

THE EPIC SCHOLARS REPORT

Presented by | the MSU Denver Department of Social Work,
Epic Scholars Program and MSU Denver Student Care Center

2019 - 2021



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many organizations and individuals for which we would like to show gratitude for their continued support of this Needs Assessment 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 Needs Assessment and the Epic Scholars program. Finally, this would not have been possible without the Epic Scholars themselves. Over the course of three years eight 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!!!

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- Emilee Cabrera - Peer Leader, Epic Scholars**



EPIC SCHOLARS

*Empowering Independent
Students to Reach their Goals*

MSU Denver
Department of Social Work



MSW 2011
10 /
YEARS
/ 25
BSSW 1996

Be the change. See it whole
2021-2022



Student Care Center

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INTRODUCTION

The face of today's college students is changing. As more individuals are finding ways to access higher education, more recognition of the possible difficulties faced is occurring. The Lumina Foundation (n.d.a) reports that today's college student body is 46% first-generation college students, 40% work full-time, 36% report food insecurity, 33% are low-income (Lumina Foundation, n.d.b), 43% are single mothers (Institute for Women's Policy Research [IWPR], 2014; IWPR, 2015), and 49% are self-supporting students. Self-supporting students are defined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) through four main categories that include youth that are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless; students whose parents are deceased; students with special circumstances (i.e., family estrangement, abuse and neglect, etc.); and former foster youth. Therefore, they often lack the emotional and financial support that other college students can depend on (Emerson, 2006). In addition, it has been reported that 42% of self-supporting students are also low-income students, a disproportionate representation when compared with the general population of college students (Lumina Foundation, n.d.b). There is very little information about self-supporting students as a homogenous population. Rather, the literature is focused heavily on former foster youth and low-income students, both of whom have high representation in self-supporting student populations. Therefore, this background review will focus on these two populations as a basis for understanding the multiple risks faced by and interventions focused on self-supporting students in higher education.

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). Because a college degree can be so important for low-income students to move towards self-sufficiency, understanding what stands in the way of degree completion is necessary. The statistics demonstrate that college completion rates for former foster youth are often significantly lower than the general student population. For example, it has been shown that over a 6-year period, 6% - 26% of former foster youth graduated with a degree or a certificate, compared with 30% - 56% of other students (Courtney, et al., 2010; Davis, 2006). Another study looking at dropout rates of former foster youth reported that 21% of former foster youth dropped out in their first year and 33% dropped out before completing their degree (Day, et al., 2011). This is compared to only 18% of non-foster care youth who dropped out prior to degree completion (Day, et al., 2011). Additionally, the Lumina Foundation (n.d.c) found that only 11% of low-income students earn a degree within 6 years. There are multiple reasons that are implicated in these high dropout rates among former foster youth and low-income students including lack of preparation for college, mental health conditions, and the most significant, financial burdens (Courtney, et al., 2010; Lumina Foundation, n.d.c.).

DESCRIPTION OF THE EPIC SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Epic Scholars was established in January 2018. The mission of the scholarship is to provide financial assistance and meaningful support to self-supporting students including those who were emancipated, unaccompanied and/or former foster youth. Once a student has been accepted to the Epic Scholars program, they will remain Epic Scholars through their academic career at MSU Denver 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 difficult 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 self-supporting 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 advising 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.**

• “Yeah, it made me feel so values, I felt like when I was a peer mentor, like you just walk around and you feel like a badass, like you’re so cool, and that you’re able to be there for people like you, people who maybe do not have as much support outside of campus.”

• “I have really enjoyed it; I wish I had found it sooner. It’s just, it’s supportive, um I do like how we do the Epic goals and it just kind of like shows you that you have those abilities to like, sort of plan something out and get to the goal.”

• “Epic saved my life. I don’t know how many times I’ve been in a stressful situation where like I literally didn’t know, like how I was going to pass a semester. Or you know, like just all of the situations I went through since being in college.”

**Scholars on the
program impact...**

“I just remember it feeling like a family. Epic feels like a big family and it’s awesome.”

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Current literature that has evaluated programs providing support and resources to former foster youth and low-income students, highly represented in self-supporting student populations, states that the first step in the provision of successful services is to know your students (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Lumina Foundation, n.d.a). Therefore, this evaluation, using a needs assessment focus, began in the Fall of 2019 to expand our understanding of students' needs. Additional Needs Assessment elements were added during the COVID-19 pandemic in Fall of 2020, to target the specific needs of this student population during this time. The following objectives were proposed to meet these goals:

1. To describe the current educational attainment of the self-supporting students on the MSU Denver campus.
2. To understand self-supporting students' awareness of the Epic program and other University resources that could aid in their college success.
3. To understand which resources self-supporting students access and if those resources are addressing the student's needs.
4. To determine the needs of this community of students based on what they identify as necessary for their success.
5. To determine which needs are not currently being addressed.
6. To determine what self-supporting students would recommend for addressing those unmet needs.
7. To identify if any of these identified needs were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This Needs Assessment is intended to increase university stakeholders' understanding of the unique needs of self-supporting students on the MSU Denver campus. The overall purpose of this Needs Assessment is to describe the needs of this specific population to aid in the development of relevant programming, a culture of support, and a long-term, sustainable evaluation of the Epic Scholars program. To gain the most effective insight, this project will employ a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, engaging current Epic Peer Leaders in every aspect of the project to achieve the objectives and overarching purpose.

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PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR)

THE PAR FRAMEWORK ENGAGES MEMBERS OF THE SAMPLE POPULATION AND SUPPORTS AND ENCOURAGES 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 EXPLORING THE NEEDS OF THIS POPULATION. THE PAR FRAMEWORK HELPED ACHIEVE THE GOALS OF THE PROJECT BY EMPOWERING EPIC PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS TO INFORM THE DEVELOPMENT OF BOTH THE QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE PROCESS. IT ALSO PROVIDED THE PAR TEAM WITH AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE THAT HELPED US TO UNDERSTAND THE "TRADITIONS" AND PRACTICES THAT GUIDE THE EXPERIENCES OF SELF-SUPPORTING STUDENTS (KEMMIS, MCTAGGART, & NIXON, 2014). IN ADDITION, THE EPIC PEER LEADERS TEAM FACILITATED MOST ASPECTS OF DATA COLLECTION INCLUDING PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT, AS WELL AS FACILITATION AND PARTICIPATION IN THE LISTENING TOURS.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



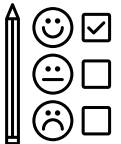
- WHAT IS THE CURRENT ACADEMIC STANDING OF SELF-SUPPORTING STUDENTS ON MSU DENVER'S CAMPUS?
- HOW ARE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN THE EPIC SCHOLARS PROGRAM DIFFERENT FROM SELF-SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO DON'T PARTICIPATE IN THE PROGRAM?
- WHAT ARE THE NEEDS OF UNDERGRADUATE, SELF-SUPPORTING STUDENTS ON THE MSU DENVER CAMPUS?
- WHAT ARE THE EXPERIENCES OF SELF-SUPPORTING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS ON THE MSU DENVER CAMPUS WHO PARTICIPATE IN THE EPIC SCHOLARS PROGRAM?

THE SAMPLE

This sample included any student identified as a self-supporting, undergraduate student on their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. Students fit into one of the four identifiers for self-supporting students as defined by the FAFSA. Those identifiers are:

- **Dependent Family (DEPFAM):** These are special circumstance students, in which they apply for independent status based on experiencing one or more of the following situations: family situation appeal (lack of family support), estrangement, abuse, and/or neglect.
- **Emancipated (EMANC):** Students qualify under this status if they are under legal guardianship (i.e., former foster youth) or have been emancipated.
- **Orphan (ORPH):** Students qualify under this status if both of their parents are deceased.
- **Unaccompanied Youth (UYOUTH):** Students qualify under this status if they qualify for the McKinney Vento Act of 1987, which identifies students as an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or at risk of experiencing homelessness.

THE MEASURES



Mixed Methods

- **Secondary Educational Data collected from Banner**
 - All identified independent students enrolled in AY 2019-2020 & 2020-2021 (See Appendix A)..
 - GPA, enrolled and completed credits, academic status
- **Needs Assessment Survey**
 - All identified independent students
 - Collected several demographic and needs variables (See Appendix B).
- **Semi-Structured Interviews**
 - All Epic Scholars
 - 10 Listening Tours over 2 weeks
 - Focused on experience and needs (See Appendix C).

Data Collection Timeline

**FALL 2019
PLANNING**

**FALL 2020
SECONDARY
DATA (BANNER)
NEEDS
ASSESSMENT
SURVEY**

**SPRING 2020
SECONDARY DATA
(BANNER)
NEEDS
ASSESSMENT
SURVEY**

**SPRING
2021
LISTENING
TOURS**

DATA ANALYSIS SUMMER 2021

QUANTITATIVE

- DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS
- EDUCATIONAL COMPARISONS

QUALITATIVE

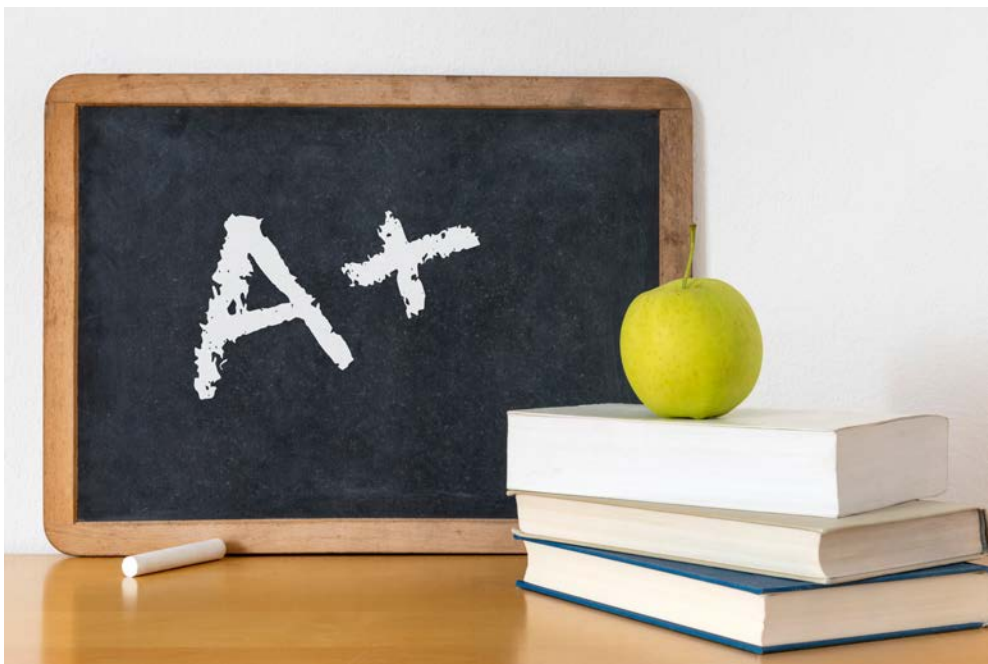
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RESULTS

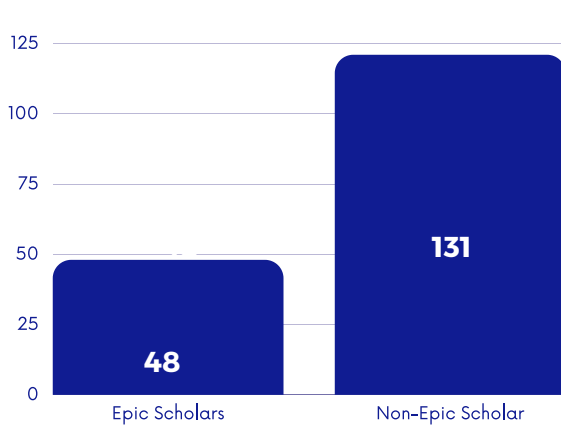
A hand holding a black marker, drawing a horizontal line under the word 'RESULTS'. The word is written in a bold, hand-drawn, black, uppercase font. The hand is positioned on the right side of the image, with the thumb and index finger holding the marker. The background is white.



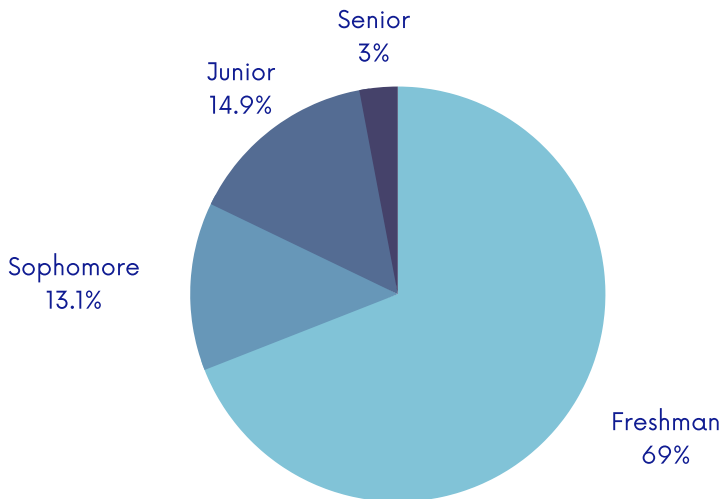
Educational Data



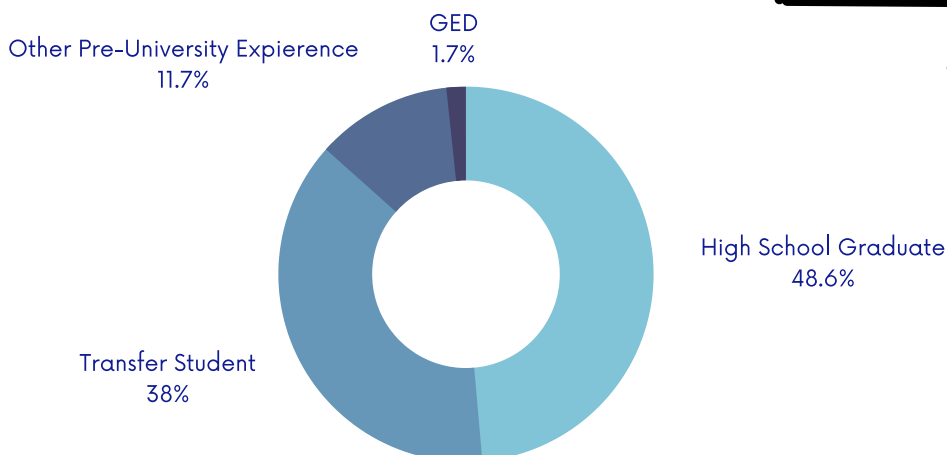
EDUCATIONAL DATA (N=179)



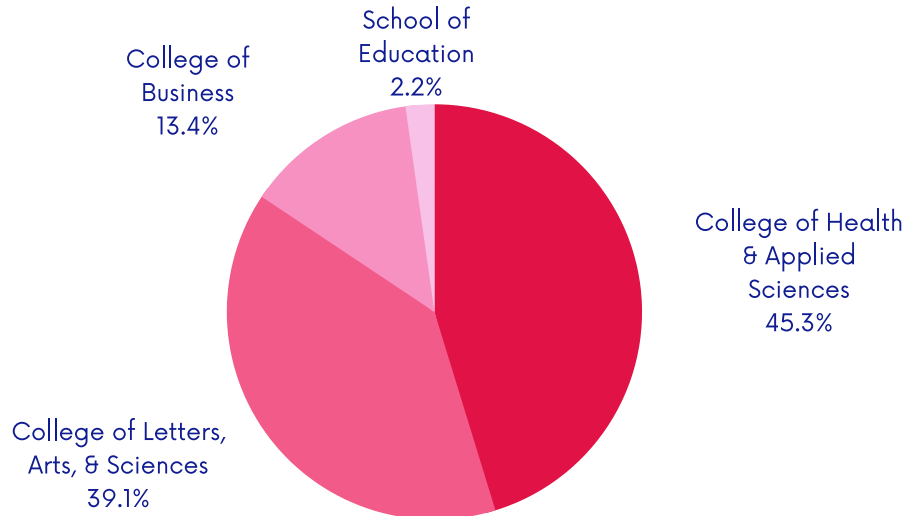
WHO IS AN EPIC SCHOLAR?



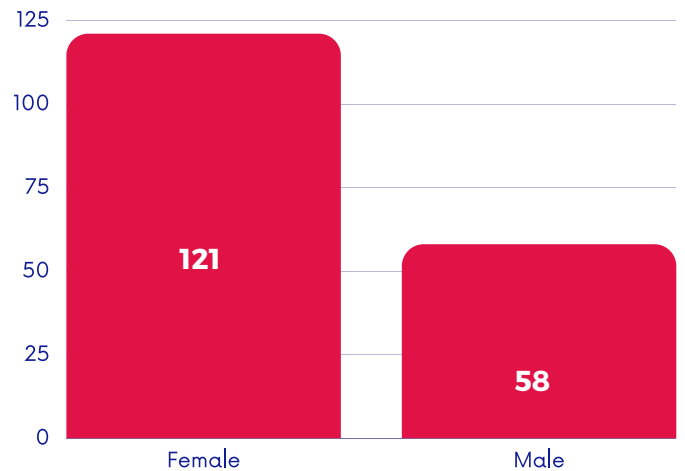
WHAT GRADE LEVEL DO STUDENTS REPRESENT?



STUDENTS EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND



WHERE ARE SELF-SUPPORTING STUDENTS ENROLLED?



WHAT IS YOUR GENDER IDENTITY?

FIRST GENERATION REPRESENTATION

83.2%

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

In each semester, students had enrolled in between 0-18 credits in a semester, with a mean of 9.2 enrolled credit hours ($SD=3.51$). Because first-year students did not have academic information available through the university at the time the data was collected, the sample size for academic-related questions is 104 ($n=104$) students and does not reflect students identified as in their first year; of this sample, students had a mean GPA of 2.92 ($SD = .745$). This subset of students had earned a total of between 0-140 credit hours, with mean credit hours earned at 46 ($SD=30.5$). The semester that the data was pulled, participants in the subset had attempted between 3-17 credit hours, with a mean of 11.3 enrolled credit hours ($SD = 2.84$). Of these students, 3.8% ($n=4$) were on academic warning, 3.8% ($n=4$) were on academic probation, and 92.3% ($n=96$) were in good standing.

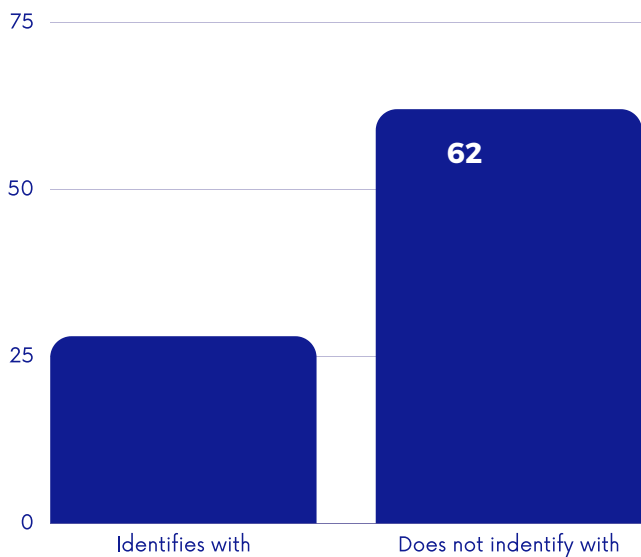
When comparing Epic Scholars with the general population of self-supporting students along academic measures, a significant difference in GPA was identified. The mean GPA for students participating in Epic Scholars was 3.12 while the mean GPA for non-Epic Scholars was 2.80. No other measures of academic progress showed significant results; however, this finding is considered promising. The PAR team will continue to collect academic data ongoing as Epic continues to adjust and revise programming based on evaluation activities.



Needs Assessment Data

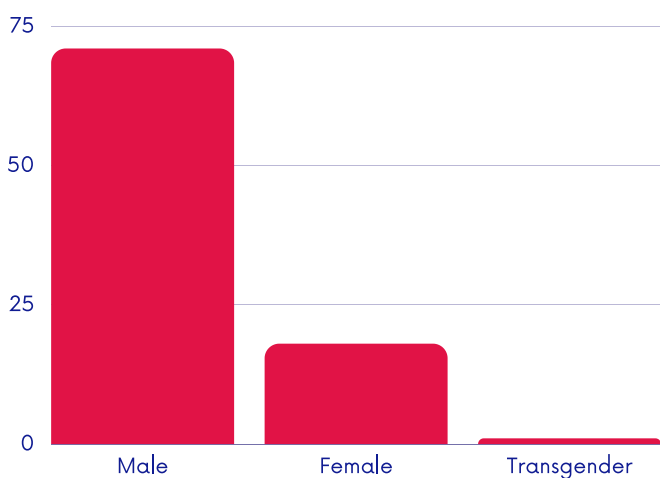


Needs Assessment Student Demographics (N = 90)

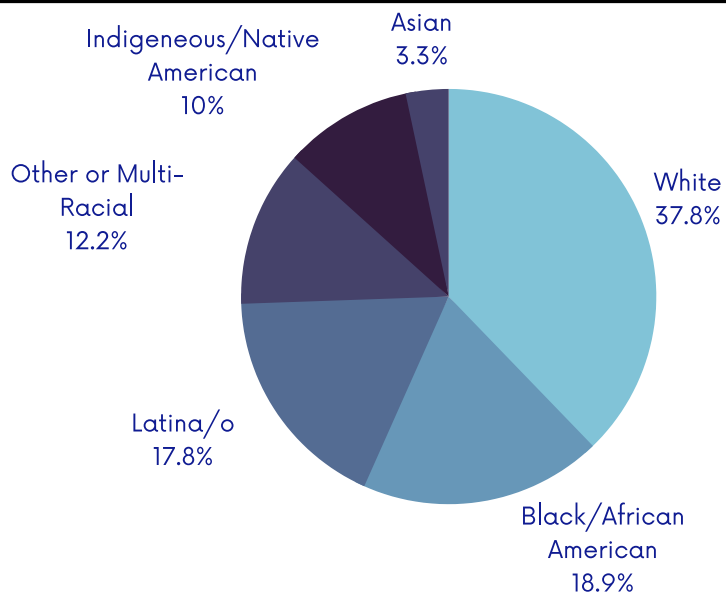
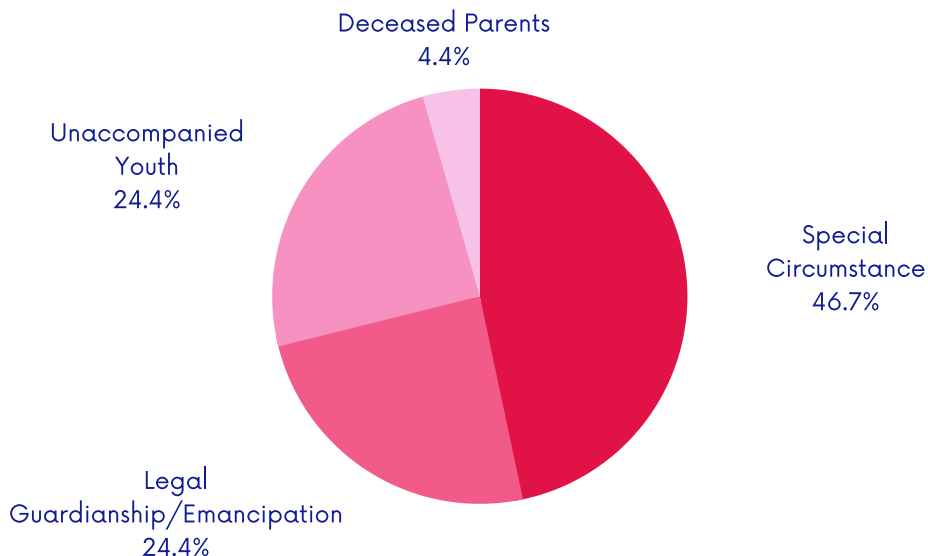


MEMBER OF THE LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY

WHAT IS YOUR GENDER IDENTITY?

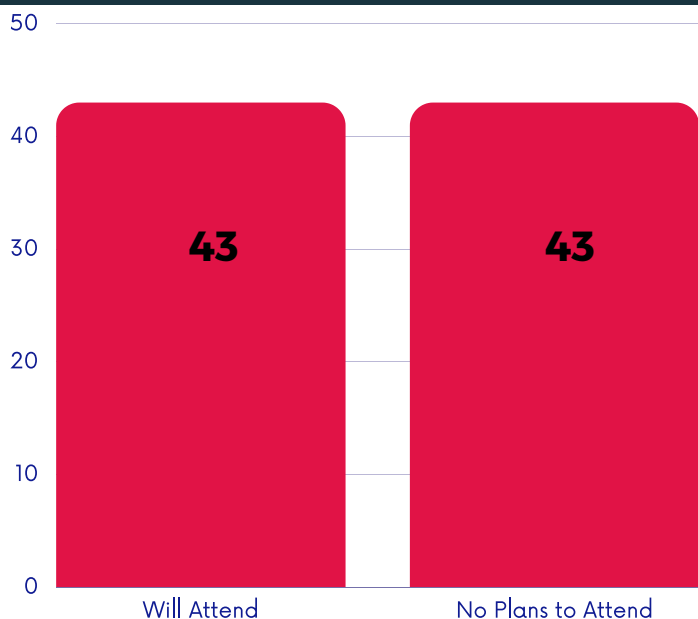


SELF-SUPPORTING STUDENT STATUS

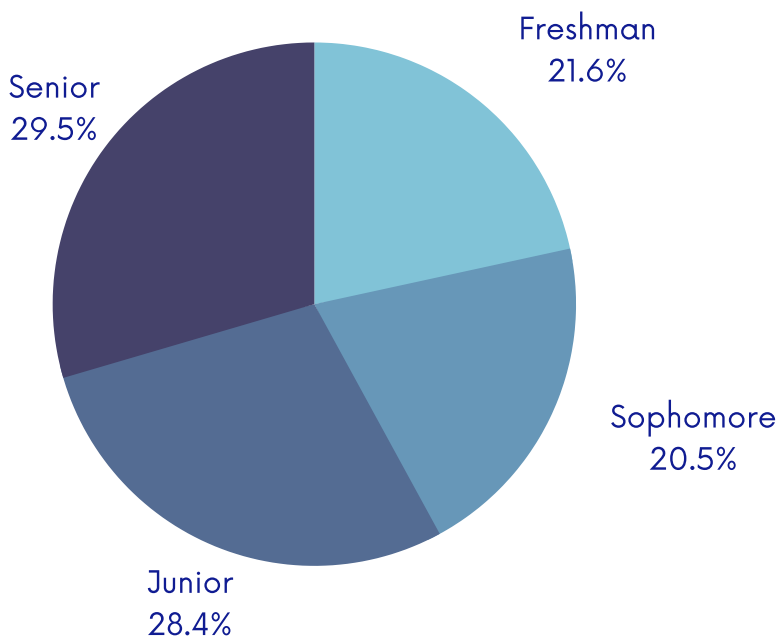


RACE/ETHNICITY

Needs Assessment Student Demographics (N = 90)



PLANS FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL



WHAT GRADE LEVEL DO STUDENTS REPRESENT?

23.6%

REPORTED A PHYSICAL DISABILITY

43.8%

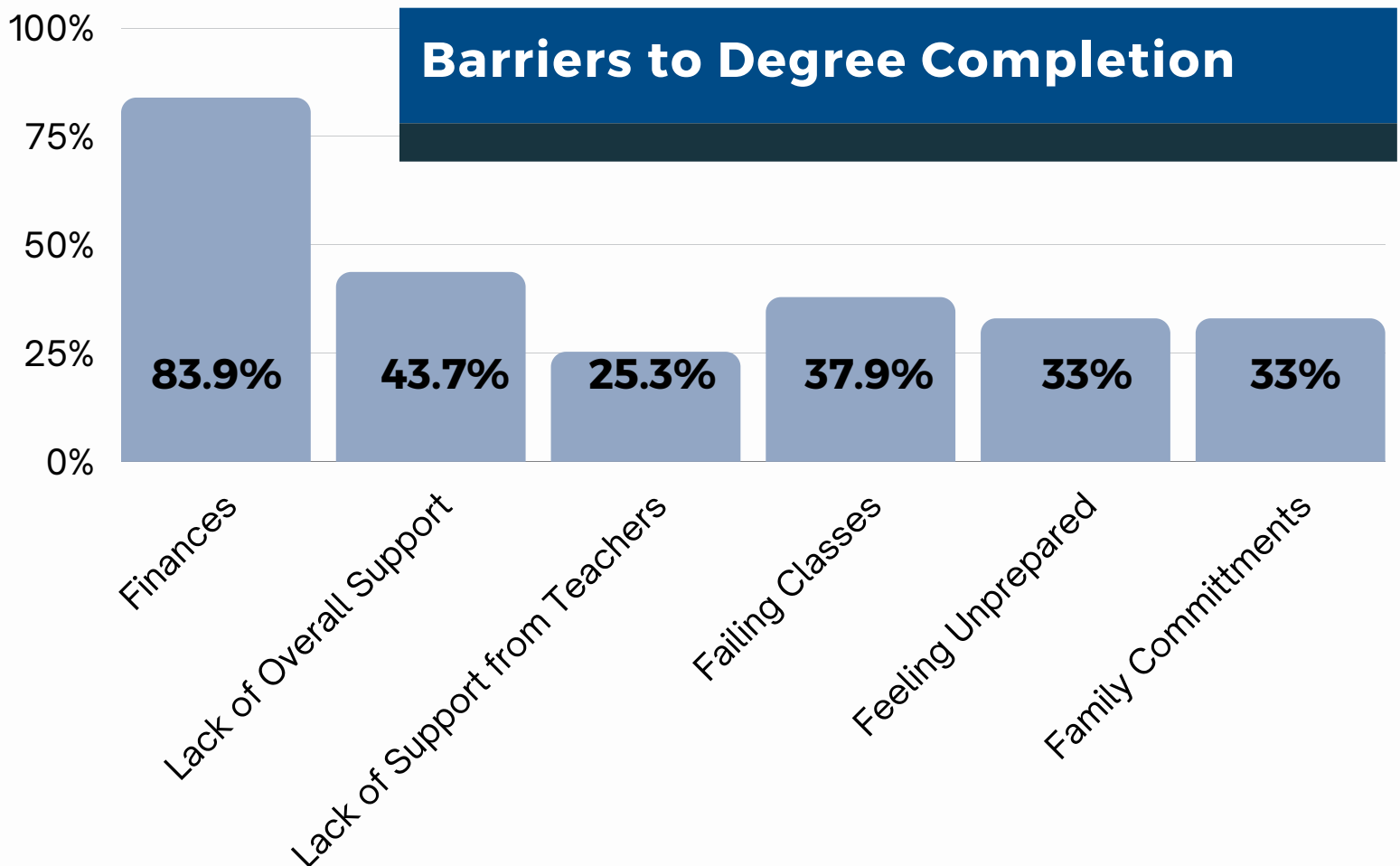
REPORTED A DIAGNOSED MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION

FIRST GENERATION REPRESENTATION

78.7%

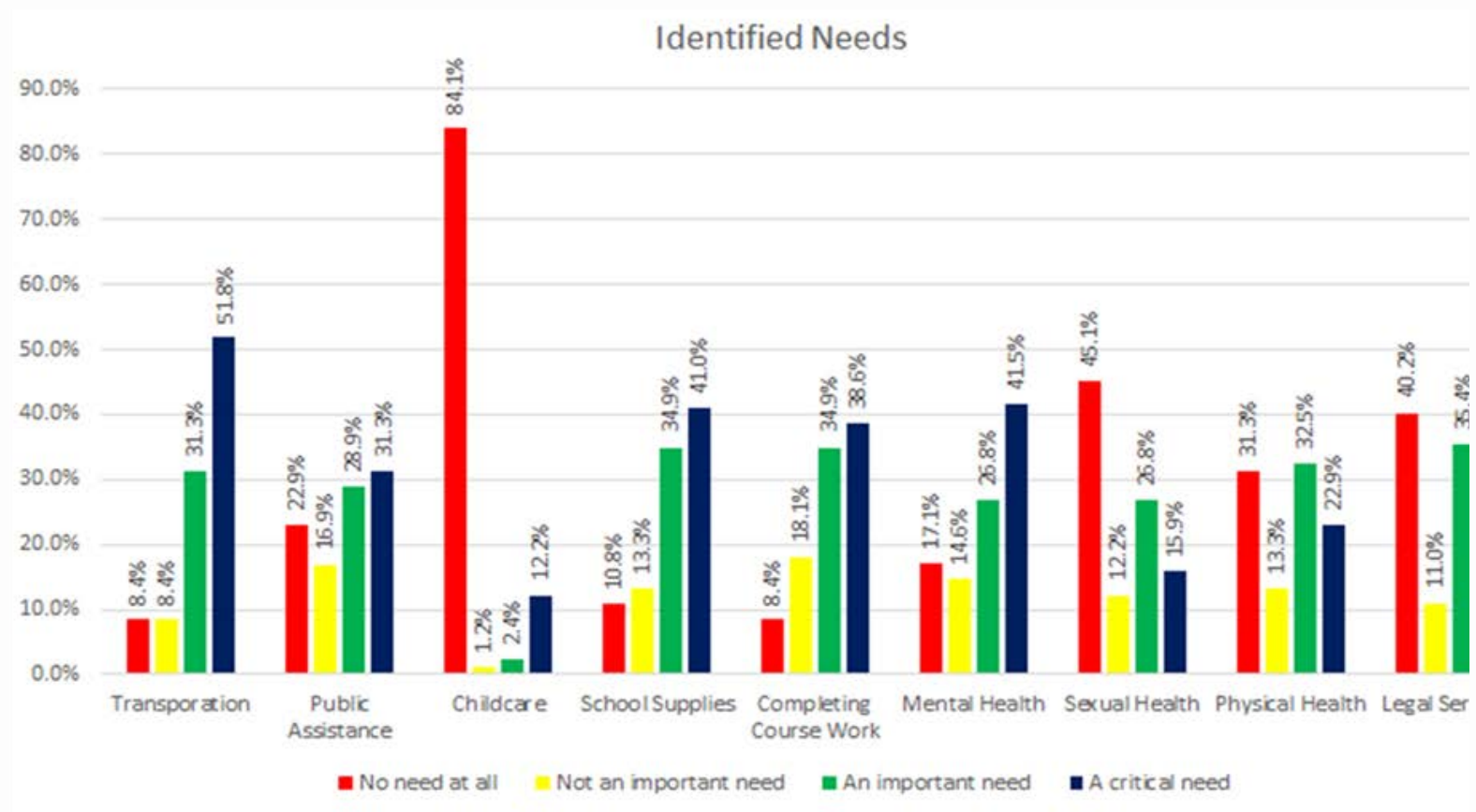
IDENTIFYING NEEDS

Self-supporting students have widespread needs. However, there were certain areas that stood out as important to acknowledge and address to ensure academic success for self-supporting students attending MSU Denver. The chart below demonstrates the number of students who identified each factor as a barrier to their success. Finances were the most prevalent barrier that students identified to completing their degree, as well as lack of overall support and feeling unprepared. No additional data was collected related to failing classes; therefore, this has been identified as an area that requires additional evaluation in the future. With that in mind, it is reasonable to consider that the impact of feeling unprepared is linked to class failures. Each of these areas will be explored with more depth below.



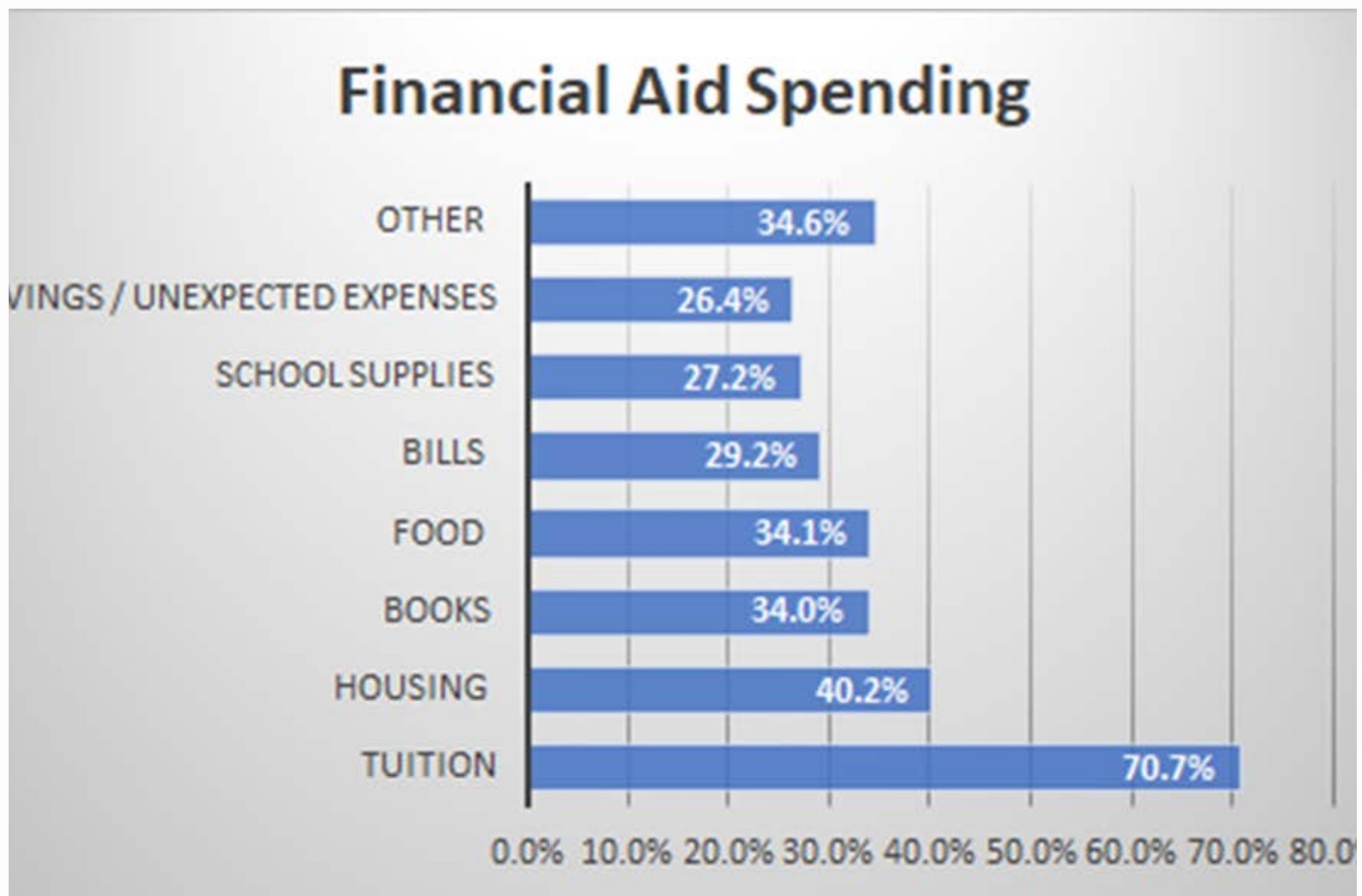
IDENTIFYING NEEDS

As a follow-up to the barriers experienced by students, the following graph outlines levels of student need, related to identified barriers, with financial barriers broken into four different categories: transportation, public assistance (i.e., housing and food), childcare, and school supplies. As demonstrated in the graph, transportation arose as a “critical need” for 51% of students and an “important need” for 31% of students. School supplies, completing coursework, access to public assistance programs, and mental health all were shown to have high percentages as a “critical need” ranging from 31% - 41% and an “important need” ranging from 26% - 35%.



IDENTIFYING NEEDS

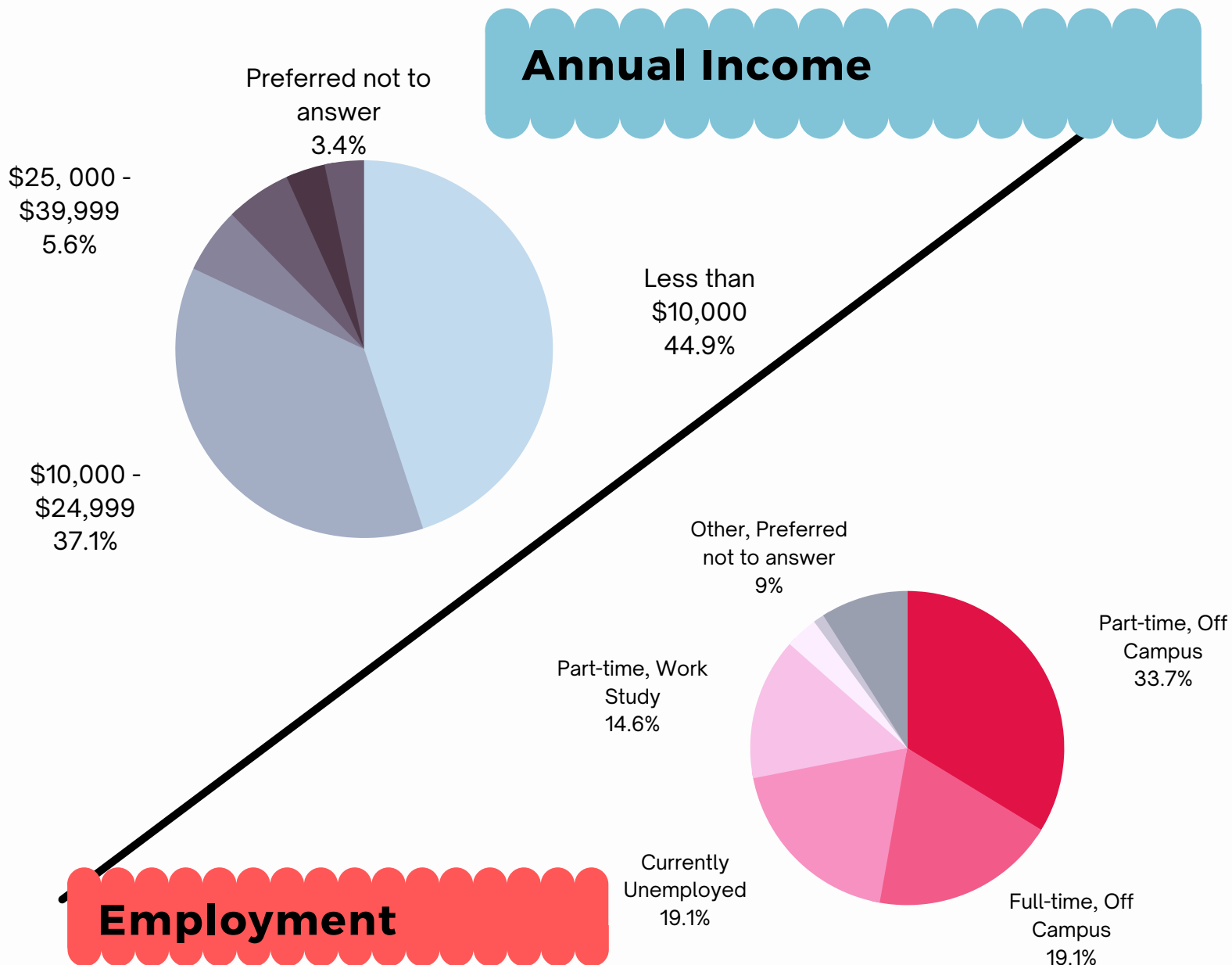
Students were asked how much of their financial aid was being used for the following resources; while these numbers may be skewed, as some students reported use of financial aid for different needs more than 100%, the mean percentage for each category was calculated to provide a more succinct overview. As expected, tuition was the biggest expense. However, it is important to note that students spend on average 40% of financial aid on housing, 34% on food, and 29% on bills. While financial aid is intended to provide for additional living expenses, it appears that many students are depending on this money to meet their most basic needs.



IDENTIFYING NEEDS

Finances.

As noted, finances were overwhelmingly identified as a barrier. However, it is important to then dive deeper to understand what areas of need were related to student finances. Many self-supporting students are juggling full or part-time work due to financial burdens, while also navigating their education, and other family commitments and/or responsibilities. In addition, most students' annual household income is below the federal poverty line. The following provides a snapshot of the employment and financial status of students.

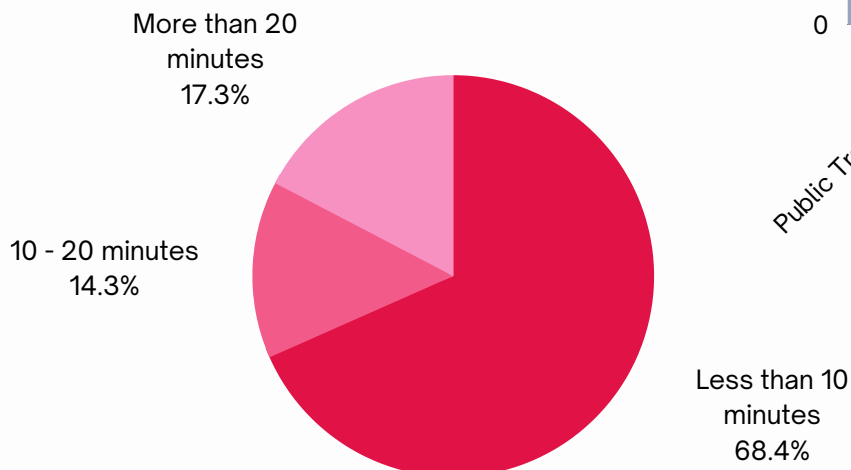
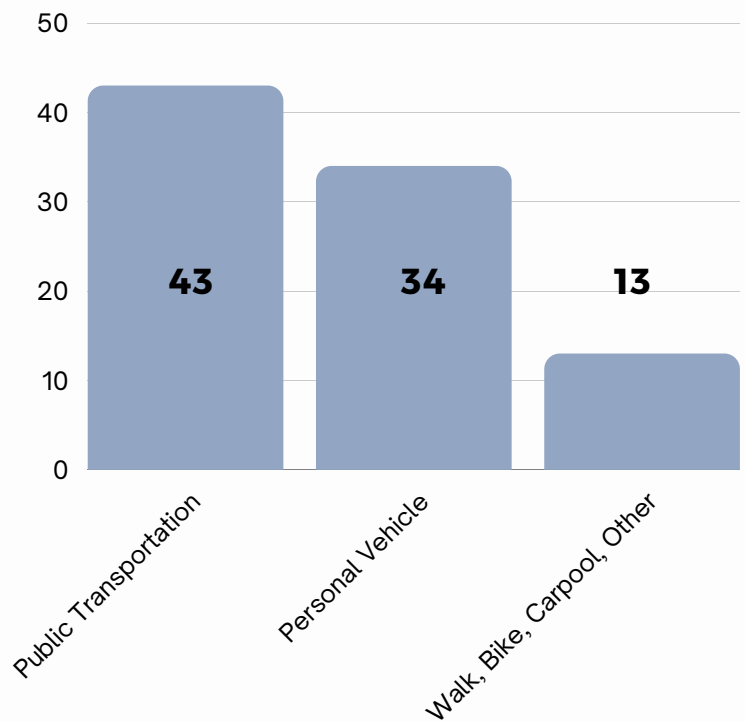


IDENTIFYING NEEDS

Transportation.

Over 50% of students reported transportation as a critical need; however, no data was collected that identified what those specific needs entailed. While the University was able to address the issue of public transportation costs during the COVID-19 pandemic, it could be that access to free public transportation may be a reasonable response to this need. For students who have personal transportation, the expenses of gas, insurance, and basic maintenance may be an additional financial concern faced by students. Students who use alternative means of transportation, particularly walking and biking, could face challenges during the winter months where cold temperatures could impede such forms of travel, creating a need for additional resources to benefit students. Overall, while transportation is an important consideration for a commuter campus, we cannot make more direct recommendations about how to best support students without more information.

Modes of Transportation



Distance from Campus

IDENTIFYING NEEDS

Housing security.

The American Housing Survey (AHS) was used to measure housing security. This measure is described as a comprehensive housing survey, collecting data on cost burdens, housing quality, and safety. The AHS was modified by the PAR team into one (1) question, that asks participants to mark all that apply, from a list of characteristics most often correlated with housing security, as identified through the AHS (Bucholtz, 2019). In addition, students were asked to describe their current living situation. At the time of the survey, 37 (41.6%) students were renting an apartment or house, 26 (29.2%) were living with family or friends, 13 (14.6%) had roommates, and 1 (1.1%) owned their own home or were homeless, respectively. The following graph shows the rate of housing insecurity in the self-supporting student population

AHS Survey



Have you experienced the following in the last year?	Percentage
Didn't pay full housing	56%
Didn't pay full utilities	39%
Moved 2+ times	39%
Moved in with others	30%
Thrown out of home	11%
Evicted	4%
Stayed in a shelter	6%
Stayed in a non-housing shelter	12%
Didn't know where to sleep	18%
Didn't have a home	13%
Didn't feel safe in living environment	34%

IDENTIFYING NEEDS

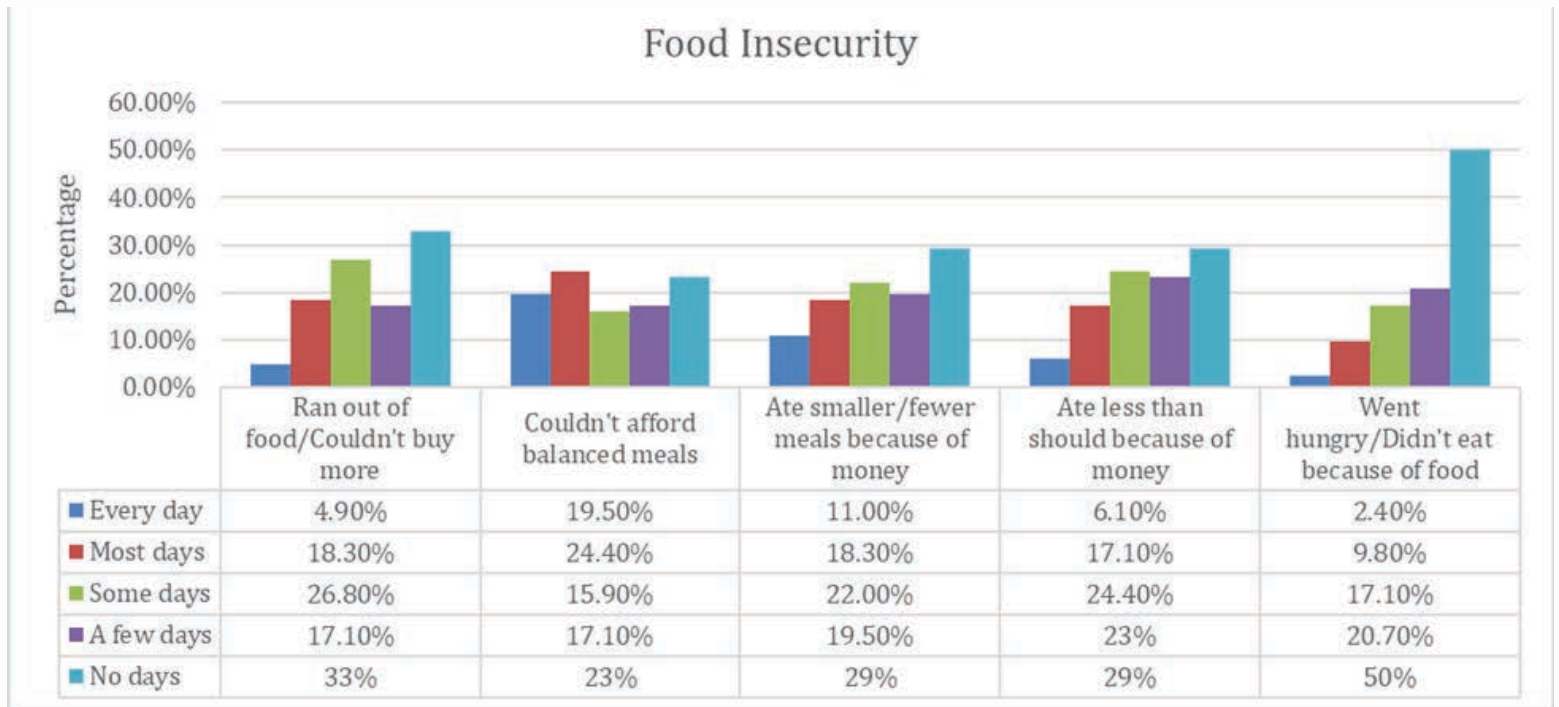
Food insecurity.

To measure food insecurity a shortened version of the United States Department of Agriculture survey with six (6) questions was utilized (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015). As demonstrated below, nearly 70% of students experienced some form of food insecurity at least a few days in the previous 7 days, with 50% of students going hungry at least a few days or not eating due to lack of access to food. Food security is a growing problem across the country but is often exacerbated within higher education populations and is an issue that requires attention. This is supported with the listening tour data:

On the MSU Denver campus, students do have access to a food pantry, which collaborates with community programs to bring access to fresh foods as well as prepared meals for students to campus throughout each semester. While the concern of food insecurity is a continuing high priority on our campus, it is crucial that we identify new ways to help students access healthy and fresh foods consistently.



IDENTIFYING NEEDS



"I FEEL THAT AND THE WAY WE EAT WHAT WE EAT AFFECTS THE WAY WE THINK IT AFFECTS THE WAY WE FUNCTION SO LIKE I KNOW IF I'M EATING A CUP OF RAMEN NOODLES EVERY SINGLE DAY, I GET VERY LOW ENERGY I HAVE A LIKE MY LACK OF MOTIVATION IS SO MUCH HIGHER AND STUFF AND SO IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE OUR NEEDS MET WHEN IT COMES TO NUTRITION."

"I WONDER, TOO, IF OTHER PEOPLE FEEL THIS WAY BUT WHENEVER I'M HAVING TO PAY BILLS AND GO TO SCHOOL I'LL LIKE SKIP OUT ON SOME MEALS, OR I [WON'T] EAT AS HEALTHY JUST BECAUSE, LIKE I'M LIKE OH, I NEED TO I NEED TO HAVE MY HOUSE BEFORE I HAVE FOOD, AND SO I FEEL THAT THAT'S A REALLY BIG THING."

IDENTIFYING NEEDS

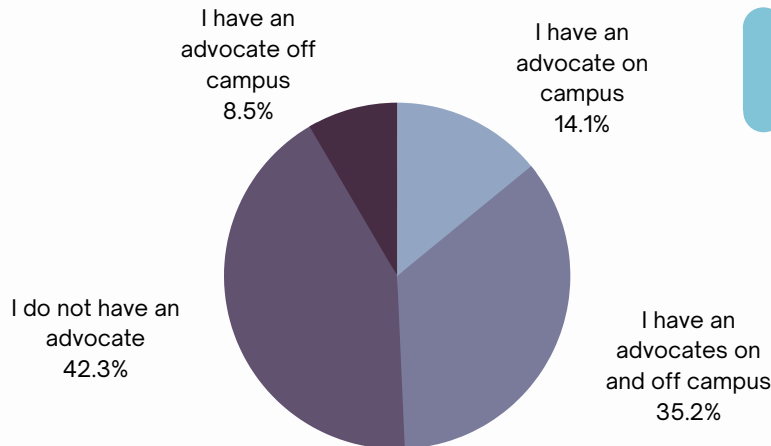
Overall support.

To understand students' experiences with support networks, students were asked about the most important influences on their decision to pursue higher education. Interestingly, it was students' internal motivation and desire that appeared to have the most influence on their decision. While parents (22.2%), foster parent or other caregiver (14.4%), social workers (11%), media (13.3%), and friends (25.6%) were shown to have an impact on students' decisions, it was clear that high school staff (44.8%) had the highest external influence on students' decisions. As noted, it was personal motivators that seemed to have the largest influence, with 46.7% of students reporting that it was their enjoyment of learning that had the largest impact, and 67.8% of students reporting their largest influence as their personal career goals and the role of higher education in helping them achieve those goals. While we cannot make a clear correlation between external influences and personal motivators in this sample of students, personal motivators are very important and areas in which the adults in these students' lives could cultivate and increase their influence.

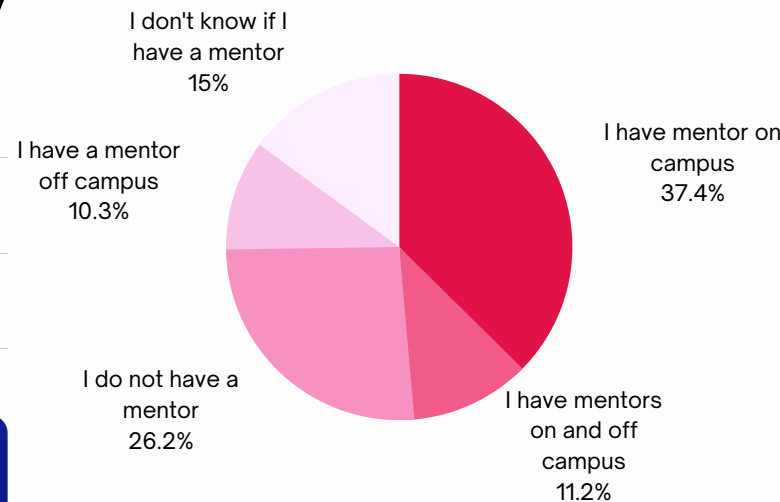
Important to note is the access that students have to outside influences once they enter higher education. In this sample of students, 64.7% reported still having access to the individuals who influenced their decision to enter higher education, with 35.3% reporting that they did not. We know that having connections and relationships that build up a sense of belonging is important for college students to achieve degree completion (Moschetti, et al., 2018; Simmons & Shea-Smith, 2020). Therefore, to better understand these relationships for college students, a series of questions regarding students' advocate and mentor relationships were asked. An advocate was defined as a person that the student could go to and help them define their needs and plan on how to have those needs met. A mentor was considered a person for whom the student could go to for professional advice related to their success in higher education and beyond.

IDENTIFYING NEEDS

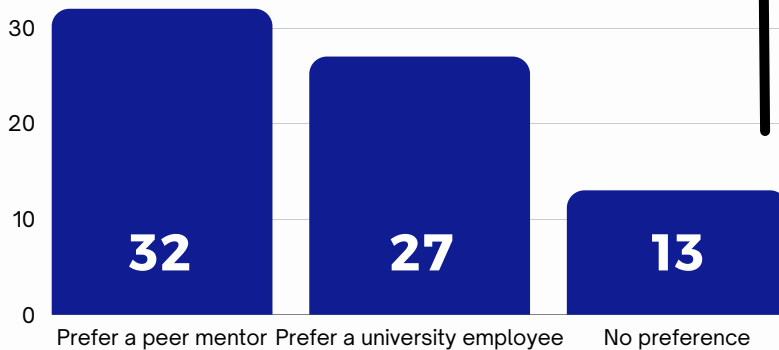
Advocates



Mentors



Mentor Preferences



Overall, students, particularly those who may not have strong outside support systems, advocates, or mentors, desire those mentor relationships. The impact of mentoring relationships in higher education has a large body of research, showing the impact of these relationships on moving students, particularly students with marginalized identities, to degree completion (Moschetti, et al., 2018; Simmons & Shea-Smith, 2020). Therefore, developing strong mentoring programs at both staff and peer levels is an important need that Epic Scholars will continue to address and build in the coming years. Finally, students were asked if they believed that faculty were aware of the needs of self-supporting students. In fact, of the 85 students who shared their perception of faculty's awareness of their needs, 64.7% (n = 55) students stated that faculty were not aware of their needs, and only 35.3% (n = 30) stated that they were. We will explore this topic with more depth in the results from the listening tours, as students were very open to discussing their experiences with faculty both in and out of the classroom and will provide a stronger sense of context for this data point.

Listening Tours



LISTENING TOURS

Who are the Epic Scholars?

The Epic Scholars program serves a very diverse population of students. During the listening tours in Spring of 2021, 21 students participated, seven of whom were transfer students from another university. Participants ranged from being new to campus to being on the verge of graduation. In addition, time in the Epic Scholars program was widely varied, with several students being in their first year with the program, while one student had been an Epic Scholar for five (5) years. Therefore, the variability of time in the program and in school provided a rich understanding of the experience. Finally, it is important to note that Epic Scholars come from all MSU Denver departments including Math, Dance, Chemistry, Social Work, and many others.

Three primary themes arose from the listening tour data:

- The role of the campus community,**
- The roles of faculty and staff, and,**
- The importance of having shared experiences and representation.**

LISTENING TOURS: CAMPUS COMMUNITY

As noted above, many of the students who participate in Epic Scholars are transfer students, first-year students, and first-generation students. Therefore, the campus community and climate are critical to the student's sense of connection and belonging. Many students reported positive connections to the campus and attributed that to their experiences with faculty and staff, as evidenced by the following quotes:

"I found that the community, the staff, and the faculty are all very invested in student success, which I found is actually that's probably the best part."

"I've had several opportunities to develop my leadership, social activism, social justice work. Um, I've worked several on-campus jobs. I'm pretty satisfied overall with my experience on campus. I think the University has like come through, for me, time and time again."

However, those in their first year on campus did not experience this same connection, primarily due to virtual instruction during the pandemic.

"We also have so much work like from just like online classes I'm like I'm like it's not the same, you know, so I would like, I definitely participated less in like school events this year because I like that face-to-face interaction."

LISTENING TOURS: CAMPUS COMMUNITY

Yet, despite that disconnection from campus during the pandemic, students felt supported overall. Epic scholars felt a sense of belonging, that they were all experiencing the pandemic together. Additionally, Scholars felt that they were doing their best, and at their best, they meet students where they are.

‘And there [previous university] I didn't either I wasn't participating or didn't find the right groups, but for some reason, MSU has felt more like more caring like people check in on me more, people seem to have more time to see how I'm doing, people seem to be more empathetic.’

It was recommended that first-year, first-generation, and transfer students need more resources for navigating campus and college life. While students felt more welcome and a sense of belonging at MSU Denver, there was still a sense of trepidation in knowing where to find what they needed. Several students reported specific concerns about accessing mental health support. While services are provided on campus, students reported being put on waiting lists and not having quick access. Additionally, when they did move up on the list and receive services, they reported feeling as if the service was not beneficial. The reasoning for this was twofold. First, students did not feel understood nor that therapy was solution-focused.

‘I have a therapist at [MSU Denver] that I see, but I feel like every time I'm meeting with her it's just let me catch you up on all the shit that's going wrong in my life and that's what it feels like it doesn't feel like I'm actually going anywhere with what's going on.’

LISTENING TOURS: CAMPUS COMMUNITY

Additionally, students reported wishing that more therapists represented their specific identities. One student discussed having support from a staff member, who had also been in foster care. The student reported that just having that shared identity manifested in an unspoken understanding that changed their relationship and motivated the student to be successful.

"I think diversity could be a really good way that they help to be understanding and flexible. There are so many different people on this campus with many different needs so just knowing that that probably also helps that understanding and flexibility with your professors."



LISTENING TOURS: ROLE OF FACULTY & STAFF

The theme of the role of faculty and staff are clearly connected to the students' experience on the MSU Denver campus. However, this theme went a step further and students engaged in rich discussion about how faculty can better support student success specifically. Students reported often not feeling heard or seen by their faculty. When asked what faculty could do to promote success, overwhelmingly the response was to recognize their potential, humanity, and social location to provide more effective support and responses.

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“ ... a lot of faculty have really underestimated my capabilities, because of all of those facts and not only should they not do that, but I think it's important as a teacher to really be mindful of all of the different perspectives and backgrounds, that you have in your classes and make sure your content is diversified and accessible to everybody, so that that's not even an assumption that people have and it's not even a problem and so yeah that's been a big thing for me especially becoming a teacher myself.”

LISTENING TOURS: ROLE OF FACULTY & STAFF

Overall, students would like faculty to respond in a compassionate manner. A compassionate response includes recognizing suffering and the universality of human suffering, feeling for the person suffering, tolerating uncomfortable feelings, and acting to alleviate that suffering (Strauss et al., 2016). Strauss and colleagues (2016) report that a compassionate response can lead to appropriate course adaptations that reduce anxiety, re-traumatization, stigma, and shame, acknowledge power dynamics, allow for flexibility, and create community. This model of the compassionate response was supported by the Epic listening tours.

“Professors do have a lot of power and they with them understanding people like us they're able to help out so much more um if they're able to accommodate those needs to help us come a long way.”

What arose as the most important adaptation that a compassionate response can create for students is flexibility. Many self-supporting students have many external obligations, from full-time work to caring for children or other family members. Therefore, at times obtaining support from the university is challenging as it is commonly operated on a 9 - 5 work schedule making it very difficult for students to access needed resources. This is true for faculty, who hold office hours during daytime hours and don't allow for additional meeting time or provide for more convenient times. Although students reported understanding that faculty and staff have their own lives, making concessions for students who legitimately need the accommodations is something to be considered.

“I work full-time, that kind of throws me for a loop with their meeting times, because I'm not on campus a whole lot.”

LISTENING TOURS: ROLE OF FACULTY & STAFF

One student indicated that when seeking support from anywhere on campus that they are often re-traumatized, as they often must recount their trauma for someone to give them support. Students would like to be able to receive the benefit of the doubt and be able to ask for support without needing to divulge their trauma and to be vulnerable. This takes time and trust-building, which is not common in many situations. It is good practice that we refrain from forcing students to relive trauma, just to provide for their needs.

“... if I didn't answer she won't let me into the program and again, this is my money I need and I needed to pay for rent or food or whatever so I'm like kind of left with no option than being vulnerable and sharing things I don't want to share. I ended up having to share that I'm a foster youth, and then I had to explain my situation even more in-depth and it's just I think a lot more people need to understand that..”

Despite some of these roadblocks that students feel that they encounter, there is often at least one faculty or staff member who demonstrates compassion and makes a difference.

“...that's been my experience so far and it's actually helped me become a better student with that support from faculty and staff because before I used to think that I was like not going to be good in school because I came into MSU with a 1.75 from my last time at school, but since the support and whatnot I've actually been able to maintain a 4.0 which I never thought I'd be able to do.”

“... one of my directors, she's been really supportive too like she's the type of person I can go to about anything like I know, like, I had a food scarcity thing, and I went to her, and she found me all these resources and like helped me out with that too.”

LISTENING TOURS: SHARED EXPERIENCE

Students who participate in Epic Scholars are very grateful for the experience and community. Scholars reported things such as, “it saved my life,” “it provided me a community,” and “I wish I had found it sooner.” It is proposed that for some Epic is a lifeline, it is necessary for their sense of belonging through shared experience, through being with people who understand you, without having to ever say a word.

“And I think Epic as I became more a part of that and started attending more of the groups kind of became a space where even if I didn't necessarily share everything with people, I at least knew that I wasn't the only one. And it gave me a sense of community in that way.”

“This is my first-year as an Epic Scholar, and so far, I really like it because you don't need to, like, know everyone's backstory and the full extent of what they've gone through, but there is that already, you already have that connection, because you do know, like, okay yeah, like, I'm not the only one who's going through these problems and I may not know, like, their story or their story, but I do know that, like, we are all on the same, like, track kind of going through similar things. And so just to have that support and people who know what you're going through can be a lot of help.”

“And there was just like a meeting we all had when Epic was like really going we all had everyone together, we were in that one room and like it was just such an unspoken comfortability with one another.”

“...it was just a welcoming environment, you know what I mean, and I feel like every time I talk to each of them, they really do get like what I'm needing and stuff and get my needs and they had helped me out.”

LISTENING TOURS: SHARED EXPERIENCE

The students also felt that the action plan for creating goals as well as the peer leadership model were instrumental for their success.

"I have really enjoyed it, I wish I had found it sooner. It's just, it's supportive, um I do like how we do the Epic goals and it just kind of like shows you that you have those abilities to like, sort of plan something out and get to the goal."

"[Peer Leader] does a lot of great work guys and she really puts a lot of thought, effort, heart, soul..., in everything that she does and I'm just so happy to work with... the Epic team with just all of these people you guys are mentioning they're just wonderful human beings."

DREAM
BIG

SET
GOALS

TAKE
ACTION

LISTENING TOURS: SHARED EXPERIENCE

Overall, Epic Scholars is an integral part of the MSU Denver self-supporting student experience. They report this sense of community and belonging, the continued support through both tangible basic needs, such as hygiene items, food, and other material needs, as well as intangible needs, such as connecting students to mental and physical health services, supporting their professional development, and being part of something bigger than themselves. The sense of family and community is evident in every student story.

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“Epic has been the first family that I felt secure with since I don't know how long you know? And so, um I really could go off on and on and on about Epic and how much I love it and how much it means to me and how much it saved me.”

“... having that community that feels like a family. I mean there's just no way to describe how much that means to me.”

“I just remember it feeling like a family. Epic feels like a big family and it's it's awesome. And I wish covid would end. I miss doing all the stuff with all of you. um but um. Yeah it's just awesome.”

DISCUSSION

The needs and concerns of self-supporting students at MSU Denver, appear to be comparable to students across the country. Self-supporting students at MSU Denver often experience major financial difficulties that make degree completion difficult. Self-supporting students at MSU Denver identified food, housing, and employment as significant needs and barriers to their success, both demonstrated in the survey and listening tours. While financial aid, stipends, scholarships, and emergency funds can help lessen these burdens, a surprising finding was how support and community can break down these barriers, as well. While almost 65% of students in the survey indicated that faculty and staff are not aware of their needs, within the listening tours there were many students who spoke highly of many faculty and staff being important factors in their success. What stood out among student responses was when staff believed students when they asked for extra time or needed to miss class without needing the student to provide personal details, demonstrating compassion and empathy to student's situation, and provided support when a student did fall behind. As demonstrated in the literature, when students feel that they belong, that they have a community committed to their success, they are more likely continue their path to degree completion (Moschetti, et al., 2018; Simmons & Shea Smith, 2020). Therefore, it is asserted that all of us have a part to play in student success: the University, faculty and staff, Epic Scholars, and the students themselves. Further recommendations are outlined below.

STRENGTHS & LIMITATIONS

It is important to recognize some of the limitations evident in this study. Both the quantitative and qualitative data were a small representation of both self-supporting students and Epic Scholars. There are around 200 students identified as self-supporting on the MSU Denver campus, therefore the response rate to the quantitative needs assessment is not generalizable to the larger self-supporting student body. In addition, this was a self-report instrument which could be impacted by biases, as well as be biased related to who chose to participate. While the listening tours had a low response rate, the data gathered was very informative about the students' lived experience. Some strengths should also be noted. The connection between the needs assessment and listening tours were clear and concise. The use of the PAR team and having students with that lived experience driving the methodological decisions had an impact on participation and analysis. Having this team as participant researchers led to ongoing member-checking to ensure support of the themes, discussion, and resulting recommendations for the Epic Scholars program and the MSU Denver community overall.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Epic

- **Continue current programming with ongoing evaluation to ensure needs continue to be met.**
- **Expand and train students in peer leadership.**
- **Be intentional about creating a community that is diverse and increases a sense of belonging, not only in the program, but at the University level.**

MSU Denver

- **Continue to support programs such as Epic Scholars to improve student outcomes.**
- **Increase diversity and representation of marginalized groups with the staff and faculty at MSU Denver.**
- **Encourage a culture of compassion that recognizes and addresses personal struggle through flexibility, rather than punishment.**
- **Employ a trauma-informed framework for student engagement.**
- **Review expectations for student reporting to receive certain benefits on campus, minimizing the need for personal details that could be re-traumatizing.**

Faculty & Staff

- **Encourage a culture of compassion that recognizes and addresses personal struggle through flexibility, rather than punishment.**
- **Employ a trauma-informed framework in and outside of the classroom for student engagement.**
- **Be patient and develop relationship with students.**
- **Consider being available to provide mentorship and/or advocacy for students in need.**

NEXT STEPS

Currently, the Epic Scholars program has employed a new team of Epic Peer Leaders for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 academic years. This team has been working this current academic cycle to prepare a logic model, programming, and an evaluation plan to assess each of these elements for need and effectiveness. The Epic team has received IRB approval for their evaluation activities, including evaluation of workshops and events provided by Epic Scholars, the Peer Leadership model, case management services, and the overall Epic Scholars experience. Data collection will end in May 2022 and will be analyzed over the summer for planning in the 2022-23 academic year.



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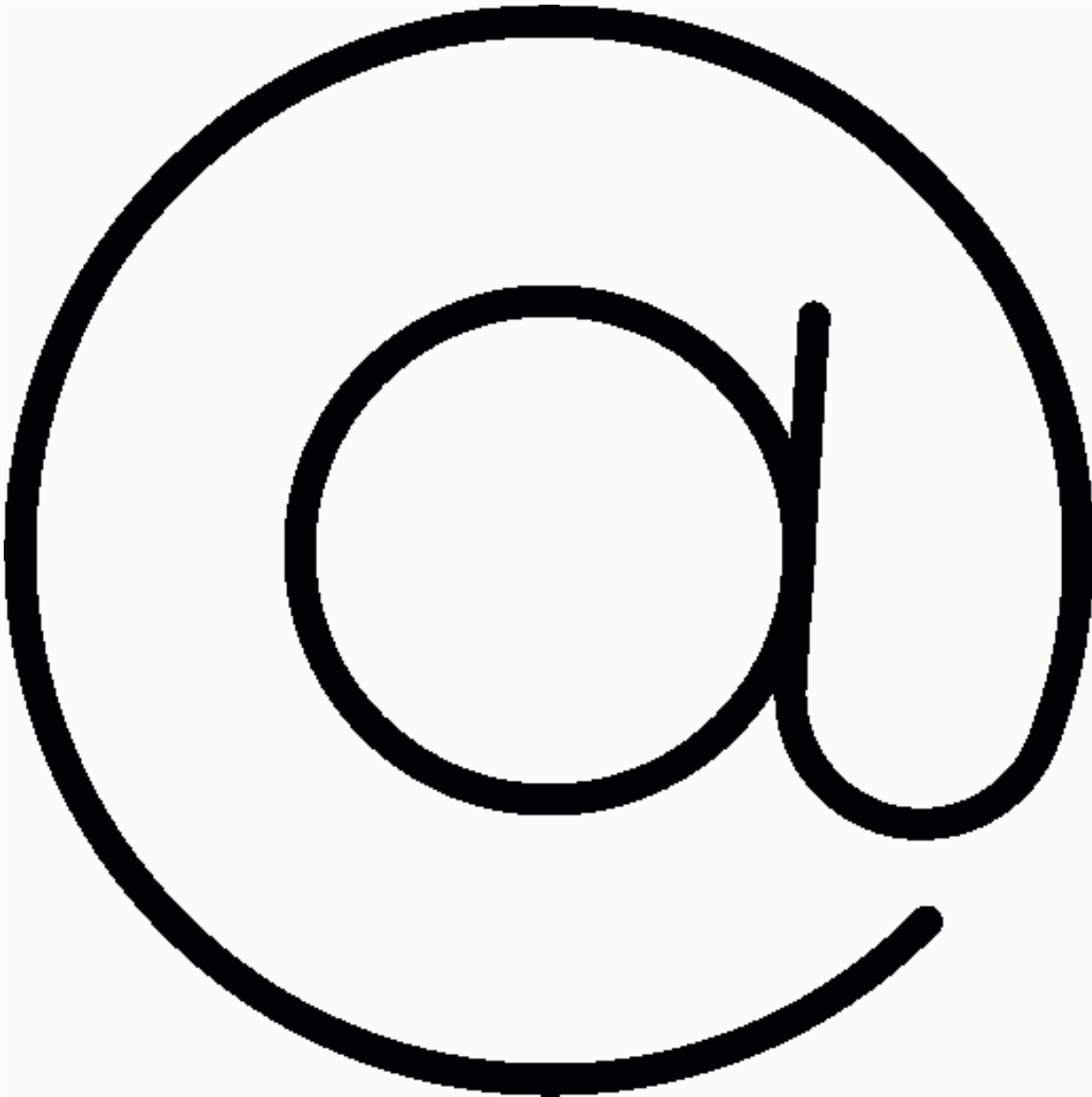
APPENDIX A: EDUCATIONAL DATA

Educational Secondary Data Points Collected

- **Race/Ethnicity**
- **Major**
- **Registration Status/Number of Credits**
- **Grade Point Average**
- **Gender**
- **Age**
- **Class Level**
- **School/College**
- **Pell Eligibility**
- **Financial Aid EFC (Expected Family Contribution)**
- **Number of Dependents**
- **Number of Semesters Attended**
- **Transfer Student**
- **Average Credits per Semester**
- **Class Withdrawals**
- **High School Graduation date/GED Completion Date**
- **First Generation Student**
- **Academic Standing**
- **Current Zip Code**
- **High School Attended**

APPENDIX B: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

**Can be provided upon request, please email Dr.
Erin Boyce, eboyce3@msudenver.edu**



APPENDIX C: LISTENING TOUR INTERVIEW GUIDE

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Listening Tours

1. What has your experience been like on the MSU Denver campus?

- 1. What has your experience been like as an Epic Scholar?**
- 2. What are the most important needs you've encountered since you have been a student at MSU Denver?**
- 3. Share some of your strategies in the chat for meeting your needs/ or difficulties in not being able to meet them.**
- 4. What should your professors know that would help you succeed at MSU Denver?**
 - a. This question will be conducted through the Whiteboard. The Whiteboard should be opened by the facilitator and explained to the participants. Then the question posed allowing 3-5 minutes for everyone to post their responses. When complete, ask students to use the "stamp" function to mark the three (3) items they think are most important.**
- 5. If you could share anything with MSU Denver leadership about your experience what would it be?**
- 6. What else what you like to share today with us today that we didn't ask about?**