



# CULTIVATING BELONGING FOR UNDERSERVED STUDENTS: THE CRITICAL NEED FOR CAMPUS SUPPORT PROGRAMS

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## INTRODUCTION

Experiencing extreme adversity in childhood or adolescence — such as dealing with abuse, homelessness, family history of addiction, or being impacted by foster care or incarceration — creates educational barriers (Skobba et al., 2018; see Adverse Childhood Experiences, Morton, 2018). In college, these barriers include difficulty with balancing work-life demands or developing relationships with peers and mentors (Dukes, 2013; Enriquez, et al., 2020; Hirano, 2014). Students might struggle with basic needs and economic insecurity, which disrupts learning and requires them to rely on creative means to sustain themselves (Kinarsky, 2017; Opsal & Eman, 2018). Students with experiences in foster care or incarceration report feeling stigmatized and isolated because of their identities and often will not reach out for help because of past negative experiences (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Halkovic & Green, 2015; Ott & McTier, 2020). These various challenges impact students' likelihood of succeeding in college.

Support from campus-based programs can address such challenges (Dukes, 2013; Enriquez, et al., 2020; Halkovic & Greene, 2015; Hirano, 2014; Morton, 2018). A systematic review of programs supporting students who experienced extreme adversity noted links to positive experiences and belonging on campus (Randolph & Thompson, 2017). Such programs highlight the strengths of the students they serve while also countering deficit views (e.g., Watt et al., 2013). Interviews with students who experienced extreme adversity revealed that programs fostered resilience by helping them to develop a strong sense of autonomy, find supportive people, and have access to “safe havens” that protected them from stressors (Hass et al., 2014). **In this study, we examine the barriers and sources of support of undergraduate students participating in the Renaissance Scholars Program (RSP), a program serving students who experienced extreme adversity in childhood or adolescence.**

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **The Renaissance Scholars Program (RSP) serves students who have experienced extreme forms of adversity and supports their college pathways.**
- **On surveys, scholars reported a higher sense of belonging at RSP than on campus, emphasizing the benefits of these spaces for building community.**
- **Interviews with scholars revealed they found a sanctuary of support in peers and staff at RSP which facilitated their efforts to give back to their communities.**
- **Scholars also valued professional development opportunities, as they provided stable work, strengthened career skills, and boosted confidence.**



## METHOD

**Research Team.** A Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach was chosen to leverage the experience and expertise of the RSP team and undergraduate scholars. PAR addresses questions significant to participants who act as co-researchers and emphasizes co-creating change together (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). The PAR team included the director of [Services for Transfer and Re-entry Students](#) (STARS), the RSP program counselor, a recently graduated undergraduate RSP scholar, and a postdoctoral researcher. The student transfer center and RSP staff and undergraduate RSP scholar developed the project intentions, ensuring the relevance of the questions to their specific community. The postdoctoral researcher, whose research focuses on the educational equity of minoritized groups in higher education, steered the research process. The undergraduate scholars brought connection, provided agency, and created a rapport with the RSP community. Together the team designed, implemented, and analyzed survey and interview questions.

**Participants and Procedures.** All survey participants ( $n=21$ ) were 18 years of age or older and affiliated with RSP. Most survey respondents identified as Latinx (47.6%) or White (23.8%), followed by Multiethnic (23.8%) and Black (4.8%). The majority identified as female (61.9%), followed by male (28.6%) or gender queer/gender nonconforming (9.5%). Almost all were Pell grant recipients (95.2%) and were first-generation-to-college (90.5%). The breakdown of involvement in RSP was 2 years or more (52.4%), a year (14.3%), or two academic quarters or less (33.4%).

The team conducted both a survey and interviews. The survey – which took approximately 13 minutes – focused on program resource use, sense of belonging in RSP and on campus, and demographics. For the in-depth interviews, ten RSP scholars participated but demographic information was not collected to protect confidentiality. There was an

overrepresentation of formerly incarcerated students in this sample. To facilitate rapport and confidentiality with interviewees, the undergraduate scholar conducted all interviews. The interviewer asked about experiences within RSP and sense of belonging within the program and on campus. Interviews ranged from 30-65 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a pseudonym.

**Coding Procedure.** The research team coded and analyzed the transcripts using deductive and inductive thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the postdoctoral scholar and trained research assistants became familiar with the data. They began generating initial codes, intentionally coding perceived challenges, campus belonging, program benefits, and improvements. When generating initial codes, the team gathered relevant transcript data for each code. At this stage, the full PAR team participated in coding. Team members attended biweekly and weekly meetings to begin revising initial codes and then developing themes. Themes concerning the research questions were named and defined. The research team then moved to establish reliability, focusing on an iterative process of coding (Syed & Nelson, 2015). The coders reconciled differences using coding consensus.

## SURVEY FINDINGS

**Community Indicators.** From the 11 possible communities RSP serves, participants on average belonged to at least three, underscoring the intersectionality of adverse experience among RSP scholars. Participants' sense of belonging, measured from 1-*Strongly Disagree* to 7-*Strongly Agree*, within RSP ( $M=5.60$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ) and campus ( $M=4.37$ ,  $SD=1.67$ ) was shown to be generally high. Yet, a paired-samples t-test determined that students' RSP belonging was meaningfully higher than their campus belonging,  $t(20)=3.50$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d=0.76$ , 95% CI [0.495, 1.953].



**Important Resources for Success.** Survey results identified which services were most important for RSP scholars' success on a scale from 1-*Not important at all* to 5-*Extremely Important*. The top five are listed in order of importance: access to winter and summer housing ( $M=4.5$ ,  $SD=0.58$ ); assistance addressing financial hardships ( $M= 4.27$ ,  $SD=0.86$ ); mental health support ( $M=4.05$ ,  $SD=0.88$ ); academic advising ( $M=4.00$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ); and paid internships ( $M=4.00$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ).

## INTERVIEW FINDINGS

**Sense of Belonging.** Many RSP scholars expressed a need for community and reported feeling isolated on campus because of their backgrounds. Jack shared his reasoning for joining RSP, *"I was feeling really alienated on campus. Feeling like a lot of people had access to familial support and normative experiences... I thought it was cool that there was a program that was for folks that didn't have that."* The RSP scholars expressed a desire to feel connected to others, engage, and find community with peers. RSP provided such a community. Scholars mentioned valuing staff and peers who understood them and their backgrounds, and who had similar past experiences. Some characterized RSP as feeling *"like a family,"* a place where they gain support and can be themselves without judgment.

**Staff Support.** Scholars identified staff as an important benefit of being in RSP because staff helped students address a multitude of issues to improve their college experiences. These included: helping navigate campus structures; validating their place on campus; troubleshooting issues; and providing social-emotional support. Christine shared, *"I really appreciate and value having one place that I can go to, uh, get referrals for resources, um, as opposed to doing it completely on my own...Many of our students have also struggled in this area... [and] how to do things a little bit differently as an independent student."* These trusting relationships provided a foundation for building confidence to work through challenges, for fostering additional

relationships outside of the program, and for establishing more stability in their lives.

**Basic Needs.** RSP Scholars valued the material resources provided by the program because they reduced students' anxiety about meeting their basic needs and helped them persist in school. They were especially grateful the help was available throughout their college experience. As Sophia explained, *"I don't have support, like, really from anybody else, whether that's financially or emotionally...that's why I find the emergency funds very valuable because it's, like, I don't have anybody else to go to."* Students identified utilizing financial assistance for co-payments, doctor's appointments, dental assistance, bills, and financial emergencies. They mentioned the importance of accessing the snack pantry, toiletry items, personal care items, school supplies (e.g. blue books, scantrons, textbooks), and laptops available at the RSP office. Students also valued assistance finding housing, paying for housing, and access to on-campus housing guarantees.

**Empowered Agents.** RSP Scholars gained a sense of efficacy, agency, and confidence from their participation and accomplishments within RSP, and they often identified their values for leveraging their growth and knowledge to give back to the community. Scholars valued professional development opportunities and the benefits of such opportunities, including stable work and pay, building communication and leadership skills, learning about program development, and strengthening career skills (e.g., interviewing), and growing confidence in professional work environments. Roberto underscored, *"All of the jobs they provide for students, all of the internships they provide for students...You're boosting their self-esteem, their confidence... to, like, get familiar with what it's like to be in a professional setting."* These skills also translated into a platform to give back to their community, and tackle problems or issues in their lives.



## IMPLICATIONS

Students' insights helped the RSP team set a course of action for future program development and goals. Findings also provided insight into other university programs that support similar communities.

**1. Ensure sufficient staff support to provide social, emotional, and academic counseling.** Scholars observed that RSP is under-resourced, and therefore understaffed. As such, scholars struggle to gain access to the sole program counselor designated to serve their needs. In addition to employing a program counselor, findings suggest the need for a program coordinator who can focus on customizing resources that speak directly to the distinct needs of community members through programming, events/workshops, and specialized services such as, increased mental health services and trauma informed counseling. Peer mentors who reflect the students' backgrounds can also play a central role in providing guidance to navigate campus structures. Given UC Santa Cruz's [commitments](#) to issues of equity and the unique needs of these communities, other campuses should prepare to provide specialized resources for the intersecting needs of these communities to retain them.

**2. Expand basic needs resources.** One of the largest needs of RSP scholars is housing security. Programs serving similar populations as RSP should consider access to subsidized year-round housing, housing security deposits, and early arrivals to campus housing with financial assistance for new students before their first fall quarter. It is also critical to increase resources promoting food security for students. Campuses might consider the development of a community-based resource guide and establish partnerships with off-campus community organizations to expand resource offerings. Our own campus's [Blum Center](#) is a great model for these efforts.

**3. Provide professional development opportunities.** Given the benefits of professional

development opportunities, one critical way to support students is to invest more in such opportunities on campus. Students shared how professional development activities provided a source of income and fostered critical leadership and professional skills. These skills helped students' build confidence in their abilities and can translate well into post-college plans.

**4. Offer more robust support in classrooms.** Campus faculty, instructors, and staff can assist students by generally sharing critical information on campus resources, such as including contact information in their syllabi or websites. Additionally, if students are sharing ways they could be further supported academically and personally (e.g. disclosing worries around housing, basic needs), faculty, instructors, and staff can become aware of such programming and reach out to programs directly and connect students through introductions and encouraging a consultation. Any efforts to build a sense of community and belonging on campus could also help ameliorate feelings of isolation among similar populations of students.

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