

# Power of YOU program evaluation

## *Interim report*

July 2007

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# Summary and implications

Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) and Saint Paul College contracted with Wilder Research to conduct an independent evaluation of the Power of YOU program. This program provides Minneapolis and Saint Paul public high school graduates with free tuition to the colleges, as well as specialized curriculum and student support services, with the goal of increasing the college enrollment and success of underrepresented students (e.g., low-income, students of color).

The purpose of the evaluation study, which covers the first two years of program operation, is to determine: the extent to which the Power of YOU program achieves its intended outcomes, the degree to which program components contribute to intended outcomes, and the extent to which other factors influence outcomes for students in the program. The evaluation addresses these issues using enrollment, demographic, and academic performance data from college records and primary data collected through surveys of stakeholder groups and key informants (senior program leadership, students, high school and college personnel, and community members).

Key evaluation questions include the following:

- What is the impact of the Power of YOU program on increasing the college enrollment of underrepresented Minneapolis and Saint Paul high school students?
- How did Power of YOU students perform academically in their first year of college?
- What factors, including Power of YOU services, are related to students' academic progress and performance?
- What are the perspectives of key stakeholders (students, high school and college personnel) on the program?
- How might the Power of YOU program be strengthened or improved?

This interim report summarizes preliminary results from the first year of the evaluation. It focuses on the impact of the Power of YOU program on enrollment, how Power of YOU students did during their first year of college, what difference program services may have made during the first year, and how key stakeholder groups (students, high school personnel, and college personnel) view the program. To better gauge the effects and implications of the Power of YOU program, we compare the fall 2006 cohort at the two colleges (which includes the Power of YOU students) with the previous two cohorts who entered the colleges in 2004 and 2005. Each cohort includes only Minneapolis and Saint Paul public high school graduates who enrolled in college the fall immediately following their graduation. We also compare Power of YOU students with their non-Power of YOU classmates in the 2006 cohort.

A final report will follow at the end of the two-year evaluation period.

## ***Results***

### Enrollment

#### **Overall impact**

- A total of 357 students enrolled in the Power of YOU program at MCTC and Saint Paul College in the fall of 2006. This number represents nearly 60 percent of 2006 Minneapolis and Saint Paul public high school graduates who enrolled at the two colleges in the fall.
- Enrollment of Minneapolis and Saint Paul public high school graduates at the two colleges doubled in the fall of 2006 compared to the previous fall (from about 300 to 600). This result suggests a strong impact of the Power of YOU program on enrollment.
- The Power of YOU program did not appear to simply draw students to MCTC and Saint Paul College who would have attended college anyway. The number of Minneapolis and Saint Paul public high school graduates enrolling in the MnSCU system increased by almost 200 over the previous year.

#### **Changes in student characteristics related to enrollment increase**

- In the 2006 cohort compared to the previous two years' cohorts, both colleges had large increases in Black students, low-income students, ESL students, and students taking developmental courses. These increases were due either to the sharp increase in general enrollment related to the Power of YOU program, a proportionate increase of students in these categories, or a combination of these two factors.
- A higher proportion of Power of YOU students took developmental courses during their first year (75-81% across the two colleges) than their classmates.
- Overall, the comparisons carried out revealed remarkably few differences in demographic or academic preparation profiles between Power of YOU students and their classmates or previous cohorts.

#### **Student perspectives on recruitment (from surveys)**

- Almost one-third of Power of YOU students made the decision to enroll in college during their senior year in high school, leaving little time to prepare for college.
- 4 in 5 Power of YOU students reported that the program influenced their decision to enroll in college, with the offer of financial assistance being the major influence.

- 30 percent of the students indicated that Power of YOU made it possible for them to attend college, and 51 percent indicated that it made it easier.

### **High school and college personnel perspectives on recruitment (from interviews)**

- Both high school and college personnel felt that most eligible youth knew about the Power of YOU program. High school personnel said that some youth that they thought should apply did not.
- About half of the high school personnel said the relationship between Power of YOU and their high school was strong or very strong.
- Both high school and college personnel suggested that a greater presence of Power of YOU in high schools could strengthen recruitment efforts.
- College personnel suggested that the Power of YOU program could better help students overcome obstacles to college enrollment through earlier outreach to prospective students.

### **Level of preparation for college**

- Only 35 percent of the students felt that high school prepared them very well for college.
- 41 percent of high school personnel felt Power of YOU students were adequately prepared for college compared to only 8 percent of college personnel.

### **First-year academic progress and performance**

#### **Retention**

- Power of YOU students had an overall retention rate of 85 percent during the first year, higher than their classmates and prior cohorts.

#### **Grade point average**

- Power of YOU students' GPA tended to decrease from fall semester to spring semester.
- Average cumulative GPA at the end of first year was the 2.3 for Power of YOU students, the same as their classmates, but lower than the previous two years' cohorts.

#### **Credits earned**

- The percentage of credits earned out of credits attempted declined for Power of YOU students in the spring semester compared to the fall semester.
- Percentage of credits earned out of credits attempted at the end of first year was about the same for Power of YOU students and their classmates (71%). Overall, the first-year credits earned/credits attempted percentage was somewhat lower in 2006-07 than in the previous two years' cohorts.

- Power of YOU students earned an average of 19.6 credits in their first year.

### **Academic standing**

- At the end of the spring semester, 62 percent of Power of YOU students were in good academic standing, a somewhat lower percentage than in the cohorts of the two previous years.

### Factors associated with student progress and performance

- On average, low-income students performed better than their peers who were not low-income on many of the progress and performance indicators.
- On average, ESL students performed better than their non-ESL peers on almost all of the progress and performance indicators.
- Higher high school GPA and educational aspirations were positively associated with college progress and performance.
- Participation in community service learning was positively associated with progress and performance in college.

### Perspectives on academic progress and program services

#### **Students (from survey)**

- Students reported that the two most common obstacles to doing well in their classes were personal issues and difficulties with coursework.
- While two-thirds of the students reporting difficulty with coursework got help, only slightly more than one-third of those with personal issues got help.
- Most students found the college orientation class useful, although some said they did not learn anything new.
- Although it is a program expectation, only about half of Power of YOU students reported that they participated in community service learning.
- Most students reported receiving support services and found them helpful. The majority of students received course selection help, career planning assistance, extra help from teachers, and financial guidance.

#### **College personnel (from interviews)**

- As with students, college personnel identified personal issues and difficulties with coursework as the two most common obstacles students faced once enrolled.

- Almost all of the college personnel felt that the college orientation class was very important, yet only 38 percent felt it prepared students “very well” for college coursework and expectations.
- College personnel suggested that the community service component of the program could be improved by incorporating it more into the college curriculum.
- Only 38 percent of college personnel rated community involvement in the Power of YOU program as “very good.”

## *Implications*

### Successes

- *Increased enrollment of underrepresented groups.* The Power of You program succeeded in greatly increasing the enrollment of Minneapolis and Saint Paul public high school graduates at the two colleges in its first year, and thereby expanding the total number of such graduates attending college. This resulted in increasing the college enrollment of underrepresented groups, especially Black and low-income students.
- *High first year retention rate.* The Power of YOU program was successful in retaining students at an exceptionally high rate through its first year. This occurred despite the apparent academic struggles of many students in the program.

### Challenges

- *Inadequate preparation for college.* Clearly, most Power of YOU students are not well prepared for college. Nearly 4 out of 5 of them needed to take developmental courses during their first year. These results raise the question of what more can be done to better prepare Minneapolis and Saint Paul public school students for college. How could the colleges work with the school districts to improve students’ college preparation?
- *Decline in academic performance after the first term.* Generally, the academic performance of Power of YOU students was not strong, and declined somewhat during the first year. By the end of the year, 18 percent of program students were on academic probation and 20 percent were suspended. At Saint Paul College there was a striking decrease in academic performance in the 2006 cohort compared to the previous two years’ cohorts. These results suggest a high need for additional academic and other supports for Power of YOU students.

### Program recommendations

- *Strengthen relationship with high schools.* The Power of YOU program could benefit from an even larger presence and stronger relationship with the high schools in its

target area. This enhanced presence and relationship could potentially be used to inform students about the Power of YOU program sooner and get students thinking about college earlier in their high school careers, and to work with high school staff to improve underrepresented students' preparation for college.

- *Balance pre-enrollment and post-enrollment services.* Students were more likely to report receiving help in overcoming pre-enrollment obstacles (73% of the time) than in overcoming the obstacles they faced once enrolled (43% of the time). Likewise, college personnel were more likely to report that students received a lot of help with the pre-enrollment obstacles than with the obstacles they faced once enrolled. These results suggest that the program helps students a lot to enroll in college but does not provide as much help to students once they are enrolled. Power of YOU staff may want to consider increasing the amount of help they provide to students in overcoming the obstacles they face once enrolled to help foster students' success in college.
- *Provide more help to students with personal issues.* Both students and college personnel cited students' personal issues as a frequent obstacle to college success, yet most students with such issues reported not receiving help with them. Power of YOU staff might consider what more could be done to reach and help students who have personal problems that interfere with their academic success.
- *Consider assisting students with finding ways to cover their living expenses while in college.* Figuring out how to cover living expenses while in college was one of the most common barriers students reported facing prior to enrollment, yet only about half of the students who had this difficulty reported receiving help from program staff to overcome it. Likewise, results from the interviews with college personnel suggest that there could be a substantial unmet need for students in meeting living expenses. Students and college personnel alike recommended that Power of YOU provide assistance to students in covering other expenses, for example, by providing child care grants, financial assistance for purchasing textbooks, transportation discounts or vouchers, and assistance in finding employment and affordable housing. Program staff may want to consider whether it is feasible and worthwhile to focus additional efforts in these areas.
- *Improve the service learning program component.* This component of Power of YOU might benefit from a review and consideration of its future direction. During the first program year, only about half of the Power of YOU students reported participating in service learning. College personnel that were interviewed felt this component could be improved by increasing the linkage between community service learning and students' coursework.
- *Further develop the community partnerships supporting the program.* While community organizations may be contributing importantly to the recruitment and

service learning aspects of Power of YOU, it appears that the program could benefit from clearer definitions and expectations for the roles of community partners. In addition, there will be a need to continue to nurture and perhaps expand the number of these relationships in the future.

- *Enhance the collaboration between MCTC and Saint Paul College.* The Power of YOU program (and the evaluation of it as well) is likely to benefit from increased communication and collaboration between the two colleges. Only about one-quarter of the college personnel interviewed felt that the communication and collaboration between the colleges were currently sufficient.