Program Evaluation: End of Year Report 2019-2020

We are a nationally recognized and award-winning expert in empowering high school students to succeed. Through our evidence-based and structured programs, students throughout Metro Detroit are immersed in a multi-year experiential curriculum that begins in tenth grade and continues through one year post high school. The programs include mentoring, life skills development, goal setting, job readiness training, career exploration, and college success coaching. With help from volunteer mentors and partnerships with the business community, students are transformed into self-reliant, employable, and productive adults with defined academic and career goals, and highly desirable workforce skills. Since 1994, we have positively impacted 49,000 students and awarded more than $1.9 million in scholarships.

Executive Overview prepared by: Stacey Brockman and Robin Jacob, Youth Policy Lab, University of Michigan, September 2020

This report summarizes results from the first year of a research partnership between Winning Futures (WF) and the University of Michigan’s Youth Policy Lab (YPL). In the 2019-20 school year, YPL researchers worked together with WF leaders to conduct a quasi-experimental evaluation of the WF 10th-grade Workforce Preparation Program. Overall, YPL researchers found evidence that WF benefits and supports students in several key ways. Specifically, WF impacted students’ attitudes (e.g., self-efficacy, growth mindset) and their academics (as measured by first semester GPAs). Students’, mentors’, and teachers’ perspectives aligned with these main findings.

Fall 2019, classrooms at three schools were randomly assigned to participate in the program or not (Comparison classrooms); outcomes for students in non-randomly selected Comparison classrooms at two additional schools were also tracked. This report presents the impacts of WF on students’ attitudes and first semester grades. It also summarizes the perspectives of individuals who participated in WF during the 2019-20 school year. To better understand the benefits of participating in the program, YPL researchers conducted a total of fifteen focus groups and interviews with WF students and mentors, as well as classroom teachers whose students participated in WF.

Unfortunately, the suspension of in-person instruction in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly limited the collection of certain data sources. Although WF staff quickly shifted post-survey delivery online and worked with YPL researchers to provide financial incentives to encourage participation, post-survey response rates were low especially with comparison students. In light of these setbacks, some of the following results should be interpreted cautiously.

Because the findings use a small sample, we are unlikely to find statistically significant results even if there are real differences between WF and Comparison outcomes – especially if these differences are modest in size. In order to offer a clearer picture of WF’s influence on participant outcomes, we need to incorporate additional cohorts into our study.
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Executive Summary of Winning Futures Impact Analyses

**Academics.** Winning Futures had modest, positive impacts on participants’ academic outcomes. Specifically, Winning Futures students’ first semester GPAs were, on average, 0.16 points higher than comparison group students (on a 0-4 scale; a small, non-statistically significant impact). The impact of WF on students’ grades is about the equivalent of raising one course grade from a C to B.

**Attitudes.** Winning Futures also resulted in slightly greater growth in students’ attitudes. For example, Winning Futures students’ average post-survey scores were higher than comparison students’ scores on self-efficacy, growth mindset, and perseverance. The estimated impacts were small and, with the exception of self-efficacy, were not statistically significant.

**Differential effects.** Winning Futures had a greater impact on students who reported less-committed college plans at the start of the program. Specifically, the benefits of WF were larger for students who expected to earn less than a BA degree and who did not plan to immediately enroll in postsecondary education following high school graduation. Although the size and statistical significance of the differential effects varied depending on the outcome considered, in some cases the increased benefits for students with less-committed plans were as large as the overall effects of participating in WF. Also notable was the fact that although students with more-committed college plans, on average, reported more positive attitudes (growth mindset, goal orientation, perseverance, and adult support), we found that participating in WF closed the gap between students with more- and less-committed plans.

Program impacts did not, however, differ along the lines of student background characteristics. Specifically, there was no evidence of greater or lesser impacts along the lines of gender, race, receipt of free or reduced-price lunch, and parents’ level of education, suggesting that students from different backgrounds gained equally from WF participation.

**Enhancing benefits of mentoring.** Winning Futures students who rated the quality of their mentoring relationships more positively also self-reported higher levels of self-efficacy, goal orientation, perseverance, and adult support. This suggests that efforts to build stronger mentoring relationships may be one way to increase the impacts of the Winning Futures program.

**About the Lab:** The University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab helps community and government agencies make better decisions by measuring what really works. We’re data experts who believe that government can and must do better for the people of Michigan. We’re also parents and community members who dream of a brighter future for all of our children. At the Youth Policy Lab, we’re working to make that dream a reality by strengthening programs that address some of our most pressing social challenges.