

Students Thoughts and Beliefs of the Impact of the Educational Opportunity Program on Their
Retention and Degree Pursuance

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to understand if student's felt the Educational Opportunity Program and counselors impacted their decision to remain in college. This research took a look at student's thoughts and beliefs regarding the impact of The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at The College at Brockport. Specifically, the research examined the influence of the Educational Opportunity Program on students' decisions to return to school and pursue an undergraduate degree. It also took a look at students' beliefs regarding their counselor's impact on their retention and degree pursuance. This study emerged from recent literature about students' experiences in the Educational Opportunity Program. A survey of seniors and juniors in the EOP program was conducted, to determine the impact of the program on their retention and degree pursuance.

Key words: educational opportunity program, students, counselors, students' beliefs

Table of Contents

Review of the Literature	6
Educational Opportunity Programs	6
Components of Educational Opportunity Programs	8
Student/Staff Relationships	11
Professional Development for EOP Counselors	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Conclusion.....	12
Method	13
Research Questions	13
Setting.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Participants	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Procedures	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Data Sources.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Data Collection.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Data Analysis	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Data Management	18
Ethical Considerations.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Results.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Findings.....	19
Frequency Distribution.....	19
Descriptive statistics.....	21
Discussion	23
Limitations	25
Implications for Future Research	26
Conclusion.....	27
References.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix A.....	32
Appendix B	33
Appendix C	34

Tables

Table 1	20
Table 2.....	21
Table 3	22
Table 4.....	23

For many first-generation underrepresented students, seeking higher education may be a daunting process. These students have not been groomed for college in the ways traditional student have. First-generation underrepresented students come from households where parents have not completed a college degree. They are often from communities where higher education is not a focal point of growing up and pursuing a career. First-generation students may experience heightened isolation and marginalization (Jehangir, 2010; Unverferth, Talbert-Johnson, Bogard, 2012). For these reasons, and various others, opportunity programs exist that afford the first-generation underrepresented student entry into college and support throughout their college career (NYSED, 2015). The efficacy of these programs has often been assessed by administrators and staff. However, student's thoughts and beliefs on the impact of such services have rarely been evaluated.

Educational opportunity programs consist of individual and programmatic support to ensure first-generation underrepresented students have the necessary tools to remain on campus and complete a college degree. These programs provide students who would otherwise not have had a means of obtaining a college degree the opportunity for higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pitre & Pitre, 2009).

Opportunity programs provide support and guidance for the first-generation student (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pitre & Pitre, 2009; SUNY, 2015). Without these programs and processes in place many students run the risk of leaving campus early and not completing their degree (Ishitani, 2003 as seen in Jehangir, 2010). Many of them simply do not have the support and encouragement of family, and their families often lack the knowledge of what it takes to succeed in college. Opportunity programs can be a valuable asset to the first-generation underrepresented

student. However, as with support and guidance there are various barriers that could hinder these students from returning to campus and completing their degree (Jehangir, 2010).

This research provides a brief overview of information gathered from primary and secondary research related to student retention and degree pursuance in educational opportunity programs. The following section gives a brief overview of the foundation of educational opportunity programs. Next, the review will cover information regarding suggested best practices for a successful educational opportunity programs. Finally, student-staff relationships and professional development for counselors working with first-generation underrepresented students will be addressed.

Review of the Literature

Educational Opportunity Programs

Educational opportunity programs have been in existence since Title VI of the Civil Rights Movement Act of 1964 was implemented (Department Of Education Grant-Related Materials). Title VI ensures that people are not discriminated against based on race, color, or national origin in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance. Until that time, Black people did not have access to quality higher education. This movement is what brought about various programs to ensure ethnic minorities of all races had an equal opportunity for higher education. The Arthur O. Eve Opportunity for Higher Education Program (HEOP/EOP) was adopted by former New York State Assembly-man Arthur O. Eve in 1968. The purpose of the EOP program is to provide a range of services to New York State residents who, because of academic and economic circumstances, would otherwise not be able to attend an institution of higher learning (NYSED, 2015). Through these programs, a wide variety of students get into

college, remain on campus, and pursue their degree. It is because of the support in these types of programs that many students go to college at all (SUNY, 2015). Educational Opportunity Program students may receive support services, such as academic, career, and personal counseling; and tutoring and supplemental instruction. As part of a student's financial aid package, the Educational Opportunity Program also provides financial assistance for non-tuition related expenses such as books and supplies (SUNY, 2015). Funding from the EOP program may also be used for living expenses or any other expense a student may incur during their college tenure.

Through EOP, first-generation students are afforded the opportunity to acquire a level playing field with the traditional college student in regards to completion of a college education. The resources and services offered by EOP may be just what the first-generation underrepresented student needs for retention and degree pursuance. The individual counseling services offered by EOP programs are designed to help students stay in college and obtain their degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) is the higher education opportunity program at four year City University of New York (CUNY) colleges. The program was established by Percy Ellis Sutton, to provide “comprehensive academic support to assist capable students who otherwise might not be able to attend college due to their educational and financial circumstances” (The History of the Educational Opportunity Program). Through SEEK, students are admitted without regard to age, sex, sexual orientation, race, disability, or creed. In 1967, SEEK was the model for the Higher Education Opportunity Program/Arthur O. Eve Opportunity for Higher Education (HEOP/EOP) in New York State (The History of the Educational Opportunity Program).

Components of Educational Opportunity Programs

Engle and Tinto's (2008) report shows evidence of student support programs as some of the best practices in relation to retention and graduating underrepresented students. The Educational Opportunity Program is very similar to student support services but offers more individual counseling and financial assistance. The model discussed in their study also shows findings from "Best Practices" in student support study (Muraskin, 1997) that have suggested positive shared characteristics for promoting and engaging underrepresented students for many years (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Zhang, Chan, Hale, & Kirshstein, 2005). More significantly, programs with strong records of success shared five characteristics: (1) a structured freshman year experience; (2) an emphasis on academic support; (3) an active and intrusive approach to advising; (4) a plan to promote participation, and (5) a strong presence on campus (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Normally the more contact and longer time students participate in the program, the more they benefit (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Students in educational opportunity programs are required to be part of a summer program during the summer before their freshman year (Engle & Tinto, 2008; SUNY, 2015). The freshman summer program is normally 6 to 8 weeks long and designed to get the student acclimated to expectations of the college life. The students take courses, attend tutoring sessions, participate in activities, and are paired up with a counselor who they must meet with regularly during the 6 to 8 weeks they spend on campus (SUNY, 2015). The purpose of students meeting with a counselor regularly is to ensure they know exactly what is expected. They also have someone to help keep them on track with the college process, and are held accountable for what they must do.

Educational opportunity programs should place a big emphasis on academic support. Academic support is focused on giving students skills they need to achieve success. These skills include developmental instruction for general education study areas and study skills included in courses. One-on-one tutoring, peer tutoring, and study groups remain effective at improving student outcomes in educational opportunity programs (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The ranges of tutoring include one-on-one, where a tutor is hired and paid to work with a single student for a specific course. Tutoring may also be in the form of peer tutoring where a student is hired to meet with a group of student to work on various courses.

These programs see their students more often than other programs. Successful programs take an “active and intrusive approach to advising that includes an individual counselor meeting with students several times per semester” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 27). They also include continual tracking of student performance and use of services. The programs also include checking student progress at mid-term to intervene and make referrals as necessary (Engle & Tinto, 2008). By using a case management approach, these programs focus on the whole student.

The plans require students to utilize available services. It is mandatory for students to sign a contract where they agree to various obligations and tasks related to their academic success. These steps are all a part of remaining in the EOP program (SUNY, 2015). In return, the programs provide incentives and rewards for participation and helps remove barriers by being aware of student’s needs and meeting them (Engle & Tinto, 2008; SUNY, 2015). There are grounds for dismissal from the program however there has to be direct violations of EOP or college policy.

“The directors of these programs have often been with their institutions for many years, are well-known and well-respected on campus, and serve in positions (e.g. as administrators or

on taskforces) that allow them to exercise influence on institutional policies and practices affecting disadvantaged students” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 27). Given their familiarity with the campus, directors of these programs are generally in a place to create sustainable relationships between their programs and the institutions’ services. Muraskin (1997) Best Practices in Student Support Services, as cited in Engle and Tinto (2008), state that “the most successful programs are part of larger service entities such as educational opportunity programs or learning centers rather than stand-alone programs” (p. 27).

Student/Staff Relationships

Important to Educational Opportunity Programs are the individual counseling services, student/staff relationships, mentoring and peer mentoring offered by the program (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Personal support from the college environment has a positive impact on the academic performance of underrepresented students (Baker, 2013; O’Keeffe, 2013). Counselors are an integral part of the guidance and development of students in educational opportunity programs. These programs generally consist of a staff of counselors assigned to a specific case load of students for specific guidance throughout the student’s college career. Counselors provide academic guidance to students by reviewing their major and helping them select the correct courses that coincide with their major. Counselors also offer career advisement and financial aid assistance. Counselors are obligated to learn the financial aid process and be able help student’s understand their accounts. Counselors should be able to help student’s stay informed of what they are paying in tuition, room and board, college fees, and all other related expenses.

Besides counselors, mentors are also considered to be very important in the guidance, development and retention of students in EOP programs. Mentoring is a guiding principle of

educational opportunity programs (Baker, 2013). Studies have shown that mentors and peer leaders have a positive influence on student retention in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gershenfeld, 2014). Many EOP programs offer a mentoring program specifically for its students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; SUNY, 2015). Students are paired up with faculty for research, development, and to learn leadership skills.

Undergraduate mentoring programs not only create relationships that help strengthen student engagement, but they also help improve academic performance and college retention (Gershenfeld, 2014). In Gershenfeld's (2014) review of undergraduate mentoring programs the author concludes that "effective mentoring programs have the potential to play a valuable role in higher education" (p. 387). Various studies of colleges and universities support the notion that mentors and academic advisors on campus tend to be a confidant for first-generation students (Baker, 2013; Gershenfeld, 2014; Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, & Jones, 2014; O'Keeffe, 2013). According to Irlbeck et al. (2014) students rely on mentors for learning about research and student development during their college years.

Professional Development for EOP Counselors

The Association for the Equality and Excellence in Education is intended to supply staff and administrators of SSS programs with professional development, training, and education related to supporting first-generation underrepresented students on the college campus (AEEE, 2015). Through this organization, educational opportunity programs learn to better support students with regards to retention and degree completion. It is one of ten regional associations recognized by the Council for Opportunity in Education that is committed to advancing equal educational access for first-generation and low-income students. The association includes seven districts within the states of New York and New Jersey (AEEE, 2015; COE, 2015).

The Association for the Equality and Excellence in Education holds a bi-annual conference that offers training, program development endeavors, professional development, and overall guidance on educational opportunity program success.

According to the Hart Research Associates (2015) study, institutions should plan intrinsic approaches and strategies that work for student success specifically for underrepresented students. It is recommended that colleges and universities utilize developmental education services, first year required experiences, early alert systems, and intrusive advising (AACU, 2015), all of which are part of the educational opportunity programs initiative for student retention and success.

Conclusion

This literature review provides information and evidence of programs that work for student retention and completion in college. Based on the information provided in the literature review, it may be stated that services rendered by EOP and individual counselors can have a positive effect on student retention and degree pursuance. The programs are structured so that students entering college through these programs have individual support from a counselor for the duration of their college experience. Mentoring, individual counseling, academic support, financial support, career counseling, and overall guidance are what continue to make educational opportunity programs work for first-generation underrepresented student success.

There is little research that elicits student opinions on the effectiveness of EOP programs. There are various practices in educational opportunity programs that offer student support and guidance through college. Knowing the impact of such processes on student retention from the student's perspective has rarely been evaluated. Student's thoughts and opinions on the impact of

the educational opportunity program can be valuable information for administrators and program implementation.

The purpose of this research is to identify students' thoughts and beliefs on the impact of the educational opportunity program. This study aims to address the following research question: *“What are students' thoughts and beliefs on the impact of the Educational Opportunity program on their retention and degree pursuance in college?”* This literature review discussed the impact of Educational Opportunity Programs, and individual counseling within opportunity programs on student retentions and degree pursuance in college. The literature review also discusses factors that may impede first-generation underrepresented students' degree attainment (Jehangir, 2010).

The hope from this research is that administrators of EOP programs will see the impact of the EOP program on student's retention and graduation pursuance. Seniors and juniors enrolled in EOP at The College at Brockport were selected for this research. They were chosen because they represent a population of students who continued their degree pursuance although they faced many barriers that may have contributed to their leaving college early (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). Understanding how the program impacts students may help with funding and expansion of EOP programs for future generations. First-generation students are at a high risk of separation from college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Programs such as EOP may help with increasing the retention rate among first-generation college students.

Method

Research Questions

The researcher set out to understand the relationship between EOP and currently enrolled students. Specifically this study sought to determine students' beliefs on the impact of the

educational opportunity program on their returning to college and degree pursuance. This study addressed the following research questions: (1) what are students' thoughts and beliefs on the impact of the educational opportunity program on their retention and degree pursuance? (2) What are students' thoughts and beliefs on the impact of their individual counselor on their retention and degree pursuance? The hypothesis for this study was that (1) students believe that being part of the educational opportunity program contributed to their returning to college and pursuing a degree, (2) students believe that their counselor played a pivotal role in their returning to college and pursuing a degree.

Setting

The setting for this study was a mid-size public 4-year Liberal Arts college in the North East Region of the United States. According to the most recent data (fall 2015) student enrollment at the college at the time of the study was approximately 8,106 students, 7,040 were undergraduates, and 1,066 were graduate students. Of the 7,040 undergraduate students enrolled in the college 321 were enrolled through the educational opportunity program.

Student demographics at the college during the time of the study was, 3,841 (54.6%) women, and 3,199 (45.4%) men. Student ethnicity from the United States at Brockport College included, 0.2% American Indian /Alaskan, 1.3% Asian, 9.6% Black/African-American, 5.2% Latino, 2.3% Multi-race (not Hispanic), 0% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 73.6% White, and 7.5% unknown. International students made up 1.6% of the student population.

Participants

To answer the research question all juniors and seniors enrolled in the Educational Opportunity Program at The College at Brockport during fall of 2015 and spring of 2016, were

asked to participate in a survey. As of fall of 2015 there were 321 students enrolled in EOP. It was anticipated that 180 students all juniors and seniors would take part in the survey. The ethnic make of students in EOP was: (Black, 167, 52%) (White, 50, 15%) (Hispanic 89, 28%) (Asian, 10, 3%) (Native American, 5, 2%). Class status for EOP participants was: (Freshmen, 71, 22%) (Sophomores 70, 21%) (Juniors, 96, 31%) and (Seniors, 84, 26%). Age breakdown for the student's enrolled in EOP were 17yrs-21yrs, 243(76%), 22yrs to 30yrs, 70 (22%), and 31yrs plus 8(2%). Gender demographics included 192(60%) female and 129(40%) male.

The participants in the study were chosen specifically because of their affiliation with the EOP department. According to SUNY and EOP eligibility guidelines in order to attend college as part of the EOP program students must be first-generation or first in their family to attend college, and meet specific financial and academic guidelines (SUNY, 2015). These students receive specific state mandated funding in access of regular tuition assistance, scholarships, and loans. EOP students are also assigned to a specific counselor within the program who they must meet with regularly for academic, career, and financial assistance. Seniors and juniors in EOP represent a cohort of students that have surpassed the typical separation point of first-generation students from college.

The sample consisted of 62 first-generation students participating in The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at The College at Brockport (N=62). Of the 321 students enrolled through the EOP program only juniors and seniors were invited to participate. This brought the number down to 180 students. However of the 180 students invited to participate only 62 students completed the survey. All of the participants were EOP student's and were either seniors or juniors at the time of the study. Every senior and junior enrolled in the EOP program, 180 were given the opportunity to participate in the study. Students participating in the study

were Black, White, Asian, and Hispanic. The ages ranged from 20 years and up both male and female.

Procedures

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the college granted permission for the study to take place on the college campus in fall of 2015. The research and assessment tool, the survey (see appendix A for survey), were approved in the fall of 2015. To participate in the study students were given a consent form. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary. No student was obligated or forced to participate. Students consented to participation by voluntarily completing the survey. The student could begin the survey and stop at any point without finishing without repercussions. There was very minimal risk involved in this study. The study was strictly unanimous. No names or names of counselors were provided.

Of the 180 students asked to participate 62 gave a response. This means 34.4% of juniors and seniors in the EOP program participated in the study. Although emails were sent to every student eligible to participate it cannot be stated that each junior and senior received or read the email. Nor can it be stated that each student took notice of the various flyers posted throughout the department (see Appendix B for flyer).

Data Sources

The survey used for the research came from a previous generated survey (Counselor Evaluation Survey) (see Appendix C) used by the EOP program every semester to evaluate counselors. The survey was used because it gives a reliable assessment of how students feel about their counselor's support throughout the program. The survey was based on a Likert scale of 1-5 (5=strongly agree, 4= agree, 3= unsure, 2= disagree, and 1= strongly disagree). The

survey contained 17 questions related to EOP students belief in individual counseling, and the program overall services contribution to their retention and degree pursuance. The first 13 questions were taken from the counselor semester evaluation surveys within the EOP department. The final 4 questions related to the overall program were created by the researcher with guidance from the program director.

Data Collection

Once the email was sent out and flyers posted throughout the department students were free to come in and complete a flyer at any time. When the students came to complete a survey the researcher handed them a physical paper survey and it was returned by placing in a manila envelope. The researcher then placed completed surveys in a locked drawer on her office desk where they remained until the completion of the study. The survey took approximately 10 minutes for each person to complete. Students were also notified that they may stop the survey at any time and they did not have to answer any question they did not want to answer. Participants in this study did not receive any type of compensation. Once the survey was completed it was physically handed to the researcher. Data collection took 5 months. Data was collected from October 2015 to March 2016. This timeline was chosen to maximize the amount of feedback received from students.

Data Analysis

This study used SPSS software to analyze students' responses to the survey. Questions 1 through 17 were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to find the mean, median, mode, interquartile range, and frequency distributions for each question. The findings will be further discussed in the results section of the paper.

Data Management

Completed surveys were kept in the office of the primary researcher. Once a survey was completed by a student and given to the researcher it was placed in an envelope labeled completed surveys. The envelope was stored in a locked file drawer in the researcher's office on the college campus.

Ethical Considerations

Generalization of this study is limited to New York State. The study was done on one college campus, with a specific set of students meeting EOP criteria. However the study may be replicable across the state since the study is only researching the educational opportunity programs where specific academic and financial limitations must be met to participate in EOP in New York State. The EOP program exists on 43 campuses in New York State. Similar programs exist in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and California. It may also be replicated by similar type programs focusing on first-generation college students across the nation.

Although the study was anonymous, no names were given; there is a slight chance of bias with relation to survey reporting. Students did hand deliver the survey to the researcher which could have influenced some of their answers. We cannot say with a certainty that any answers were influenced one way or the other.

Results

The purpose of this research was to identify students' thoughts and beliefs on the impact of the educational opportunity program. The aim of the study was to recognize if students' believed being part of the EOP program impacted their remaining in college and pursuing a degree. Specifically the students' were asked about the overall program and individual

counselors' impact on retention. To complete the study SPSS was used to analyze the data. Frequency interval and descriptive statistics were analyzed with regards to data reporting. Findings from the study are reported below.

Findings

Frequency Distribution

Table 1 and 2 summarizes the results of how frequent each answer was chosen for each question on the survey. Based on the research results it can be stated that the majority of students believe their counselor and the program had some impact on their returning to college and pursuing their degree. When asked about the impact of individual counseling services and trust in their counselor more than half of students taking the survey (N=62) chose (5SA=Strongly Agree) or (4A=Agree). Which meant that each student agreed with the statements regarding individual counselor services. When asked about program impact on retention and degree pursuance, more than half of students chose (5SA=Strongly Agree) or (4A=Agree) and agree that the program had an impact on their remaining in college and or finishing degree.

For questions 1-6 only SA=Strongly Agree or A=Agree were chosen by the entire sample. The questions dealt primarily with the personal nature of the relationship between counselors and students. There was a minor uncertainty with relation to questions 7-13, 11 students or 6.82% answered (2D=Disagree) or (3U=Unsure) concerning counselor help with academics, majors, financial aid, and careers. No students reported strongly disagree or disagree when it came to assessment of their counselor. This means that students believe their counselors did help and or played a role in their decision to remain in college.

For the overall program assessment question 1, all students answered (5SA=Strongly Agree or 4A=Agree) this means that 100% of students agreed that they returned or remained in college because of support from the program. Two students were unsure if they would return or not if they were not part of EOP, not a significant finding. Nine students 5.58% strongly disagreed or disagreed that they would not have returned if not for EOP. The majority of students

Table 1

Frequency Distribution for Counselor Impact

Variable	5SA	4A	3U	2D	1SD
1. Trust counselor	37	25			
2. Genuinely concerned	37	25			
3. Available to meet on regular basis	43	19			
4. Listens	37	25			
5. Assist/w clarity of academic goals	32	25			
6. Assist/w clarity of personal goals	39	23			
7. Assist/w choosing right courses	32	28	2		
8. Assist w/ concerns choosing major	30	22	10		
9. Knowledgeable of financial aid process	31	22	9		
10. Assist with academic performance	37	23	2		
11. Knowledgeable about acad. pro requirements	26	27	9		
12. Assist with understanding DARS/DW	27	20	1		
13. Helps with career counseling	36	21	5		

(58/93.55%) believed the program helped them remain in college and are very satisfied with the EOP program.

Variable	5SA	4SA	3U	2D	1SD
1. Returned/remained because of support of program	44	18			
2. Would not have returned if not for the program	41	10	2	9(=<2)	
3. Believes program helped them remain in college	47	15(=<4)			
4. Overall very satisfied with program at Brockport	47	15(=<4)			

Note= Strongly Agree=5, Agree=4, Unsure=3, Disagree=2, Strongly Disagree=1

Descriptive statistics

Table 3 and 4 include the median, interquartile range and standard deviation for each question on the survey. There is a 95% probability that the calculated confidence interval includes the true value of the population. If repeated samples were taken and the confidence interval for each sample was computed 95% of the intervals would contain the population mean. This means the range of values used likely encompasses the true value of the population used for the study.

With regards to questions 1-13 concerning individual counseling services the majority respondents indicated agreement with the idea that they could trust their counselor ($M=5$, $IQR=1$), their counselor is concerned ($M=5$, $IQR=1$), their counselor is available to meet ($M=5$, $IQR=1$), their counselor listens when they speak ($M=5$, $IQR=1$), counselor assist with clarification of development of academic goals ($M=5$, $IQR=1$), counselor assist with clarification of development of personal goals ($M=5$, $IQR=1$), counselor assist with choosing the right courses

($M=5$, $IQR=1$), counselor assist with choosing major ($M=$, $IQR=1$), counselor is knowledgeable of financial aid process ($M=4.5$, $IQR=1$), counselor assist with academic performance (suggest workshops, tutoring, all student support services) ($M=5$, $IQR=1$), counselor is knowledgeable about academic program requirements ($M=4$, $IQR=1$), counselor assist with understanding DARS/Degree Works, and counselor helps with career counseling($M=4$, $IQR=1.25$), employment options, and graduate school information ($M=5$, $IQR=1$).

Regarding the second half of the survey related to the overall program, most or all students believed because of support from the EOP program they returned or remained in college ($M=5$, $IQR=1$), most students agreed ($M=5$, $IQR=1$) that they would not have returned if not for EOP, the majority of the students believe the EOP program helped them remain in college ($M=5$, $IQR=.25$), and the majority of the students are satisfied with the EOP program at this college ($M=5$, $IQR=.25$).

Table 3

Counselor Impact

Variable	IQR	<i>M</i>	95% CI	
			<i>SD</i>	
Q1	1.00	5.0000	.49455	
Q2	1.00	5.0000	.49455	
Q3	1.00	5.0000	.46478	
Q4	1.00	5.0000	.49455	
Q5	1.00	5.0000	.53165	
Q6	1.00	5.0000	.48701	
Q7	1.00	5.0000	.56516	
Q8	1.00	4.0000	.74160	
Q9	1.00	4.5000	.72647	
Q10	1.00	5.0000	.56164	
Q11	1.00	4.0000	.70523	
Q12	1.25	4.0000	.80650	
Q13	1.00	5.0000	.64655	

Variable	IQR	<i>M</i>	95% CI	
			<i>SD</i>	
Q1	1.00	5.0000	.45762	
Q2	1.00	5.0000	1.31430	
Q3	0.25	5.0000	.43175	
Q4	0.25	5.0000	.43175	

Discussion

In this study the researcher examined students' thoughts and beliefs concerning the impact of counseling services and the overall program offerings on their retention and degree pursuance. The researcher wanted to find out if students believed the program and or individual counselor influenced their reasons for returning to school and or pursuing their degree. A Likert scale survey was completed to answer the following research questions: (1) what are students' thoughts and beliefs on the impact of the educational opportunity program on their retention and degree pursuance? (2) What are students' thoughts and beliefs on the impact of their individual counselor on their retention and degree pursuance? The hypothesis for this study was that (1) students believe that being part of the educational opportunity program contributed to their returning to college and pursuing a degree, (2) students believe that their counselor played a pivotal role in their returning to college and pursuing a degree.

A survey was given to juniors and seniors in the Educational Opportunity Program at the college. Participants were selected due to their affiliation with the EOP program as students.

Juniors and seniors were chosen because it is commonly known that attrition rates for undergraduates increase during the first semester or freshman year of college; juniors and seniors have passed the standard attrition level (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

In this study the findings supported the hypothesis. Students did agree that their counselor and the EOP program had an impact on their retention and degree pursuance in college. Students agreed that the program had some kind of impact on their returning to college and pursuing their degree. Students also agreed that counselors assisted them with academic needs, understanding of financial aid packages, choosing majors, and career development. Past research with relation to student support services on campus indicates that student support services such as EOP play a role with increasing student involvement and academic success in college (Baker, 2013; Grant-Vallone, Ried, Umali, and Pohlert, 2004). According to the findings in this study can be stated that specific support for first generation students' on campus such as EOP can be helpful with retention and degree pursuance.

With relation to the overall program impact 82.26% of students believed they returned to college because of support from the EOP program, 3.22%% were unsure, and 14.51% disagreed. Support from the program encompassed academic support such as tutors; peer assisted learning, understanding major/academic requirements, writing assistance, and career development. According to research by Grant-Vallone, Ried, Umali, and Pohlert (2004) "specific programs such as Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and Academic Support Program for Intellectual Rewards and Enhancement (A.S.P.I.R.E.) exist on many college campuses to provide support services that will increase the retention rates of first generation, underrepresented students" (p.258). Support also involved emotional and moral support to help with student development. Research indicates that social support contributes to college adjustment; consequently it is likely

that social support has an impact on both students' commitment to college and overall retention rates (Grant-Vallone, et al., 2004).

In regards to questions 1-4 on the survey which specifically asked about the nature of trust in the counselor, concern from the counselor, counselor availability, and listening skills. All students 100% strongly agreed on these four elements. Specifically all students (N=62) agreed that they returned to college and pursued a degree because of support from the EOP program. The study indicated that students' believe the EOP program played a huge role in retention. It further indicated that the program is a viable program and is doing what is supposed, retaining and graduating students. Previous research has indicated that student support programs predict retention rates and a sense of belonging in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Grant-Vallone et al., 2004; Smith, 2005).

Limitations

Though the study indicated positive results for impact of counselors and the program on retention there were limitations. The study was not longitudinal. The study was completed over a 5 month period from November 2015 to March 2016. The impact of counselors and the program on retention and degree attainment could be done over a 4 to 5 year period to measure the effectiveness of the program. Measuring the program from entering freshmen to the time students graduate with specific questions concerning retention may allow administrators to see the value and if what is being done is working. The study was done on one college campus in New York State. Replicating this study across the state to all EOP programs may yield better results. Surveying more students will lead to a larger sampling number. This study was based on findings in one EOP program in upstate New York. It may be possible to get a better

understanding of exactly how students feel the program helps them if the study is spread further with more specific questions. Future studies should also include the Metro center.

The Metro center is a satellite campus of The College at Brockport. It is located in downtown Rochester, NY, in the heart of the city. Many transfer, adult, and commuter students utilize the Metro center. Students utilizing the Metro center may well be a part of EOP however information about the study was not posted or advertised there. Students that commute and strictly utilize the Metro center may not have been reached for the study. The study was only advertised within the EOP program at the college. Advertising throughout the campus may be a consideration to reach more students.

An email blast was sent out to juniors and seniors. There may have been students who did not receive or read the email regarding the study. This could have been addressed by requesting read receipts from students. Read receipts notify the sender of an email when the email has been read. Using this operation may have helped researcher know when and how many students' opened the email. Knowing this information the researcher may have decided to send the email more than once and possibly gained a higher number of completions. The survey may have also allowed an option to be completed electronically. This may have been done by adding the request to the IRB proposal.

Implications for Future Research

The hope from this research is that administrators of EOP programs will see the impact of the program on student retention and graduation. This study may help Administrators understand the importance of the program and counselors with relation to student perseverance. Some students stated specifically that the reason they came back or remained in college was because of

their involvement in EOP. It is also desired that policy makers and stakeholders see how the program works to help first-generation students complete college and contribute positively to society. Also understanding how the EOP impacts students may help increase funding and expansion of such programs for future generations. Research supports that on campus support directly influences student retention (Grant-Vallone et al., 2004; Pitre and Pitre, 2009

Although the findings of this research suggest that counselors and the overall program have an impact on student retention additional research on assessing programs or services is needed. Longitudinal studies should be done to see the effect of program and services across time. There may be many factors that affect retention and graduation which should also be evaluated.

Conclusion

In sum, this research provides information and evidence of a program that impacts student retention and completion in college. Based on the information provided from survey results, services rendered by EOP and individual counselors can have a positive effect on student retention and degree pursuance.

Educational Opportunity programs have helped start the successful college careers for thousands of first-generation college students (SUNY, 2015). Research concerning educational opportunity programs and its impact on student retention and degree pursuance is limited. For this reason it is imperative that colleges and universities conduct longitudinal studies that measure program outcomes. These types of studies are important for the continuation and development of programs such as EOP that impact students' retention and success in college.

The findings in this study indicate that individual counseling services provided by EOP and overall services and experiences positively impact retention and degree pursuance. This study is important because it gives voice to students with relation to their needs being met by EOP and if they believed the program helped them remain in college. Information found in this study may be used to help ensure educational opportunity programs are funded and expands to incorporate more eligible first-generation students.

The rationale for this study was to find out if EOP had an impact on student retention and degree pursuance which should lead to degree completion. The data provided in this study may help begin the process of analyzing students' needs in a student support program. The educational opportunity program focuses on supporting the first-generation student through college and degree obtainment. The program addresses the challenges of economically and academically disadvantaged students to help them become successful college students'. However more studies should be done on the impact of the program on students' retention and graduation rates so that administrators and program developers understand the need for EOP. The EOP program has played a vital role in acclimating first generation students to college, preparing them academically, and supporting them financially so that they remain in college and obtain their degree.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

You reserve the right to skip any question you do not wish to answer.

Please answer the following questions based on your thoughts about individual counseling provided by your EOP counselor	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel I can trust my EOP Counselor	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP counselor is genuinely concerned about me	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP counselor is available to meet with me on a regular basis	5	4	3	2	1
MY EOP counselor listens to me when I speak	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP counselor assist me in clarifying and developing a plan to reach my academic goals	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP counselor assist me in clarifying and developing a plan to reach my personal goals	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP counselor assist me with choosing the right courses	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP counselor assist me with my concerns about choosing a major	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP counselor is knowledgeable about the financial aid process	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP counselor assist me with academic performance (suggest workshops, study sessions, writing center, all student support services)	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP counselor is knowledgeable about the academic programs and requirements	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP counselor assist me with understanding my DARS	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP counselor helps me with career counseling (i.e. employment options, graduate school information)	5	4	3	2	1
Answer the following questions based on your beliefs concerning the impact of the EOP Program on you staying in college and/or graduating college	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
It is because of the support in the EOP program that I returned to or remained in college	5	4	3	2	1
I would not have returned to college if it were not for the EOP program	5	4	3	2	1
I believe EOP program helped me remain in college	5	4	3	2	1
Overall I am very satisfied with the EOP program at The College at Brockport	5	4	3	2	1

Appendix B**SENIORS AND JUNIORS IN THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM****WE NEED YOU, YES YOU!!!!!!!**

Do you believe your thoughts matter? Are you ready to let your voice be heard? If so please let us know. This research will provide information and gives a voice to YOU the student. As a member of the college and the EOP family we care what you think. PLEASE let us know how this program has impacted you by participating in this research. See below for details.

Hello, my name is Lisa Jones. I am a graduate student at The College at Brockport in the Counselor Education Department. I am conducting research on the impact of the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) on student retention and degree pursuance. I am inviting you to be a part of this study because you are a senior or junior and a member of EOP at the college.

Participation in this research is voluntary and requires little time. Participation includes taking a survey about your thoughts and beliefs on the impact of the EOP program which will take approximately 10 minutes. If you agree to participate in the study your time commitment will be about 10 minutes.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached in Rakov G20 or at 585-415-0286 or ljone4@brockport.edu.

***Remember, your thoughts do count but only if we, as a program know what they are.
Thank you for considering***

Appendix C

Please complete this evaluation in its entirety. We are interested in receiving feedback so that we can evaluate, maintain and/or improve the quality of EOP and the services the program provides.

My EOP counselor is:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel I can trust my EOP Counselor	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor is genuinely concerned about me.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor is available to meet with me on a regular basis.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor makes me feel comfortable and accepted.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor listens to me when I speak; I don't feel rushed.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor assists me in clarifying and developing a plan to reach my <u>academic goals</u> .	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor assists me in clarifying and developing a plan to reach my <u>personal goals</u> .	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor assists me with choosing the right courses.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor assists me with my concerns about choosing a major.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor is knowledgeable about the financial Aid Process.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor assists me with the Financial Aid process.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor is knowledgeable about my Financial Aid package.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor assists me with my Student Account Bill	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor assists me with my academic performance.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor is knowledgeable about academic programs and requirements.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor assists me with understanding my DARS.	5	4	3	2	1
My EOP Counselor helps me with career counseling (i.e. employment options, choosing a major, graduate school).	5	4	3	2	1

Additional Comments: (Please use reverse side if necessary)