

One Million Degrees

Focus Groups Findings Summary

September 2020

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to One Million Degrees staff for their partnership on this project. In addition, we are humbled by and indebted to the focus group participants, scholars, volunteers, and staff who shared their perspectives and feedback with us to better understand the program model and inform future potential programmatic improvements. We thank you for your time and your candor.

We would like to thank Carmelo Barbaro and Roseanna Ander for their consistent support of this project; and Emma Shirey, Julian Hayes, and Kenny Hofmeister for ongoing research assistance.

This project was graciously supported by the City Colleges of Chicago and Willian Rainey Harper College, with grants from the Spencer Foundation, A Better Chicago, the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) North America, Arnold Ventures. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the authors and focus group participants and do not necessarily represent official position or policies of Harper College or City Colleges of Chicago.

Land Acknowledgement

“Chicago is the traditional homelands of the Council of the Three Fires: The Odawa, Ojibwe and Potawatomi Nations. Many other Tribes like the Miami, Ho-Chunk, Sac and Fox also called this area home. Located at the intersection of several great waterways, the land naturally became a site of travel and healing for many Tribes. American Indians continue to call this area home and now Chicago is home to the third largest Urban American Indian community that still practices their heritage, traditions and care for the land and waterways. Today, Chicago continues to be a place that calls many people from diverse backgrounds to live and gather here. Despite the many changes the city has experienced, we see the importance of the land and this place that has always been a city home to many diverse backgrounds and perspectives.”

- American Indian Center of Chicago

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Executive Summary

“College life without OMD, right now – I wouldn’t be here still. I’d quit...”

OMD woke up a dream in me that I didn’t know that I had.”

– Malcolm X scholar

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The University of Chicago Poverty Lab is currently evaluating the effectiveness of One Million Degrees (OMD), a non-profit organization that provides wrap-around supports to community college students in Chicago and its suburbs, through a randomized controlled trial designed to study the impact of the program on college enrollment, persistence, and graduation drawing on administrative data. To complement this quantitative research, staff at the Poverty Lab met with students, volunteers, and OMD staff to conduct a series of focus groups to gain deeper insight into the program.

Between 2017 and 2019, we conducted 21 focus groups with 129 participants composed of OMD scholars, coaches, and staff who attend, volunteer, or are affiliated with one of the seven City Colleges of Chicago campuses or Harper College. The data collected through the focus group provides a rich picture of participants’ experiences in the program, insights into what drives program effectiveness, and formative feedback to inform ongoing program improvement. An open-ended coding scheme was used to provide insights that align with the four core OMD program elements academic, financial, personal, and professional supports.

ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

Scholars shared that they greatly benefited from OMD’s tutoring and advising supports. Both tutoring and advising were built upon individualized academic attention that fit the specific needs of the scholars. OMD tutors were flexible, encouraging, and knowledgeable, teaching scholars helpful and healthy study skills. Regarding academic advising, Program Coordinators (PCs) and coaches often supplemented college-provided academic advisors to help scholars figure out their course selections in a timely manner.

Scholars noted that there were often logistical constraints that hindered how often they could utilize OMD tutors as a resource, including a lack of tutoring capacity in certain classes and campuses. PCs and coaches, additionally, wished for additional training and resources to adequately advise students as supplemental advisors. These challenges were particular to the model’s implementation at City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), where unlike at Harper, PCs do not also serve as academic advisors.

FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

OMD provides various financial supports for scholars, including stipends, enrichment grants, and other indirect financial support, such as reimbursements for public transportation costs.¹ Among these supports, scholars felt that the stipend was the most impactful financial support. Scholars used the stipend for educational and personal expenses. Scholars appreciated OMD's flexibility in providing financial supports, especially for unrestricted purposes, but still struggled with additional financial burdens, such as a lack of transportation, an inability to pay cell phone bills, financial aid issues, and food insecurity. Students also reported it was critical to receive assistance with institutional financial challenges, including FAFSA completion and verification, paying school balances for a smooth transfer, and avoiding SAP holds.²

PERSONAL SUPPORTS

Scholars reported experiencing great personal growth through increased academic, personal, and professional confidence, along with improved communication skills due to OMD's comprehensive supports, such as PCs and coaches. Scholars credited their relationships with their coaches and PCs as the main components in their growth and success, and greatly appreciated how empathetic, compassionate, and dedicated their PCs and coaches were, even if their PCs and coaches did not share their background or identity.

Coaches and PCs reported that they were able to establish trust with scholars through engaging in consistent and reliable communication. Scholars discussed how they appreciated how their coaches and PCs helped them develop growth-mindsets and acted as their "cheerleaders" throughout their college experiences.

Despite these positive experiences, scholars and coaches also reported experiencing challenges based on the matching process, potential personality differences, and mismatched availability to meet between scholars and coaches. PCs and coaches reported sometimes feeling ill-equipped to meet scholars' needs due to the wide-ranging and unpredictable nature of scholars' lives. All participants reported that enhanced communication could improve scholar-coach-PC relationships.

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS

OMD's professional supports are composed of Scholar Development Sessions, networking opportunities and events, and application and resume support from coaches and PCs. Students of all professional experience levels reported enjoying and benefiting from these supports by taking part in opportunities to practice their professional skills, obtain jobs, and learn more about their industry fields of interest. While many coaches reported taking a strong role in their assigned scholars' professional development, including reviewing resumes and invitations to job shadowing, ongoing efforts are needed to ensure that all scholars can benefit equally from the professional opportunities of the broader coach network.

¹ See page 5 for more information about OMD's program model.

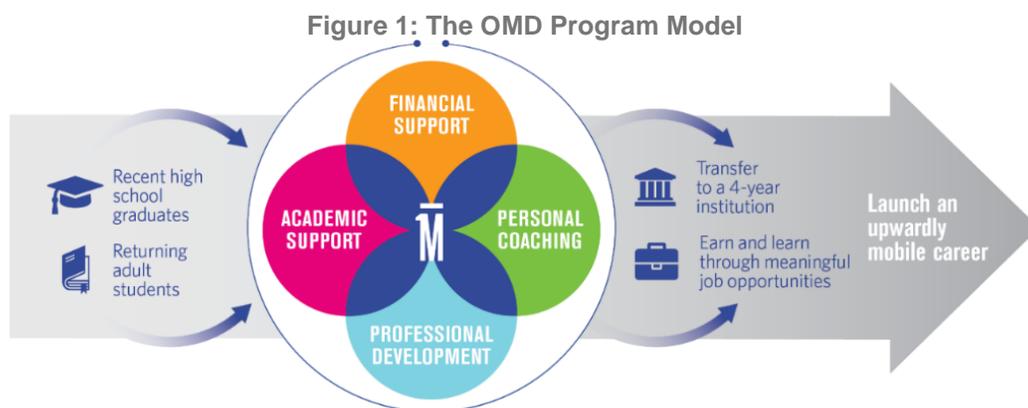
² Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) holds occur when students are unable to meet one or more federally guided minimum academic standards for GPA, Timeframe and Pace, which have implications on students' ability to receive federal financial aid.

Introduction and Overview

Community colleges are powerful vehicles for social mobility in the U.S., particularly for students who have not always had an equal opportunity for advancement.³ In Chicago, unfortunately, fewer than one in four community college students graduates within three years.⁴ The University of Chicago Poverty Lab has partnered with One Million Degrees to evaluate the efficacy of One Million Degrees' holistic approach to helping students reach graduation through a randomized controlled trial and participant focus groups. The seven City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) and Harper College are participating in this evaluation.

ABOUT ONE MILLION DEGREES

One Million Degrees (OMD) is a non-profit organization operating at all seven campuses of the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC)⁵ and at three community colleges in Chicago's suburbs: Prairie State, South Suburban, and William Rainey Harper (Harper). OMD uses a comprehensive approach to serve low-income and often, first-generation community college students. Its program supports students academically, financially, personally, and professionally through skill-building workshops, financial incentives, coaching, and advising (see Figure 1).



OMD scholars meet monthly, on average, with **Program Coordinators (PCs)**, who work with them to set and reflect upon academic and professional goals while encouraging academic and personal progress. Embedded PCs on college campuses work with an assigned caseload of roughly 65 students, connecting them with their colleges' resources and services. The frequency at which scholars meet with the Program Coordinators vary depending on a scholar's academic needs, risk factors, and stage in their community college journey.

Scholars also attend **monthly workshops** composed of meetings with a **volunteer coach** and professional skill building activities. By participating regularly in professional development programming and similar OMD events, scholars receive a \$1,000 **performance-based stipend** (\$750 stipend at Harper). OMD also offers financial assistance in the form of last-dollar

³ Carnevale, A. P., Rose, S. J., & Cheah, B. (2014). *The college payoff: Education, occupations, lifetime earnings*. Retrieved from the [Georgetown University website](#).

⁴ City Colleges of Chicago, FY2018 Completion Update.

⁵ The seven colleges are: Richard J. Daley College, Kennedy-King College, Malcolm X College, Olive-Harvey College, Harry S. Truman College, Harold Washington College, and Wilbur Wright College.

scholarships and **enrichment grants** that cover academic or professional costs (e.g., honor society dues, college transcripts for transferring, and more).⁶

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANT FOCUS GROUPS

The RCT study evaluating OMD draws on quantitative administrative data to examine the effect of the OMD program on students' likelihood to enroll, persist, and graduate from college. To provide additional context to this quantitative analysis, we conducted **21 focus groups** over the course of three years (2017-2019) to better incorporate and hear from the voices of those involved with OMD at all seven CCC campuses and Harper. The focus groups were comprised of scholars, coaches, and OMD staff (PCs and Program Managers who were formerly PCs).⁷ Each focus group consisted of stakeholders who occupied the same role in OMD. The research team conducted focus groups at all seven CCC campuses and at Harper College, including **129 participants** (64 scholars, 50 coaches, and 15 staff members; see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Focus Group Breakdown by Year, Participant Group, and Campus⁸

Year	Participant Group	Campus	Total
2017	Scholars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Richard Daley (8) ▪ Malcolm X (8) ▪ Harry Truman* (8) 	24 scholars
	Coaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Richard Daley (4) ▪ Malcolm X (4) ▪ Harry Truman* (4) 	12 coaches
	OMD Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Multiple</i> (6) 	6 staff
2018	Scholars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kennedy-King (5) ▪ Wilbur Wright (10) ▪ Harry Truman* (6) ▪ Kennedy-King (4) 	21 scholars
	Coaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Wilbur Wright (5) ▪ Harry Truman* (7) 	15 coaches
	OMD Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Multiple</i> (5) 	5 staff
2019	Scholars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Harold Washington (4) ▪ Harper (9) ▪ Olive-Harvey (6) ▪ Harold Washington (5) 	19 scholars
	Coaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Harper (11) ▪ Olive-Harvey (6) 	22 coaches
	OMD Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Multiple</i> (4) 	4 staff

⁶ Scholars are evaluated using the "Do Your PART Evaluation Rubric," which assesses how well they are meeting program requirements. Scholars earn points, which translate into a rating scale. If scholars are in "Excellent" or "Good" standing, their stipend is not affected. If they drop to "Probation" or "Subject to be Dropped," their stipend is withheld until they return to "Good" standing.

⁷ OMD staff who volunteered as coaches were put in the coaches' focus groups.

⁸ We conducted focus groups with scholars and coaches at the Truman campus in both 2017 and 2018, which may lead to a potential overrepresentation of program feedback specific to the Truman campus.

Focus Group Considerations, Limitations, and Methodology

All scholar and coach focus groups were conducted at students' home campus on a day during OMD-scheduled programming in order to provide familiarity and comfort to scholars and coaches. Coaches were interviewed in the morning before monthly Scholar Development Sessions, while scholars were interviewed in the afternoon after the sessions. As appreciation for participants' time, all focus group members were compensated for participating with a breakfast or lunch meal, respectively. Since scholars participated in focus groups after sessions, their responses may be skewed due to the recency of their sessions, such that their focus was on the sessions instead of on their holistic experiences in OMD.

The facilitators of scholar focus groups rotated between three female researchers from the University of Chicago, each of whom were either white or white passing. Having white and white passing women in a space of predominately scholars of color could have impacted scholar responses. For example, scholars may have felt less comfortable responding. Having a shared identity facet of being female, however, could have increased the comfort of female-identifying scholars. Additionally, because some Harper College staff volunteer as coaches, they were included in the coaches' focus groups. This had the potential to create a dynamic where other volunteer coaches might have been more reticent to express their opinions, especially those that might reflect less positively on the program.

The physical location of OMD staff focus groups was OMD's downtown office. Although held in a separate conference room, participants' responses could have been impacted by their being in the same space as their superiors. Data regarding perceived race and gender of focus group participants was not collected.

In compiling the focus group data into this summary, we transcribed all 21 audio recordings of the focus groups and assured the integrity of the transcriptions by using a professional transcription service when available, and when not available, we listened to the recordings again to correct any transcripts with missing information. We **open-coded** the 245 pages of qualitative data to identify emerging major themes. With the insights from open coding, we **reviewed** the data a second time to better comprehend the common experiences and feelings of individuals in the program. In this summary, we tried to represent the diverse interactions individuals had with the program and cited these occurrences if other focus group participants shared similar sentiments. We chose direct quotations and anecdotes that provided a perceived consensus among individuals during the focus group by verbal affirmations such as "mhm," or through the facilitator's perceived consensus by other individuals nodding during the focus groups. Any instance where there is not a perceived consensus is stated explicitly in conjunction with the quotation or anecdote.

Focus Group Insights on OMD's Holistic Program Model

In this section, we provide a detailed overview of insights and reports from focus group participants along the four primary dimensions of OMD's program model. We anchor remarks around these four pillars of OMD's program to better contextualize how scholars, coaches, and PCs experienced each aspect of the program model.

ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

Tutoring

Takeaway 1: Scholars reported benefiting from individualized academic attention, skills-building, and support.

Scholars emphasized their appreciation for OMD's one-on-one tutors, especially in contrast to their lower likelihood of working with a college tutor privately. Scholars often noted that they felt well-matched with their tutors, who ranged from students to faculty members and professionals in the fields tutored. OMD tutors were familiar with course content, unlike many college-assigned tutors who were unable to assist scholars due to their unfamiliarity with course content. Scholars described OMD tutoring sessions to be private, personal, focused, and flexible. Flexibility in tutoring schedules encouraged scholars to seek tutoring assistance when they otherwise could not have without OMD's academic support system. OMD tutors encouraged students to excel in their classes, rather than merely pass, and helped scholars develop useful study skills. Scholars discussed how they believed that college would have been more stressful and difficult without OMD's academic support, and that this support prevented them from dropping more classes. For instance, one Wilbur Wright scholar attributes his academic success to OMD tutors, saying, "last year, I was getting 40s, 50s, 60s, and now I'm getting 70s with my tutoring."

"[OMD tutors are] able to take the time to get in depth with the things you don't understand. That way if it comes around again... you'll have a better idea... The tutoring has helped me maintain the honor roll and the Dean's List."

– Daley scholar

Takeaway 2: Scholars identified some unmet tutoring needs in specific subjects.

Although PCs and coaches often volunteered to provide academic assistance when tutors were unavailable, scholars still indicated a need for increased tutoring capacity. This capacity includes pedagogical capacity, where scholars hope to interact with tutors who are knowledgeable with a wider variety of subject matter, such as for career-specific classes, like accounting, and high-level science classes, like advanced physics. It also includes logistical capacity concerning tutors' availability, such that tutors are available at all campuses, since some campuses, such as Kennedy-King and Olive-Harvey, often lack tutors.

Takeaway 3: Scholars requested greater programmatic leniency with meeting OMD's tutoring requirements.

Scholars expressed a desire for a potentially more lenient tutoring requirement that would allow them to avoid repercussions on their OMD standings, which are affected by their tutoring session

attendance.⁹ This request for leniency was born out of scholars' frustration when tutoring requirements stood in the way of their personal goal of receiving an "Excellent," versus "Good" standing. While scholars under "Good" standing are still eligible for stipends, other perks such as attending special luncheons seemed only available to scholars in "Excellent" standing. Further, many scholars discussed how they would appreciate a change in the tutoring requirements such that they could successfully meet the rubric's standards while balancing other responsibilities, such as familial and financial obligations.¹⁰ Many scholars mentioned how it was difficult to attend every required tutoring session due to their work schedules.

Supplemental Advising

Takeaway 4: Scholars reported that their relationships with their coaches and/or PCs were essential in providing them with additional college advising supports, although PCs and coaches suggested a need for additional training to better support students in the advising role they are asked to perform.

Scholars reported that PCs and coaches play a crucial role in supplementing academic advisors at CCC, where some campuses lack the resources to always provide students with adequate individualized attention and support.¹¹

Scholars understood the importance of seeking college advising and the reasons why advisors were generally less available, so they appreciated when PCs and coaches took the time to develop relationships with them and support their needs in a more individualized manner. For instance, coaches often expressed concern when scholars took classes that appeared unrelated to their courses of study and were unnecessary and costly. In many cases, scholars with schedules like this, and almost every scholar who spoke about their academic advisors, said that they did not seek the support or advice of their college-affiliated advisors due to previous negative experiences.

"I love that they call us scholars. I love that. When I was younger, a scholar was really smart. And you look at me like a scholar? It gives me confidence. I'm horrible with names, but when I walk around Malcolm X, I see another face and I'm like, 'There's another scholar.' I'm not here by myself. Here's another me. Yes, I got this. They're doing this, and I can do it, too."

– Malcom X scholar

Broadly speaking, all participants discussed how one crucial element of relationship-building between scholars and their coaches or PCs was trust, which helped the scholars feel comfortable in opening up about personal and academic issues. Participants also mentioned that another essential element was PCs' responsiveness to scholar questions and concerns. Scholars noted that the timeliness of PC support contrasted greatly with that provided by their college advisors.

⁹ OMD's tutoring rubric is as follows: 1-3 Points: Developing (needs significant development in order to meet OMD standards of performance) – a scholar has missed two or more tutoring sessions, arrives late on a regular basis or has not signed up for required tutoring; tutoring reports reflect poor attendance, engagement, or preparedness; scholar is unresponsive to tutoring strategies based on feedback from their tutor. 4-6 Points: Emerging (approaching OMD standards of performance) – a scholar consistently attends tutoring sessions and is usually on time; tutoring reports reflect that the scholar typically uses tutoring for homework help and less frequently uses tutoring to build skill or reinforce knowledge. 7-9 points: Thriving (meets and often exceeds OMD standards of performance) – shows commitment to making significant academic progress through use of tutoring; incorporates and applies strategies presented by tutor; signs up for tutoring in all subjects in which student is having difficulties and attends all tutoring appointments in a timely manner.

¹⁰ Coaches discussed how students faced the academic challenge of failing some of the same classes, suggesting that there could be issues with the ways in which these classes are taught. It could be helpful to consider data on student class evaluations to see if they are correlated with scholars' persistence in college.

¹¹ On some CCC campuses, advisors have immensely large caseloads of over 500 students per advisor.

“Some of the best aspects of OMD is the community you’re provided. There hasn’t been one time when I’ve needed something and actually worried about needing it... The support system and the accountability, it ensures that you’re already on top of everything. It gives you the boost that you don’t get at home.”

– Truman scholar

Scholars and PCs reported that one reason that PCs became a source of advising was due to their offices’ physical locations on campuses. PCs learned about the resources available on different campuses, built relationships with college staff at resource centers, and connected scholars to these resources. PCs reported that the most common resources that they referred their scholars to were the wellness¹² and tutoring centers.

PCs and coaches both helped students with class selection and the transfer process (for example, by helping students identify potential four-year institutions and reviewing scholars’ transfer application materials). In addition, PCs and coaches served as “accountability mechanisms” as they consistently checked in with scholars, reminding them about important deadlines and ensuring that they were meeting academic and other program requirements, such as the submission of time-based “deliverables” for the OMD curriculum on leadership, jobs and/or apprenticeships, and graduation and/or transfer. More often, however, PCs took on the additional roles of supplemental academic advisors compared to coaches due to their OMD staff positions. PCs noted that they would strongly appreciate additional training from OMD to best support their scholars when serving in this advising role.



A scholar and coach work together at a Saturday Scholar Development Session at Kennedy-King College in Chicago.

Note: Academic supports at Harper College differ from those offered at CCC due to different staffing structures. PCs at Harper are employed by the college to specifically serve as academic advisors for OMD scholars. Harper PCs serve a caseload of 70-80 scholars, which is smaller than the typical Harper advisor caseload, but larger than the PC caseload for PCs at CCC campuses. Harper PCs indicated a desire to develop stronger, more meaningful relationships with their scholars and thought that it would be helpful to their relationship-building in the future to have smaller caseloads. Harper PCs are also unique from non-Harper PCs due to their status as college employees. As a result of this status, Harper PCs reported being able to

implement a weekly seminar class for their first-year scholars, which has provided them with increased engagement points and check-ins with their students.

¹² CCC’s wellness centers provide mental health, stress and time management counseling, and access to other social services, including referrals and benefits application assistance.

FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

OMD Stipends, Financial Flexibility, and Other Supports

Takeaway 1: Scholars discussed maximizing the impacts of their stipends by using them for educational and personal expenses.

Scholars noted that their OMD-paid stipends were especially useful in covering education-related costs that were not covered under federal Pell Grants, such as calculators, textbooks, certification exams, and honor society fees (Phi Theta Kappa). Moreover, stipends were commonly used to pay for classes and served as the reasons why it was “possible to go to school [and] to not take out loans” for scholars.

“I signed up for the money... but what made me stick around was the community that I discovered. That there's always somebody there that you can talk to. The networking, and the coaching [are] awesome... invaluable. They've turn me into a movie star, man. I love One Million Degrees. I love them, I love them, I love them.”

– Olive-Harvey scholar

In terms of personal expenses, scholars mainly used their stipends to pay bills, but uses varied. For example, some scholars saved their stipend money for applying for transfers to four-year institutions while other scholars used it for health and wellness reasons, such as buying a pair of needed glasses or braces. Scholars also discussed the importance of their OMD stipends in emergencies, such as a sudden job loss. For instance, one scholar who suddenly lost her job discussed how her stipend money “saved her from living in a shelter” by paying her rent while she got a new job.

Scholars attributed part of the impacts of the stipend to the way it was distributed throughout the year, which was usually around final exams. Scholars also noted that the stipend was a method

“They help pay for things the Pell Grant won't pay for. What they have done for me with financial aid, it has allowed me to get a degree. Without their support, I won't get an associate for another 3-4 years. Financially, they have been wonderful.”

– Daley scholar

of accountability that felt like a reward for doing a good job and keeping up with all the rubric requirements. Scholars also discussed how the stipend helped them learn about financial literacy. One Wilbur Wright scholar worked with a PC to figure out ways to “save a lot of money” and was successful in doing so, as the scholar budgeted money to buy business casual clothes and pay for their mother’s medical bills. The scholar said, “OMD helped me achieve saving that amount so I took my mom out to dinner!” No matter how

scholars used their stipend money, the most common phrase they used to describe this money was “a stress reliever.” They also called it “a means of sustaining life itself.”

Takeaway 2: Scholars appreciated OMD's flexibility in providing financial supports, indirect financial support provision, and enrichment grant offerings.

Scholars reported that OMD was able to help scholars with their financial situations in a variety of ways. For instance, when scholars faced larger financial concerns, PCs worked with them to apply

for emergency assistance funding through their colleges.¹³ In urgent situations where emergency assistance funding was not enough, PCs released part of the stipends earlier than the usual distribution time.

“It’s nice to have someone to invest in your future. They’re taking the time and resources to invest in your future. Just to see you succeed.”

– Olive-Harvey scholar

Moreover, the indirect financial support that scholars often appreciated were reimbursements for public transportation since CTA U-Passes for scholars were not available at the time of our focus groups. Finally, scholars utilized OMD’s enrichment grant as a financial support when they needed to be reimbursed for transfer application fees, required exam fees, or honor society fees. Some scholars were able to use the enrichment grant for experiential learning opportunities, like attending shows related to class content.

Remaining Barriers

Takeaway 3: Despite financial supports from OMD, scholars still faced multiple barriers relating to caretaker obligations, transportation, bills, financial aid, and food insecurity.

While scholars reported benefiting from OMD’s financial supports, many reported still struggling with broader financial problems. Many scholars discussed the difficulties in having to support their families financially, such as by covering expenses related to their children, to large medical expenses, or to supporting a disabled spouse. One Truman coach mentioned helping her scholar with her personal matters: *“I’m helping her out, like looking into affordable housing, and her son is special needs. Helping her stay involved with her case worker. She’s a great mom who’s on top of her stuff. She just needs extra help.”*

There were two barriers that specifically impacted scholars’ abilities to engage in OMD’s programming. The first was a lack of access to transportation. Despite students later becoming able to secure CTA U-Passes offered by CCC, not having a car limited scholars’ abilities to fully engage with OMD as scholars were often unable to meet with coaches and remain in contact with coaches and PCs. The second barrier was the lack in ability to pay cell phone bills, which resulted in communication barriers between scholars and their PCs and coaches.

Various scholars also reported financial aid issues as a large barrier. For instance, many scholars experienced the FAFSA verification processes, which required physically going to the IRS office to resolve issues. Some scholars remarked how these FAFSA verification issues seem to primarily affect low-income (i.e. Pell-eligible) students of color, who were being flagged for verification much more frequently than their white peers.

The final most commonly discussed barrier was food insecurity. OMD attempts to alleviate this concern during Scholar Development Sessions. Several coaches and PCs discussed having food at their meetings with scholars. PCs also mentioned their informal attempt to address food insecurity by having food in their offices to encourage scholars to stop by. PCs suggested that food insecurity should be addressed more formally by OMD, especially considering the stigma that some scholars feel regarding visiting campus food pantries.

¹³ CCC partners with the non-profit organization, AllChicago, which provides access to an emergency fund that is accessible to all Chicago-area college students.

PERSONAL SUPPORTS

Personal Growth and Building Community

Takeaway 1: Scholars reported that OMD's holistic supports model contributed to their abilities to make significant strides in personal growth due to increased academic, personal, and professional confidence, along with a feeling of empowerment to speak up and ask for help.

Scholars emphasized how OMD has built their self-esteem and confidence in ways that have allowed them to feel comfortable in setting large goals with high expectation for themselves, which they had not done before. Some scholars reported that OMD empowered them to feel like they could be role models to family members and friends. One scholar from Olive-Harvey captured the sentiment of OMD's ability to help scholars with personal growth through barrier reduction, as coaches and PCs work to “release [scholars'] barrier. Like dispositional, institutional, situational.”¹⁴ This scholar connected with the experience of many of these barriers, such as “health, fear of failure, [and] low self-confidence,” but OMD “provided [the scholar] with those steps” to overcoming them in a helpful educational process.

“I liked the community that everyone has here... I came from not knowing anyone. With my [college] advisor... I feel I was just another student. I wasn't somebody to that person, and I feel with the OMD I'm a part of something.”

– Harper scholar

Finally, scholars reported that OMD helped create growth mindsets in them, such that they can have a positive outcome in situations, where “mistakes are something to learn and grow from, [and] not remain in.” This could be a result of OMD staff's nonjudgmental approach to addressing scholars' issues and needs. One Malcom X scholar said that OMD “makes us feel like there's never a wrong answer. We're not perfect, we make mistakes. As long as you acknowledge that, and you know what you did wrong and how to make it better. I feel like OMD really brings it out... It's okay to make mistakes. You only fail if you don't try... OMD makes you feel good about yourself despite [your] mistakes.”

“When I first started it, I was very shy and timid. I stayed in my own shell. Then I started to meet new people and make connections with others. It built my self-esteem and confidence, and helped me speak out more, something I really value a lot. The friendships and the connections.”

– Malcom X scholar

Additionally, several scholars explained that they felt like they were unable to ask for help previously, but through OMD's community, they have learned how to ask for and to accept help, i.e. from their coaches and PCs, as well as reaching out to professors to explain personal circumstances that might have impeded their abilities to do or complete academic work. Scholars said that these communication skills have been especially important for more soft-spoken and introverted scholars.

“I have 20 plus years of experience in the business admin field. Coming back to school... being a scholar, it's bringing up a fire... waking up that little spirit in me. You're more powerful, you're more this, you're more that... reach for the sky. Reach high! It's not going to do anything to hurt me.”

– Malcom X scholar

¹⁴ The scholar's reference to “dispositional, institutional, and situational” is from OMD's curriculum for scholars.

“When you wear that [OMD] shirt, you feel powerful. It’s an honor to wear it. To be part of something bigger than yourself.”

– Malcom X scholar

Takeaway 2: Scholars described the community that OMD has built as a central component of its success and scholars’ success.

Scholars explained that they have been able to find more support and encouragement through OMD than they have been able to find anywhere else and described OMD’s community of scholars, coaches, and PCs as a “family”

made up of valuable connections. This “family” has encouraged scholars to persist academically and personally through difficult situations and stressful experiences. Many scholars echoed one scholar’s sentiment that *“OMD doesn’t give you room to fail,”* explaining that their PCs and coaches’ abilities to keep them on track and hold them accountable have been essential to their college experiences.

Moreover, most scholars described their coaches as “cheerleaders” who helped build their confidence. Some scholars described their coaches as their friends, sisters, role models, or parents. Some coaches strengthened their relationships with their scholars by sharing aspects of their personal lives with their scholars through inviting them to social activities such as working out, going to family birthday parties, getting meals, and going to museums and shows. One scholar shared an anecdote about how her coach took her on a road trip to tour the University of Michigan and how she appreciated how her coach connected her to the world.

Additionally, scholars specifically mentioned the positive impacts of being around peers with similar goals and values, having a sense of belonging, and having another source of help and support. Subsequently, scholars heavily recommended that OMD increase its advertising to expand the OMD community of scholars and the number of people who could benefit from OMD’s supports. Scholars suggested that OMD could approach this by reaching out to more Chicago high schools, advertising OMD at colleges’ first-year orientations, and by advertising on public transportation.

Takeaway 3: Both PCs and coaches emphasized the importance of relationship-building with scholars and usually prioritized scholars’ personal concerns over academic or professional concerns through OMD’s holistic supports approach.

PCs and coaches have learned that they are often one of the few support systems upon which their scholars can rely, as scholars often described their college advisors’ support as inconsistent and often mentioned how they are unable to seek support from their families. Thus, many PCs and coaches felt that they prioritized the long-term goal of helping their scholars develop healthy life habits over the “shorter-term” goal of graduation. These habits included balance, wellness, self-care, confidence, forward-thinking, clear goal setting, persistence, and reflection. Both PCs and coaches recognized that if scholars were struggling in their personal lives, they would usually struggle academically and professionally as well.

“It’s hard to see where the personal support ends and the academic support begins. Sometimes, personal support may be the best academic support. It filters quite directly.”

– 2017 OMD PC

Program Coordinators

Takeaway 4: PCs and scholars reported that they viewed the role of PCs as one of the most important aspects of OMD as PCs' consistent presence, support, active listening skills, and focus on scholars' growth pushed scholars to succeed in healthy ways.

PCs' roles include various obligations ranging from "transactional" and administrative tasks central to nonprofit management to scholar-facing responsibilities that focus on building relationships with and supporting scholars academically, professionally, and personally.

Scholars discussed how PCs' accessibility, ease of contact, and responsiveness made them want to reach out to their PCs and feel comfortable sharing personal information with their PCs, who often shared their own experiences with scholars. Scholars felt that their PCs genuinely cared about them by checking up on them through texting beyond required meetings in ways that encouraged scholars' self-care. Scholars felt that PCs were sincere in their support for scholars due to how PCs have personalized supports according to the needs of each scholar and by how PCs constantly made themselves available even when they had limited time. Many younger scholars even described PCs as their friends and parents. Scholars reported that PCs relieved scholars' pressure to try to figure out to whom they should reach out to for help.

Several scholars discussed how they loved how their PCs were good listeners, people who remembered details about them, and valuable sources of advice who were nonjudgmental, compassionate, and empathetic. One Daley scholar, who returned to school as an older scholar

"With [my PC's] encouragement, I have reached levels in my life that I've never seen possible... Without her and OMD, that would have been unattainable."

– Daley scholar

and who was worried about being "too old" for school, discussed how pivotal their PC was in their college experience. The scholar said, *"I would have not made it this far without OMD and my PC... When I had problems, I could talk to someone. I was alone [before]. My PC let me know that there's someone out there who cares, who wants me at my best potential."* Lastly, scholars noted their appreciation for having a physical space to meet with PCs on campuses as a place to decompress.

Takeaway 5: Despite their best efforts to build deep relationship with scholars, PCs were concerned about their ability to maintain these deep connections in the face of growing scholar caseload responsibilities. Content warning:

death, sexual assault, and poor familial relationships



A scholar and coach work together at a Saturday Scholar Development Session at Kennedy-King College in Chicago.

PCs noted that they had a concern about expanding the capacity of OMD's programming when considering their ability to develop deep relationships with scholars. Some PCs, who had smaller caseloads to begin with, discussed how they felt that their caseload responsibilities have grown over past years. PCs felt that they already lacked some capacity to address scholars' needs based upon PCs' own expectations with smaller caseload sizes of closer to 60 scholars.¹⁵ PCs often wanted to check in more than the required once a month meeting for low-touch scholars and

¹⁵ For the past three years, OMD has been consistent with having caseloads of no more than 65 students per PC.

more than the required once a week meeting for high-touch scholars but felt that they did not have enough time to do so.

Moreover, PCs reported that although they often want to help address scholars' issues, sometimes scholars' experiences fall outside of the bounds of their professional knowledge or scope of responsibilities. Meetings with scholars could become more complicated when they presented needs or challenges outside of academics. One PC described these conversations: *"a lot of my meetings are talking to people about all the different circumstances in life – pregnancies, housing instability, navigating violence in their neighborhood, abusive relationships, dealing with deaths – those are the things that rise to the top."* A specific example of a time when a PC felt that the scholar's issues felt outside of typical PC knowledge was when one scholar came to his PC as his only source of support for his marital issues. This PC talked about how it was important to find resources and service providers for the scholar. PCs also discussed how *"there's a huge learning curve for PCs."*

"Whether it's like, hey, you're telling me things, 'you're really stressed,' things that maybe I feel like I'm a social worker and I really shouldn't be doing this thing or not. And this is maybe not ethical for me to [do]; I can't advise you on this. I shouldn't be giving you counsel on whatever issue that might be mental health related or something like that... [But instead saying] 'you know, there's some really great people I've met over the wellness center, let's walk over.'"

– 2019 PC

Takeaway 6: Scholars reported facing a variety of specific barriers to their academic, personal, and professional success, including having family trauma, being a "non-traditional" student, addressing language barriers, and navigating mental health concerns. Content warning: death, sexual assault, and poor familial relationships

When asked about the main personal issues scholars faced in their lives, both PCs and scholars discussed how scholars often had to cope with deaths in their families or circles of close friends, heal from sexual and physical abuse and assault, and address other familial issues or responsibilities, which included the stresses of having poor relationships with family members while living at home, serving as translators for parents, and needing to take care of parents, siblings, or children. PCs and coaches shared that these stresses often became too overwhelming for scholars, consequently causing them to drop OMD's programming.

Scholars of specific subgroups also faced unique challenges due to distinct needs and priorities that were not always able to be addressed. For example, coaches felt that scholars over the age of 50 were underserved because there was not a source of technology support for these individuals who were not comfortable with using computers. Coaches also discussed how their scholars who are English learners sometimes struggled with language barriers and with navigating competing cultures and international differences. One coach described a scholar who was doing everything she could to keep up with academics, but the language barrier *"broke her down"* to a point where she dropped out of school. Moreover, coaches described how scholars often felt torn between American culture and their parents' cultures, and that it was difficult to navigate their understanding of their identities.

Finally, PCs and coaches mentioned how leaves of absence were common among scholars due to mental health concerns. They also mentioned how many scholars struggled to maintain a

balance between work, school, and their personal lives, often sacrificing one area at the cost of trying to improve in another.

Volunteer Coaches

Takeaway 7: Scholars and coaches reported that the most impactful relationships were built through establishing trust and consistent communication.

Scholars asserted that without their coaches, they would have been “lost” and “alone” without the necessary emotional support. When talking about their relationships with their coaches, scholars often described the importance of trusting their coaches and feeling safe to talk about their issues and areas in which they needed support.

“I think the positive energy that comes from OMD is really powerful and different than other volunteer opportunities I’ve done in my professional life. There’s celebration for everything from, I got an A on a test, to I got a job, I got into college, or it’s like... I’m getting married!”

– Harold Washington coach

For instance, one Olive-Harvey scholar discussed how they were comfortable sharing information with their coach because they shared the understanding that *“when we’re talking about our issues... whatever we talk about... it doesn’t leave that room. It’s with us, and that’s what a family is.”* Another scholar followed up by saying

“The most valuable part of this program to me, is not just having people coaches, who care and check in on you, but having the coaches specifically who care about your future, and try and get you opportunities... it’s just really great to know that in the future we may not see your coaches for years, but they’ll always be an opportunity [where] the coaches have your back if something comes up.”

– Harper scholar

how their relationship with their coach is like an “escape, like when [they] can’t talk to [their] best friend,” later describing their coach as a best friend even, which “makes [them] feel good.” Coaches echoed this sentiment, agreeing that building relationships of trust with their scholars required time, especially since they start out as strangers. Coaches shared that they recognized the importance and responsibility of building relationships with their scholars and often allowed their scholars to lead their conversations in the ways that would be the most beneficial for them.

Coaches with similar and dissimilar backgrounds were mostly able to build this trust with their scholars by maintaining contact with their scholars

outside of coaching sessions. Coaches found that texting was the most effective way to engage with younger scholars and that email was the most effective way to communicate with older scholars. Coaches learned that that it was important to adapt their communication methods to the method that would best reach their scholar. For instance, one coach even engaged with her scholar through the social media platform, Snapchat. Regardless of how coaches communicated with their scholars, scholars indicated that they were grateful for their coaches who constantly and persistently checked in with them; some coaches even maintained contact with their scholars after their scholars graduated. It is important to note, however, that scholars sometimes faced barriers outside of their control that hindered their abilities to communicate with their coaches, such as inability to pay for phone bills or a lack of transportation.

Scholars also reported feeling close to coaches who remembered important details about their lives and made efforts to tell scholars that they cared, such as the coaches who wished their

scholar a happy birthday or those who sent them messages of getting well when they were sick. In one case, when a scholar was very ill, her coach visited her at her home with flowers. It was common for some coaches to reach out to check in on their scholars' wellbeing by going to the scholars' homes.

Takeaway 8: Although industry match is the main guide in OMD's current coach and scholar matching process, coaches from similar and different identities, backgrounds, and industries from their scholars were able to build meaningful relationships.

Scholars often explained that they were thankful to have coaches who shared identity facets or similar backgrounds with them. For example, some coaches lived in the same neighborhoods and went to the same colleges as their scholars and other coaches were OMD alumni. These scholars felt more open and comfortable with their coaches. One scholar and his coach, who both identify as Black, connected over people asking to touch their hair. The scholar expressed that even though this might seem like something "small," it helped him feel less alone. Another scholar, who attended Wilbur Wright, and her coach both come from the same ethnic background. The scholar is low-income and said of her coach, *"she has been an emotional support for me. She's offered me certain tools that help me cope. She's helped me with that... [and] we set up meetings between the Saturday sessions. We see each other every two weeks."*

"Every time [my coach and I] meet... I just feel so connected with her and I feel she has my best interest at heart... She's just an incredible, strong woman. And I'm so grateful that I got to meet her and have her on my team. Because she's just been incredible and so inspiring for me."

– Harper scholar

Scholars also expressed enthusiasm about their relationships with their coaches even when their backgrounds and identities differed greatly, alluding to how coaches greatly contributed to scholars' personal and professional success insofar as they established trust and consistent communication. One Wilbur Wright scholar shared, *"My coach and I could not be more different. I asked for someone the same but we're different – he's white rural lawyer and I'm Hispanic engineer. But we're still a good fit."* This scholar and his coach text each other to check-in and show that they care. The scholar says, *"I'll text him, 'hey are you still alive because I know you have long work days' and he says, 'hey are you still alive because I know you have long school days' but he keeps me accountable and helps me set goals. And he doesn't get disappointed in me. He says what can we do now to get closer to that goal?"*

Scholars and coaches, however, noted that there could be barriers to building meaningful relationships, which they hoped to resolve. The first main barrier was age, where coaches who were older discussed lacking an ability to connect scholars to resources as extensively as they wanted due to a lack of technological skills. The second barrier was a lack of cultural competency among coaches. Coaches appreciated OMD's diversity training but wished for more materials and discussions surrounding being a culturally competent coach, especially when their backgrounds differed from those of their scholars.

Takeaway 9: Coaches reported that the relationship between coaches and scholars not only benefitted scholars, but them as well.

Some scholars and coaches reported getting more out of their coaching relationships than they originally expected. One Olive-Harvey scholar shared, “I didn’t think I needed a coach at first, but I’m really grateful...from the first day I met him, he was always like uplifting me and trying to work with me.” The scholar shared that he appreciated how his coach started conversations by first checking in on the scholar’s personal life before talking about academics.

In addition, one Harold Washington coach explained their motivations for continuing to coach when asked about what they valued most about being a part of OMD. This coach said, “I think the connections with people is the core of why I keep going. I like helping people, I like feeling like I helped someone more towards self-actualization on that hierarchy of needs. You end up, as an adult in your own circles, and I think OMD broadens my circle of people I interact with and broadens the experience of what it means to be a Chicagoan. And I think that’s really important.” Other coaches described how their experience working with Chicago community college students has opened their eyes to how the school district operates and the real experiences of young people in the city. A few reported recommending peers to serve as coaches for OMD in the future.

“[My coach and I] really connect a lot! She inspires me to be a better person and to constantly improve myself.” – Wilbur Wright scholar

Takeaway 10: Coaches explained that they volunteered to coach because they are passionate about building relationships with and supporting scholars; coaches shared a concern about being left unmatched with scholars.

Coaches spoke about how in an ideal situation, they would have consistent connections with their scholars and would be matched with the same scholars for the duration that the scholars were in OMD. Coaches were volunteers who usually joined because they wanted to give back to their community. Coaches, however, were often left unmatched when their scholar(s) suddenly stopped communicating and/or dropped out. Also, experiences of serving as a “sub-coach” left some coaches feeling less valued than primary coaches.



A scholar and coach work together at a Saturday Scholar Development Session at Kennedy-King College in Chicago.

Therefore, coaches hoped for improved lines of communication with OMD staff to be updated on the status of their scholars’ participation in OMD as well as whether the other assigned coach, if co- or sub-coaching, was available or would attend programming. In addition, coaches shared the hope of being reassigned to a different scholar or of having the ability to serve as a substitute coach when another coach did not show up to a coaching session. Scholars have expressed that they would appreciate having substitute coaches at sessions when their own coaches were not present for coaching sessions. Coaches wanted to be as involved in whatever capacity possible with OMD scholars because they felt like they were able to make a positive difference on scholars’ lives.

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS

Scholar Development Sessions

Takeaway 1: Scholars with less professional experience reported that Scholar Development Sessions were immensely helpful. More experienced scholars indicated a desire for advanced development exercises.

One of OMD's main professional supports for scholars is its mandatory monthly Scholar Development Sessions (SDS),¹⁶ where OMD staff and coaches convene on-site at students' college to provide workshops and coaching sessions to help scholars build their professional skills. Examples of topics taught in workshops by PCs include building transferable skills like time management, healthy study habits, grade maintenance (getting good grades to maintain or improve scholars' GPAs), and job preparation. Scholars also discussed how their PCs helped them think about next steps for their futures and set manageable and achievable goals with them.

“OMD is really engaging, they're hands-on, they really do care about the success of the scholars. They don't really give you room to fail – your coach or your PC will get you right on track. It's like a second family.”

– Kennedy-King Scholar

Scholars who have not had experiences in a workplace and/or did not have a social network that could provide them with professional advice discussed how the SDS workshops were incredibly beneficial in teaching them about professionalism in formal workplaces. Some scholars who have had some prior professional experience expressed wanting to explore certain topics in more depth past an introductory level. Overall, however, scholars viewed workshops as valuable. When asked about what scholars perceived to be the most valuable aspect of OMD, one Kennedy-King scholar cited the mentorship OMD provided through coaches and formalized training sessions. This scholar exclaimed, *“You can't help but look forward to coming, especially to the development sessions. Someone's there. They're there to support you and encourage you. They don't give you the opportunity to hang your head down [or] feel sorry for yourself. That's what OMD has been.”*

OMD Events, Networking, and Application Support

Takeaway 2: Scholars, especially first-generation college students, expressed appreciation for and benefited from support in networking and preparing application materials for four-year institutions and for jobs.

Through OMD's networking opportunities, such as speed networking events, scholars were able to create professional connections and work on their interpersonal skills. Scholars shared that these opportunities allowed them to connect to internships and develop professional skills like giving an elevator pitch, learning how to properly research job opportunities, and practicing socializing in a professional setting. Events such as speed networking allowed scholars to practice their skills in a higher support and lower pressure environment. One scholar, for instance, was nervous about engaging with others in conversation at an event, but other scholars enthusiastically helped her navigate it.

¹⁶ SDS workshops are held on Saturdays at students' campuses and include breakfast for scholars composed of bagels and light pastries, although scholars are requesting a more substantive breakfast to improve their abilities to focus early in the morning.



A scholar at a Saturday Scholar Development Session at Kennedy-King College in Chicago.

Another networking event that scholars appreciated was Wisdom from the Workplace, which took them to large companies and allowed them to interact with employees in those fields. Several scholars explained that Wisdom from the Workplace gave them direct paths to internships and even employment opportunities, which they felt that they would not have been able to obtain without the event due to a lack of access. They also described how this event was one that *“helped make success feel attainable”* due to how they were able to interact with individuals who had attained their professional goals.

These connections were especially valuable for first-generation college scholars who did not have established professional networks of their own through their families or acquaintances. Scholars shared various anecdotes about how their coaches were able to help them build these connections. For instance, one coach set up a dinner with multiple colleagues for a scholar, which helped that scholar gain insightful knowledge into that workplace. Another coach held a job shadowing day for her scholar so she could see what that career would look like in practice. Scholars noted their appreciation for coaches who connected them to industry professionals outside of the coach’s own network if the coach was in a different industry than the scholar. Scholars also received professional guidance from their coaches in the forms of resume reviews and mock interviews. Scholars expressed strong appreciation for assistance in these areas and explained that they would have not been prepared for post-graduation job searches without it.

In addition to making connections with coaches, scholars were able to network with one another and learn from one another. As scholars attended networking events, they were able to meet and build relationships with scholars from other campuses.

Takeaway 3: Scholars desired more equitable access to professional opportunities and career networks beyond the coaching relationship.

While scholars reported benefitting from OMD’s professional supports in at least one way or another, the level of supports that scholars received varied from scholar to scholar. For instance, some scholars who did not have coaches who were as active in scholars’ job searches, shared that they wished that their coaches would be more proactive in providing resources and guidance for questions that the scholars might not have considered due to a lack of exposure to those topics. Also, scholars reported being somewhat limited in access to career opportunities based on coach matching and placement. The structure of some networking events also prevented students from making as many connections as they wanted to. Some students said that the isolated nature of Harper College was a hindrance to tapping into the Chicago-area job markets.

Regarding post-graduation plans, scholars also noted a desire for increased help in securing internship and job placements. While assigned coaches could help connect scholars to their own professional networks, scholars also wanted to better understand where past OMD students worked, where other coaches are and were previously employed, as well as where peers were planning to attend and work. Efforts to make professional supports more visible and accessible to all scholars, irrespective of the coach’s network and relationship, could help address scholars’ concerns in this arena.

Conclusion

As one Wilbur Wright scholar concisely said, the most valuable part of OMD is *“knowing that my back is covered not by one person, but by a whole institution.”* As reported by focus group participants, OMD’s holistic support system of academic, financial, personal, and professional supports has positively impacted the lives of its scholars as a result of OMD’s passionate staff and volunteer coaches.

With regards to **academic supports**, scholars reported benefiting from the individualized academic attention and development of academic skills from OMD’s tutors, along with supplemental academic advising provided by PCs and coaches. Scholars also indicated a need for increased tutoring capacity in various subjects and at various campuses, while PCs and coaches desired increased training and institutional knowledge to better fulfill their roles as supplemental advisors.

In terms of **financial supports**, scholars discussed how helpful OMD’s stipends, financial flexibility, and other supports have been, such as emergency assistance, enrichment grants, and transportation reimbursements. Scholars were able to utilize these financial supports on educational and personal expenses, although scholars reported still facing multiple financial barriers despite these supports, such as transportation and utilities, including cell phone bills.

Moreover, scholars believed that the **personal supports** provided by OMD have contributed greatly to their personal growth and built a strong community and network of empathetic and knowledgeable peers, coaches, and PCs. Scholars reported that OMD’s community was a central component of their personal success and of OMD’s model. All participants discussed how this community was built upon relationships established through trust between scholars and coaches, along with relationships between scholars and PCs. Coaches and PCs, however, indicated that there could be improvements to how OMD provides its personal supports. Coaches discussed how it would be beneficial for them and for scholars to ensure that coaches and scholars are not left unmatched and not in a coaching relationship, while PCs shared concerns about being able to maintain deep relationships with scholars without sufficient knowledge in addressing complex scholar life experiences.

Lastly, scholars reported how OMD’s **professional supports**, in the forms of Scholar Development Sessions, networking events, and mentorship have taught scholars valuable professional skills, such as interviewing and resume writing, and knowledge about their industries of interest – although scholars discussed how they would appreciate additional access to professional opportunities and career networks through OMD.

The insights above from the focus groups have provided deep insight into how the program model is operating and how its core elements are experienced by scholars, volunteers, as well as program staff. As the core RCT evaluation continues in the years ahead, we hope that these rich contextual insights, alongside the causal outcome estimates, will provide invaluable information to One Million Degrees stakeholders, as well as to other practitioners and policymakers in the broader postsecondary space.