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Program Evaluation • Consultation • Market Research

Evaluation of the STARS Scholarship Program: Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG) was contracted by the Council Bluffs Community Education Foundation (CB-CEF) to conduct an evaluation of the STARS Scholarship Program. The evaluation focused on key scholarship program outcomes regarding economic impact, personal fulfillment, and effects on family, as well as on the value of various program components. The primary data collection method was an online survey of alumni, current scholars, and scholars who left the program, which had an overall response rate of 41%. Additional methods included phone interviews with 10 survey respondents, a non-respondent bias survey, and a review of program materials.

KEY FINDINGS

Personal Fulfillment and Effects on Family

- ❖ Most respondents were pleased with their STARS experience and believed the STARS Scholarship made a big difference in their ability to fulfill or exceed their educational expectations.
- ❖ Current scholars found the program most influential and leavers found the program least influential. Leavers also found motivation a greater barrier to completing the program.
- ❖ Respondents believed their STARS-supported education resulted in heightened expectations for their children's achievement and persistence.

Economic Impact

- ❖ Most scholars, alumni, and those on leave were employed, some with two jobs, and over two-thirds worked in jobs that were related to their STARS-supported education.
- ❖ Incomes varied tremendously among scholars and alumni, with the largest group of full-time employees earning between \$30,000 and \$40,000.
- ❖ More than 80% of alumni had seen an increase in their wages since leaving the STARS program.
- ❖ Most respondents had debt when starting STARS and had quite a bit of debt after STARS. Alumni had significantly more debt than did current scholars; however, if current scholars continue with their education, they are likely to incur as much debt as alumni. Those who left the program before completing their degrees also had slightly more student loan debt than did current scholars.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Scholarship Funds

- ❖ Consider increasing the STARS scholarship amount and decreasing the number of scholars, specifically awarding \$4,250 to 40 incoming scholars (or \$3,400 to 50 incoming scholars).

Scholarship Recipients

- ❖ We encourage discussion of a more targeted approach to providing the STARS Scholarship, with possible options including:
 - applicants who will seek jobs in high-need fields that also pay well;
 - students who have successfully completed Bachelor's degrees; and
 - applicants over the age of 25.

Support Activities & Resources

- ❖ Consider adding a part-time academic counselor to the STARS staff to work with the STARS program director and community colleges to better orient and advise non-traditional scholars.
- ❖ We strongly recommend STARS institute a mandatory requirement for scholars to get focused tutorials on financial literacy and debt management. A workshop on debt management could be a stand-alone offering or part of a larger series on financial literacy.
- ❖ Consider beefing up the tutoring component and trying out more pilots such as the math tutoring for a group. Moreover, academic resources should be highlighted to incoming scholars both at orientation and throughout their time with STARS.
- ❖ Use stress indicator assessments on a regular basis in order to target assistance or counseling. Also, consider providing meditation and stress-reduction techniques to scholars.
- ❖ Offer a workshop or series on Growth Mindset to help students realize their potential and help set their goals.

Program Process

- ❖ Consider measures to increase participation of current scholars and alumni, including:
 - describing the group of incoming scholars as a “cohort”;
 - changing the name of the mentor program to ‘buddy’ or some other name;
 - providing a database of alumni to help with networking and group support; and
 - presenting webinars and video tutorials.
- ❖ Create a fillable online application and other required scholarship forms.
- ❖ Increase the visibility of STARS scholarship program by updating the STARS website.

IN CONCLUSION...

GRG's evaluation surfaced a number of successes and benefits of the STARS program. Those who completed their education viewed STARS support as crucial to their success. The recommendations offered here are in the spirit of helping an extremely beneficial program achieve a better completion rate among its selected scholars.