stay longer in the system compared to other groups (Needell, 2011).

In FY 2010, approximately 3,431 children in San Diego County live in foster care. Latinos represent 47% of San Diego County's foster care population, followed by Whites (26%) and Blacks (22%). 15% (499) are ages 16-17. Although the numbers vary in the two neighboring counties, the proportion of youth ages 16-17 is similar. In Orange County, 14% (328 of 2,319) of foster children are ages 16-17; and over 61% (1,426) are Latinos. Riverside has a larger number of children in foster care with a total of 4,066 of whom 15% (595) are ages 16-17; Latinos comprise 51% (2,093). Annually, over 900 youth age out of foster care in these three counties (Needell, 2011).

### Former Foster Students Pursuing Higher Education

It has long been recognized that foster youth face challenges in their personal lives that impact their education. They often arrive at school with inherent barriers to academic success and lacking academic resources. Additionally, prevalent emotional, physical, and/or psychological issues distract them from focusing on academics. Inadequate adult support and limited out-of-school resources (such as help with homework, access to the internet, or transportation for group projects) also affect their academic success (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2009). For these and many more reasons, foster youth display lower academic performance than their peers. Specifically, they are more likely than their peers to display higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary problems; earn lower grades, achieve lower test scores, and perform

below grade level; be retained a grade; qualify for special education services; drop out of high school before graduation; and/or fail to complete college (Ibid.). Nationally, almost half of foster youth leave the system without a high school diploma or a GED (Dworsky, et. al, 2010) and only about 10% of former foster youth enroll in institutions of higher education nationwide (Davis, 2006). In California, only about 30% of foster youth graduate from high school and of those who start college, approximately 3% ever earn a college degree (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2009; Lovitt & Emerson, 2008). However, when asked about their aspirations to go to college, on average 70% of foster youth respond that they would like to pursue a college education (Lovitt & Emerson, 2008).

### **Challenges Foster Youth Encounter Pursuing their Education**

Foster youth aging out of the system face unfavorable life conditions restricting access to higher education. Former foster youth in the United States are more likely than their average peers to end up homeless, unemployed, and on the welfare system after discharge (Shin, 2003; Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Day et al., 2011).

#### **Economic Hardship & Housing**

Aging out of foster care or “forced independence” as it is also referred to, is often the biggest challenge foster youth face (Cochrane & Szabo-kubitz, 2009). Being on their own and lacking a family or social support system, former foster youth tend to have a difficult living without the social services they have depended on for many years (Cochrane & Szabo-kubitz, 2009). Although funding for foster youth seeking a college education is available in various forms, this aid often only covers tuition and some school related expenses but not all living expenses. Inability to meet financial responsibilities is the main reason cited for abandoning college (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Foster youth struggle transitioning into independent living showing higher rates of homelessness, less housing stability, poor neighborhood quality, and more reliance on public housing assistance (Cosner Berzin et al, 2011).

#### **Overcoming Trauma**

The legacies of foster care experiences imprint on youth who grow up in the system and can carry long terms effects into adulthood. Foster youth typically experience significant trauma or abuse. Even though they enter into the system due to an unhealthy or unsafe environment, they often experience another detrimental and precarious environment within the system. Traumatic experiences continue to be expressed in thoughts, emotions, and behavior of children and adolescents. The experience of trauma may lead to psychiatric conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depressive disorder, and anxiety disorders (Stone, 2007). Traumatic experiences in childhood can also have profound effects on developmental progression, relationships with peers and family members, academic achievement and motivation for learning, memory, and full participation in society (Miranda Samuels, G. & Pryce J., 2008). To the detriment of foster youth, limited attention has been dedicated to understanding how agencies involved with foster youth can integrate trauma-related information and expertise into the responses of these agencies and systems to help (Taylor, N. & Siegfried, C. 2005; Atukpawu, G., 2012). Science has shown that even when a young person has experienced complex trauma, neuroplasticity makes the brain capable of overcoming trauma and gaining resiliency in the face of risk. Hence, child welfare and other service systems can make a positive impact when they are trauma-informed, have core

knowledge of trauma and its impact, and create safe and welcoming environments for foster youth (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011).

### Limited Access to Quality Education & Information about Higher Education

In addition to precarious living conditions, foster youth have limited access to quality education that will prepare them for college. They often move and switch schools, live in group homes, and lack social, academic, and financial support systems (Cochrane & Szabo-kubitz, 2009). The instability and lack of social and academic support systems influence learning and academic success (Zeltin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). Former foster youth report various obstacles preventing them from pursuing post-secondary education including missing personal and school documents, courses not transferring from one school to another, placement in non-college tracks, and lack of information about financial aid and the college application process (Zeltin et al., 2004). According to results of a four county study in California, only 1 in 5 foster youth is proficient in English and only 1 in 20 is proficient in math by the time they reach 11<sup>th</sup> grade (Frerer, K. et al., 2011). Additionally, less than 49% of foster youth complete high school or receive their GED (California Department of Social Services, 2009). In California, lack of knowledge and support to understand A-G requirements for CSU and UC admission is a major barrier. The CSU requires a minimum 15-unit pattern of courses for admission as a first-time freshman. Each unit is equal to a year of study in a subject area. A grade of C or better is required for each course to meet any subject requirement ([http://www.csumentor.edu/planning/high\\_school/subjects.asp](http://www.csumentor.edu/planning/high_school/subjects.asp)).

### Translating Support into Improved Outcomes

A consistent finding from evaluations of programs supporting academic success of foster youth indicates that youth who receive meaningful support during critical transition periods (between ages 18 to 21) and in higher education remain in college longer and are more likely to complete their degrees. Hence, youth are more likely to enroll in higher education; are twice as likely to find employment and stay employed; young women are less likely to become pregnant before age 20; and are more likely to access independent living services (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010).

Nationwide, disparities in educational attainment persist between students from foster backgrounds and their counterparts at all levels of education. Foster youth experience disparities in educational opportunities (e.g. gifted education and completion of college preparatory curricula) and outcomes (e.g. test scores and graduation rates) in high school and higher education. These disparities have negative immediate and long-term impact directly on foster youth and society as a whole. However, research shows that when provided with the attention and support systems necessary to succeed, former foster students can and do succeed. Academic success for former foster students in higher education is effectively facilitated through implementation of comprehensive and cohesive support systems.

Report authors (Nuñez-Alvarez, A. & Uekusa, S., 2012) created table below to summarize key challenges former foster students face in higher education and recommend strategies and interventions found in successful programs to best meet the needs of former foster students. The synthesis draws from the list of references included in the reference section of this report. This is intended to provide a cursory glance at issues and recommendations that have been suggested by researchers and advocates to help address prevailing challenges.

Figure 2: Summary of Effective Research-Based Program Strategies

TYPICAL CHALLENGES	SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES & APPROACHES
Programs and services are developmentally inappropriate for former foster students	Develop multi-system support partnerships that are developmentally appropriate to meet the needs of adolescents and young adults in higher education and acknowledge the unique experiences of foster youth. Ensure that programs and services are clearly defined to increase student success (i.e. long-lasting positive mentoring relations). Involve youth in the design and operation of the center and specific programs and services.
Programs and services are fragmented	Identify individual and community assets and coordinate community resources to build youth capacity and foster caring relationships with adults and advocates. Facilitate ongoing and clear communication involving youth, caseworker, judicial system, foster care providers, young person’s legal representative, education liaison, etc. Provide childcare for students who are also parents. Sustain an on-campus hub or center where support services are available rather than through referrals.
Poor academic preparation and lack of academic counseling	Provide academic support to ensure students successfully complete courses and make academic progress towards graduation. Facilitate one-to-one mentoring relationships with faculty and peers. Invite former foster youth to serve as mentors for younger peers.
Lack or limited access to housing	Make housing accessible to former foster youth. Identify and provide on-campus housing to connect foster youth to higher education. Facilitate interdependent living to help youth establish connections with mentors and will help develop a sense of rootedness.
Limited economic support	Provide economic support to ameliorate immediate socio-economic vulnerability (i.e. tuition, housing, employment) and support students in critical transition period. Provide work experience as part of a work-readiness program. Secure on-campus institutional support to sustain programs and services that serve former foster youth.
Limited access to health and psychological services	Connect youth to college/university health services to improve health outcomes including mental health services with professionals who are trauma-informed, possess core knowledge about trauma and its impact on child and youth development; understand the experiences of foster youth and promote healing and emotional security.
Major gaps in research and data collection/sharing systems	Design state, regional, and local studies to continuously assess how former foster care students are doing and disseminate information about effective programs and interventions. Identify education indicators and outcome measures to track progress. Improve data collection and data tracking to inform cross-disciplinary decision-making and programming.

## V. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

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The aim of this evaluation is to assess how the ACE Scholar Services are meeting their objectives and to explore the students' further needs in order to improve this program.

NLRC designed the evaluation plan informed by the project's identified needs, objectives, and plan of operation. The program evaluation incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The evaluation of ACE Scholars Services utilized a qualitative research model consisting of a semi-structured survey and a focus group with program participants. Using a reliable and culturally-sensitive approach, the research design gathered measurable baseline and process data. The first phase of the evaluation focused on gathering qualitative data. The qualitative evaluation provides descriptive and narrative data via a semi-structured survey. This qualitative approach effectively assesses participants' experiences utilizing program services; their relationships with staff, fellow students, and faculty; their perceptions of the



effectiveness of ACE Scholars Services in helping them achieve their educational goals; and their perceptions of the supportiveness of the overall program. The results of the semi-structured survey helped to inform the scope of the focus group.

The quantitative data was collected through an online survey from January-February 2012. NLRC researchers sent invitation emails to complete the online survey to 43 program participants including former students who graduated already.<sup>1</sup> As of February 16 when the online survey was closed, 28 students responded (65.1% response rate). All students who completed the online survey received a \$10 Starbucks e-gift card in appreciation for their participation.

After analyzing emerging key themes from the quantitative data, NLRC conducted a focus group and two interviews to collect follow-up qualitative data. NLRC researchers analyzed the data in February 2012 and completed the report in March 2012. Follow-up emails were sent to those who completed the online survey to recruit focus group

participants. Seven students responded, 3 participated in a one hour focus group, and 2 agreed to participate in a structured interview. Focus group and interview participants were given open-ended questions, and NLRC researchers guided the conversation which covered some pre-established topics at a more in-depth level and allowed for reflection and sharing of general personal experiences interacting with the program from a broad perspective. Focus group and interview participants received \$10 Starbucks gift cards.

This report provides descriptive and narrative summary of the data collected from the survey, focus group, and interviews. The structured survey, focus group, and interview questions assess participants' experiences using program services; their relationships with staff, fellow students, and faculty; and their perceptions of the effectiveness of ACE in helping them achieve their educational goals.

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<sup>1</sup> Even though 58 students have participated in ACE Scholars Services, contact information was available for 43 students.

## VI. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF CSUSM STUDENTS IN ACE SCHOLARS SERVICES

According to the Office of Institutional Planning and Analysis at California State University San Marcos, 58 students have been identified as former foster students who have attended CSUSM since 2006 and are included in the ACE Scholars Services cohort. The ACE Scholars Services program was formalized in 2008. Prior to 2008, data related to former foster students was managed by different campus support programs such as Education Opportunity Program (EOP) and TRIO Student Support Services.

Institutional data provides a baseline profile of former foster students at CSUSM (CSUSM Office of Institutional Planning and Analysis, 2012). Out of 58 former foster students who have attended CSUSM, the majority of the students (72.4%) are female and 27.6% are male. The majority (82.8%) of the students entered the program at age of 22 or younger. Eighteen (18) students (30%) transferred from Palomar College (7), Mira Costa College (3), Cuyamaca College (3), San Diego Mesa College (2), Cerritos College (1), Grossmont College (1), and San Diego Miramar (1). Forty (40) students (70%) started CSUSM as freshman. According to their self-reported race/ethnicity, 37.9% (22 students) are Latino/Hispanic, 25.9% (15 students) are African American, 15% (9 students) are White, 3.4% (2) are Pacific Islander, 1.7% (1) Native American, 10.3% (6) are Other race/ethnicity, and 5.2% (3) are bi-racial/multi-racial.

Former foster students declared interest in a variety of majors when they applied to CSUSM. However, students are concentrated in five main programs including business, biology, criminology, and sociology. The largest cluster of students is in Business Administration. The second largest group is Undeclared. The initial majors declared are listed in adjacent figure. Additional research is necessary to assess whether they maintain the initial interest as declared and/or how their career interests may shift over time during the course of their studies at CSUSM.

The average high school GPA for ACE Scholars who started at CSUSM as freshman is 2.96 compared to 3.17 for the average high school GPA of freshman who started at CSUSM in fall 2011. The average transfer GPA for ACE Scholars is 2.80 compared to 3.09 for all transfer students entering in fall 2011. Former foster students who enter as freshman and/or transfer students start with lower average GPA than all CSUSM students.

ACE Scholars Services is specifically designed for undergraduate students.

**Figure 3: Declared Majors at time of Application**

	Frequency	Percent
Business	12	20.7
Criminology	7	12.1
Sociology	6	10.3
Undeclared	6	10.3
Biology	5	8.6
Liberal studies	4	6.9
Psychology	4	6.9
Human development	3	5.2
Kinesiology	2	3.4
Visual & performing arts	2	3.4
Computer science	1	1.7
History	1	1.7
Lit. & writing studies	1	1.7
Mass media	1	1.7
Mathematics	1	1.7
Political science	1	1.7
Nursing	1	1.7
Total	58	100.0

According to the Office of Institutional Planning and Analysis, ACE Scholars have had a higher one-year continuation rate for freshman students (87.5%) consistently since 2008 compared to the general student population of freshman (79.6%). However, the one-year continuation rate for male transfers has been

consistently higher (100%) for ACE Scholars since 2008 compared to all CSUSM transfers (84.4%). However, female transfer students have a lower one-year continuation rate (71.4%) compared to the CSUSM female transfer population (83.7%).<sup>2</sup>

Figure 4: Freshman One-Year Continuation Rate				Figure 5: Transfer One-Year Continuation Rate			
	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Total</b>		<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Total</b>
ACE Scholars	75.0	92.9	87.5	ACE Scholars	100.0	71.4	77.8
Number	(12)	(28)	(40)	Number	(4)	(14)	(18)
	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Total</b>		<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Total</b>
All CSUSM Freshmen				All CSUSM Transfers			
Fall 2010	78.7	80.7	79.6	Fall 2010	85.3	83.7	84.4
Fall 2009	74.9	78.7	77.3	Fall 2009	84.8	84.5	84.7
Fall 2008	71.3	76.1	74.3	Fall 2008	83.9	85.6	84.9

Disparities are evident by gender and race/ethnicity but the general results for ACE Scholars exceed the university rates. ACE Scholars from ethnically/racially underrepresented backgrounds have higher continuation rates compared to White students. The one-year continuation rate for freshman Latinos (92.9%) and African Americans (80%) in the ACE Scholars Services program exceeds the current overall university rate (79.6%). The rate for underrepresented minorities (URM) (88.9%) in ACE Scholars Services exceeds the overall university rate (79.6%) for underrepresented minorities. Figures below provide a breakdown by race/ethnicity for freshman and transfer students participating in ACE Scholars Services.

Figure 6: Freshman One-Year Continuation Rate by Ethnicity			Figure 7: Transfer One-Year Continuation Rate by Ethnicity		
	<b>Rate</b>	<b>n</b>		<b>Rate</b>	<b>N</b>
African American	80.0	10	African American	80.0	5
Pacific Islander	100.0	2	Latino	100.0	8
Latino	92.9	14	<b>URM Subtotal</b>	<b>92.3</b>	<b>13</b>
Native American	100.0	1	White	25.0	4
<b>URM Subtotal</b>	<b>88.9</b>	<b>27</b>	Other/Unknown	100.0	1
White	100.0	5	Total	77.8	18
Other/Unknown	100.0	5			
Multiple Race	33.3	3			
Total	87.5	40			

<sup>2</sup> Note: 2010 is most recent one-year continuation rate institutional data available.

## VII. ACE SCHOLARS SERVICES SURVEY & FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Below is a summary of survey and focus group results by demographics of survey participants, impact of services, and overall strength of the program. Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 contain copies of protocols.

### Demographics of Survey Participants

A total of 28 students participated in the online survey, including six male students and 22 female students.

According to their self-reported race/ethnicity, 35.7% identify as Hispanic/Latino, 21.4% African American/Blacks, 10.7% Caucasian/White, 10.7% Native American, and 5% multiracial. The average age of respondents is 24.43 with the youngest of 18 and oldest of 60.<sup>3</sup> Most respondents are upper division students including seniors (32.1%) and juniors (21.4%). Three students graduated already and are in graduate school. The average current overall self-reported GPA among survey respondents was 2.84. Most respondents (78.6%) live off campus and five (17.9%) reported living on campus. The majority live in the neighboring cities of San Marcos, Vista, Oceanside, and Escondido but several students commute from Corona and other parts of San Diego. 70.4% of the respondents are currently employed, and the average number of hours they work per week is 22.8 hours. 21.4% of them have multiple jobs and work both off campus and on campus, while 28.6% work on campus. Only eight students (28.6%) are currently unemployed. The majority of ACE Scholars are achieving the dual task of being full-time students (83.3%) and/or working at least one job. Former foster students often work one or two full-time jobs in addition to taking full-time classes (Hook, 2011).

#### KEY SURVEY FINDING

The majority of ACE Scholars are achieving the dual task of being full-time students and working at least one job.

Twenty-eight (28) students answered the question on the survey asking them how they learned about ACE Scholars Services. More than half of respondents (57.10%) said they learned from ACE outreach phone call, community college counselor, or a case worker; a quarter said they learned from the ACE website (25.00%); and 21.40% learned from a high school counselor or a friend. Table 8 provides a breakdown:

**Figure 8: Question: How did you learn about ACE?**

	N	Frequency
Teacher	1	3.60
Friend	3	10.70
H.S. Counselor	3	10.70
ACE Scholars Services Website	7	25.00
Other : ACE Outreach (phone), CC counselor at Mira Costa and Palomar, Case worker, EOP, ILS worker, Financial Aid Office	16	57.10

When asked what the most effective means for ACE Scholars Services to communicate with students, the majority (78.60%) of students reported email is the most effective means of communication. The rest indicated in-person meetings (32.10%), phone calls (32.10%), and texting (7.10%).

<sup>3</sup> Even though several students are older than 26 years of age, one of the criteria to participate in the program, these transfer students are former foster students who sought support as undergraduate students when they transferred to CSUSM and found a home in ACE Scholars Services. Even after they graduated, they continue to stay connected to the program.

## VIII. IMPACT OF ACE SCHOLARS SERVICES ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS

ACE Scholars Services is an innovative program utilizing effective strategies and collaboration across the university making a significant difference in improving academic performance and educational outcomes among former foster students in many different ways.

### Most Helpful Services and Resources

According to survey participants, the top five (5) most helpful services and resources ACE Scholars Services offers are 1) advising and counseling (academic, career, and/or personal) (82.10%); 2) on-campus jobs (60.70%); 3) connection to other support services on-campus (42.90%); 4) assistance dealing with other departments on campus (32.10%); and 5) emergency financial assistance (32.10%). Figure below provides a summary of all responses.

Figure 9: Top 5 Most Helpful Services and Resources		
Question: Which program services and resources have been most helpful to you? (please select your top 5 choices):		
Answer Options	Response Count	Response Percent
Advising and counseling (academic, career and/or personal)	23	82.10
On-campus jobs (working scholarships)	17	60.70
Connection to other support services on-campus	12	42.90
Assistance dealing with other departments on campus (advocacy)	9	32.10
Emergency financial assistance	9	32.10
Campus housing	6	22.2
Crisis management support	6	22.2
Career development and internship opportunities	5	18.5
Social activities	5	18.5
Personal development training	3	11.1
Freshman seminar	2	7.4
Career assistance after graduation	2	7.4
Other (please describe) <i>(Providing a comfortable environment to go and receive advice)</i>	2	7.4

### Academic Support

According to the survey results all respondents (100%) agree that the services and resources ACE Scholars Services provides are helping them to make progress towards completion of their degree. More than 90% of respondents reported that ACE Scholars Services is helping them to maintain good grades and about 80% of respondents reported that ACE Scholars Services is helping them to complete entry-level math and writing requirements. In addition, program services and resources are offered at times/days that are convenient for them and are playing a very important role for the students to succeed educationally.

#### KEY SURVEY FINDING

100% of ACE Scholars agree that the services and resources ACE Scholars Services provides are helping them to make progress towards completion of their degree at CSUSM.

## Financial Support

Typically financing education is a significant challenge for former foster students. However, 78.3% of the respondents believe that they are receiving enough financial aid. 100% of students agree or strongly agree that ACE Scholars Services staff has directed students to campus financial resources. Over 70.8% (n=17) have applied for scholarships. Some students applied for 1 scholarship while others applied for up to 10 scholarships and the majority of students who have applied for scholarships have received at least one scholarship. The amount of the scholarship ranged from \$1,500 to over \$5,000. This suggests that the efforts of ACE Scholars Services to collaborate with other programs that offer financial aid in the forms of grants and scholarships works well.

In addition to grants and scholarships, 60% of ACE Scholars reported having taken out student loans to pay for education and living expenses. Almost half of the respondents (47.8%) are concerned with accumulating excessive student loan debt. When asked if students understand the difference between subsidized and unsubsidized student loans, 75% said yes. Students who do not understand the difference between subsidized and unsubsidized loans (25%) could greatly benefit from this information to help them be better informed about the debt they are accumulating.

### KEY SURVEY FINDING

100% of students agree or strongly agree that ACE Scholars Services staff has directed students to campus financial resources.

The majority of students believe they have the knowledge and skills to manage their finances. When asked if they need more information and/or guidance to help them develop a management plan, the majority (82.6%) reported that they do not need information/guidance to help them develop a financial management plan. It appears that the majority of the students are comfortable and confident with their current economic situation and their ability to manage their finances. However, 17.40% reported needing more information and guidance to help them develop a financial management plan. This finding is consistent with other research findings that have commonly found former foster youth coping with the tension of independence and dependence (called survivalist self-reliance). In the context of a system that responds to most severe levels of need, some foster youth learn to take care of themselves and find ways to cope with need and scarcity on their own. Gaining independence for foster youth signifies that he or she is doing well; therefore, taking on the role of self-advocate gives former foster youth a sense of pride and accomplishment even when they could benefit from others' support (Miranda Samuels & Pryce, 2008). This theory might help to explain why the majority of survey respondents reporting not needing information or guidance.

Further study to better understand this paradox is merited. On one hand, students believe they are receiving enough financial support yet over half of the students are taking out student loans and are concerned about accumulating excessive debt. Furthermore, over three-quarters of the students believe they have the information they need to manage their finances. This study did not verify the actual amount of financial support students are receiving at CSUSM but it is an indicator that has been identified for future tracking and monitoring.

## Emotional Support

In addition to academic and financial support, ACE Scholars Services provides moral and emotional support. 100% of the survey respondents agree that the ACE Scholars Services staff members have encouraged them to stay in college and to do well in their classes, have directed them to other campus resources, and reminded them of important deadlines. Furthermore, more than 90% of respondents felt that ACE Scholars Services staff members have created a comfortable environment for them on campus, have advocated on their behalf and have demonstrate sensitivity to their unique needs as former foster students.

It is evident that ACE Scholars Services plays a critical role in the success of former foster students at CSUSM.

### Inclusiveness & Community-Building

Helping former foster students develop a sense of family and belonging on campus is another critical element ACE Scholars Services has successfully accomplished. It is well known that

former foster students have aged out of a system in which they usually changed families, schools and communities frequently resulting in a loss of social connections and a sense of permanency as they move from placement to placement. All respondents agree that the ACE Scholars Services has helped them feel more connected on campus and is contributing to building a sense of community on campus for former foster students. According to a survey participant, *to know that only foster youth are part of ACE Scholars helps me realize I can relate to the other ACE Scholars*. ACE Scholars report that the program has provided opportunities to meet other former foster students on campus and promotes a sense of pride and belonging at CSUSM for ACE scholars. More than 90% of respondents also agree that ACE Scholars Services is increasing campus awareness and understanding of challenges former foster students face in higher education. Meeting and connecting with other former foster students who have the same struggle was important for respondents to develop stronger sense of solidarity and social connections, which former foster students usually lack or hesitate to develop (Survey, Focus Group, & Interviews).

#### KEY SURVEY FINDING

More than 90% of respondents felt that ACE Scholars Services staff members have created a comfortable environment for them on campus, have advocated on their behalf and have demonstrate sensitivity to their unique needs as former foster students.

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## IX. OVERALL STRENGTH OF THE PROGRAM

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Survey and focus group participants cited many different program strengths and provided examples of how the program has helped them. Many ACE Scholars mentioned that the program and its staff have played a major role in helping them graduate. A focus group participant summarized it as follows:

*I do not know what I would do without ACE Scholars support in my educational and life goals. This is a great program that I would highly recommend to any former foster accepted to Cal State San Marcos. I would even encourage former foster youth to attend Cal State San Marcos not only because it is a great university, but because ACE Scholars truly makes a difference in the lives of the former foster youth in its program (Unedited response).*

First and foremost, students consider ACE Scholars Services a “home” and the staff who work in the program and other peers as family members. It is evident based on student comments that ACE Scholars Services is a home for former foster students at CSUSM. Students feel welcomed and comfortable going to

meet with staff. In fact, many students discussed how challenging and frightening it is to share their personal stories; however, the staff who work in the program have made them feel at home. Whenever they “feel like they are going to fall apart” they know exactly where they can go - ACE Scholars Services. Once they feel comfortable and trust certain individuals on campus, they feel safe, emotionally connected and are able to overcome many other barriers. ACE Scholars Services helps them to get connected with other resources and services on campus that will help them address financial, academic, or other needs.

Many respondents said that program staff has done a wonderful job in establishing trust and comfort with their students. For example, a focus group participant said:

*I was in the ACE program for two years as an undergraduate student and I still feel comfortable contacting [an ACE staff member] when I need to talk to someone or need help. It feels like an open door when I need to talk to staff (Focus Group Participant – Unedited response).*

Another focus group participant said:

*Trust is a big factor for me. It's so much to overcome and you feel like what you say may be used against me or pushed aside and not deal with me anymore. Having someone in the office it helped to stand up for myself. You can be a part of this big family here. When I go there they always gave me the encouragement that I can do it. You have to have the confidence in yourself. I made the dean's list and that did it for me. You think you will always be a statistic. It helped me to help others in that same situation (Focus Group Participant – Unedited response).*



In this respondent's comment, it is even more apparent that one of the most important functions of ACE Scholars Services is to serve as these students' primary social connection or “family.” One student said:

*[An ACE staff] set up and paid for a private tutor on the professor's recommendations. The tutor is an RA at the dorms and did not accept payment so he tutored me for free but it was set up by the program. There are so many people who don't understand the emotional and psychological issues we carry. Everything feels ten times more difficult because we doubt ourselves. Awareness needs to be spread out. The play [Telling Stories: Giving Voice to Former Foster Youth] was so profound that I wish more people had seen it. Nobody really understands just how bad it is [to grow up in the foster system] (Focus Group Participant).*

Another student said the following:

*My main contact was [an ACE staff member]. I didn't want to build a new relationship with the new staff. So I went to [an ACE staff member] and when [an ACE staff member] left, I shut down the others.*

Developing a trusting and strong relationship between a program staff member and a former foster student takes time. Once a bond is established with one individual, students may be less willing to establish the same or similar relationship with new staff. Hence, consistency is a major factor of the program's success.

### On-Campus Job Placement

On-campus job placement is one of the most significant supports that the students receive as it makes it easier to work and study on campus. Below is a student comment from the survey:

*ACE scholars (sic) staff has helped me obtain my on campus job, making it easier to work and study. Also, they have helped me pay for much needed tutoring in physics as well as other financial discrepancies. [ACE staff members] have both played a huge role in helping me graduate in a timely manner. I would be lost without the help, care, support, and encouragement that ACE Scholars has provided (Survey Participant – Unedited response).*

According to study participants, ACE Scholars Services provides a variety of supports, in a very flexible manner, often exceeding the list of structured and fixed supports listed on the website. The following excerpt from the focus group also describes how the program provides multiple forms of supports that directly respond to student needs:

*ACE Scholars Services staff has advocated on my behalf several times. They have helped me talk with professors, bought textbooks I could not afford, helped with food, and helped me with finances in my rent just to name a few (Focus Group Participant).*

Investing in human, personal, and social capital pays off, according to Hook et al. (2011). Because foster youth are less likely to find employment after aging out of the system, improving employment outcomes for foster youth will positively impact the transition into adulthood (Hook et al., 2011).

### Emergency Financial Assistance

ACE Scholars Services provides services in a *flexible* manner, responding to each student unique needs and considering the contextual factors that arise throughout the semester. This is very unique and effective approach to serving former foster students in higher education.

Emergency cash assistance or other types of financial support – help paying rent, buying textbooks, help paying for tutors, etc. – are clear examples of how the ACE program is able to provide financial support in various forms and whenever needed to help retain students in higher education. ACE Scholars clearly articulated the significance of this type of support system.



According to open survey open-ended responses, ACE Scholars Services staff members provide the following services and resources to help students stay on track and succeed academically. Some of these may be interrelated but students listed them separately. This is an original coding system designed specifically for this program. Appendix 3 contains a more detailed summary of open ended responses.

**Figure 10: 22 Ways ACE Scholars Services is Supporting CSUSM Students**

Based on Student Survey Responses

	CODE	SUPPORT SERVICE OR RESOURCE
1	A	Advising regarding graduation, graduate school and other areas
2	AS	Academic support including referrals to academic programs, services and resources on campus and off campus
3	AD	Advocacy on behalf of students facilitating faculty relations when issues or concerns arise
4	C	Counseling
5	CI	Check-In regularly to ask how students are doing
6	COMM	Communication with professors and other programs or departments
7	E	Emotional support
8	EFA	Emergency Financial Assistance for books, rent, and food
9	EP	Encouragement to persist
10	FA	Financial aid support to complete applications, information about scholarships, etc.
11	G	Goal setting support
12	GRAD	Graduation information
13	GS	Graduate school information
14	H	"Home" on campus where students feel welcomed
15	J	Job placement on campus
16	M	Motivation
17	MH	Mental Health support
18	N	Networking with other students with similar experiences
19	PR	Priority registration
20	R	Reminders about important deadlines
21	T	Tutoring support
22	U	Understanding



## X. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

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In general, data gathered about ACE Scholars Services is extremely positive and compelling. However, students provided several recommendations for program improvement for consideration.

### Increase Awareness among Faculty & Staff

One of the suggestions focus group participants offered is to find ways to increase awareness about former foster youth in higher education and their unique needs among faculty and staff at CSUSM. Several students shared negative experiences they have had in classes with faculty who are insensitive to the needs of former foster students. They believe that ACE Scholars Services can serve as mediator and educator to help faculty understand certain circumstances and to help professors and staff understand student needs. One idea discussed during the focus group is hosting workshops or presentations in which former foster students who feel comfortable sharing their experiences can provide testimonials, similar to the project held in Fall of 2011, *Telling Stories: Giving Voice to Former Foster Youth*, a program made possible through the partnership with ACE Scholars Services, Playwrights Project's Telling Stories program, Arts and Lectures, and CSUSM Theater. The program paired theatre artists with former foster youth to create four short plays based on the lives of the "storytellers." Students had very positive feedback to about this project and would like to see more events like this one to help increase general awareness about foster youth on campus. For more information about *Telling Stories* at CSUSM, visit: <http://playwrightsproject.wordpress.com/2011/12/02/csusms-new-play-festival-highlights-foster-youth/>.

### Host More Gatherings

Based on data gathered from surveys and focus groups, students suggest having more gatherings for students to interact. These events help students on campus to build a community in which they can meet other former foster students who can relate to them. It seems that, unlike the strong relationship between the students and ACE staff, these students do not have as many opportunities to connect with other former foster students. Furthermore, graduate students would like to share their experiences with other students, they are especially interested in sharing information about graduate school, how to prepare, etc. Ultimately this will make the senior or former ACE students feel that they are giving back and they feel more confident and appreciated.

### Develop Mentorship Component Involving Graduate Students

Even though the number of former foster students in graduate school is small, they would like to stay connected with the program and to mentor undergraduate students. Being able to contribute back to the program will help them to feel like they belong and will validate their expertise and experience as upper division or graduate students. A focus group participant said,

*If they would use us to mentor the new students as a way to give back and work hand in hand. It builds your self-esteem, your confidence and you feel wanted.*

It is evident that students value ACE Scholars Services and feel fortunate to be part of this support group. They expressed that areas for improvement are minimal and they want to see the program continue to help other students succeed.

## XI. CONCLUSION

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The findings of this evaluation confirm that support programs customized to serve and advocate for former foster students in higher education work. Even though former foster youth are struggling academically throughout the nation, CSUSM former foster students have found a home with a team of advocates who understand their needs and are proactively searching for effective strategies that will improve recruitment, admission, retention, and graduation at CSUSM. ACE Scholars Services is connecting a disenfranchised population of students in higher education to crucial support services that address academic, emotional, social, physical and financial needs of former foster youth.

The results of the surveys and focus group reveal that students are very satisfied with the program and find its services and resources valuable. The survey and focus group data also helped to identify a few areas for improvement which will make it an even more successful program. ACE Scholars Services is increasing college retention and graduation rates of former foster students including underrepresented students (i.e. Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans) who are struggling across the state of California to succeed in higher education. Not only are students graduating, but many are continuing on to pursue graduate programs here on campus. Although improved data collection and ongoing research are necessary to better understand barriers to education and effective solutions for former foster youth in higher education, the efforts to address the needs of this population at universities like California State University San Marcos exhibit exceptional institutional commitment and demonstrate great potential for success.

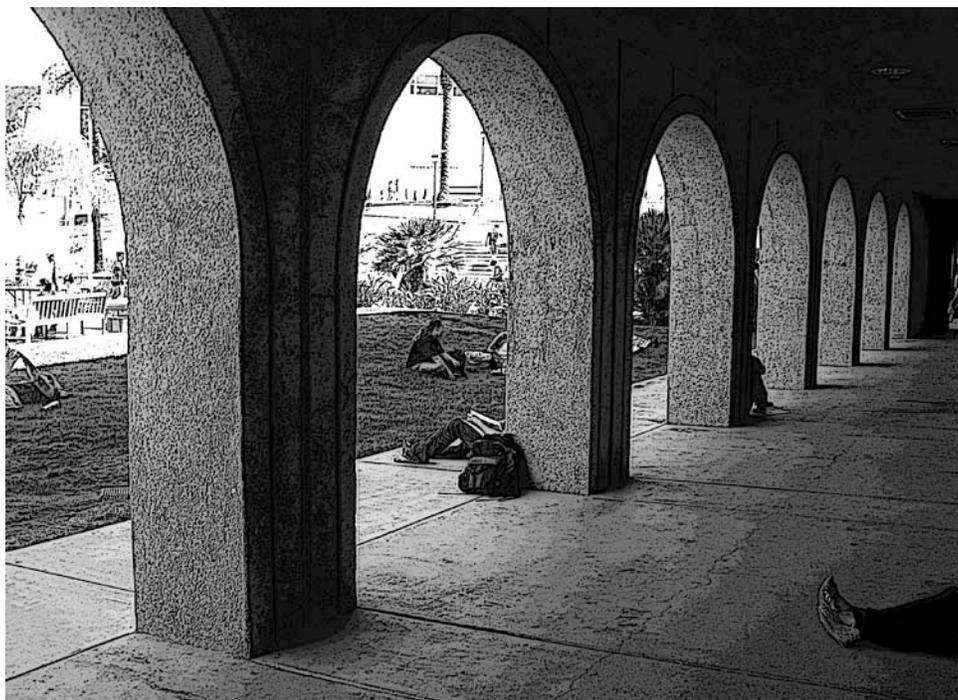


Table 11 summarizes key challenges former foster students face and describes how ACE Scholars Services is addressing these typical challenges.

Figure 11: Successful Strategies & Approaches		
TYPICAL CHALLENGES	SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES & APPROACHES	ACE SCHOLARS SERVICES
Programs and services are developmentally inappropriate	Develop multi-system support partnerships that are developmentally appropriate to meet the needs of adolescents and young adults in higher education and acknowledge the unique experiences of foster youth. Ensure that programs and services are clearly defined to increase student success (i.e. long-lasting positive mentoring relations). Involve youth in the design and operation of the center and specific programs and services.	ACE Scholars Services has developed a program that is developmentally appropriate and is meeting the needs of former foster students at CSUSM in order to increase matriculation, retention, graduation, and employment.
Programs and services are fragmented	Identify individual and community assets and coordinate community resources to build youth capacity and foster caring relationships with adults and advocates. Facilitate ongoing and clear communication involving youth, caseworker, judicial system, foster care providers, young person's legal representative, education liaison, etc. Provide childcare for students who are also parents. Sustain an on-campus hub or center where support services are available rather than through referrals.	ACE Scholars Services coordinates services and resources serving as a hub and a "home" for former foster students at CSUSM. The program provides academic, financial, emotional, and other support systems as needed.
Poor academic preparation	Provide academic support to ensure students successfully complete courses and make academic progress towards graduation. Facilitate one-to-one mentoring relationships with faculty and peers. Invite former foster youth to serve as mentors for younger peers.	ACE Scholars Services connects students to academic support systems to make sure students complete first year requirements and successfully complete their courses.
Lack or limited access to housing	Make housing accessible to former foster youth. Identify and provide on-campus housing to connect foster youth to higher education. Facilitate interdependent living to help youth establish connections with mentors and will help develop a sense of rootedness.	ACE Scholars Services provides access to on-campus housing for students who need it.
Limited economic support	Provide economic support to ameliorate immediate socio-economic vulnerability (i.e. tuition, housing, employment) and support students in critical transition period. Provide work experience as part of a work-readiness program. Secure on-campus institutional support to sustain programs and services that serve former foster youth.	ACE Scholars Services provides emergency financial assistance; connects students to on-campus job placement; and assists with other emergency financial issues as these arise.
Limited access to health, counseling and/or psychological services	Connect youth to college/university health services to improve health outcomes including mental health services with professionals who are trauma-informed to understand the experiences of foster youth and promote healing and emotional security.	ACE Scholars Services assists students with personal counseling and refers students to crisis management support on campus and off campus as needed.
Major gaps in research and data collection/sharing systems	Design state, regional, and local studies to continuously assess how former foster care students are doing. Identify education indicators and outcome measures to track progress. Improve data collection and data tracking to inform cross-disciplinary decision-making and programming.	ACE Scholars Services conducted its first program evaluation to assess student perceptions of program services and resources. A follow-up longitudinal study will help to track and monitor student success.

## XII. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

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There are some limitations to this evaluation. All measurements are either based on participants' self-reports or based on focus group qualitative data. However, as a first evaluation study, it is the intent of the researchers that the qualitative analysis enriches this evaluation and offers more in-depth and detailed findings.

In the future, ACE Scholars Services will be able to track and monitor students more systematically in order to conduct a longitudinal study in which retention and graduation rates can be monitored. 6-year graduation rate has been used in many institutional and program assessments. Since the program has not been formalized for six years, calculation of a 6-year graduation rate is not yet feasible.

Another important measurement which can be used in future evaluations is GPA. GPA is one of the common measurements for students' academic performance and thus commonly used to evaluate academic programs. However, given that student GPA is influenced by various factors, it is difficult to associate GPA directly to program functions. NLRC has developed electronic databases to track and monitor student progress and academic performance, funding, and GPA for future analysis.

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## XIV. APPENDICES

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Appendix 1: Survey

Appendix 2: Focus Group Protocol

Appendix 3: Survey Open Ended Responses



*Photos by Jim Mickelson*