EPIC SCHOLARS ANNUAL REPORT 2021 - 2023

METROPOLITAN
STATE UNIVERSITY℠
OF DENVER

EPIC Scholars Program
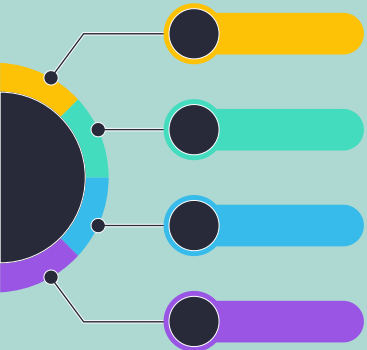
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you!

There are many organizations and individuals for which we would like to show gratitude for their continued support of this Program Evaluation and the Epic Scholars program. First and foremost, we would like to thank the Dean of Students Office for their continued commitment to Epic Scholars and the students they support. We would like to thank the Student Care Center and the Department of Social Work for providing ongoing consultation, data collection, and resources to support both the Program Evaluation and the Epic Scholars program. Finally, this would not have been possible without the Epic Scholars themselves. Over the course of four years ten students have been involved in the development, data collection, and analysis for this project. You all were the leaders that were needed when called upon. Thank you!

Epic Scholars was established in January 2018. The scholarship's mission is to provide financial assistance and meaningful support to independent students including those emancipated, unaccompanied and/or former foster youth. Once a student has been accepted to the Epic Scholars program, they will remain an Epic Scholar through their academic career at MSU Denver, receiving a supportive stipend, if annual program requirements are completed. Epic Scholarships awarded are based upon the availability of funds and additional qualifying criteria. Epic Scholars is a Metropolitan State University of Denver program aimed at connecting, supporting, and empowering students who've emerged from the foster care system and other independent student backgrounds—all of whom aspire to achieve greatness through higher education. The Epic Scholars mission is built on championing the desire to overcome, unlocking the potential within, and delivering the opportunities foster alumni and other independent students need to succeed. And at its core, the program aims to be the bridge between inner belief and outward ambition, lighting a pathway toward a better future for these students and the community they represent. The Epic Scholars Program operates under the Student Care Center. The Student Care Center houses MSU Denver's case management services and provides holistic, non-clinical case management support to MSU Denver Students who are facing challenging life circumstances that may prevent them from otherwise pursuing their educational goal. Participants in the program will have access to–

- Student Support Services provided by Epic.
- Individualized academic coaching and emotional support.
- Scholarship opportunities and support with the scholarship search, application, and overall process.
- The Epic Scholars Stipend.
- Graduate school and career advising.
- Social events and workshops created to engage and connect students on campus.
- Referrals for housing, food, clothing, health, and wellness.
- School supplies and other material supports as expressed/requested by Scholars.
- Peer Leadership & mentoring

A unique aspect of Epic Scholars that should be highlighted is the model of Peer Leadership. This has been implemented in all levels of engagement and practice for this program. Our Peer Leadership team works as members of the Participatory Action Evaluation (PAE) team (described below), this guides decisions and recommendations for continued programming, which is decided through a collaborative and team process that values and centers the experiences of independent students. This collaborative process of engagement was born out of the implementation of the PAE model. The PAE framework engages members of the sample population to encourage their input and involvement at all levels of the project. It was determined to be the most effective way to create an inclusive and effective study for both: evaluating the effectiveness of programming and planning programming for coming semesters. The PAE framework helped achieve the goals of the project by empowering Epic Leadership to inform the development of the evaluation process, from the literature review to data interpretation to presentation of evaluation findings, in writing and at conferences. It also provided the PAE oversight team with an insider's perspective that helped us to understand the "traditions" and practices that guide the experiences of independent students (Kemmis, Mctaggart, & Nixon, 2014).

WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

Navigating higher education as an independent student can be described as jumping directly into the deep end, tough to provide for oneself while pursuing schoolwork, and overwhelming with everything going on according to the lived experiences of our students at MSU Denver. Data from 2012 found that 51% of the total student body across the nation were independent students, whom are age 18 – 24 and identified through one or more of the following categories (IWPR, n.d.):

- Students that are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless;
- Students whose parents are deceased;
- Students with special circumstances (ex. legal emancipation, abuse, and neglect, etc.); and/or
- Students that are former foster youth or raised in kinship care.

These life circumstances alone may increase the assistance independent students need and should receive in areas such as housing, transportation, childcare, and school supplies to be successful in higher education. When these needs are not all met, it decreases their likelihood of graduating with an undergraduate degree (Lumina Foundation, n.d.). Other identities that intersect with independent students include first-generation students (46% of college students), students of color (42% of college students/ 55% of all independent students with Black and Indigenous Students disproportionately represented at 65 & 63%, respectively (IWPR, n.d.), first-generation immigrants (9% of college students), and full-time worker (40% of college students) (Lumina Foundation, 2019). Students represented in the Epic Scholars program are comprable, in our student body is nearly 82% report identifying as a student of color, 78% are first generation students, 83% report working with nearly 1/3 working full time and taking care of children or other family members, and receive nearly 6 times less in family financial contributions than their traditional student peers (Epic End of year data, 2022-23). The IWPR reports that of all students working full-time, 80% are independent students, and over 75% work while attending school, with 31% working full-time. Students living below the poverty line are also disproportionately represented within independent student populations, accounting for 72% of all students living at or below the poverty line, with 42% living 100% below the poverty line (IWPR, n.d.). The intersection of race with poverty can cause even more hardship, such that Black independent students account for 60% and Indigenous independent students account for 53%, compared with 43% of Latine independent students and 36% of white independent students who are experiencing poverty (IWPR, n.d.).

Independent students often lack the financial and emotional support that most dependent students can depend on from family and other community support (Emerson, 2006). This is even more prevalent for the 46% of independent students who identify as first-generation students and 9% as first-generation immigrant students (Lumina Foundation, 2019). Student bodies in higher education, particularly here at MSU Denver, are becoming increasingly diverse (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). With new generations of students finding their place in higher education, comes the need for adaptability and spaces for them to find their niche.

Education is considered a key factor in moving individuals out of poverty and into a more financially secure future (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora, et al., 2006). In fact, it's been shown that low-income individuals with a college degree are five times more likely to overcome poverty (Lumina Foundation, n.d.a). However, only about one-third of independent students obtain their degree within 6 years of entering higher education, way below the rate for their dependent peers (IWPR, n.d.). Because a college degree can be so important for low-income students to move towards self-sufficiency, Epic leaders and leaderhip continue to engage with students annually to ensure program effectiveness.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION
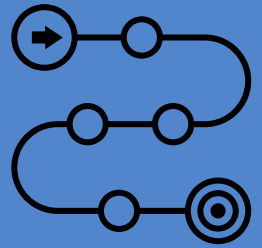
During the 2019 – 2021 Academic years (AY) Epic Scholars conducted a large-scale needs assessment, focused on both all independent students on the MSU campus and the Epic Scholars community. During that data collection, we learned a lot about our students' experience but also determined identified needs that we may not have been addressing adequately. Some of those key findings indicated that many of our scholars were struggling with food and housing security, many were seeking mental health support, as well as, wanting additional support around course work and futures planning. We also were able to identify the impact of the Epic leadership program, which among many duties, provided peer mentorship to thier peers. Because this was identified as a key indicator of students finding community, we formalized the process with a 2-day training and community building event to support our Epic leaders in thier effort to support others.

Once that was phase of the work was completed, the PAE team used this new knowledge to develop a robust evaluation of the Epic Scholars programming that began during the 2021-2022 academic year. The team identified that Epic provided programming in two primary areas. First, we wanted to look specifically at the Peer Leadership model and the impact that was having on scholars' academic success and sense of belonging. The second is overall programming, which includes case management, personal and professional workshops, community events, and the stipend. Based on these two areas, two surveys were collected at the end of the Spring 2022 and Spring 2023 semesters. All scholars who participated in Epic Scholars during the 2021 – 2022 AY and the 2022 – 2023 AY were invited to participate. Using a convenience sample our response rate was lower than anticipated, making any generalizations not feasible. However, planning for 2023-2024 will include additional methods for inviting participation. The following outlines the results of data collection.

2021

2022

RESULTS
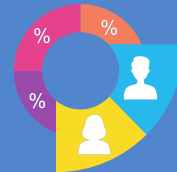
Peer leader surveys. 22 scholars completed the Peer leader survey in the Spring of 2022. Below you will find Table A. Scholar demographics, which provides a snapshot of the scholars who participated in this survey. Table B. Scholars' experience with peer leadership, which provides a look at the scholar perspective of the peer relationship and the benefits or lack thereof to their academic success. Finally, scholars reported on their experience having a shared identity with their peer leader and using the action plan model.

Table A. Scholar Demographics

Demographic	Student Total	Percentage
Gender		
Female	14	63.6%
Male	5	22.7%
Non-Binary	1	4.5%
Transgender	2	9.1%
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	2	9.1%
Black/African American	2	9.1%
Indigenous/ Native American	1	4.5%
Latino/a	7	31.8%
White	8	36.4%
More than 1	2	9.1%
Grade Level		
Freshman	1	4.5%
Sophomore	7	31.8%
Junior	6	27.3%
Senior	7	31.8%
In Between	1	4.5%
Enrolling Fall 2023		
Yes	18	81.8%
Expected Graduation Date		
Spring / Fall 2022	8	36,4%
Spring / Fall 2023	6	27.3%
Spring / Fall 2024	4	18.2%
Spring / Fall 2025	4	18.2%
1:1 meetings with Peer Leader attended		
None	1	4.5%
1-2 Times	16	72.7%
3-4 Times	3	13.6%
5 or More	2	9.1%
Group Events attended		
None	3	13.6%
One	10	45.5%
Two	6	28.6%
More than two events	2	9.5%

RESULTS

| Statement	Strongly to Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Disagree to Strongly Disagree
My peer leader helped me feel more prepared for college	19 (86.4%)	1 (4.5%)	2 (9%)
My peer leader helped me feel more motivated for college	20 (90.9%)	1 (4.5%)	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader made a difference to my sense of belonging here	20 (90.9%)	1 (4.5%)	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader provided useful feedback for understanding MSU	21 (95.5%)	0	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader helped me feel integrated into the Epic community	21 (95.5%)	0	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader helped me feel a strong positive connection	21 (95.5%)	0	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader provided helpful resources	21 (95.5%)	0	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader cared about my academic success	22 (100%)	0	0
My peer leader helped me maintain or increase my grades/ GPA	17 (77.3%)	4 (18.2%)	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader was approachable	21 (95.5%)	0	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader was able to meet with me as needed	21 (95.5%)	0	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader was responsive	21 (95.5%)	0	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader answered questions or helped me find answers	21 (95.5%)	1 (4.5%)	0
My peer leader was supportive	22 (100%)	0	0
My peer leader had a positive attitude toward students	22 (100%)	0	0
My peer leader was respectful towards students	21 (95.5%)	0	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader kept their commitments	21 (95.5%)	0	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader shared their personal educational experiences with me	21 (95.5%)	1 (4.5%)	0
My peer leader shares a personal identity with me	15 (68.2%)	6 (27.3%)	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader connected with me through a shared identity	15 (68.2%)	6 (27.3%)	1 (4.5%)
My peer leader never expected me to share more than I wanted	21 (95.5%)	1 (4.5%)	0
My peer leader was a capable representative of independent students varied identities	21 (95.5%)	1 (4.5%)	0
My peer leader gave me a choice in the development of my plan	22 (100%)	0	0
My peer leader devoted the resources to developing a relationship	21 (95.5%)	0	1 (4.5%)

Shared identity. A key element of understanding the scholar's experience with the peer leadership model is related to shared identity. While 68% of the population reported that they shared an identity with their peer leader, either academically or another personal identity, and 27% had a neutral response, most scholars agreed that this was important to them. Scholars were asked to rank the importance of shared identity on a scale of 1 – 10, with 1 meaning it's "not important at all," to 10 it is "extremely important," 80.9% (n = 17) scholars rated this between 8 – 10. When asked to explain their rating on the importance of having a peer leader representing their identities, most scholars report it helped them to feel heard and understood, to develop a stronger bond with their peer leader, and that understanding, and check-ins were of primary importance. Affirming what we learned in the 2019 – 2021 program evaluation.

Action plan. The action plan allows for the peer leader to get to know their peer, to understand their hopes, dreams, and goals and then to collaboratively create an action plan to achieve those goals. When asked about how often the scholar referred to their action plan over the AY, it was reported that one (4.5%) scholar used their action plan never, once a week, or every day, respectively with two (9%) reporting using their action plan every other week or a few times a week. Six (27.3%) used theirs once a semester, nine (40.9%) once a month. When considering how happy the scholar was with the outcome of their action plan, using a scale of 1 – 10 with 1 meaning the scholar was "completely unhappy" and 10 representing "completely happy," the lowest reported score was a four with three (14.3%) reporting in the mid-range of 4 – 7. The highest reported score was a 10 reported by ten (47.6%) scholars, and four (19%) scholars reported 8 and 9, respectively. When asked to explain their rating on their happiness with the outcome of the action plan, most scholars reported it was beneficial, it had helped keep track of goals and progress, or that it had helped them feel accomplished and reach their goals. A smaller subgroup of scholars identified needing more support completing their goals. Based on these insights the team will continue to train in and refine the Wise Choice model of goal development and accomplishment to ensure the needed support for scholars.

Overall, scholars appeared to use the action plan frequently and all scholars, except one, used the plan at least once a semester. Scholars also seemed very satisfied with the outcome of their action plan, future research should seek to understand how many goals scholars are setting for themselves and how many they are achieving. When asked how peer leaders could help the scholars feel more connected to Epic, most students indicated no recommendations or general satisfaction. A subgroup of scholars suggested a variety of actions, including: more check-ins and reminders, more welcoming and introduction time, and flexible scheduling.

RESULTS
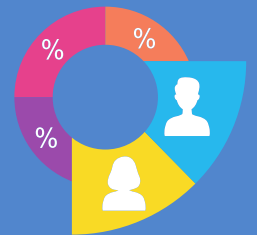
End of year survey. A total of 26 scholars completed the End of year survey in the Spring of 2022; however, it is important to note that some scholars did not answer all questions therefore, there is some variation in total responses between 22 – 26. Below you will find Table C. Scholar demographics, which provides a snapshot of the scholars who participated in this survey. And Table D. Scholars' experience with Epic Scholars programming, which provides a look at the scholar perspective of the Epic Scholars program and the benefits or lack thereof to their sense of belonging and academic success. Finally, scholars reported on their experiences related to college preparedness, belonging, food, housing, and medical insecurity, and ongoing needs.

Table C. Scholar Demographics

Demographic	Student Total	Percentage
Gender		
Female	19	73%
Male	2	7.7%
Non-Binary	2	7.7%
Transgender	2	7.7%
Prefer not to answer	1	3.8%
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	2	7.7%
Black/African American	1	3.8%
Latino/a	4	15.4%
White	14	52%
2 or More	5	19.2%
Attended more than 1 High School		
Yes	4	15.4%
First Generation Student		
Yes	17	65.4%
Employed		
Yes	24	92.3%
Grade Level		
Freshman	2	7.7%
Sophomore	6	23.1%
Junior	8	30.8%
Senior	9	34.6%
In Between	1	4%
Enrolling Fall 2022		
Yes	22	84.6%
Expected Graduation Date		
Spring / Fall 2022	8	30.8%
Spring / Fall 2023	10	33,9%
Spring / Fall 2024	5	23.8%
Spring / Fall 2025	3	11.5%

RESULTS

Statement	Strongly to Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Disagree to Strongly Disagree
I feel integrated into the Epic Scholars community	22 (91.7%)	1 (4.2%)	1 (4.2%)
I feel integrated into the University community	17 (70.8%)	5 (20.8%)	2 (8.4%)
I feel a strong positive connection to Epic leaders	20 (83.3%)	3 (12.5%)	1 (4.2%)
I feel a strong positive connection to other Epic scholars	17 (70.8%)	6 (25%)	1 (4.2%)
I feel a strong positive connection to the University	19 (79.2%)	3 (12.5%)	2 (8.4%)
I have at least 1 person I can turn to for emotional support	20 (83.3%)	3 (12.5%)	1 (4.2%)
I have at least 1 person I can turn to for academic support	18 (78.3%)	4 (17.4%)	1 (4.2%)
My support system encourages me to attend and graduate from MSU	21 (87.5%)	2 (8.4%)	1 (4.2%)
Epic Scholars made me feel like MSU cared whether I graduate	21 (87.5%)	2 (8.4%)	1 (4.2%)
Epic Scholars had contributed to my academic success	19 (79.2%)	3 (12.5%)	2 (8.4%)
Epic Scholars has contributed to my personal success	20 (83.3%)	2 (8.4%)	2 (8.4%)
I feel comfortable coming to Epic leaders to address my needs.	16 (66.7%)	3 (12.5%)	5 (20.9%)
I felt I could trust Epic leaders to be honest with me	21 (87.5%)	2 (8.4%)	1 (4.2%)
Epic Scholars increased my sense of community	20 (83.3%)	2 (8.4%)	2 (8.4%)
I felt that I had a voice in how I engaged with the program	20 (83.3%)	3 (12.5%)	1 (4.2%)
I believe Epic was respectful of my cultural and personal identities	24 (100%)	0	0
I can handle the stress associated with being a student at MSU	20 (83.3%)	2 (8.4%)	2 (8.4%)
I can handle the financial responsibilities of being a student at MSU	14 (58.3%)	6 (25%)	4 (16.6%)
I believe I am a capable student and will successfully graduate	22 (95.7%)	0	1 (4.2%)
Epic Scholars is an important part of my college experience	22 (91.7%)	1 (4.2%)	1 (4.2%)
I would recommend Epic Scholars to other independent students	23 (95.8%)	1 (4.2%)	0

RESULTS

College preparedness. Scholars were asked to identify how prepared they felt to begin college, 14 (54%) of scholars reported feeling "very to somewhat prepared," and 12 (46%) reported "neutral to not prepared at all." In relationship to this scale, scholars identified the following themes as impacting their preparedness including, but not limited to, mixed levels of support from others, a lack of knowledge, and lack of financial support. One respondent was exposed to pre-college research and high support from others, but this is not typical of the average Epic Scholar.

Scholars were then asked to identify their level of preparedness currently, after this year as an Epic Scholar, 24 (92%) of students reporting feeling "very to somewhat prepared," as well as being "very to somewhat confident" in their ability to graduate. In support of this finding, scholars identified the following as important: having increased support from others, an increased knowledge of resources, and increased financial capability. The impact of access to resources cannot be understated, most scholars reported accessing several resources beyond Epic Scholars including but not limited to, academic advising, tutoring, and the writing center. When asked about their confidence in their ability to succeed in completing their degree, several scholars reported they were graduating soon, indicating that coming closer to a goal seems to have an impact on overall confidence. Several scholars also identified feeling somewhat confident while still encountering barriers, discussed more fully below.

Belonging. As demonstrated in Table D above the majority of scholars reported feeling integrated into both Epic Scholars and the university community, as well as having strong positive connections in both areas. In addition, 18 (78.3%) scholars reporting making new connections through the Epic Scholars program this year. While there is more work to be done to understand the Epic Scholars' sense of belonging, we feel we are moving in the right direction. A clear area that requires our attention is to develop strategies to increase scholars' confidence in coming to their peer leader for support.
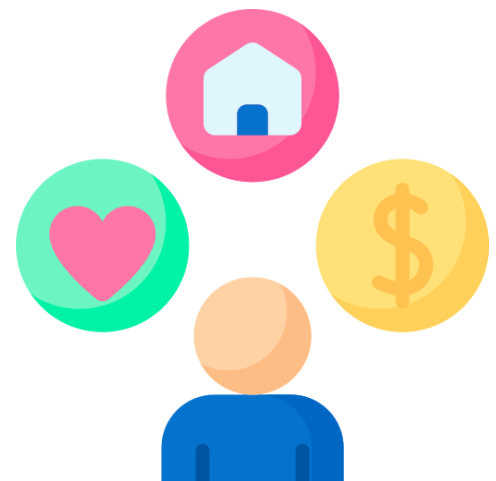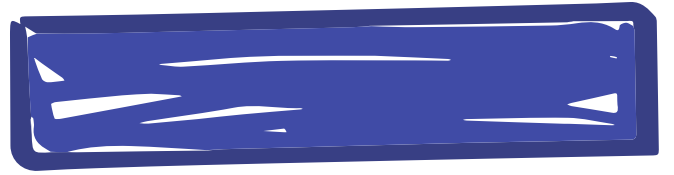
RESULTS

Support insecurity . Current literature and government reports indicate the concern of food insecurity across college campuses, it has risen to the level of a social problem. While such insecurities are necessary to identify and require a connection to a supporting resource, as noted above sometimes students aren't sure who they can trust with these difficulties. And while scholars are still achieving academic success, it is not without struggles and barriers. Currently, 77% of Epic Scholars reported some experience with food insecurity in the last 30 days, with the majority indicating multiple experiences. Seventy-four percent report housing insecurity in the last year, with many reporting multiple experiences, including being unhoused and experiencing a lack of safety within their living arrangements. Finally, 74% of scholars report medical insecurity experienced within the last year, as well as fears related to having access. These and other current needs are provided below in Table E. Scholars Ongoing Needs.

Table E. Scholars Ongoing Needs

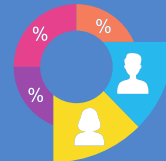| Need help with	Total (percentage)
Food	4 (19%)
Housing	6 (28.6%)
Physical Health	4 (19%)
Mental Health	13 (61.9%)
Technology	3 (14.3%)
Academic Support	4 (19%)
Career Preparation	12 (57.1%)
Multiple Options chosen	14 (66.7%)

2022

2023

Peer leader surveys. 20 students completed the Peer leader survey in the Spring of 2023. However, some questions were left unanswered, leading to some discrepancies in representation of the total sample of scholars. Below you will find Table F. Scholar demographics, which provides a snapshot of the scholars who participated in this survey. Table G. Scholars' experience with peer leadership, which provides a look at the scholars perspective of the peer relationship and the benefits or lack thereof to their academic success. Finally, scholars reported on their experience having a shared identity with their peer leader and using the action plan model.

Table F. Student Demographics

Demographic	Student Total	Percentage
Gender		
Female	12	60%
Male	3	15%
Non-Binary	2	10%
Transgender	2	10%
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	1	5%
Black/African American	2	10%
Indigenous/ Native American	4	20%
Latino/a	5	25%
White	6	30%
More than 1	1	5%
Grade Level		
Freshman	4	20%
Sophomore	3	15%
Junior	7	35%
Senior	4	20%
In Between	2	10%
Enrolling Fall 2022		
Yes	20	100%
Expected Graduation Date		
Spring / Fall 2023	6	30%
Spring / Fall 2024	7	30%
Spring / Fall 2025	3	15%
Beyond 2025	4	20%
1:1 meetings with Peer Leader attended		
None	4	20%
1-2 Times	7	35%
3-4 Times	7	35%
5 or More	2	10%

RESULTS

| Statement	Strongly to Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Disagree to Strongly Disagree
My peer leader helped me feel more prepared for college	13 (72.2%)	5 (27.8%)	0
My peer leader helped me feel more motivated for college	14 (77.8%)	4 (22.2%)	0
My peer leader made a difference to my sense of belonging here	13 (72.2%)	5 (27.8%)	0
My peer leader provided useful feedback for understanding MSU	14 (77.8%)	4 (22.2%)	0
My peer leader helped me feel integrated into the Epic community	15 (83.3%)	3 (16.7%)	0
My peer leader helped me feel a strong positive connection	15 (83.3%)	3 (16.7%)	0
My peer leader provided helpful resources	13 (72.2%)	5 (27.8%)	0
My peer leader cared about my academic success	15 (83.3%)	3 (16.7%)	0
My peer leader helped me maintain or increase my grades/ GPA	12 (66.7%)	5 (27.8%)	1 (5.6%)
My peer leader was approachable	17 (94.4%)	1 (5.6%)	0
My peer leader was able to meet with me as needed	16 (88.9%)	2 (11.1%)	0
My peer leader was responsive	16 (88.9%)	2 (11.1%)	0
My peer leader answered questions or helped me find answers	16 (88.9%)	2 (11.1%)	0
My peer leader was supportive	16 (88.9%)	2 (11.1%)	0
My peer leader had a positive attitude toward students	16 (88.9%)	2 (11.1%)	0
My peer leader was respectful towards students	16 (88.9%)	2 (11.1%)	0
My peer leader kept their commitments	16 (88.9%)	2 (11.1%)	0
My peer leader shared their personal educational experiences with me	15 (83.3%)	2 (11.1%)	1 (5.6%)
My peer leader shares a personal identity with me	12 (70.6%)	4 (23.5%)	1 (5.8%)
My peer leader connected with me through a shared identity	11 (64.7%)	4 (23.5%)	2 (11.8%)
My peer leader never expected me to share more than I wanted	15 (88.2%)	2 (11.8%)	0
My peer leader was a capable representative of independent students varied identities	16 (94.1%)	1 (5.9%)	0
My peer leader gave me a choice in the development of my plan	15 (88.2%)	1 (5.9%)	1 (5.9%)
My peer leader devoted the resources to developing a relationship	15 (88.2%)	2 (11.8%)	0
My peer leader facilitated a high level of trust and support	15 (88.2%)	1 (5.9%)	1 (5.9%)

RESULTS

Support. Two key elements of the peer mentorship relationship is support As demonstrated in the above table, the majority of scholars identify the role of thier peer mentor in their personal and acadmic success. Peer leaders were described as responsive, supportive, resourceful, and trustworthy. While there does appear to be a scholar who is not satisfied with Epic Scholars support, overall the Scholars are benefitting from the peer leadership model. In addition, Scholars were asked to rank the importance of shared identity on a scale of 1 – 10, with 1 being "not important at all," to 10 meaning "extremely important," 83.3%% (n = 15) scholars rated this between 7 – 10. Shared identity seems to also be important when thinking about the Scholar experiece, most Scholars report that having shared identity is important. When asked to explain their rating on the importance of having a peer leader representing their identities, most scholars report it helped them to feel heard and understood, to connect with someone, have someone that helped them stay focused, and that understanding, and check-ins were of primary importance. There appeared to be improvement from the Spring of 2022 related to the peer leaders identifying stronger connections and more check-ins, both were identified as a need at that time, in Spring of 2023 it has been reported as a strength.

Action plan. The action plan allows for the peer leader to get to know their peer, to understand their hopes, dreams, and goals and then to collaboratively create an action plan to achieve those goals. When asked about how often the student referred to their action plan over the AY, it was reported that three (16.7%) students never used their action plan, most Scholars used the action plan at least once a semester (6 (33.3%)). The next highest endorsed use was once a month, 4 (22.2%), every other week 3 (16.7%), and one student each using the action plan either once a week or every day. When considering how happy the student was with the outcome of their action plan, using a scale of 1 – 10 with 1 being "completely unhappy" and 10 being "completely happy," the lowest reported score was a one with five scholars (29.4%) reporting in the mid-range of 4 – 6. The highest reported score was a 10 reported by eight (47.1%) students, and three (17.6%) students reporting 7 or 8. When asked to explain their rating on their happiness with the outcome of the action plan, most scholars reported it was beneficial, it had helped keep track of goals and progress, or that it had helped them feel accomplished and reach their goals. A smaller subgroup of students identified needing more support completing their goals. Therefore, we do still have some work to do regarding the action plan, while students did feel more supported overall, the action plan seems to require more discussion in meetings. More students reported being unsatisfied with the action plan from 2022, we hope to learn more about these gaps during a series of listening tours in the Spring of 2024.

Overall, students appeared to use the action plan frequently and all students, excepting one, used the plan at least once a semester. Students also seemed very satisfied with the outcome of their action plan, future research should seek to understand how many goals students are setting for themselves and how many they are achieving. When asked how peer leaders could help them feel more connected to Epic, most students indicated no recommendations or general satisfaction.

RESULTS
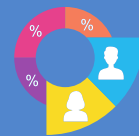
End of year survey. A total of 28 scholars completed the End of year survey in the Spring of 2023; however, it is important to note that some scholars did not answer all questions therefore, there is some variation in total responses. Below you will find Table H. Scholar demographics, which provides a snapshot of the scholars who participated in this survey. And Table I. Scholars' experience with Epic Scholars programming, which provides a look at the scholars perspective of the Epic Scholars program and the benefits or lack thereof to their sense of belonging and academic success. Finally, scholars reported on their experiences related to college preparedness, belonging, food, housing, and medical insecurity, and finally ongoing needs.

Table H. Scholar Demographics

| Demographic	Student Total	Percentage
Gender		
Female	14	50%
Male	6	21.4%
Non-Binary	4	14.3%
Transgender	2	7.1%
Prefer not to answer	2	7.1%
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	1	3.6%
Black/African American	4	14.3%
Indigenous/Native American	3	10.7%
Latino/a	7	25%
White	8	28.6%
More than 1	3	10.7%
Prefer not to answer	2	7.1%
Attended more than 1 High School (Missing =4)		
Yes	12	42.9%
First Generation Student		
Yes	22	78.6%
Employed		
Yes	24	85.7%
Grade Level		
Freshman	3	10.7%
Sophomore	5	17.9%
Junior	11	39.3%
Senior	6	21.4%
In Between	3	10.7%
Enrolling Fall 2023		
Yes	25	89.3%
Expected Graduation Date (Missing = 1)		
Spring / Fall 2023	7	25%
Spring / Fall 2024	10	35.6%
Spring / Fall 2025	3	10.7%
Beyond 2025	8	28.5%

RESULTS
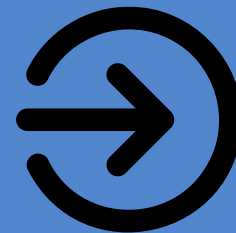
Table I. Scholars' experience with Epic Scholars programming,

Statement	Strongly to Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Disagree to Strongly Disagree
I feel integrated into the Epic Scholars community	24 (88.9%)	3 (11.1%)	0
I feel integrated into the University community	19 (70.4%)	7 (25.9%)	1 (3.7%)
I feel a strong positive connection to Epic leaders	23 (85.2%)	4 (14.8%)	0
I feel a strong positive connection to other Epic scholars	21 (77.8%)	4 (14.8%)	2 (7.4%)
I feel a strong positive connection to the University	19 (70.4%)	6 (22.2%)	2 (7.4%)
I have at least 1 person I can turn to for emotional support	25 (92.6%)	0	2 (7.4%)
I have at least 1 person I can turn to for academic support	25 (92.6%)	0	2 (7.4%)
My support system encourages me to attend and graduate from MSU	24 (88.9%)	2 (7.4%)	1 (3.7%)
Epic Scholars made me feel like MSU cared whether I graduate	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	0
Epic Scholars had contributed to my academic success	25 (92.6%)	1 (3.7%)	1 (3.7%)
Epic Scholars has contributed to my personal success	25 (92.6%)	2 (7.4%)	0
I feel comfortable coming to Epic leaders to address my needs.	23 (85.2%)	3 (11.1%)	1 (3.7%)
I felt I could trust Epic leaders to be honest with me	26 (96.3%)	0	1 (3.7%)
Epic Scholars increased my sense of community	25 (92.6%)	2 (7.4%)	0
I felt that I had a voice in how I engaged with the program	22 (81.5%)	5 (18.5%)	0
I believe Epic was respectful of my cultural and personal identities	27 (100%)	0	0
I can handle the stress associated with being a student at MSU	21 (77.8%)	1 (3.7%)	5 (18.5%)
I can handle the financial responsibilities of being a student at MSU	17 (63%)	2 (7.4%)	8 (29.6%)
I believe I am a capable student and will successfully graduate	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	0
Epic Scholars is an important part of my college experience	24 (88.9%)	3 (11.1%)	0
I would recommend Epic Scholars to other independent students	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	0

RESULTS

College preparedness. Scholars were asked to identify how prepared they felt to begin college, 16 (57%) of students reported felling "very to somewhat prepared," and 12 (42%) reported feeling "neutral to not prepared at all." Scholars were then asked to identify their level of preparedness currently, after this year as an Epic Scholar, 19 (68%) of scholars reported feeling "very to somewhat prepared." Fifteen (53.6%) scholars report being "very confident" in thier ability to graduate, this is unfortuntely lower than previous years, and provides us another area of improvement. Scholars reported several external stressors, commonly financial, that impacts both their ability to be prepared and their confidence. Twelve (43%) scholars reported a "neutral" response to this question of confidence, it is possible that the continuing life stressors creates an enviornment of ambiguity for the scholar requiring them to focus on the day to day, rather than having a more future thinking mindset. Another area of focus, and we believe that improving our level of engagement and accountability to the action plan, highlighting academic and futures goals, we may be able to help students focus and see a future that includes them walking across a graduation stage.   Finally, the impact of access to resources cannot be understated, most scholars reported accessing several resources beyond Epic Scholars including but not limited to, academic advising, tutoring centers, Rowdy's corner food bank, and the health center. However, concerns with waitlists and inconvenient service hours, at times outside resources must be sought for scholars well-being; therefore, the Epic leaders team has been working to create a comprehensive guide to community resources.

Belonging. As demonstrated in Table D above the majority of scholars reported feeling integrated into both Epic Scholars and the university community, as well as having strong positive connections in both areas. Of note, 26 (96.3%) of Scholars reported that a program such as Epic Scholars makes them feel as if MSU Denver cares whether or not they gradaute. It's possible, that just the provision of additional and specific services for this hidden population of students creates an atmosphere of care and concern for thier success, at the University level, not just programmatic. Finally, it is important to note that 100% of scholars surveyed believed that the leadership of Epic Scholars respected the individual and demonstrated a sense of cultural humility and curiosity, a key driver in creating a sense of belonging. Not only is this in relationship to some of the core identities often considered (i.e. race, gender, LGBTQIA status), but also in relationship to their identity as an Independent student. We believe that our scholars sharing this particular identity, is one of our most important attributes. The lived expereiences are vast, and yet there is a continued unspoken recognition, respect, and visibility that Epic Scholars provides independent students. In addition, 19 (73.1%) scholars reporting making new connections through the Epic Scholars program this year. While there is more work to be done to continue to grow the Epic Scholars' sense of belonging, we believe that we are on the right path and the more students we can reach and support, the more that will begin to feel seen, valued, who will grow in confidence and reach degree completion.
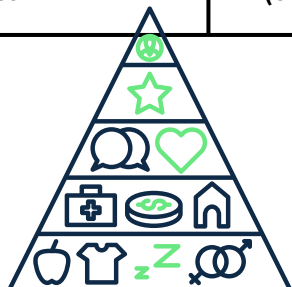
RESULTS

Support insecurity . As noted from the 2022 data, food insecruity has gotten more prevelant in the scholars community, and remains a pressing problem. While such insecurities oten require a connection to a supporting resource, either on or off campus, sometimes scholars aren't sure who they can trust with these difficulties. Sharing such insecurities can be overshadowed by a sense of independence, or guilt and shame. Which again makes the case for the importance of programs such as Epic Scholars that provides a community space where individuals shame and trauma can remain unspoken. Currently, 81% of Epic Scholars reported some experience with food insecurity in the last 30 days, with the majority indicating multiple experiences. Seventy-one percent report housing insecurity in the last year, with many reporting multiple experiences, including being unhoused and experiencing a lack of safety within their living arrangements. Finally, a major change from 2022, only 1 (3.8%) scholar reported experiencing medical insecurity, while this is an exciting update, when exploring the need for mental health servies, we are still missing the mark. While our scholars are doing well academically, as demonstrated below, this is not without expeirencing mutliple setbacks and barriers, the following Table J: Scholars Onging Needs outlines the continued needs in the scholar population.

Table J. Scholars Ongoing Needs

Need help with	Total (percentage)
Food	11 (50%)
Housing	10 (45.5%)
Physical Health	12 (54.5%)
Mental Health	14 (60.9%)
Technology	5 (22.7%)
Academic Support	13 (56.5%)
Career Preparation	13 (56.5%)
Multiple Options chosen	24 (88.9%)

EDUCATIONAL DATA

RESULTS

Educational Data. Educational data collected at the University level is also collected and analyzed to determine how Epic Scholars compare to thier peers who are not participants in the Epic Scholars program. Table F. Demographics for all Independent Students, presents the demographics for all Independent students on campus, regardless of affiliation with the Epic Scholars Program. Table G. Educational Outcomes presents identified educational outcomes, such as, GPA and credits completed, comparing Epic Scholar participants to non-participant Independent students. The table demonstrates the effectiveness of the Epic Scholars program at ensuring strong educational outcomes when compared to thier peers.

Table F. Independent Student Demographics

Demographic	n (%)
Grade Level	Freshman = 1 (<1%) Sophomore = 3 (0.5%) Junior = 20 (37%) Senior = 29 (55%)
Gender Identity	Female = 39 (74%) Male = 14 (26%)
Race	African American = 6 (11%) American Indian/Alaskan = 1 (<1%) Asian = 3 (0.5%) Hispanic = 19 (36%) White = 18 (34%) 2 or more races = 6 (11%)
Age	19 or younger = 1 (<1%) 20-24 = 30 (56%) 25-29 = 12 (23%) 30 and above = 10 (21%)
First Generation Status	First Generation = 49 (92%) Non-First Generation = 4 (8%)

RESULTS

Table G. Educational Outcomes & Comparisons
**Indicates a statistically significant result

Educational Measure	Epic Scholars (n = 53)	Other Independent Students (n = 5783)
GPA*	3.23	2.98
Academic Standing*	100%	89%
Average attempted credits / semester*	10.8	10.1
Total Withdrawals	1.87	1.36
Current credit hour enrollment*	10.6	9.93
Average Expected Family Contribution*	$1200	$6595
Total semesters completed*	9.47	7.16

Overall, Epic Scholars demonstrate better educational outcomes than other independent students on campus. Epic Scholars score statistically significantly higher on almost all measures of success. The one variable in which this difference is not seen is related to total withdrawals, while Epic Scholars do withdraw at a slightly higher rate, this is not a significant finding. The implication of this finding is tied to the rate at which Epic Scholars are enrolling in classes, in other words, they are enrolling in more credit hours and yet, are withdrawing from classes at the same rate as their peers. There are still gaps in our ability to assess other important elements of academic success, specifically retention and graduation rates. While self-report data on these variables is impressive, for example almost 84% of scholars in 2022 and 90% in 2023 self-reported continued enrollment, and we proudly congratulate the six students who graduated since 2019, with at least four more slated for graduation in Spring 2024. We believe what we are doing is working, at least for a majority of our population. As previously noted, one of our most important responsibilities is to engage those voices we have heard from, to understand more clearly what we might be missing to imporve those areas where we may be falling short.

DISCUSSION

Discussion.

As Epic moves into it's 5th year of data collection, we are excited to begin the next AY to moving into more longitudinal data that will allow us to measure outcomes through comparisons. We hope to more effectively show the continued progress and hopefully growth of Epic Scholars, academically and personally. As this report highlights, students who participate in Epic Scholars have better educational outcomes as thier peers, and they are being retained and subsequently gradaute, some going on to gradaute school and others entering the work force with great success. While we are not reporting 23-24 data at this time, in the Fall of 2023 three Epic Scholars graduated, with 4 -5 slated to graduate in the Spring. Students are finding a community with Epic, they have a sense of belonging, of being heard and seen, and believe in themselves in part, because we believe in them and highlight representations of what success can look like, no matter where you come from and what you bring with you. As we continue into the 23-24 AY we believe that we will continue to see progress and positive outcomes for Epic Scholars. As a part of evaluation, during the Spring of 2024, we will hold another round of Listening Tours, as we believe, it's time to hear the voices of our scholars through thier experiences and stories and look forward to sharing these stories with you next year.

Thank you for your time and support of the Epic Scholars program, if you'd like more information about our services or how you can get invovled, please contact Miguel Huerta at mhuerta6@msudenver.edu.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

New Orleans

Epic Scholars provided an opportunity for the peer leaders and research assistants to gain important skills such as public speaking, advocacy, and analyzing systems to create meaningful change. The Title IV-E Roundtable conference presentation was in front of an array of professional attendees from across the nation. The Epic team offered their experiences and potential solutions by advocating to make changes within the child welfare systems and how to include the population of study that is impacted as part of the research team. Our presentation, "Using Participatory Action Research in Higher Education," left us feeling proud and motivated to continue the work that we are contributing to for Epic Scholars and independent students.

Atlanta

We were able to also present at the Council on Social Work Education's annual conference in Atlanta, GA. To continue building on the scholars skills and to share the continued good work done through a program for Independent students, we had two presentations accepted. The first was a similar panel to that presented in New Orleans, "Using Participatory Action Evaluation in Higher Education." The second was a poster session that focused on the role of "Peer Mentorship in Higher Education."

Congratulations!

Peer Mentorship. Peer mentorship continues to stand out as one of the critcial supports that Epic Scholars provides to program participants. Epic Scholars are overall satisfied with peer mentorship, and most report the overwhelming benefits to thier personal and professional journey. Therefore, this support should continue and seek additional resrouces to build strong mentors, with managable case loads. Epic currently supports 50 scholars; however, in 2023 reports showed that their were 320 independent students at MSU who could benefit from Epic Scholars programming. Continued efforts towards more check-ins that are meaningful and help scholars with goal development & accountability is a quick and easy activity that can be implemented immediately. A more nuanced variable is the lowered confidence in ability to graduate seen in 2023, Epic Scholars should take a more direct focus on improving acacemic skills and connections, as a means to grow student confidence toward graduation and thier future.

Continued Resource Building. Due to the number of students who could qualify for Epic support, it is critical that the Epic team continue to seek out additional funding and support for the independent student body. As we have clearly demonstrated the benefits, particularly the educational benefits, of Epic Scholars such as higher GPA's, and higher completed credit hours, this program should be made available to all eligible students as a means of upholding the CADRE values and meeting the retention and graduation goals of MSU Denver.

Community Advisory Board. The Epic community is thrilled to announce a significant development for our program in December 2023 aimed at enhancing the support and success of a crucial and vulnerable community within our university, independent students. (sentence explaining what an independent student is) As part of our ongoing commitment to student success and retention, we are proud to introduce the creation of a Community Advisory Board.

This esteemed board comprises distinguished individuals, including the founder, Dr. Vicki Golich (Provost Emerita), alumna Ley-Lonni Woodruff, MSW; alumna Kiara Galvan of Cobbled Streets, Lara Bruce (Director of the Colorado Child Welfare Scholars Consortium and Faculty of the Dept of Social Work (let's wait to hopefully add Clay and Bleu) as well as other dedicated individuals connected to this community including current Epic Scholars,. The Advisory Board will play a vital role in consulting program staff and Epic Peer Leaders and advocating for the program's importance and mission.